

# **REFORMING LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN ENGLAND: AN EXAMINATION OF THE BLAIRITE AGENDA**

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*This article examines the impact of the reformist agenda implemented in English local government since the election in 1997 of the first Blair government. Under 18 years of Conservative administrations (1979-1997), English local government had survived what some described as a legislative onslaught which had been designed to direct, control and remove functions from local authorities. Against this background, the first Blair administration inherited a system of local government upon which it would depend for key policy implementation. However, many within the Blair inner circles were deeply suspicious as to the motivations and capacity of local government to deliver on these key policies. The result therefore was a widespread overall of how local authorities were to be managed and importantly how they were to connect with their respective communities. As the article will examine, one of the key strategies for achieving Blair's objectives was to be, in terms of the UK, both a radical and controversial innovation. Central to the Blairite agenda was the introduction to the UK of the concept of a directly elected mayor.*

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## **Context.**

The Thatcher and Major administration's view of local government can be succinctly summed up by quoting a knowledgeable source in the form of a former Cabinet member thus:

"Only about 25% of the electorate vote in local elections. And all they do is treat it as a popularity poll on the political leaders in Westminster ... Nobody knows who their local councillor is. And the councillors know nobody knows who they are. Or what they do. So they spend four totally unaccountable years on a publicly subsidised ego trip, handing out ratepayers hard earned money to subsidise lesbian awareness courses and borough pet watch schemes to combat cat theft. They ruin the schools, they let the inner cities fall to bits, they demoralise the police and undermine law and order."

A more academic interpretation is offered by Wilson and Doig who note:

"Successive Conservative governments between 1979-97 viewed local authorities with considerable hostility, generally regarded them as inefficient, unresponsive and monopolistic bureaucracies." (2000, p.58)

Against this somewhat negative view, we can contrast the optimistic stance offered by the then chief executive of a major metropolitan local authority in 1990 who ventured:

“We have a wider role to play in society which we have tended to neglect, other than our statutory conditions. We are not the sum of our strategic parts, because we are the only effective democratic voice of the local community. There is no other, and there is unlikely to be another ... I mean I’m hoping that members will see that in due course, far from having their role diminished, they have a wider role.”

A contemporary angle to this view is offered by Wilson thus:

“Elected local government in the United Kingdom is now one part of an elected mosaic of agencies concerned with community governance. In the past two decades its role has as a *direct* service provider has declined markedly. Partnerships at local level have increased: elected local authorities now ‘share the turf’ with a wide range of non-elected agencies.” (2005, p.155) (Emphasis in original)

It could be argued that despite the inherent optimism contained in the chief executives words, he should nevertheless be considered to have been a visionary. Indeed, at the time he made the comment, he was widely credited, along with a ‘New’ Labour council (some four years before Blair et al coined the term.) of taking a former traditional, Victorian municipal corporation, transforming it into a ‘model’ local authority which won many plaudits. Recognition for the success of the transformation – which blazed a trail for entrepreneurial local government embracing sustainable community development – came from across the political spectrum – and to some extent served as a ‘test bed’ for some of the local government goals later championed by the Blair administration.

### **The Conservative legacy.**

It is generally agreed that following the election of the first Thatcher administration in 1979, local government in Great Britain (and indeed the public sector as a whole) underwent, and in fact is still undergoing, profound change (Flynn, 2002; Hughes, 2003; Isaac-Henry et al, 1997; Pollitt, 2003). Indeed, as Bennis et al (1976) and Waterman (1988) observed, the 'only constant is change'. Quirk (1991), then assistant chief executive of the London borough of Lewisham, indeed argued that 'transformation' rather than 'change' is the appropriate term to apply to local government.

Despite Quirk's (1991) qualifications about the extent and nature of the change experienced by local government, there has undoubtedly been a fundamental reappraisal of the nature and role of the public sector. Traditional values, structures and practices have been challenged by models whose philosophical bases rest firmly within the private business sector. Public administration has to some extent been replaced by public management, and even more fundamentally, services are now customer or client led rather than provider led (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992).

Flynn (2002) accredits much of this change to the rise of the ideas of the 'New Right' within British politics, who gave intellectual rigour to the aspirations of the Thatcher administrations. The agenda of the 'New Right' contained four principal planks: the curtailment of the growth in public expenditure; a belief in the workings of the free market; enhancement of individual choice and the development of 'self-reliance'; and the ending of what they saw as the 'nanny state', meaning the targeting of resources to those groups in society deemed to be in genuine need of the welfare state's expenditure.

Although this paper is concerned solely with one specific arm of the public sector, the local government system in England, both the general features of the change process, and indeed the outcomes of the process, are equally applicable to the local government systems in Scotland and Wales, and indeed to other parts of the public sector. It can be argued further that the general findings are applicable to the public sectors in other countries. Batley and Stoker (1991), Denters and Rose (2005) and Pollitt (2003), writing about the management of change in local authorities in different countries, all relay similar examples of the management of change to those identified in this study. In order to get an adequate grasp of this change process, it is necessary initially to examine the major

changes that have affected local authorities before the actual management of change process can be addressed.

The real extent of the Conservative governments reform agenda can be seen in the fact that in the UK between 1979 and 1997 there were 210 Acts of Parliament which were directly concerned with the activities of local authorities (Wilson and Game, 2003). Such an active legislative agenda led Davis (1988) to suggest that local government was in effect 'under siege', whilst Wilson and Game (2003) observe that the ability of local authorities to comprehend and accommodate wave after wave of change represents a fundamental cultural shift for them. Indeed, the ability of local authorities to encompass such a concerted period of intense change, all the while retaining their respective corporate identities, speaks volumes for the qualities exhibited by both the elected representatives – the councillors, and of the calibre of managers recruited and retained by English local authorities.

Whilst it would not be appropriate in this paper to detail the minutiae of the Conservative legislation, it is worth noting in a general sense the line of attack successive Acts of Parliament took in an attempt to emasculate local authorities – unsuccessfully in the eyes of the writer. Indeed it might be appropriate to liken the relationship to the one enjoyed by the cartoon characters Tom and Jerry. No matter what pains Tom (the Conservative Government) seeks to afflict on Jerry (local government), Tom never managed to 'kill' Jerry – despite all his efforts. To a certain extent though, despite the obvious frustrations of Conservative Environment/Secretaries (the UK Cabinet Minister charged with responsibility for local government) this situation was one deemed to be beneficial to central government.

Certainly in the UK, there has been a trend for the political composition of local government in general to be opposite that of Parliament. Hence during the period 1979-1997, whilst Parliament had a Conservative majority, local government was generally dominated by the other two main political parties, Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Hence, policies developed and implemented within local government deemed to be outside the accepted (central government) 'norms' or those committing to additional expenditure could be easily be blamed away on inefficient Labour or Liberal Democrat regimes within local government. As such, there are a number of examples where local authorities were openly recognised to have been wasteful and woefully badly run – both politically and managerially – which were left to fester because it suited the cause of the Conservative Government. Cases which jump out here are Liverpool in the 1980's; several inner London boroughs and Hull City Council – more of which later.

As the majority of these failing local authorities were Labour controlled, it is clear to see that Blair et al, with their modernising, efficient new broom could not afford politically or practically, to allow this woeful state to continue to exist. Hence, reform of local government was a very hot topic after Labours election victory in 1997.

### **The New Labour Agenda**

Whilst in Opposition between 1979 and 1997 the Labour Party vigorously opposed the legislation introduced by the Thatcher and Major administrations which was designed to reform local government. The Labour Party argued that this legislation was basically aimed at 'neutering' local government, and was being implemented by a Conservative Government which was bent on centralising state power. Indeed Travers (1996) observed that despite Thatcher's general anti-government, laissez-faire stance, her actions, towards local government at least, were more controlling and dictatorial than those exhibited by Stalin.

To a certain extent it can be argued that the position of local government was seriously weakened by this torrent of legislation. The ability of local government to raise revenue and then to spend it was effectively removed with the imposition of a system of universal 'capping'. Under the capping

regime, a complex formula was used by central government to determine exactly what each local authority needed to spend in order to provide a 'standard' level of service – a most unscientific, Weberian process if ever there was one. Further, it is now difficult to identify a single local authority department or service that remotely resembles what it looked like in 1979.

Yet, it can be argued that such 'reformed' departments and services were lucky. The Conservative Government actually resorted to abolishing certain authorities it felt were neither reformable nor necessary. Hence, if you look at a map of local government in England, you will not find an authority called the Greater London Council (GLC) nor one called West Midlands Metropolitan County Council - both were abolished in 1986, along with 5 other metropolitan counties. The GLC was a particularly difficulty for the Conservatives, with its leader, Ken Livingstone being a particular thorn in the side of Margaret Thatcher's government. Upon losing his position as Leader of the GLC, Livingstone subsequently became a London Labour MP, and as we shall see later, upon Blair's victory in 1997, somewhat acrimoniously became the elected mayor of London, much to Blair's annoyance. Despite such draconian actions though, the Conservatives were constitutionally correct in their actions. The United Kingdom is a unitary state, as such it has a single source of legitimate authority, the legislature, which of course consists of both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Hence, any legislation which is approved by both Houses of Parliament becomes law.

When the Labour Government were elected to office in May 1997 they pledged to radically reform both the way in which Whitehall related to local government and the ways in which local authorities operated. Two themes underpinned the New Labour agenda – continued managerialism combined with community engagement. Once in office, the Labour government was indeed quick to act. There was a realisation that a constructive relationship with local authorities was required if crucial manifesto pledges, specifically those relating to education, were to be achieved – Blair had famously said that his key priorities were 'education, education and education'. In a country where local authorities run the majority of the schools, local government found itself as a key tool of central government policy implementation.

The importance of this new relationship was illustrated by the creation of a new Whitehall 'super' Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) which was headed by the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott. One of Prescott's first acts at the DETR was to establish a 'Central-Local Partnership' (CLP) with the Local Government Association (LGA). The LGA is the representative body of virtually all local authorities in England and Wales. The aim of the CLP was to involve the local authorities much earlier in the policy making process than has previously been the experience. It is worth noting that Margaret Thatcher's epic policy disaster, the Poll Tax was embarked upon without any form of local authority consultation whatsoever. Clearly, Prescott was hoping to avoid Thatcher's mistakes.

Another theme in the Labour Manifesto in 1997 was a commitment to create a strategic elected authority for London, the Greater London Authority (GLA) and an elected mayor, covering the area of the former Greater London Council. It was argued that of all the western capital cities, London was unique in not having an elected mayor. In it's first year in office, the Labour Government produced a White Paper on the issue. The mayor would be elected separately from the GLA by the people of London. As such the mayor would have a separate authority or mandate from the people to that of the GLA. Despite this opening up the possibility of legislative/policy 'gridlock' similar to that experienced in the United States when different political parties control the Congress and the White House – this has not been the case.

A referendum was held on 7 May 1998 to coincide with elections to the London boroughs to ascertain whether or not support for a mayor of London and the GLA existed. The outcome was an overwhelming 'Yes' vote on both counts. The other interesting feature about the elections for

both the GLA and the mayor of London is the electoral system to be used. For the first time on the mainland the 'first past the post' electoral system is being abandoned in favour of a hybrid form of PR which should ensure that the GLA is a non-partisan body which is more representative of the voting intentions of Londoners.

The subsequent mayoral election in London saw the former GLC leader and then Labour MP Ken Livingstone elected to office, much to the annoyance of Tony Blair. Livingstone had run as an independent, having been vetoed as 'unacceptable' to be the official Labour Party candidate. The Prime Minister 'persuaded' the then Health Secretary and London Labour MP Frank Dobson, to resign from the Cabinet to run as the official Labour mayoral candidate. The outcome of the mayoral election was highly embarrassing to Blair who in effect had Livingstone expelled from the Labour Party. Once in office however, Livingstone proved to be a popular mayor, who despite the odd skirmish with controversy, appeared to have realised that his role was somewhat different to that as Leader of the GLC. In a humiliating reconciliation in 2004, Livingstone was readmitted to the Labour Party prior to the London mayoral election to avoid him once again running as an Independent and defeating the official Labour Party candidate who had spent the previous mayoral term as Livingstone's official deputy.

In addition to the White Paper on London, the beginning of 1998 saw the publication of no less than six Green Papers on local government. These consultative papers dealt with a range of issues. Probably the most important one dealt with 'Democratic Renewal'. The Government was seeking ways in which local authorities could be increasingly seen as being of importance by the voting public, in that they (local authorities) have an important role to play in society. The UK has some of the lowest rates of turnout in local authority elections in the European Union, with an average turnout of between 35-40%, compared to over 70% in general elections. The next highest figure is 54% in the Netherlands, with 80% of Germans and Danes voting in local elections. The Government was determined that if local government was to have any meaning to individual citizens, then they (the citizens) must perceive that it is important that they participate in the electoral process.

It is often argued that apart from citizens seeing local government as having little influence over their everyday lives, citizens do not vote in local elections because they are concerned about the motivations and ethics of those seeking election to office - the so-called 'sleaze' factor. Indeed, in the late 1990s the Labour Party, both in Opposition and in Government was embarrassed by major scandals involving Labour controlled local authorities in both England and Scotland. The Labour Government was very keen to act to clean up such scandals and to prevent them from happening again. It therefore proposed the adoption of a new ethical framework for both local councillors and officials. Whilst this new code is 'voluntary', there is a clear element of 'adopt or else' attached to it.

### **New Labour in action.**

A review of the literature generated by the Blair agenda vis a vis local government demonstrates a three pronged approach based around management; performance and governance (Hartley et al, 2002; Newman et al, 2001, Painter et al 2003; Wilson, 2005; Wilson and Doig, 2000). These can be extrapolated to mean that Blair believed in the need for strong management of public services which needed to perform and be seen to perform, in an environment acknowledged to exhibit and demonstrate the highest standards of governance and probity. There were an alarming number of local authorities whose activities were if not illegal, left a lot to be desired (Collyns, 2002; Hanlon, 2002; Local Government Chronicle, 2002a; Parsons, 2002; Shaw, 2002b; Simmon-Lewis, 2002; Trigg, 2002).

Where as Thatcher came to power advocating the introduction of markets as a means of overcoming (as she saw them) the inefficient bureaucracies which delivered public services in the UK, Blair's

election saw him advocating a different mantra. Whilst accepting the need for a strong managerialist streak in public service provision, this was intertwined with a belief in the values of public service – whereas Thatcher could be described as anti-public service. Blair's vehicle for delivering his manifesto commitments entailed the use of 'network' arrangements to ensure effective implementation of 'joined up government' (Pollitt, 2003). However underpinning this desire was a driving belief on a strong centre (i.e. Whitehall) was needed to ensure delivery. Blair's approach to government was to be strikingly different from that seen before, and was termed the 'Third Way' – in that it was neither driven by traditional arguments from the political left or right. Hartley et al sum up Blair's philosophy thus:

“The 'Third Way' is a rhetoric intended to capture this fusion: neo-liberal economic policies combined with social inclusion and active citizen participation in governance.” (2002, p.388)

Critics of New Labour's reforming agenda in relation to local government are numerous, pointing to a strategy vacuum in a number of areas. Painter et al (2003) points to the seemingly endless list of initiatives forced upon local government as Whitehall seeks the optimal solution to any given issue – giving rise to the disease 'initiavitis'. Others point to the overly complex nature of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment which requires a raft of detailed service inspections and creates additional bureaucracy for local authorities (Lorimer and Tahir, 2002).

Lacklustre local governance was clearly something which the Blair administrations made clear would not be tolerated (Wilson and Game, 2003). From the outset in 1997, it was clear that public services would receive considerable new investment. It was stated unequivocally that this new investment would be made along stringent performance management criteria policed primarily by the Audit Commission, alongside a range of other monitoring agencies. Signs of service failure or organisational weakness were not to be tolerated. Whereas as noted above, it politically suited the Thatcher and Major administrations to have public service organisations which were deemed to be either failing or to have failed – such failure fuelled the drive towards privatisation – such failure was politically unacceptable to Blair. Effective, public services were central to Blair's agenda. As such, it was therefore essential that those organisation charged with service delivery did so in an efficient and economic manner. Hence, whilst local authorities began to operate in an environment which placed a new importance on their roles, this new central/local relationship contained fresh tensions. As Hartley et al observed, these relationships are:

“... Less confrontational and more collaborative in its initial form, but which demands rapid improvements in the quality of public service and where government threatens to intervene very directly and forcibly if minimum standards are not met.” (2002, p.389)

Examples abound of New Labour acting to correct these service or organisational failings. It was noted above that the Conservatives let Liverpool fester in a sea of mis-management in the 1980's and a number of inner-London boroughs likewise in the 1990's. Upon entering office in 1997, Labour acted with some haste to tackle such failings, supported by findings from the Audit Commission and a number of Inspectorates. A number of devices were used to achieve the desired outcomes. In both Leeds and Bradford for example, the failing education services were outsourced to private contractors. Elsewhere senior managers were displaced or had mentors from either the public or private sectors brought in to watch over them. In more serious cases, the entire management team of local authorities were displaced, as happened in Walsall (Shaw, 2002a).

The case in Hull mentioned above is one of considerable embarrassment to the Government. Apart from a short period of time, the Cabinet Minister with responsibility for local government since 1997 has been John Prescott, the Deputy Prime Minister. Prescott is a Member of Parliament for Hull, an old-fashioned right wing Labour bastion. Hull is most famous for its municipal controlled telephony system, the only one in the UK. For years the Labour Council had used profits from the telephone

system to subsidise the municipal coffers. This had led in effect to an one-party municipality, which in turn bred both managerial and political indifference and complacency.

This situation came to a head in 2002 when a series of damning reports from the Audit Commission and the Office for Standards in Education earned the city council the label as the worst in England. The council management was a mess and its schools delivered the poorest educated children in England (Audit Commission, 2002; Office for Standards in Education, 2003). Prescott quickly handed the file on Hull to his deputy minister with instructions to sort out the problem. The issue came to a head when Labour lost control of the city council in Hull in 2002. The new Liberal administration 'leaked' a previously confidential report from the Audit Commission which chronicled the organisational weaknesses and failings – particularly amongst the outgoing Labour administration. The initial government response was to appoint a mentor, an experienced senior civil servant with a remit to essentially run the organisation until a time when it is deemed the organisation is in a healthy enough state to run its own affairs once more (Local Government Chronicle, 2002b). Later, a former local authority chief executive was appointed to fulfil this corporate governance mentoring role.

One of the most damning elements of the report related to the bullying of officers by Labour councillors. The controlling Liberal group sought to tackle these organisational deficiencies by replacing the entire top tier of managers with a new elite team led by a newly recruited managing director. Fast forward to May 2003 to the next municipal elections which saw a Labour victory. On the day after the elections, the Labour leader issued a warning to the top tier of managers, particularly the managing director, that if they did not perform, then their jobs are at risk – this from a man accused of bullying officers (Humphries, 2002). A short time later, the managing director was suspended and eventually paid off with €250,000 (Local Government Chronicle, 2003c). The shenanigans in Hull still continues, with a new management team installed and the schools still ranked as the poorest performing in England – with follow up reports still indicating fundamental organisational weakness (Audit Commission, 2002b, 2003, 2004).

### **Constitutional reforms.**

If local authorities were to meet the challenges posed by the Blair government, it was argued that the status quo on internal organisation which had existed in a largely unchanged format for over 100 years, had to be reformed. In a series of Green Papers (and subsequent White Papers), which in turn became enshrined in the Local Government Act (2000), local authorities were to transform their internal management by adopting one of three models. Only those smaller district councils with less than 85,000 population were to be exempt (Wilson and Game, 2003). The three models were a Leader with a Cabinet (a la Whitehall); a directly elected mayor with a cabinet or a directly elected mayor with a council manager (Rao, 2003). As expected, the majority of councils opted for the Leader and Cabinet model, and only one authority opting for the Mayor with a council manager model. However, it is the Mayor with cabinet model which attracted the most attention.

Traditionally in England, each city, district or town council has had a mayor, This person has typically taken over the role of council chair for a year, and served as the areas 'first citizen'. It is common for the mayor to be a councillor of many years standing, and the mayors chain is often seen as a reward for service to the community. The Blair reforms though set out to fundamentally challenge the perception, driven along by group called the New Local Government Network (NLGN). The NLGN is a group of elected (Labour) councillors, academics and practitioners advocating fundamental change in local government, principally around the concept of an elected mayor. The leading academic proponent of the NLGN, Gerry Stoker has led the call for directly elected mayors since the early 1990's (Stoker and Wolman, 1992). As an adviser to the Labour government on local governance issues, Stoker can clearly be seen as an New Labour 'insider' with the prime ministerial ear.

The Mayoral model was sold to an unsuspecting nation with a raft of extravagant sounding claims (Sandford, 2004). These claims centred around the election of a figure who would be above the petty-politics seen to characterise local government. There was also a hope that senior business figures or celebrities would seek the mayoral office – with Richard Branson of Virgin cited as a possible candidate in London – which didn't happen. This 'super-politician' would be able to act to achieve things on behalf of the populace, cutting through red-tape and bureaucracy.

The whole idea seemed to hang on the premise that a mayor would almost depoliticise local government, and remove power from under-performing councillors. Indeed, in a poignant article 'If mayors are the answer, then what was the question?', Orr (2004) poses some searching questions about the whole (ill-conceived) mayoral question. Perhaps the most telling of these is the use of internationally known 'super-mayors' – the most famous of whom is the former mayor of New York, Rudi Guiliani to 'sell' the idea to the nation. The supporters of elected mayors in the UK cited such examples, conveniently forgetting the fact that in the UK model, as outlined in the Local Government Act (2000), the mayor has very little executive power, having to work with an elected council with whom legal authority rests. Elsewhere, Copus (2004) questions whether a mayor elected on a party ticket will remain loyal to that party when as mayor, his first loyalty should be towards the general community well-being, which may be at times put him at odds with his political party, both within the local authority and in the wider world.

The first mayoral elections took place in 2002 and were an humiliating experience for the Blair Government. Despite hopes and aspirations that business people, even celebrities might seek election as Mayor, the first round of elections offered a somewhat different picture. It is indeed true that two 'celebrities' were elected as Mayors – against strong Labour Party opposition. Both Middlesbrough and Hartlepool in the north east of England found themselves with directly elected mayors in the form of Robocop (Ray Mallon a disgraced former police commander) and H'Angus the Monkey (Stuart Drummond the wearer of the local soccer teams monkey suit mascot) – hardly the storming success predicted by NLGN (Leach, 2002; Parsons et al, 2002; Shaw, 2002a). Indeed, one leading academic commentator on local government noted that if these results didn't encourage the Government to abandon the Mayoral drive, then nothing would.

In May 2002, in total 11 local authorities elected mayors for the first time – for differing lengths of term according to their local electoral cycle. It is however very interesting to note, that off this wave of first time mayors elected since 2002, those who stood for re-election in 2005 enjoyed differing fortunes. Whilst Drummond/H'Angus in Hartlepool increased his majority from 603 to over 10,000, another pioneering Independent mayor, Mike Wolfe in Stoke-on-Trent was defeated by a Labour party candidate. Elsewhere the Labour mayor in Doncaster saw his majority fall from 13,000 to under 8,500, and in North Tyneside the sitting Conservative mayor was narrowly defeated by a Labour party candidate. Hence, it would appear that from the evidence available that there is little to support the argument that when mayors are seen to be above traditional local politics, then their level of electoral support reflects this.

The evidence elsewhere regarding the general public perception of the elected mayor issue is somewhat patchy – with no marked improvement in voter participation levels for mayoral elections – one of the key rationales for the model (Sandford, 2004). Indeed, it is worth noting that the march towards elected mayors is somewhat indifferent. In order to trigger a mayoral election, a local referendum must vote in favour of such an election (as was the case in London). The number of 'no' votes from such referenda actually outweighs the 'yes' results (Rao, 2003). This can hardly be seen as an endorsement for the mayoral experiment envisaged by the New Local Government Network, and it is argued that this was a direct result of the overall public apathy towards the elected mayor model (Latham, 2002).



Away from the media spotlight surrounding Robocop and H'Angus, it should be noted that the elected mayoral figure has not been a total failure. The London Borough of Lewisham, a long-time trailblazer of radical reform in local government, and an oft cited beacon of excellence in local governance, was in the first tranche of authorities to follow the mayoral path in 2002 (Parsons et al, 2002). In Lewisham the mayor is a very popular and public figure, with a higher visibility rating than any of the local MPs. Further, the mayor has successfully used his office to further enhance the well-being of the community within Lewisham – exactly along the lines advocated by NLGN. The writer would suggest caution here though. Lewisham has a long history of excellent leadership, both political and managerial which together form an environment within which the mayoral model would be expected to thrive (Asquith, 1994, 1997). This though is not to negate the fact that such success does not just 'happen', it requires continuous energy from both managers and politicians to renew and invigorate relationships both within and outside the authority (Bullock, 2003; Quirk, 2003).

The new constitutional arrangements clearly redrew the boundaries surrounding the officer/elected member interface. Alongside these internal manifestations, were the changes brought about by the requirement of local authority managers to accommodate the concept of 'joined up government'. Hence, new skills were required to management both intra local authority relationships and inter local authority relationships. As such, Painter et al observe that:

“Public managers with the requisite collaborative competencies and mindsets have been described as 'boundary spanners'. This offers another vantage point from which to assess the transition from the classic bureaucratic form operating in the intra-organisational domain to the post-modern networking form operating in the inter-organisational domain.” (2003, p.39)

The developments in political leadership outlined above have been significantly reinforced by events in 2006. Firstly, four of the original mayoral cohort were re-elected to serve further four year terms in May 2006, in Hackney, Lewisham, Newham and Watford. Of key importance in these re-elections, all four mayors received more voter support than in their first election. There was also an overall increase in the level of citizen participation in the mayoral contests. Interestingly in Lewisham, a 'flag ship' mayoral authority, the rise in popularity of the Labour mayor, Steve Bullock, was not matched in terms of electoral support for Labour Party candidates for the council. For the first time in over 20 years, the Labour Party lost control of Lewisham Council. This would appear to indicate that the mayor in Lewisham was seen as being separate (and above) from the traditional minutiae surrounding local government. This was one of the key objectives outlined by the NLGN, and is seen as being a vindication of the pro-mayoral lobby.

In addition to the mayoral electoral successes of 2006, the Department of Communities and Local Government, the Whitehall successor to the DETR, published a White Paper in November which sought to radically extend the use of the mayoral model by compelling local authorities to move towards either a directly elected mayor or alternatively a directly elected council executive (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2006). Further, the White Paper argues that the new internal management arrangements should vest all the executive power of the local authority in either the directly elected mayor or the elected executive. This at a stroke would both assuage critics who complain that the mayoral model introduced in 2000 lacks real 'teeth' and would create local government leadership model which is similar to the one used originally to 'sell' the model to the public from 2000 onwards. It would of course, provide ammunition to critics of the mayoral model who argued that it undermines the concept of representative democracy in local government (Latham, 2002). The implementation of these reforms will be watched with great interest.

## **Conclusion.**

We can see from the evidence above that whilst New Labour entered office seeking to effect a major policy change both in terms of its relations with local government and in the way local government acted as agents of change for the centre. However this has not always met with overwhelming success. Whilst it would be easy to follow the old Conservative line and simply blame local authorities for being hostile to change, and more conciliatory line is offered by Painter et al when they note:

“... Given the conflicts and tensions in New Labour's modernisation programme, perhaps we ought to be less critical of local authorities when they are accused of dragging their feet and be more appreciative of the dilemmas they face.” (2003, p.34)

Within the New Labour agenda lies the threat that rather than freeing local authority managers (and indeed public service managers in general) to get on with their respective tasks, what in fact the agenda might ultimately do is to rebureaucratise public services. The requirement to build and maintain a raft of network arrangements in order to deliver public services within the target driven performance regime within which they exist, carries with it a danger of recreating a corporate management structure so despised by Blair and his acolytes. The somewhat historic account by Cockburn (1977) of corporate management in Lambeth should serve as a warning.

Local government in England is undoubtedly stronger now than it was under the Thatcher/Major administrations – not least because it exists now in a climate which accepts the need for (local) governments involvement in public service provision. Indeed, local government resilience during years of conflict signifies this strength. What local government must do though is to rise to the challenges offered by the Blair agenda. Local government certainly seems to be aware of the opportunities offered to it, and generally speaking seems to want to exploit these openings to strengthen local governance in England.

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