Political power and corporate managerialism in local government: the organisation of executive functions

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Abstract. The history of British local government since the 19th century reveals two opposite organisational tendencies. On the one hand there has been the entrenchment of a decentralised political structure based around the committee system; on the other hand there have been recurrent expressions of concern at the absence of executive unity within councils, and the development of a number of reintegration corporate initiatives. Sometimes these initiatives have taken a political and sometimes a managerial form; the most prominent managerial expression of the pursuit of corporate cohesion is the post of chief executive, but this post is to varying degrees disabled by the absence of a cohesive political structure in those authorities where politicians actively seek to govern. It is only where politicians are relatively weak, and where local democratic accountability is attenuated and power transferred to the officers, that the post of chief executive can live up to its corporate expectations. The perpetuation of these circumstances reflects in part a reluctance amongst councillors to concentrate local political power in a centralised political executive; a reluctance which, in practice, plays into the hands of those who favour a managerialist future for local governance.

Introduction
Forms of local government differ from one another in the organisation of their executive functions. Some are based upon a centralised political executive, either a 'mayor' or a 'cabinet' which has specific powers and is distinct from the wider body of councillors. Others employ a centralised managerial executive, a 'city manager' who is appointed by the council to assist in the development of policies and to oversee their implementation. Third, some systems of local government revolve around a decentralised political executive, in which all or most of the elected representatives are able to participate in the conduct of policy. Directly elected mayors are a feature of some US and German councils, whereas indirectly elected mayors are characteristic of French communes, and city managers are found in many reformed US municipalities (Wolman and Goldsmith, 1992, page 148). In Britain both executive and representative functions are located with the full council and can be delegated to committees but not to individual politicians. Most councils in the United Kingdom have a political leadership which performs many executive functions and is elected from the ruling party where there is one, but this leadership rarely if ever possesses the authority of an executive mayor or cabinet. Most councils these days also have a chief executive officer who is appointed by elected members to oversee the organisation, but the powers of a chief executive compare unfavourably with those of a city manager (Stewart, 1992, page 12).

Local government in the United Kingdom is therefore based upon a decentralised form of political executive, whilst at the same time displaying a number of centralised political and managerial features which vary in importance from one place to another.

This system has evolved over many years, but it has been exposed to chronic fiscal and political pressure since the 1980s to the point where it seems that the functions of the chief executive are becoming difficult to fulfil. The Society of Metropolitan Chief Executives, for instance, has estimated that between 1988 and 1990 there was a 54% turnover amongst chief executives in urban (London and metropolitan) boroughs.
The Society concludes that the high turnover rate is in part "attributable to a confusion over the chief executive's role" (LGC 1992a; see also LGC 1992b). Likewise, in a survey by the Local Government Chronicle in July 1991 it was found that one in four councils had changed their chief executive over the preceding two years (LGC 1991). Between 1989 and 1991, 14 out of a total of 32 London boroughs lost their chief executive; by 1994 the rate of turnover had increased, with 11 London chief executives (over a third) leaving or planning to leave in an eight-month period (LGC 1991; 1995). These circumstances raise difficult questions about the continuing viability of the post of chief executive, and more generally about the organisation of local government.

In the present paper I consider the nature and limitations of the position of local authority chief executive and use this to explore certain contradictions at the heart of local government in the United Kingdom. I begin by examining the way in which the role of chief executive is defined, referring both to the origins of the post and to the views of its occupants. The historical development of council organisation is described in terms of a dynamic tension between 'centrifugal' and 'centripetal' forces, and a model of the council power structure is put forward. I assess the current state of play in this dynamic by reference to recent initiatives on the part of central government, including the 'Widdicombe Inquiry', the 'Heseltine Review', the growth of competition and of challenge funding regimes. I conclude by arguing that there is a tension between the corporate aspirations of the post of chief executive and the power of committees in councils that are politician led, a tension which can be resolved in a manner that strengthens democratic accountability only by establishing a centralised political executive and converting the chief executive into a chief administrative officer. At present it is only in officer-led councils, where democratic accountability is relatively attenuated, that the post of chief executive comes into its own and that the corporate aspirations of local authorities are able to succeed.

The post of chief executive

There are at least three angles from which to derive a definition of the role of local authority chief executive in the United Kingdom:

(a) from the historical origins of this post and its introduction into councils;
(b) from the ways the post is currently perceived and described by practitioners;
(c) from the things that chief executives do in order to perform their duties effectively.

There was a growing commitment in postwar Britain to the rational technocratic solution of managerial problems both in private and in public sectors, and to the use of corporate planning procedures. It was argued during the 1960s, for instance, that planning processes must be developed which employ the 'technology of strategic choice', and that a coordinated approach to the totality of an authority's policies requires a new post with responsibility for corporate management (Friend and Jessop, 1969, page xx; Norton, 1991, page 2). An early example of the new thinking is provided by Newcastle-Upon-Tyne City Council. Under the influence of T Dan Smith, and in the light of experience drawn from certain US cities, a post of Principal City Officer (PCO) and Town Clerk was established in 1965 to improve corporate coordination and control: "it was believed that the administrative process could only be really efficient and adequately co-ordinated if under the controlling guidance of a 'city manager'" like those in the USA (Elliott, 1971, page 149; compare Smith, 1965, page 416).

The relationship of the traditional town clerk to the other chief officers was that of first among equals, but "Mr Smith expected the PCO to be more than primus inter pares; he expected him to be the 'boss'" (Elliott, 1971, page 158). In the job description for the PCO post this was compared to a 'managing director' in 'big business', and when appointed (from a multinational company) the PCO described himself as
"managing director of the town hall business" (Elliott, 1971, page 151). The Newcastle experiment was in many respects unique and had limited success, but it was followed by similar appointments elsewhere [in Basildon, for instance (see Basildon UDC, 1966)]. These experiments were taken up and promoted in reviews of local government by Maud, Redcliffe-Maud, and Bains (reporting in 1967, 1969 and 1972, respectively) and the Local Government Act 1972. After a period in abeyance the 'business-like approach' to local government was renewed with vigour from the late 1980s, and once again it was argued that a central manager was required to embody the unity of the Council and to establish the corporate direction (see for instance Audit Commission, 1989a; 1989b).

The job description of a local authority chief executive is likely to state that the postholder is responsible for devising the overall organisational structure of the council, for undertaking policy development and forward planning, for steering the organisation as a whole via the chief officers' management team, and for monitoring the performance of staff (see Norton, 1991, page 6). A survey by Morphet shows that when asked to identify other comparable jobs a majority of chief executives (53% of respondents) considered that "managing directors of PLCs were their nearest equivalent" (1993, page 178). In order to produce a cohesive organisation that is amenable to corporate management, and to give themselves the power to carry this forward, chief executives have, in many cases, attempted to introduce a series of structural changes. For instance: (a) ensuring that chief officers report to them directly; (b) proposing a reduction in the number of committees; (c) reducing the size of the management team; (d) streamlining departmental structures; (e) centralising policy planning and performance review; (f) commissioning a corporate strategy; (g) establishing a corporate budget-planning process.

By no means all chief executives have adopted this approach, but since the 1980s it has become a model to which many councils have aspired. Furthermore, this sort of response is not itself new but seems to have been implicit from the outset: when Harris was appointed as PCO in Newcastle in 1965 he proposed a reduction in the number of committees from 37 to 8 and "the abandonment of the one-committee—one chief officer principle" (Elliott, 1971, page 155).

These three strands—origins, perceptions, and actions—point to the same general conclusion, that the post of chief executive in British local government is viewed as the embodiment of corporate unity, comparable in the eyes of practitioners to managing directors in industry or perhaps to city managers in the USA (see also Norton, 1991). The aspirations reflected in the post are high and in particular they are 'managerialist', seeking to embody the executive unity of local councils at a managerial level (Pollitt, 1990). Indeed to a considerable extent they are also 'privatist' in that—like US 'city managers' before them—they look to the private sector and to the split between a board of directors and a chief officer for their model of local government organisation (see for example Audit Commission, 1989a, page 3; Stoker and Wolman, 1991, page 9; Wolman and Goldsmith, 1992, page 148).

The history of corporate cohesion
To appreciate the significance of the post of chief executive it is important to understand the organisational history of local government in the United Kingdom. The roles and responsibilities of local authorities expanded rapidly from the 1850s, and for each new service that was introduced a specialist board or committee was formed. As the number of boards grew so this fragmentary structure became increasingly problematic, with
citizens in some areas liable for eighteen separate rates. Eventually it was recognised that these bodies should be pulled together, and between 1872 and 1902 the system of local governance was rationalised by merging boards into “compendious” authorities, unified councils from which specific committees derived their authority (Finer, 1950, page 22). But as with the formation of private sector conglomerates around the same time, preexisting units—in this case committees—retained considerable independence within the ‘plural’ local authority, and the problem of coordination was not so much resolved as internalised. Indeed coordination was not aided by the relative weakness of the centre of most local councils: “statutes gave no encouragement to dynamic political leadership, as in the ‘strong mayor’ concept found in the United States, or in the strong administrative leadership through the city managers” (Keith-Lucas and Richards, 1978, page 17; see also Robson, 1931; Stewart, 1992).

A further trend in the late Victorian period was that each new service, as it emerged, was associated with the establishment of a new municipal profession, and the professionalisation process reinforced the internal differentiation of local authority organisation and culture. The Institute of Municipal Engineers was founded in 1873, for instance, and the Institute of Municipal Treasurers and Accountants in 1885 (Keith-Lucas and Richards, 1978, page 110). Departments were created around the nuclei provided by these professions and a form of administrative practice was adopted which reflected their professional origins. By the turn of the century it was recognised that greater coordination was required to counteract the growing division of local council organisation, and it was argued that a legal specialist should be appointed in order to leave the town clerk free to provide overall supervision (Headrick, 1962; Waller, 1983, page 285). Central-government funding and supervision of local services increased, especially from the 1870s, but grants in aid were themselves tied to particular services not provided to the authority as a whole. The corporate existence of local authorities was acknowledged in the new block grant of 1929, but funds earmarked for particular activities remained the predominant form of financial assistance. Government inspectors were appointed to monitor the quality of local authority services, but once again standards were imposed separately for each council activity and compartmentalisation was thereby reinforced.

There was no concerted reorganisation of local government in the 1920s and 1930s, but rather a continuing tendency for local authorities to be merged and the system consolidated. The increased penetration of party politics into local government during the interwar period, although it eroded the already-weakened position of the mayor, also went some way towards improving internal coordination. The Labour Party in London during the 1930s, for example, introduced the offices of ‘leader of the council’ and ‘leader of the opposition’ together with a committee of principal chairs of committees: “just as a party can organise a council by holding its committees together, so can it bring some organisation into a committee” (Wheare, 1955, page 200). But the power of such positions was quite limited and the devolved executive was strengthened under the Local Authorities Act 1933, which permitted committees to be given “the full power of executive action” (Redlich and Hirst, 1970, page 234). Meanwhile, the scope and professionalism of local authority services continued to expand and to reinforce the pluralistic pattern.

The plea for greater coordination was taken up again during the postwar period. In 1949 a committee of local authority associations recommended that the town clerk should become the chief executive officer of the council. It was suggested that

(1) Radicals, Liberals, and Conservatives were influential in certain areas during the 19th century but it was not until the interwar period, with the advent of the Labour Party, that party politics entered systematically into local government (Young, 1982).
'establishment and general administrative committees' be formed in each authority to develop a comprehensive view of the civic machine (Smellie, 1968, page 95). Sir John Maud, in 1966, recommended the streamlining of council organisation, and in 1967 the Maud Committee reported that there was too much dispersal of control within local government, with too many members and committees (Maud, 1967). Authorities in Liverpool, Newcastle, West Bromwich, Bedford, Grimsby, Ealing, and Camden experimented with the grouping together of departments, fewer committees, and a new kind of chief officer (Maud, 1966, page 495). Policy and resources committees were introduced to strengthen coordination in a number of councils during the late 1960s (Bedford had a 'Management Committee', Basildon a 'Committee of Chairmen'). But central supervision and the professional compartmentalisation of services were also increasing with the expansion of the national welfare state and the contribution to this of local authority committees and departments (Wraith, 1966, page 132).

The reports of Redcliffe-Maud (1969) and Bains (1972) advocated that a corporate approach to local services be reinforced by councils appointing a chief executive officer. Gradually, from the late 1960s, and more quickly after reorganisation in 1973/74, the post of town clerk was replaced by that of chief executive. But generally the most centralised function in local government remained that of the treasurer, who sustained a modicum of corporate cohesion through the operation of a unified budgetary process.\(^{(2)}\) Indeed, many councils continued to function with town clerks or a hybrid 'chief executive and town clerk' into the 1980s. Despite acknowledgements of the 'corporate deficit' in reviews of local government during the 1950s and 1960s, the committee system was largely unchanged under reorganisation in 1972, and indeed the power of delegation to committees was actually strengthened.

Technocratic corporate planning had been prominent in the 1960s and 1970s but was displaced in the early 1980s by a range of substantive policy initiatives and political strategies (for example, toward equal opportunities or economic development) in larger urban authorities (Boddy and Fudge, 1984). Although politically inspired, these initiatives were frequently corporate in character—seeking to change the council as a whole—and the weakness of the town clerk's position (where this still existed) was further exposed by the difficulties encountered during implementation. But from the late 1980s council strategies were shifted back in a formal managerialist direction and were exposed to mounting budgetary pressures and the renewed influence of business culture. In this context the executive functions of local government came increasingly to be seen as the responsibility of corporate managers. The Audit Commission, for example, argued that "in the absence of a strong chief executive, local authorities find it hard to make effective corporate decisions" (1989a, page 2). One of the few growth areas in local government between 1988 and 1992 was that of strategic management, with the proliferation of central policy and review units. Much of the effort of these units has been devoted to the establishment of policy-planning procedures for achieving agreement between committee chairs whose interests are divergent (Collinge and Leach, 1995).

The history of local government in Britain over the last century reveals two opposing organisational tendencies. It reveals a strong and persistent 'centrifugal' tendency towards the entrenchment of a decentralised executive structure based upon committees and departments and reinforced by professionalisation, the expansion and differentiation of services, the weakness of the centre, and the service-based pattern of central government funding and supervision. Once in place this system became self-perpetuating, inducing shared interests between departmental officers and committee members and between local and central government which were

\(^{(2)}\) I am grateful to John Stewart for this observation.
underwritten in law. But alongside this runs a second, 'centripetal', tendency against the compartmentalisation of services and towards the reintegration of executive functions within a unified policy framework and administrative structure. In some respects—such as the replacement of the 'mayor' by the 'leader', the establishment of policy and resources committees, and the pursuit of substantive manifesto commitments in the early 1980s—this 'corporate project' has taken a political form, a form which sought to reorganise and reinforce the cohesion of the political executive.

In other respects, however, it has taken a managerialist form, seeking to embody executive coherence at the managerial level, to introduce corporate management posts and procedures to redress departmentalism and on this basis to forge unity amongst officers and amongst politicians. The replacement of town clerks by the stronger central authority of the chief executive was just one of several managerialist steps taken over the years towards the realisation of this corporate project, and the managerial rather than the political route to executive cohesion has generally been stressed by national committees of inquiry and in local government legislation since 1945. After a period in which corporate aspirations took a predominantly substantive political form in the late 1970s and early 1980s, this project has once again been recast in a formal managerialist vein in the context of the administrative and budgetary pressures from the late 1980s.

**The council power structure**

The introduction of the post of chief executive, together with the other initiatives identified above, reveals the aspirations of local councils: the desire for greater corporate coherence and unity of direction which was expressed both in political and in managerialist terms. But to what degree are these aspirations viable given the underlying realities—and legal foundations—of local authority organisation, and are there conditions under which this viability can be enhanced? To take the argument forward we need to examine the power structure of the typical council and to generate a model that will elucidate the constraints upon the corporate project.

Although the de jure uniformity of UK local government permits significant differences of emphasis from one council to another, the basic contours of the system are much more standardised than is the case within the federal systems of Germany or the USA, where different Länder or states may sustain fundamentally different models of municipal government (Stewart, 1992, page 6). It used to be thought that the most fundamental feature of British local government was the horizontal division between elected politicians ('members' who determine council policies) and appointed officers (who enable the council to implement these policies) (see, for example, Norton, 1991, page xiii). But whatever the constitutional position, in practice most councils are run by politicians and officers working together through the committee system. This system ensures that councils are divided into a plurality of vertical columns: committees and departments each with responsibility for specific sets of services. Relationships within these columns, between committees and departments, and between chairs and chief officers, are generally close and are cemented over time as the two sides come to identify with one another and to share interests in common.

It might be thought that the ruling group—or more specifically the group leadership or group 'executive committee'—is the most powerful body in the council. Certainly power within the political structure rests ultimately with the controlling group where there is one; this group appoints individual councillors to their positions and rules on issues of importance. But committees are powerful not only because they control services of a politically sensitive nature (for example council houses, refuse collection, finance) but also because they have delegated authority and are able to
exercise considerable discretion. Legislation does not permit councils to delegate responsibility to individual councillors, and chairs of committees are by no means accountable in hierarchical fashion to the leader of the group or to the group executive but report in the first instance to their committees and through these to the group as a whole (Stewart, 1992, pages 7–8). Neither the political leadership nor the executive committee of the ruling group is recognised in law as the executive body of the authority. Although the group executive may be powerful, this power generally depends upon the degree to which its membership coincides with the chairs of the most powerful committees. Likewise, the political leadership of a council may be strong but it must go to considerable lengths to maintain the support of fellow councillors.

Most modern councils have a policy and resources committee which is supposed to serve as the central coordinating body (see for instance Rusbridge, 1994). But if this is to exercise control over the administration as a whole it must be prepared to overturn decisions taken in other committees, which is something that can be done only sparingly if at all. The reality in most large councils is that the policy and resources committee deals with some of the least important issues and serves as a back stop, a place to which decisions that have already been taken are referred before going to a meeting of the full council. Some authorities may have 'quasi-cabinets' made up of committee chairs, but where these exist they may well serve primarily as a forum in which chairs defend their committee interests rather than as a source of positive corporate leadership (Borraz et al, 1994, pages 3–4).

The power of the committee system ensures that the political structure of local government is fundamentally decentralised and pluralistic, and guarantees that political manifestations of the corporate project have so far failed to deliver. How does this affect the position of the chief executive? To take the argument forward it is necessary to reflect some of the variation which exists within the uniformity of the UK system. In particular, a distinction must be drawn between 'politician-led' authorities (in which councillors actively establish the priorities of the organisation and ensure that these are carried out) and 'officer-led' authorities (in which officers lead and the councillors provide a passive check on officer decisions). Clearly these define the poles of a continuum along which most councils will be ranged, but they also capture an important characteristic that distinguishes local authorities from one another [on variations in the extent and intensity of political control between councils see Gyford et al (1989) and Young and Davies (1990)]. Generally speaking, urban Labour-controlled councils have been more politician led whereas rural Conservative-controlled authorities and hung councils have been more officer led.

It is true that in both kinds of organisation power within the officer structure lies with the chief executive and the directors. It might also lie with the chief officers' management team, but in most politician-led authorities the management team functions in the first instance as a representative forum or parliament in which chief officers defend their departmental interests. Whatever the formal reporting lines, in practice chief officers in politician-led authorities report not only to the chief executive but also to chairs of committees and must to some degree represent these in corporate meetings. Chief executives, for their part, generally report to the policy and resources committee and to the leadership of the ruling group. As we have seen, however, these may be relatively weak bodies and may do little to reinforce the corporate role of the chief executive. The organisation of politician-led councils is built upon a decentralised foundation—the committee system—which strengthens chairs and chief officers and weakens the positions of leader, chief executive, and chief officers' management team in equal measure. The post of chief executive and other initiatives aimed at building corporate unity, such as policy-planning processes and
initiatives by the Local Government Management Board (LGMB) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), have modified but not transformed these foundations in politician-led councils (Collinge and Leach, 1995; LGMB, 1993; 1995; SOLACE, 1993). This contrasts markedly with the situation in officer-led authorities in, for example, many hung councils where the chief officers’ management team is able to exert corporate control and the position of chief executive comes into its own.

The continuing power of the committee system, underwritten in law as the point to which executive authority may be delegated, has helped to ensure that political expressions of the corporate project in local government (the post of leader, the policy and resources committee, member cabinets) have been relatively weak. Indeed in politician-led authorities (where the council tends to fulfil its constitutional role as a politically accountable democratic body) the political power of the committee system limits the effectiveness of the corporate aspirations of councils, whether pursued in a political or managerial vein. In particular, this political and organisational reality tends to contradict the strategic aspirations which are embodied in the office of chief executive, to falsify comparisons either with the managing director in a business corporation or with the city manager in a US municipality, and to condition the difficulties of the post as manifested in the high turnover of chief executives in urban areas (Stoker and Wolman, 1991). On the other hand, in officer-led authorities (where the council falls short of its constitutional role) the weakness of politicians and committees clears a path for the chief executive to become the de facto centre of power, to forge corporate unity, to exert management control over chief officers and via these over politicians, committees, and the authority as a whole. In the existing political structure it is only in officer-led authorities that corporate unity can be secured and that chief executives come near to realising the corporate aspirations inscribed in their posts.

The local government system
Since the early 1980s there has been a series of central government initiatives with a direct bearing upon the internal organisation of local authorities. What has been the impact of these initiatives upon the committee system, the power structure of councils, and the corporate cohesion of the local authority executive?

The eruption of central–local conflict in the early 1980s prompted the Conservative Government to establish the Widdicombe Inquiry into the conduct of local authority business and ‘abuses of political power’ in local government. In its report, which was published in 1986, this committee made a number of recommendations in which it sought in practice to acknowledge, clarify, and even to strengthen political leadership, while reinforcing the formalisation of council procedures and the division between management and politics (Widdicombe, 1986; Young and Davies, 1990). Although decision-taking committees would in future have to reflect the political balance of each council, single-party deliberative or policy-formulating meetings could be established. It was accepted that a limited number of party political advisors could be appointed by councils, but at the same time officers above a certain level were to be disqualified from political activity (that is to say, from a practice known as ‘twin tracking’) (Loughlin, 1996, page 147). In addition, it was recommended that the propriety of local authority conduct should be reinforced by strengthening the supervisory powers of professional managers, and that local authorities should be obliged to appoint a chief executive who would have overall responsibility in law for the conduct of council business as “head of the paid service” (Leach, 1989, page 117).

Many of this committee’s recommendations were eventually incorporated into legislation under the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. The political balance of decisionmaking committees was accepted, and the practice of twin tracking was
outlawed for politically sensitive posts. But in other respects legislation weakened or reversed the committee's recommendations. The existence and single-party nature of deliberative committees was rejected, for instance, making an effective political executive more difficult to establish or to formalise (Leach, 1989, page 105; Stewart, 1992, page 8). At the same time, the powers of the chief executive were adjusted only slightly; the act simply required the appointment of a 'head of paid service' with responsibility for the council organisation, and a 'monitoring officer' responsible for the legality and probity of the administration. The effect of these changes was to inhibit political leadership and to reinforce—albeit to a limited extent—the managerial route to internal supervision by making chief officers rather than leading members responsible in law for monitoring the behaviour of councillors: "The Widdicombe-inspired reforms ... attempt to drive a wedge between the council and its officers through the attachment of statutory duties" to the officers rather than the council itself (Loughlin, 1996, page 150).

In 1991 Michael Heseltine, then Secretary of State for the Environment, announced as part of a more general review of local government that he intended to examine the internal organisation of local authorities (DoE, 1991). The DoE consultation paper on the subject referred to alternative models of the local government executive as exemplified in other countries, and provided descriptions of these in an appendix. The aim of the review, as stated by the DoE, was to "strengthen the role of all elected members in formulating council strategies, leading and representing their communities". It was also "to develop the framework for effective leadership within local authorities—including clear political direction, identifying the needs and priorities of local communities and overseeing the efficient provision of high quality services to them" (Young, 1993, pages 4–5). The Working Party report, which was published in 1993, considered four models of political executive (Young, 1993, page 38):

1. a directly elected single person executive (an 'elected mayor' as in parts of the USA and Germany);
2. a directly elected multiperson executive;
3. a single person executive appointed from the council (an indirectly elected mayor, chosen by councillors from amongst their body, as in France);
4. a multiperson executive appointed from the council (a 'cabinet' system).

Each of these models represented a political rather than a managerial route to executive cohesion, and each was intended to reinforce the corporate role of leading members and to strengthen their capacity for strategic control. The option of appointing a single person as executive officer (like a city manager in the USA or county manager in Ireland) had been considered earlier but was dropped because it received little support (Stewart, 1992; Young, 1993, page 38). The report concluded that adequate cohesion could not be achieved within councils unless there was a focusing of power and responsibility amongst leading politicians. The assumptions and recommendations of the Heseltine Review were significant because they ran counter to the general trend towards a stronger managerial form of central executive, as exemplified by the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 and the pronouncements of the Audit Commission. But the executive-mayor and cabinet concepts fell foul of the existing membership of councils and of a number of backbench Conservative MPs who were agreed that they did not want to see an increased concentration of power amongst local politicians, and the Working Party's proposals have since gone into abeyance (Borratz et al, 1994, pages 84–91; House of Lords, 1996, page 28, page 54; Leach et al, 1992, pages 8–9).

Although the Conservative Party has failed to produce a clear position on the question of executive mayors, the Heseltine Review has helped to stimulate a debate and provided arguments that have been taken up by the Labour Party and others:
Imagine the potential energy an elected mayor could give to London in the new millennium. Not a ceremonial role but elected political leadership which has as its job speaking up for the people of London and driving the renewal of the city. And I think the potential for this idea is equally strong for other cities in Britain (Blair, 1996, page 8). It is also interesting to note that around the same time as the Heseltine Review was published, a similar debate was opening up in North Rhine-Westphalia, which had inherited a system of local government from the British after the war but was now considering the merits of introducing directly elected bürgermeisters (Grunow, 1992, page 52). Indeed, following the shift towards a directly elected bürgermeister system in Hessen, other Länder are moving in the same direction: “by 1999 local government in almost all cases will have a directly elected mayor or bürgermeister” (Stoker, 1996, page 21).

In 1995 the House of Lords established a select committee on central-local relations, which were considered to have been characterised by “a high degree of unconstructive tension” over preceding years (House of Lords, 1996, page 6). The report of this committee was presented in July 1996, and considered a wide range of issues pertaining to the shifting roles and balance of power between central and local government. Concern was expressed in particular at the ambivalent attitude of citizens towards local government and the relative lack of interest in council elections. Several ideas were canvassed as having the potential to contribute to an improvement in the standing of local government, including the freedom to experiment with new internal working arrangements such as the establishment of executive mayors or cabinets, and the use of local referenda. The report concluded that local government should also be allowed “more freedom to experiment with internal structure ... we urge the Government to find legislative time as a matter of urgency” to implement the recommendations of the Heseltine Review (page 30, page 54).

Other contributors to this debate include the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which in 1994 undertook a review of different executive arrangements in Europe and the USA and identified some of the implications for local government in the United Kingdom. But the study found intense resistance to any further concentration of power amongst local councillors in Britain, and concluded that “the examples of the working of the mayoral system in France, Germany and the United States are most unlikely to win support here” (Borraz et al, 1994, page 91). A report prepared by the Institute of Local Government Studies suggests that the debate has tended to simplify the choices involved in moving towards an executive mayor, and to assume that parts of other models could be transplanted directly into UK local government without changing their character in the process (Clarke et al, 1996). The Commission for Local Democracy has also reported on the introduction into British local government of directly elected single-person executives (Stoker, 1996). It is argued that as direct service provision becomes less important so the committee system loses its relevance and it is necessary to examine other forms of political leadership. The Commission for Local Democracy concludes by recommending that a firm commitment to legislation is necessary, and that this should lead not to a period of experimentation but to the introduction of certain exemplary changes in particular places to initiate the process of reform (Stoker, 1996, page 8).

Competition
Since the early 1980s central government and other agencies have attempted to mimic changes in the private sector by introducing Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) and ‘Service Level Agreements’ into local public services (see for example, Audit Commission, 1988). Added impetus has been given to this process by notions of the ‘enabling authority’ and of ‘catalytic government’, and by the argument that “the job
of government is to steer, not to row the boat. Delivering services is rowing, and
government is not very good at rowing" (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992, page 25). The
separation of policy from implementation, of 'client' from 'contractor', is having a
significant impact upon the internal organisation of local authorities, with particular
implications for the role of the chief executive and the 'corporate core'. A debate has
been initiated within local government, for instance, about the viability of attempting to
separate strategy from implementation, the role of the corporate centre and its relation-
ship to service departments and elected councillors, and about whether or not CCT is
contributing to executive cohesion (see Stewart, 1996). Michael Lyons, when appointed
Chief Executive of Nottinghamshire County Council in 1990, observed that these
developments "seem set to encourage the atomisation of public service provision and
threaten the ability of a local authority to provide a co-ordinated response to the needs
of its community and achieve the economies and benefits which such co-ordination can
provide" (Nottinghamshire County Council, 1991, page 2). Other authorities, however,
feel that CCT can be used to strengthen corporate direction by relieving the councillors
of operational concerns and allowing them to focus upon matters of wider significance.

More recently, central government has also introduced competitive-bidding regimes
(City Challenge, the Single Regeneration Budget Challenge Fund, and a variety of
subsequent challenge funds) for resources to support urban regeneration, capital spend-
ing, and estates action. It is argued that these regimes are encouraging the emergence
of a more strategic response to local problems, and indeed there is some evidence to
suggest improved interdepartmental coordination within authorities, and better inter-
agency cooperation within localities usually under the leadership of the local council
(Hall et al, 1996). But local authority leadership has been acknowledged grudgingly by
government, and these programmes have generally functioned by transferring respons-
bility from elected councils to semiautonomous partnerships mainly comprising local
authority officers and officials from other government agencies (for example, Training
and Enterprise Councils) as well as Chambers of Commerce and the voluntary sector.
Once again a managerialist solution is being promoted, but in this case to the wider
governance aspirations of councils (Collinge and Hall, 1996; Hall et al, 1996).

Net effect
The Local Government and Housing Act 1989 made it more difficult to formalise a
workable political executive, and reinforced the delegation of executive responsibility to
multiparty committees. At the same time, although this act favoured the managerial
route to local government supervision, it contributed only marginally to the powers of
a managerial executive—either the chief executive or the chief officers' management
team. The Heseltine Review of council organisation put forward proposals which
would allow local authorities to devise structures that could strengthen the cohesion
of the political executive. But the implementation of these proposals ran into serious
difficulties and was stymied by the jealousy of backbench politicians both at national
and at local levels. Opinion remains divided as to whether the introduction of com-
petition (either in the form of white-collar CCT or competitive bidding for government
funds) is allowing authorities to 'steer' better or is having a disintegrative effect upon
executive functions. But the move towards governance and partnership working in
practice seems to be strengthening the hand of unelected 'official' local government
against elected 'political' local government. To a considerable extent the future of local
authority political cohesion is now hanging in the balance, and depends upon the ways
in which government and councils respond to the challenge posed by the proliferation
of quangos, by the imposition of CCT, and by the growth of competition and partner-
ship (Davis, 1993).
Conclusions

Systems of local government may be based upon a centralised or decentralised political or managerial executive, and in each case there is likely to be a tension between the performance of executive and representative functions. British local government has, since the 19th century, entrenched a decentralised political executive based upon the committee system; but over the same period it has also accommodated reactions against decentralism in the form of a periodically renewed 'corporate project'. This project has sought to build a cohesive executive structure within local councils and has taken both political and managerial steps towards this end. Generally speaking, it has been the managerial rather than the political route to executive cohesion that has received most recognition and support from central and local government over the years. The post of chief executive was one important step towards corporate unity, seeking to rectify perceived operational incoherence through the introduction of a powerful managerial executive. It was inspired by similar corporate management initiatives in the private sector and in US local government, by the example of 'city managers' in reformed urban administrations rather than the opposite, and equally available, model of US or European executive mayors. It was supported both by politicians and by officers as a solution to corporate executive disunity but without being given adequate authority, and without any compensating changes to the dispersal of political power in councils.

The viability of the managerial route to corporate cohesion depends very much upon the context in which it is introduced. I have suggested in this paper that the difficulties of the chief executive's position, and more generally of corporate management in local government, can be traced back to a dissonance between the corporate aspirations inscribed in this post and the devolved power structure of most politician-led local authorities. Where councils are politician led, and so able to fulfil their democratic mandate then corporate coordination and strategic direction rely first and foremost upon strong political leadership—which is by no means guaranteed under current arrangements and has, if anything, been eroded over the years by legal and structural changes. Here the chief executive's post tends either to draw the council in a managerial direction or to have its aspirations blocked and its credibility undermined by the diffusion of political control. The only viable approach under these circumstances is to moderate the expectations attached to the post and at the same time to develop strategic capacity amongst politicians by strengthening the process of coalition management, something which has occupied increased amounts of officer time in recent years (Collinge, 1996; Collinge and Leach, 1995). On the other hand where councils are officer led, and so more limited in the fulfilment of their democratic remit, then the post of chief executive will come into its own—organising the administration and its politics and reinforcing the managerialist character of the authority.

Perhaps there is a middle path between these extremes, in which strong and effective political leadership emerges spontaneously from within the devolved power of a political group, and combines with a strong and effective chief executive and management team to achieve corporate cohesion and accountability. Here it may be possible to alter the operation of the committee—departmental system to facilitate central coordination, and for the leader and chief executive to function as a powerful central axis which is able to bring a high degree of political and administrative unity. But this situation is rare, goes against the grain of local government legislation and the council power structure, and relies very much upon the personalities involved. In most normal circumstances the post of chief executive will not operate successfully in politician-led authorities. To moderate the managerialism of the chief executive post a political response is needed—whether or not this takes the form of (directly or indirectly) elected executive mayors or councillor cabinets—to encourage local political leadership.
Finally, we must consider the factors which contribute to the reproduction of these circumstances. It has been argued that the committee system is self-perpetuating; that political responses to executive decentralisation have been inhibited over the years by the committee system itself, which undermines the willingness of elected members and chief officers to hand power spontaneously to the centre. Indeed, recent evidence in the context of the Heseltine Review confirms that the absence of political cohesion, and so the predominantly managerialist nature of the corporate project in local government, reflects the opposition of backbench councillors together with members of parliament to the concentration of local political power (Borraz et al, 1994, pages 84–91; Leach et al, 1992). The paradox is that local councillors who are jealous of their power are helping to perpetuate a weak executive structure in politician-led councils, playing into the hands of those who favour a managerial version of the corporate project for local government and are prepared to see the attenuation of local democracy.

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