



The Local Government Association is the national voice for more than 450 local authorities in England and Wales. The LGA group comprises the LGA and five partner organisations which work together to support, promote and improve local government.



Local government leadership – creating political value



a collection of essays

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Improvement and Development Agency for local government (IDeA)

The IDeA works for local government improvement so councils can serve people and places better.

Our offer is built around the real issues for local people, focusing on partnership working, place-shaping and tackling cross-cutting issues.

We use experienced councillors and senior officers, known as peers, who support and challenge councils to improve themselves.

We enable councils to share good practice through the national Beacon Scheme and regional local government networks. The best ideas are put on the IDeA website.

Our Leadership Academy programmes help councillors become better leaders so they can balance the diverse demands of people living in the same community.

Working with our national, regional and local partners, we help councils work through local partnerships to tackle local priorities such as health, children's services and promoting economic prosperity. We advise councils on improving customer service and value for money. We also promote the development of local government's workforce.

The IDeA is owned by the Local Government Association and belongs to local government. Together we lead local government improvement.

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Leadership Centre for Local Government great leaders, great places

It takes great leadership to create a thriving and prosperous community. The Leadership Centre gives leaders the opportunity to shift their thinking on leadership so they can fundamentally transform their communities for the better.

Today's local leaders are at the heart of their communities – it is up to them to provide the imagination and the inspiration to create a community out of a place. We are here to help leaders meet the challenge of leading across their place, rather than a council.

Place is a contested space for local government leaders, so our work focuses on the unique realities of the people and relationships involved to help leaders and chief executives to lead beyond their authority – literally – so they can shape their places as the voters wish.

Our interest in leadership is not in leadership per se but in creating the change that results in better lives for citizens.

The Leadership Centre is part of the LGA Group.

www.localleadership.gov.uk

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Lucy de Groot
Executive Director
Improvement and
Development Agency (IDeA)



Stephen Taylor
Chief Executive
Leadership Centre
for Local Government

The speed, depth and breadth of local government improvement over the last decade has been impressive and substantial, yet there is still much to do.

Local government white papers, acts and commissions have focused on the need for radical improvement in service delivery; better, more strategic commissioning, efficiency and effectiveness, partnership working, community engagement and empowerment and the emergence of the community leadership role for councils, which involves shaping places, going beyond traditional local government concerns.

Considerable attention has been paid to quality and outcomes through inspection regimes, both corporate and service focused, and a dozen or more ministers have added their particular

thoughts about the tasks at hand to improve both service delivery and public perception of local government. However, there is still a long journey ahead for local government improvement, particularly with regard to enabling a culture where innovation can really thrive – especially in the areas of efficiency and customer service.

Ten years ago the term ‘leadership’ was rarely used to describe either the political or managerial imperatives of local government. Now perhaps the most important and commonly shared understanding throughout the sector is that high quality leadership, political, executive and particularly the shared political/ executive leadership capacity is absolutely key to the continued improvement of the sector and its credibility and reputation with

introduction

the public it serves. Thoughtful and engaged leadership is also vital to the widespread debate and experiments to renew and enhance local democracy and engage citizens in their communities.

If improved leadership is the answer, then there are some very serious questions to be answered about how this will continue, be renewed and developed beyond those who are already fine practitioners and enthusiasts for the cause.

Over recent years, the experience of the IDeA and The Leadership Centre has been that both councillors and officers respond well to an eclectic mix of academic research and models, action learning, political party thinking, peer support, challenge and mentoring as well as cross-party discussion and networking.

We do not usually advocate long periods of time spent in dark rooms scrutinising the individual or the collective navel, but leadership improvement cannot be sustained without moments of thought, and the sharing of learning and research. It’s a tough challenge to make the collective experience of established leaders, thinkers and academics easily accessible and digestible, so that is what this series of essays is all about.

In this collection, we present the thought of political leaders from the three main parties, alongside compelling research pieces and a number of different slants on the business of leadership in local government.

In-line with the philosophies of both of our organisations we very much hope that you will both learn from it and enjoy it as well.

mind of a manager, soul of a leader, art of a politician



Councillor Stephen Greenhalgh
Leader of the London Borough
of Hammersmith and Fulham

In 1992, Craig Hickman published a book called 'Mind of a manager, soul of a leader'. I was a young brand manager at Procter and Gamble at the time and I recognised the conflicting traits of the manager and the leader. The title resonated with me although, like most business books, I only thumbed through a few pages.

Hickman argued that leaders and managers have two distinct personality types and an adversarial relationship with each other. However, this natural tension or schism between managers

and leaders can be exploited to gain positive results so that an organisation can become more successful. According to Hickman, it is just not possible to have the visionary and the concrete thinker or the strategic thinker and the nitpicker in one person.

In reviewing Hickman's book, a first-time chief executive officer (CEO) argues that the entrepreneur CEO has to be both manager and leader and try to do both roles effectively 'without driving the team nuts'. As the entrepreneur CEO of a thriving multimillion pound turnover medical publishing and conference business that I started myself, I have to agree: if you want to build a successful business from scratch, you cannot get away with being either a leader or a manager. You have to be both.

I would argue, however, that the challenge of being a successful council leader is even greater. Trying to be an effective council leader of an inner London borough has been the greatest challenge that I have faced. I believe that you need the orderly, rational mind of a manager, the creative soul of a leader and the canny art of a politician. Let's look at these skills in turn.

mind of a manager

In my view this is the most important of the three core skills of a council leader. Without this attribute you are lost and you will have no chance to effect change or put your stamp on your time in power. You will be reduced to the role of a glorified spin doctor as you watch the council machine slow down.

At Hammersmith and Fulham, our biggest achievement to date is a managerial one - we have been able to cut council tax by three per cent two years running and deliver better services. The council has managed to produce substantial savings by competitively tendering council services, cutting waste and bureaucracy and by introducing new ways of smarter working. We have lowered the council's debt by a staggering £20 million, saving council taxpayers more than £1.5 million a year in reduced payments. Reducing the debt bill means there is more to spend on services.

How has all this been achieved?

Through preparation, planning and execution which all require the mind of a manager. It is important to have the mind of a manager but not to become a manager. That is the job of your chief executive, and chief officers – although they probably think I step over that line occasionally.

soul of a leader

Council leaders lead large organisations with big budgets and thousands of talented staff and managers as well as a large political group of councillors who have worked hard to get elected and who are either in the cabinet or perform a scrutiny role. The best people who choose to work in local government are public servants who want to deliver for their residents. The best councillors care about the place they represent. They both need a motivating 'big picture' of how a council will make a real difference over the long-term to the lives of the residents who live and work in the borough. Sir Michael Lyons calls this 'place shaping' but I prefer 'vision'. Our vision for Hammersmith and Fulham has taken time to develop.

mind of a manager, soul of a leader, art of a politician

At one level our vision of 'putting residents first' is simple. We are helping the vast majority to help themselves. It means lower taxes, less waste and better services. It means we will listen to real people. It means cleaner streets and safer streets. It means we will wage war on waste. It means we will not make residents pay a penny more than they need to. And it means we will concentrate on delivering the services that really matter.

At another level our vision of creating a 'borough of opportunity' is to give our residents the opportunity to get on in life. We want to help those who need help by giving them a hand up rather than a hand out. Over the years our borough has become more polarised. Some of the wealthiest households in the country are located in Hammersmith and Fulham. The borough ranks fourth highest in London for average house prices. But the borough also has significant areas of deprivation, where people's lives are blighted by crime, poor environments and low aspirations. The 'borough of opportunity' vision is about:

- offering schools of choice and excellent state education for the young people of Hammersmith and Fulham
- creating a housing ladder of opportunity with home ownership at its core
- regenerating the most deprived parts of the borough with a focus on physical, economic and social renewal.

Developing a vision requires the soul of a leader if the vision is to be compelling, but delivering the vision is the hardest part of leadership. It requires courage.

People who become good council leaders have a willingness to make bold moves, but they strengthen their chances of success – and avoid political suicide – through careful deliberation and preparation. This requires setting clear goals to deliver the vision, selecting the right time and developing contingency plans before things go wrong. This is even more important when a council changes control dramatically, as it did in Hammersmith and Fulham. Getting the workforce to recognise a different vision quickly was a deciding factor in achieving our goals.

art of a politician

Being a manager and leader is not enough. A council leader needs the art of a politician. You achieve nothing if you do not have the support of your officers, but you also get nowhere if your council group is divided. This means that you have to keep the group together and keep them both informed and able to contribute. The key to a happy group is to have a common purpose combined with constant communication. A large majority does help – but an effective chief whip is essential.

A council can deliver great things for local people but it also needs to tell the story. Effective communication with residents is the fine art of politics. A council leader needs to sell the positives and respond to the story as it unfolds. A good director of communication is second only to the chief executive. Once you have the story or the rebuttal you need the political network to be able to make it count.

Finally you have to be pragmatic. Politics is the art of the possible. Conservative councils have to be prepared to work with their political opponents who are in power at a regional or national level or who control many of the government agencies. We are a flagship, high profile, Conservative, inner London council with a Conservative mayor – and a Labour government. You have to be able to recognise the strength of your hand, be prepared to compromise and make deals, but never forget when to draw the line.

Being a council leader has been my biggest challenge so far but the irony is that council leaders are not held in high esteem and local government is perceived as a political dead end. This has to change.

Hickman, C. R. (1992) 'Mind of a manager soul of a leader', New York: John Wiley

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political leadership: the Stevenage story



Councillor Sharon Taylor
Leader of Stevenage
Borough Council

'Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these in institutions, in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment, under the pressures of experience, contact and discovery, writing themselves into the land.'

Raymond Williams, 'Culture is ordinary' (1958)

In the words of Tip O'Neil, that great Speaker of the American House of Representatives 'all politics is local'. So let me tell you about what political leadership means to me as seen through the prism of my town. First, a little background.

Stevenage is derived from the Old English 'Stigenace' meaning 'place at the strong oak'. In post-war Britain the Abercrombie Plan called for the establishment of a ring of new towns around London and, in November 1946, Stevenage was chosen as the first of the new towns, planned around six self-contained neighbourhoods. It was developed under the auspices of a paternal and proactive welfare state. Post-war public policy framed and gave birth to the concept of new towns.

Stevenage is now only 18 minutes on the fast train from King's Cross, but in 1950 it might just as well have been another continent for the displaced families from London who made their way there in search of better housing, jobs and greater security. There were a number of social problems associated with moving vast numbers of families from London to the town, some suffering

from post-war trauma, many poor and most having lost their social ties. A key priority for Stevenage as a new town was to build decent, modern homes alongside first class facilities. The initial master plan included 60,000 units, based around six neighbourhoods.

The vision was to create a town and political framework in which mutuality and care were prioritised, with the help of a strong and well funded voluntary sector, neighbourhoods that included people's day-to-day needs, so that community was at the heart of their lives, and beautiful civic spaces. A number of prescient urban planning measures such as cycle routes, the ability to walk to everything you needed, and the first pedestrianised town centre in 1959, were included when the town was built. Economics and community engagement also benefited from this forward-thinking and has characterised the leadership of the council since then: Stevenage has been Labour-run for over 40 years.

Key to that success has been our residents' strong sense of place – they know where they live and identify themselves with their local area. They have pride in the town and a sense of belonging that is underpinned by the strong neighbourhood model. This affiliation to place is no accident – it is the result of careful planning and robust political decisions that are not just historic but are actively pursued by today's Labour leadership. Today there is a strong emphasis on the importance of leadership of place - I think that has been central to our vision of politics for the last 40 years.

The design of the neighbourhood model in Stevenage is now heralded as one of the most outstanding achievements in town planning and development in the 20th century. The six neighbourhoods are self-contained and the town centre acts as a meeting point. It is in the neighbourhoods that the real business of going about daily life can be found. But it's not just about the physical environment – places require animation by people, through their experiences and memories. This is where Stevenage's achievement really lies; in the strong community that has formed out of the neighbourhood model.

political leadership: the Stevenage story

Localism is emerging as a distinctive Labour concept. It refers to an appreciation of the value of community. In a Labour context it puts forward the important proposition at the heart of the socialist ethic that individuals can be co-operative and thrive better in a community. It asserts that strong community is the agent for creating opportunities for all and that community is essential for the advancement of individual potential. It means creating places in which there is a springboard from which everyone can thrive and, importantly, where the weak can be protected. So localism is my second theme, and I believe we have been practising it way before it became fashionable elsewhere.

Each Stevenage neighbourhood has had a community centre from the start, and they really are the centre of the community. They host a range of activities for all ages; lunch clubs, youth clubs, Irish dancing, the Scouts, cafes, summer play schemes, bingo, nurseries, and in one case a Volkswagen owners club! Each has developed its own identity and many share the space with local churches and the voluntary sector.

The neighbourhood structure also supports a key objective of the Labour council, which is to keep governance close to people. The council works hard to maintain this, by running regular consultation and engagement initiatives, where a high response rate is the norm. Where problems exist the community is invited to identify issues and suggest solutions that the council commits to acting upon. Each neighbourhood has an area committee and a dedicated budget, and Labour has recently created teams of officers dedicated to each area, covering services such as environment, police, children and families. This practical step is one way in which the Labour council continues to rejuvenate and build on a strong sense of place and community in the town.

So here is my third theme. In modern language it's about devolution to, and through local government. Our job as politicians is to create structures and neighbourhoods that make it easier for people to participate in deciding their own futures.

But Stevenage is very tightly bounded - we need more housing to serve our population. Such developments are only possible on the territory of a neighbouring Conservative district council, and the importance of building good-sized homes at reasonable cost was, and is not, their priority. The Labour council has had to fight tenaciously and constructively with its Conservative peers to ensure that the model of building communities that they know works is applied. The negotiations are still continuing, but have required the key essentials for new developments to be identified. These are principally that the new housing should not become dormitory developments, and that they should carry on the ethos of building communities, with a commitment to services within each area. So here is my fourth theme, it's about championing our communities and representing their interests elsewhere in the region and more nationally.

Two underlying values central to the Labour ethos and vision are concern for social justice, and improving life chances and opportunity for all. This is manifest both at the macro and micro levels in Stevenage, where intrinsic to our vision is that 'nothing is too good for Stevenage'. So, political leadership should be embracing (reaching out to engage all) and ambitious.

The former leader of the council, Brian Hall, was determined to create an all-pervading Labour culture, for which the priorities were good places to live, good jobs, good cultural opportunities and a vibrant voluntary sector. His determination and constancy in asserting and maintaining fundamental Labour values were allied with innovation, boldness and risk-taking. The current leadership is equally ambitious. New towns often have an inferiority complex, and the role for the Labour council must be to say

'you can achieve something'.

political leadership: the Stevenage story

This is a town built out of expressed socialist values, where Labour has served and governed for an extended period of time. The practical expression of these values, of high aspirations and opportunities for all, has been on a range of levels. Underpinning them at all times is a strong budget footprint and sound financial management.

One other theme key to good political leadership is willingness to innovate. Let me illustrate. In 1972 Stevenage built the first combined leisure and arts centre at a cost of £3 million. It was the first centre in the UK to combine leisure and culture and was built after the council persuaded the investment bank Goldman Sachs to lend them the money on preferential terms. A precursor to Private Finance Initiative (PFI), and manifestly people and community-orientated, the leisure centre today includes a spa to which doctors refer patients, pioneering a prevention rather than cure model.

The example and achievements of Stevenage are relevant at a time when the very idea of a town or city has become blurred and the challenges of housing provision and the creation of new communities within the four designated growth areas are both enthusing and vexing politicians, policy makers and private sector partners in equal measure. How can we use the example of places like Stevenage to create new settlements where a high priority is accorded values of community, mutuality and opportunity?

Stevenage is a place where the founding ideals and longevity of the Labour leadership have combined to create a place that reflects Labour values. Achieving this elsewhere in today's Britain, especially where development may need to be accelerated on account of need, and when the imperative of taking account of multiple communities and interests, be they ethnic, social, commercial, political or faith-related, is complex. The example of Stevenage shows that it is possible, but that it takes time. So my final point is that politics is not about the quick fix - it's about making sustained (and sustainable) differences to peoples lives.

'Place at the strong oak',

the original meaning of the word Stevenage, is a good analogy with which to conclude this essay. An oak tree is a symbol of endurance. As the proverb says, 'Every majestic oak tree was once a nut who stood his ground' – and this is at the heart of the challenge. We believe that fundamental Labour values should and can inspire. When practised over time, 'by the strength of our common endeavour', and stated with clarity and confidence, they can serve to bring about the formation of the communities and kinds of places we believe in, where opportunities and daily life is the very best it can be, for people of all classes and backgrounds.

Williams, R. (1958) 'Culture is ordinary' in N. Mackenzie (ed.), Conviction, London: MacGibbon and Kee

magic – the sparkle of political leadership



Councillor Richard Kemp
Liverpool City Council

I was gobsmacked when I casually Googled 'political leadership' and was amazed to get 14.4 million hits!

'How do so many politicians find time to write so much?'

I thought and set myself the task of answering that question.

I cannot claim to have viewed every single one of those 14.4 million but a reasonably authoritative random check lasting all of five minutes suggests to me that the number of these articles/books/discourses written by active practical politicians is approximately NIL! Academics in their thousands – anthropologists

in their hundreds – journalists in their slimy over abundance – retired politicians justifying their past, a mere handful. But real life real time doing politicians? - I couldn't find even one.

I suppose on reflection I should not have been surprised at this. I have been an active politician for 41 years and a councillor for 27 of them. No-one until very recently actually thought that politicians and our alter egos, elected representatives, needed training and support at all. We were supposed to go from the egg state of candidate to the caterpillar state of back bencher alone and unaided. We were then supposed to go from larval state to the brilliant butterfly of leadership with the assumption that because we had got there we must be good at it – whatever it may be.

In the main that view still persists. Check the budget of your council and see how much the council spends per head on training, support, education and conferences for the top senior officers. Then compare that with the amount spent on the top 60 councillors. Shocking isn't it. Yet high quality political leadership is vital to the effective running of councils. Good councillors do not create good, well run and efficient

councils. But bad councillors do prevent good officers from creating or continuing such councils. Poor political leadership creates a poor officer cadre as good officers leave for tastier options and good officers in other authorities decline to apply for jobs because of the council's reputation.

Let's start with the first problem – the newspaper headlines on the day we sweep to power! 'Liberal Democrats to run City', 'Tories to form the administration', 'Labour take control'. To be clear councillors do not run councils, we do not administer them, we do not control them. What we do is lead them and the community that we have a mandate for. Sometimes that is the ward and we may be 'just' a backbencher or we may be in control and in the cabinet. Our job is three fold:

Firstly, to have a clear sense of direction for the area we represent (place shaping). If we are the leader of the council or part of the leadership team we need to have a very strong analysis of our area, and the strengths on which it will build a successful future and a political view of what that future should be. If we cannot answer the question,

'how will things be different in ten years if we get in rather than our opponents?'

I would question whether we should seek election in the first place. If we are 'just' a back bencher we have an entirely similar role. That is why I have used the word just in quotes. A good ward councillor (that should be all of us) should act as the cabinet member for her/his ward. At that level too we need to have a sense of direction for our community and clearly represent that vision, shared with our constituents through all the official channels.

Secondly, we need to work with officers and partners to share that vision and ensure that the political mandate that we have derived from the electorate is converted to changed priorities both within our council and within the agencies that support our council (community leadership). Key amongst these partners must be the people we represent to ensure that there is a shared vision which even those who do not support us can share or at least understand.

magic – the sparkle of political leadership

Lastly there is the job of ensuring that the systems deliver the outputs and outcomes required (scrutiny). Great plans and bold gestures mean nothing if the bins are not emptied and the schools turn out students with few qualifications and even less hope for the future. Watching key performance indicators is vital if we are to ensure that our staff are delivering our priorities and not theirs.

Sounds easy? Well, unfortunately I have just dealt with the first area of complexity. The second is that of the changing nature of the skills required given the changing political situation of the councillor. Let's take the four ages of councillorship:

1. yippee

I am the first member of my party on the council. I have no power, no influence and people don't even recognise that my party exists. My job is to create a fuss, create a stir, be an awkward squad of one so that people know my party is around and campaign like mad to get a mate or two elected.

2. wow

There are eight of us. We've got a seat on every committee and occasionally one of the big boys comes to talk to us if there is a close vote. My job now is to become the leader of a guerrilla force. Ambushing the other parties using our position to drag facts into the open – to challenge poor performance and stage debates in the council and community drawing attention to the failure of everyone else.

3. blimey

There are 20 of us. I discover I have two jobs – I have to be the leader of my party and keeping 20 councillors going well is a lot, lot more complicated than keeping eight. But I also have to be the leader of the opposition. I now get invited to everything. I have to have an opinion on most things and people are eyeing me up and thinking what sort of council leader I will become.

4. glory of glories

I am now the council leader. I discover I have three jobs. I have to lead my group - quite complicated with 35 people, an elite that is knowledge rich and a majority that doesn't know as much. I have to lead the council. The chief executive wants to see me regularly and most incredible of all, his door is usually open to me when I want to talk to him! I have responsibility for the entire budget, all the staff, everything. Lastly I am also leader of the city. People look to me for leadership in a wide range of fields and to be the embodiment of the future of this great city.

Sadly each of these levels requires different skills. The person who was the best singleton in the world may make the jump to guerrilla leader but rarely has the skills needed to make it to council leader. Our political system is not strong enough in most parties in most places to take the tough replacement decisions that this implies. We have had no method in place to help people sharpen their skills and up their game as they move from one level to another.

Times they are a changing. The Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) process has led to a sharp understanding that poor politics is at the heart of a poor council. Poor councils have councillors of all parties that play politics and love politicking. Good councils have councillors of all parties who understand the political differences but more importantly recognise the political similarities. They know how to argue but stay on the same side for most of the time.

The IDeA has its well-established programmes looking at councillor leadership in generic and technical terms. The new kid on the block, the Leadership Centre for Local Government has programmes that look at political skills and crucially that magic alchemy of top politico and top manager.

Local government is going places. It is improving well and is the most efficient part of government in the UK. We still have a lot to do but there is now another target. We are being held back by the inhabitants of that Ruritainian monstrosity on the banks of the Thames and the self-seeking Sir Humphreys who brown nose in their wake. Game for a revolution anyone?

what distinguishes the best politicians in local government?



Ben Page
Managing Director of Ipsos MORI

Local political leadership has changed. It is no longer just about heading a local political party, with the aim of controlling a local council which delivers local services and has become much more facilitative and less partisan. Our latest research highlights the key features of the best political leaders.

1. style matters

The best leaders have reflected on how they interact with others carefully, and invested considerable time in it. Our 29 hours of interviews with a wide range of different politicians show that one of the over-arching challenges is managing relationships, in a way that is quite different than it is for officers:

'I think it's incredibly complicated. The public's view of what leadership is about is a sort of generalissimo command and control leadership which is rarely very appropriate in the complex environment you're in. And that's even more so in my case because of working in a partnership with another party. I cannot order my partners in the administration to do things even if I wanted to. So there's an awful lot more involved in this sort of leadership about listening to people and building relationships than there is in just saying follow me over the top!'

2. clear relationships with officers matter

The roles of the cabinet and the senior officer management teams – and the relationships between them – are crucial. Good leaders have worked out a clear modus operandi:

'I try very hard not to micromanage. I set the direction and the policy and leave officers to do the professional bit. Not all of my cabinet have quite cottoned on to that message yet. But we are providing the political leadership and are not getting down and emptying individual bins.'

The best leaders and chief executives have strong working relationships even where individual 'styles' differ they operate with mutual respect. They understand the importance of presenting a 'united front' when it comes to communicating key messages with staff:

'The chief executive and I are very different people; we probably wouldn't be friends if we just met casually. But we do both have the ability to talk very openly with each other. We've built up that level of trust. And if I'm really concerned about something, she almost knows I am before I say anything.'

3. knowing when to delegate matters

A skill that applies to all forms of leadership – knowing when to get involved and when to step back. They will avoid chairing contentious meetings so that they are able to take part as appropriate without dominating or being seen to shut down debate:

'I'm very good at delegation. I'm very willing to let go of things and let other people get on with them as long as they tell me what they're up to. I think it's quite important to not be tied down into too much detail in any one area.'

what distinguishes the best politicians in local government?

4. managing other politicians is an additional but essential pressure

The best leaders are systematic in their approach to working with both their group and other councillors. This is particularly challenging in the new political context where some backbenchers feel disenfranchised from decision-making. Sir Simon Milton, one of our interviewees, highlights five golden rules of party leadership, four of which recognise the importance of managing others within the group (and the fifth recommends being accessible, closely associated with this anyway). The four are:

1. Keep your colleagues informed about what is going on – this means pro-active and regular internal communication
2. Ensure there are good feedback mechanisms in place so that colleagues who have a gripe know how they can raise it
3. Find opportunities to bring your group together outside formal group meetings both socially and for more strategic discussion

4. Manage expectations by telling people what you intend to do in terms of group management and appointments long before you do it

The best leaders understand the importance of providing visible (and coherent and consistent) leadership – communicating key messages, walking the floor and ultimately taking staff and partners with them:

‘I do induction sessions for new staff, so that they see a face, and I try to make the organisation a bit more aware that it’s a political organisation. I think it’s very important for people to understand, this is the policy, this is why you’ve put the policy in place, and this is your role in it.’

5. deal making is a key skill, both formally and informally

Many leaders regard themselves as ‘deal makers’. Facilitative leadership, where local leaders pull together a fragmented set of partners and citizens around a shared vision for the future of their local area is emerging as vital in local government:

‘So what I can do as a mayor is use influence to get what we want with partners, and a lot of that depends on goodwill and strong relationships. The Primary Care Trust has undergone a few problems here, financially and organisationally. And other partners through the Local Strategic Partnership held out the hand of guidance and carried them through the difficult patch.’

6. it’s a full-time job... and then some

A common frustration is the amount of time leaders have to give over to administrative tasks, like checking emails, dealing with central government demands and the challenges in ensuring a work-life balance. Most of the leaders we spoke to did it as a full-time job; only the truly manic had a separate full-time job. Our work suggests that the pressures of modern leadership mean that few people are going to have the skills, time and resources to make it work best.

7. self-knowledge matters – change can be painful but inevitable and a good leader recognises this.

The best know that major change is sometimes inevitable:

‘I think there’s a whole new generation of officers now. What my chief executive and I have done is put a team together who are the new generation of local government officers; who understand much more about giving a service to people. Not having a monolithic organisation that, first and foremost, puts its own systems in everything as a priority, and expects the rest of the world to fit in with that. Quite a lot of the councillors had been around a long while, and got used to the way the county worked, and couldn’t, necessarily, see that there was anything wrong. Not bad people in any way, but unable to see that things were changing.’

what distinguishes the best politicians in local government?

8. many never expected to do this role – and often became leader by default

Motivations can be different to those of officers: many we spoke to are ambitious for their area, but less so for themselves. Many had entered politics initially to try and stop something, and not necessarily because they had political ambitions per se. They had taken the reins because no-one else would, but none regretted it:

'I didn't particularly try to get elected to become leader of the council. So it's as much of a surprise to me as anyone else but, as I say, I ended up as leader of the group largely because I was asked to stand by a variety of people, and so I'm here now.'

Above all what stands out is passion for one's area. This has always distinguished the best people in local government – but what has changed are the behaviours and styles needed to succeed.

connoisseurs of complexity: leadership and storytelling



(left) Mike Bennett
Assistant Director General of SOLACE and
(right) Kevin Orr
Director of the Centre of Management and Organisational Learning, Hull Business School

'Science, once the great explicator, garbles life with complexity and perplexity. Who can listen without cynicism to economists, sociologists, politicians? Religion, for many, has become an empty ritual that masks hypocrisy. As our faith in traditional ideologies diminishes we turn to the source we still believe in: the art of the story.'

Robert McKee, screenwriter (1998)

Storytelling is not one of the classic features of managerial leadership in local government, yet it will soon form part of a new orthodoxy. As the quote above from Robert McKee, the screenwriter's screenwriter, suggests, while many traditional forms of authority are declining, the story retains its power. Managing a local authority is a messy business. Robert Chia talks of the 'blooming buzzing confusion' of managerial life but in local authorities this is conducted in direct political glare. In the centre of this heat, noise and motion council chiefs are expected to plan services and ration resources, implement policy and manage performance. One way that they do so is by telling stories.

Over the last year we have spoken to a wide range of chief executives and senior managers about the role of storytelling in their day-to-day activities. We found that storytelling forms an important part of the way in which they lead, learn, persuade, establish credibility, network and form relationships. Yet while political organisations have always been a rich fund of colourful stories (who's up, who's down, who's in and who's out) and powerful visions (I have a dream...) this is excluded from the traditional account of managerial leadership.

connoisseurs of complexity: leadership and storytelling

Our research highlights the distinctive ways in which storytelling serves strategic purposes for chief executives' leadership behaviour. This short article outlines some of our headline findings and argues that storytelling should be recognised as central to the ways in which local authority chief executives act as leaders. We confine our findings to three main areas. The ways in which chief executives use stories to:

- persuade and to construct meaning for others
- establish credentials and join the group
- build relationships and learn from others in the group

leadership and persuasion

Leaders are sometimes described as those who can make sense of complexity for others. A powerful means of achieving this goal is through a story that changes the way that others understand their environment. Leaders often use stories to construct a narrative that draws out apparent contradictions and conflicts into an engaging sense of purpose. This art is widely recognised in the world of politics where stories are aimed at changing the state of mind of voters. As the Democrat political psychologist Drew

Westen writes, political parties' big picture narratives must be 'clear, coherent, and emotionally alive' to define 'the overarching message of its framers, its leaders, and those who identify with it' (2007, p151). In politics, he argues because it is positive emotions that motivate 'voters to rally to the polls' (2007, p310) 'successful campaigns compete in a marketplace of emotions and not primarily in the marketplace of ideas' (2007, p305). This point is supported by Republican strategist Frank Luntz when he argues that 'words not only explain but also motivate... They trigger emotion as well as understanding' (2007, xiv).

Some of our chief executives described this to us in terms of trying to win the heart as well as the head. They identified that the social roles – better local environments, better health outcomes, improved life opportunities – played by councils give them more opportunity to create powerful or emotive images and ideas than their private sector counterparts.

However, they also expressed a sense that this cuts against the grain of some local government traditions. Local authorities are complex organisations founded on principles of corporate governance which enshrine the importance of reason, rules and regulations – and of hard facts, based on evidence. Effective organisation and good governance promise to create order in a chaotic world and make the job of serving the competing publics manageable. Bureaucracy's potential to produce fairness and equity means that it remains the dominant organisational form, but it is also one which generates jargon and darkness – languages and methods of communication which are exclusive and fragmenting, deadening rather than enlivening and muddy rather than transparent.

The chief executives we spoke to stressed the power of stories to articulate purpose, or social mission, in ways which can resonate across different professional or technical groups. Stories transcend the traditional communication methods of council papers laden with facts and figures.

As one of our interviewees told us 'it's difficult because our profession, you know, says that professionalism requires one to be detached and factual and rational and all those things ... but in reality to lead a group of people and get them engaged in something, you need to be a bit more than that.'

A dual challenge for chief executives becomes how to interpret a bewildering world for an organisational constituency that is itself characterised by enormous complexity. Storytelling is, therefore, one way in which chief executives make sense of their complex and often contradictory environments for staff, partners and for the wider community. As Barry Quirk has posed it, how do you turn a mass of critical people into a critical mass of people? Stories allow leaders to create a narrative about the challenges the organisation is facing and what it needs to do to overcome them.

connoisseurs of complexity: leadership and storytelling

As one interviewee said,

‘chief executives construct realities for other people and the way they marshal resources of information, of experiences from other places so they have a successful narrative for their management teams.’

As this suggests, stories are not morally neutral and can spring from different motives. A number of chiefs we spoke to raised an ethical concern about the ways that stories can be used to manipulate audiences. Stories can operate in a grey area between the desire to show leadership and the temptation to manufacture consent. As with other forms of managerial authority its use requires an ethical mindset.

A different image for the managerial leader therefore emerges. Rather than heroic decision-maker in full control of the levers of power in their organisation, a picture emerges of the need to be a ‘connoisseur of complexity and paradoxes’ (Czarniawska-Joerges and de Monthoux, 1994, p13), who is able to read and operate in a dynamic inter-organisational, social and political context.

establishing credentials

Anyone who has been to a SOLACE conference will have observed chief executives telling stories to each other as a means of establishing their credentials and building relationships. Occasionally this will even happen over a drink at the conference bar.

Chief executives in local government come from many different backgrounds and, in a UK context, rarely meet outside of their local or personal networks. We found that stories play a role in enabling chief executives to communicate directly about issues of common interest. Stories can be seen as capital to trade by way of displaying competency and experience; establishing licence to practice. Chief executives we spoke to volunteered examples which often contained the added frisson of competition. One chief described the practice as follows:

‘A little bit of preening, a little bit of one-upmanship, a little bit of establishing your credentials, a little bit of the unspoken ‘I’m fit to be in this company because I’ve also got a story I can trade’.’

Like most people in work, chief executives also trade stories about the people they work for. As one chief executive told us, ‘if you tell a Councillor Bloggs story when you’re sitting at the SOLACE conference you can bet somebody is going to try and trump it! Because their Councillor Bloggs is more of a lunatic than your Councillor Bloggs for sure! I mean the tale will get told in the best way but what we’re doing when we do that is we’re either letting off steam or we’re just trying to demonstrate that, you know, I’ve got a hard job back at the office because I’ve got these characters to live with just as much as you do.’

A former chief offered this interpretation:

‘These things often have mixed motives... it is a bit of a display, you have to hold your own, and if you’re in a peer group and you’re not talking about your situation in ways which are interesting and indicate you’re at the cutting edge, you know, people sort of... it’s a dramaturgical kind of situation and you either have to be in crisis or you have to be fighting the enemy or you have to be doing interesting things.’

connoisseurs of complexity: leadership and storytelling

Focusing on stories highlights the performative aspects of chief executives networking behaviour, and can give glimpses of the sociological dynamics of these groups. We found that stories offered a compelling way for chief executives to project and to reflect upon issues of common professional concern. Stories provide a means to access collective experience and to establish their right to group membership.

storytelling and learning

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that chief executives' peer-to-peer behaviour is simply competitive. Anyone who has been to a SOLACE conference will have observed chief executives telling stories to each other as a means of learning, support and mutual reassurance. Occasionally this too might happen over a drink at the conference bar...

Stories enable busy people to cut to the chase, to share common issues and to both learn and gain reassurance. This process is important both for highly experienced chief executives and for those still finding their feet.

'I remember, I think it was just before I became a chief executive hearing from a well known figure about one thing in particular he'd done, and I did it when I took the new job... and it bought me months of credit. It wouldn't have worked if he had just expressed it conceptually, rather than as a story... it wouldn't have stuck, or had an impact.'

Stories, therefore, play an important part in 'becoming' a manager.

Exchanging stories is also an informal – if routine – means of sense-checking their experience against others. Stories provide resources for reflection. 'When you share tales the biggest thing I notice is how recognisable the things that are troubling me are vis-à-vis the things that are troubling other people. I mean if I ever went to a conference and came away feeling they're all talking about something completely different from me, I mean, then I'd start to worry. And that's quite important because where else do you get that point of reference?'

Chief executives often speak about the isolation that they experience in their roles. It is among peers that they experience a safe environment in which they no longer feel the need to show leadership that they can expose cock ups, near misses and darkest fears. Stories also enable them to experience the intimacy they need from peers while expressing the distance they feel from others not in that group.

As one county chief said

'you're not in competition, not directly anyway with those people and you're not seen as being responsible for them or leading them. It's a much more relaxed dynamic.'

conclusion

The role of chief executive is a purposeful one and the stories they tell are expressions of purpose. Storytelling emerges as a well established culture within this context, but one that cuts against orthodox accounts of managerial and professional traditions in local government. It also suggests a different image of the chief executive. Stories reveal the human and emotional dynamics of leadership with effective chief executives acting as connoisseurs of context, not organisational engineers. Stories also offer resources for learning and reflection which can help leaders develop. Exchanging stories is part of how intimacy and closeness can develop between chiefs who can otherwise feel distant from others. Yet they can also be used in competitive ways, establishing pecking orders, acting as currency and to gain group membership. Our work suggests that while other forms of authority decline, the power of the story is alive.

connoisseurs of complexity: leadership and storytelling

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what political leaders do



Joe Simpson
Director of Politics and Partnerships
at the Leadership Centre
for Local Government

Leadership is now seen as the answer to problems. Find an issue and better leadership is now the proposed solution. Curiously most of this focus is on managerial leadership whilst interest in what we want or expect of political leadership has not been centre stage. Importing managerial notions into politics is unlikely to solve our problems, for the simple reason that we need political leaders to do different things from managerial leaders.

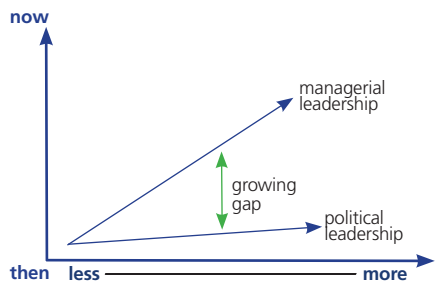
Minister for Local Government John Healey talks of the problems of political cross dressing when politicians and managers start trying to do each others jobs.

Another way of thinking of this distinction is the difference between organisational and social leadership.

Politicians don't run organisations, managers do. In democracies politicians are as powerful as people think they are, the power is in the eyes of the beholder.

The tale all politicians should remember is the story of the emperor and his new clothes.

John Nalbandian is Professor of Politics at the University of Kansas and was himself the mayor of his local town. Nalbandian talks about the difference as being about two different but parallel systems of logic (in summary the difference between the world of reports and the world of stories – of which more later). He also has a remarkably simple but effective summary of the growing disparity between investment in managerial and political leadership¹.

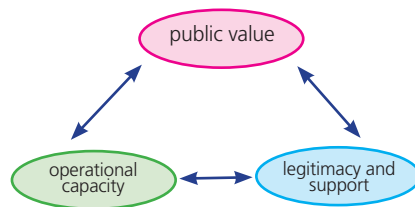


At the heart of politics is the resolution of conflicts of value and of interest, of multiple perspectives and perceived realities.

Throughout history there have only been three ways of such resolution – money, force or politics – but as history has told us in the long run neither money nor force alone work.

In the end we need politics. Like sausage making it might not be an edifying sight, but as with the food it's the end result we remember.

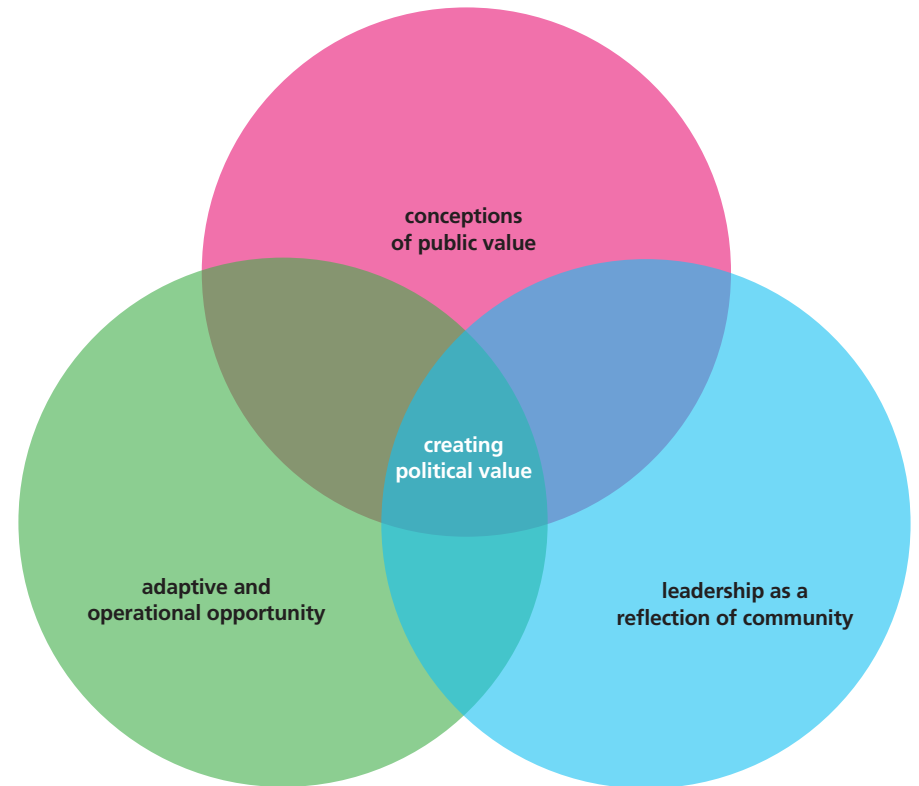
Bringing this alive in a modern context, one of the most used frameworks for assessing public administration is Mark Moore's famous strategic triangle²:



Mark Moore
creating public value

Moore saw his work as giving a strategic framework for public managers. At its simplest it's a brilliant guide for any young public manager. The way to success is have a good idea, know how to implement it and get your bosses backing to do it.

But consider the territory that politicians occupy. For me the triangle now looks more like overlapping circles.



what political leaders do

This is a world where concepts of public value are disputed, where there are no simple technical solutions to the challenges posed (and indeed where changes in public behaviour may be key to the solution) and where (even as the politician) we may be personally clear what the solution should be and how we should achieve it. That is only possible by securing public support for that course of action. (And of course others have radically different solutions). So if, à la Moore, creating public value should be the core purpose of public managers, then perhaps for politicians it should be creating political value.

Politics thus operates at three separate levels – of values and ends that have to be rationally argued; of ways of engaging people in addressing issues; and of ways of binding people together to accept outcomes. It follows that politics works at three levels – the world of reason, of psychology and also at a more socio-anthropological level.

As a slogan I say successful politicians are thinkers, fixers or communicators. Really great politicians may operate at two levels (and only in myths do we find those who do all three). Politics is a team sport – great political teams develop when all three skills are manifested within the team.

Of the three, the least needed are thinkers. This is not to say that politics is boorish (though it can often seem so). It is simply that of the three skills, 'thinking' is the easiest to acquire from elsewhere. That was after all the *raison d'être* of universities, and administrations have the whole of the public service to do policy. But secondly we know that the thing that most guarantees political defeat is when a party is gripped by internal battles about different big ideas about what their central purpose should be. Moreover the type of thinking required from politicians is not so much deep research (again better done by others) but the synthesis of ideas.

The one least commented on is that of the fixer. But at the heart of politics is the need to negotiate and to seek consensus (to find a deal that can stick). As a simple test I ask people which is the largest ministerial team in this (or indeed any recent) Government? Answers vary. Sometimes people think it must be the Treasury, or until the split into two departments, the Home Office as was. In fact it's the government whips, the people who ensure that government secures sufficient backing to achieve its objectives. Similarly around any leader there is normally some version of the kitchen cabinet – the inner sanctum where the deals are brokered.

The famous American Supreme Court Justice Wendell Holmes described Roosevelt as having a 'second class intellect, but a first class temperament'.

Even less charitably Roy Jenkins said of Jim Callaghan that he had never met anyone with such political nous who was so unintelligent. Meanwhile lots of managerial literature talks about 'politics' in very negative terms – as something rotten at the core of failing organisations. I think we need to celebrate not denigrate this political skill. Let's recall instead another famous political saying, that of Rab Butler,

'politics is the art of the possible'.

The third skill is that of the communicator. There is a lot of talk about the need for political narrative – a phrase I must confess I hate. When I go home at night my children normally ask me to read them a story. They have never asked me to tell them a narrative, so if we are talking about communication, let's at least use words that most people use and understand.

But this third skill itself has to work at these three different levels. One has to be able to articulate policies in ways that can be subject to critique – the story has to work in the world of reason. Secondly it has to be able to persuade.

what political leaders do

Politics is an emotive business, politics can inspire or build on (or even create) fears, sometimes doing both simultaneously. But thirdly political storytelling binds groups together; they create our sense of community. Even the language itself is critical. This is not just a case of the 'dog whistle' (a use of words which connect in code to different audiences) – consider the actual language chosen. In modern Belgium politics divides around language, with parallel parties and organisations between Flemish and French-speaking parts of the country. Here we have seen how questions of language have been critical to Irish nationalism, and how important the Welsh language question has been to sustaining Welsh nationalism.

But more generally stories are ways of interpreting the world, not scientific accounts. Let me quote from a character in 'Making History' (1988) by the Irish dramatist Brian Friel:

'If you are asking me will my story be as accurate as possible – of course it will. But are truth and falsity the correct criteria? I don't know. Maybe when the time comes my first responsibility will be to tell the best possible narrative. Isn't that what history is, a kind of story-telling?'

Political story telling is a way of both sense making and coalition binding (be they nations or voters). So to add to politics being the art of the possible it's also the art of the persuadable.

Let me conclude with one final comment about ambition. Thomas Balogh was one of the two famous 'Hungarian twins' who were key advisers to Harold Wilson. The other (Lord Kalogh) was a great thinker (and a major contributor to economic theory). Balogh was more worldly, believing in a what works approach.

His description of politicians was as follows:

'every politician worth his (her) salt believes that self-advancement is in the interests of the nation'.

We need to recognise this interplay of personal and political ambition as both part of the political DNA and as legitimate.

Nye Bevan told a story about himself. In his political career starting with his local trades council, and moving from county council to parliament to cabinet at each stage he saw power being held at the next level – so he aspired to that level to help make change, only to find at the end of his career – by then near the 'top' of the political ladder that power seemed to be behind him. Politics is about things that are ephemeral rather than tangible. Like the rainbow we can see it, it is in front of us, but it's illusive.

1: Adapted from John Nalbandian's numerous presentations and publication, based on 'Politics and Administration in Local Government', *International Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 29, 2006

2: Moore, Mark H 1995. 'Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government'. Cambridge (Mass): Harvard University Press

recruiting political leaders



(left) Jo Silvester
Professor of Organisational
Psychology at City University London
and (right) Christina Dykes
Political Director (Conservative)
at the Leadership Centre
for Local Government

There's something provocative about the idea of recruiting political leaders. Politicians are elected aren't they? Doesn't their democratic mandate to lead depend on them being voted into power by a large number of people rather than appointed by a few? Well yes and no. In most Western countries people who wish to represent a political party in local or national government must first undergo one or more selection processes. Political parties are the gatekeepers to political roles. They decide who does or does not

possess the qualities necessary to become a future political leader. They are therefore also responsible for attracting and selecting the best possible candidates. To do this effectively, however, each political party needs a clear vision of what they mean by excellent political leadership (i.e. the behaviour they expect from candidates once elected), the knowledge, skills and values that candidates require, and robust and fair methods for identifying men and women most likely to deliver it. Put simply, the aim of political recruitment should not only be to win elections, but to ensure that the public can vote for elected representatives from a pool of the best possible candidates.

Until now political selection processes have remained shrouded in mystery. Little is known about the criteria used by the parties to judge the political capabilities of potential candidates and, perhaps not surprisingly, political selection has been criticised for being subjective and biased. In fairness to the political parties, however, there has until now been very little evidence to support objective decision making. Unlike our understanding of the selection criteria for managerial

leadership virtually no study has been made of the qualities that predict excellent political leadership (Silvester, 2008a). The absence of a supportive evidence base makes it difficult to counter decisions based on personal preferences, assumptions and stereotypes. There is therefore a clear need to understand the qualities and behaviour associated with excellent political leadership in order to support political parties in their use of robust, objective and fair selection processes to deliver candidates and politicians of the highest calibre.

the next generation study of political leaders

Over the past two years we have been investigating the psychological characteristics associated with excellent political leadership as part of the Next Generation programme run by the Leadership Centre for Local Government. This programme lasts for 12 months and is aimed at councillors in executive or shadow executive positions who, given a fair wind, may expect further advancement. Separate programmes for Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative councillors enable politicians to focus on issues and values relevant to their party. As part of the programme all

participants have been offered confidential psychological profiling and 360-degree reviews based on a political leadership questionnaire and 360-degree review developed by Silvester (2008b). With the consent of those taking part we have been able to use the data provided by 114 politicians from all three parties, and 620 of their political colleagues, officers and constituents, to explore two questions. First, do people share a common view about what is meant by 'good political leadership' for local politicians? Second, are there certain psychological characteristics (e.g. motivation, personality, political skill) that predict others' judgements of their effectiveness as a political leader?

To date there have only been three published studies of how individual differences influence politician behaviour, and only one of these found a link with performance. This study found that critical thinking skills and communication ability measured three years earlier predicted the percentage swing and proportion of votes achieved by prospective Parliamentary candidates in the 2005 General Election (Silvester and Dykes, 2007).

recruiting political leaders

The Next Generation study builds on this earlier work by looking at the political leadership styles of elected politicians, and by investigating a wider range of psychological characteristics including leadership style, Machiavellianism and political efficacy.

modelling political leadership

With information provided by more than 700 politicians, officers and members of the public it was possible to determine statistically that each of these groups associate the same behaviours with political leadership. The shared view was that political leadership has two main components and seven subcomponents (see figure 1). We labelled the two main components 'leading' and 'politiking' based on the type of behaviours that people associated with them. Leading emerged as a positive aspect of political leadership, which involves inspiring and motivating others, building relationships, and communicating. It has four subcomponents: 'reputation' (being seen as a role model and sought out for advice), 'cohesion' (building relationships with political colleagues, officers and other groups), 'coping' (dealing with competing demands and areas), and 'communication

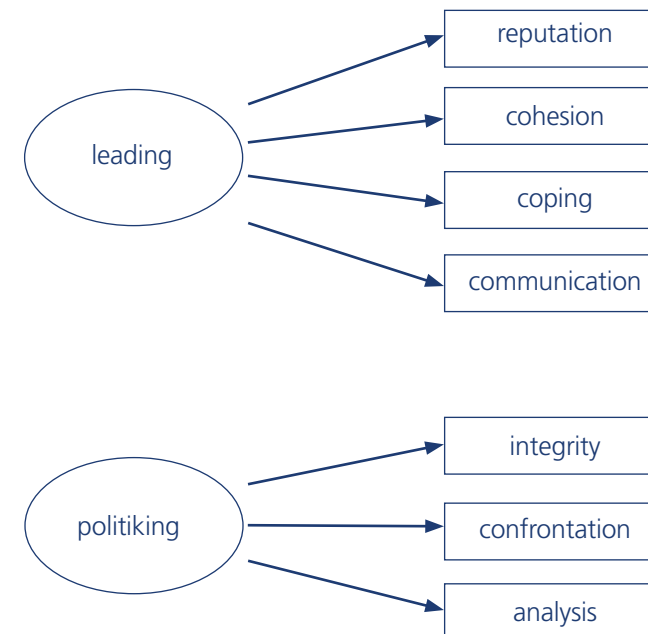
skills'. In comparison politiking was judged a more negative aspect of political leadership. Its three subcomponents were: 'integrity', 'confrontation' and 'analytical skills'. Integrity and analytical skills were both inversely related to politiking, such as low integrity (a willingness to compromise values and win for self rather than others) and low analytical skills (difficulty in dealing with complex information) were associated with high levels of politiking, as were high levels of 'confrontation' (willingness to challenge others to engage in political blood sports).

In addition, we were able to use information from a specially designed 360-degree political review process looking at whether politicians' self-rated personality, leadership style and motivation predicted how officers, political colleagues and constituents rated their performance. We found that those politicians who described themselves as more socially astute, more likely to network and use transformational leadership styles, and as more capable of influencing political outcomes, were rated by others as better political leaders. We also found that politicians who rated themselves lower on

conscientiousness, networking and transformational leadership were judged by others as more likely to use 'politicking'. Finally we also found differences between the way in which male and female politicians were judged, and between ratings for younger and older councillors. Specifically, women received equal performance ratings to men from officers, political colleagues and constituents in all areas except integrity (where they were rated

higher) and confrontation (where they were rated lower). This means that in comparison to male politicians women were judged less likely to engage in politiking behaviour. In addition younger politicians were rated lower on integrity than older politicians, but higher on analytical skills. Interestingly, younger politicians also rated themselves higher on Machiavellianism.

figure 1:
model of political leadership



recruiting political leaders

how can this help us recruit political leaders?

This study of elected politicians provides the first evidence that people (including politicians, officers and members of the public) share a common understanding of the behaviours associated with good political leadership. It also provides support for the idea that relatively stable psychological characteristics can predict political leadership style. This does not rule out the importance of context. Rather it suggests that politicians will show a preference for a particular style, and that this may be more or less effective depending on the political situations they find themselves in. As such, these results can inform decisions about the design of robust selection processes for political candidates, as well as the development and support they are likely to require. The association between transformational leadership style and good political leadership is particularly interesting given that the original work on transformational leadership by Burns was inspired by politicians rather than managers ('Leadership', 1978). This is clearly an area worth exploring further.

However, the findings also raise important questions: To what extent is politicking a necessary part of politics? Do effective political leaders need to demonstrate both leading and politicking at different stages of their political career? How does the political environment influence the need for different political leadership styles? Do politicians in opposition need to engage in more politicking than those in power, and is there more politicking behaviour generally in the run up to an election rather than mid-term? More importantly should political parties seek to match political candidates to seats based on a fit between individual characteristics and the situational needs of the seat?

George Bernard Shaw once commented that,

'democracy substitutes election by the incompetent many for appointment by the corrupt few'

('Man and Superman', 1903).

Yet in reality the most successful democratic elections depend on the ability of political parties to attract and select the best possible candidates. We would therefore very much like to hear from anyone who is interested in helping with ongoing research into the qualities and characteristics associated with excellent political leadership.

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Christina Dykes is a Political Director (Conservative) of the Leadership Centre for Local Government and is in her third year as director of the Conservative cohort. She has recently successfully completed training at the Tavistock Centre to be a political coach. In addition Christina has worked with Dominic Grieve QC MP for the last five years and is now his special policy adviser.

Jo Silvester is Professor of Organisational Psychology at City University London. Her interests focus on political leadership and how political leaders can be identified, selected and developed. Jo has worked with the IDEa, the Leadership Centre and CLG and has been responsible for creating the Political Skills Framework, 360-reviews for councillors and development centres for cabinet members. For more information about this research, political-360 and copies of papers cited here please email jo.silvester.1@city.ac.uk.

councillors, officers and citizens – a study of differences



Judy Billing
Political Leadership Adviser at the
Improvement and Development
Agency (IDeA)

background

Throughout the years of focussing on local government improvement, a great deal of attention has been paid to the vitally important relationships between councillors and officers, and their respective effectiveness as leaders.

The regular census of local councillors and more recently the Councillors' Commission (2007) have highlighted the issues of age, race and gender which suggest that for better or worse councillors do not accurately

reflect the communities they represent. Less attention has been paid to the arguably even more important relationships which both councillors and officers at all levels are able to forge with the citizens they serve. These are at least as much about personality and style as they are about gender, age and ethnicity. To achieve the best outcomes councillors and officers need to understand how they are perceived and why. They also need to explore the most effective ways of communicating with their citizens.

For several years now the IDeA Leadership Academy has been using the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to help leading councillors explore their own personality preferences and styles in order both to increase their own self-awareness and also their awareness of others. This work has been almost universally appreciated by the councillors whose 'eureka' moments of self-understanding have been one of the major learning planks of the Leadership Academy. A greatly fortunate unintended consequence of this work has been the collection of personality reference data on more than 1500 leading councillors, which in 2007 formed the basis of some

new research called Politicians and Personality (IDeA, 2007) which for the first time explored the differences between councillors and those they represent.

Further work has since been published by IDeA and Ashridge Management College (2008) which adds to this fund of information a study of the personality preferences and styles of middle managers in local government. The collation of all this data leads to some fascinating and quite stark information which is ignored by officers and councillors at their peril.

the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator

Amongst the many psychometric, style and personality preference instruments the MBTI stands out as a familiar tool throughout industry, commerce and the public sector and is equally useful for individual personal development and group development for work teams, political groups and organisations. Based on the work of Carl Jung, developed and researched for over 50 years by the Myers–Briggs family and associates, it identifies four dichotomies leading to the personality preferences which, it is argued, are inborn – but are then

of course subject to life experiences and modifications through age and experience.

Whilst the indicator identifies 16 main personality types there is of course infinite difference within and between those types. Peoples' individual preferences exist on a continuum of Very Strong preference to Very Minor preference, and whilst this article is unable to extend beyond the generalities of the research this must always be borne in mind by those developing their own self-awareness and seeking to apply the research.

The four dichotomies can be most simply described as:

1. where people prefer to focus their attention and get their energy (extraversion and introversion)
2. the way in which people take in information, and which information they trust (sensing and intuition)
3. how people prefer to take decisions (thinking and feeling)
4. how people like to live their lives (judging and perceiving)

councillors, officers and citizens – a study of differences

the really interesting findings

The two studies were extraordinarily fruitful in identifying a wide range of dilemmas and dichotomies for both councillors and managers in their relationships with the citizens they serve. I will highlight here those which give the strongest and perhaps starkest of messages – those which should give both councillors and managers the greatest food for thought and opportunity for reflection on how they as individuals, and their organisations as a matter of generality, communicate with the public.

the basic preferences:

1. extraversion and introversion:

People with a preference for extraversion draw their energy from the external world of people things and actions, whilst people with a preference for Introversion draw energy from their internal world of ideas, thoughts and concepts.

extraversion	introversion
councillors 68%	councillors 32%
managers 61%	managers 39%
UK population 52%	UK population 48%

It is clear from these figures that councillors, and to a lesser extent managers, are a considerably more extroverted bunch than the citizens they represent and serve. Whilst this might not be surprising it gives considerable food for thought about the ways in which they engage, consult and communicate with the populations they serve. We can also see some cause for irritation and misunderstanding by officers when less than a third of councillors prefer to pause and reflect before sharing their opinions.

2. sensing and iNtuition¹:

People with a preference for sensing like to have specific and detailed information from which to understand the here and now, whilst people with a preference for iNtuition like to know the bigger picture and deal with a future focus.

sensing	iNtuition
councillors 50%	councillors 50%
managers 48%	managers 52%
UK population 76%	UK population 24%

It is quite clear from these figures that, whilst half of councillors and managers are most comfortable in the realm of visioning and blue-sky thinking and therefore happy to share in the process of developing council visions and strategies. But this is an area where they could be a long way from the far more practical 'here and now' focus of the general public. Hard facts and services like the efficient removal of waste, graffiti and faulty street-lights will generally be of more concern to citizens.

3. thinking and feeling:

People with a preference for thinking prefer to make decisions on the basis of logic, reason and a business case, whilst people who have a preference for feeling need to know the impact on people of the decision to be made.

thinking	feeling
councillors 67%	councillors 33%
managers 84%	managers 16%
UK population 46%	UK population 54%

Another case for considerable reflection. Citizens often give the impression that they don't find local government managers, and sometimes councillors, responsive to their personal needs. These figures, which describe how the different groups prefer to make decisions, show a wide gulf between local government generally and its citizens which can lead to tremendous misunderstanding if not taken into account.

The thinking/feeling disparity between councillors and managers is often visible in areas where a councillor is acting as an advocate for a constituent and officers are dealing with the statistically based objectivity of the whole area.

4. judging and perceiving:

People with a preference for judging prefer to live an organised and structured life with clear goals, defined outcomes and a schedule, whilst people with a preference for perceiving prefer open-ended plans with flexibility and options to be amended as they go.

councillors, officers and citizens – a study of differences

judging	perceiving
councillors 56%	councillors 44%
managers 66%	managers 34%
UK population 58%	UK population 42%

Here we see that the councillors and those they represent seem pretty evenly split between those who prefer a planned and organised life and those who prefer greater spontaneity. The local government managers however seem to be a generally far more planned and organised bunch. These officers may find both councillors and constituents less organised than they would wish, particularly in response to phone messages, letters and emails.

evidence from the quadrants

The permutations of type preferences as described above lead to the definition of 16 basic types of people with a set of recognised preferences. These can be further examined in four main quadrants: The extraverted/sensing, introverted/sensing, extraverted/iNtuitive and introverted/iNtuitive. These show further and quite stark differences between those who inhabit local government, and those who populate real places!

The table below, with its proposed mottos for the four groups clearly shows some of these dichotomies:

<p>IS thoughtful realist</p> <p>councillors 18% UK population 39% manager 23%</p> <p>'if it ain't broke don't fix it!'</p>	<p>IN thoughtful innovator</p> <p>councillors 14% UK population 9% manager 17%</p> <p>'let's think ahead'</p>
<p>ES action oriented realist</p> <p>councillors 32% UK population 37% manager 25%</p> <p>'let's just do it'</p>	<p>EN action oriented innovator</p> <p>councillors 36% UK population 15% manager 35%</p> <p>'let's change it!'</p>

Clearly there are issues for local government councillors and managers to consider when only 15 per cent of the UK population is likely to share the enthusiasm of the councillors and managers for change, some might argue for its own sake, and the largest population group, the thoughtful realists, really might want very little change at all.

This fact alone has resonated strongly with groups of councillors who suddenly realise that all their exciting plans, visions and strategies are not universally applauded by their constituents for this particularly strong reason, whatever the merits of the change proposed.

The MBTI must never of course be used to promote or define stereotypes, but the 10 per cent gap between local government managers and the UK population on 'action orientated realism' ('Lets just do it!') could also explain some common misconceptions between citizens and their town halls.

conclusions

It may not be surprising that the attributes and motivations which drive people to become councillors or local government officers differ in a number of ways to those which drive the population as a whole. Debates often take place as to whether affirmative action should be taken to improve the representative nature of councillors in relation to gender, age and ethnic background, but no-one would suggest that personality preferences should be more evenly distributed.

What this research and these insights can do however is to improve radically the self-awareness of councillors and local government officers about the ways in which they may be perceived and the very special care which they need to take to ensure that their communications and relationships with the public are more sensitive, productive, acceptable and comprehensible. In this way small adjustments to the way we work could lead to a large leap in the reputation of local government and the councillors and officers who inhabit its spaces and places. And that's on top of all the other things they need to do!

1 In Myers-Briggs typology iNtuition is expressed by a capital N to distinguish in from introversion. Strange but true.

Green, M. (2007) Politicians and Personality: a councillor's guide to understanding difference working more effectively getting your message across, London: Improvement and Development Agency

Gribben, C., Holton, V. and Woudstra-Van Grondelle, I. (2008) 'Middle Managers and Personality: a guide for middle managers in local government to understanding difference, working more effectively, getting your message across', London: Improvement and Development Agency

developing our leaders of tomorrow



Councillor Margaret Eaton OBE
City of Bradford Metropolitan
District Council

When I was first elected as a Conservative councillor in 1986 I never dreamt that I would still be an elected member over 20 years later.

As leader of Bradford Council for six years (from May 2000) I can tell you that no two days are the same and that nothing could have prepared me for some of the tasks I faced. So how can we best equip our future leaders of local government?

To answer this question we primarily need to consider what forms the role of a councillor – a vocation; a public service; or sometimes a full-time job? The more we can understand the role of a councillor, whether a back bencher or a council leader, the better we can attempt to safeguard this paramount aspect of our democracy. There are some very good documents around that outline what being an elected representative of your community is all about. I would argue that all councillors are community leaders, by the very nature of their election, and I would suspect that in the majority of cases it is fair to say that this is what initially draws people to local government – the power to change things for the better of your community.

Good leadership in the council benefits the local community by creating a vision of a better place and then delivering it effectively. Residents and businesses in our communities, for the most part, do not care about council structures and styles. Their main concern is value for money in public services, and this should remain the priority for any leader in local government now and increasingly so for the future.

This reinforces the fundamental need for local discretion – leaders need to champion the local dimension at every opportunity.

We also need to pause for thought about the changing context of local government. The society we live in at the moment is arguably far more divided and in need of quality leadership more than ever before. There is also a greater focus on outcomes for our local communities and therefore on the importance of customer service. Working in partnership to better achieve these outcomes more effectively is something that we can identify as a trend, along with the favourite ‘buzz word’ of the day – innovation.

I would suggest that we do not need a government white paper to tell us that we need to work with our communities more to deliver for our residents. However, some of the issues around engagement that have been raised recently, especially with those who feel disillusioned with politics, do ring true and supporting local government leaders of the future will include much work to proactively address some of these complex concerns.

Leaders as elected members of our communities, are accountable to their residents and this, lest we forget, is the ultimate measure of success. Whether you are a back bencher in opposition or the leader of the council, you will be judged on the demonstrable work you have done for your community and, arguably the leadership you have displayed in your ward and your council.

supporting community leaders

If we start with the principle that all elected members are community leaders, how are we currently supporting them? There are some excellent national development leadership programmes that are run by the LGA Group and an increasing number of councils are starting to invest in the future of their members through internal and external training. There is a substantial role for political parties to play in supporting their elected members and especially those with significant leadership potential; as the former Chairman of the Conservative Councillors’ Association I feel I must declare an interest at this point!

developing our leaders of tomorrow

Another form of support that cannot be underestimated is the sharing of collective experience and putting this to good use – the term ‘best practice’ seems to be increasingly unfashionable, yet it is still an important component of how councillors can learn from each others wealth of experience and expertise.

The Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and the Leadership Centre for Local Government have done much to support those councillors who have significant talent and ambition, yet are not yet in official leadership positions. The IDeA Leadership Academy has an impressive track record with councillors and has also sponsored a ‘fast track’ programme for councillors under 35. The Leadership Centre for Local Government’s Next Generation scheme has focused on developing leadership skills for councillors through the three main political parties. The strengths of these programmes, whenever you speak to any of the many who have graduated from them, is the opportunity to talk to counterparts in different councils and other political parties, who are generally facing the same issues, although perhaps with varying contexts and different backgrounds.

There is need to mention the role of council officers in supporting councillors. The recent white paper has gone some way to clarifying that the old excuse around a request being ‘too political’ is less valid and officers are increasingly signing up to the fact that they need to commit to go the extra mile to assist councillors to carry out the work that they have been elected to do. The IDeA is currently putting together a framework to help councils support their elected members, including items such as providing basic administrative assistance.

leadership for the future

I have touched on some of the national programmes that aim to shape leaders of the future for local government and I hope that these will continue to thrive – the demand for places is an optimistic indicator. Also, councillor mentoring projects between different councils are incredibly useful – allowing leaders to discuss helpful new perspectives on the issues that they face.

Another aspect where we could perhaps do more is in recognising talent – which would allow the sector to tailor more relevant support, at an earlier stage. The national improvement bodies of all genres will play a role in this, but it is vital for political parties to play a leading role in considering the calibre of their local government candidates and therefore it is crucial that they have a considerable pool of gifted potential candidates to choose from.

Some would argue that local government leadership across the sector has changed over recent years – leaning more towards leadership in partnership (with local area agreements; councils as commissioners of services rather than providers; local strategic partnerships to name a few aspects). This shift in the leadership needs of local authorities does mean that our support to leaders of the future needs to react accordingly, yet this does not take away from the importance of training in some of the more traditional leadership skills and the all important charisma of the individual. The ability to provide a clear, strategic vision, to manage a team and to successfully build relationships can, to a certain degree,

all be learnt; although where this is intrinsic, we need to make sure that this is nurtured and allowed to flourish.

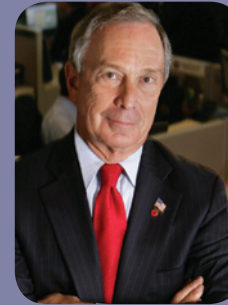
When considering local government leadership support for the future, it would seem that a more proactive approach to stimulating the leadership development market is in demand. This is already the case in the private sector, where genuinely innovative leadership development techniques are constantly emerging. By ‘market-making’ we can ensure that other providers fill the gaps with more relevant leadership development programmes. For example, linking up graduate development programmes across the public sector would be a massive step forward.

developing our leaders of tomorrow

As the sphere of influence of local government has grown, especially over the last few years, others are perhaps more likely to accept the concept of a 'career' in local government. The perception that being a councillor is merely a stepping stone to becoming a member of parliament is on the decline – people are waking up to the fact that it is local government where genuine leadership thrives – for example, it is council leaders who are controlling multi-million pound budgets and driving large scale regeneration projects that will shape generations to come. This would account for the renewed focus on leadership in local government and is yet another dimension that will challenge leaders in the future.

The best place to learn about leadership is to talk to those who have been there, whether through a mentoring programme or informally at one of the many local government social functions. Many of us have faced the same challenges, been through some of the same problems and come out the other side, so why not adapt our tried and tested solutions for yourself or hear about some of the theories that did not work in practice. To that end, please do not hesitate to contact me or any of my distinguished colleagues who have contributed to this booklet. I hope that you have found it helpful, regardless of which stage you are at on your leadership journey.

a letter from America



Michael R Bloomberg
Mayor of the City of New York

'This is the Conservative Party's candidate for Mayor of London?'

That was the first thought that ran through my head when I met Boris Johnson at the Party's annual conference last year in Blackpool, which I attended at the invitation of David Cameron. Boris certainly didn't look or sound like a politician — but then again, neither did I when I first campaigned to become Mayor of New York in 2001.

Back then, the pundits had a field-day lampooning my campaign. They said I was inexperienced, which was true. They said I was a walking verbal gaffe, which was no less true.

And they said I had no chance of winning, which certainly seemed true.

But New Yorkers in 2001, as with Londoners in 2008, were more sophisticated than they were given credit for by the chattering class.

In each case, voters looked beyond superficial tabloid stories and marked their ballots for the candidate they believed most capable of fresh leadership on a host of critical issues, including a struggling economy and the spectre of rising crime.

When I was in London a few weeks ago, I met Boris to discuss our shared challenges, and I offered him a few bits of advice that have served me well in New York:

Hire the best — and give them room to innovate. Mayors, like CEOs, are only as good as their teams. In politics, hiring tends to centre on party and financial relationships, which is a recipe for mediocrity. Of course, if you want to attract the best and brightest, you also must give them the opportunity to be creative.

a letter from America

Mayors and CEOs who micro-manage operations stifle innovation. In both the public and private sector, the best leaders are those who are not afraid to try new ideas, no matter which party proposes them.

Do the hard things first. Incoming mayors, like incoming presidents and prime ministers, enjoy a honeymoon. In many cases, politicians worry about how to extend the honeymoon for as long as possible. That's exactly the wrong approach. The honeymoon is the best time to push through the most controversial priorities, because if you delay, you fail to give people sufficient time to see the benefits of your work.

For instance, I banned smoking in all workplaces in my first year in office. It was terribly controversial, but over time it proved spectacularly successful — and popular. Had I waited a few years, city council members might not have been willing to risk their re-election by passing the law. As it turned out, there were few critics left by the time we all ran for re-election.

Remember La Guardia. New York's greatest mayor, Fiorella La Guardia, famously said that there is no Democratic or Republican way of cleaning the streets. Leave the ideological battles and party politics to the national legislators. Mayors are elected to be doers, not debaters. Voters want clean streets, good schools, affordable housing and — above all — safe neighbourhoods. Boris has wisely made public safety a top priority, and his decision to ban alcohol on public transport was a brilliant stroke. Our crime-fighting success in New York has centred on the same kind of 'zero tolerance' for petty crimes, as well as on targeted, data-driven law enforcement that utilises the most advanced technological tools. Today, New York City is the safest big city in America, and we have done it with fewer officers and in the face of rising crime across the nation. I am confident that Boris can achieve similar success in London if he champions the same approach — and he's already got me beat in helping the police net a knife-wielding youth.

Make accountability a trademark.

Accountability is part of the private sector's genetic code, but in government it is still largely a foreign concept. Mayors can create a culture of accountability by insisting that data drives decisions and by making it public, because people will use it to demand change; and by thinking like a customer. When I came into office, if you wanted to call the city to report a pothole or a broken streetlight, you had to look through hundreds of listings in the telephone book and then call around until you got the right person. With the creation of a 24-hour hotline, staffed by operators who speak 170 different languages, New Yorkers can now report those problems — or find out information on any government programme or policy — simply by dialing 311.

When I met with Boris what I found most encouraging about him — and I see this in many new mayors I meet in the US — was that he has not yet learned what he can't do. In both business and government, that is the greatest of all assets. In December 2005, after two New York City police officers were gunned down on our streets, I was told that mayors cannot do anything about the interstate trafficking of illegal guns; it's a national problem requiring a national response.

So be it: over the past two years, Boston Mayor Tom Menino and I have organised a national bipartisan coalition of Mayors Against Illegal Guns, and our numbers have grown from 15 to more than 320.

We haven't yet solved the problem, but we have already begun to change policy in Washington and develop regional partnerships that will allow us to do together what the federal government should be doing on its own.

The limits on a mayor's ability to act are constrained only by the imagination, and mayors can find support for creative new solutions by tapping the private sector. Business leaders have a stake in the quality of services that municipal governments provide because a city's quality of life is a critical factor in companies' ability to attract the best and brightest — and that is growing truer by the day.

As the flow of capital and labour becomes ever more fluid, cities are competing like never before to offer the safest streets, the fastest mass transit, the greenest parks, and the most exciting nightclubs, theatres, museums and galleries. New York and London still retain substantial advantages in these areas in comparison to other financial capitals, but as those other cities work to catch up, they will become increasingly attractive places for multinational companies to invest. That is why it is critical for New York and London not only to continue improving the social conditions that attract talent, but also the economic conditions that companies consider when making investment decisions.

Kindly reproduced from advice from Mayor Bloomberg to Mayor Johnson, in The Spectator Magazine, 2008.

