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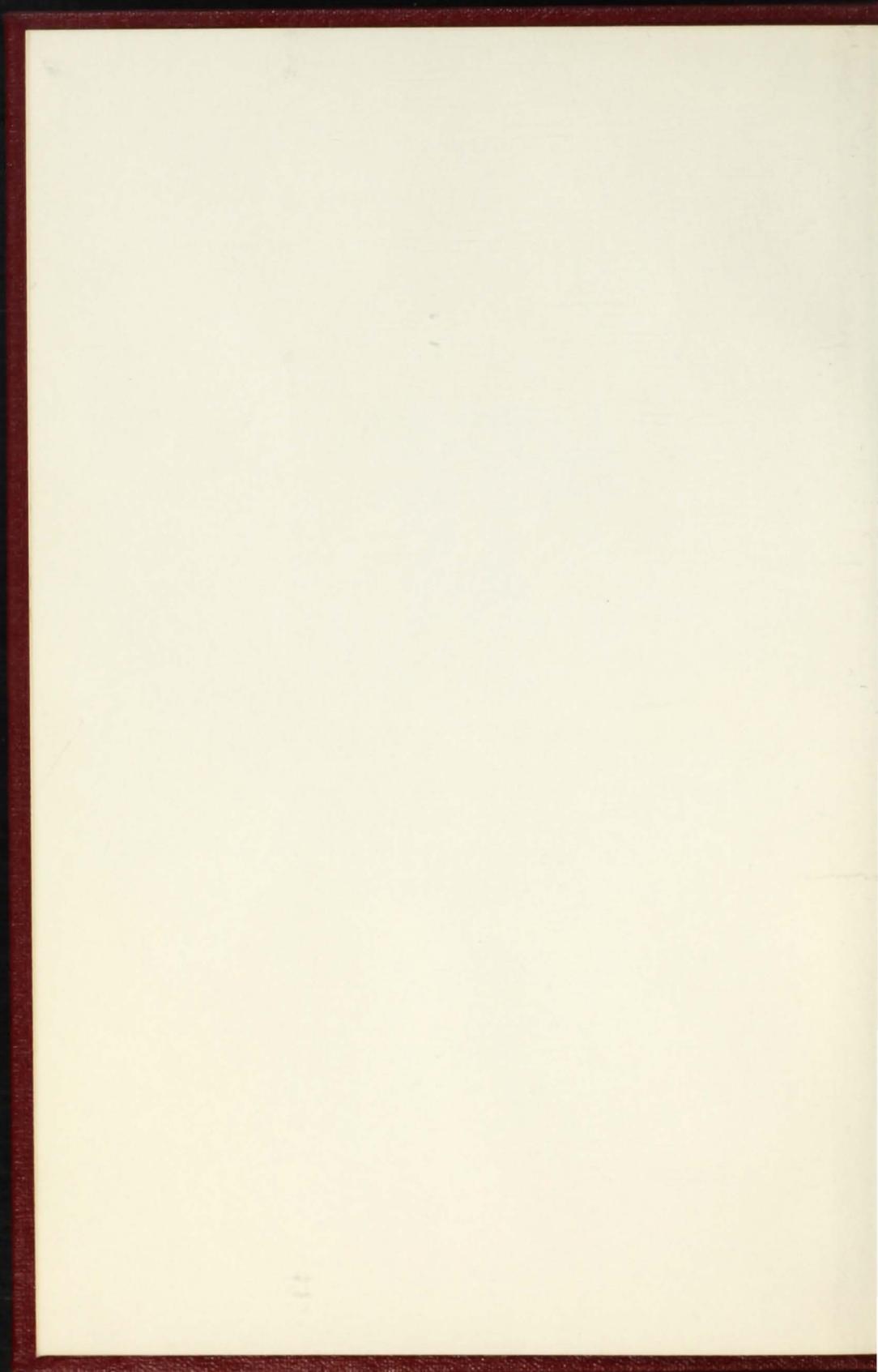
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Labour and local politics

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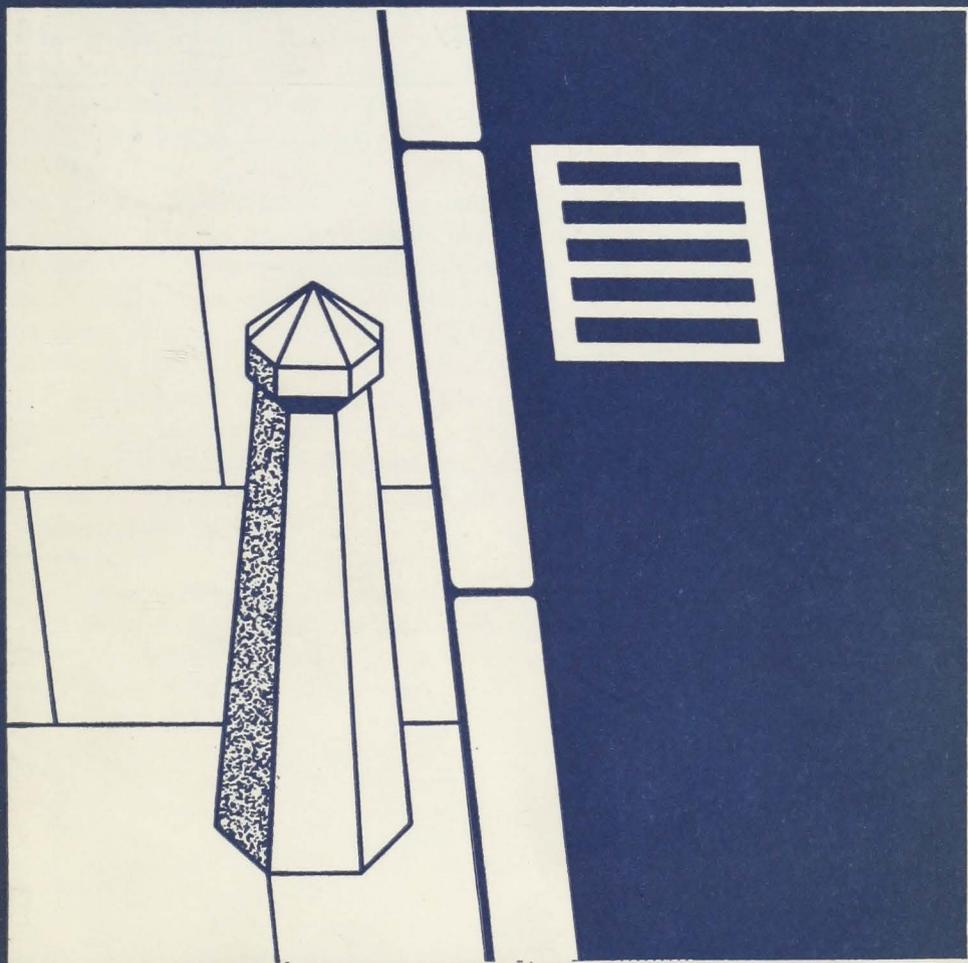


Labour and local politics

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initiatives in local
government

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Labour and local politics

Colin Crouch
(series editor)
chapter

	initiatives in local government	1
1	the political dimension	2
2	the party and local government	4
3	councillors and officers	9
4	local equality	16
5	conclusion	19

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initiatives in local government

Colin Crouch

series editor

Although it provides an arena for intensive effort by a large number of politically active people, local government is often curiously non-political in its operation. Apart from a few well trodden themes—such as council housing and comprehensive education—many Labour councillors have difficulty in seeing how socialism applies to their work. Towards the end of this pamphlet, the authors direct attention to some of the issues in local government which have a political content which is often not perceived. Their contribution here is stimulating and initiatory rather than exhaustive, and there is ample scope for further pamphlets in this series to take up the themes they raise.

But grand political schemes are of no practical use if the machinery to implement them is inadequate, and this is where the present pamphlet makes its main contribution. There have been many developments in local government structure in recent years: reorganisation of the system itself, new theories of management, and corporate planning. None of these has had much to offer for the improvement of specifically political decision making, and some of them may have actually inhibited it. It is therefore crucial that thinking on local government structure at a political level begins to make some progress. This is the central purpose of this pamphlet. It deals with the role of Labour groups, councillors, and committee chairmen in a way which should prove of practical value to all in the Labour party who are engaged in local politics.

This is the fourth pamphlet in the series "Initiatives in local government". The other three are "Building better communities" by Chris Cossey (30p), "Inner cities" by Nicholas Falk and Haris Martinos (45p) and "Changing prospects for direct labour" by John Tilley (40p).

1. the political dimension

Over a period of little more than ten years, local government in England has undergone a series of major changes in its structure and functions. First in Greater London, then in the rest of the country, the whole structure of local government has been reorganised, though with little evidence that the provincial metropolises are to be allowed to avoid the mistakes of Greater London.

Major local government functions have been lost to new *ad hoc* bodies—water, sewerage, health. New functions have been acquired and old ones enhanced—transport co-ordination, consumer protection, prevention of pollution.

Existing services have been recast or their traditional philosophies questioned and modified—social services after the Seeborn report, planning after the Skeffington and Planning Advisory Group reports, education after the drift away from selection.

Managerial enthusiasms have taken hold in some quarters, bringing notions of corporate planning, performance review and programme budgeting. Almost as if to counterbalance the trend to bigness, rationalisation and co-ordination at the “top” of local government, increasing concern has been voiced for the smaller units of life at the “bottom”—educational priority areas, housing action areas, conservation areas, community development projects, neighbourhood councils and the like.

Yet in the midst of so much change, one feature of local government remains little altered—the councillors. True, there are now fewer of them—22,000 as against 35,000 before reorganisation—and consequently they may seem even more remote than before. Perhaps, with the enforced retirement of some pre 1974 aldermen, they may on average be slightly younger. Certainly, everyone seems to know that they are now eligible for some form of attendance allowance, thereby affording letter writers and local pressmen ideal targets for envy and abuse. However, notwithstanding these particular changes, councillors remain

part time politicians charged with the running of multi-million pound organisations made up of full time officials.

Harold Laski once observed that the key to good local government lay in the intelligent use of officials by the councillors. There are, however, two ways of interpreting that particular aphorism. Some might interpret it as meaning little more than hiring the best men and letting them get on with the job—a situation where the councillor, like the monarch, reigns but does not rule. Others would take a more robust view of the elected members' role along the line that the councillors make the decisions and the officers carry them out. The latter is indeed theoretically correct and many chief officers are eager to insist, when questioned, that in their local authority at least the theory and the reality are one. Our own view is that the theory and the reality certainly ought to be one, but that current practice and custom inhibit their becoming so. Enabling councillors to control effectively the authorities for which they are theoretically responsible is no easy task. The various changes in function and structure that have collectively recast traditional local government over the past decade have almost wholly ignored the political, as distinct from managerial, aspects of this problem. Unless it can be solved, the recent reforms of institutions will merely give us a more complicated machine but one still lacking adequate political motive power. To ignore the political aspects is to overlook an essential dimension of local government operations.

In formal terms it is of course the whole body of councillors on a local authority who are responsible for its actions and who are charged with defining its policies and priorities. In practice, the use of committees with delegated powers makes the responsibility of the full council something of a legal fiction. Moreover, the notion of councils of several dozen part time members, meeting once in six weeks, effectively controlling, let alone managing, anything, is hardly realistic. In practice the weaknesses of full council, and the strengths of the semi-independent

committees as policy makers are fused into some semblance of corporate coherence by informal political means. Where political parties are represented on the council, they may be the means whereby coherence is attained "across the board". They can provide a focal point for resolving inter-committee conflicts and a source of definitive policy guidance for chief officers. In the absence of parties, the task of informal co-ordination falls upon the chief officers, or upon groups of Independents, operating as cliques based perhaps upon Rotary, the Chamber of Commerce or the local Constitutional Club.

One consequence of the 1974 reorganisation seems likely to be the gradual disappearance of non-party local authorities. In the English and Welsh counties, for example, under the old system Independents held nearly 40 per cent of all seats. In the new counties their share has fallen to 14.3 per cent, and in England only Cornwall and the Isle of Wight can show an Independent majority. In the district elections since 1973, the Independents have also fared badly: in metropolitan districts they now hold less than 2 per cent of all seats. The pressure on the Independents seems likely to continue. This is not merely due to the impact of urban Labour on rural areas following "amalgamation" of adjoining authorities. It also represents the consequence of a deliberate policy by Conservative Central Office to persuade erstwhile Independents to show their true Conservative colours on the new Councils. Since this policy is to be repeated at future local elections, the party battle lines in local government are clearly becoming more firmly drawn.

Given the growing significance of party both in the extent of its presence within local government, and as a potential source of coherent policy, it seems clear that effective political parties on the council are more than ever a prerequisite for effective councillors. The Labour Party of course has for long paid lip service to the importance of party in local government as a means of securing democratic control of policy making. Yet the operation of the Party, nationally,

locally and on the Council, causes one to wonder whether Labour does not need a clearer conception of its local government role.

2. the party and local government

Despite its historic roots in local working class political action the Labour Party has never developed any one clear philosophy of local government. It seems instead to have been torn between differing and often conflicting viewpoints. One school of thought has emphasised the virtues of the small scale democracy of the local community. Historically this school has links with some of the earliest Fabians and perhaps also with the Guild Socialists, although the latter were often more concerned with functional, as opposed to territorial, democracy. Today it is revived in such forms as the Association for Neighbourhood Councils, and the community action movement. Contrasting with this is the view that local democracy is of less importance than functional efficiency. Adherents to this view have favoured single tier local government, with large authorities capable of planning and co-ordination on a wide scale, and preferably marrying rich and poor areas to the benefit of the latter. The Party's reception of the original proposals of the Redcliffe-Maud Commission, and the Commons debate on the eventual 1972 Local Government Act, showed clearly the extent of Labour's enthusiasm for the large unitary authority.

In addition to the conflict over the question of scale there has been some divergence over the role of local government *vis-à-vis* central government. Traditionally Labour liked to present itself as the defender of "general powers" for local authorities, and between the wars sought a local authorities' Enabling Bill to allow councils to overcome the restrictions on their activities implied by the doctrine of *ultra vires*. The allied notion of the Labour council as master in its own house and thus as a vehicle for socialism found support from G. D. H. Cole (*The Future of Local Government*, 1921) and from the ILP who saw local authorities as "the instruments of decentralised public ownership in a democratic socialist state".

In opposition to this lay the concept of local government as the transmission belt for parliamentary legislation from West-

minster. According to this approach the road to socialism lay through parliament, with the local councils merely carrying out the approved measures. An egalitarian democracy was seen as presupposing a strong political centre; local autonomy could all too easily sustain pockets of reactionary resistance. Few, though, went as far as Attlee in contemplating the "supersession" of local government during the "period of critical transition" to socialism (*Problems of a Socialist Government*, 1935). One corollary though was that if local authorities were mere transmission belts, then they could always be superseded by other devices more equal to particular tasks, such as the public corporation and the *ad hoc* authority. These conflicts as to the desirable scale and the powers of local government have never been fully resolved within the party. Some clarity of thought on the subject might assist Labour councillors in defining their role more effectively. One factor which does merit notice is the fact that increasingly local government has become the main focus of working class political representation. With parliament, after the post 1945 heyday, relapsing into middle class domination it is at local level that working class experience is chiefly brought to bear on issues of public policy. This should, presumably, have some consequences for the degree of significance, and perhaps freedom of action, which Labour should afford to local government.

As it is, the party as a national organisation has been strangely hesitant in its local government work. Amongst Labour's opponents the image persists of Labour councillors waiting patiently for the latest diktat from Transport House. In practice things are very different and if indeed the party has seen local councils as being the humble but essential implementers of socialist legislation on the ground, it has been strangely reluctant to organise itself for the task. Councillors must understand the legislation they are to implement, they must know how much and how little discretion they are afforded, they must know what possible variations may be played on a single

legislative theme. Party officials and ministers must understand the realities of local politics and the limitations of procrustean tactics. This presupposes some effective mechanism of contact and information between party headquarters and Labour councillors.

In 1931 William Robson brought to an end his valiant attempt to edit a local government journal for Labour councillors. In his final article he complained that Labour lacked "any adequate recognition of the immense problems and difficulties facing the groups of Labour councillors in the localities, the need for integrating national and municipal Labour policy into a coherent unity, or the opportunities for leadership in municipal affairs open to those at the head of the party in London". Local government, he complained, took third place to parliamentary and trades union affairs. Over 40 years later, in 1974, the Labour Group on the Association of County Councils reviewed the councillor's requirements for advice and information from Transport House and concluded that "at the moment, none of these needs is met in a systematic or comprehensive way".

The provision made for dealing with local government by Labour party headquarters has for too long been inadequate despite the vigorous efforts of some of the individuals involved. Attempts mooted for example in 1931 and again in the early 1970s failed for a variety of reasons, some financial and administrative and some not unconnected with the internal politics of Transport House. Until very recently local government fell within the sphere of the party's research department, usually in the form of one "local government officer" with secretarial help and access to research department specialists in, for example, education and housing. The fact that some research department staff were from time to time councillors themselves, provided a welcome, if fortuitous additional source of advice. Now, however, the local government work is undertaken within the National Agent's department and the load slightly more widely spread

with the appointment of an assistant to work under the local government officer. Whether the new departmental affiliation is an improvement remains to be seen. It certainly does not in itself solve one problem, the absence of the local government officer from heads of departments meetings, at which matters with local government implications may be discussed. The appointment of an additional member of staff in this field is obviously welcome, though in view of the recent expansion in workload as a result of increasing legislation, this may prove to be more of a catching up operation than a source of improvement in service.

The need for more local government expertise at Transport House does not arise solely from the need to be able to proffer the fullest technical and legal advice on individual problems, important though this is.

A development liable to impose greater demands on the party nationally lies in the growing importance that attaches to the Labour Groups on the local authority associations. The importance of these Groups is now recognised by their representation on the NEC's Local and Regional Government Sub-Committee. As channels of communication between national and local politicians on matters of local government policy such Groups seem likely to become increasingly important—a view certainly held by Conservative Central Office. These Groups must be serviced by Transport House, as indeed they already are to some degree. Labour councillors embroiled in the work of their own council and their own local authority association (and their own job) are likely to require greater political assistance in running these "national" Labour Groups than is the case with local Groups. The alternative is for them to fall back on the officials of the local authority associations or on the random enthusiasms of councillors with time to spare. There is then work to be done for an expanded and enhanced Local Government department at Transport House. The recent creation of an Association of Labour Councillors may assist in bridging the gap between Smith Square and local

2. the party and local government

Labour groups by providing a corporate link between the ideas and information that can be generated by the party at both national and local levels. The revamped *Labour Councillor* journal may also prove more effective in this regard since its incorporation into *Labour Weekly*. The central/local link could of course be made even stronger, and the role of local government within the party enhanced, if the composition of the NEC were altered to permit the election to it of representatives from the ranks of Labour councillors. Richard Rose observes that such a move "would bring home to Westminster based politicians the problems of central/local government relationships, and ensure that when Labour was out of office in Westminster the NEC would contain some members in touch with the responsibilities of governing on a day-to-day basis" (*The Problem of Party Government*, 1974). In particular it would bring into the national level of party policy making some practical experience of the consequences at local community level of national policies for housing, planning, education and so forth.

It is not only at national level that the party might do better by local government. At local level too the party often accords local government a scanty share of resources.

In Essex for example a permanent County Labour party has existed in embryo since 1972 and formally since the new national party constitution came into operation in 1975. This organisation exists to formulate county wide policies at election time, to hold periodic conferences on specific issues, to compile a panel of county election candidates, and generally to ensure that the politics of the top tier of local government are not lost sight of by local party branches immersed in district and constituency affairs.

The major problem that has to be faced is that running such a county party can be costly. Labour in Essex have been fortunate in being able to rely until recently on two full time constituency agents to act as secretary and treasurer,

thus reducing organisational overheads. The basic sources of finance are annual subscriptions from the constituency parties. Some constituencies are not always eager to pay their share, with county matters taking third place to parliamentary elections and district affairs when money has to be allocated. At the time of writing the county Labour party is carrying out the task of discussing policies for the 1977 county elections. This involves setting up working parties, holding policy conferences, searching for sympathetic experts in various policy fields, and eventually publicising the agreed policy and waging a county wide election. In addition, candidates for 1977 must be sought out, interviewed for entry on to the panel and selected for specific seats. All this will involve considerable expense on such things as clerical and reprographic work, hiring of halls and committee rooms, postage and telephone charges and various other expenses. In practice, some of the cost will be effectively subsidised by expenses and telephone calls and postage not being charged for by the members who incur them, by reprographic work going through trade union and co-operative channels, and by the local parties bearing some of the overheads.

The actual work of party policy making will of course be a spare time occupation for those involved, to be fitted in between the demands of jobs, families and other party, council and local community involvement. With the best will in the world, it will lack any detailed research background since most of the information that might be relevant to local policy making is collected by council officers, for the use of council officers, at the expense of the ratepayers. It is not readily available for party use until the same officers have processed it, interpreted it according to their lights, and published it as support for their own recommendations. Public opinion on various crucial policy issues will be virtually unexplored, other than at the subjective and anecdotal level, simply because there are no resources to spare. Situations such as that just described might improve if the party's basic organ-

isation were reoriented to focus more on local government rather than on parliamentary constituency boundaries but this is perhaps too radical a change to contemplate so soon after the introduction of the new 1975 constitution. It has, however, already been suggested by one member of Labour's NEC, John Cartwright (*Socialist Commentary*, October 1976).

Perhaps if state finance were to become available to parties along the lines of the Houghton Committee report, means could be found to ensure that some of it went to district and county, as well as to constituency, parties.

Whatever assistance and inspiration may come from the party nationally or locally, for most Labour councillors or the council Labour group is the immediate political arena within which they must operate and whose effective operation can provide useful political leadership or determined opposition on the council. Whether or not the Group is effective, however, depends on how it operates. In fact, there seems to be a wide variety of practices adopted by Labour Groups. Some Groups operate a draconian system of discipline over a wide range of issues; others function without taking a binding Group decision from one meeting to another. Some operate in a loose and informal manner guided in theory by the party's Model Standing Orders and in practice by long schooling in the traditional conduct of Labour party meetings; others have elaborate standing orders of their own specifying in detail the precise duties of Group officers, rights of members, relations with the local party, and how Group decisions are to be taken. Some Groups keep full minutes and records of their activities; others seem to rely on some species of "folk memory". In some cases Group meetings are little more than a quick run through the agenda of the next council meeting, whilst elsewhere special Group meetings may be set aside for discussion of long term policy.

Perhaps the worst combination of practices is to be found amongst those

Groups which never discuss future policy, never lift their eyes above the immediate agenda, yet impose a very rigid Group whip. Here surely is a classic case of elevating means above ends. Some Groups will deny a councillor the right to go his own way on a burning local issue in his ward, even when he has the support of his ward party. They fear that such laxity will be the thin end of the wedge. In these days of community politics, with all manner of amenity societies, activists and community groups ready to pounce on councillors who neglect local interests this sort of policy seems a recipe for political failure quite apart from any other consideration. Each year the NEC (and its organisation sub-committee) finds itself trying to resolve between 15 and 20 local disputes arising from Group disciplinary actions. Other disputes are of course being settled at regional level. This is, to say the least, a waste of valuable time and staff resources, bad for party morale, and bad for the party's public image. Moreover, it is only on rare occasions that some major policy issue is at the root of the problem.

All too often the dispute has stemmed from some combination of too strict discipline, poor Group organisation and procedure, and clashes of personality and individual ambition. This sort of dispute has been deplored time and again by the party leadership, both in parliament and at Transport House, most recently by the NEC's Special Committee on the Conduct of the Party in Local Government. But pleas for a more liberal attitude may fail if discipline is seen as a problem divorced from the procedure and purpose of the Group.

By procedure is meant the actual conduct of the Group in terms of how it elects its officers, how it appoints to committee places and chairmanships, how individual members are involved in policy making, how far Group discussions are dominated or not by an inner caucus. The question of the Group's purpose ultimately renders down to the question of whether (at least when in control of the council) it is to be a major source of policy initiatives or merely a means of ratifying the ideas

of the officers as and when they come up with them.

A Group which devoted some of its time to forward policy planning, and which had a clear mechanism for involving members actively in policy making would have much to commend it. By identifying through discussion major policy issues it would facilitate the use of Group solidarity for positive rather than punitive ends.

One problem here, however, concerns the ability of Groups to discuss policy issues effectively in the absence of expert advice. Traditionally local government officers have fought shy of offering advice to political parties on the council. The Bains report on Management Structure in the New Local Authorities, however, approved the notion of developing mechanisms that would allow party groups to receive official advice. There are of course ways and means to achieve this. Officers can prepare papers for committee chairmen in the knowledge that the contents will be divulged to the ruling Group, or officers can advise a one party Policy Committee of the council. Unfortunately, the first method prevents members from cross questioning the officer, and both methods offer no help to a minority Group. The simplest answer seems to be the practice agreed in Nottinghamshire where officers of the county council may accept or seek invitations to meetings of party Groups but where neither politicians nor officials can compel an officer's attendance. After some initial unease on the part of officers this procedure seems to be developing to the benefit of all concerned.

By giving members this type of access to official advice within their Group meetings, by setting aside some time for discussion of policy beyond the day to day agenda, by focussing the use of Group discipline on areas that the Group have identified as being of major importance, and by allowing "ward conscious" councillors to defend local interests more freely, some Labour Groups might find themselves free from the frustrations and disputes that sometimes afflict them.

3. councillors and officers

Even when Labour councillors are backed by an improved service from Transport House and by better equipped district and county parties, when they can express their corporate views through an Association of Labour Councillors, when they have a voice on the NEC and when they have organised their Group to good effect, there will still remain a further set of problems. These concern the ability of the councillors to employ the officers to their chosen political ends.

There are undoubtedly serious and widespread problems in the relations of officers and councillors. The problems are too widespread to be explained by the failings of individuals and they are far more serious than any problems of relations between ministers and civil servants about which the academic literature of government says so much on the basis of so little objective evidence.

Ministers and civil servants nowadays are, socially and intellectually, very similar sorts of people, who are mostly career professionals with political views usually ranging over a similar spectrum from right centre to left centre. Outright reactionaries and outright radicals seldom survive the struggle to the top at national level whether as ministers or as civil servants. Top civil servants survive by caution, moderation and compromise and are trained to a very high level of political sensitivity. Ministers are well provided with office services and support of all kinds from a wide variety of quarters, including political secretaries and policy advisers who are not civil servants.

Local government councillors represent a much wider social and political variety than ministers. Even the leaders of some large authorities lack the most minimal secretarial or office services. Nearly all have other full time jobs. Few have any individual managerial authority. They can only operate collectively through a complex committee system and hence with a degree of formality and inflexibility of which central government ministers can very often free themselves. Nearly all officers are professionals in the narrow sense of the word, most only

coming near any sort of generalist administrative function fairly late in their careers.

The average local government chief officer has probably been trained and has practised in his most formative years primarily as an engineer, a social worker, an educationalist, a lawyer or an accountant. Unlike the civil servant he may often find it hard to understand that politics is not an irrelevance intruded into his work by stupid and irresponsible people but part of its whole foundation and justification. When he learns to live with it, it may sometimes be more on a basis of reluctant acceptance than of understanding and respect. He may also be earning the kind of salary which puts him in the same social class as ministers or top civil servants and (more relevant) as the most successful local businessmen—the leaders of local society. His committee chairman, even if he is a Conservative, may well be a teacher or a quite small businessman; if Labour, perhaps a lowly paid railway worker. The chief officer may be a prominent figure in social circles to which only the more affluent local residents will be able to gain entry. Alternatively, the chief officers of city authorities may well live in the semi-rural commuter belt, miles away from the urban problems of the ratepayers and councillors whom they serve.

The chief officer's personal political views may of course possibly accord fairly closely with the committee chairman's, indeed this fact may have been within the unexpressed knowledge of both when he was appointed. Yet this does not necessarily put the two on an easy footing. Even if they are sufficiently tolerant men of the world to overcome the social distinctions, the enormous disparity in specialist knowledge and of the time available to improve it must place severe strains on their relations. Again one must acknowledge that it is a great tribute to the good sense of most chief officers and committee chairmen that cases of really difficult personal relationships are in a minority. But is it really necessary to have a system which places such strains on so

many basically good people on both sides?

In the early years of modern local government these problems were not perhaps so serious. Local services were neither as complex nor as costly as today and officers were not as highly trained as today. The gap between councillors and officers in terms of expertise and resources was not formidable. Indeed in authorities where the officers were unqualified, or were qualified men in part time private practice, the late Victorian city fathers and county society might well commend sufficient resources, learning and social standing to be able to outface them in any dispute. Today, however, the professional full time local official can easily be more than a match for the part time amateur politician.

In practical terms the resolution of the difficulties involved in the councillor/officer relationship revolve around two basic issues. One concerns the bringing together of lay and professional minds, the other concerns the disparity in resources available to the councillor compared with the officer.

One of the commoner confessions amongst councillors, even amongst committee chairmen, is the admission that "I don't really understand local government finance". This is in fact merely the most extreme example of the problems of councillors trying to grapple with an expertise alien to them. Professional officers are trained to talk a language of their own, to value certain standards and norms, to assume that there are certain "right" technical answers. As recent reports on corporate management have complained, they are prone to cling to the security of professional departmentalism and to avoid wider issues for which a narrow education has not prepared them. In local government, technical advice from such officers reaches lay politicians unmediated by generalists; the councillors have to swallow whole the technical complexities of capital programmes, structure plans and transportation policies. If local government is to move towards a more corporate approach,

and if naked expertise is to be presented in terms relevant to its *political* implications, then some form of generalist officer seems essential.

It can be argued that in the past the separate professional interests of the various groups of officers obstructed the efforts of councillors to work for the interests of the community as a whole. Here again there is a contrast with central government. Local government until the appointment of Chief Executives, employed no generalist officers as such—however broad and generalist certain chief officers may have managed to be in practice, despite the constraints of their departmental structures and their personal professional training and career or profession. Even its committee chairmen tended to specialise for long periods.

Local government has no parallel to central government's two layers of generalist, interchangeable ministers supported by generalist, interchangeable civil servants. The Fulton Report certainly castigated the whole concept of generalist government administration—or rather blinded itself to the rationale or even the existence of such a concept. But this was during the time of the "white hot technological revolution" of the last decade—now gone pretty cool.

The sixties was the decade of the technocrats. The seventies and eighties must see the restoration of the generalist but as the servant of the common man, not as an elitist. Even in the past, however, the basis of central government generalist administration was not so much any real or alleged amateurishness of civil servants but the historically fundamental and still essential principles of parliamentary sovereignty and the collective responsibility of ministers. The professional separatism of local government departments is also rooted in history but a history which is today losing most of its relevance.

As local government moves away from its historical departmentalism towards a more corporate structure the need will increase for the political leadership of

local authorities to be able to pull together the varying strands of technical advice into some coherent set of social and political priorities. It is here that there is a need for the generalist local government officer. By "generalist" we do not mean merely someone who can turn his hand to anything. His essential task is to submit professional advice and proposals to some form of social and political audit, to interpret the expert to the politician in terms of the latter's language and priorities.

Such men may be hard to find. Traditions of professionalism and of trying to "keep politics out of local government" die hard. The possible sources of such generalists for local government seem to be three in number.

1. *The lay administrator.* Traditionally employed in a subordinate role, servicing their professional colleagues, the local government administrators have in recent years sought both enhanced status and a more positive role. Both still seem to elude them. Their elevation to a role akin to the old Administrative Class civil servant would involve major changes in their traditional pattern of recruitment, training and deployment.

2. *The ex-professional.* Many professional officers have in recent years acquired a broader knowledge of managerial techniques and have moved away from their original professional concerns towards a wider involvement in authority wide policy making. In some cases such men have become Chief Executives, for example former planners Jim Amos and Clifford Smith at Birmingham and Suffolk respectively. If indeed established professionals are readily convertible into managers perhaps a wider interpretation of management along the generalist lines indicated above might provide another source of generalist officers.

3. *The a-professionals.* We refer here to a new but growing breed of individuals whose studies and experience in fields such as community work, urban planning and social research have equipped them intellectually and practically to make a

valuable contribution to local government, but who harbour grave doubts as to the continuing validity of professional institutions, whose pretensions they reject. Many of these people are alive to the problems involved in "the politics of policy" and although some of the staid authorities could find their approach too radical, others might benefit from their combination of social purpose and iconoclasm towards the experts.

Mastery by the councillors of the official machinery of local government, thus ensuring that it serves desired political ends, may be facilitated by the use of the generalist but that alone will not suffice.

Members still face the problem of coping with the workload that the machinery produces. The difficulties in their way were aptly summed up in the Labour manifesto for the Nottinghamshire County elections of 1973, *The Way Ahead*: "There is no formal machinery by which councillors can inform themselves of comparative facts and figures from other authorities about the proposals before them, or request detailed information and figures other than those which the officers choose to put before them. In short, there are no research facilities available to councillors at all.

"The ordinary councillor has to carry himself the whole burden of postage, letter writing, telephone calls and personal visits which both his administrative and his representative work involve him in, except for the expense of his actual committee and council meetings. He receives no assistance or allowance for any accommodation, publicity or following up activity which may be required by his attempts to give a personal service to his electors."

As a solution to these problems, the manifesto proposed: "We shall set up a proper members' secretariat to provide councillors with background information, statistics, previous committee decisions, information from other councils and government departments, both on request and on the initiative of the department itself. It will be part of the council's

executive office, but it must have close links with the council's research department. One of its purposes, like that of the House of Commons library, will be to provide members with the means and material to assess independently the progress and work of the service departments. It should be the normal channel for members' questions to departments: a large part of a councillor's work is finding out information and getting fuller explanations for members of the public, and this secretariat will take away much of the burden, and make sure members of the public get prompt answers. The section will also provide proper secretarial services to members. About one day a month will be an 'approved duty' day, on which councillors can come to County Hall, consult officers, visit the members' secretariat and the research department, hold political group meetings, and follow up individual queries, and receive attendance and travelling allowance. This is allowed for under existing legislation, and is already the practice with Derbyshire County Council. In the past, councillors from outlying parts of the county have often had to make marathon and inconvenient journeys by local transport to attend meetings. In future we shall ensure that councillors who cannot get satisfactory transport will have access to a hired car or council transport to attend meetings. The Council will make available accommodation and provide publicity for some at least of the occasions when a councillor is available to see members of his own electorate about personal complaints and queries. A councillor should be expected to make himself regularly available for this purpose, and it too will be an approved duty.

"There is room for flexibility between the various methods of providing this service: advice bureaux, door to door visits, participation in public meetings (such as on planning, clearance and improvement schemes). It is important for this purpose that councillors should be accessible on the telephone, and the rent of these telephones and a fixed part of the cost of calls, will be paid by the council. These are not privileges for the councillor. They are prerequisites of the job which

the electors should be able to require of of him."

On winning control the Labour Group in Nottinghamshire began to implement these proposals. For example, members' services were to include a specialist library, information and research service which, amongst other things, could circulate summaries of recent developments in local government, prepare abstracts of journals and other literature, assist members with enquiries made on behalf of electors and carry out small research projects on behalf of members. Associated with the library would be a secretarial service for members. Provision was made for committee chairmen and the minority Group to have special secretarial assistance and personal assistant staff.

Convinced that taking control requires "being on the job", provision was made for payment of allowances to each of the Chairmen, majority and minority Group officers and certain "shadow" chairmen on any "duty day" spent at County Hall "in connection with the business of the council or his customary duties as a councillor". This has enabled the leading councillors on both sides to devote as much time as required to the job to which they were elected. The key committee chairmen have in effect become full time professional councillors.

Nottinghamshire are not alone in pioneering the provision of resources that enabled councillors to do their job, although theirs is probably one of the more determined and comprehensive efforts. Members' information rooms have been set up for example at Hammer-smith, Havering and Hull, members' libraries at Bristol and Liverpool. At the GLC, services' to members include a Daily Intelligence Bulletin, a press cutting service, a members' information officer, and a series of literature reviews under the title *London Topics*.

One further possible development that could be explored, particularly by minority Groups perhaps, is the establishment of links with the facilities of local universities and polytechnics. This is

especially so if one accepts the view that members need an "alternative" information source to balance the information generated by the administrative machine inside the Town Hall. Such links could be useful in another way too. At present, in so far as councillors are offered any education about their roles or about local issues it comes in the shape of informal socialisation into the established routines of the council. Links with academic institutions could provide councillors with new insights into a wide range of possible causes of, and remedies for, local problems. More councillors could do as some do already and attend short courses or one day schools, both as speakers and as class members, meeting not only academics but also councillors and officers from other local authorities. They could also more frequently invite academics to join study groups to review policies inside their own authorities. In some cases local Fabian societies might prove admirable catalysts for bringing about the fusion of contributions from practising politicians and theorising academics.

In order to keep their feet firmly on the ground, Labour Groups should also consider the utility of the information to be gathered about local conditions from such sources as community groups and their publications, tenants associations and amenity societies.

The need for such alternative information is generated by the traditional form in which officers present their reports to elected members. These normally take the form of a chain of reasoning—or possibly assertion—leading to a single recommendation or to an allegedly finite number of options. Thus the councillor may find himself in the position of a jurymen confronted with a cogently argued case for the prosecution but with no defence case against which to judge it. Of course, the notion that official advice to councillors should be presented in anything approaching adversary proceedings would run counter to traditional practice. It would certainly be resisted where it might lead to the emergence of conflict between younger,

and more radical members of staff and their established professional superiors. As for chief officers debating both sides of an issue before a committee, they would regard this as an unfortunate departure from their usual solidarity. Moreover the introduction of chief officers' management teams is likely to enhance the tendency for chief officers to all tell the same story to the councillors. (Incidentally, the worries of some officers that councillors can meet collectively in party groups in the absence of officers, is not matched by any uneasiness that they themselves meet collectively in the absence of councillors.)

The belief that experts can be relied on to provide one single right answer to a given problem has taken something of a knock in recent years. The social disasters of high rise housing, the urban shambles produced by some town centre redevelopments, and the successive mutually inconsistent certainties as to the "best" site for the third London Airport, have persuaded some that the experts are not always right and that occasionally a second opinion may be worth having. If this second opinion cannot be obtained from within the local authority, then it will have to be obtained from sources outside it, be they political or academic or of a pressure group nature. The dangers of single channel monolithic official advice also exists in Whitehall, but good ministers are much more readily able to identify, contact, and use a variety of differing views among different groups (see M. Kogan, *The Politics of Education*, 1971).

Among the more controversial schemes for aiding members has been the appointment of personal assistants to senior councillors. Here the GLC are in the vanguard following the commitment made to provide specialist help for committee chairmen in the Labour manifesto *A Socialist Strategy for London*. The arrangements now agreed and operating at the GLC include not only a members' secretariat but specific provision for personal assistants: (a) For the Leader of the council, a head and deputy head of his private office, an executive officer,

and two secretaries. (b) For the Leader of the opposition, a personal assistant plus a secretary. (c) For Chairmen on the GLC and ILEA, a total of fifteen personal assistants plus six secretaries. (d) For opposition spokesmen, four personal assistants and two secretaries.

The jobs which the personal assistants do tend to vary according to the members to whom they are assigned but amongst the personal assistants on the majority side they have included: liaison between the chairman and committee clerks, managing the chairman's appointments and diary, processing constituency business, filtering paperwork and dealing with trivialities, and gathering information.

On the opposition side, their role is naturally rather different. The present minority Leader, Horace Cutler, sees their prime use as being in the field of research rather than office administration, finding the ammunition with which to shoot down the majority, or get a proposal modified.

Clearly there are problems about how far such personal assistants can be or should be politicised. With the exception of the head and deputy head of the Leader's private office, GLC standing orders prevent them from attending party group meetings. The extent to which they are kept politically "in the know" depends very much on the predilection of the member to whom they are assigned. However, although they are formally debarred from political contact, one of the qualities looked for when the appointments were made (all from within the GLC establishment) was evidence of political sensitivity. Given that most of these personal assistants are young graduates doing a two to three year stint before returning to "normal duties", it is tempting to speculate that their experience would be valuable training for the generalist officers of the future, referred to previously.

It should not be imagined that the acquisition of a personal assistant per-

mits a GLC committee chairman to lead a life of idleness. Their presence at County Hall is still required on most days of the week. Experience suggests that in large authorities the "full time" committee chairman—with or without a personal assistant—is an increasingly common phenomenon. This development should not alarm those who believe that elected representatives should indeed be "on the job", ensuring that the bureaucratic machine is responding to political pressures. It may however raise problems in terms of the relationship between the chairman and the "back-bench" councillors on the various committees.

Here of course we approach a subject exhaustively covered in recent years, namely the problems of committee structure and decision making within the local authority. The shortcomings of administration by committee have been rehearsed far too often to bear lengthy repetition. The recommendation of the Maud Committee that their main functions should be deliberative rather than executive sums up much of the criticism directed at council committees (*Management of Local Government*, 1967). Although Maud's specific recommendations about Management Boards as "the focal point for the management of the authority's affairs" did not enjoy widespread adoption, the subsequent trend towards some form of central policy committee was noticeable.

The existence of such policy committees combined with the emergence of full time chairmen of service or programme committees calls into question any notion that all committees and all councillors are equal in the sight of the council and the community respectively. We seem to be moving from the era of the councillor as a "good committee man" to the era of the councillor as political manager (or political entrepreneur?) But this trend is hard to accommodate within the present formal structure of committee powers and responsibilities.

The radical cure for all this would be to introduce a ministerial system into local

government freeing the bulk of councillors from responsibility for management and leaving them to function like back bench MPs specialising in particular issues if they wish, taking particular grievances or suggestions of their constituents acting as critics and advisers. For this they need not be paid anything except travelling and other unavoidable expenses and compensation for demonstrable loss of earnings when attending essential public meetings of the council or its committees. Legislation might be necessary to enable councils to delegate their major management functions to individual full time paid "ministers" among their numbers, retaining only "parliamentary" functions for themselves. Local ministers could be individually responsible for departments but combine in local cabinets to take overall responsibility for the management of all their councils' functions. Officers would be responsible solely to their ministers and cabinets and provide them only with services and advice—just as in central government. Ministers could then work full time with their officers, get themselves really well informed and briefed and be able to delegate informally as well as formally. They might become at least as professional as experienced ministers in central government.

Such a radical solution would probably be unpopular—hard to work out in practice and politically unacceptable. Back bench councillors would resent the power of the new ministers and the resulting greater effective power of officers. The whole thing might be attacked as elitism, professionalism, bureaucracy and so on. It might be hard to find enough people with the time, ability and experience to make good "ministers." The back benchers would be jealous of their salaries while obviously sore at losing their own attendance allowances.

A more practicable solution would be to change titles, forms and legal powers as little as possible; then simply take steps to strengthen the position of committee chairmen by: (a) Paying them increased allowances—say by letting all time spent by chairmen on any kind of council

business, however informal qualify for allowances. (b) Providing them with offices, personal assistants, secretaries and all necessary office facilities. (c) Encouraging councils and committees to delegate more functions to committee chairmen individually, and collectively as a steering group or "Policy and Resources Committee" for the whole council—subject to their accounting for their responsibilities to the council and to committees in general debates open to the public—and possibly by introducing a "question time" on parliamentary lines. (d) Encourage committee chairmen to identify themselves more publicly with specific council functions and departments and to accept public responsibility, receiving both personal praise and blame for the way things went.

In fact this sort of situation is emerging already in certain councils. But it should be taken further and more openly recognised and accepted than hitherto, particularly in the larger local authorities.

One difficulty would be that of possible loss of contact with officers and loss of official facilities by the opposition party. It might be necessary to provide some special basis of payment for a Leader of the opposition and "shadow" chairmen (who could be called vice chairmen) and some special information service by officers for them—stopping short of course at information about such things as advance policy planning by individual ministers and the cabinet.

4. local equality

So far we have concentrated on the means of improving the ability of councillors, especially on the Labour side, to control the machinery of local government. Thus we have suggested measures involving both the local authorities and the Labour party. The question may now legitimately be asked as to what end are such measures directed. More effective Labour councillors are not ends in themselves: they should presumably have certain aims to pursue.

We have indicated earlier that the Labour party has to some degree suffered from a longstanding uncertainty as to the true role of Labour councillors and we have asked for a greater clarity as to what this role might be. Perhaps we should now suggest some lines along which the solution to this problem may be found. In doing so we hope to carry into the arena of practical Labour municipal politics a debate now engaging academics, researchers and community workers, centred around the distributive effects of local policy making. We take up the substance of that debate and argue that it is of crucial relevance to the future of any attempt by Labour to be politically, rather than simply administratively, effective in local government. In brief we shall argue that the conflict between the "haves" and the "have nots" is as relevant to local politics as it is to national politics and that Labour politicians must adopt locally the overtly egalitarian perspective which they have traditionally adopted at the national level. Many Labour councillors may of course react to such a suggestion by claiming a lifelong attachment to the ideal of equality and an enduring commitment to the interests of the "have nots." Those claims are clearly well founded at the level of ideology and sentiment. However, there is a case for saying that local government has not hitherto proved as useful a vehicle for egalitarian social reform as it might have done.

Local government developed historically in order to provide certain technically based services of municipal housekeeping (such as lighting, cleaning, drainage, sewerage, water, police and paving)

required by Act of parliament. As such it developed an approach to public policy-making which concentrates on the technical and the legal and whose character is well summed up in the old adage that there is no conservative or socialist way of emptying dustbins, only a right way and a wrong way. Local government has long retained this neutered style of operation even though its functions have since expanded from mere house keeping into such areas as housing, planning, transport, education and social services, each having a very serious impact on the life chances and life styles of the local population, and thus each having major political implications.

Central government has not been so fearful of the intrusion of politics. Its activities have grown out of the successive political conflicts between the monarch and the barons, the landed interests and the manufacturers, the Lords and the Commons, the workers and the middle class. As a consequence it is an arena of conflict, of claim and counter claim, of rights and duties, of liberties and equalities, of the clash of faction and of party. Now most local politicians are, increasingly, members of one of the national parties, and for them one might expect the natural style of government and politics to be the style of Westminster and the hustings. It is arguably a style of some relevance to those modern local government functions which extend beyond mere house keeping. It is not however a style which commends itself to the local government officer, whose training and traditions sensitise him far less to the political dimension of his work than do those of the senior civil servant. As we argued earlier, local officials are deeply steeped in those traditions of professionalism and of local government which speak in bland and neutral terms about "the public interest" and "the good of the community." These traditions are strong enough not merely to ensure the adherence to them of the officers; even Labour politicians are liable to succumb to them.

They may succumb for three reasons: first because of the sheer weight of

inertia accumulated by the tradition of "keeping politics out of local government", a tradition bolstered by a coalition, covert, perhaps even unconscious, of conservatives and officers; second because of an unwillingness to make specific the local manifestations of the national conflicts between, say, labour and capital, lest this harms local images of a friendly community at one with itself; and third, because of uncertainty as to how precisely questions can be posed or answered locally which bear on traditional socialist pre-occupations with distributive justice.

Where Labour councillors have been able and willing to act in a socialist manner it has tended to be by means of expanding the role of municipal activity, and by more generous measures of public provision or planning for the community at large. The emphasis has been on expanding the inputs and outputs of the municipal machine, rather than on measuring the differential outcomes of municipal activity for the various groups within the community. In essence the political conflict between conservatism and municipal socialism has been over what levels of municipal activity would most benefit "the whole community", rather than over which groups within the community gain or lose by particular levels and types of municipal activity. The debate has been about "what shall we provide?" rather than "who gets what?"

In so far as local authorities have been involved in activities which are redistributive in aim this has tended to be the result of pressure from central government. The introduction of comprehensive education and of experiments in positive discrimination in social policy have both been justified in terms of reducing inequalities, but they are largely the creatures of Westminster rather than of the local authorities. In other areas of local government activity there is little evidence of any concern with distributive outcomes, either locally or nationally. Yet evidence is now accumulating to show that policies once justified as being for the general good of the community

do in fact have very specific consequences for different social groups at the local level: (a) Thus the switch of public spending from new housing to the improvement of old housing during the late sixties seems to have resulted in a shift of real income from the poorer to the richer and also from the old to the young. The abuse of the improvement grant system by virtue of its contribution to gentrification and to the second homes boom has now been widely recognised; (b) The policy of rehousing low income families from the inner city on to peripheral estates has often caused them to end up worse off in financial terms than they were before due to the costs of moving, setting up home and travelling to work; (c) Low income families who tend not to own cars and thus rely on public transport find that there are fewer and fewer places of work, education or recreation which they can reach, and those that they can are accessible only at higher and higher fares and on increasingly infrequent services; (d) A wide range of planning policies (urban containment, Green Belts, redevelopment) have recently been shown to benefit the more skilled and the better off at the expense of lower income groups. Indeed Peter Hall has concluded that the main distributive effect of 25 years of town and country planning "was to keep the poor, or a high proportion of them, poor." Hall argued that one reason for this regressive outcome was that planning "has not concerned itself specifically enough with such questions of distribution" (*Labour and Inequality*, Fabian Society, 1972.)

Hall was referring here to one specific form of local authority planning. However, his observation has considerable relevance to the whole range of planning activities upon which councils nowadays embark such as structure plans, local plans, housing strategies, transport policies and programmes, corporate plans. Local government particularly in the metropolitan and county authorities has moved into an age of corporate planning. All too often such plans may be prepared and presented in a bland and technocratic style which obscures rather

than clarifies the consequences of the plans for different groups in the community. As a result aims and policies seem related not to any real needs or inequalities but only to some vague and unformulated notion of public interest. Such local authority plans merit the criticism which the Layfield Report levied at the Greater London Development Plan. The Plan was found to be "full of statements of aims which do not mean anything to anyone" and it was "extremely difficult to discover what the precise aims were that many of the policies were supposed to fulfil."

This sort of failing is likely to continue so long as planners are able to persist unchallenged in the use of broad brush analytical techniques, employed in such a way that they do not break down their findings into small spatial or social sub-groupings. The result is that it becomes hard to identify particular sub-areas or small groups who may actually benefit or lose from policies described in well meaning generalities.

As local government moves into an era of corporate planning the councillor faces a serious challenge. The era seems likely to produce a formidable new coalition of professional expertise, with local authority treasurers and urban planners joining with the traditionally dominant local authority lawyers to emerge as the prime movers and managers of local government operations. Elected councillors must not let themselves be over ridden by the new coalition and must set their face against any attempts to move power away from politicians towards those who claim the managerial and technical skills of the corporate planner. Labour councillors in particular must resist the notion that corporate planning can somehow dissolve local conflicts over the allocation of resources and produce an indisputable best policy. Public policy making rarely distributes resources, costs and benefits equally to all. Some groups gain, others lose. As socialists have often observed of society as a whole, those who gain at one point in the system are frequently those who gain at other points, whilst those who lose, lose again

and again. Labour Councillors must therefore be willing and able to disrupt the blander non-political tendencies of local government tradition and of corporate planning. They must ask questions which clearly relate the processes and outcomes of local policy making to the specific needs and objectives of particular local groups. They must ask questions about who benefits from policies, be they for ring roads, peripheral shopping centres, nursery schools, recreation and leisure, housing, transport or commercial development. Unless there is a strong political determination to press these questions they will not be adequately answered. Once asked and answered there must be equally strong pressure to ensure that the right policies are adopted.

For Labour councils the right policies must surely mean policies which tend to reduce the gap between those who have much and those who have little. Magnificence and munificence of public services are not in themselves an adequate substitute for redistributive policy making, at least not for socialists. By subjecting local policy making to distributional analysis, Labour councillors may give new life to the old ideal of municipal socialism, basing it squarely upon the issues of equality. It is to this end that efforts should be made to ensure that politicians, not officials, control the operations of Labour councils. It is by progress towards this end that improvements in party and municipal organisation and procedures should ultimately be judged.

5. conclusion

We have considered some developments which might, we think, impart greater purpose and effectiveness to Labour in local government. In doing so, we have referred particularly to the problems of the councillor in the context of his party and of the councillor in the context of his local authority. We do not for one moment doubt that there are other problems also deserving attention, notably in the field of the councillor's relationship with the multiplicity of groups and individuals within his electorate. This however could be, and perhaps should be, a subject meriting separate treatment in its own right.

By way of conclusion, therefore, it may be in order to summarise the particular changes we seek. Within local government Labour should press for: (a) A more widespread move toward quasi-ministerial committee chairmen who can be on the job full time if necessary, with proper services and support; (b) Provision of adequate backup facilities for all councillors in terms of information, research and secretarial services; and (c) The introduction of generalists into the local government service with the prime object of servicing the politicians and strengthening their ability to formulate and implement policies, and also to interpret the professionals and the politicians to one another.

Within the Labour Party, developments should include: (d) Provision for the election of councillors on to the NEC; (e) Improved facilities for local government support work at Transport House; (f) The development of better alternative sources of information for councillors, including closer liaison with local sources such as academic institutions, community groups, and other voluntary organisations such as tenants associations and amenity societies; (g) Enhanced status and greater resources for district, county and Scottish regional parties, to permit effective party policy making; (h) A recognition that Labour groups need to initiate policies on the council rather than merely marshal votes for officers' recommendations; and (j) A greater concern for the distributional impact of local

policy making, in terms of its ability to reduce local inequalities of access to the good life.

policy-making in terms of its ability to address local inequalities of access to the goods that are produced. A key question here is how far the state can go in redistributing income and resources to meet the needs of the poor. Such local redistribution is the focus of the book. The book is based on the data at the Greater London Development Plan. The Plan was found to be "full of assumptions of what should be done and what should be done" and the precise details of what should be done were not specified.

This sort of failure is likely to be repeated in other parts of the country. It is not, therefore, a failure of the state as a whole. It is a failure of the state in London. The book is a study of the state in London. It is a study of the state in London. It is a study of the state in London.

An early governmental policy, that of the 1960s, was to provide a "social infrastructure" for the poor. This was a policy of providing a "social infrastructure" for the poor. This was a policy of providing a "social infrastructure" for the poor. This was a policy of providing a "social infrastructure" for the poor.

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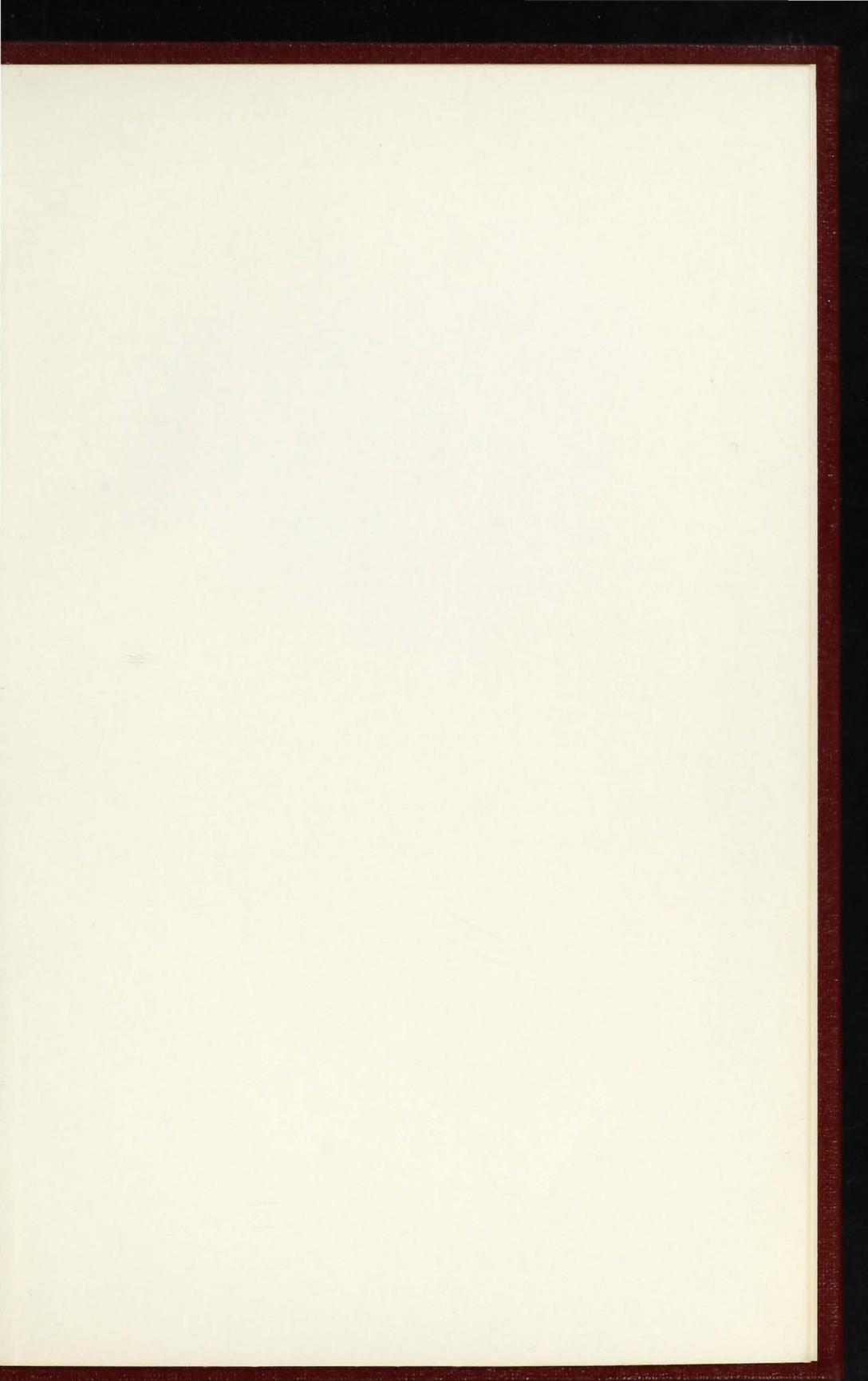
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Political Pamphlets

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Local Pamphlets

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