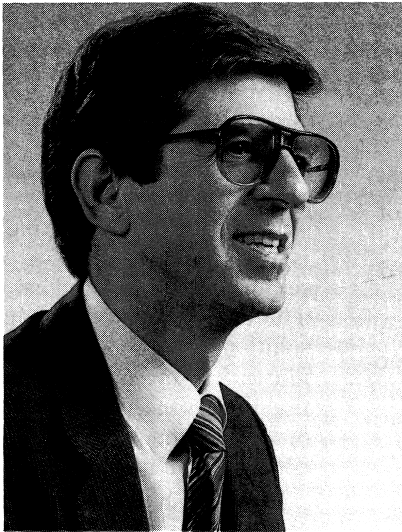


# RESCUING LOCAL GOVERNMENT



Warren Kinston, Director of the Political Management Programme at Brunel University, would like members to pay more attention to political management, improving councillor structures and developing political skills.

**I**F the vitality of local democratic life is to be reasserted and if local government is to have a meaningful future, it will have to be achieved now by political and legislative means, and not simply by better executive management.

The *Political Management Programme* (PMP) at Brunel University in 1985 was founded as a response to the increasing political awareness within society and a need to harness and channel political drives. I and my close colleagues (David Wilshire and Professor Ralph Rowbottom) saw an urgent need to develop the skills, methods, organisation, and procedures associated with political effectiveness in local government.

One reason, perhaps the reason, that local government is in such deep trouble is that the political skills and political organisation within local councils have not been up to the task of relating effectively to central government. So, in a just published *Guide*<sup>1</sup>, we are introducing ourselves and offering a sensible and realistic approach to making local councils work politically.

Ineffective political control potentially leads to a host of further ills from poor communication with the public, through inadequate management, and finally to the present outpouring of legislation aimed at removing or drastically modifying the responsibilities and powers of local councils. ►

Whatever the cause of the present situation, we believe that only effective political management can rescue it. It is now necessary to take stock, review councillor frameworks and political achievements, and, building on whatever opportunities exist, develop a new future.

In fieldwork and seminars, I and my colleagues have found that there is confusion about what is involved in political management. So it is necessary to start off by clarifying misconceptions.

First of all, like it or not, the councillor is not a manager in the same way that an employed executive is. Attempts to blur the roles between members and executives, or to claim that they ought to be blurred, or that such blurring is inevitable, are in our view seriously misconceived. Poor management is only too likely if members feel they have to or ought to perform executive work. *Only if the two roles are kept sharply distinct can satisfactory member-officer procedures and relations be developed.*

Secondly, the councillor is not simply a party activist, there to implement the party-line. The party-line, whatever it may be, will mean very different things according to the circumstances, and adapting it is a crucial political skill. Using local government as a vehicle for blind implementation of ideology without sensitivity to the overall political situation, community values, central government policies, and management issues is a recipe for disaster.

Nor can councillors simply regard themselves as innocents: just a man-in-the-street, who sensibly and pragmatically appraises the situation and then votes. Such behaviour is not inappropriate, but it is not enough. On its own, it leads to sleepy councils, avoidance of change, and officer domination.

In our *Guide*, we point the way forward in a non-partisan way. Members, whatever their party allegiance, must become aware of the need for active political management rather than passively protesting and complaining, must work positively at developing greater understanding and more sophisticated skills rather than assuming that there is nothing to learn, must introduce better frameworks for governing rather than following the existing system because that is the way it has always been, must develop a positive political drive aimed at achievable political objectives rather than making insensitive political judgements leading to futile political gestures, and must observe and uphold democratic ideals rather than allowing

the ends to justify the means.

We believe that all this is unlikely to occur in the absence of a deliberate and ongoing policy of council and councillor development. Such development must not be confused with management (or organisational-) development for executives. What is required is *political development oriented directly at councillors, party groups and the governance process itself.*

Governance is the exact but rarely used word to describe the work of councillors.<sup>2</sup> All organisations require governance. In formally constituted organisations, this takes the form either of a Board (as in business), or an Authority (as in public utilities), or Council (as in voluntary associations). Although governing bodies vary in their structuring and procedures, their underlying rationale is identical.

The governing body mediates change in the executive organisation on behalf of the members of the association or community concerned. The executive has a specialised component, the top executive, which mediates change on behalf of the executive.

In local government, the situation is complex. The community as individuals and a collective are the immediate members in the sense just described, but the wider public also has a stake. As for the top executive, requisite arrangements vary according to the complexity of the council's services. In all governing bodies, controversial issues develop and lead to *factions* forming. In local councils controversial issues may be handled via party politics. However, the degree of influence of party-politics varies greatly.

The need for substantial improvement in governance processes seems to be widely recognised and openly acknowledged. In our seminars and workshops, issues which have been repeatedly brought to our attention by members include:

- Full council meetings which do little and/or ramble on interminably
- Councillors who continuously intrude or interfere with managerial duties
- Executives who bewilder or block members
- Prolonged distrust and antagonism between members and officers
- Unfair standing orders or arrangements for committee representation
- Inadequate debate due to excessive use of the party whipping system
- Instability of party group leadership
- Proliferation and duplication of committees and working parties
- Unsatisfactory agendas and paperwork for committees
- Poor communication amongst members

- Absence of a workable coalition on balanced councils
- Poor or absent working relations between group leaders
- Ignoring mundane but real local needs in the community
- Committee chairmen unable to control their committee
- Members who do not know what services their council provides
- Lack of any steering of the governance process

What seems to be lacking until now is a clear and sensible way forward to resolving these and similar problems. The PMP believes that it has found a solution. The central idea, as illustrated, involves a shift from the traditional conception of a simple chain of power and responsibility, to the concept of an interactive system.

**Figure 1** shows the commonly held image of the council. We believe that such a model leads to poor focus on the public, confusion of role, duplication of decisions, waste of talent, frustration and delays, battles for control, and ineffectiveness.

The underlying rationale of any organisation is the conversion of values into action, and on this basis a new image can be developed as in **Figure 2**. In this approach, there are four distinct roles and six distinct relationships; all linked into one system. Through collaborative work with members and officers, we have developed in detail the basic principles of the governing and top executive roles and how to improve council-top executive relations.<sup>3</sup> The details of this framework are easily understood and, once explained, are intuitively obvious to councillors.

Given the political will in leading members and the party groups, development and implementation of the PMP model is possible. The result is a significant improvement, even transformation, in council operation.

**The PMP is keen to develop collaborative working relationships with local councils led by different parties to illustrate how governance can be improved, given determination and clarity of purpose. The PMP is a self-financing and non-profit non-partisan research and development organisation. Anyone interested in learning more about us should phone (0895 56461 Ext. 305) or write for details.**

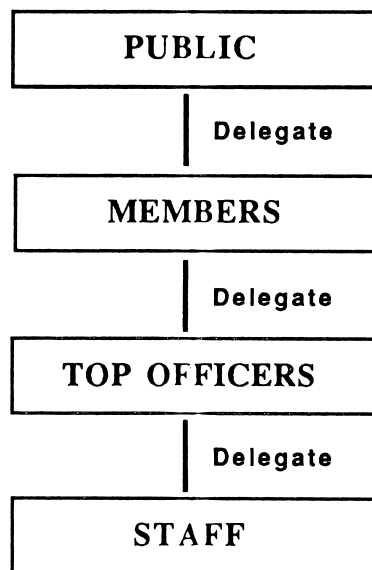
<sup>1</sup> *Stronger Political Management in Local Government: A Guide* (1988). Available from the Political Management Programme, Brunel University, Uxbridge, Middx. UB8 3PH. £5.95 incl. p&p.

<sup>2</sup> Kinston, W. (1986). Purposes and the translation of values into action. *Systems Research*, 3 (3).

<sup>3</sup> Kinston, W. (1987). *What people should do inside and outside organisations*. Discussion Document, Political Management Programme, Brunel University. Kingston, W. (1986) *The District Health Authority: Tasks Organisation and Relationships of the governing body*, Uxbridge, Middx: Brunel University.

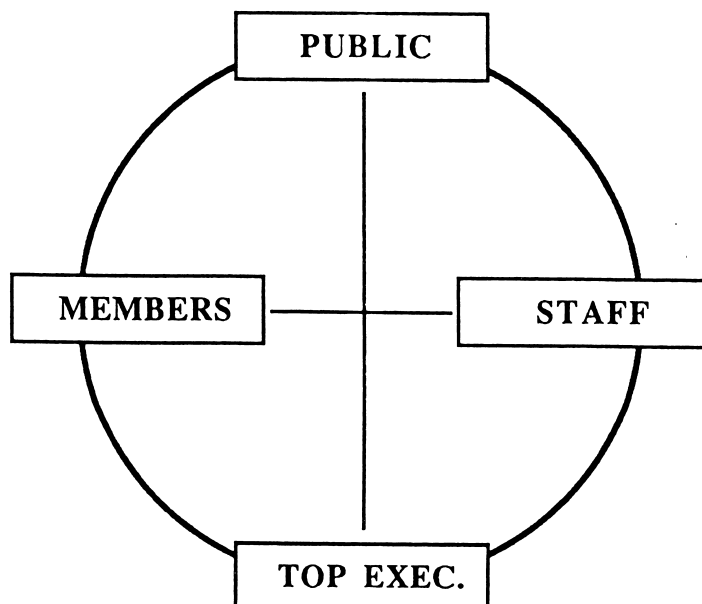
**Figure 1:**

**The Traditional View**



**Figure 2:**

**A New Approach**



The **Political Management Programme** at Brunel is part of the SIGMA Centre. Its staff have long established reputations in developing executive organization and management in the public sector, and active experience in local government.

**Conferences** and **workshops** are regularly provided in central London, at Brunel University, and, by invitation, regionally and on-site, on most aspects of political organization and management. Leaders of councils and top officers are notified of these by mail.

**Consultations** and **seminars on-site** may be provided as part of organizational or management development.

A major commitment can be offered to Leaders and Chief Executives to assist in the **long term development** of councils.

All work is carried out under conditions of **confidentiality** and to the highest **professional standards**.

**Contact us for further details of how we may help you.**

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