

**COMMUNITY POLITICS:  
A STUDY OF  
THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS  
IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

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## **Abstract**

### **COMMUNITY POLITICS: A STUDY OF THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

Community Politics implies a bottom-up approach to politics, working inside and outside existing political institutions to create a participatory democracy. First adopted by the Liberal Party in 1970, this political strategy is based upon the principles of subsidiarity and devolution of power. It has remained a key component of the third party's strategy throughout the last three decades.

This thesis examines Community Politics and its practical application by the Liberal Democrats to contemporary local government. The first part of the thesis traces the historical development of Community Politics from the Social Liberal tradition of Thomas Hill Green, through Jo Grimond's reinvention of the Liberal Party as a radical, non-Socialist alternative to Conservatism, to the radical Young Liberal activists of the 1970s. It then goes on to present a theoretical analysis of Community Politics, which investigates the dilemmas and contradictions of a strategy founded on the ideas of locality and the collective for a liberal party in a modern, urban democracy. The second part of the thesis is an empirical analysis of the recruitment of Liberal Democrat councillors and of their representativeness. Research data is used to assess the claims that Liberal Democrat councillors offer a distinct quality and type of representation that corresponds with the aims of the Community Politics strategy. The third and final part considers Liberal Democrat politics in the context of

the local authority party group and the level of democracy in the organisation of these groups, before finally exploring the policy and practice of Community Politics in Liberal Democrat controlled authorities.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Political parties are a modern phenomenon. Their creation coincided with the birth of the modern, bureaucratic state. Parties represent the need for intermediary institutions between governments and their citizens. As such, they are the means through which public opinion and public participation in the political system are mediated in liberal democracies, and, to a different degree and in different ways, in other political systems. For an individual to become active in public life and hold elected office it will almost always be necessary for them to be a member of a political party. As Bogdanor has stated, 'In almost every modern democracy, government by the people turns out to be government by party; and democratic elections are choices between competing parties or party nominees who offer themselves as candidates for office.'<sup>1</sup> Political parties, then, are central to representation in modern democracies.

After the 1997 General Election, the Committee on Standards in Public Life, chaired by Lord Neill, investigated the funding of political parties. Its report to the Prime Minister, submitted in October 1998, went so far as to state:

Political parties are essential to democracy. Needless to say, they are not always popular. They emphasise conflict rather than co-operation. They are associated with vehement

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<sup>1</sup> V. Bogdanor, 'Introduction,' in V. Bogdanor, ed., *Parties and Democracy in Britain and America* (Eastbourne, Praeger, 1984), p.ix.



controversy. They can appear self-serving. Nevertheless, no modern democracy can exist without them.<sup>2</sup>

Yet from the very outset of research into political parties serious doubts have been expressed over their ability to perform the mediating function required of them in a democracy.<sup>3</sup> More recently, the sheer volume of competing demands generated by political parties in a democracy has been held accountable for a decline in political legitimacy.<sup>4</sup> Empirical evidence suggests that political parties do not command the trust of the British public. Curtice and Jowell found that only 22 per cent of the population trusted British governments of any political party to place the needs of the nation above their own party interests at all or at most times.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the long standing doubts regarding the efficacy of political parties, and the growth of pressure groups and new social movements, the dominance of the public sphere by parties has expanded rather than receded. In 1955 less than five in ten local authorities in England and Wales were party controlled, now the figure is nine in ten; the entrance of the Greens into European politics may have initially appeared to threaten the party monopoly on elected office, but in fact served to

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<sup>2</sup> *Fifth Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life: The Funding of Political Parties in the United Kingdom, Volume 1* (London, TSO, Cmnd. 4057-1, 1998), p.24.

<sup>3</sup> M. Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organisation of Political Parties* (Trans. F. Clarke, London, MacMillan, 1902); R. Michels, *Political Parties* (Trans. C. Paul and E. Paul, New York, The Free Press, 1962), originally published in 1911.

<sup>4</sup> K. Deschouwer, 'Political Parties and Democracy: A mutual murder?' *European Journal of Political Research*, 29 (1996), pp.263-78.

<sup>5</sup> J. Curtice and R. Jowell, 'Trust in the political system,' in R. Jowell, J. Curtice, A. Park, L. Brook, K. Thomson and C. Bryson, eds., *British Social Attitudes: the 14<sup>th</sup> Report* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 1997), p.91.

strengthen their hold.<sup>6</sup> Political parties may not always meet popular expectations, but they are central to modern democracy and representation and are likely to remain so.

This thesis is a study of one modern political party: The Liberal Democrats. The Liberal Democrats were formed out of the merger of the Liberal Party and Social Democratic Party in March 1988. They are the smallest of the three main national parties in Britain, with a membership of approximately 100,000, compared to the approximate figure of 400,000 for the Labour and Conservative Parties. Their smaller scale is reflected in their expenditure: at the 1997 General Election they spent a total of £2.3m compared to the £25.7m and £28.3m the Labour and Conservative Parties spent respectively.<sup>7</sup> In the last seventy years they have not been serious contenders for national power. The Liberal Democrats are, therefore, the third party in British politics. This thesis focuses upon their political strategy of Community Politics, that was adopted by the Liberal Party in 1970.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> P. Seyd, 'In Praise of Party,' *Parliamentary Affairs*, 51 (1998), pp.198-208; S. B. Wolinetz, 'Party System Change: The Catch-All Thesis Revisited,' *West European Politics*, 14 (1991), pp.113-28.

<sup>7</sup> Figures published by the *Fifth Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life: The Funding of Political Parties in the United Kingdom, Volume 1*.

<sup>8</sup> Community politics is a phrase with multiple meanings. In the United States, it is very often used to refer generally to urban politics or to politics specifically related to the Afro-American population. Similar meanings and uses exist in Britain, although they are less prevalent. A. Cochrane, 'Community Politics and Democracy,' in D. Held and C. Pollitt, eds., *New Forms of Democracy* (London, Sage, 1986), provides an account and assessment of what is more generally known as community politics. The title-case Community Politics is used throughout this thesis to identify the specific strategy practised by the Liberal Party and Liberal Democrats.

## **Liberals: yesterday and today**

McKenzie's 1955 study of British political parties famously relegated the Liberal Party to a single footnote.<sup>9</sup> It could be argued, given the history of the Liberal Party as a nineteenth and twentieth century party of government, and the importance to the social and economic policy of the time of such Liberals as the late John Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge, that McKenzie underestimated the party. Without doubt, any contemporary account of British politics and parties would be incomplete without more thorough reference to a party that gained 46 MPs and over five million votes at the 1997 General Election, and had more than 5,000 principal authority councillors and overall control of 28 local authorities after the May 1999 local elections. The current strength of the third party marks a revival after a long period of decline during a time when there was, perhaps paradoxically, a general acceptance of liberal principles.<sup>10</sup>

The classical liberal concern was the creation of institutions that would protect the rights of individuals to trade, to own property and to the basic universal freedoms of speech, movement and worship. The three philosophers fundamental to classical liberalism, Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, all paid particular attention to the

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<sup>9</sup> R. T. McKenzie, *British Political Parties* (London, Heinemann, 1955).

<sup>10</sup> R. Eccleshall, 'Liberalism,' in R. Eccleshall, V. Geoghegan, R. Jay and R. Wilford, *Political Ideologies* (London, Unwin Hyman, 1984), p.69. Notable accounts of the decline of the Liberal Party include T. Wilson, *The Downfall of the Liberal Party 1914-1935* (London, Collins, 1966); G. Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London, Serif, 1997) and A. Sykes, *The Rise and Fall of British Liberalism 1776-1988* (London, Longman, 1997). An overview of the history of the third party is provided by, C. Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party 1900-1997* (London, MacMillan, 1998).

creation of institutions necessary to achieve the conditions for individual liberty to thrive.<sup>11</sup> For these thinkers such conditions could only come about where a minimal state and constitution protected property and contracts, and all individuals had equal rights before the law.

Although the First World War has been cited as the ultimate defeat of liberalism leading to its withdrawal from the world stage,<sup>12</sup> the aftermath of the conflict saw the creation of a liberal hegemony throughout Europe of nation states founded upon the principles of liberal democracy, the rule of law and the separation of judicial, executive and legislative powers. In Britain, since the introduction of universal suffrage in 1918 enshrined the liberal principle that each individual had equal rights to representation and participation in decision-making,<sup>13</sup> no purely Liberal government has been elected. As Bogdanor has noted, 'it is a paradox that the Liberal Party began its long decline in a democracy which was beginning to realise liberal ideals.'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For example, A. Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael and P. G. Stein, eds., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978); J. Bentham, *Constitutional Code* (F. Rosen and J. H. Burns, eds., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983); J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (London, Penguin, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> A. Arblaster, *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1984), pp.299-308.

<sup>13</sup> P. Thane, 'Women, liberalism and citizenship 1918-1930,' in E. F. Biagini, ed., *Citizenship and Community: Liberals, radicals and collective identities in the British Isles 1865 - 1931* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), links the suffragettes, early feminists and the extension of the franchise to women to liberal principles.

<sup>14</sup> V. Bogdanor, 'Introduction,' in V. Bogdanor, ed., *Liberal Party Politics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983), p.2.

Liberal parties throughout Europe declined as European states began to resemble the liberal model. The British Liberal Party's decline from its nineteenth and early twentieth century heyday fitted this pattern, leaving the party in the position described by Smith:

In most party systems, liberal parties now occupy a minor place, and there is a temptation to treat liberalism as just of marginal significance, an interesting historical survival.<sup>15</sup>

Given that the fundamental tenets of classical liberalism had been realised in Britain, it might be judged that the Liberal Party had outlived its purpose, and that its continued existence, therefore, required some explanation. Watkins provided a useful narrative of how the party survived in the two decades after the Second World War, highlighting *inter alia* the importance of the electoral pact with the Conservatives in the small number of Parliamentary seats the party held in the 1950s, which enabled it to maintain a presence in Parliament beyond that which its vote would otherwise have secured.<sup>16</sup> For Rasmussen, certainly, the survival of a small third party standing between the monolithic class interests of the Labour and Conservative Parties, and the motivation of its members, were matters of academic curiosity that demanded empirical investigation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> G. Smith, 'Between left and right: the ambivalence of European liberalism,' in E. J. Kirchner, ed., *Liberal Parties in Western Europe* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.17.

<sup>16</sup> A. Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma* (London, MacKibbon & Kee, 1966).

<sup>17</sup> J. S. Rasmussen, *The Liberal Party: A study in retrenchment and revival* (London, Constable, 1965), particularly pp.5-6 and pp.175-236.

Rasmussen undertook qualitative interviews with Liberal MPs, candidates and senior officials, with the primary objective of investigating their motivation to become party members. Six main categories were identified into which those susceptible to joining the Liberal Party fell. First, Rasmussen cited maladjusted needs, arguing at length that the Liberal Party was a home for those who could not accept the reality of the stark divisions in industrial society between left and right, working class and middle class, Labour and Conservative. These people might unkindly be described as the maladjusted, ‘who have failed to come to terms with modern society.’<sup>18</sup> Second, Rasmussen identified group-related interests, arguing that many joined the party to further the interests of a particular group, such as shopkeepers or small businesspeople. Third, many were attracted out of civic obligation, a desire to play some part in public life. Fourth, Rasmussen identified the importance of family tradition in a party that had only two generations earlier held national power. Fifth, a number became members out of self-interest, perceiving that social, career, intellectual or avocational gain was made from party membership. Rasmussen’s sixth and final category were those whose motivation was ideological or political, who joined from a philosophical commitment to liberalism.

There is evidence that many within the Liberal Party at this time believed, in the face of the expansion of the modern state and the rise of totalitarianism in continental Europe, that the foundations of Western liberal democracy were built upon shaky ground and a Liberal

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<sup>18</sup> Rasmussen, *The Liberal Party*, p.189.

Party was essential for their defence.<sup>19</sup> While providing a number of useful indicators of where party members' motives lay, the principal weakness of Rasmussen's empirical research was the failure to present any comparative data for the general population. It is impossible to judge, therefore, other than anecdotally, the extent to which Liberal Party members were more maladjusted or more inclined to civic service than the whole of the population or any other group in society.

In the post-war era the Liberal Party made a number of spectacular by-election gains, notably at Torrington in 1958 and Orpington in 1962, that gave 'the illusion of revival,' while disguising the fact that a real breakthrough in either local or central government remained elusive.<sup>20</sup>

Only in the last three decades has the Liberal Party, and now the Liberal Democrats, become more than simply an interesting case study in political survival. During this time they have not only revived, but prospered, winning substantial proportions of the popular vote at local and national elections and becoming the undisputed second party of local government between 1995 and 1998. The Liberal Democrats are now unique in political history as a national third party that has survived in a two party system for over seventy years (albeit in slightly different guises). This real change in the fortunes of the third party coincided with the adoption of the techniques and strategy of Community Politics.

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<sup>19</sup> G. Watson, ed., *The Unserving State* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1957), provides an insight into contemporary liberal thinking.

<sup>20</sup> K. Young, 'Orpington and the 'Liberal revival'', in C. Cook and J. Ramsden, eds., *By-elections in British Politics* (London, UCL Press, 1997), p.157.

## **Liberalism and Community Politics**

Community Politics was adopted as an official strategy of the Liberal Party at their annual Assembly at Eastbourne in 1970, when the main clauses of a Young Liberal amendment to the agreed Party Strategy and Tactics were accepted. Prior to the official adoption of Community Politics, the campaigning techniques that have come to be associated with the strategy, namely, locally organised campaigning dealing almost exclusively with locally orientated issues, had been used with great effect by Liberals campaigning in local election contests, particularly in inner-city and urban areas.<sup>21</sup> From the outset, there was a tension within the Liberal Party between those who saw Community Politics as nothing more than a very effective technique for winning local elections and those who believed it to be, ‘an ideology, a system of ideas for social transformation.’<sup>22</sup>

### *Liberalism, local campaigning and local politics*

It was during Jo Grimond’s leadership that the Liberal Party began seriously to contest local elections as a matter of course. At a time when local government was not politicised to the extent that it is today, aggressively fighting local elections was perceived to be a pragmatic means of laying the basis for renewed Liberal support in Parliamentary contests. The party hierarchy believed advances in local contests were

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<sup>21</sup> S. Mole, ‘The Liberal Party and Community Politics,’ in V. Bogdanor, ed., *Liberal Party Politics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983); Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party*, pp.149-56.

<sup>22</sup> B. Greaves and G. Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics* (Hebden Bridge, Association of Liberal Councillors, 1980), p.1.



a pre-requisite to national growth, following party grandee Mark Bonham Carter's dictum that, 'It is easier to change people's voting habits at local elections than at by-elections and at by-elections than at General Elections.'<sup>23</sup>

This maxim proved accurate, and for many within the third party Community Politics never amounted to more than a technique for winning elections. Localised campaigning on local issues was a means of achieving power, rather than an end in itself. The aim of the strategy was to further liberalism purely by achieving Liberal Party or Liberal Democrat power. In the early 1960s, however, the Liberal Party had attracted a relatively large number of young activists,<sup>24</sup> many of whom participated in the early electoral successes connected with Community Politics. They saw how the strategy could have a powerful impact on areas previously indifferent to political activity.<sup>25</sup> Out of this experience, and the radical political culture of the time, many came to believe that the principles of Community Politics could be applied on a wider, even global, scale to bring about the emancipation of the poor and the dispossessed.<sup>26</sup>

It was these young radicals who framed the Community Politics amendment that became party policy at Eastbourne in 1970 and went on to develop the theoretical aspects of the strategy. They believed that

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma*, p.109; See also, Young, 'Orpington and the 'Liberal revival'', pp.157-9.

<sup>24</sup> P. Abrams and A. Little, 'The Young Activist in British Politics,' *British Journal of Sociology*, 16 (1965), p.325.

<sup>25</sup> Mole, 'The Liberal Party and Community Politics,' p.260.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, B. Greaves, ed., *Scarborough Perspectives* (London, National League of Young Liberals, 1971).

Community Politics was not simply a means of gaining power, but that the practice of the strategy was an end in itself. The 'bottom-up' and participatory nature of Community Politics, coupled with its impact on localities previously considered immune to political activity, led many within the third party to believe it represented a fundamental development and expression of liberalism in a modern context.

The connection between liberalism and local government did not originate during this period. In the nineteenth century, Joseph Chamberlain had shown in Birmingham that local government could be an effective vehicle for social reform and radical Liberal politics,<sup>27</sup> and local government and local democracy were essential to the constitutional settlement envisaged by the classical liberal theorists. Bentham argued, from a utilitarian perspective, that a hierarchical system of representative bodies, moving outwards and downwards from the centre, was the most effective means of providing local administration.

It was John Stuart Mill, however, who was the seminal liberal advocate of the importance of local democracy, rather than simply local administration. Mill agreed with Bentham that local government was the most efficient agent for providing services that were essentially local in character, but he went beyond this narrow, functional view, to argue that local representative bodies were essential to the maintenance of basic liberal freedoms. Mill believed participation in decision-making was necessary to educate and cultivate individuals into the

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<sup>27</sup> B. Keith-Lucas, 'The Liberals and Local Government,' in V. Bogdanor, ed., *Liberal Party Politics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983), p.255.

kind of moral beings able to see beyond their own immediate interests and therefore sustain democracy. Local representation and devolution of power were essential to this process as they provided much greater opportunity for popular participation in decision-making than purely centralised representation.<sup>28</sup> Local government was also necessary to safeguard against an all-powerful central state and prevent such a state stamping a uniform pattern on diverse and autonomous localities:

The very object of having local representation, is in order that those who have an interest in common which they do not share with the general body of their countrymen may manage that joint interest by themselves.<sup>29</sup>

Mill, then, provided the classic defence of local government and local democracy as not merely efficient means of providing services at a local level, but essential components of democracy. Local self-government was necessary for the protection of local identities from the potential might of an all encompassing central state and the cultivation of moral individuals capable of self-government. The creation and maintenance of a liberal democracy was inconceivable without some form of local government.

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<sup>28</sup> V. Bogdanor, *Politics and the Constitution* (Aldershot, Dartmouth, 1996), p.27; D. M. Hill, *Democratic Theory and Local Government* (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1974), p.27-9.

<sup>29</sup> J. S. Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (Oxford, World Classics, 1912), p.368.

### *The relevance of community*

Community was also a concept that had an important place in the liberal vocabulary long before the present era. The free market, individualist liberalism of Smith, Bentham and Mill held sway over the Liberal Party and liberal thinking until the late nineteenth century, when growing concern was expressed that the apparent triumph of their values had some unpleasant side effects. Late Victorian society was prosperous and the British Empire covered a large part of the globe, but there was anxiety that the social cost of this success was the ruination of the lives of the poorest members of society. It was feared that a society of rootless and atomised individuals, lacking social and moral bonds, was being created, and that unless communal ties that bound together all members of society were restored, the future prosperity, and even survival, of British society was at risk.<sup>30</sup> For liberals, this meant distilling a liberalism that not only defended individual liberty, but also located each individual within their social context.

Foremost among those who took up this task was the Oxford philosopher Thomas Hill Green. For Green, the prosperity enjoyed by many in the late nineteenth century was not founded solely upon the success of the hegemonic liberal economic model, but was also inexorably bound to the strength of society's collective institutions. Green wrote of the material prosperity of Victorian man [*sic*]:

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<sup>30</sup> S. Den Otter, "Thinking in Communities": Late Nineteenth Century Liberals, Idealists and the Retrieval of Community,' *Parliamentary History*, 16 (1997), pp.67-84.

This well-being he doubtless conceives as his own, but that he should conceive it as exclusively his own – his own in any sense that it is not equally and coincidentally a well-being of others – would be incompatible with the fact that it is only as living in community, as sharing the life of others, as incorporated in the continuous being of a family or a nation, of a state or a church, that he can sustain himself in the thought of his own permanence to which the thought of permanent well-being is correlative.<sup>31</sup>

Green and the followers of his Idealist philosophy made a crucial development of liberalism. They agreed with Mill that the individual was of central importance, but they described that individual as ‘deeply embedded in community, owing personality, moral development, and the possession of rights to society... they pushed liberalism into new places.’<sup>32</sup>

A crucial implication of Green’s philosophical development of liberalism was that the state should assume an interventionist role where unregulated market forces produced an undesirable outcome. Green’s cogent philosophical articulation and defence of this view had a strong influence on Gladstone’s later administrations, which introduced *inter alia* legislation to control the sale of alcohol and the 1881 Irish Land Act to safeguard popular ownership of common land

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<sup>31</sup> T. H. Green, *Prolegomena to ethics* (Second Edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1884), Section 232.

<sup>32</sup> Den Otter, “Thinking in Communities”, p.73.

in Ireland,<sup>33</sup> and on the Liberal governments of Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith, which laid the foundations of the modern welfare state.<sup>34</sup> Green's philosophy had a powerful influence on what became known as New or Social Liberalism and on the emergent socialist movement in Britain.<sup>35</sup>

After the First World War and the initial Liberal collapse, many of the New Liberal followers of Green switched their affiliation from the Liberal Party to the emergent Labour Party,<sup>36</sup> though a minority, unwilling to accept the egalitarian and collectivist tenets of socialism, remained within the Liberal Party. The ideas of Green and his followers, then, are important not only to the development of the Liberal Party, but also to an understanding of the development of the Labour Party right through to the present day.<sup>37</sup> Community Politics involved an explicit attempt to continue and develop the Liberal Party's reconnection with this radical, progressive tradition that Jo Grimond had originally set in motion.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> C. Harvie, 'Gladstonianism, the provinces and popular political culture 1860 – 1906,' in R. Bellamy, ed., *Victorian Liberalism: Nineteenth century political thought and practice* (London, Routledge, 1990), presents evidence for and against the view that Gladstone could be considered a New Liberal.

<sup>34</sup> J. R. Hay, *The Origins of the Liberal Welfare Reforms 1906-1914* (London, MacMillan, 1975), pp.34-47, links the welfare legislation of this period to the Idealism of T. H. Green.

<sup>35</sup> P. Nicholson, 'Thomas Hill Green: Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation,' in M. Forsyth and M. Keens-Soper, eds., *The Political Classics: Green to Dworkin* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996), p.17.

<sup>36</sup> Den Otter, "'Thinking in Communities",' p.69.

<sup>37</sup> S. Driver and L. Martell, *New Labour: Politics After Thatcherism* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1998), p.16.

<sup>38</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, pp.15-6.

By placing the idea of community at the centre of a professedly liberal theory, the Community Politics strategy replicates many of the theoretical dilemmas and questions originally posed by Green's work. As one commentator has noted, one of the central difficulties of Green's philosophy is the 'tension between the logic of his ideas and the liberal ideology he espoused.'<sup>39</sup> Green's primary emphasis on community and society as the arenas where individual identity is formed and each individual's 'good life' may be realised logically lead away from liberal individualism to a more communitarian approach. The apparent contradictions of liberal pluralism and communitarianism have been the subject of a good deal of contemporary debate,<sup>40</sup> and this debate is of crucial importance to an understanding of liberalism and Community Politics.

The debate around liberal pluralism and communitarianism pertains to the nature of community itself. Community is a widely used term, yet its meaning is extremely ambiguous. It is a word that has come to be used as palliative to be applied to any potentially unpopular or controversial policy, one notable example being the Thatcher government's rebranding of the Poll Tax as the Community Charge. More generally, a wide range of policies have been justified in the name of 'community development,' 'community relations,' or

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<sup>39</sup> R. Bellamy, 'T. H. Green and the morality of Victorian liberalism,' in R. Bellamy, ed., *Victorian Liberalism: Nineteenth century political thought and practice* (London, Routledge, 1990), p.131.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, S. Avineri and A. de-Shalit, eds., *Communitarianism and Individualism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992); E. Frazer and N. Lacey, *The Politics of Community* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993). M. Walzer, 'The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism,' *Political Theory*, 18 (1990), pp.6-23.

‘community safety.’ In the words of Plant, community has become, ‘a legitimising notion within any field of social policy.’<sup>41</sup> Certainly the value of community as a serious concept of social or political theory has long been questioned.<sup>42</sup> Hillary infamously found 94 different definitions of the term,<sup>43</sup> and Stacey commented:

It is doubtful whether the concept ‘community’ refers to a useful abstraction. Certainly confusion continues to reign over the term community.<sup>44</sup>

There is doubt as to the difference between community and locality, and whether community always implies a geographical place or can refer to a specific interest held in common irrespective of physical distance or proximity. Such semantic difficulties attain critical importance when a concept as ambiguous as community is placed at the centre of a political strategy. These difficulties are magnified when the concept, like community, is loaded with meanings and interpretations that can have important implications in a public policy context.

Thomas *et al*'s study of the regeneration of the docks area of Cardiff, for example, illustrates how constructions of community can be used to exclude certain people, groups or decisions from the policy process. In

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<sup>41</sup> R. Plant, ‘Community: Concept, Conception and Ideology,’ *Politics and Society*, 8 (1978), p.80. See also, Cochrane, ‘Community Politics and Democracy,’ p.51.

<sup>42</sup> R. MacIver, *Community* (Second Edition, London, MacMillan, 1924), pp.22-3.

<sup>43</sup> G. A. Hillary, ‘Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement,’ *Rural Sociology*, 20 (1955).

<sup>44</sup> M. Stacey, ‘The Myth of Community Studies,’ *British Journal of Sociology*, 20 (1969), p.134.



this case, an attempt was made to redefine a working class, multi-racial part of the city as an affluent, desirable, modern housing development, through a process that excluded constructions of place that alluded to the area's past as a working dock.<sup>45</sup> Community, then, is not a benign, value-free concept, but one that can embody powerful connotations. How the idea of community has been constructed and understood within the Liberal Party and Liberal Democrats, and how the balance between its pluralist and communitarian implications has been achieved, is of crucial importance to a study of Community Politics.

### **Community Politics: implications for representation**

Community Politics presented a critique of and an overt challenge to existing forms of representation. The advocates of Community Politics argued that power within society was concentrated in too few hands and only through the creation of structures to facilitate the participation of a greater proportion of the population in decision-making could that power be more equally distributed. It was argued that the existing mediating structures and institutions of society, whether local government, central government or political parties, enabled power to be monopolised by a single, establishment elite.<sup>46</sup>

Community Politics demanded a different form of representational relationship between the elected and their electors. The emphasis on 'doorstep' campaigning, dealing with the problems closest to the

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<sup>45</sup> H. Thomas, T. Stirling, S. Brownhill and K. Razzaque, 'Locality, urban governance and contested meanings of place,' *Area*, 28 (1996), pp.186-98.

<sup>46</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.5.

residents of a particular locality, was intended to bridge the perceived gulf between representatives and the represented. The strategy implied a critique of remote politicians who visited their constituencies only at election times and then paid little attention to their constituents' views and concerns. One of the earliest guides to the practice of Community Politics began with the following outline of the representational relationship envisaged by the architects of the strategy:

The first step is to become involved in the local community. Most Liberals will have at least superficial relationships with local people: the job is to extend these relationships and to relate them to the community and to political issues. Therefore, go and talk with local people. We want something deeper than conventional canvassing: we want to find out about problems, needs and fears.<sup>47</sup>

The aim of the strategy was to involve the vast majority of the population in the decision-making processes that affected their lives. By linking together what might appear to be minor, unimportant and isolated issues, Community Politics could have a politicising effect, showing where power lay in society and how it could be disseminated.<sup>48</sup>

In the document produced by the Young Liberal activists in support of their Community Politics resolution at Eastbourne in 1970, the

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<sup>47</sup> G. Lishman, *Community Politics Guide* (Manchester, North West Community Newspapers, 1974), p.1.

<sup>48</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.1.

leadership of the party's youth wing collectively summarised their critique of the existing structures of representation thus:

[O]ur concept of democracy is not one of a passive majority and an elected elite; it is an idea of a democracy in which every individual has the perceived power and the right to participate in the political process not only by casting an occasional vote but also by a continuing dialogue with his elected representatives and his fellows... This is the continuing process which we mean by a 'participatory democracy.' It is an essential step forward both in governing our society and in enabling each individual to find a personally authentic meaning in life.<sup>49</sup>

The critique of contemporary representation inherent within the Community Politics strategy was not an isolated development. Rather, it reflected wider concerns that existing representational arrangements were inadequate to deal with the requirements of a modern democracy. One of the most eminent scholars of this area concluded, 'our contemporary real-life problems are such that none of the traditional formulations of representation are relevant to the solution of the representational problems which the modern polity faces.'<sup>50</sup> Eulau argued that the decisions facing a modern society were so diverse and complex that traditional forms of representation, based primarily on

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<sup>49</sup> National League of Young Liberals, *Eastbourne '70: A strategy for Liberals* (Eastbourne, National League of Young Liberals, 1970), p.5.

<sup>50</sup> H. Eulau, 'Changing views of representation,' in H. Eulau and J. C. Whalke, eds., *The Politics of Representation: Continuities in Theory and Research* (Beverly Hills, Sage, 1978), p.36.

nineteenth century models, were inadequate. Furthermore, the traditional theoretical models of representation did not address the most important question modern society asked of its representational arrangements, namely, the status of the represented and representatives, in terms of super-ordination, subordination or equality. Eulau's concern, then, was that traditional approaches to representation did not address the inevitable distance between representatives and represented, and the implications of this distance for the distribution of power within society:

It is an error, I think, to assume that the 'chosen' – whether elected or selected – are or can ever be like their choosers. The very fact of their having been elected or selected – having been elevated through some mechanism of choice from one position to another – makes the chosen fundamentally different from their choosers. Having been chosen, the representative has at least one attribute that differentiates him from the represented, no matter how similar, socially, or psychologically, he may be in all other respects. Status differentiation, then, is the crucial property of any representational relationship.<sup>51</sup>

This concern that our representational arrangements were outmoded and failed to address questions of status and power, reflected in the Community Politics strategy and the work of Eulau, was indicative of wider social and cultural trends.

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<sup>51</sup> Eulau, 'Changing views of representation,' p.51.

## *Cultural change in Britain*

The 1960s were a decade marked by popular protest and dissatisfaction with political institutions in many Western democracies, particularly the United States and Britain. In the United States protest, particularly by students, centred upon the country's involvement in the Vietnam War and the black civil rights movement.<sup>52</sup> Caution, however, should be exercised when judging the scale of these developments. Marsh notes that the scale of protest in the US may have been amplified by the media, 'and the idea of the 1960s as a distinct Age of Protest may testify merely to the growth of the power of the news media to report such events and dramatise their importance.'<sup>53</sup> Equally, to make casual generalisations regarding an increase in popular protest in Western European states that experienced the rise of totalitarianism based upon mass mobilisation in earlier decades this century seems particularly unwise. What may have been significant about this protest was that it involved many of those who stood to gain the most from the existing social organisation, namely those with access to higher education who could expect to enter the reward structure of society.

It is clear, however, that a specific cultural shift occurred in British society during this period. Prior to the mid-1960s Britain was frequently cited within Western political science as the classic example of a deferential political culture.<sup>54</sup> In their classic empirical study of

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<sup>52</sup> A. Marsh, *Protest and Political Consciousness* (London, Sage, 1977), pp.14-21; Cochrane, 'Community Politics and Democracy,' pp.56-8.

<sup>53</sup> Marsh, *Protest and Political Consciousness*, pp.14-5.

<sup>54</sup> Marsh, *Protest and Political Consciousness*, pp.29-34; H. Eckstein, 'The British political system,' in S. H. Beer and A. Ulam, eds., *Patterns of Government* (New York, 1965).

civic culture undertaken in 1963, Almond and Verba cited deference as the crucial difference between Britain and the United States:

Both nations achieve a balance of the passive and active roles of the citizen, but whereas in the United States the balance appears to be weighted in the direction of the active, participant role, in Britain it tends somewhat in the direction of the subject, deferential role.<sup>55</sup>

A little over twenty years later, however, an entirely different picture of British public attitudes towards political authority emerged from the empirical research conducted by Jowell and Topf:

People's feelings towards the pillars of the establishment are rather like those of the world-weary theatre critic towards actors and directors, incorporating little respect for reputations or efforts, a slight air of superiority (suggesting they could do a lot better if only they could be bothered), and a constant vigilance lest the stars should begin to get too self-important for their own good.<sup>56</sup>

The disparity between these two descriptions illustrates the extent of the cultural change that took place in British society between the 1960s

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<sup>55</sup> G. A. Almond and S. Verba, *The civic culture* (Boston, Little Brown, 1965), pp.360-1.

<sup>56</sup> R. Jowell and R. Topf, 'Trust in the establishment,' in *British Social Attitudes: The fifth report* (Aldershot, Dartmouth, 1988), p.120.

and 1980s, a process characterised as ‘the decline of deference.’<sup>57</sup> The reasons for such a cultural shift are obviously numerous and complex. A number of causal factors, however, may be identified. The expansion of higher education coincided with greater public access to information via the mass media and a loss of confidence in professional experts, whose solutions were very often seen to fail at first hand by the public.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, the public became less willing to accept decisions handed down from those in authority or with claims to expert status, and far more prepared to assert their own rights in the face of perceived injustice or unfairness.<sup>59</sup> Economic and demographic changes also contributed to the cultural change. Britain’s relative economic decline meant that, ‘questions of how resources should be distributed became much more hotly contested now that prizes could no longer be made available to everybody.’<sup>60</sup> The changing demographic profile of the population, with many British towns and cities becoming more heterogeneous, created competing sectional interests.<sup>61</sup> The societal and cultural changes that occurred during this period created new pressures on the existing institutions of representative democracy.

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<sup>57</sup> Marsh, *Protest and Political Consciousness*, pp. 29-34; See also, N. Rao, *The making and unmaking of local self-government* (Aldershot, Dartmouth, 1994), pp.7-11.

<sup>58</sup> J. Gyford, ‘Diversity, Sectionalism and Local Democracy,’ in *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business, Research Volume IV: Aspects of Local Democracy* (London, HMSO, Cmnd. 9801,1986), pp.107-8.

<sup>59</sup> See also, A. Giddens, *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity and Intellectuals* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1987).

<sup>60</sup> Gyford, ‘Diversity, Sectionalism and Local Democracy,’ p.107.

<sup>61</sup> Gyford, ‘Diversity, Sectionalism and Local Democracy,’ pp.106-8.

The cultural shift had a particular impact on local government as an important provider of services and distributor of resources in education, housing and social services.<sup>62</sup> Those who engaged in local politics during this period, then, entered an arena subject to external pressure. Growing popular assertiveness and the decline of deference placed pressure on all elected representatives, particularly the more accessible local politicians. Additional pressure was applied to local government by central government after the election of a Conservative government in 1979 committed to the destruction of the existing political consensus. The role of local authorities, as service providers and as spenders of public money, was to be severely curtailed.<sup>63</sup> The influence of this new public management on local authorities and local political culture proved powerful. Many of the initiatives introduced by Liberal Democrat (and Labour) controlled authorities during the last decade would be justified primarily in the language and terms of the new public management, that is, in the name of greater efficiency and accountability, rather than in the name of extending local democracy, even if the latter was the actual aim.<sup>64</sup> In the sense that Thatcherism was an attack on the collectivism and corporatism of the old political culture, favouring instead the values of self-help and individualism,<sup>65</sup> it can be seen as a product of the decline of deference and the new popular assertiveness.

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<sup>62</sup> D. M. Hill, *Participating in Local Affairs* (London, Penguin, 1970), pp.190-5; Cochrane, 'Community Politics and Democracy,' pp.53-9.

<sup>63</sup> See, K. Walsh, *Public Services and Market Mechanisms* (London, MacMillan, 1995), particularly pp.120-37; N. Rao, *Towards Welfare Pluralism* (Aldershot, Dartmouth, 1996), particularly pp.173-80; K. Young and N. Rao, *Local Government Since 1945* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1997), pp.265-99.

<sup>64</sup> R. Hambleton, 'Consumerism, decentralisation and local democracy,' *Public Administration*, 66 (1988), pp.125-47.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Rao, *Towards Welfare Pluralism*, p.173.



## *Community Politics and cultural change*

Gyford accurately linked Community Politics in the Liberal Party and libertarian local socialism in the Labour Party to the cultural trends that occurred in British society during the 1960s and 1970s, arguing that these new forms of local politics and resultant moves towards area-based decentralisation and greater consultation were a product of the decline of deference; a desire for greater popular control resulting from a loss of faith in established leaders.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Beer connected 'the collapse of deference' in British society during this period to a 'new populism,' which found an outlet in the Liberal Party in the form of Community Politics.<sup>67</sup>

To what extent, then, has Community Politics offered a new answer to the dilemmas posed for representational relationships by this cultural change? Empirical research evidence, based upon analysis of the time allocated to different aspects of a councillor's role by members of different political parties, suggests that Liberal Democrat councillors do have a representative role orientation distinct from representatives of other parties. This specific role orientation is characterised by an outreach approach geared to meeting the needs of individual constituents, fitting the classic Community Politics model of the locally orientated activist.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Gyford, 'Diversity, Sectionalism and Local Democracy,' pp.114-9.

<sup>67</sup> S. H. Beer, *Britain Against Itself* (London, Faber and Faber, 1982), pp.196-7.

<sup>68</sup> N. Rao, K. Young, P. Lynn and P. Hurrell, 'Place, Personal Characteristics and Councillor Roles: A Multivariate analysis of survey data,' *Policy and Politics*, 22 (1994), pp.31-42; Rao, *The Making and Unmaking of Local Self-Government*, p.165.

How councillors approach their representative role is one important measure of the representational relationship. A more complete picture of this relationship, taking into account questions of status and power, may be provided when analysis is also made of the social and personal characteristics of councillors. The extent to which elected representatives resemble the represented in sociological terms provides an important insight into the representational relationship. The theory of Community Politics contained a critique of existing representation as elitist and supporting an unequal distribution of power in society. If Community Politics has successfully altered representational relationships, Liberal Democrat councillors should be drawn equally from all sections of society. Further insight into the impact of Community Politics upon representation will be provided by analysis of the policies pursued by the Liberal Party and Liberal Democrats in local government.

The quantitative survey of a national sample of Liberal Democrat members undertaken by Bennie *et al* in 1993 is the only previous empirical research specifically targeted at the Liberal Democrats.<sup>69</sup> Yet no research has been directed specifically at the party's local government base of councillors. This can be judged as a serious anomaly, given the importance of local government to the Liberal Democrats and the importance of the Liberal Democrats to local government. Pinkney's study of the Liberal Party's emergent local

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<sup>69</sup> L. G. Bennie, J. Curtice and W. Rudig, 'Liberal, Social Democrat or Liberal Democrat? Political Identity and British Centre Party Politics,' in D. Broughton, D. Farrell, D. Denver and C. Rallings, eds., *British Elections and Parties Yearbook 1994* (London, Frank Cass, 1995); L. Bennie, J. Curtice and W. Rudig, 'Party Members,' in D. MacIver, ed., *The Liberal Democrats* (Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996).

government base during the early years of the Alliance with the Social Democratic Party has not to date been replicated or built upon.<sup>70</sup> The important studies collected by Bogdanor and MacIver were written from a Westminster perspective, concerned primarily with questions of national strategy and policy.<sup>71</sup> There has been no previous concerted attempt to analyse the third party's approach to local government.

## **Research methods**

In the light of the issues raised above, a research strategy comprising four components was developed to facilitate the exploration of Community Politics and the Liberal Democrats in local government. First, a review of the relevant literature. Second, an analysis of quantitative data generated by a postal survey of Liberal Democrat councillors. Third, an analysis of qualitative data generated by a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews. Fourth, case studies of two Liberal Democrat controlled authorities.

### *The survey*

The aim of the survey was to generate data on the social and personal characteristics of Liberal Democrat councillors. The questionnaire explored the councillors' gender, age, employment status, education

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<sup>70</sup> R. Pinkney, 'Nationalising Local Politics and Localising a National Party: the Liberal role in Local Government,' *Government and Opposition*, 18 (1983), pp.347-58; R. Pinkney, 'An Alternative Political Strategy? Liberals in Power in English Local Government,' *Local Government Studies*, 10 (1984), pp.69-84.

<sup>71</sup> V. Bogdanor, ed., *Liberal Party Politics* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1983); D. MacIver, ed., *The Liberal Democrats* (Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996).

and their history of party membership. To discern how recently they were elected, questions were also asked about their length of service and past experience of involvement in other voluntary and community organisations. To examine distinctiveness in their representational styles, questions were asked about their work as councillors, relating to the time devoted to different aspects of their work, and the importance they attributed to different features of their role. Finally, to explore their experience of internal party democracy, the councillors were asked about the circumstances in which their views might conflict with the party group's demands on their loyalty.

The Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors supplied a list of all Liberal Democrat principal authority councillors. This list was ordered alphabetically and a systematic sample of one in three English and Welsh councillors was selected. Scottish councillors were removed from the sample, having regard to the regional basis of the Liberal Democrats (the Scottish Liberal Democrats are effectively a separate party) and the different political arrangement in Scotland, where Community Politics has not been established in the same way that it has in England and Wales.

In September 1997 questionnaires were distributed to all 1,505 councillors in the sample. Thirty-six unusable questionnaires were returned and these were removed from the sample. A total of 846 usable questionnaires were returned between September 1997 and January 1998: a response rate of 58 per cent. The 846 usable returns were coded and analysed using the EPI INFO data analysis package.

The questionnaire for this study is attached as Appendix 1. To facilitate comparative analysis the questionnaire was based in part on previous studies of local authority councillors and political participation.<sup>72</sup> The author was given access to the 1993 dataset produced for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. This survey involved a sample of ten per cent of all elected members in England, Wales and Scotland, achieved by selecting all councillors in a number of authorities, totalling ten per cent overall. An unusually high response rate of 67 per cent was achieved.<sup>73</sup> This dataset was re-analysed, with the exclusion of Scottish respondents, to enable effective comparison between the data generated solely by Liberal Democrat councillors and the most recent national survey of councillors of all parties.

### *The interviews*

A total of 61 in-depth interviews were conducted between November 1996 and September 1997. Fifty-nine interviews were conducted on an anonymous basis with Liberal Democrat members of the City of York Unitary Authority, the London Boroughs of Greenwich, Richmond, Southwark, and Sutton, South Somerset District Council, and Worthing Borough Council. Councillors were given prior notice in

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<sup>72</sup> *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business, Research Volume II: the Local Government Councillor* (London, HMSO, Cmnd. 9799, 1986); K. Young and N. Rao, *Coming to Terms with Change? The Local Government Councillor in 1993* (York, Joseph Rowntree Trust, 1994); C. Copus, *The Influence of the Political Party Group on the Representational Activities of Councillors* (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1997); G. Parry, G. Moyser and N. Day, *Political Participation in Britain* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>73</sup> Young and Rao, *Coming to Terms with Change? The Local Government Councillor in 1993*, pp.61-3.

writing of the nature and purpose of the interview. The interviews were semi-structured to ensure each one covered the key areas of research, while allowing for a degree of variation and spontaneity. An interview schedule was used and a copy of this is attached as Appendix 2. All the councillor interviews were recorded, and took place on a face to face basis, on the councillor's own territory, either in their civic offices, place of work, or own home.

The interviews aimed to provide detailed qualitative information, of the type that would prove more difficult to obtain through a postal questionnaire, about the councillors' background, reasons for joining the Liberal Democrats, entry into local politics and selection as a candidate, and their work as a councillor. The councillors were also asked about their understanding and experience of Community Politics, policy-making within the Liberal Democrat party group, their future plans in politics, and (where relevant) how their authority had tried to achieve greater popular participation and devolution.

In addition to the 59 councillor interviews, two interviews were conducted with key informants, who agreed to be named in this thesis and, therefore, to speak 'on the record.' These two respondents had a special place in the history of Community Politics that merited their named inclusion in the research. The first key informant was Lord Tope, Leader of the London Borough of Sutton since 1986, MP for Sutton and Cheam between 1972 and 1974, and presently a Liberal Democrat Peer. The second was Michael Meadowcroft, a former Leeds City councillor, West Yorkshire Metropolitan County councillor, Local Government Officer for the Liberal Party between 1962 and 1967, and

Liberal MP for Leeds West between 1983 and 1987. These interviews covered a broader range of topics than the councillor interviews, and focused specifically on the theoretical and strategic questions relating to Community Politics.

### *The case studies*

Case studies of two Liberal Democrat controlled authorities were undertaken to provide thorough and detailed information as to how Liberal Democrat councils have sought to implement the ideas of Community Politics in the practical world of contemporary local government. In order to facilitate an understanding of the long term application of Community Politics two councils were selected where the Liberal Democrats have been in power for more than a decade and where they have also achieved success in national politics: the London Borough of Sutton, in South-West London, and South Somerset District Council, in the Liberal Democrats' Somerset heartland. By selecting an urban, unitary authority, and a rural council in a two-tier system, these two councils provided an opportunity to study the application of Community Politics in different local circumstances.

To facilitate the case study approach, additional questions were added to the councillor interviews involving members of these authorities, to enable a more thorough discussion of the authorities' corporate aims, achievements and aspirations. In Sutton, the Leader of the Council was interviewed, as well as two Committee Chairs and eight backbench members. In South Somerset, two former Leaders of the Council were interviewed, in addition to one Area Committee Chair, and six

backbench members. A thorough review of each authority's internal literature was undertaken.

### **The structure of this thesis**

This thesis sets out to provide an historical account and theoretical analysis of Community Politics, and to test its claims to provide a distinctive quality and type of representation on a number of measures. These measures are: the extent to which Community Politics has achieved greater popular participation in local government, either through the election of councillors who more closely resemble the socio-economic profile of their constituents, or through public involvement in decision-making structures; the extent to which Liberal Democrat councillors behave differently towards their constituents in comparison with councillors of other parties; and the extent to which Liberal Democrat controlled authorities have successfully devolved power and facilitated greater public participation in their work.

The thesis is divided into three parts. Part I provides the historical and theoretical context of the development of Community Politics and the success of the third party in local government. Part II addresses the representational context of Community Politics and the Liberal Democrats in local government. Part III concerns the practical application of Community Politics in contemporary local government. The three sections are further divided into six chapters.

The following chapter of the first section, *The Historical and Theoretical Context*, provides an historical overview of the



development of Community Politics within the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats. The chapter begins with an account of the adoption of the Community Politics strategy by the Liberal Party Assembly at Eastbourne in 1970. It then charts the origins of Community Politics from the Social Liberal tradition of T. H. Green and late nineteenth century liberalism and Idealism, through Jo Grimond's radical leadership of the Liberal Party, to the 'Red Guard' leadership of the National League of Young Liberals in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Community Politics is brought up to date with an account of the years of the Alliance with the Social Democratic Party and the growing success and strength of the third party in local government. Data from interviews with the two named key informants is used in this chapter to provide insight into the perspectives of those involved in the events described.

Chapter 3 provides a theoretical analysis of Community Politics. This chapter engages with the theoretical dilemmas and questions raised by the strategy, which centre upon the ambiguous nature of the term 'community,' its links to locality and identity, and the origins of the modern usage of the word. The problematic nature of community leads to a discussion of constructions of community within Liberal politics, with particular reference to tensions and contradictions between pluralist and communitarian constructions. This discussion is then related to the contemporary debate between liberal theory and communitarianism on the relative merits of individual rights and the common good.

The heart of the thesis concerns *The Representational Dimension* and draws upon new evidence on Liberal Democrat councillors. Chapter 4 discusses the concept of representation, then presents an analysis of the sociological representation provided by Liberal Democrats councillors. Survey data from the questionnaire is used to provide evidence of the socio-economic characteristics of Liberal Democrat councillors. Comparison is also made with the 1993 Joseph Rowntree Foundation survey of councillors of all parties. This discussion is then related to the recruitment of Liberal Democrat councillors. The recruitment of local politicians and the extent to which they resemble their constituents are crucial to representation in local government. Interview data was used to amplify the councillors' accounts of their entry into local politics.

Chapter 5 explores the role orientation of Liberal Democrat councillors in the light of existing models of councillor roles. This chapter uses empirical evidence to address the question of whether Liberal Democrat councillors are more likely to develop an outreach approach in keeping with the aims of the Community Politics strategy than councillors of other parties. It explores whether some Liberal Democrat councillors are more likely to fit the Community Politics model of representational behaviour than their colleagues, based upon survey data from the questionnaire of Liberal Democrat councillors. Comparison with the 1993 Joseph Rowntree Foundation study is made, where appropriate. Data from the interviews with Liberal Democrat councillors is also presented in this chapter to facilitate an exploration of the councillors' own perspectives of their role orientation.

The third section of the thesis, *The Local Authority Context*, assesses the application of Community Politics in the real world of local government. Chapter 6 examines the Liberal Democrat councillor and the party group, focusing on the extent of openness and democracy in Liberal Democrat local authority groups, and the demands groups make on councillors for loyalty. The practical application of Community Politics to local government is discussed in Chapter 7, which presents case studies of two leading Liberal Democrat controlled local authorities: the London Borough of Sutton and South Somerset District Council. The case studies investigate the extent to which these authorities have achieved the goals of the Community Politics strategy by bringing local politics closer to the people, and assesses the success of the strategy in local government policy and practice.

The concluding chapter summarises and draws together the findings of the previous chapters, and address the questions raised therein. An assessment is made of the impact of Community Politics on the third party, its implications for liberal theory, and the extent to which the strategy has changed the nature and quality of representational relationships.

## **PART I: HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT**

## 2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY POLITICS: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In September 1970 the Liberal Party's annual Assembly met at Eastbourne on the South coast of England, three months after a disastrous General Election at which the party's Parliamentary representation had been halved from twelve to six MPs and its share of the vote had fallen from 11 per cent in 1964 and nine per cent in 1966 to eight per cent. Of the 332 Liberal candidates, 184 had lost their deposits. With no significant local government base - the party had fewer than 150 principal authority councillors at the time<sup>1</sup> - the continued existence of a political party which in the previous twelve years appeared to have pulled itself back from the brink of extinction was once again in serious doubt.

At the Eastbourne Assembly an amendment to the agreed Party Strategy and Tactics was proposed by the youth wing of the party, the National League of Young Liberals. The motion, which became known as the 'Community Politics Resolution,' was proposed by Tony Greaves, Chair of the National League of Young Liberals, on the 25<sup>th</sup> September 1970. Despite initial opposition from Jeremy Thorpe's party leadership, the amendment was passed by a majority of 348 to 236 votes. The full text of the resolution was as follows:

*This Assembly, recognising that, in a world in which Liberal values are increasingly under attack, the need for a political*

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<sup>1</sup> Exact figures are not available, see D. Butler and G. Butler, *British Political Facts 1900-94* (London, MacMillan, 1994), p.443.

*party dedicated to the promotion of Liberal principles and Liberal policies is of ever-growing importance; expresses its determination to maintain the independence of the Liberal Party in opposition to both Conservatism and Socialism, and to develop its power and influence through democratic and constitutional methods at international, national and local levels.*

*It therefore calls on Liberals to continue to effect their political aims within the organisations of the Party and, in suitable cases, to work with other bodies to achieve reforms, subject to the requirements of the Party Constitution.*

*In determining the organisational strategy to achieve Liberal aims, this Assembly endorses the following objectives as of prime importance:*

- 1. A dual approach to politics, acting both inside and outside the institutions of the political establishment.*
- 2. A primary strategic emphasis on Community Politics; our role as political activists is to help organise people in communities to take and use power, to use our political skills to redress grievances, and to represent people at all levels of the political structure.*

3. *A national strategy based on:*

*a. The recognition of the need for a comprehensive and coherent organisational strategy covering all aspects of our Party's work;*

*b. A national commitment to build a Liberal power base in the major cities of the country;*

*c. The provision of an aggressive political lead on issues of moral concern, injustice and oppression and the use of these campaigns to publicise Liberal attitudes and policies. We aim to identify with the under-privileged of this country and the world;*

*d. The building of a national image to capture people's imagination as a credible political movement, with local roots and local successes.*

4. *A strategy for political development aimed at involving Liberals and the public in a continuing debate about policies and principles and at developing a comprehensive framework for Liberal policies.*

5. *The development by Regional Parties of appropriate strategies in the regions and their integration into a national whole.*

6. *The creation of a party structure and organisation which is tailored to this strategy.*

*7. The creation of a Liberal organisation in every constituency, an organisation with the two-fold aim of:*

*a. Producing in every constituency an organisation capable of strongly contesting local government and Parliamentary elections;*

*b. Increasing, through enlarged membership, the financial support given by the constituencies to the Party.*

*8. The development of area organisations to deploy material resources and personnel to contest all Parliamentary by-elections in which Liberal effort can be advantageously made.*

*9. The implementation by the national organisation of a plan to contest the next General Election on the broadest possible front.*

*To this end, the Assembly calls on the National Executive Committee, in collaboration with the Standing Committee, to institute a feasibility study of the organisational strategy of the Party in relation to material resources and political priorities, to act upon its findings and report progress to the 1971 Assembly.*

The resolution committed the Liberal Party to a strategy of Community Politics. The success of the resolution was front page news in the broadsheet press the following day. *The Times* gave the most extensive coverage; its leader compared the Young Liberals to the Palestinian faction Al Fatah, before aptly placing Community Politics in the



context of the difficulties facing a third party in a two party system where its *raison d'être* was unclear:

So, the Liberals, ever attentive to political fashion, are to be the national patriots of community action. It is a good idea if only because it will give some party members new grounds for hope in a Liberal future. And the delegates recognised all right that community politics is no substitute for parliament-directed politics if the party wants to remain in business. But what is its business? It may at best exercise an intermittent influence on the direction of policy of the two main parties, as it did in the early 1960s. It may hope to contribute to changes in political style; to give organised expression to enduring political values. And it gives lodging too, in this decade, for two to three million people who for understandable reasons cannot bring themselves to vote at general elections for either of the contestants for power.<sup>2</sup>

The adoption of the Community Politics strategy by the Liberal Party must be set in the context of the 1970 General Election, but its acceptance can also be traced to three specific strands within the Liberal Party. First, the tradition of Social or New Liberalism dating back to the Idealist philosophy of Thomas Hill Green and the Liberal governments of Gladstone and Asquith. Second, Jo Grimond's leadership of the Liberal Party from 1956 to 1967, which emphasised participation as the key Liberal value in the modern world and local

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<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, 26/9/70, p.13.

electoral success as the only sound basis for a national revival of the party. Third, the 'Red Guard' of the Young Liberals, a small group of young idealistic libertarians inspired by the counter-culture of the 1960s who sought an alternative to what they saw as the class politics and entrenched interests of the Labour and Conservative Parties. This chapter will examine these three strands, before tracing the development of Community Politics during the years of the alliance between the Liberal Party and Social Democratic Party and their eventual merger to form the Liberal Democrats, who achieved the long awaited Parliamentary breakthrough at the 1997 General Election.

### **Liberal Communitarians: Social Liberalism and the Idealism of Thomas Hill Green**

The individual was the basic unit of the philosophy of the nineteenth century Liberal Party. This reflected the party's traditional Whig values and the primary concerns of past liberal thinkers: namely individual liberty, utilitarian self interest and the political economy of the free market. Although liberal thinkers had been concerned with the collective, they saw the collective in terms of individuals, rather than individuals in terms of the collective. The most celebrated philosopher of this classical liberal tradition was John Stuart Mill. Mill wrote in his seminal work on individual liberty:

[I]ndividuality is the same thing with development, and that it is only the cultivation of individuality which produces, or can produce, well developed human beings.<sup>3</sup>

Hence, for Mill, social progress was only possible through people acting as individuals rather than acting in unison. Measures that would bring about positive social or political change were those that cultivated in each individual a distinct sense of self, rather than sought to encourage collective action or a sense of fellowship.

Mill's philosophy was in part a development of the utilitarianism of his father, James Mill, and Jeremy Bentham. A very similar view of the pre-eminence of the individual can be found in the work of Bentham, who described the community as a 'fictitious body' without any interest of its own, save the sum of the individual members who composed it. The community was not a level of analysis at which utilitarian principles could be meaningfully applied; they could only be applied to the interests of each individual.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Atomisation, individuality and T. H. Green*

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, a number of liberal thinkers grew, 'sensitive to the failure of utilitarian liberalism which stimulated competition to the extent that community was

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<sup>3</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, p.128.

<sup>4</sup> J. Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, (J. H. Burns, ed., London, Methuen, 1982), p.12.

destroyed.’<sup>5</sup> This sensitivity to the apparent loss of communal values within industrial society was reflected in much of the sociological and political thought of the time. Perhaps the best known examples are Emile Durkheim’s concept of anomie, an atomisation of society as a result of the profound division of labour in industrial society and Karl Marx’s theory of alienation, again a phenomenon linked to economic factors.

The liberal philosophers who sought to grapple with the apparent atomisation of society created by the workings of industrial capitalism were largely grouped around Thomas Hill Green. Green spent almost his entire adult life lecturing at Balliol College, Oxford. Unlike many of his fellow dons, who chose to live in a cloistered academic environment, Green sought an active engagement with the wider society. He was an Oxford town councillor, a member of the Oxford school board and was a leading figure in the temperance movement during the last decade of his life.<sup>6</sup> His philosophy and public life were underpinned by a strong Christian faith, which influenced his acceptance of an Hegelian ideal view of the state as the embodiment of God’s will on earth and thus also the manifestation of the common good in society.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> K. Hoover, ‘Liberalism and the Idealist philosophy of Thomas Hill Green,’ *Western Political Quarterly*, 26 (1973), p.559.

<sup>6</sup> P. P. Nicholson, ‘T.H. Green and State Action: Liquor Legislation,’ *History of Political Thought*, 6 (1985), pp.517-9.

<sup>7</sup> T. H. Green, ‘Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation,’ in P. Harris and J. Morrow eds., *T. H. Green: Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligations and other writings* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986). Sections 113-116 are a good example of Green’s Idealist philosophy.

Green's political philosophy differed from the existing liberal philosophical hegemony in a number of crucial respects. Arguably the most striking distinction between the work of Green and his predecessors was Green's conception of the individual as firmly rooted in society and of being incomprehensible outside of the collective. In his posthumously published treatise on ethics, Green wrote:

So human society presupposes persons in capacity - subjects capable each of conceiving himself and the bettering of his life as an end to himself - but it is only in the intercourse of men, each recognised by each as an end, not merely a means, and thus as having reciprocal claims that the capacity is actualised and that we really live as persons.<sup>8</sup>

Green argued that although society did consist of individuals who were conscious of their own identity and self-interest, it was only through communal activity that the opportunity to realise truly those interests arises. Who that individual was, what opportunities and possibilities they had, were determined by the social context in which they lived. Any attempt to understand, place or interpret an individual outside of their social context was destined to failure. It was only through collective endeavour and association that each individual could achieve their true potential and 'really live as persons.'

This view of the individual in a social context led Green - like many of his contemporaries on the emerging left in British politics - to develop

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<sup>8</sup> Green, *Prolegomena to ethics*, Section 183.

a political philosophy based upon a return to the values of community that many feared were being trampled in the incessant economic advance of the late nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Green argued that Britain's material success was founded not only upon the transcendence of free market and utilitarian principles, but also upon pre-existing values of community, and that without those communal values the existing social order would perish:

Some sort of community, founded on such unity of self-consciousness, on such capacity for a common idea of a permanent good, must be pre-supposed in any groupings of men from which the society that we know can have developed.<sup>10</sup>

For Green, then, the institutions of society, whether the family, the state or the church, provided the stability in which people could enjoy the fruits of their labour and create future prosperity. Should future economic advance be founded upon a weakening of the collective bonds and shared values that underpinned those institutions, then that economic progress was both unsustainable and undesirable. The prosperity of Victorian Britain, then, was founded as much upon cultural values as economic principles.

In keeping with the active role he sought in public life, Green was concerned with the direct political implications of his theoretical work.

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<sup>9</sup> Den Otter, "Thinking in Communities", provides an excellent description of the desire for a return to community in British politics at this time.

<sup>10</sup> Green, *Prolegomena to ethics*, Section 202.

Arguably the finest example of the application of his theory to the policy debates of the day was Green's speech to the Leicester Liberal Association in January 1881 on 'Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract.' In this lecture, one of the few pieces of Green's work published in his own lifetime, Green made clear his support for legislation and state action, such as, restricting the sale of alcohol, providing elementary education, and ensuring safe and sanitary conditions for factory workers, that had been resisted by some liberals on the grounds of an infringement of individual liberty:

I have said enough to show that the most pressing political questions of our time are questions of which the settlement, I do not say necessarily involves an interference with freedom of contract, but is sure to be resisted in the sacred name of individual liberty, not only by all those who are interested in keeping things as they are, but by others to whom freedom is dear for its own sake.<sup>11</sup>

Green, then, moved beyond the purely negative definition of liberty inherent in the work of Mill and the classical liberals. Mill had specifically defended the sale of alcohol in *On Liberty* on the grounds that the arguments for prohibition used in the United States could be used to justify any violation of individual liberty.<sup>12</sup> Green, however, argued that to allow people to be 'enslaved' by alcohol, lack of education or poor housing and working conditions was a greater

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<sup>11</sup> T. H. Green, 'Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract,' in P. Harris and J. Morrow, eds., *T. H. Green: Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligations and other writings*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.195.

<sup>12</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, p.158.

infringement of their liberty than the proposed state intervention.<sup>13</sup>  
Hence, Green opposed the classical liberal doctrine of freedom of contract under any circumstances:

To uphold the sanctity of contracts is doubtless a prime business of government, but it is no less a business to provide against contracts being made, which, from the helplessness of one of the parties to them, instead of being a security of freedom, become an instrument of disguised oppression.<sup>14</sup>

Green's work implied that liberal freedoms could not be seen out of context of the existing power relationships in society, otherwise their purpose was to simply enforce a status quo of inequality and oppression. Green believed a responsibility of government was to intervene in the mechanisms of the market to ensure that unequal power and economic relations in society did not result in the exploitation of the poor and powerless by the wealthy and powerful. For Green the invisible hand of the market could not always be relied upon to find the best possible solution:

No doubt there were many high-minded employers who did their best for their workpeople before the days of state-interference, but they could not prevent less scrupulous hirers

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<sup>13</sup> For a full review of this fascinating argument between Green and Mill see, Nicholson, 'T. H. Green and State Action: Liquor Legislation,' pp.534-8.

<sup>14</sup> Green, 'Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract,' p.209.



of labour from hiring it on the cheapest terms... If labour is to be had under conditions incompatible with the health or decent housing or education of the labourer, there will always be plenty of people to buy it under those conditions.<sup>15</sup>

The work of T. H. Green marks the first and most lasting theoretical elucidation of the development of classical liberal philosophy that became known as New or Social Liberalism. In fact, Green's radical approach to existing liberal theory has led Morrow to question whether Green and his followers can be considered liberals at all. Morrow concluded that Green should be considered, 'a liberal of a sort,' because he was concerned with individuals.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps what this point illustrates best, however, is the flimsiness of certain philosophical and theoretical descriptions and distinctions, particularly when used in relation to a thinker with a holistic view of society.

### *The Social Liberal tradition*

The influence of Green on the Liberal Party and British politics as a whole towards the end of the nineteenth century – and, after his death, into the twentieth century - should not be underestimated. Green was influential in his support for a number of Gladstone's more controversial policies, notably the restrictions on licensing introduced in his second administration. It is worthy of note that the Liberal Prime Minister who first introduced state welfare provision in the form of old

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<sup>15</sup> Green, 'Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract,' p.204.

<sup>16</sup> J. Morrow, 'Liberalism and British Idealist Political Philosophy: A Reassessment,' *History of Political Thought*, 5 (1984), p.108.

age pensions, H. H. Asquith, was an undergraduate at Balliol College during Green's time there. Asquith attended Green's lectures and described him as, 'undoubtedly the greatest personal force in the real life of Oxford.' Although influenced by Green's political theory, however, Asquith rejected the suggestion that he was a follower of Green's Idealist philosophy.<sup>17</sup> Other contemporary Liberal Ministers, notably Herbert Samuel and R. B. Haldane, more clearly identified themselves as followers of Green.

Social Liberalism was further established as the dominant form of British Liberalism by the work of L. T. Hobhouse. Hobhouse was influenced by Green and the early sociologists, notably Herbert Spencer's organic conception of society, and in 1907 was appointed to the first British chair of Sociology at the University of London. Hobhouse's seminal work, *Liberalism*, echoed Green's view that liberalism was a philosophy that rooted the individual within a collective whole:

[W]hile the life of society is nothing but the life of individuals as they act one upon another, the life of the individual in turn would be something utterly different if he could be separated from society. A great deal of him would not exist at all. Even if he himself could maintain physical existence by the luck and skill of a Robinson Crusoe, his mental and moral being would,

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<sup>17</sup> H. H. Asquith, *Memories and Reflections, Vol 1* (London, Caswell, 1928), p.19; For an account of the connection between Green and the welfare reforms of Asquith's era, see, Hay, *The Origins of the Liberal Welfare Reforms 1906-1914*, pp.34-47.

if it existed at all, be something quite different from anything that we know.<sup>18</sup>

Like Green, Hobhouse argued that the real interest of each individual was to be found in the common good. It was through an engagement with the community – rather than a Crusoe-like isolation – that a person could discover their own individual good.<sup>19</sup>

Green's influence extended beyond the Liberal Party. His work was influential in the formation of Fabian ideas and the creation of Guild Socialism, a small movement within the Labour Party that bears a resemblance to Community Politics within the Liberal Party and Liberal Democrats.<sup>20</sup> Of the liberals who left the Liberal Party for the Labour Party at the end of the First World War a number had been closely associated with Green, notably the philosopher Bernard Bosanquet and R. B. Haldane.<sup>21</sup>

The particular significance and lasting contribution of Green to the Liberal Party and its successors is two-fold. First, he provided the philosophical foundation for Social Liberalism that led to the policies of Asquith and Lloyd George and which were to be developed later

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<sup>18</sup> L. T. Hobhouse, *Liberalism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.60.

<sup>19</sup> See, S. Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979), particularly, pp.121-46.

<sup>20</sup> The parallels between many of the ideas of Guild Socialism and Community Politics are strong, although the former never achieved wide currency within the Labour Party. See, D. Blaazer, 'Guild Socialism and the Historians,' *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 44 (1998), pp.1-15; A. W. Wright, 'Guild Socialism Revisited,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, 19 (1974), pp.165-80.

<sup>21</sup> Den Otter, "'Thinking in Communities",' pp.68-9

within the Liberal Party by John Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge. It is probable that without Green the work of these two great figures of British economic and social history would have taken place outside of the Liberal Party. Second, Green's emphasis on the values of community as those which enable people truly to prosper and develop was a strong influence on the Young Liberals who framed the Community Politics Resolution in 1970 and on the early practitioners of Community Politics within the Liberal Party.<sup>22</sup> Thomas Hill Green was the first of a tradition of Social Liberals stretching from the final quarter of the nineteenth century to the present day.

The flame of Social Liberalism continued to burn, albeit dimly, throughout the wilderness years of the Liberal Party, largely through the socio-economic analysis of Keynes and Beveridge. After the Second World War, however, the party became more concerned with the fate of the individual in the face of what was felt to be an increasingly encroaching state.<sup>23</sup> The Liberal Party appeared to have more in common with the Conservative Party than the radical tradition of British politics, as illustrated by the fact that the majority of Liberal MPs throughout the 1950s were in Parliament only via the acquiescence of the Conservative Party. The Liberal Party did not begin to move from conservatism to radicalism until Jo Grimond ascended to the leadership in 1956 and brought a new strategic direction.

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, National League of Young Liberals, *Eastbourne '70: A Strategy for Liberals*, p. 4; L. Freedman, 'Liberalism and Capitalism,' in B. Greaves, ed., *Scarborough Perspectives* (London, National League of Young Liberals, 1971), p.18.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Watson, ed., *The Unserving State*.

## **Grimond, participation and a new emphasis on local government**

Jo Grimond was elected Leader of the Liberal Party by the six Liberal MPs in November 1956, two months after the resignation of Clement Davies. The change marked a transition from one generation to the next; Grimond was 43 years old, replacing a man in his seventies. In addition to being young, Grimond was a charismatic figure, with the ability to combine intellectual depth with a feel for popular opinion that the Liberal Party had lacked throughout the previous three decades.

### *Grimond: repositioning the Liberal Party*

It was under Grimond's leadership that the Liberal Party first showed real signs of revival from the near death experience of the previous thirty years. Grimond's election to the leadership took place during the Suez Crisis, an event that caused a sudden and enforced change in Britain's perception of its role in the world. The Suez Crisis also marked a significant change in the positioning and outlook of the Liberal Party. Grimond sought to change the party from the backward looking, quasi-conservative rump it had become, into a forward looking, radical organisation.

At the time of Grimond's election the Liberal Party was split over whether to support or oppose the Conservative government's action over Suez. Indeed, at the Carmarthen by-election in December 1956 the Liberal candidate supported the government action, yet only four months later in March 1957 the Liberal Parliamentary Party announced

its support for unilateral British nuclear disarmament.<sup>24</sup> The stark contrast between these two positions demonstrates the direction in which Grimond wished to move the Liberal Party. He undeniably saw the Liberal Party as a progressive party of the left and sought a reconnection with its Social Liberal heritage which had often been overshadowed by the economic doctrine of the free market. Grimond wrote:

The heaviest handicap from which the Liberal Party has suffered has not been the lack of any solid material interest, serious though that has been. It has been that so long as the climate of the thirties prevailed, Liberalism was associated exclusively with economic doctrines which few Liberals ever held in their extreme form; the political, social humanitarian base of Liberalism was forgotten.<sup>25</sup>

Grimond's fresh, youthful approach attracted a new generation of members, activists and supporters, many of whom would form the backbone of the Liberal Party's local government activities for the next three decades. In interview with the author, Lord Tope, recalled that it was Jo Grimond who had initially attracted him to the Liberal Party:

*I think Jo Grimond was - perhaps it's a bit strong to say an inspiration - but he was a political leader for a lot of us then*

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<sup>24</sup> Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma*, pp.84-7. In his memoirs Grimond wrote that the impact of the Suez Crisis on public opinion provided an opportunity to transform Britain's social and economic policy that was not taken: J. Grimond, *Memoirs* (London, Heinemann, 1979), pp.196-7.

<sup>25</sup> J. Grimond, *The Liberal Challenge* (London, Hollis and Carter, 1963), p.33.

*young people who stood out and that attracted me. In my mid-twenties, relatively old to be joining the Young Liberals, I felt I wanted to get involved.*

Similarly, the editor of a recent collection in which a wide range of leading Liberal Democrat Party figures explained why they were Liberal Democrats, concluded:

One name recurs time after time in the pieces of those aged 45 and over: Jo Grimond. Grimond's idealism, his imagination, his ability to communicate, his freshness, were clearly of central importance to the post-war revival of the Liberal Party - more so, I suspect, than many of us too young to remember him as leader realise.<sup>26</sup>

The Liberal Party under Grimond, then, successfully attracted a relatively large number of young people to a political party with only six MPs, less than 500 local councillors and next to no prospect of national power. As two contemporary writers on youth activism commented:

The recent willingness of several thousand young people to work for the Liberal Party is the most striking and the only truly distinctive aspect of the political participation of youth in

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<sup>26</sup> D. Brack, ed., *Why I Am A Liberal Democrat* (Dorchester, Liberal Democrat Publications, 1996), p.161.

contemporary Britain. If young people are in any way seriously unlike their elders it is perhaps in their Liberalism.<sup>27</sup>

This high level of support among young people owed a great deal to the Liberal Party's apparently classless basis and approach, as opposed to, what was portrayed as, the old-style class politics of the larger parties. A key feature of this appeal to the young who were unmoved by traditional class politics was Grimond's contention that Britain required a new, modernised participatory democracy. Grimond published a number of carefully argued books in which he set out the Liberal critique of the present electoral and legislative system, arguing that the society of the future required new democratic institutions to give all citizens the opportunity to participate on equal terms in all levels of decision-making. Grimond argued:

Today one of the main tasks of the Left is to widen the area of participation. It is difficult to achieve this in the old ways when the scale of government and industry have grown so big, when populations have increased and so much of the old group life has disappeared. If we are to have more participation by more people we need to think in new patterns.<sup>28</sup>

Although proportional representation had been a policy of the Liberal Party since 1922, Grimond's thesis of a wholesale modernisation of all the social and political institutions before 'real' democracy was possible became a central tenet of the policy and philosophy of the

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<sup>27</sup> Abrams and Little, 'The Young Activist in British Politics,' p.325.

<sup>28</sup> Grimond, *The Liberal Challenge*, p.26.



third party from his time onwards. The emphasis that Grimond placed on participation as a fundamental liberal principle was an important influence on the Liberal Party's future approach to local government and Community Politics, not least by attracting to the party those interested in the ideas of the New Left but disillusioned with the paternalistic, exclusive approach of the Labour Party.<sup>29</sup>

### *Local politics and local campaigning*

A further important step in the development of Community Politics during Grimond's leadership was the new emphasis the party placed upon achieving electoral success at a local level. At a national level, Grimond's long term strategy was to reposition the Liberal Party as the non-Socialist radical alternative to the Conservatives, believing that the intellectual bankruptcy of Socialism would eventually lead to a realignment of the left, with the Liberal Party replacing the Labour Party as the dominant force on the left in British politics. In the short term, however, Grimond and other members of the party hierarchy, notably Mark Bonham Carter and Richard Wainwright, believed that success at local elections was a pre-requisite to national or Parliamentary success. The question of whether local election success has led to national success is considered in detail later in this chapter, but certainly for the Liberal leadership at this time it appeared logical that significant Parliamentary gains would not be possible until and unless the party made an impact at local elections.

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, G. Lishman, 'Framework for Community Politics,' in P. Hain, ed., *Community Politics* (London, Calder, 1976), p.89.

The emphasis upon local government was complemented by a wholesale reorganisation of the Liberal Party Organisation in 1960, which involved the creation of a Local Government Department at Party Headquarters in London. Pratap Chitnis was appointed the first Local Government Officer, acting under the direction of Richard Wainwright. The key task of the Department was to provide organisational back-up and support to Liberal candidates fighting local elections and the small number of Liberals who were already members of local authorities. Chitnis spelt out the commitment of the Liberal Party to organise to fight local elections more successfully than the other parties:

Those areas where in recent years Liberals have made the greatest progress in achieving representation on Councils have not necessarily been those places where our policy was any better than that of Liberals elsewhere, but places where our organisation, whether amateur or professional, could match and even surpass that of our professionally organised opponents. Elections are not won only by organisation; nor are they won only on the merits of policy. Liberals must organise their elections, and organise them well.<sup>30</sup>

After his success as the agent in the Orpington by-election victory in 1962, Chitnis was succeeded by Michael Meadowcroft, who went on to become one of the leading practitioners of Community Politics in inner-city Leeds, culminating in his election as Liberal MP for Leeds

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<sup>30</sup> P. Chitnis, *Local Government Handbook* (London, Liberal Party Organisation, 1960), p.80.

West in 1983. Michael Meadowcroft recalled the importance of providing support and advice on campaigning to those Liberals who had already been elected in interview with the author:

*I was touring the country incessantly seeing people and going through ways and means of linking them more effectively and more vividly with the community... but it was not within any philosophy or any kind of framework, it was simply that they had to be better councillors than anyone else otherwise they would be subject to the tide politically as it came in and went out.*

The necessity for Liberal councillors to be particularly responsive to their constituents to avoid being swept away on a national political tide was an important factor in the practical development of Community Politics. The simple equation that casework equalled votes and votes equalled political power, meant that constituency work was not seen as a tedious necessity, but as a means of directly furthering the cause of the Liberal Party and liberalism. This was made clear in a speech Jo Grimond delivered in the year that the Local Government Department was created, when he stated that, ‘every time a local Liberal councillor gets a bus stop moved to a better place he strikes a blow for the Liberal Party.’<sup>31</sup>

Although Community Politics became for many more than simply a means of winning local elections, the electoral success of locally based

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma*, p.108.

campaigning on specifically local issues was a crucial factor in the acceptance of the strategy by the wider Liberal Party. At a time when any national breakthrough was distant to the point of impossibility a small number of activists, largely working in inner-city urban areas, began to see the first signs of the unprecedented local success that would follow by employing the methods that later formed the basis of Community Politics.

The real fruits of this success did not flourish until after Jeremy Thorpe took over the leadership from Jo Grimond in 1967. The techniques that were to form the backbone of Liberal Party and Liberal Democrat election campaigns for decades to come, however, were developed at this time, often by chance rather than from design. For example, Michael Meadowcroft recalled in interview the haphazard way in which the Liberal councillors in Leeds developed their own local newsletter to inform ward residents of Council decisions:

*What we began doing, quite innocently and naively, was to take documents we got from the Council as councillors, copying the bits out for our ward, putting them on a newsletter and sending them out door to door. We had a phenomenal response, quite astonishing... what we didn't realise was how we would then get attacked by the Council for giving people information about their own area. Both Labour and Tory went berserk!... But, of course, the electorate thought this was great, and so we stumbled upon this particular aspect of Community Politics absolutely by accident; that if you*

*actually gave people the information they would respond, often enough, very sensibly.*

Another important development during Grimond's leadership was the formation of the Association of Liberal Councillors. ALC was formed out of a series of largely informal meetings held by Liberals fighting local elections using the developing techniques. The origins of ALC are somewhat hazy. A Standing Committee was formed some time between 1964 and 1967 with the aim of raising subscriptions to fund a campaigning and information service that many felt the national organisation was unable to provide. The first ALC newsletters were issued during this time, and various workshops and conferences were held.<sup>32</sup> It was not until the mid-1970s, however, some time after the success of the Community Politics Resolution, that ALC replaced the Young Liberals as the most influential radical grouping within the Liberal Party.

The period of Jo Grimond's leadership marked a significant change in the tactics, style and approach of the Liberal Party; a political party that had previously appeared to be undergoing the longest, most drawn out, death in political history now held significant pockets of support and power in many major cities and enjoyed growing influence in local government. It laid the foundation for the development, in the first few years of Jeremy Thorpe's leadership, of the more radical aspects of the Community Politics theory that would culminate in the success of the Community Politics Resolution in 1970.

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<sup>32</sup> Pinkney, 'Nationalising Local Politics and Localising a National Party: The Liberal Role in Local Government,' pp.350-5.

## **The Red Guard and the ‘transformation of society’**

The driving force behind the successful Community Politics Resolution of 1970 and the major part of the theory of Community Politics was the ‘Red Guard’ leadership of the National League of Young Liberals and, to a lesser extent, leading members of the Union of Liberal Students, towards the end of the 1960s. The Red Guard was the name given to a small group of young, idealistic libertarians within the Liberal Party, most of whom were members of the Young Liberal National Executive at some point between 1966 and 1974. In fact, the invention of the term Community Politics as understood within the Liberal Party and Liberal Democrats is usually credited to two members of the Red Guard, Gordon Lishman and Lawry Freedman, at a Young Liberal strategy meeting early in 1969.<sup>33</sup> The emphasis on community and Community Politics evolved from their rejection of the class based approach of the Labour and Conservative Parties and much of the radical left at this time. Community Politics aimed to see, ‘people in communities rather than as classes or sections.’<sup>34</sup> Community Politics, as opposed to class politics, did not confine individuals into monolithic classes directed solely by external forces beyond their control.

The original theory of Community Politics developed in the political culture of the late 1960s. As Clay has pointed out, the theory must be seen in the context of the ‘profound optimism about the possibilities

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<sup>33</sup> W. Wallace, ‘Survival and Revival,’ in V. Bogdanor, ed., *Liberal Party Politics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983), p.63.

<sup>34</sup> M. Steed, ‘Introduction,’ to A. Cyr, *Liberal Politics in Britain* (London, John Calder, 1977), p.20.

for world society' shared by many students and political activists at this time.<sup>35</sup> The idea that radical social change was not only possible but inevitable fuelled the protest movements of the 1960s.<sup>36</sup> It was a time when, in great part due to the establishment support for the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War, many young people believed that their ideas held equal if not greater validity than the ideas of older generations. As *The Times* leader article on the Community Politics Resolution commented, this was, 'a time when youth [was] fashionably credited with a political insight that has more usually been supposed to belong to age.'<sup>37</sup>

The Red Guard, then, were inspired and influenced by the ideas of the counter-culture of the 1960s. In common with many of those involved in student and New Left politics at the time their goal was radical social change; Hain wrote of the Community Politics vision:

Our goal is nothing less than the transformation of society. In place of the competition and authoritarianism which characterises contemporary society, we wish to see mutual aid and mutual co-operation.<sup>38</sup>

The belief in the need for a transformation of society implies a critique of the existing social order. The Red Guard argued that the expansion of industrial capitalism and the growing pace of technological

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<sup>35</sup> M. Clay, *Liberals and Community* (Hebden Bridge, Liberal Party Publications, 1985), p.3.

<sup>36</sup> Marsh, *Protest and Political Consciousness*, pp.29-39.

<sup>37</sup> *The Times*, 26/9/70, p.13.

<sup>38</sup> P. Hain, *Radical Liberalism and Youth Politics* (London, Liberal Party Publications, 1974), p.19.

development were unsustainable because of the environmental, economic and social problems that were an inevitable by-product. The culture that supported the capitalist system failed to address the questions of ecological damage, world poverty or the spiritual poverty of the lives of most people in Western society, but rather engendered a passive acceptance that crept into all areas of social and political life. In one of the more compelling passages written at this time, Bernard Greaves argued:

There is a tendency towards our society becoming passive rather than active, consuming rather than producing. In more and more fields people, rather than do things themselves, have things done for them. In entertainment they watch rather than take part. In the home they use pre-prepared food rather than prepare their own. The ultimate is television where one just switches on and sits back. This is essentially an individual form of activity rather than a communal one. And it is associated with the growth of professionalism. Faced with expert and specialist competition in so many fields, the ordinary amateur is not prepared to compete. Politics becomes the field of the politician, sport of the sportsman, and so on; and to be successful in any one field means a degree of dedication which precludes successful and active participation in others.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> B. Greaves, 'A New Perspective,' in B. Greaves, ed., *Scarborough Perspectives* (London, National League of Young Liberals, 1971), p.10.



The Red Guard's critique of contemporary representation, then, extended beyond the political realm to other aspects of social organisation. The very idea of representation, of others acting on one's own behalf served to negate the authenticity and integrity of people's lives. For people to regain an authentic meaning in their lives, to escape the endemic passivity of contemporary society, it was necessary for them to stop accepting that others should act on their behalf and be their representatives. In the political field, this meant mass participation in decision-making, rather than leaving all decisions to professional politicians.<sup>40</sup>

This critique of a passive political culture had parallels with Jo Grimond's advocacy of democracy through participation, but also echoed the critical theory that had gained wide currency among students at that time, notably the Neo-Marxist theorist Herbert Marcuse, and the Situationists, a small French anarchist group who inspired the Paris students involved in the campus occupations and civil disturbances of May 1968. The events of May 1968 in France were an important influence on the Red Guard, as they appeared to demonstrate that real social change could be born out of the activities and analyses of small groups of young people and students:

France, in May 1968, showed more conclusively the result of an initial spark of discontent in the Universities leading the population as a whole to rationalise their feelings of frustration through living in a highly centralised and basically

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<sup>40</sup> National League of Young Liberals, *Eastbourne '70: A Strategy for Liberals*, p.5.

authoritarian society, and to take over their places of work, of education and of leisure under their own control. Whole communities began to be run by the people living in those areas in a spontaneous movement which almost made the complete structure of society irrelevant.<sup>41</sup>

The Red Guard wished to see the transformation of a stagnant political culture dominated locally and nationally by professional politicians who were not only out of touch with the lives and concerns of the majority of the population, but had a vested interest in maintaining their own positions of privilege and influence rather than seeking to create a more equal distribution of wealth and power. Society was perceived to be governed by a professional elite of bureaucrats and politicians, while the power relations that were the root cause of poverty and inequality went unchallenged. Hain argued that the existing political institutions did not provide opportunity for change, but instead served to perpetuate the status quo:

Behind the facade of 'democracy' we have a rigid executive-controlled system where the limited power of the parliamentary process is vested in the Prime Minister operating through the Cabinet. The political Parties have become obsolete and are simply tools of the system rather being vehicles for democratic control.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> S. Mole, *Community Control* (London, Union of Liberal Students, 1969), p.3. Mole also quotes from Herbert Marcuse on this page.

<sup>42</sup> P. Hain, 'The Alternative Movement,' in B. Greaves, ed., *Scarborough Perspectives* (London, National League of Young Liberals, 1971), p.46.

The Red Guard theorists were clear that they wanted to see social change on a wide scale, but they were less clear as to how that change would come about or where it would ultimately lead. In common with most - if not all - critical theorists they were a good deal more successful at diagnosing society's ills than at prescribing a cure. Lishman was certain that the creation of 'real' democracy was necessary:

The idea of real democracy is an important part of this approach. We abhor the idea of a government acting without the consent of the people; we look forward to a time when people will not only passively consent but actively participate both in making decisions and in deciding what are the questions of which decisions need to be taken.<sup>43</sup>

The question of how greater participation might be achieved lies at the heart of the theory of Community Politics. The Red Guard failed to address satisfactorily, or were at least exceptionally vague about, the nature, size or scope of the institutions required to facilitate the participation of members of communities in decision-making and in the process of deciding which decisions were taken. Lishman argued for a system of local government by voluntary association, where those who wished would be able to form larger federations and those who did not could remain as small units of an unspecified size:

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<sup>43</sup> G. Lishman, 'Community Politics: A theoretical approach,' *The New Politics*, 2 (1) (1970), p.4.

If a Welsh county has some feeling of community identification, then let that be the basic unit of local government; if a city has such a feeling, or a country town, then let that be the basic unit of representative government... I would argue that this principle of voluntary association is one that should apply to local government as a whole... The size and scope of the community which will form this 'basic unit' will vary enormously; it will rarely be larger than walking distance from the centre, except in the more scattered rural areas, and sometimes considerably less. The important criteria will be perceived homogeneity, or at least perceived identity of interest.<sup>44</sup>

The Red Guard were certain that a change in representative arrangements and institutions was required, but they were consistently vague as to the form new institutions would take. They believed that the idea of change was more important than the form it would ultimately take:

Ideally, a federation of community and industrial groups might be the ultimate aim, making the need for a central state irrelevant. On the other hand it might be found that modern industrial society demanded at least some degree of central co-ordination. The eventual structure of society is, however, less

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<sup>44</sup> G. Lishman, 'Community Politics,' in B. Greaves, ed., *Scarborough Perspectives* (London, National League of Young Liberals, 1971), pp.34-5.

important than the acceptance of the principle of community control.<sup>45</sup>

The Red Guard extended their critique of traditional representative institutions to political parties. They were critical of what they saw as the failure of the parties of the left, both Labour and Liberal Parties, to offer an alternative vision to the post-war consensus exemplified by the Heath and Wilson administrations:

Across the spectrum, the Labour Party has been rather artificially given a new lease of life by the reactionary programme of the Heath government. But, whatever pretence it may historically have had to socialism, it is unquestionably now a social democratic Party occupying the centre role in establishment politics and increasingly blurring the division in the two-Party system. Meanwhile, the Liberal Party, faced with this new challenge by Labour to its traditional role and increasingly finding itself squeezed out of the machine politics of the Party game, is insipid, directionless and ideologically stagnant.<sup>46</sup>

Drawing on this criticism of political parties, in an article that attempted to link anarchist and liberal theory, Hebditch argued that the new institutions of a participatory democracy would replace all political institutions with an interest in maintaining the status quo, including political parties:

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<sup>45</sup> Mole, *Community Control*, p.2.

<sup>46</sup> Hain, 'The Alternative Movement,' p.45.

Genuine neighbourhood councils are not mouthpieces of local government units - they are the new alternatives to those units. This approach to community action should lead us to question the long-term validity of any political party as at present constituted. We must acknowledge the fact that the logical conclusion of our belief that the people must take and use power for themselves is the elimination of the party system... the Liberal Party and the others will become unnecessary anachronisms likely to hinder rather than advance the emergence of new democratic institutions.<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that the leadership of the Liberal Party were extremely sceptical of the commitment of the Red Guard to the Liberal Party and to liberalism.<sup>48</sup> The Red Guard did appear to view the Liberal Party as simply a convenient vehicle for their own ideas and political ends. One senior London Borough of Sutton councillor whose political career began as a Young Liberal activist recalled in interview his own early commitment: *'It was Community Politics first and the party came second.'*

The success of the Community Politics Resolution may be an example of a successful 'breakthrough' that was the subject of a great deal of contemporary discussion; where the youthful, radical element in an established political organisation becomes large enough to take control of policy and strategy. Abrams and Little argued that, 'whatever the

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<sup>47</sup> S. Hebditch, 'Liberals in the Anarchist Camp,' in B. Greaves, ed., *Scarborough Perspectives* (London, National League of Young Liberals, 1971), p.29.

<sup>48</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, pp.1-2.

demands of young activists, a breakthrough by the young themselves is not within the structural possibilities of British politics.’<sup>49</sup> Certainly, the Red Guard never assumed complete control of the Liberal Party, but the size and competence of the youth wing enabled it to exert a profound and lasting influence during this period, suggesting that Abrams and Little underestimated what could be achieved by young activists.

The success of the Community Politics amendment written by these individuals, perhaps paradoxically, proved to be one of the crucial factors in the survival of the Liberal Party after 1970 and its subsequent growth and influence in local government. Indeed, a number of the Red Guard theorists remain influential figures within the Liberal Democrats to this day. Tony Greaves was first elected a local councillor in 1971 and was a member of Lancashire County Council and Pendle Borough Council from 1973 to 1998. He has written a regular column for the party’s weekly newspaper for over fifteen years. Bernard Greaves and Gordon Lishman went on to hold senior posts in the Liberal Party and continue to be active Liberal Democrats. Simon Hebditch joined the Labour Party in 1977, but returned to the Liberal Party a decade later. Peter Hain also joined the Labour Party in 1977, and was elected Labour MP for Neath in 1991. He became a Minister of State at the Welsh Office in May 1997.

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<sup>49</sup> Abrams and Little, ‘The Young Activist in British Politics,’ p.324.

## **Alliance, merger and continued growth in local government**

After the success of the Community Politics Resolution at Eastbourne in 1970 many of those who had argued in support of the amendment went back to their local areas with the intention of putting the ideas they had preached into practice. The success of these activists saw the Liberal Party gain local government seats in more areas where Liberal representation had been previously unheard of.<sup>50</sup> There can be no doubt that Community Politics was a crucial factor in the sustained growth of the Liberal Party after 1970.

### *Initial successes and criticisms of Community Politics*

The result of the February 1974 General Election was a huge advance for the Liberal Party on the debacle it had suffered four years earlier. The party won over 19 per cent of the vote, its largest share since 1929. Though this level of support was rewarded with only 14 seats, the party lost only 23 deposits from a total of 517 candidates. Although the party suffered a slight squeeze to 18 per cent and 13 seats in the October contest, the 1974 results were a remarkable advance on 1970.

More concrete success was experienced at a local level. In Liverpool, community campaigning led by Trevor Jones saw the party go from having one member on the City council in 1967 to being the largest party after the May 1973 elections. A power-base was established in one of the country's most deprived areas that contributed to the

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<sup>50</sup> Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party*, pp.150-4.



election of a Liberal MP at the 1979 Liverpool Edge Hill by-election; a seat that was held for a further eighteen years. Comparable success was achieved in Birmingham, where Wallace Lawler employed locally based campaigning to establish a foothold in the city. This activity also contributed to a Parliamentary by-election win prior to 1970, when Lawler won Birmingham Ladywood in 1969, although the seat was lost at the subsequent General Election.

These activists, and others in similar areas, demonstrated that Liberals could win elections and could do so in places previously considered ‘no-go areas’ for what had been the party of the Celtic fringes. One community activist recalled the optimism that accompanied the advance into new territories:

Liberals who came to Ladywood wondered at the solid displays of orange posters in working class streets and at the new fierce loyalty of former Labour stalwarts. It seemed a marvellous oasis of Liberalism in a most unpromising desert. If it could be done here, of all places, they mused, even at a time when the Liberal Party barely registered on the national political barometer, surely it could be done *anywhere*.<sup>51</sup>

The methods used to put the Community Politics strategy into practice were controversial outside the Liberal Party, yet most Liberal activists did not appear unduly concerned by the strategy’s opportunism. The basic Community Politics technique was an extension of that practised

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<sup>51</sup> Mole, ‘The Liberal Party and Community Politics,’ p.260.

within the Liberal Party during the previous decade: that of the responsive and conscientious local authority member. The new breed of community orientated activist, however, developed this basic outreach approach into a more extreme form. Candidates and councillors took up small, individual and group concerns with an almost religious devotion. They distributed self-produced Focus newsletters covering usually purely local problems in a primarily local context on a ward to ward basis. The aim of the activists was over time to build individual and group concerns into a broad movement and to win local elections.<sup>52</sup> The campaigning method was developed into a means of entering a locality, ascertaining the concerns of the population, holding public meetings, organising petitions, demonstrations and direct action.<sup>53</sup> This proved to be a very successful technique for unseating incumbent local politicians. One of the original aims of the strategy; to link different groups and campaigns together to build a broad coalition for political change, from both inside and outside the Liberal Party, was, however, gradually forgotten in the face of the more immediate goal of winning local elections.

Although the Community Politics activists felt justified in using what might be considered cynical methods because they were aware of the liberal values underlying their methodology, political opponents very often felt the technique was intrinsically dishonest, as it appeared Liberal Party activists were hiding their political views behind the front of local campaigns and manipulating popular discontent for political

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<sup>52</sup> Lishman, *Community Politics Guide*.

<sup>53</sup> J. Smithson, *Community Campaigning Manual* (Second Edition, Hebden Bridge, Association of Liberal Councillors, 1981).

ends. Labour Cabinet Minister Barbara Castle wrote in response to the Liberal campaign in February 1974 that politics was being downgraded into an exchange of favours:

We can and must beat the Liberals at their own community politics game. Most people are so politically confused these days <sup>that</sup> they judge candidates purely in terms of what they can offer them personally. Time and again I got it in various forms of crudity: If you help me, I'll help you. That's only right, isn't it?<sup>54</sup>

Although these criticisms clearly did contain some validity, it was also undoubtedly true that the community orientated methods brought Liberal candidates and councillors closer to the people they represented and this break from the paternalistic approach of the larger parties brought electoral rewards. Liberal Party representation in local government continued to grow. By the time of the 1983 General Election the party had 1,900 local councillors and had gained overall control of Adur, Chelmsford, Eastbourne, Hereford, Medina and the Isle of Wight councils. Minority control of Calderdale, Cannock Chase, Liverpool, Pendle, Wear Valley, Wyre Forest and Yeovil had also been achieved.<sup>55</sup>

While the practical application of Community Politics was bearing fruit, its theoretical development proved somewhat slower. Only two

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<sup>54</sup> B. Castle, *The Castle Diaries 1974-76* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), p.31-2.

<sup>55</sup> Pinkney, 'An Alternative Political Strategy? Liberals in Power in English Local Government,' p.69.

significant attempts to develop the theory of Community Politics took place after 1971. In the mid-1970s Peter Hain sought to take Community Politics out of the confines of Liberal Party politics and place it in a broader social and political context; linking it to the direct action protests of CND, mainstream neighbourhood councils, community development programmes, and broader New Left politics.<sup>56</sup> The attempt to give a wider social and economic perspective to Community Politics resulted in an uncomfortable engagement with many of the theoretical dilemmas of social democracy, while the attempt to give the theory a coherence it had previously lacked by diluting the original libertarian base left very little remaining that was distinct.<sup>57</sup> The failure of this exercise probably contributed to the ultimate disillusion of Hain and Simon Hebditch with liberal theory and the Liberal Party.

The primary attempt to develop the theory of Community Politics within the Liberal Party was a paper commissioned by the Association of Liberal Councillors from two of the original Red Guard theorists, Bernard Greaves and Gordon Lishman. Perhaps not surprisingly the result, published in 1980, lacked the verve and inventiveness of their original work. Instead, their tone was defensive and cautious. Greaves and Lishman's starting point was a negative defence of Community Politics as an ideal for the transformation of society, in the light of the

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<sup>56</sup> P. Hain, ed., *Community Politics* (London, Calder, 1976).

<sup>57</sup> See particularly, G. Clark, 'Neighbourhood Self-Management,' in P. Hain, ed., *Community Politics* (London, Calder, 1976), pp.110-5; and T. Young, 'The Industrial Connection,' in P. Hain, ed., *Community Politics* (London, Calder, 1976).

developing reality of its practical application within the Liberal Party simply as an effective means of winning local elections:

Community Politics is not a technique for the winning of local government elections. Community Politics is not a technique. It is an ideology, a system of ideas for social transformation... It is an approach to the collective making of decisions and the co-operative regulation of society that is relevant in any social group, from the family to the world.<sup>58</sup>

Greaves and Lishman articulated their concern that a high ideal had become little more than a technique, and that, therefore, Community Politics had become part of the system it had set out to change:

If elections and the holding of elected office become the sole or even the major party of our politics, we will have become corrupted by the very system of government and administration that community politics sets out to challenge. The process will have displayed the motivating ideas. We will have lost our reason for fighting elections at all.<sup>59</sup>

Greaves and Lishman perceived that the practical success of locally orientated campaigning had become a conservative force in Liberal Party politics. Not only could the methodology be used by those who did not necessarily share the strategy's underlying values to achieve elected office, but the reality of public office and the necessity of

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<sup>58</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.1.

<sup>59</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.1.

decision-making within existing constraints and structures led those with radical ideals to adopt an incremental approach. This would lead radical Liberals down the path they believed the Labour Party had taken to a mute acceptance of the status quo; the very reason why many Community Politics theorists and activists had joined the Liberal Party initially:

Indeed, the Labour movement is a fearful lesson to us of how our own idealism could become corrupted and our radicalism diluted by the prospect, cynics would say the realities, of political office.<sup>60</sup>

Greaves and Lishman noted that the sheer time and effort involved in practising Community Politics may preclude the thought and reflection necessary to keep in focus long term objectives. Campaigners may instead be simply responding to immediate problems and achieving short term goals:

Out of this [Community Politics] has emerged a new generation of highly effective activist campaigners working for the Liberal Party up and down the country and concentrating in large measure upon local government. Many have transformed the politics of their locality and many have become councillors and some have taken substantial power in their Councils. They have set a new and dauntingly high standard for local government politics. The price they are in danger of paying is

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<sup>60</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.11.

to drive themselves to the point of exhaustion and, perhaps more important, to deprive themselves of the time to think.<sup>61</sup>

Michael Meadowcroft was clear in interview that it was probably unsustainable and certainly undesirable to win elections by sheer dint of effort alone. It was essential that a broader political dimension was given to work in the community:

*It is impossible to maintain the amount of effort to keep winning seats by Community Politics alone. It is physically impossible, you will kill yourself in the end. I was always saying; look, we have to get over to people why we do this. It's not enough to say what or how, you've also got to get over why, so that people become Liberals by being involved in it.*

Yet there remained, throughout this period of success in local government, a nagging doubt that the success owed very little to Liberal principles and a great deal to the mobilisation of popular discontent via community based campaigning. One reason why articulating the underlying motives of Community Politics proved difficult was that there had never been a generally agreed theory of Community Politics. While Greaves and Lishman did reiterate that the strategy was, 'a system of ideals for social transformation,'<sup>62</sup> they found it necessary to comment:

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<sup>61</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.2.

<sup>62</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.1.

Over a decade the Liberal Party has committed itself at decreasing intervals with increasing majorities to the practice of community politics. It would be reasonable to expect that the ideas are now clearly understood and widely accepted in the Party. Such a presumption would not be correct.<sup>63</sup>

Not only were many of the Liberals practising Community Politics apparently unaware of the theory underlying the strategy, as Greaves and Lishman pointed out, but a number of leading figures within the party were extremely suspicious of the practice and the theory.

#### *Community Politics and the Liberal Party leadership*

Whilst a growing vanguard of local councillors and activists attempted to put into practice the principles of community participation, the national hierarchy of the Liberal Party under the leadership of David Steel pursued a very different strategy, with profoundly different ideas of what they would do with any power they gained. Steel's strategy was to accept privately that the Liberal Party could not win an outright election victory and to manoeuvre the party into a position where it held balance of power in a hung Parliament. Then it could secure electoral reform, almost certainly from a minority Labour administration.

In 1977, one year into his leadership of the Liberal Party, Steel entered into a pact to support Jim Callaghan's teetering Labour government, a move that was controversial among grassroots activists, many of whom

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<sup>63</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p. 1.



were fighting Labour on the ground and objected to the Liberal Party holding up an administration whose policies they believed to be diametrically opposed to Liberal values. Their criticism of Steel was particularly severe because he had failed to win any significant concessions for his support, such as cabinet seats or proportional representation.<sup>64</sup>

The resignation of the Gang of Four from the Labour Party and the creation of the Social Democratic Party in 1981 brought into sharp focus the division between the Westminster leadership of the Liberal Party and the community orientated activists, whose alternative power-base was the Yorkshire headquarters of the Association of Liberal Councillors. While Steel actively sought an alliance with the new party, a sizeable proportion of Liberal activists were deeply suspicious of and hostile to the SDP. Although it should be noted that the Liberal Party's Llandudno conference of 1981 supported an electoral pact between the two parties by a huge majority of 1600 to 112 votes, Crewe and King argue that Steel and his immediate circle were the only Liberals with an unequivocal commitment to the Alliance.<sup>65</sup> For many Liberals, the SDP represented the values of the post-war consensus and old style moderate Labourism. It was the apparent failure of these values in the 1960s and 1970s that had led many radicals into the Liberal Party. To enter into a formal alliance with the SDP and, therefore, those values, appeared to herald a watering down of the principles of the Liberal Party. Tony Greaves wrote in the early days of the Alliance between

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<sup>64</sup> For Steel's account, see, D. Steel, *A House Divided* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980).

<sup>65</sup> I. Crewe and A. King, *The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995), pp.140-73.

the two parties of the need for Liberals to ensure that liberal principles prevailed:

Perhaps above all, the real task of activists is to ensure that the alliance with a party, which on present form looks like being almost the opposite of the Liberal Party in its internal structures, attitudes to power and elections, and many of its local policies, does not seriously harm our long term strategic campaign of community politics. This will require toughness and vision from Liberals at local level. It is vital that we do not falter.<sup>66</sup>

The suspicions of many leading ALC figures towards the Alliance and the Liberal leadership's strategy led to a widening of the division within the party to the extent that many felt there were effectively two parties, as a contemporary author noted:

Somewhat shunned by the party establishment, several of the leading lights in the community politics movement have responded by distancing themselves from the official Liberal Party machine... Tony Greaves has since 1976 presided over a kind of Liberal Party in exile, the Association of Liberal Councillors, which has had a fairly frosty relationship with the party leadership. He claims with some justice that it is the Association's 2,000-odd members, the great majority of whom are elected Liberal local councillors, rather than the handful of

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<sup>66</sup> T. Greaves, 'The Alliance: Threat and Opportunity,' *New Outlook*, 21 (2) (1981), p.23.

Liberal MPs and party officials in London, who represent the real Liberal Party... To some extent, indeed, two quite distinct Liberal parties have developed in the last fifteen years or so.<sup>67</sup>

In 1985 the ALC conference in Worthing issued a collective declaration which challenged the ability of the small Liberal Parliamentary Party to claim to represent the party more than its large body of councillors. ALC asserted its claim to be the effective leadership of the Liberal Party:

[L]eadership of the Liberal Party throughout the country is coming increasingly from local Liberal Councillors who are the motivators, the organisers and the driving forces of Liberal activism... The Alliance – the mechanics of the Alliance rather than the SDP – has weakened the democratic processes of the Liberal Party and led to a superficiality and blandness of policy presentation which has seemed to have little in common with the real image (and indeed reality) of a campaigning, positive party with roots, with ideas and with passion.<sup>68</sup>

The Worthing Declaration challenged the strategic direction that the national leadership of the party was following, arguing that Community Politics offered greater prospects of electoral success and more hope of a liberal society than the alliance with the SDP.

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<sup>67</sup> I. Bradley, *The Strange Rebirth of Liberal Britain* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1985), pp.166-7.

<sup>68</sup> Association of Liberal Councillors, *The Worthing Declaration* (Worthing, Association of Liberal Councillors, 1985), pp.1-4.

It might be judged paradoxical that while the radical practitioners of Community Politics in the Liberal Party sought to distance themselves from the SDP, their brand of Social Liberalism had a good deal more in common with social democracy than with the classical liberalism adhered to by many senior Liberal MPs. This argument is usually dismissed by community activists of the time, who argue that social democracy and liberalism are incompatible political philosophies.<sup>69</sup> British social democracy, however, can be traced back to Fabianism and Guild Socialism (and also to Bernstein's revisionist interpretation of Marx), philosophical strands linked to Idealism and T.H. Green's view of the state as a force for good in society; the origins of Social Liberalism and Community Politics.<sup>70</sup> Roy Jenkins, one of the Gang of Four, has gone so far as to argue that liberalism and social democracy are separated by, 'one of the narrowest divides in the history of politics.'<sup>71</sup> The validity of this argument is probably demonstrated by the ease with which the two parties have become a single coherent unit since merger, with all sections of the Liberal Democrats apparently comfortable to fight the 1997 General Election on a manifesto pledged to raise taxes to fund increased state intervention.

It was not until after the merger of the Liberal and Social Democratic parties in 1988 that the profound division between the Westminster

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<sup>69</sup> M. Meadowcroft, *Social Democracy: Bridge or Barrier?* (London, Liberator Publications, 1981), advances this argument while accepting that liberalism and social democracy are both on the progressive left opposing reactionary conservatism.

<sup>70</sup> D. Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition: Socialists, Liberals and the Quest for Unity 1884-1939* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>71</sup> R. Jenkins, *Partnership of Principle: Writings and Speeches on the Making of the Alliance* (C. Lindley, ed., London, Secker and Warburg, 1985), pp.66-7.

leadership and the regionally based campaigners healed. The process of merger required a reassessment and re-evaluation of many long held beliefs in the light of national political realities that led to a lessening of the claims to ideological purity among the different sections of the party. This process was facilitated by the election of Paddy Ashdown as the first leader of the merged party. Ashdown took steps to bring ALC - or ALDC as it became - into the national fold, an enterprise that was strengthened by Ashdown's radical credentials and the fact that his own Somerset power-base was largely built upon Community Politics style campaigning. In addition, the arguments employed by those Liberals who opposed merger and sought to continue the Liberal Party outside the Liberal Democrats were perceived by many who entered the merged party to lack credibility and defy practical logic. The attempt by the continuing Liberals, led by Michael Meadowcroft, to claim the intellectual and therefore moral highground alienated many who might otherwise have been tempted to stay outside the merged party, as one renowned activist wrote of the merger period:

As a 'yes but' I thought long and hard about the horrible things the sogs [social democrats] did to my party and two things made me stay in. First, the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors decided proactively to make the Party feel good about itself again and involved me in some of that work. Secondly, the alternative place to go, Meadowcroft's liberals, were so illiberal in their intolerance of the rest of us.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> S. Ritchie, in D. Brack, ed., *Why I Am A Liberal Democrat* (Dorchester, Liberal Democrat Publications, 1996) p.115.

Community Politics continued to be an important force in the new merged party. In fact, 'community' was named, along with 'liberty' and 'equality' as one of the three core values of the Liberal Democrats in the party's new constitution, illustrating the central importance of community and Community Politics to the new party.

### **The 1997 Parliamentary breakthrough**

The formation of the Liberal Democrats in 1988 is a convenient place to end a narrative of the historical development of Community Politics. A full account of the development of the strategy would be incomplete, however, without some reference to the 1997 General Election when the Liberal Democrats made the breakthrough in Parliamentary seats that had eluded the third party throughout the Alliance years. The Alliance, of course, had achieved larger shares of the vote, over 25 per cent in 1983 and just under 23 per cent in 1987, but due to the vagaries of the first-past-the-post electoral system, only returned 23 and 22 MPs respectively.

In 1997, less than 17 per cent of the vote brought the Liberal Democrats a return of 46 seats, 27 of which were gained on polling day from sitting Conservative MPs.<sup>73</sup> This result was generally considered to constitute the breakthrough that had eluded the third party for many years, though the scale of the Labour landslide denied

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<sup>73</sup> D. Butler and D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1997* (London, MacMillan, 1997), also count Gordon as a Lib Dem gain - the notional 1992 result after boundary changes being a Conservative win. This precedent has not been followed for the purposes of this analysis.

the party the balance of power such a return might have been expected to bring.

*The contribution of Community Politics to the 1997 result*

To what extent did Community Politics and local government success make this Parliamentary breakthrough possible? Analysis of the constituencies gained shown in Table 2.1 overleaf would appear to support the contention that local government success prior to May 1997 was an important contributing factor to Parliamentary victory. Table 2.1 shows that of the 27 seats the Liberal Democrats gained, nine were constituencies where the Liberal Democrats controlled all levels of local government. A further eight seats were gained where the Liberal Democrats were the only party to have overall control of any level of local administration. In those authorities with no overall control the Liberal Democrats were usually the largest party, often forming a minority administration. What is particularly striking is the absence of Conservative control at any level of local government in what were Conservative held Parliamentary seats. The decline of the Conservatives in local government in these areas can be illustrated by the Sheffield Hallam constituency, for example, where there was only a single Conservative councillor on the day of the election.

Local success may contribute to success at a General Election in a number of ways. First, it can help to build a team of experienced and committed activists. Second, local success can create a political and electoral momentum in the years between a General Election. Third, the opportunity to govern at a local level and demonstrate competence

**Table 2.1: Seats gained by the Liberal Democrats at the 1997 General Election and political control of local authorities within each constituency**

Constituency	Party Won From	Control of LA(s)*
Aberdeenshire and Kincardine	Conservative	noc
Brecon and Radnorshire	Conservative	ind
Carshalton and Wallington	Conservative	Lib Dem
Colchester	Conservative	noc/Lib Dem
Cornwall South East	Conservative	Lib Dem/ind/Lib Dem/ind
Devon West and Torridge	Conservative	noc/noc/noc
Edinburgh West	Conservative	Labour
Harrogate and Knaresborough	Conservative	noc/Lib Dem
Hazel Grove	Conservative	noc
Hereford	Conservative	noc/Lib Dem
Isle of Wight	Conservative	Lib Dem
Kingston and Surbiton	Conservative	Lib Dem
Lewes	Conservative	noc/Lib Dem/noc/Lib Dem
Northavon	Conservative	noc/noc
Oxford West and Abingdon	Conservative	noc/Labour/Lib Dem
Portsmouth South	Conservative	Lib Dem/Labour
Richmond Park	Conservative	Lib Dem
St Ives	Conservative	Lib Dem/noc/noc/ind
Sheffield Hallam	Conservative	Labour
Somerton and Frome	Conservative	Lib Dem/Lib Dem/Lib Dem
Southport	Conservative	noc
Sutton and Cheam	Conservative	Lib Dem
Taunton	Conservative	Lib Dem/Lib Dem/noc
Torbay	Conservative	noc/Lib Dem
Twickenham	Conservative	Lib Dem
Weston-Super-Mare	Conservative	Lib Dem
Winchester	Conservative	Lib Dem/Lib Dem

\* within a two-tier system the County is listed first followed by the District(s)



is important in building the credibility of a party with no experience of national office in living memory.

One of the MPs newly elected in 1997, Adrian Sanders, in an article that made no mention of the national Conservative collapse, argued that Community Politics, and in particular Focus newsletters, leading to local election success, had played the crucial part in his victory at Torbay:

Community Politics was born and Focus newsletters exploded onto an unsuspecting public... In came all year round campaigning, sore feet and casework. Strictly targeted campaigns in realistically winnable seats ensured that local election success swiftly followed. Without that local election success we would not have had the credibility to mount a serious challenge at the general election. Today we control the 'shadow' unitary authority and hold the Parliamentary seat.<sup>74</sup>

Prior to 1997, however, local government success had not brought the national rewards that might have been reasonably expected. The Liberals had held local power in many areas for over a decade before 1997 - the South West London suburbs of Richmond Park, Twickenham, Sutton and Cheam, and Carshalton and Wallington, are good examples - yet the Parliamentary breakthrough did not occur until the collapse of the Conservative vote in 1997.

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<sup>74</sup> *Liberal Democrat News*, 13/6/97, p.8.

The first-past-the-post electoral system has been an important factor in the failure of the third party at General Elections, but the electoral system has not held the party back in local government. Indeed, the Liberal Democrats have not had greater difficulty winning the larger County or Metropolitan seats than the smaller District seats, as might be expected if the size of Parliamentary constituencies were a factor. Equally, in Parliamentary by-elections the record of the Liberal Democrats is comparable to if not more impressive than that of the two larger parties. Many people, then, prepared to support the Liberal Democrats at local elections have not been prepared to do so at a General Election.

Rallings and Thrasher's analysis of the local elections held on the same day as the 1997 General Election clearly demonstrates that split voting occurred in many areas. They provide two particularly interesting examples:

In Cambridge, where the major parties were opposed by a single unsuccessful Independent, 21,000 people voted Labour and just over 18,000 Liberal Democrat at the local elections. In the Parliamentary contest, which actually attracted a slightly smaller turnout, Labour polled in excess of 27,000 and the Liberal Democrats fewer than 9,000. In Pendle the Liberal Democrats slipped from a good second place locally to a poor third at the General Election as their vote slumped from nearly 16,000 to just 5,460.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, 'The Local Elections,' *Parliamentary Affairs*, 50 (1997), p.689.

The willingness of a large swath of the public to vote for third party at local elections but not at General Elections has proved costly to the Liberal Party and Liberal Democrats. General Elections, of course, should not be seen out of the context of national campaigns and national political events. It may be the failure to connect with and benefit from national factors that has been at the root of third party failure at General Elections. Michael Meadowcroft explained in interview with the author that his victory in 1983 at Leeds West came about in part because of his ability to lose the tag of being a ‘super-councillor’ only concerned with local issues:

*The thing that I realised very closely was that what they were looking for in a Parliamentary candidate was different to a local government candidate. They were not looking for a super-councillor, they were looking for a Parliamentarian. I think it was very significant to realise this. Canvassers would come back and laugh and say: ‘Mr Meadowcroft, all right for the City Council, but not for government.’ That was coming back... From ’81 onwards I did a lot more national things, I issued statements on foreign affairs - not that people necessarily took any notice - but one promoted oneself as a Parliamentarian, not the super-councillor. That had a big effect.*

At a General Election, then, a Community Politics style or purely locally based campaign may prove counter-productive, as it may persuade the electorate that the candidate is not suitable to represent them in Parliament. Rallings and Thrasher have also shown that while

the Liberal Democrats outperform the Liberal Party and Alliance in local elections, they have been unable to match their predecessors' performance at General Elections in terms of share of the vote.<sup>76</sup>

At the 1997 General Election the swing from Conservative to Liberal Democrat was lower in Liberal Democrat target seats than in non-target seats. This may suggest that a more intensive local campaign by the Liberal Democrats reduced their vote. This may have been because when attention was diverted from the national campaign, or when the national message was diluted by localised activity, the Liberal Democrat vote dropped. This may suggest that Community Politics style campaigning hindered success at the General Election.

*The 1997 General Election and the ethnic minority vote*

The apparent breakthrough achieved by the Liberal Democrats in 1997 may have hidden the shortcomings of the party's campaigning strategy. It may have also masked the failure of the third party to win any substantial level of support among Britain's ethnic minority population. Analysis of the voting patterns at the 1997 General Election, drawn from data collected by the British Electoral Survey and shown in Table 2.2 overleaf, illustrated the failure of the third party to gain significant support from the black and Asian population.

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<sup>76</sup> C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, 'The Electoral Record,' in D. MacIver, ed., *The Liberal Democrats* (Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), p.222.

**Table 2.2: Distribution of Asian and black votes at the 1997 General Election**

Party	Asian vote %	Black vote %	Total %
Conservative	10.8	4.2	8.5
Labour	80.6	89.2	83.5
Liberal Democrat	3.5	3.0	3.3
Other	1.3	0.0	0.8
Refused/don't know	3.8	3.6	3.7
(Base)	(314)	(166)	(480)

Source: S. Saggar, *The General Election of 1997: Ethnic Minorities and Electoral Politics* (London, Central Books, 1998), p.35.

For ethnic minority voters at the 1997 General Election, the Liberal Democrats were a less attractive proposition than the Conservative Party, who received twice the level of black and Asian support, while the Labour Party secured an impressive 84 per cent of the ethnic minority vote. These figures demonstrate a failure of some magnitude on the part of the third party. It should also be noted that none of the 46 Liberal Democrat MPs elected in 1997 were from an ethnic minority. Although in comparison, none of the 165 Conservative MPs, and only nine of the 418 Labour members returned were from an ethnic minority. The Liberal Democrats, in fact, selected more ethnic minority

candidates than the Labour and Conservative parties (19 compared to 14 and 11 respectively), but none of these candidates was selected in a seat that could be considered remotely winnable.<sup>77</sup> It might be argued that one reason for the failure of the Liberal Democrats to win ethnic minority support is that the Community Politics method, and particularly its campaigning emphasis on geographic locality, may alienate those who do not feel an affinity with traditional constructions of a community. Indeed, it has been argued from within the Liberal Democrats that the localised campaigning techniques have led to an over emphasis on finding 'local' candidates who are sociologically representative of their constituents. Gifford has argued that the only non-white Liberal to be elected to Parliament, Dadabhai Naoroji, elected in the nineteenth century, would not be selected by the third party today:

Yet if Naoroji were around today, he'd stand little chance of being a Liberal Democrat MP. Aged 66 when elected, selection panels would tell him he was far too old. Born in India, he would be 'unrepresentative' of the area, so perhaps he might try Southall? His concern for people outside the constituency, never mind overseas, would count against him in today's obsession for a 'local' candidate.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> S. Sagar, *The General Election of 1997: Ethnic Minorities and Electoral Politics* (London, Central Books, 1998), pp.62-8.

<sup>78</sup> Z. Gifford, in D. Brack, ed., *Why I Am A Liberal Democrat* (Dorchester, Liberal Democrat Publications, 1996), p.59.

Clearly, then, the Community Politics strategy has not been an unqualified success with regard to the representation of Britain's minority populations.

### **Community Politics in historical context**

Community Politics has had a somewhat chequered history in the three decades since its adoption as a political strategy by the third party. The strategy and its advocates have frequently appeared at odds with the national leadership of the party. There has never been unanimity within the third party as to what the strategy actually entails. For some, Community Politics is a system of ideas for social transformation, for others, it is an extremely effective technique for winning elections. Yet it is probably no coincidence that the 1970 Liberal Party Assembly was the last occasion when the continued existence of the third party was seriously questioned by its own members.

Community Politics has been the key to the revival of the party's fortunes in local government. Dorling *et al*'s analysis of the Liberal Democrat vote in local elections demonstrates the importance of campaigning factors over socio-economic variables in explaining the Liberal and Liberal Democrat advance in local government during the last two decades.<sup>79</sup> Although aspects of the Community Politics style have attracted criticism from both inside and outside the third party, and may have in some respects hindered the party's advance on the national stage, power in local government provided the credibility and

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<sup>79</sup> D. Dorling, C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, 'The epidemiology of the Liberal Democrat vote,' *Political Geography*, 17 (1998), pp.64-5.

the strength on the ground necessary for the Liberal Democrats to take advantage of the Conservative collapse in 1997.

Community Politics can be seen as part of a long tradition of Social Liberalism that is concerned with the fate of communal ties in the face of seemingly pernicious economic and social forces. The most important theoretical contribution to this tradition was made by T. H. Green. Although it would be contentious to suggest that a majority of the party's councillors or members are aware of the modern party's roots in the philosophy of Green and others, the policy positions of the Liberal Democrats do more clearly reflect this tradition than that of classical liberalism. As Bennie *et al* concluded from their study of the attitudes of Liberal Democrat members: 'Overall, the political attitudes of Liberal Democrats fit well with the tradition of social liberalism as propounded by Hobhouse and Hobson rather than the classical liberal approach of laissez-faire economics... We can safely conclude that the social liberal tradition is alive and well in the attitudes of modern day Liberal Democrats.'<sup>80</sup>

Before 1970 the Liberal Party represented the narrow interests of an educated middle class intelligentsia.<sup>81</sup> For the original Young Liberal advocates of Community Politics, the strategy was an attempt to broaden the party's appeal to include the interests of young radicals disillusioned with the established parties and what was perceived as a largely voiceless, disenfranchised underclass. By doing so, Community

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<sup>80</sup> Bennie, Curtice and Rudig, 'Party Members,' p.144.

<sup>81</sup> See Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party*, p.150, for a social profile of the Liberal Party's candidates at the 1970 General Election.



Politics was intended to break apart the old staid and elitist politics, and introduce a new set of representational relationships. This thesis now addresses the theoretical aspects of Community Politics, before assessing its success in securing those new representational relationships.

### 3. COMMUNITY POLITICS: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

The adoption of the strategy of Community Politics placed the idea of community at the heart of the third party's approach and thinking. The stated aim of the strategy in the 1970 Assembly Resolution was, 'to help organise people in communities to take and use power.' Community, however, is an extremely ambiguous concept, whose use in political debate and policy discussion can often be little more than platitudinous.<sup>1</sup> Yet community is also a term that can be loaded with powerful meanings, as the Young Liberal paper written in support of the original resolution described:

The word 'community' has overtones of security; it is a society in which a person is accepted as a whole, not purely as the practitioner of a particular skill. This is the community which is so lacking in our highly mobile, materialist society. Our political initiatives can help to establish it. Community is a state of mind, a sense of belonging which can be created in almost any group.<sup>2</sup>

To make sense of Community Politics, to establish its implications, possibilities and limitations, then, requires a better understanding of the term community. This chapter will perform this task by tracing the present usage of community in political and social theory back to the industrialisation of Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and

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<sup>1</sup> K. Young, *People, Places and Power – Local Democracy and Community Identity* (Luton, Local Government Management Board, 1993), pp.2-3.

<sup>2</sup> National League of Young Liberals, *Eastbourne '70: A Strategy for Liberals*, p.10.

the belief that community was in some way incompatible with the emerging urban society.

The idea of community will then be explored further in the context of the linked concepts of place and locality. The origins of the modern usage of community in the Industrial Revolution and the contemporary view that geographic ties are becoming less important to an increasingly diverse and mobile population raise serious implications for the Community Politics strategy. The original architects of the strategy did not intend that it be applied to a narrow definition of community as synonymous with locality,<sup>3</sup> but the development of Community Politics in this direction means that the continued relevance of place and locality must be considered in a theoretical discussion of the strategy. Locality and community will also be linked to identity and the possible negative power of constructions of community that exclude certain people or definitions of place.

The spatial organisation of government means that the idea of place is indelibly linked to representation and, therefore, to power.<sup>4</sup> Power in modern democracies is almost always dependent upon the political control of geographical areas. The ideas of locality, place and community are, therefore, of particular interest to those who seek power. Community Politics was intended to be a bottom-up approach to politics, where power rested firmly at the lowest possible level:

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.3.

<sup>4</sup> Young, *People, Places and Power*, p.16.

The essence of politics is power. The central concern of politics is with the distribution of power and the inter-relation between different centres of power... The nature of community politics thus entails a commitment to the dispersal of centralised power in society and its redistribution to the communities which make it up.<sup>5</sup>

Although subsidiarity is a key principle of Community Politics, there have been occasions when the approach has appeared to be a primarily top-down strategy. A clear example of this is provided by the distinction Lishman originally made between 'latent' and 'primary' communities,<sup>6</sup> which he later developed further with his collaborator Bernard Greaves.<sup>7</sup> Lishman argued that the role of the Community Politician was to turn latent communities, where a shared identity was not perceived, into primary communities, where a group of individuals perceived and acted upon their collective identity.<sup>8</sup> This may be perceived as a top-down view of community, where political activists seek to impose a sense of community where one did not previously exist. It may be argued, then, that Community Politics, and other political strategies that use similar theories and methods, may be a means by which those with power impose a definition or construction of community upon those without power. This chapter will investigate this particular dilemma of Community Politics and the attempts that have been made to resolve it.

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<sup>5</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, pp.4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Lishman, 'Community Politics: A Theoretical Approach,' p.7.

<sup>7</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.3.

<sup>8</sup> Lishman, 'Community Politics: A Theoretical Approach,' p.7.

Finally, the strands outlined above will be brought together for a discussion of Community Politics in relation to liberalism. The architects of the theory of Community Politics have claimed their starting point to be the individual,<sup>9</sup> but how well does a theory centred upon the idea of community and the collective fit with the central liberal values of pluralism and tolerance within the context of individual rights? What has Community Politics added to British liberalism and what has it taken away from it? These are the questions this chapter will address.

### **Community, industrialisation and urban society**

Although there are echoes of the modern expression of community in the work of Plato, Aristotle, and many other philosophers from Cicero through to Hegel, the modern usage of ‘community’ can be effectively dated to the Industrial Revolution. This revolutionary social and economic change began in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century and spread to continental Europe. It caused the sudden end of the feudal social order and the transformation of rural societies into urban societies, of skilled artisans into unskilled factory machinists, and of traditional hereditary hierarchies into distinct economic classes. The dramatic explosion in urban life in Europe during the nineteenth century can be illustrated by the fact that between 1801 and 1901 the population of Britain grew from under 10 million to over 35 million, and in the same

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<sup>9</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.3.

period the proportion of the population living in rural areas fell from 70 per cent to just over 20 per cent.<sup>10</sup>

The German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies was among the first to identify a distinction between community and society in response to these changes. In 1887 he published his most famous work, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, usually translated as Community and Association, or, more accurately, Community and Society. Tönnies' thesis was that the Industrial Revolution and the advance of the modern state had resulted in the destruction of traditional rural communities and their replacement with urban society, exemplified by life in the new industrial town and cities:

Both village and town retain many characteristics of the family; the village retains more, the town less. Only when the town develops into the city are these characteristics entirely lost. Individuals and families are separate identities, and their common locale is only an accidental or deliberately chosen place in which to live. But as the town lives on within the city, elements of life in the *Gemeinschaft*, as the only real form of life, persist within the *Gesellschaft*, although lingering and decaying... However, in the city and therefore where general conditions

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<sup>10</sup> E. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (London, Penguin, 1968), Unnumbered appendix.

characteristic of the *Gesellschaft* prevail, only the upper strata, the rich and the cultured, are really alive and active.<sup>11</sup>

For Tönnies, community and society described qualitatively different social relationships. *Gemeinschaft* or community was a series of complex and meaningful relationships found in close knit rural areas. *Gesellschaft* or society described more superficial and inauthentic relationships that existed only out of financial necessity. These relationships characterised urban life. Tönnies used the concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* as Weberian ideal-types to express the extreme possibilities of social relations. The ideal-type of *Gemeinschaft* or community was the German rural family, and of *Gesellschaft* or society the atomised industrial city. Community, then, expressed a deeper relationship between people than the interdependence of those members of a society who happened to trade together or live in the same locality. According to Tönnies' definition, community could exist between all of humanity or between the members of a single family; each would be a community if the appropriate sentiment were present:

In the most general way, one could speak of *Gemeinschaft* [community] comprising the whole of mankind, such as the church wishes to be regarded. But human *Gesellschaft* [society] is conceived as mere coexistence of people independent of each other.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> F. Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (Trans. C. Loomis, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), p.265.

<sup>12</sup> Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, p.38.

Tönnies' description of the less 'alive and active' working class in industrial society echoed Marx's theory of alienated labour. Though for Marx alienation was not simply a product of urbanisation, but a consequence of the private ownership of the means of production that reduced labour, and therefore people, to a commodity.<sup>13</sup> The nature of these aspects of the work of Marx and Tönnies illustrates the extent of the social change wrought by the Industrial Revolution. Industrialisation created an urban civilisation on an unprecedented scale, a change that appeared irreversible and pernicious to many contemporary thinkers. In a study of the concepts of alienation and anomie, both linked, in different ways, to industrialisation and urbanisation, Lukes has written of the similarities of these aspects of the theories of Marx and Durkheim:

They both had a picture of history as a process of the progressive emergence of the individual and both thought that man's potential for individual autonomy and for genuine community with others (both of which they envisaged differently) was frustrated by existing social forms.<sup>14</sup>

There was a sense that a common world had been lost and the prospects for a new community were not great. Durkheim, of course, lived and worked in Paris at the turn of the century, and he was conscious that the new industrial cities offered a pluralism and a freedom denied by smaller

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<sup>13</sup> K. Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Trans. C. Milligan, New York, International Publishers, 1964), pp.106-19.

<sup>14</sup> S. Lukes, 'Alienation and Anomie,' in P. Laslett and W. G. Runciman, eds., *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (Third Series, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1967), p.147.



social groups, that ‘because there are more individuals living together, common life is richer and more varied.’<sup>15</sup> Durkheim, however, was also conscious that the social and economic change resulting from industrialisation had created inherent conflicts. The shared interests that created the social solidarity of pre-industrial life had been replaced by interests that often appeared to be in opposition, resulting in a weakening of social cohesion. Durkheim described this condition as an anomic division of labour:

Machines replace men; manufacturing replaces hand-work. The worker is regimented, separated from his family throughout the day. He always lives apart from his employer, etc. These new conditions of industrial life naturally demand a new organisation, but as these changes have been accomplished with extreme rapidity, the interests in conflict have not yet had the time to be equilibrated.<sup>16</sup>

Community, then, came to describe a feature of the pre-industrial world that many believed had been lost in industrial, urban society. Perhaps this explains the elusiveness of the term: community expressed a sentiment that was absent, rather than one that was present. What these late nineteenth century writers felt to be absent was a communal sentiment based upon shared experience, mutual interest and common values.

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<sup>15</sup> E. Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* (Trans. G. Simpson, New York, The Free Press, 1964), p.346.

<sup>16</sup> Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, p.370.

The modern usage of community can, therefore, be understood as a response to industrialisation and urbanisation. As Reeve has pointed out, at the end of the nineteenth century industrial society was a novelty and the work of Tönnies and his contemporaries should be seen in the context of an attempt to come to terms with the features of this social order - state, civil society, market, community - and understand their relative roles in constituting the new, industrial world.<sup>17</sup>

Thomas Hill Green was a contemporary of Durkheim, Marx and Tönnies, and his response to the emerging urban, industrial society and his strong religious faith are reflected in the prominence he gave in his work to the idea of community. Green saw community as an essentially spiritual phenomenon that encompassed the whole humanity. His writings addressed the concern that such a moral community was not an inevitable feature of human social organisation, but was in fact a relatively rare occurrence in human history.<sup>18</sup> Underlying this concern was the social change occurring in British society at that time, when the moral community of which Green considered himself to a member appeared to be threatened by rapid social change and the 'perceived disintegration of communal values.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> A. Reeve, 'Community, industrial society and contemporary debate,' *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 2 (1997), p.212.

<sup>18</sup> Green, *Prolegomena to ethics*, Section 258-9.

<sup>19</sup> Den Otter, "'Thinking in Communities",' p.84.

### *Community and economic forces*

The origin of Tönnies' distinction between community and society in the Industrial Revolution illuminates the contribution of economic factors in determining the wider social structure. If the apparent loss of community was primarily a consequence of economic forces then it might be reasonable to assume that a restoration of community would also require the workings of economic mechanisms. Certainly, the primacy of economics in other non-Marxist constructions of community has been noted. For example, McCulloch wrote of Peter Kropotkin and William Morris that, 'both thinkers accord primacy to the economic category, denying the possibility of achieving to any lasting degree something which is absent from or even denied by the economic sphere of human activity.'<sup>20</sup>

Contemporary British liberalism, however, has consistently failed to give an economic dimension to its analysis of community. An important reason for this failure is that, as Curtice argued, the Liberal Party (and now the Liberal Democrats) viewed the economic as subordinate to the political.<sup>21</sup> The most recent contribution to the theory of Community Politics, written by a number of leading party figures, made a definite rejection of economic analysis:

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<sup>20</sup> C. McCulloch, 'The Problem of Fellowship in Communitarian Theory: William Morris and Peter Kropotkin,' *Political Studies*, 32 (1984), p.441.

<sup>21</sup> J. Curtice, 'Great Britain – social liberalism reborn?' in E. Kirchner, ed., *Liberal Parties in Western Europe* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.116.

Community Politics is about having views on the wider and general good, and putting in place mechanisms that allow for genuine choice within a community and which does not take a narrow economic view of politics.<sup>22</sup>

This rejection of a primarily economic analysis owes much to the Liberal Party's acceptance of the post-war consensus of a mixed economy based on Keynesian principles and to the rejection of Marxist dialectics by the early advocates of Community Politics. More recently, a primarily economic analysis has become associated with Thatcherism. Indeed, there is a logic to this position, given that, as Bogdanor has pointed out, 'a liberal society is compatible, in principle, with a range of different economic and social systems.'<sup>23</sup> Liberalism does not, necessarily, imply any particular form of economic or social organisation.

There are, however, practical and theoretical implications for Community Politics of the refusal to broach an economic analysis. The strategy has been advanced as a means by which individuals can achieve power over, 'all the forces which control them,'<sup>24</sup> yet it is difficult to see how this can be achieved without an engagement with economic forces. Even at the most basic level of participation in locally based decision making, it might be judged naïve to believe that an individual can work a seven hour day at a supermarket check-out, on a production line, or even at a

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<sup>22</sup> Liberal Democrats, *The Future of Community Politics* (Dorchester, Liberal Democrat Publications, 1994), p.3.

<sup>23</sup> V. Bogdanor, 'The Liberal Party and Constitutional Reform,' in V. Bogdanor, ed., *Liberal Party Politics* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1983), pp.176-7.

<sup>24</sup> Liberal Democrats, *The Future of Community Politics*, p.7.

reception desk, then participate at a meeting in the evening, and for that person to feel they are exercising complete control or power over their life. It is the economic sphere in which people are most powerless and to fail to address this might be deemed a serious theoretical weakness.

Indeed, Hill has developed this point further, arguing that the failure to consider economic relations leaves questions of power and inequality unresolved. The efficacy of political participation is doubtful if it does not take into account or offer the opportunity for some amelioration of material inequality:

In this view, Mill, T. H. Green and the English idealists were naïve to believe that all men could take an equal part as voters and elected representatives when they were manifestly unequal in other respects. More social and economic equality is needed in order to give equal participation to all citizens.<sup>25</sup>

The original Community Politics advocates, in common with Mill and Green, believed that attempts to create an egalitarian society based upon the redistribution of wealth and income would inevitably infringe individual liberty. They sought instead to reduce inequality by redistributing power. By doing so, however, their analysis may have neglected a crucial aspect of political power.

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<sup>25</sup> Hill, *Democratic Theory and Local Government*, p.36.

### *Community and urban society*

The view that communal values cannot prosper in industrial, urban society has important implications for all those concerned with the idea of community in contemporary society. The distinction between community and society contains an implicit assumption that urban life is incompatible with community. A classic example of the view that urban life is in this crucial respect deficient can be found in the work of Wirth. Writing during the tremendous explosion of North American cities, Wirth described the city as, 'impersonal, superficial, transitory and segmental.'<sup>26</sup> Wirth's analysis built upon those of Tönnies and Durkheim to argue that the expansion of urban centres had caused a lessening of shared values and social integration, creating an increasingly alienated and fragmented population:

Whereas, therefore, the individual gains, on the one hand a certain degree of emancipation or freedom from the personal and emotional controls of intimate groups, he loses, on the other hand, the spontaneous self expression, morale, and the sense of participation that comes with living in an integrated society.<sup>27</sup>

For Wirth, urban life denied the individual the opportunity to participate socially with the majority of people they came into contact with. Whereas, in rural areas an individual came into contact with numerically

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<sup>26</sup> L. Wirth, 'Urbanism as a Way of Life,' *American Journal of Sociology*, 44 (1938), p.12

<sup>27</sup> Wirth, 'Urbanism as a Way of Life,' pp.12-3.

fewer people, the opportunity existed to participate fully in their lives. This experience of social integration was the crucial missing ingredient of city life. Consequently, urbanism was a way of life characterised by alienation and emotional estrangement.

A similar sense of a community that had been lost was a feature of the writings of the original architects of the Community Politics strategy within the Liberal Party. They understood community as a quality of social relationships frequently absent from modern, industrial society. Bernard Greaves described the isolation and alienation present in modern society resulting from the erosion of traditional community structures:

The sense of helpless isolation felt by the individual is aggravated by the undermining of the traditional patterns of communities that in the past would have provided much of his social support... The community provides each individual with a personal role and a sense of his own identity. He is aware of the value of his activity to the community, which is simple enough and small enough for him to comprehend in its entirety. It brings together all aspects of life and experience within a framework and social organisation that is relatively simple and easily understood. Such communities are breaking down... People spend much of their time among strangers and many of their social contacts are either competitive or ephemeral.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> B. Greaves, 'Communities and Power,' in P. Hain, ed., *Community Politics* (London, Calder, 1976), pp.40-3.

The failure of communal ties, then, left an individual adrift in a society where they had no set role and no clearly defined identity to give meaning to their life. The most recent Liberal Democrat paper on Community Politics proposed an analysis of contemporary society that closely resembled the earlier critiques of an atomised social world:

We believe that today many individuals have become alienated, both from society and from one another, while at the same time they have come under all sorts of increased pressures and where there is no secure framework of beliefs and values. Society has become a mass society within which individuals have smaller circles of friends and families and where many cannot relate to wider groups. There has been a loss of mechanisms whereby people can inter-relate, for example shops have become larger and more impersonal.<sup>29</sup>

These passages reveal the response of their authors to the world around them, described in terms strongly reminiscent of those used by Tönnies and Wirth. This sense of a bygone golden age of community, just beyond one's grasp, can be identified as a recurring theme in writing on community dating back more than a century. It is a nostalgic longing for a time when people had closer and simpler relationships with their family, friends and the world around them. A pervasive yearning for 'the world we have lost,' to use Laslett's celebrated phrase,<sup>30</sup> whether that world is real or imagined, is common to many of the calls for a

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<sup>29</sup> Liberal Democrats, *The Future of Community Politics*, p.3.

<sup>30</sup> P. Laslett, *The World we have lost* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1965).



restoration of community, including the theory underlying the Community Politics strategy within the third party.

The Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft thesis proposed by Tönnies and developed by Wirth into a critique of urbanism was extremely pessimistic for the prospects of community in an urban civilisation. A number of important criticisms of the Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft thesis in this context must, however, be considered. The first and most obvious criticism is that in reality the dichotomy between rural and urban life is erroneous. As Stewart noted, the division between the urban and the rural is not clear cut, but 'in effect urban and rural space co-exist, the former being superimposed on the latter, with varying degrees of enmeshment.'<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, Christenson argued that the Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft classifications did not apply helpfully to rural and urban social relations. Rather a variety of social relations, ranging from what might be termed community to what might be termed association, could be found in both urban and rural settings.<sup>32</sup> Kasarda and Janowitz also challenged Tönnies' original distinction with the use of empirical data to illustrate the multiplicity of friendship and kinship ties and the wide range of community organisations in modern urban society.<sup>33</sup> Fischer drew a

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<sup>31</sup> C. Stewart, 'The Urban-Rural Dichotomy: Concepts and Uses,' *American Journal of Sociology*, 64 (1958), p.153.

<sup>32</sup> J. Christenson, 'Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft: Testing the Spatial and Communal Hypotheses,' *Social Forces*, 63 (1984), pp.160-8.

<sup>33</sup> J. Kasarda and M. Janowitz, 'Community Attachment in Mass Society,' *American Sociological Review*, 39 (1974), pp.328-9.

similar conclusion from empirical research that demonstrated how the private lives of city inhabitants were unlikely to differ greatly from their rural counterparts in terms of social contact with family, friends and neighbours.<sup>34</sup>

Yet despite this modern, empirical research suggesting the urban environment to be an integrated and cohesive social system, where community should be able to flourish as comfortably as in rural areas, there is undoubtedly a difference between the social relationships found in cities and in villages. The sheer volume of possible social contacts in a city, an environment that has been likened to that of communal insects rather than mammals,<sup>35</sup> means an inevitable disengagement with the majority of one's fellow city dwellers. Michael Hill has argued that, 'the search for communities in an urban environment is likely to be a fruitless one, though this is not to say that one will not find patterns of neighbourliness and patterns of interdependence of a complex kind,' but these relationships should be deemed 'social networks' rather than misconstrued as traditional communities fixed to a single locality.<sup>36</sup> Although urban society may have strong communal ties, it does not necessarily have community. Research by Milgram supported the view that the inhabitants of cities were likely to have an equal number of deep and significant social relationships as those residing in rural areas, but

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<sup>34</sup> C. Fischer, 'The Private and Public Worlds of City Life,' *American Sociological Review*, 46 (1981), pp.306-16.

<sup>35</sup> K. Davies, 'Urbanisation of the Human Population,' *Scientific American*, 213 (1965), p.41.

<sup>36</sup> M. J. Hill, 'Community concepts and applications,' *New Community*, 1 (1972), pp.106-7.

also accepted that superficially the behaviour of urbanites may appear to be depersonalised. This was because 'norms of non-involvement' existed to filter out the huge number of potential emotional inputs to which an individual living in a city was constantly subjected:

These norms [of non-involvement] develop because everyone realises that, in situations of high population density, people cannot implicate themselves in each others' affairs, for to do so would create conditions of continual distraction which would frustrate purposeful action.<sup>37</sup>

The superficial coldness of a city was, therefore, generated by the necessity of emotional non-involvement with the huge numbers of people each individual came into contact with every day. Useful and significant relationships with friends or family could only be maintained if no attempt was made to enter into such relationships with the countless strangers an individual came into contact with in an urban environment.

A fundamental point was raised by Milgram's research into the experience of living in cities - particularly in the light of Tönnies' original critique of *Gesellschaft* - for those concerned with community in contemporary society. Milgram's research questions whether community can be meaningfully or institutionally understood in terms of locality where a population is transient or emotionally disengaged from the majority of their neighbours. A mobile, urban population is not

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<sup>37</sup> S. Milgram, 'The Experience of Living in Cities,' *Science*, 167 (1970), p.1464.

necessarily atomised or alienated, rather their social networks may spread over an entire city: they may work in one district, shop in another, socialise in a third and live in a fourth, with millions of people living in between. If an inevitable consequence of city life is the ‘filtering out’ of large numbers of people, even if this is to enable meaningful relationships with a smaller number, is it then possible to filter back in larger numbers of people to allow for effective communality of purpose or outlook, at, for example, a local election or in consideration of a planning issue?

In his one essay on the subject of Community Politics, the former Liberal leader Jo Grimond addressed this question. Grimond was conscious that the ties of locality and tradition were becoming less important to a socially and geographically mobile population, and that a restoration of community was only possible if it were based upon the actual values and interests by which people lived in modern, urban society, not the values by which people may once have lived or others wished to them live. Grimond argued:

The new communes must be identified, by which I mean that we have to find out the allegiance of people in today’s world - it is not necessarily to their parish or indeed on a geographic basis at all.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> J. Grimond, ‘Community Politics,’ *Government and Opposition*, 7 (1972), p.141.

The new communes, new interests, new allegiances, had to be identified in order to access the sentiments of fellowship and fraternity that still existed in contemporary society. Grimond raised the possibility that locality, and therefore a spatial construction of community, was no longer relevant to a complex and diverse modern society. He was conscious of the serious implications such a view held for political institutions, including parties, organised on a primarily geographical basis. Grimond argued, therefore, that any renewal of democratic legitimacy must take into account communities of interest as well as communities of place.<sup>39</sup>

Grimond's paper raised a crucial point, particularly in the light of the development of Community Politics since then into a phenomenon almost exclusively concerned with locality: is locality a meaningful or helpful level of analysis? Both in terms of how people experience their lives and how they are able to influence the decisions and forces that affect them? This point will now be addressed in the context of a discussion of community, locality and identity.

### **Community, locality and identity**

A distinction is made between communities of place and communities of interest in the majority of the writing on community.<sup>40</sup> Community

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<sup>39</sup> Grimond, 'Community Politics,' pp.135-44.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, D. Clark, 'The Concept of Community: A Re-examination,' *The Sociological Review*, 21 (1973), pp.397-415; D. Burns, R. Hambleton and P. Hoggett, *The Politics of Decentralisation* (London, MacMillan, 1994), pp.223-8.

Politics set out to develop a similarly sophisticated view of community that took into account the multiple roles, interests and allegiances an individual had in a modern society:

[T]he community seen in the community politics analysis is not a monolithic entity. Rather it is a dynamic one changing to meet different circumstances or to serve specific collective interests; thus any one individual may be part of a series of communities – at work, in education, at home, or within a narrow pressure group – simultaneously... while it is important that we view community in a localised context and in terms of the personal relationships within it, we should not lose sight of the fact that... community consciousness is also determined by forces externally controlled – such as transport, education, housing, etc – which emphasises the inter-related nature of the whole concept.<sup>41</sup>

A very similar view of community as a dynamic entity connected to identity, but not restricted to locality, was proposed by Greaves and Lishman almost a decade later:

A community is a group of individuals with something in common: nationality, neighbourhood, religion, work, workplace, victimisation, hobbies and mutual interest are a few obvious examples. The members of a community have some interest in

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<sup>41</sup> Hain, 'The Alternative Movement,' pp.49-50.

common: something which enables them to identify, one with another.<sup>42</sup>

In the most recent statement on Community Politics and the nature of community to emanate from the third party this view that, ‘communities can be either geographic or non-geographic,’<sup>43</sup> was reiterated. Yet these statements were written in part as a reaction against the reality of application of Community Politics in the real world, where the strategy has been applied in almost exclusively spatial terms. Community Politics has very rarely transcended locality politics.<sup>44</sup>

A number of explanations may be proposed for the development of Community Politics into a strategy concerned almost exclusively with locality and a geographic interpretation of community. The campaigning techniques advocated by the practitioners of the Community Politics strategy had an essentially spatial focus to enable their implementation by activists in their localities. The methods of community orientated campaigning, such as newsletters delivered to local authority wards, petitions, public meetings, residents’ surveys and advice centres,<sup>45</sup> all focused on a specific locality. This contributed to a perceived link between Community Politics and a narrow definition of community as locality. Effective campaigning techniques that reached communities of interest proved more difficult to develop, and where the existing

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<sup>42</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.3.

<sup>43</sup> Liberal Democrats, *The Future of Community Politics*, p.6.

<sup>44</sup> D. MacIver, ‘Party Strategy,’ in D. MacIver, ed., *The Liberal Democrats* (Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), p.178-9.

<sup>45</sup> Smithson, *Community Campaigning Manual*, pp.4-8.

techniques were successful (in terms of winning local elections) and time consuming there may have been little motivation to do so.

Dorling *et al*'s study of Liberal Democrat progress in local elections in the last two decades has shown the unique importance of spatial context to Liberal Democrat support. In West London, for example, South of the Thames the third party has achieved high levels of support and electoral success, yet North of the river, in a demographically identical area, Liberal Democrat support and success is minimal.<sup>46</sup> The key difference is that concentrated, community orientated campaigning techniques have been applied on the South side, but not on the North. The realities of the Community Politics strategy on the ground, then, coupled with the geographical basis of local government organisation and elections, have accentuated the importance of the spatial dimension of community over its other aspects.

Equally, most interest groups or communities of interest have a strong spatial focus. Interest groups concerned with the provision of health or education services tend to be centred around a particular hospital or school, while broader communities of interest, such as the gay community, tend to focus their activity on the localities where their membership is most concentrated. Localities, then, may be judged important forums where communities of interest and communities of place can be successfully accessed. In this respect, localities, and in particular urban localities, may be seen as the arenas where governmental

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<sup>46</sup> Dorling, Rallings and Thrasher, 'The epidemiology of the Liberal Democrat vote,' pp.49-66.



and non-governmental organisations compete, negotiate and blend to form 'regimes' to provide policy outcomes.<sup>47</sup> If this is the case, then the spatial emphasis of Community Politics is not necessarily a failure or a weakness, but rather a reflection of the fact that political participation is 'concentrated overwhelmingly at local level.'<sup>48</sup>

Gyford has argued that the importance of place and locality in contemporary policy debates has grown as changes in the nature of work and society have shifted the principal focus of many people's lives from the workplace to the home:

What we have here essentially is the proposition that the relevance or salience of locality has increased significantly as a factor in the life of civil society. It represents a shift from the view which saw the residential locality as little more than a dormitory or as a sphere of secondary importance to the 'real' life of full-time male employment.<sup>49</sup>

The increasing salience of the ideas of locality and community may reflect the need to understand and describe complex social relationships where many do not enter the economic sphere at all or significantly. In the face of a changing world, the rigid spatial nature of locality may

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<sup>47</sup> G. Stoker, 'Regime Theory and Urban Politics,' in D. Judge, G. Stoker and H. Wolman, eds., *Theories of Urban Politics* (London, Sage, 1995).

<sup>48</sup> D. Wilson, 'Exploring the Limits of Public Participation in Local Government,' *Parliamentary Affairs*, 52 (1999), p.249.

<sup>49</sup> J. Gyford, *Does Place Matter? -Locality and Local Democracy* (Luton, Local Government Management Board, 1991), p.17.

provide a last stand against ‘such processes as internationalised money and industrial capital, culture and state structures, which transcend and “disorganise” what are generally known as “societies.”’<sup>50</sup> While the processes of globalisation and the international movement of money take many aspects of economic and social policy out of the hands of policy-makers, there may be a retreat to those areas that remain responsive to policy intervention. Locality, then, does matter, and the spatial emphasis of Community Politics may reflect the increasing salience of locality in politics and policy-making.

A meaningful model of locality, however, must take into account the complexities of modern society. Research evidence suggests that people do not identify with a single locality, but that ‘people have multiple loyalties to villages, towns and counties. In addition, they often feel an attachment to a small area around where they live.’<sup>51</sup> It would appear that the majority of the population feel the strongest sense of identification with the small area immediate to where they live, and an attachment to their town, district and county, lessening as the geographical area in question expands.<sup>52</sup>

Equally, within a single locality there may be very different levels of identification and very different perceptions of the area. Day and Murdoch’s study of a small Welsh valley found an area subject to

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<sup>50</sup> J. Urry, ‘Society, space and locality,’ *Society and Space*, 5 (1987), p.436.

<sup>51</sup> G. W. Jones, ‘Against regional government,’ *Local Government Studies*, 14 (1988), p.9.

<sup>52</sup> C. Rallings, M. Temple and M. Thrasher, *Community Identity and Participation in Local Democracy* (London, Commission for Local Democracy, 1994), pp.13-5.

multiple interpretations, understandings and constructions of its identity and character. This reflected the complex nature of the locality itself:

The relevance of 'locality' is more problematic. On no criterion does the Ithon valley seem to have an objective unity: it is cut across by several travel-to-work areas, local institutions mesh internally and externally in varied ways, and there is no clear evidence of economic 'layering.' The geological metaphor would make some sense of the way in which new kinds of residents enter the valley, but it would be a mistake to assume that the boundaries drawn around 'communities' are consistent with these layers. We prefer instead to see the local situation as one in which actors operate within a variety of particular social, political and economic networks across a variety of spatial scales.<sup>53</sup>

If different constructions of community exist within a single locality, community may be a concept as much concerned with the imagination as with the physical reality of place. To the extent that how we understand, interpret and make our reality is socially determined all communities are social constructions and therefore ultimately imaginary.<sup>54</sup> This does not, of course, necessarily mean that communities do not exist for those who feel themselves to be their members. In fact, one of the great sociologists

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<sup>53</sup> G. Day and J. Murdoch, 'Locality and community: coming to terms with place,' *The Sociological Review*, 41 (1993), pp.108-9.

<sup>54</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London, Verso, 1983); Burns, Hambleton and Hoggett, *The Politics of Decentralisation*, p.227.

of the spatial environment, Robert E Park, has argued that the inverse is true; it is a conception of reality not grounded in the wider social world that may be considered to be unreal:

The individual whose conception of himself is not at all determined by the conceptions that other persons have of him is probably insane.<sup>55</sup>

Although communities may be social constructions, this does not mean that they do not exist. The constructions of community, locality and place in our imaginations are inextricably linked to the construction of our identity.<sup>56</sup> Perceiving oneself to be a member of a certain community, or to come from a particular place, forms part of our identity. Identity means knowledge of who one is, and therefore, of who one is not. It is this exclusionary nature of identity and self-assertion that is bound up with ideas of community and place and gives the concepts their potency. Appeals to community can originate from a desire for inclusion and mutuality, 'But equally, of course, they can be seen as articulating a deep anxiety about and a deep desire to reject "others," to maintain boundaries that exclude "the other."' <sup>57</sup> It is inevitable that when people join hands in a circle there will be those who are excluded as well as those who are included. It is this exclusionary power of community identity that led

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<sup>55</sup> R. E. Park, *Human Communities* (New York, The Free Press, 1952), p.181.

<sup>56</sup> Young, *People, Places and Power*, pp.7-11; Thomas, Stiring, Brownhill and Razzaque, 'Locality, urban governance and contested meanings of place,' p.187.

<sup>57</sup> E. Frazer, 'The Value of Locality,' in D. King and G. Stoker, eds., *Rethinking Local Democracy* (London, MacMillan, 1996), p.94.

Hirsch to conclude that, 'the longing for community is a chimera – romantic, naïve, and in the end, illiberal and dangerous.'<sup>58</sup>

Constructions of community identity may not only be harmful to those defined as the other, outside the community, but also to those who are included within the community. A community and the parochial culture that it can sustain may serve to trap its members in a narrow environment where they are unable to access education and training and unwilling to become geographically and socially mobile in order to pursue new opportunities. Security does not derive from being locked in one place, but from the ability to escape:

[F]rom Andromeda to the beautiful Indian princess in Peter Pan, it is the vulnerable who are chained to the rocks in the face of rising tides, the point being not to remain there but to be rescued into security... Insofar as remnants of traditional society exist, they are to be found mainly in the further fringes of the British Isles. And they represent precisely the intimate form of social organisation that, given the choice, the vast majority of the motivated and the ambitious are only too eager to leave behind.<sup>59</sup>

Community, and a strong sense of identity connected to a particular locality or social group, may not equate to the good life that it is often assumed to promise. Community may be considered a regressive and

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<sup>58</sup> H. N. Hirsch, 'The Threnody of Liberalism,' *Political Theory*, 14 (1986), p.424.

<sup>59</sup> Young, *People, Places and Power*, pp.9-10.

negative sentiment that excludes some and seduces others at the cost of their freedom.

Locality, and the idea of a particular quality of social relationships inherent in our understanding of the term community, are concepts whose salience appear undiminished by the homogenising forces of globalisation and industrialisation. One reason is that, as Urry pointed out, the homogenisation process has combined with other forces, such as the subdivision of large company operations, the increased importance of local labour markets and local economies, the endurance of symbols of locality and place in the mass media, and the resurgence in some areas of local politics and local authority decentralisation, that 'seem to have heightened the distinctiveness of one place compared with another.'<sup>60</sup> Another reason is that all places are, of course, in part imaginary constructions and for the residents of any place, their locality, their community, will always hold unique and distinctive qualities.

### **Community, politics and power**

The spatial organisation of government creates an inevitable link between community, place and power. 'All localities are mere groupings within the larger political order of the state,'<sup>61</sup> but equally in a democracy control of the periphery often determines control of the centre. Overall political power is dependent upon power in numerous localities spread

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<sup>60</sup> J. Urry, 'Conclusion: places and policies,' in M. Harloe, C. Pickvance and J. Urry, eds., *Place, Policy and Politics* (London, Unwin Hyman, 1990), p.188.

<sup>61</sup> Young, *People, Places and Power*, p.16.

over a wide area. The word politics, of course, derives from *polis*, the Greek word for the city-state. The link between territory and power can be traced back to the very origins of politics in antiquity. Questions of locality and community, then, are of particular interest to those who seek political power.

Power, and its redistribution, were central to the original Community Politics vision. Greaves and Lishman argued that the strategy entailed, 'a commitment to the dispersal of centralised power in society and its redistribution to the communities which make it up.'<sup>62</sup> The redistribution of power to communities necessarily required the creation and identification of strong communities capable of taking and using power. The role of those activists embarking on a strategy of Community Politics was to facilitate this process, by creating and maintaining communities:

The first stage in the creation of community is the emergence of a community identity, involving and interesting its members. Sometimes, such an identity will emerge from a particular struggle and die with it. Sometimes such struggles leave behind a core of dedicated, disillusioned activists, representing nothing but themselves. Our role is to maintain communities which have a function to fulfil but, beyond that it is to create a habit of participation, binding a community together in constant relationship with power and decision-making.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.5.

<sup>63</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.5.

Lishman made a distinction between a ‘primary community’ where a group of individuals held a shared identity that was perceived and acted upon, and a ‘latent community’ where the shared identity existed but was not perceived by its members and therefore was not acted upon. The role of the Community Politician, then, was to turn latent communities into primary communities through political activity.<sup>64</sup> Lishman reiterated this view with his collaborator a decade later, when they argued, ‘Some communities are latent; they are only called into existence – or rather their existence is only realised – when they become necessary or useful.’<sup>65</sup> This distinction between primary and latent communities may contain echoes of a Marxist or Marcusean model of false consciousness, where the members of a community (class) are unaware of their true situation and what they have in common with their fellow community (class) members. The role of the activist (revolutionary) is to bring about true consciousness, an awareness of their real condition.

A similar view of the role of the political activist in raising the consciousness of the local population was proposed by Michael Meadowcroft in his critique of the failure of the Labour left to reach the disenfranchised in many urban areas:

Fortunately in some of these areas there is a radical, community based Liberal party that has begun the task of raising the political consciousness of the people. Their example shows that there is hope and that there are new ways of building caring communities

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<sup>64</sup> Lishman, ‘Community Politics: A Theoretical Approach,’ p.7.

<sup>65</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.3.



that have security and stability. It is only thus that the latent compassion and neighbourliness can be realised.<sup>66</sup>

It was proposed, then, that the practitioners of Community Politics should attempt to instill a sense of community where one did not previously exist. This may be a top-down approach to community, where political activists decide that a community should exist and seek to impose a suitable identity on a locality. It might be judged that in such a situation the main beneficiaries could be the politicians who have created a power base on which to build their own electoral support. Certainly, the success of the third party in local elections since the adoption of the Community Politics strategy suggests that a political strategy that connects with or engenders a sense of locality and community will reap rewards at the ballot box. This does not simply mean that Community Politics may become a top-down strategy, but more importantly, it may provide a powerful means for skilled political activists to manipulate an electorate to achieve power.

Constructions and definitions of place are intrinsically connected to questions of power. The ability to define the identity of a locality is a means by which those with power are able to exert control on the policy agenda to ensure which decisions are taken and which decisions are not even considered. An example of this process can be seen in the creation of Urban Development Corporations by the Conservative government in the 1980s. Urban Development Corporations took planning control out of

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<sup>66</sup> M. Meadowcroft, *Liberalism and the left* (London, Liberator Publications, 1982), p.3.

the hands of local authorities who were perceived as barriers to the attraction of the investment to areas in need of economic regeneration. An important part of the regeneration process was for rundown, traditional working class localities to be redefined as affluent, desirable places to live undergoing regeneration and redevelopment. This process involved relatively high expenditure on local newsletters, media presentations and events, and extended as far as changing the names of localities perceived to have negative connotations, so that Tiger Bay in Cardiff became Cardiff Bay and the Surrey Docks in London became Surrey Quays.<sup>67</sup> The ability to define what sort of place a particular locality is, bestows the power to pursue a policy agenda appropriate to that definition of place. The ability, therefore, to turn ‘latent’ communities into ‘primary’ communities, may equally yield rewards of power and control.

Greaves and Lishman warned that Community Politics was in danger of becoming a technique frequently practised by people without a fundamental understanding or acceptance of the underlying ideas.<sup>68</sup> Certainly, there is a danger that an approach founded upon responsiveness to public opinion and grassroots activity can easily slide into populism and opportunism. This must be a particular concern if we accept that, ‘public opinion generally, though not always, tends to be conservative – not in the party sense but in its attitude towards change.

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<sup>67</sup> Thomas, Stirling, Brownhill and Razzaque, ‘Locality, urban governance and contested meanings of place,’ pp.186-98; R. Batley, ‘London Docklands: An Analysis of Power Relations between UDCs and Local Government,’ *Public Administration*, 67 (1989), pp.167-87.

<sup>68</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.1.

Radical policies (again not in a party sense) are the creation of elites.<sup>69</sup> An approach that aims to follow rather than lead public opinion may quickly become reactionary and conservative. Michael Meadowcroft made clear that it was necessary for an activist to withdraw from a situation where an illiberal proposal was advanced and a solution could not be found.<sup>70</sup> There may be activists who do not have the wit or guile either to recognise such a situation or to withdraw from it when it occurs.

An implication of this argument is that the will of the majority should not always prevail. At first sight, this may appear to be an undemocratic view, but, of course, the inverse is true. The oppression of a minority by a majority, to use an extreme example, is not democracy. The ‘tyranny of the majority’ to use Mill’s phrase, or the ‘despotism of the majority’ to use de Tocqueville’s, represents a failure of popular government to provide democracy.<sup>71</sup> Democratic government pertains to the fair and equitable representation of all sections of society and their protection from tyranny. This requires a more sophisticated framework for filtering public opinion, involving the application of the values of tolerance and pluralism. Such an analysis will now be provided in the context of a discussion of liberalism, Community Politics and the philosophical choice between the common good and individual rights.

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<sup>69</sup> R. Klein, ‘The case for elitism: public opinion and public policy,’ *Political Quarterly*, 45 (1974), p.417.

<sup>70</sup> M. Meadowcroft, *Success in local government* (London, Liberal Publication Department, 1972), p.8.

<sup>71</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, pp.61-2; A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (P. Bradley, ed., New York, Vintage, 1945 edition), Vol 1, Chapter XV.

## **Liberalism, community and rights**

The understanding of community expressed within the Community Politics strategy connects with a deep seated desire for a quality of human relationships often perceived to be absent from modern, urban society, for relationships built upon more than merely trade or commerce. This understanding is not unique to the third party, but rather, ‘the term “community” as used in contemporary political thought is a normative concept, in the sense that it describes a desired level of human relationships.’<sup>72</sup> Community Politics was also an attempt to root the individual firmly in a social context, reconnecting contemporary liberalism with Green’s argument that it was only in community with others that each individual could fully develop and find a truly enriched life.<sup>73</sup> The desire to locate the individual more concretely in their social context, both in the nineteenth and twentieth century vintages of liberalism, grew out of a concern for the atomistic implications of liberal theory. Many feared that when utilitarian and laissez-faire liberalism were combined with wider social and economic forces they had the potential to create a society of strangers.<sup>74</sup>

Although the aspiration for community often flows from a desire for greater fellowship with others, it raises a number of practical and

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<sup>72</sup> S. Avineri and A. de-Shalit, ‘Introduction,’ in S. Avineri and A. de-Shalit, eds., *Communitarianism and Individualism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992), p.6.

<sup>73</sup> Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, Section 183; Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.3.

<sup>74</sup> See, for example, Greaves, ‘A New Perspective,’ p.11; Den Otter, “Thinking in Communities”,’ pp.67-73.

theoretical complications, particularly for a political party apparently committed to liberalism and individual liberty. The strong link between community and identity means that being a member of a community often forms an important part of our identity and self-image. As stated earlier, identity implies knowledge of who one is and therefore who one is not. If, for example, part of a person's identity is being English, then this inevitably implies an awareness that others are not English. Frazer has argued that community, therefore, articulates exclusion as well as inclusion:

Community... does all the ideological work of expressing cosy inclusivity, while also carrying the unspoken connotations of exclusivity that give subtle articulation to our fantasies of rejection and violence.<sup>75</sup>

The idea of community, then, may be connected to a perception of difference and, therefore, exclusion. Placing the idea of community at the centre of any political programme may provide further opportunities for the dark potential of the concept to be realised when the good of the community is deemed more important than the well being of any one individual. Green's political theory is founded upon the claim that 'the various individuals which compose a society share a "common good."'<sup>76</sup> Within any society, Green argued, there was a common good that prevailed over the interests of each individual. Green conception of this

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<sup>75</sup> Frazer, 'The Value of Locality,' p.100.

<sup>76</sup> C. A. Smith, 'The Individual and Society in T.H. Green's theory of virtue,' *History of Political Thought*, 2 (1981), p.187.

good was based upon his theological view of a spiritual force with higher moral status than each individual's self-interest. The common good was, essentially, divine will on earth. Green's view, then, was a development of the utilitarian construction of the good as the aggregate of multiple individual interests.<sup>77</sup> For Green, the common good was a spiritual will to be virtuous in the interests of humanity:

This process is... the conviction that the true good is good for all men, and good for them all in virtue of the same nature and capacity... the only good in the pursuit of which there can be no competition of interests, the only good which is really common to all who may pursue it, is that which consists in the universal will to be good.<sup>78</sup>

Green's view that the interests of the individual can and should be subjugated to the interests of society as a whole, albeit in Green's conception via individual choice and education,<sup>79</sup> has serious theoretical implications. The view that there existed a common good with a higher moral basis than any individual's self-interest could be used to justify the denial of human rights to an individual or group if that denial were deemed to be in the interests of the greater, common good. Berlin judged that, 'many a tyrant could use this formula to justify his worst acts of oppression,'<sup>80</sup> and, similarly, Richter argued that Green's philosophy

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<sup>77</sup> Green, *Prolegomena to ethics*, Section 240.

<sup>78</sup> Green, *Prolegomena to ethics*, Section 244.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, Green, *Prolegomena to ethics*, Section 338.

<sup>80</sup> I. Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty,' in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969), p.133.

was, ‘a liberal and humanitarian version of a form which in our time has been too exclusively identified with Nazism and Communism.’<sup>81</sup>

Green’s theory was underpinned by his belief in the perfectibility of humankind, the idea that the ‘universal perfection of human character is a goal which is possible, and towards which we can move.’<sup>82</sup> Any progress towards this goal would justify an infringement of individual liberty, because the ultimate attainment of human perfection would give each individual freedom in an otherwise unprecedented sense.<sup>83</sup> The critiques of Green’s theory written by Berlin and Richter were informed by their knowledge of the Holocaust and the Stalinist terror. They were written, therefore, at a time when the idea of human progress towards perfection appeared more distant than the reality of the human capacity for evil.

It is an unassailable truth that the history of humanity has been punctuated by the persecution of those, usually minorities, who were perceived to be different, whether from a different race, religion, tribe or place, or to hold different opinions or moral standards. Berlin wrote that, ‘The periods and societies in which civil liberties were respected, and variety of opinion and faith tolerated, have been very few and far between – oases in the desert of human uniformity, intolerance and oppression.’<sup>84</sup> That his assessment was correct can be illustrated by

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<sup>81</sup> M. Richter, *The Politics of conscience: T. H. Green and his age* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1964), p.211. See also, Bellamy, ‘T. H. Green and the morality of Victorian liberalism,’ p.131.

<sup>82</sup> Nicholson, ‘T. H. Green and State Action: Liquor Legislation,’ p.548.

<sup>83</sup> See, for example, Green, *Prolegomena to ethics*, Section 288.

<sup>84</sup> I. Berlin, ‘John Stuart Mill and the ends of life,’ in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969), p.173.

recent figures compiled by the United Nations, which show that in 1996 the total number of refugees worldwide, that is, those fleeing from persecution under the terms of the UN Human Rights Convention, was more than 15 million people. This figure does not include a further five million people internally displaced within their country of origin, and three million ‘others of concern’ who did not fall within the terms of the Convention.<sup>85</sup>

Despite the collapse of many Communist regimes with dubious records on individual rights, failure to respect basic human rights remains a problem on a global scale. Victims of persecution are frequently those perceived by their persecutors to be different and therefore to merit exclusion from the life of a community or country, whether they are Jews in Nazi occupied Europe, Roma in Eastern Europe, or Tutsis in Rwanda. Alternatively, there are often those whose political opinions are perceived to be against the interests of a community, whether those living in government controlled areas in contemporary Sierra Leone or pro-democracy campaigners in China. It is the inability or failure to tolerate difference in some form that lies at the heart of genocide and persecution.

A leading communitarian theorist, Walzer, argued that the solution to serious and long standing internal disputes regarding what constitutes the nature and good of the community was the creation of homogeneous communities bound by moral consensus: ‘If the community is so radically divided that a single citizenship is impossible, then its territory

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<sup>85</sup> Source: UNHCR Refworld, 1997 Statistics, Table 1 (UNHCR, 1998).



must be divided.’<sup>86</sup> Walzer appeared to propose the terrifying prospect of life within highly segregated communities, defending their territories against those perceived to be different. Such a view could be used to justify campaigns of ‘ethnic cleansing’ as witnessed in Europe and Africa in the last decade, or the exile from a country of those deemed to hold dissident opinion.

By placing the interests of the collective over those of the individual, any political theory based upon a conception of the common good risks justifying the denial of rights to individuals whose actions or interests are deemed to fall outside or oppose that common good. The protection of the individual against the potential threat to liberty posed by any collective, then, is the first task of liberalism.<sup>87</sup> Rawls has summarised the liberal position that each individual possesses basic human rights that cannot be violated, whatever the deemed benefit to the greater good:

Each member of a society is thought to have an inviolability founded on justice or, as some say, on natural right, which even the welfare of every one else cannot override. Justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others. The reasoning which balances the gains and

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<sup>86</sup> M. Walzer, ‘Membership,’ in S. Avineri and A. de-Shalit, eds., *Communitarianism and Individualism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992), p.83.

<sup>87</sup> R. Dahrendorf, *The Future Tasks of Liberalism: A Political Agenda* (London, Liberal Movement, 1988), pp.5-10.

losses of different persons as if they were one person is excluded.<sup>88</sup>

This classic defence of natural rights was extended by Mill and Berlin to preclude any coercion of an individual to act against his or her will, even if such action was believed to be in the individual's best interests. Berlin argued that to use people for ends other than those they independently conceived, even if it was for their own benefit, was to, 'in effect, treat them as sub-human, to behave as if their ends are less ultimate and sacred than my own.'<sup>89</sup> Such a view of individual autonomy requires tolerance of opinion we do not agree with and of behaviour we consider wrong or immoral, if it does not infringe the liberty of others.<sup>90</sup> As Mendus stated, 'Toleration, in the strong sense, involves allowing things believed to be morally wrong,' because it is of higher importance that individuals are not denied the autonomy and freedom to make their own choices.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, the crucial point frequently neglected by critics of liberalism, is that we should tolerate others so that we ourselves are tolerated, because one day we might find ourselves, as countless others have done at various times in various places, outside of a supposed moral consensus.

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<sup>88</sup> J. Rawls, 'The Right and the Good Contrasted,' in M. Sandel, ed., *Liberalism and its critics* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1984), p.39.

<sup>89</sup> Berlin, 'Two concepts of liberty,' p.137.

<sup>90</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, pp.142-3.

<sup>91</sup> S. Mendus, *Toleration and the limits of liberalism* (London, MacMillan, 1989), p.57.

Liberalism and a concern for the well being of society as a whole are not mutually exclusive. To suggest that natural rights and the common good represent two diametrically opposed positions is to commit what has been described as, ‘the tyranny of dualisms.’<sup>92</sup> In reality, a conception of rights implies a social and historical context in which rights are defined and constructed. Equally, a conception of justice implies moral standards and judgements, rather than a purely neutral or objective philosophy.<sup>93</sup> Therefore, as a leading critic of liberalism has indeed argued, ‘the deep structure of even liberal society is in fact communitarian.’<sup>94</sup> Liberal natural rights, then, are not purely atomistic, but are born out of a social and moral context. The crucial difference is that liberalism attempts to build a conception of the good from the starting point of individual rights, whereas a communitarian perspective will seek to develop rights out of a conception of the good. Liberalism, then, views the right as prior to the common good.<sup>95</sup> To do otherwise is to risk justifying the oppression of individuals in the name of the greater good. It can be argued, then, ‘the common good of Western liberal societies is neutrality and basic liberties; hence liberalism does not fall short of the demands of communitarianism.’<sup>96</sup>

Certainly, taken in isolation, the negative defence of liberty provided by Mill has often been viewed as inadequate, as noted in the previous

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<sup>92</sup> A. Gutmann, ‘Communitarian Critics of Liberalism,’ *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 14 (1985), p.322.

<sup>93</sup> Rawls, ‘The Right and the Good Contrasted,’ p.42.

<sup>94</sup> Walzer, ‘The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism,’ p.10.

<sup>95</sup> Rawls, ‘The Right and the Good Contrasted,’ p.57.

<sup>96</sup> Avineri and de-Shalit, ‘Introduction,’ p.8.

chapter. The classical liberal doctrine of freedom of private contract could be used to justify non-intervention by the state where people were economically exploited. Green and his followers argued that liberty was not only infringed by the actions of the state, but could also be denied by those with economic power, who forced others to work in unsanitary or dangerous conditions or for unreasonable hours. It was, therefore, a duty of government to impose minimum standards on the sale and conditions of labour to prevent the economically powerful exploiting the economically powerless.<sup>97</sup> Liberalism, then, without the broader context provided by the more communitarian perspective of thinkers such as Green, denies the true social basis of natural rights and may allow exploitation in the name of freedom.

The question, then, is one of balance, and, crucially, an awareness that a balance needs to be made between the demands of positive and negative liberty. The unique role that a liberal party can perform in the public policy process as a third party, through a combination of holding local power, and campaigning and engaging in national debate, is to defend individual liberty. This is not a purely abstract or theoretical contention, but one that has very real implications when considering, for example, the denial of benefits to asylum seekers, the imposition of a single national curriculum, or access to information held by government offices. The emphasis of Community Politics on the collective, and its insular and parochial pathologies, may inhibit the ability of the Liberal Democrats to defend liberal values.

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<sup>97</sup> Green, 'Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract,' pp.201-4.

In his address to the 1965 Young Liberal conference Jo Grimond advised his audience to read Mill's *On Liberty* annually.<sup>98</sup> A number of those present went on to frame the Community Politics amendment which placed community at the centre of the Liberal Party's (and now the Liberal Democrats') strategy. The Community Politics strategy has provided the third party with a unique perspective on the spatial aspects of politics and the continuing power and salience of the idea of community. Although the commitment of those activists to the liberal principles of individual liberty should not be doubted, they have, perhaps in a similar fashion to their progenitor Thomas Hill Green, developed a philosophy that may be used to justify illiberal actions, in the name of popular control and responsiveness. There is danger that the common good make take priority over individual rights. For example, Liberal Democrat authorities, such as the London Borough of Sutton, have been at the forefront of the installation of Close Circuit Television in public places, arguing that any invasion of privacy or loss of liberty is a price worth paying for crime prevention. Such a development may have serious implications for the party that has inherited the liberal tradition in British politics and presently plays such an important role in the distribution of local government services.

In a fringe meeting at the 1998 Liberal Democrat Conference in Brighton, Michael Ignatieff argued that it was the inability of many Liberal Democrat activists to appreciate the distinction between liberalism and social democracy that posed the greatest threat to the

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<sup>98</sup> Quoted by G. Lishman, in D. Brack, ed., *Why I Am A Liberal Democrat* (Dorchester, Liberal Party Publications, 1996), p.90.

party's continued existence in the face of the Labour Party's move to the centre ground under Tony Blair:

It's obvious that there is clear water between liberalism and socialism or between liberalism and conservatism. It's much less clear to many of you that there's clear water between liberalism and social democracy... I just think at the end of the day a liberal believes in negative liberty and a lot of that's difficult for Liberal Democrats because they want a generous welfare state, they want a caring and compassionate society. I think that at the end of the day what demarcates liberalism is a feeling that behind all those good intentions always lurk certain dangers for the liberties of ordinary people.<sup>99</sup>

Community Politics reconnected the third party with the social liberal aspect of its tradition, and this, coupled with the merger of the Liberal Party with the SDP, has given the Liberal Democrats a fresh sense of the collective, and of the value of place and locality. But the cost may prove to be the loss of the unique *raison d'être* of the party in British politics, namely to defend the liberal values of the ultimate moral primacy of the individual.

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<sup>99</sup> M. Ignatieff in Centre for Reform, *Identity and Politics: A Discussion with Michael Ignatieff and Sean Neeson* (London, Centre for Reform Paper No. 2, 1998), p.22.

## **PART II: THE REPRESENTATIONAL DIMENSION**

#### 4. REPRESENTATION, RESEMBLANCE AND THE RECRUITMENT OF LIBERAL DEMOCRAT COUNCILLORS

One of the several definitions of representation posits it as ‘the making present of something which is nevertheless not literally present.’<sup>1</sup> Political representation, then, describes the making present in government of the people or the nation, who cannot physically be present. Representatives are required to represent the people. Modern representative government now involves the relationship between the represented and representative, and also political parties, who play an intermediary role between the two traditional partners:

Representation has lost all immediacy and can no longer be viewed as a *direct* relationship between the electors and the elected. The process hinges on three elements – those represented, the party, and the representatives.<sup>2</sup>

How political parties perform this mediating function, then, is of central importance to the study of contemporary representation. Despite this centrality, the party political dimension has received scant attention from scholars of representation. Rather, two particular aspects of representation have proved of greater interest to political and social scientists. First, the extent to which representatives actually resemble the represented. If a representative body is to be a map or a mirror of those it represents, then

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<sup>1</sup> H. F. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1968), p.144.

<sup>2</sup> G. Sartori, ‘Representation: Representational Systems,’ in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, MacMillan, 1968), p.472.



the members of that body should share the socio-economic characteristics of the wider population. This Sartori describes as ‘sociological representation.’<sup>3</sup> An early President of the United States, John Adams, wrote that a representative legislature, ‘should be an exact portrait, in miniature, of the people at large, as it should think, feel, reason and act like them.’<sup>4</sup> Second, the relationship between the represented and the representative, particularly in terms of power, has been of particular interest to political scientists.<sup>5</sup> The very fact of political representation inevitably creates a gap in status between the two parties involved in the relationship.<sup>6</sup>

The Community Politics strategy aimed to address both these aspects of representation. The original theorists of the strategy argued that the existing institutions of representative democracy were elitist and served to prevent the mass of the population from making the decisions that most affected their lives. Those elected to positions of power were not representative of those who elected them and therefore could not represent their interests.<sup>7</sup> The strategy aimed to bridge the status gap between the represented and the representative by building a society based upon the principles of subsidiarity and popular participation, so that numerous centres of power were created and the need for representation was minimised.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the critique of representation made by the original

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<sup>3</sup> Sartori, ‘Representation: Representational Systems,’ pp.465-6.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, p.60.

<sup>5</sup> A. de Grazia, ‘Representation: Theory,’ in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, MacMillan, 1968), pp.461-4.

<sup>6</sup> Eulau, ‘Changing views of representation,’ p.58.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, P. Hain, ‘The Future of Community Politics,’ in P. Hain, ed., *Community Politics* (London, Calder, 1976), p.13.

<sup>8</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, pp.1-5.

Young Liberal theorists was extended beyond the institutions of government to include the very idea of representation, of others acting on a person's behalf. An existential argument was proposed: that allowing others to represent oneself in any aspect of life, whether by watching other people converse on television rather than talking, watching sport rather than participating personally, eating pre-prepared food rather than cooking for oneself, and so on, served to negate the authenticity of a person's own existence.<sup>9</sup> This amounted to allowing others to live on another's behalf, creating a sort of life by proxy. Mass participation, then, was central to Community Politics, not only for reasons of political efficacy, but also to ensure each individual's personal authenticity and meaning.

This chapter is concerned with the extent to which the practice of Community Politics within the third party has contributed to greater popular participation in local politics and decision-making. This can be assessed by measuring the level of resemblance between the elected and their electors in local government. The lack of resemblance is a phenomenon common to all modern democracies and indicates low levels of participation among certain social groups. Representatives tend to be older and disproportionately male and middle class, in comparison to the population they represent.<sup>10</sup> This does not necessarily mean that they cannot represent them politically. As Eulau *et al* stated, 'The function of

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<sup>9</sup> National League of Young Liberals, *Eastbourne '70: A Strategy for Liberals*, p.5; Greaves, 'A New Perspective,' p.10.

<sup>10</sup> A. H. Birch, *Representation* (London, MacMillan, 1971); J. Stanyer, 'Electors, Candidates and Councillors: Some Technical Problems in the Study of Political Recruitment Processes in Local Government,' *Policy and Politics*, 6 (1977), p.71; J. Barron, G. Crawley and T. Wood, 'Drift and Resistance: refining models of political recruitment,' *Policy and Politics*, 18 (1989), pp.207-8; R. Darcy, S. Welch and J. Clark, *Women: Elections and Representation* (New York, Longman, 1987).

representation in modern political systems is not to make the legislature a mathematically exact copy of the electorate.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, demands for sociological resemblance may be deemed pernicious if they are, ‘grounded in the assumption that those who look like us can be expected to act like us,’<sup>12</sup> thus excluding those who do not ‘look like us.’ Sociological representation does not necessarily imply a healthy democracy, but it is generally assumed undesirable for representatives to be drawn from a narrow section of society. The criticism of the Community Politics theorists was that the majority of representatives were indeed drawn from a narrow section of society. This chapter will examine whether the Liberal Democrats have been able to achieve a distinctively different type of representation in terms of greater resemblance between the represented and their representatives. A comparison of the social characteristics and background of Liberal Democrat councillors with Labour and Conservative councillors will be made, based on two quantitative surveys of councillors, that of a representative sample of all councillors undertaken for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 1993 and that of Liberal Democrat councillors undertaken by the author in 1997. Where possible, further comparisons will be made with data for the whole population.

Analysis of the recruitment of political actors should explain how those who become elected representatives enter public office and should, therefore, facilitate an understanding of why those who share particular socio-economic characteristics tend to become representatives.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> H. Eulau, J. C. Whalke, W. Buchanan and L. C. Ferguson, ‘The Role of the Representative: Some Empirical Observations on the Theory of Edmund Burke,’ *American Political Science Review*, 53 (1959), p.747.

<sup>12</sup> N. Rao, ‘Representation in Local Politics: A Reconsideration and some New Evidence,’ *Political Studies*, 46 (1998), p.23.

<sup>13</sup> Stanyer, ‘Electors, Candidates and Councillors,’ pp.71-2.

This chapter will also investigate the recruitment of Liberal Democrat councillors through analysis of the councillors' own accounts of their entry into local politics given in interviews with the author in 1996 and 1997. In conjunction with analysis of the existing data on the recruitment of local politicians, an assessment will then be made as to whether the councillors' narratives of their own recruitment provide a satisfactory explanation of the sociological profile of Liberal Democrat councillors.

### **Sociological characteristics and background of Liberal Democrat councillors**

The quantitative surveys investigated the social characteristics and background of councillors. This data illuminated six areas: the gender distribution of councillors, the age of councillors, their level of education attainment, the councillors' employment status, and their personal history of party membership and council service.

#### *Gender distribution of councillors*

Previous national studies of councillors of all parties have found the vast majority of councillors to be male. Those studies conducted for the Maud Committee in 1964,<sup>14</sup> the Robinson Committee in 1976, the Widdicombe Committee in 1985,<sup>15</sup> and for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 1993,<sup>16</sup> found that at least three-quarters of all councillors were men. Women,

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<sup>14</sup> *Report of the Committee on the Management of Local Government, Volume 2, the Local Government Councillor* (London, HMSO, 1967).

<sup>15</sup> *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Conduct of Local Authority Business, Research Volume II, The Local Government Councillor, Cmnd. 9799.*

<sup>16</sup> Young and Rao, *Coming to Terms with Change? The Local Government Councillor in 1993.*

therefore, are under represented in British local government. The full statistics found in these studies are shown in Table 4.1 below.

**Table 4.1: Gender distribution of all councillors in 1964, 1976, 1985 and 1993**

	All cllrs 1964 %	All cllrs 1976 %	All cllrs 1985 %	All cllrs 1993 %
Male	88	83	81	75
Female	12	17	19	25
(Base)	(3,497)	(4,731)	(1,552)	(1,665)

When the results for 1993 were broken down by party and Scottish councillors excluded, to allow comparison with the 1997 data for Liberal Democrat councillors, it was found that a higher proportion of Liberal Democrat councillors were women than Labour and Conservative councillors. In 1993 Liberal Democrat councillors were found to be 35 per cent female, compared with 27 per cent for the Conservatives and 22 per cent for Labour councillors. In 1997 a comparable figure of 33 per cent of Liberal Democrat councillors were women. This data is shown in Table 4.2 overleaf.

**Table 4.2: Councillors' gender distribution in 1993 and 1997 by party**

	Conservative Councillors 1993 %	Labour Councillors 1993 %	Liberal Democrat Councillors 1993 %	Liberal Democrat Councillors 1997 %
Male	74	78	65	67
Female	27	22	35	33
(Base)	(572)	(509)	(255)	(862)

A further analysis of the data by the Party's position in relation to the political management of the authority showed a slightly higher proportion of women (37 per cent) on Liberal Democrat groups with overall control of their authority. There is evidence to suggest that women are generally more likely than men to be selected to fight marginal seats,<sup>17</sup> and therefore in areas of Liberal Democrat control there may be more opportunity for women to contest winnable seats and for marginal wards to be won, thus creating a more equal sex distribution.

In their quantitative survey of more than 1,600 Liberal Democrat party members conducted in 1993, Bennie *et al* found that 47 per cent of all Liberal Democrat members were female,<sup>18</sup> indicating a disparity between the gender distribution of Liberal Democrat councillors and the whole

<sup>17</sup> S. Welch and D. Studlar, 'The Effects of Candidate Gender on Voting for Local Office in England,' *British Journal of Political Science*, 18 (1988), pp.273-86.

<sup>18</sup> Bennie, Curtice and Rudig, 'Party Members,' p.137.

party membership. A similar disparity between the proportion of women councillors and women party members has been found in the Labour and Conservative Parties,<sup>19</sup> suggesting barriers to women becoming elected representatives but not party members.

### *Age distribution of councillors*

Comparison of the 1993 and 1997 surveys also found differences in the age profiles of Liberal Democrat councillors and representatives of other parties. Table 4.3 overleaf shows that while the great majority of all councillors are aged 35 and over, Conservative councillors clearly had a much older age profile than Liberal Democrat and Labour councillors. The 1997 survey, however, found that Liberal Democrat councillors were disproportionately middle-aged, with 62 per cent falling between 45 and 64 years old. By comparison, only 23 per cent of the whole United Kingdom population fell into this age category in the same year.<sup>20</sup> This suggests that Liberal Democrat councillors are unrepresentative of the whole population with respect of their age profile, and, indeed, their higher concentration in this narrow age band makes them less representative than both Labour and Conservative councillors.

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<sup>19</sup> P. Seyd and P. Whiteley, *Labour's Grass Roots* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992), p.32, 39% of Labour Party members are female; P. Whiteley, P. Seyd and J. Richardson, *True Blues: The Politics of Conservative Party Membership* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1994), p.50, 49% of Conservative Party members are female. In comparison with data for the gender distribution of all councillors in Young and Rao, *Coming to Terms with Change?*, p.5, the disparity is clear.

<sup>20</sup> *Social Trends 29* (London, TSO, 1999), p.31.

**Table 4.3: Councillors' age distribution in 1993 and 1997 by party**

Age in years	Conservative Councillors 1993 %	Labour Councillors 1993 %	Liberal Democrat Councillors 1993 %	Liberal Democrat Councillors 1997 %
Below 25	0	0	0	0
25-34	6	7	6	5
35-44	10	24	23	16
45-54	23	29	31	32
55-64	33	21	23	30
65 and over	28	19	16	18
(Base)	(555)	(493)	(245)	(857)

*Educational attainment of councillors*

Both surveys found Liberal Democrat councillors to be more highly educated than their counterparts in other parties. The majority of Liberal Democrat councillors possessed a degree/higher degree or a professional qualification, nearly twice the proportion of Conservative and Labour councillors. While more than a quarter of Labour councillors held no educational qualification, less than 10 per cent of Liberal Democrat councillors fell into this category. This data, illustrated in Table 4.4 below, provides evidence of the distinctiveness of Liberal Democrat councillors, who are primarily drawn from the educated stratum of society. By



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### *Economic activity of councillors*

In common with councillors of other parties, the majority of Liberal Democrat councillors were either employed in some capacity or retired. Very few Liberal Democrat councillors (nine per cent in 1997), or councillors of other parties, were unemployed, registered sick or disabled, or looking after a home or family. Of the general United Kingdom population, approximately one in five are unemployed or economically inactive.<sup>22</sup> Table 4.5 overleaf shows that the most striking difference in economic activity status was the level of self-employment among councillors of different parties. In 1993, 27 per cent of Conservative respondents were self-employed, compared with only seven per cent of Labour councillors. In both 1993 and 1997, 15 per cent of Liberal Democrat councillors were found to be self-employed. In this respect Conservative and Liberal Democrat councillors are unrepresentative of the general population, of whom less than seven per cent are self-employed.<sup>23</sup> The retired are also over represented in local government in comparison. Table 4.5 shows that in 1993 and 1997 more than a quarter of all councillors were retired, compared to a figure for the whole population in 1997 of approximately one in ten.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Social Trends 29*, pp.31 and 72. Exact comparisons are not possible because of the different categorisations used in official statistics.

<sup>23</sup> *Social Trends 29*, pp.31 and 72.

<sup>24</sup> *Social Trends 29*, pp.31 and 72.

**Table 4.5: Councillors' economic activity status in 1993 and 1997 by party**

Activity status	Con. Councillors 1993 %	Labour Councillors 1993 %	Liberal Democrat Councillors 1993 %	Liberal Democrat Councillors 1997 %
Employed full-time	26	40	38	33
Employed part-time	6	6	9	11
Self employed	27	7	15	15
Unemployed	2	9	3	2
Retired	32	28	26	32
Sick or disabled	1	4	2	1
Looking after family/home	6	4	6	3
Other	1	1	2	3
(Base)	(564)	(502)	(252)	(848)

Of the Liberal Democrat councillors who were employed in some capacity, the majority worked in the private sector. Table 4.6 shows that in 1993, 59 per cent of Liberal Democrat councillors were employed in the private sector, while in 1997 the proportion was 63 per cent. The survey of party members by Bennie *et al* found that 49 per cent of Liberal Democrat members worked in the public sector,<sup>25</sup> suggesting a disparity between councillors and the party membership as a whole, with councillors significantly more likely to work in the private sector than their party

<sup>25</sup> Bennie, Curtice and Rudig, 'Party Members,' p.138.

colleagues. This may indicate a difference in outlook and experience between party members and their local government representatives. The government's Labour Force Survey does not divide the working population into the private, public and voluntary sectors of the economy, but analysis of the official statistics for the United Kingdom workforce by industry suggests that in 1997 the public sector accounted for broadly 30 per cent of all employment.<sup>26</sup> The data shown in Table 4.6 below, then, suggests that Liberal Democrat councillors were more representative of the general population in this respect than Labour and Conservative councillors, who were disproportionately drawn from the public and private sectors of the economy respectively.

**Table 4.6: Councillors' employment by sector in 1993 and 1997 by party**

Employment Sector	Conservative Councillors 1993 %	Labour Councillors 1993 %	Liberal Democrat Councillors 1993 %	Liberal Democrat Councillors 1997 %
Public	16	49	34	32
Private	81	41	59	63
Voluntary	3	10	6	5
(Base)	(328)	(268)	(155)	(500)

<sup>26</sup> *United Kingdom National Accounts, The Blue Book* (London, TSO, 1999), p.156.

It is also noteworthy that a very small proportion of Liberal Democrat councillors, six per cent in 1993 and five per cent in 1997, were employed in the voluntary sector. The original Community Politics strategy advocated a 'dual approach' to politics, which implied working both inside and outside existing political institutions.<sup>27</sup> A key part of this approach was to build links with voluntary sector organisations. There have been high profile recruits to the third party from the voluntary sector, notably the former Director of SHELTER and Chairman of Friends of the Earth, Des Wilson, who served as President of the Liberal Party during the 1987 General Election campaign, and attributed his membership of the Liberal Party to the Community Politics Resolution passed in 1970.<sup>28</sup> On the whole, however, there is little evidence that the third party have made stronger links with the voluntary sector than the Labour or Conservative Parties, and the data presented in Table 4.6 supports the contention that the dual approach has not been effective in this respect.

#### *Length of Council service and Party membership of councillors*

A reading of Table 4.7 overleaf suggests that Liberal Democrat councillors had less experience of council service than their counterparts in other parties. This difference may be growing more pronounced. In 1997, 45 per cent of Liberal Democrat councillors were in their first three years of council service, compared to less than a quarter of Labour and Conservative councillors in 1993.

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, pp.12-3.

<sup>28</sup> D. Wilson, *Battle for Power* (London, Sphere, 1987), p.16.

**Table 4.7: Councillors' length of council service in 1993 and 1997 by party**

Length of Service	Conservative Councillors 1993 %	Labour Councillors 1993 %	Liberal Democrat Councillors 1993 %	Liberal Democrat Councillors 1997 %
0-3 years	22	23	39	45
4-9 years	39	37	38	29
10-20 yrs	34	30	20	22
21+ years	5	10	3	4
(Base)	(560)	(493)	(249)	(857)

This data most probably reflect the gains the Liberal Democrats have made in local government in recent years, with a new influx of councillors on many authorities.

The survey found that 21 per cent of Liberal Democrat councillors had been a party member for five years or less, a statistic that makes interesting comparison with Gordon's figure of only over eight per cent of Labour councillors with five years or less party membership.<sup>29</sup> Whereas in the Labour Party an apprenticeship of party membership is usually a pre-

<sup>29</sup> I. Gordon, 'The Recruitment of Local Politicians: An Integrated Approach with some Preliminary Findings from a Study of Labour Councillors.' *Policy and Politics*, 7 (1979), p.21. Gordon's figures were based on a survey of only 71 councillors and therefore should be treated with caution.

requisite to candidacy,<sup>30</sup> this is not necessarily the case in the Liberal Democrats, nor, from other evidence, is it the case in the Conservative Party, or was it in the former Alliance parties.<sup>31</sup>

As a relatively new party, the Liberal Democrats offer an interesting case study in previous party membership. The vast majority of Liberal Democrat councillors (63 per cent) joined the party upon its creation in 1988. The survey also found, however, that the overwhelming majority of councillors (73 per cent) had been a member of another political party before joining the Liberal Democrats. By comparison, Denver and Bochel's empirical study found that only 18 per cent of Social Democrat Party members had been a member of another party prior to joining the SDP.<sup>32</sup>

Analysis of the previous party membership of Liberal Democrat councillors illustrated the importance of the Liberal Democrats' inheritance of the Liberal Party's traditional support and political base. Sixty-four per cent of the Liberal Democrat councillors who had been a member of another party had been members of the Liberal Party alone, compared to 13 per cent who had been members of the SDP alone. These figures represent 46 per cent and nine per cent of all the councillors, and correspond to Bennie *et al*'s findings that 48 per cent and 13 per cent of

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<sup>30</sup> J. Brand, 'Party Organisation and the Recruitment of Councillors,' *British Journal of Political Science*, 3 (1973), p.478; Barron, Crawley and Wood, 'Drift and Resistance: refining models of political recruitment,' p.208.

<sup>31</sup> J. Dearlove, *The Politics of Policy in Local Government* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1973), p.104; Barron, Crawley and Wood, 'Drift and Resistance: refining models of political recruitment,' p.212.

<sup>32</sup> D. Denver and H. Bochel, 'Merger or Bust: Whatever Happened to Members of the SDP?' *British Journal of Political Science*, 24 (1994), p.400.

**Table 4.8: Liberal Democrat councillors' previous party membership in 1997**

Previous party	Liberal Democrat councillors With previous party membership %
Liberal only	64
SDP only	13
Conservative only	4
Labour only	3
Green only	1
Nationalist only	1
Liberal and SDP	2
Liberal and Conservative	3
Liberal and Labour	3
Liberal and Green	1
Liberal and Other	1
SDP and Conservative	1
SDP and Labour	4
SDP and Other	1
Labour and Other	1
Other	1
(Base)	(613)



the entire Liberal Democrat membership were former members of the Liberal Party and SDP respectively.<sup>33</sup> The figures also support the empirical evidence generated by Denver and Bochel's study suggesting that less than a third of SDP members had joined the Liberal Democrats by 1992, while the vast majority of former Social Democrats (62 per cent) had left active politics.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, Table 4.8 shows how few Liberal Democrat councillors had made the journey from the Labour Party, through the SDP, into the Liberal Democrats: only four per cent of councillors with previous party membership, equating to less than three per cent of all Liberal Democrat councillors. This might be considered further evidence of a Liberal hegemony within the Liberal Democrats. The figures show that of the councillors who had been members of another party, 12 per cent had at some time been members of the Labour Party and eight per cent members of the Conservative Party. Therefore, almost seven per cent of all the councillors were former members of the Labour Party and nearly six per cent former members of the Conservative Party. This means that 12 per cent of all Liberal Democrat councillors, more than one in ten, have at some time in their lives been members of one of the two major parties.

Cross fertilisation between political parties was also reflected in the councillor interviews. For example, a London Borough of Richmond councillor spoke of his own route into the Liberal Party, via the Labour Party:

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<sup>33</sup> Bennie, Curtice and Rudig, 'Liberal, Social Democrat or Liberal Democrat? Political Identity and British Centre Party Politics,' p.151.

<sup>34</sup> Denver and Bochel, 'Merger or Bust: Whatever Happened to Members of the SDP?' pp.411-2.

*I had previously been a Labour Party member and but for a quirk of fate I'd probably be a Labour MP now, as I had been selected for [a safe Labour seat] in 1960-something, but I went abroad, got disaffected with the political scene, and really got revived through the thrust of Community Politics of Kew Liberals.*

A similar political journey was described by a Liberal Democrat councillor in South Somerset:

*I was up until the early to mid-60s a member of the Labour Party here in Yeovil, and became disillusioned with how it tried to impose on one's ability to think, that it was very old style Labour... it seemed to me even then to be so blinkered and narrow, that I didn't perceive it as having enough opportunity for people to behave as individuals and I got very disillusioned with that, and joined what was a very tiny Liberal Party locally... because I thought it was radical, it embraced lots of things I felt strongly about, but wasn't a sort of straightjacket organisation.*

The survey data on the party membership history of Liberal Democrat councillors appears to be illustrative of three phenomena. First, a sizeable minority of Liberal Democrat councillors had very little experience or history of party membership, and therefore had apparently become representatives without a long history of party activism. Second, a much larger group of Liberal Democrat councillors, about half, had a long history of involvement with Liberal politics, had been members of the Liberal Party and had joined the Liberal Democrats at their inception. Third, another group of councillors had a history of multiple party

membership and at interview described a political journey across parties. These councillors might be considered political recidivists, who sought out political involvement at different times in their lives, often in different geographical locations and with different parties. The qualitative analysis of the councillors' background will be explored further in the following section.

In summary, analysis of the social characteristics of Liberal Democrat councillors revealed the majority to be male, middle-aged and well educated, with a degree or professional qualification. In this respect, they matched the characteristics usually found among those who achieve elected office in democratic societies. From the evidence presented above, however, it can be seen that they differ from their counterparts in the Labour and Conservative Parties to the extent that they were more likely to be female (and therefore more representative of the general population) and more likely to hold a university degree (which makes them less representative). They were also less representative than councillors of other parties in terms of age, with nearly two-thirds being middle-aged. In common with all councillors they were more likely to be retired than the general population. Those Liberal Democrat councillors who are employed in some capacity, however, presented a representative mirror of the relative size of the labour force in the public and private sectors of the economy.

If the aspiration of Community Politics was to achieve greater resemblance between the representatives and the represented, then the record is mixed to say the least. They are more representative in terms of gender, but Liberal Democrat representatives elected through Community

Politics continue to be drawn from a narrow stratum of society. How does the interview data on the recruitment of Liberal Democrat councillors account for this phenomenon? This is the question this chapter will now address.

### **The recruitment of Liberal Democrat councillors**

This section examines the recruitment of Liberal Democrats councillors. To be successful, a theory of the recruitment of political actors must perform two tasks. First, advance an understanding of why elected representatives are almost always drawn from a narrow section of society. Second, explain why certain individuals fitting the social characteristics found in that stratum of society enter public life while others do not.

The classical paradigm of political recruitment, built upon the work of Schwartz<sup>35</sup> and Jacob<sup>36</sup> in the United States, has been summarised by Budge and Farlie as featuring four basic components: certain personality traits constitute the motivation to seek elected office, particular social backgrounds are associated with such motivations, certain social positions also constitute useful resources to those seeking public office, and the preferences of established political actors make certain motives and resources more useful than others.<sup>37</sup> This model goes a long way to performing the first task required of a model of political recruitment. It

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<sup>35</sup> D. Schwartz, 'Towards a Theory of Political Recruitment,' *Western Political Quarterly*, 22 (1969), pp.552-71.

<sup>36</sup> H. Jacob, 'Initial Recruitment of Elected Official in the US – a Model,' *Journal of Politics*, 24 (1962), pp.703-16.

<sup>37</sup> I. Budge and D. Farlie, 'Political Recruitment and Dropout: Predictive Success of Background Characteristics over Five British Localities,' *British Journal of Political Science*, 5 (1975), pp.33-4.

does offer an explanation of why elected representatives are almost always drawn from a narrow stratum of society. Critics of this approach have argued, however, that it fails to adequately explain why some individuals fitting those social characteristics enter public life while others do not.<sup>38</sup> To perform successfully both tasks has become the squaring of the circle that many studies have failed satisfactorily to achieve.

### *Supply and Demand Factors in Political Recruitment*

Whiteley and Seyd have divided explanations of party activism and political participation into supply-side and demand-side theories.<sup>39</sup> Supply-side explanations focus upon the supply of recruits into party activism while demand-side explanations concentrate upon the demand for recruits from political parties.<sup>40</sup>

This section will investigate both the supply and demand-side of the recruitment of Liberal Democrat councillors. On the demand-side, the importance of the requirement upon local parties to recruit suitable candidates and their formal procedures for doing so will be investigated. On the supply-side, analysis will be made of the accounts given by Liberal

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<sup>38</sup> Barron, Crawley and Wood, 'Drift and Resistance,' p.207; C. A. Collins, 'Considerations on the Social Background and Motivation of Councillors,' *Policy and Politics*, 6 (1978), p.427.

<sup>39</sup> P. Whiteley and P. Seyd, 'Rationality and Party Activism: Encompassing tests of alternative models of political participation,' *European Journal of Political Research*, 29 (1996), pp.216-9.

<sup>40</sup> J. Richardson, 'The Market for Political Activism: Interest Groups as a Challenge to Political Parties,' *West European Politics*, 18 (1995), pp.116-39, proposes an alternative market for activism, in which parties and interest groups supply opportunities for activism to meet the demand of potential activists. Here, the people are consumers, as opposed to the more common model articulated by Whiteley and Seyd (above) where the mass organisations are the consumers.

Democrat councillors of their own entry in local politics. A number of recurring themes from these narratives will be highlighted and discussed in comparison with existing qualitative data on the recruitment of local politicians. These accounts will also inform an understanding of the demand-side of political recruitment. In conclusion, an assessment is made of how well the demand-side and supply-side evidence contribute to an explanation of the narrow sociological composition of the Liberal Democrat councillors.

The recruitment of local political actors takes place within a local political context and culture. No two local political environments are identical, but it is possible to draw out the recurrent features and for these to inform an overall analysis of political recruitment within the Liberal Democrats on a nation-wide basis.

### **The formal selection of Liberal Democrat councillors**

All Liberal Democrat groups that seriously contest local authority elections have in place formal procedures for the selection of candidates. Formal selection is a two-stage process. First, all individuals seeking selection, and re-selection in most areas, must be approved as candidates on an authority-wide basis. Second, ward parties will select a candidate or candidates to contest the seat or seats within their ward. This two-stage process is identical to that used by the Labour and Conservative Parties,

although sitting Conservative councillors are not always required formally to seek re-selection.<sup>41</sup>

Authority-wide approval of Liberal Democrat candidates is usually conducted by senior figures within the existing Liberal Democrat group or local party. It involves an interview of approximately half an hour before an approval panel on questions of personal history, motivation, party policy and knowledge of local government. The rigorousness of candidate approval in all regions, however, is a matter of debate within the party and certainly varies from area to area. In some authorities, for example, Worthing Borough Council, it was claimed that the process was strenuously applied to the extent that sitting councillors whose views did not coincide with substantial areas of party policy had been deselected. In most other areas, it was clear that failure to be accepted onto the list of approved candidates was practically unheard of and would require some effort on the part of a potential candidate. As one London Borough of Southwark councillor commented on his selection for the 1994 elections:

*I had a local adoption meeting organised by the constituency, but frankly, that was a foregone conclusion by that stage, as it was so well known what I was doing, it was literally, does every one agree?.. The party looks very highly on people who work hard, so anybody who does that and looks reasonably sensible ... [will be able to stand].*

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<sup>41</sup> Dearlove, *The Politics of Policy in Local Government*, pp.103-5; Brand, 'Party Organisation and the Recruitment of Councillors,' pp.476-8; G. W. Jones, *Borough Politics* (London, MacMillan, 1969), pp.95-7.

The thoroughness of the entire selection process may be determined by the supply of candidates. Very often there were not enough approved candidates to fill all the available seats in an authority. In this instance, it was possible for a candidate accepted late in the day to circumvent the formal approval process. This may result in incomplete vetting and the candidacy of those who were not previously party members. There is evidence that this can also be the case in the Conservative and Labour Parties.<sup>42</sup> One senior London Liberal Democrat councillor recounted his own experience of selecting candidates in the final days before the deadline for nominations, even in potentially winnable seats:

*Because of the lack of available people to call on at any given time you usually end up with people thrashing around at the last minute and that is very dangerous... one would hope to recruit at least twelve months beforehand. Quite often people are not even members when they are asked to stand. I think that is particularly dangerous.*

This point highlights the crucial importance of senior party figures, and their assumptions and expectations of potential councillors, in the recruitment of candidates, especially when that recruitment takes place on a very ad hoc basis. Indeed, Jones' study of the recruitment and selection of potential councillors in Wolverhampton found that, 'The Conservative means of selecting candidates put a premium on informal and personal

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<sup>42</sup> Dearlove, *The Politics of Policy in Local Government*, p.104; Barron, Crawley and Wood, 'Drift and Resistance,' p.213; J. M. Bochel, 'The Recruitment of Councillors: A Case Study,' *Political Studies*, 14 (1966), p.362.



contacts, and allowed the leaders of ward parties great scope to make their friends candidates and even Councillors.<sup>43</sup>

The second phase of the formal selection procedure is the selection by the ward party of the candidate or candidates to fight the seats within that ward. In theory, every ward holds a formal selection meeting with a question and answer hustings session before the ward membership. Although occasionally there are contests between potential candidates, the reality is far more frequently a foregone conclusion, with one candidate proposed and accepted for each vacancy, as another London councillor explained of her selection for the 1994 elections:

*I think you probably know if you've spoken to other councillors that all parties are desperate for candidates, aren't they? They're not going to turn candidates down. The seat I stood in was a marginal one with four men and a dog in it, and me, and it just sort of became obvious that I was going to have to stand, and I was quite happy with that, but it certainly wasn't out of ambition, because it was a hellishly difficult seat to win.*

An identical picture of the flexibility and minimal importance of theoretically formal procedures was drawn by councillors in all parts of the country. For example, a London Borough of Richmond member explained:

*I think it's fair to say that when I became a councillor there wasn't really a selection process. I was involved in the ward, I*

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<sup>43</sup> Jones, *Borough Politics*, p.99.

*obviously banged about, it was generally accepted that if you've got three places to fill and only two people anxious to fill it, then it's something of a buyer's market; you go along, you show a bit of interest, and all of a sudden you find yourself being put up and everybody heaving great sighs of relief all round.*

Formal selection, then, is not the crucial gateway through which a Liberal Democrat council candidate must pass. Rather, it is more frequently a ritual that may serve to disguise the fact that the actual recruitment and selection of candidates takes place in other, informal arenas.

### **The informal selection of Liberal Democrat councillors**

#### *Ambition or Drift?*

The most telling criticism of the rational actor model of political recruitment has centred upon the notion that those who seek elected office are ambitious individuals motivated by self-interest. Here, participation as an elected representative is understood as a process that produces positive benefits for those with ambitious personalities who seek rewards of status and power through public office. Characteristic is the model proposed by Schwartz:

[T]he individual who is predisposed to political activity is likely to differ from persons who aspire only to citizen roles essentially in the following ways: he is higher in needs

achievement, autonomy, dominance and aggression, and lower on needs of abasement, change, succorance and order.<sup>44</sup>

This ambition model gained particular currency in the United States in the 1960s, where the primary system of candidate selection meant that many more potential candidates were likely to be self-starters and public competition takes place between those seeking selection. Seligman's study of the primary contests in four districts of the lower-house of the Oregon state legislature provides a good case study of the impact of the primary system on political recruitment and motivation.<sup>45</sup>

Two main difficulties, however, face the ambition or personality model of political recruitment. First, it is likely that people meeting the personality characteristics identified by Schwartz and others are to be found in the higher echelons of most professions or organisations. The personality model fails to address why some people fitting this model enter politics while others do not. Second, there is weight of empirical evidence against this model. Barber found one group of elected legislators to have low self-esteem and to be dependent on political participation for emotional reassurance.<sup>46</sup> Blondel and Hall concluded from their study of councillors

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<sup>44</sup> Schwartz, 'Toward a Theory of Political Recruitment,' p.561. Similar models are proposed by J. A. Schlesinger, *Ambition and Politics: Political Careers in the United States* (Chicago, Rand McNally, 1966); L. M. Snowiss, 'Congressional Recruitment and Representation,' *American Political Science Review*, 60 (1966), pp.627-39; K. Prewitt, 'Political Ambitions, Volunteerism and Electoral Accountability,' *American Political Science Review*, 64 (1970), pp.5-17; G. S. Black, 'A Theory of Political Ambition: Career Choices and the Role of Structural Incentives,' *American Political Science Review*, 66 (1972), pp.144-59. For a complete review of the ambition theory of political recruitment see Rao, *The making and unmaking of local self-government*, pp.128-31.

<sup>45</sup> L. G. Seligman, 'Political Recruitment and Party Structure: A Case Study,' *American Political Science Review*, 55 (1961), pp.77-86.

<sup>46</sup> J. Barber, *The Lawmakers* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1965), pp.214-6.

in Colchester and Maldon, that, 'Most councillors are not "ambitious" in that they do not appear to consider the council as a stepping stone.'<sup>47</sup>

Barron *et al* found that, 'none of the councillors or candidates we spoke to explained their own recruitment in terms of political ambition.'<sup>48</sup> Whiteley and Seyd conducted empirical research to test rational choice models of political behaviour among Labour party members and concluded:

(E)ven in a situation where individuals have objective reasons for feeling a sense of political efficacy, since they can contribute to the provision of the public good, a rational actor model of participation does not fit the evidence.<sup>49</sup>

In research that purported to support a personality model of political recruitment, Browning acknowledged that, in some cases, the father's political activity led to the son's entrance into politics by making him visible to party leaders and increasing the likelihood that they would recruit him when they needed a candidate,<sup>50</sup> suggesting it was not the personality of the individual concerned that led to their recruitment into elected office, but other factors, in this case proximity to established political actors. As the most recent analysis of the recruitment of local government representatives concluded, 'Contrary to popular conception,

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<sup>47</sup> J. Blondel and R. Hall, 'Conflict, Decision-Making and the Perceptions of Local Councillors,' *Political Studies*, 15 (1967), p.327.

<sup>48</sup> Barron, Crawley, and Wood, 'Drift and Resistance,' p.208.

<sup>49</sup> Whiteley and Seyd, 'Rationality and Party Activism,' p.227.

<sup>50</sup> R. Browning, 'The Interaction of Personality and Political System in Decisions to Run for Office: Some data and a simulation technique,' *Journal of Social Issues*, 24 (1968), p.98.

self-seeking ambition is not a common quality in the motivation of would-be councillors.<sup>51</sup>

It should also be considered that given the personal and career costs of the time required for public service as a local authority member ambitious individuals might be actively discouraged from following this path. Indeed, in the context of a study of the third party, it should also be noted that a party that is unable seriously to offer advancement through a political career might face particular difficulty attracting ambitious personality types to elected office. Rasmussen's phrasing of this problem in respect of the Liberal Party still has salience for the Liberal Democrats:

Thus the puzzling and significant question concerning the Liberals' continued existence deals not so much with the party's clientele, as with its participants. While one might be willing to vote for such an alternative if it were offered, since this would involve little personal expense, why would one be willing to make a personal investment in such a hopeless cause? Why would anyone be willing to spend time working for such a party; why would anyone give money to such a party; why would anyone be willing to squander political talent and sacrifice a political career by standing in hopeless contests, or, if elected, by being denied any governmental position.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> N. Rao, 'The Recruitment of Representatives in British Local Government: pathways and barriers,' *Policy and Politics*, 26 (1998), p.293.

<sup>52</sup> Rasmussen, *The Liberal Party*, pp.5-6.

The continued existence of a third party in a two-party system offers particular difficulties for an ambition model of political recruitment and motivation. Although in many local political environments the Liberal Democrats could not be considered a ‘hopeless cause’ in the same way that the Liberal Party often was at the time of Rasmussen’s study, it is still hard to conceive that the party is able to offer personal or career advancement in the same way as the Labour and Conservative Parties.

An alternative model of political recruitment, that takes into account the empirical evidence against ambitious personality types, has been proposed by Barron *et al.*

[T]he majority of local politicians are not fired by determined ambition but drift gradually – albeit with encouragement – into a council candidature.<sup>53</sup>

Here, recruitment is a process of drift, which some potential candidates resist, and others do not. A number of the councillors interviewed described their recruitment into local politics in terms that fitted the model proposed by Barron *et al.* They were not ambitious individuals seeking power or status, but rather over a period of years found themselves drawn ever closer into party activity until the decision to stand for elected office became inevitable. Typical was the account given by a member of the London Borough of Sutton:

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<sup>53</sup> Barron, Crawley, and Wood, ‘Drift and Resistance,’ p.207.

*I almost became a councillor by accident. Not entirely, because I always knew there was a possibility, but I was never 100 per cent keen. There are others who are very, very anxious to become councillors, others who think, 'I wouldn't mind, if it came to the point.'*

This process of drift, of minor involvement progressively becoming more serious, was described by many of the councillors interviewed. A Worthing Borough councillor described becoming a party member, 'entirely by accident,' and similarly, a York City councillor described his own journey to serious candidature as something that happened to him rather than action he took:

*It just seemed to happen! I stood two years earlier as a paper candidate just so we had a full ticket across the whole constituency in the Counties. I'd become more involved in the community, as I was involved supporting youth work and I'd become involved in one or two issues with a colleague who was a County councillor at that point, and it just seemed to be the natural thing to do.*

The idea of drift does not imply that councillors were completely powerless or wholly driven by forces beyond their control, but that there was not a point at which a conscious decision to stand for election was made. In fact, in some respects greater will may be required not to become a candidate than to become one. One former Labour councillor described his journey from the Labour Party into the Liberal Democrats as a process

of drift which began after losing his Council seat to the Liberal Democrats:

*I think I just drifted. I came off the Council and at that time I was rather put out and very disappointed. But I got a promotion at work which meant it would have been very difficult to carry on... so it was just a general drift away more than anything else, not a conscious decision to say, right, I will leave the Labour Party. I just sort of drifted away and I was rather disappointed locally with the organisation and nationally they didn't seem to do anything for me. I feel at home in the Liberal Democrats.*

This evidence suggests that councillors may be members of a 'political class' who participate in party politics through party membership, electioneering, candidacy, and the holding of elected office. One London Borough of Sutton councillor admitted, '*Probably if I lived elsewhere I would vote Labour,*' a frank admission that highlights the fact that if many Liberal Democrat councillors lived in different regions or if their circumstances had been different, they could quite easily be representatives of other parties. In the sense that political activity is an unusual activity,<sup>54</sup> the similarities between councillors of different parties may often be greater than the differences. Indeed, one City of York councillor asked to be described in the following terms:

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<sup>54</sup> G. Parry and G. Moyser, 'A Map of Political Participation in Britain,' *Government and Opposition*, 25 (1990), pp.148-51, suggest that less than 4 per cent of the adult population can be considered active in party politics.



*My position in politics has always been anti-Conservative. If you want to describe me say, he's anti-Conservative, rather than he's a Liberal Democrat or Labour or whatever. That's my stance and I can do more as a Liberal Democrat keeping them out.*

When considering qualitative evidence of this nature, however, a serious question must be raised as to the extent to which one would expect any individual to self-report ambition as a motive for seeking public office. Although not one councillor interviewed described his or her motivation as personal advancement, a small number did describe their entry into local politics in terms of what they wanted to achieve for the wider good. A prime example was provided by a senior South Somerset District councillor:

*It was a very conscious decision and it was one that I came to because after so long – and it was the Thatcher years really – I got so angry, absolutely angry, during the Thatcher years at the outrageousness and the social divisiveness and the arrogance and just the appalling behaviour of the Conservatives under Thatcher, and her fundamental position being so exclusive in the sense of looking after the few to the detriment of the many, and you develop a kind of boiling anger within yourself and there is always the point where you have to stop saying, 'someone should be doing something about this,' or 'who's doing something about this?' and you come to the point, well, I'm in a position to do something... I came to the clear decision that that somebody who should be doing something should be me.*

The advent of Thatcherism, and the opportunity to oppose it in local government, was cited as an important motivation by a number of the councillors interviewed, particularly in traditionally Conservative areas. The polarisation and intolerance that Thatcherism appeared to represent inclined a number of councillors to political activity who may not otherwise have felt sufficiently motivated.

Given the importance of political party in contemporary local government, the importance of philosophical or ideological concerns should not be dismissed when considering councillor recruitment and motivation. Although the majority of Liberal Democrat councillors were not predominately motivated by political philosophy, for a small number this was a crucial concern. One London councillor judged that his own philosophical commitment had ultimately led to him to stand for election in an area with very little Liberal Party activity and support at that time:

*I honestly do think the primary motivating factors were political, philosophical, ideological ones, not especially instrumental, although my motivations may have become more instrumental later on... I've always taken the view that self-determination, personal liberty, was even more important than, however desirable, an egalitarian aim or objective, and in the end to sacrifice personal liberty for egalitarian ideals compromised your ability to achieve egalitarian objectives. I guess you'd say I was a philosophical or ideological recruit to the cause.*

The belief that the Liberal Party, and now the Liberal Democrats, offered a distinct philosophical and practical alternative not provided by the

Labour or Conservative Parties can be identified as one of the factors that has ultimately sustained the third party through the last seventy years. A senior Worthing councillor explained his own history of party activism and candidacy, dating back two decades, in terms of a commitment to deeply held personal beliefs unencumbered by thoughts of electoral success or failure:

*I explain to people who say, 'Why do you bother? What happens if you don't win?' My view is, as far as I'm concerned, win or lose, I have my beliefs and I'll be back on the streets next year.*

Clearly, there are individuals who do not drift into politics, but make a conscious decision to enter public life. These councillors are often highly motivated individuals who have achieved a level of success in their professional lives and enter local politics for idealistic rather self-interested reasons. For the majority of Liberal Democrat councillors, however, their own accounts of their entry into public life most closely fits a model of drift than of ambition.

### *Negotiation*

Councillor recruitment, of course, should not be viewed solely from a supply-side perspective. Taking into account demand-side factors, the drift described by many councillors may be further characterised and understood as a process of negotiation between established political actors and potential recruits. Councillors described negotiation taking place in a number of informal situations, for example, at party social events or during an election campaign. The following account of the transition from

party activist to candidate, for example, was given by a senior councillor from the London Borough of Southwark:

*The transition took place very abruptly! As it has a habit of doing. I rejoined the party in late 1981 and there were elections in May 1982. I can remember, at some kind of social event in early 1982, suddenly hearing [a key local party figure] announce to three or four people stood behind me that I would be standing at the Council elections in a month's time, and that's what I found myself doing. I didn't get elected then, but having reached that level of involvement I wasn't going to stop then.*

Many councillors may not have stood for election at all if they had not been directly asked to do so. One London Borough of Sutton councillor recalled that being asked to stand as a candidate came completely out the blue. He was flattered to have been considered: '*It was quite an honour to be asked,*' and was invited to attend a selection meeting where a candidate would be chosen from all those who had been approached, only to find on arrival that he was the only potential candidate.

A number of the councillors interviewed had entered into a process of negotiation with established political actors regarding their availability and willingness to stand for election over a period of years. The most common reason given for not standing when initially approached was work or family commitments. One South Somerset councillor gave the following account of his attempts to resist pressure from a key local figure to stand on the grounds that he was new to the area:

*I resisted it for a good eighteen months. I thought I was far too new. His argument was that my experience was such that it didn't matter. You don't need to know the area, what you need to know is what is fair, right, honest, and to do a good job for the community you represent. He's quite right, of course, that is what it's about. I had these misgivings that I needed to be known first, but he made sure through Focus that I was soon known.*

The process of negotiation frequently described by councillors illustrates the importance of established political actors in screening and informally selecting potential candidates. One London Borough of Richmond councillor, a middle aged man with a professional background, described his own selection:

*I was sort of nudged into being a councillor, I won't say because there was nobody else, but because I was told I had to do it and it was high time I was and gave some stiffening to the group.*

Similarly, another member of the same authority, in this case a middle aged woman from an academic background, described how she was pursued by the local party elite after initially showing an interest in the Liberal cause:

*I was not active for a long time, then one day at an election someone knocked on the door and I said, can I have a poster please? So I was then marked out. The next thing they asked me was could they use my front room as a committee room... then*

*someone rang me up in the early-80s and said, 'Would you like to be Chairman of the ward Liberals?' I had never even been to a meeting of the ward Liberals at that stage! I said, 'No thank you,' so they signed me up instead to be a secretary. After being secretary for two years I became the Chairman and while I was still Chairman I was persuaded to become a councillor.*

In his study of political recruitment, Schwartz noted *inter alia* that, 'the recruitment process is characterised by the existence of real, small, informal recruitment groups within the party, which both socialise and screen predisposed persons.'<sup>55</sup> The data generated by the interviews with Liberal Democrat councillors provided strong evidence to support the view that many people become councillors because they are identified by existing councillors and senior party figures as possessing the appropriate abilities and attributes necessary to become successful political actors. One senior Worthing councillor commented on the influence of the group hierarchy on the selection of candidates:

*We know our people, we don't take people off the streets. The final word will often come from the ward's other colleagues, and we will draw a candidate from within our own circle, or someone we know and we feel will add something to it [the group].*

To win selection as a council candidate one must win the approval of the existing local party hierarchy, not only formally by passing through the official approval process, but also, most importantly, informally, in the

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<sup>55</sup> Schwartz, 'Toward a Theory of Political Recruitment,' p.571.

processes of screening and negotiation that take place in a number of settings. Two important arenas where such negotiation took place emerged from the qualitative and quantitative data, and will be examined now.

### *Family background*

For those with family members who are already political actors, the political milieu will be part of daily life, and to drift into party activism and candidature may be particularly easy. One London Borough of Sutton councillor explained her entry into politics in exactly these terms:

*My family have always been Liberals, from the word go. It was just something that I just drifted into. When I was young I happened to be one of the children that went round delivering Focus.*

The survey of Liberal Democrat councillors found that family involvement in party politics was a factor in the backgrounds of one in five Liberal Democrat councillors, more than double the proportion of the general population.<sup>56</sup> The survey asked if councillors' parents had been *members* of political parties and found that 22 per cent of the councillors' fathers and 18 per cent of the councillors' mothers had been party members. Interestingly, female councillors were slightly more likely to report parental membership than male councillors, suggesting family

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<sup>56</sup> Parry, Moyser and Day, *Political Participation and Democracy*, p.112, suggest 7 per cent of the adult population are party members. Even taking into account the higher figures for party membership in past decades, the figure for the councillors' parents is significant.

involvement was a more important variable for women than for men. This data is shown in Table 4.9 below.

**Table 4.9: Liberal Democrat councillors' parents' membership of any political party, in 1997**

Member	All Lib Dem cllrs		Male Lib Dem cllrs		Female Lib Dem cllrs	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes	22	18	21	17	25	19
No	72	77	73	78	71	75
Unknown	6	5	6	5	5	5
(Base)	(841)	(846)	(560)	(564)	(280)	(281)

The majority of councillors' parents who were party members were not members of the Liberal Party, SDP or Liberal Democrats. In fact, more than 40 per cent were members of the Conservative Party and over a quarter were members of the Labour Party. This may be indicative of the strength of Conservative Party in past decades.<sup>57</sup> A full breakdown of parental party membership by party is provided in Table 4.10 below.

<sup>57</sup> R. S. Katz, 'Party as Linkage: A Vestigial Function?' *European Journal of Political Research*, 18 (1990), p.148, reports membership of the Conservative Party during the period 1950 to 1964 as between eight per cent and 6 per cent of the total British electorate.



**Table 4.10: Liberal Democrat councillors with politically active parents; parents' party membership by party, in 1997**

Party	Father %	Mother %
Liberal	22	29
SDP	2	0
Liberal Democrat	0	1
Labour	31	25
Conservative	41	42
Other	4	4
(Base)	(184)	(150)

While the majority of Liberal Democrat councillors did not have a family history of party membership, there was an important strand, representing more than one in five councillors, who came from families with a tradition of political activism running through more than one generation. Indeed, a number of the councillors interviewed reported grandparents who had been party activists and civic figures, and in one case a great-great-grandfather had been a Liberal MP in the last century. Family tradition was also a key factor cited by Rasmussen as an explanation of the continued existence of the Liberal Party from his empirical study of Parliamentary candidates and MPs.<sup>58</sup> This may be equally true of councillors of other parties. Indeed, Eulau *et al's* study of legislators in a number of American states also indicated the importance of political

<sup>58</sup> Rasmussen, *The Liberal Party*, p.198.

socialisation within the family at an early age to those who enter politics, as did the more recent empirical research undertaken by Barron *et al.*<sup>59</sup>

Those who grow up in a political environment are likely to see political activity as ‘normal,’ to have available role models of participants in the political process and civic life, and to have access to and be known by established political actors. They are, therefore, also likely to hold the crucial cultural capital sought in candidates by established political actors.

### *Involvement in community organisations*

Another arena where potential candidates may be identified and screened by, and enter into negotiation with, established political actors was in community groups and other organisations ostensibly outside the realm of party politics.<sup>60</sup> Active membership of non-political groups could lead to involvement with party politics in three primary ways. First, established political actors actively seek potential recruits among those already active in their locality, particularly if they appear to have the respect of others. Second, activity in a community organisation may give an individual the confidence to allow their name to go forward as a candidate for elected office. This point was noted by Barron *et al*, who explained that for those who were apprehensive about becoming candidates and representatives, especially women, ‘Sometimes this hesitancy could be overcome by experience on a school governing body or in a political party.’<sup>61</sup> Third,

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<sup>59</sup> H. Eulau, W. Buchanan, L. Ferguson and J. Whalke, ‘The Political Socialisation of American State Legislators,’ *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, 3 (1959), pp.188-206; Barron, Crawley and Wood, ‘Drift and Resistance,’ p.211.

<sup>60</sup> Rao, *The making and unmaking of local self-government*, p.130.

<sup>61</sup> Barron, Crawley and Wood, ‘Drift and Resistance,’ p.212.

involvement with a non-political organisation may have a politicising effect in demonstrating the importance of political power if the goals of a group or organisation are to be achieved. This point was illustrated by a London Borough of Southwark councillor:

*The reason I joined the Liberal Democrats was because being involved with the tenants' movement on my estate for twenty-five years I was very disenchanted with my local councillors. They let me down when I needed them most. I decided that if they couldn't do anything for me I would stand as a councillor myself, which I did. I was going to stand as an Independent, but I got chatting to a friend of mine who is a Liberal Democrat and the policies they put forward for the coming election I was pleased with, and he said you need a back-up to become a councillor, for canvassing, etc, and so I joined the Liberal Democrats.*

The survey also investigated the councillors' involvement with a number of organisations before and after their election. Perhaps surprisingly for a party that prides itself on a Community Politics approach, involvement with Community, Tenants' or Residents' Associations was, after membership of Parent-Teacher Associations, the least common form of pastoral activity undertaken by Liberal Democrat councillors. Involvement with church or religious organisations was cited by a third of councillors, a higher figure than among the general population, of whom one in eight claim to attend church regularly, and among the wider Liberal Democrat party, of whom only a quarter report regular church attendance.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Bennie, Curtice and Rudig, 'Party Members,' p.138.

Furthermore, 41 per cent of the councillors had at some time been members of a Professional Association and 30 per cent a Trade Union. In total, 58 per cent of respondents indicated that they had been or were members of a Trade Union or Professional Association, a figure that bears close resemblance to that of 57 per cent for the entire population reported by Parry and his colleagues.<sup>63</sup> The most frequently cited form of voluntary work, however, was service on a school governing committee, which a clear majority of councillors had experienced. This is reflective of the fact that school governing committees are the bastions of political appointees, as well as their importance as recruiting grounds for potential candidates. A full breakdown of councillors' involvement with community and other voluntary organisations is presented in Table 4.11 overleaf.

The data presented in Table 4.11 would appear to support the view that a relationship exists between community, church and voluntary work, and candidacy. Many councillors perceived their work as an elected member to be an extension of voluntary work begun prior to their election. For example, a South Somerset District councillor described her role as a councillor as complementary to her church activities:

*I guess the beliefs and ideology were already there, but for me, from my personal point of view, it's more of a Christian commitment which happens to fit in with Liberal Democrat beliefs and policies and ideals quite well.*

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<sup>63</sup> Parry, Moyser and Day, *Political Participation and Democracy*, p.90.

**Table 4.11: Liberal Democrat councillors citing involvement with community/voluntary organisations in 1997**

Organisation	Involved before election %	Only involved since election %	Total with involvement %
Community Assoc.	17	5	22
Tenants/Residents'	14	6	20
PTA	5	14	19
School Governors	47	11	58
Church/religious	29	4	33
Voluntary Service	23	6	29
Trade Union	18	13	30
Professional Assoc.	30	11	41
(Base)	(all respondents)		

Community groups, then, are important fora within each local political environment, where established political actors are able to screen and negotiate with potential recruits on an informal and casual basis. This interaction is unlikely to be limited to Liberal Democrat councillors and recruits. Although directly comparable quantitative data is not available, the qualitative research by Barron and her colleagues, for example, did point to the importance of community and voluntary groups in the recruitment processes of councillors of all parties.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Barron, Crawley and Wood, 'Drift and Resistance,' p.211-3.

## **Representation and recruitment**

Budge and Farlie have demonstrated that social characteristics and background are an effective predictor of political activity, and, particularly, non-activity in a population sample.<sup>65</sup> Empirical study of Liberal Democrat councillors has found that, in common with the usual socio-economic profile of representatives in democracies, the majority are male, middle-aged and well educated. Although change may be taking place with regard to the representation of women, overall the evidence suggests that Community Politics has failed to have the impact its advocates hoped on the participation of under represented groups in local politics and decision-making.

This data suggests that barriers of resources and opportunities exist that prevent some people from becoming representatives and thereby facilitate the progress of others. These barriers exist formally, for example in terms of being able to secure appropriate time away from work or arrange child care,<sup>66</sup> and informally, in terms of the screening by and negotiation with established political actors.

The data generated by interviews with Liberal Democrat councillors adds to the already strong evidence suggesting that the majority of those who enter local politics are not motivated by ambition. It would appear that as important as the motivation of potential recruits in deciding who is selected for candidacy and therefore elected, is the role of senior party figures in informally screening potential candidates and entering into

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<sup>65</sup> Budge and Farlie, 'Political Recruitment and Dropout,' pp.33-68.

<sup>66</sup> Rao, 'The Recruitment of Representatives in British Local Government,' pp.295-8.

negotiation with them regarding their suitability and availability. The recurrence of social events and, less frequently, a family background of political activity, in the councillors' narratives of their entry into local politics indicates the importance of shared values and culture in the selection of candidates.

Senior party figures hold assumptions and expectations of who will make a good councillor and these assumptions exert a strong influence on which individuals enter the selection process and therefore go on to become candidates and councillors. When a middle aged, professional man joins a local party he may be identified immediately as a potential candidate by established political actors and will move comfortably in the social environment in which negotiation and informal selection takes place. When a working class woman, for example, joins a local party, she is unlikely to be identified as a potential councillor and may not share the cultural norms that would enable her to enter into the process of negotiation. Where women do become candidates they may be less likely to be selected to contest winnable or target wards.

Social characteristics and background, then, may determine which individuals are identified as potential councillors, and have the confidence and cultural capital necessary to 'drift' into candidature via negotiation with established political actors. The recruitment of Liberal Democrat councillors, then, can be understood as an interaction of supply-side and demand-side factors, which work to reproduce the narrow socio-economic profile of representatives in local government. On the basis of this evidence it appears, then, that Community Politics has, thus far, failed to break this cycle of replication.

## **5. REPRESENTATIONAL STYLES, COUNCILLOR ROLES AND COMMUNITY POLITICS**

The essence of Community Politics was a critique of contemporary political representation. The advocates of the strategy argued that representatives in local and national government were remote and out of touch with the people they represented. Effective channels of communication did not exist between the elected and their electors, and consequently the majority of the population were unable to communicate their views to their representatives and very often did not have access to the information necessary to facilitate their meaningful participation in decision making. The proposed solution was new representative arrangements and new roles for representatives:

In our modern industrial state, it is impossible for each individual to have the necessary knowledge and expertise to make decisions on every matter which affects his life. Many of the most important decisions are taken at a considerable distance from his sphere of activity. We therefore need a representative system of democracy to enable decisions to be taken by people who possess professional expertise at making decisions, the sources of expert information and also some degree of responsibility to their electors... the delegation of the power to make such decisions conveys very serious responsibilities both to the representative and to his electors. This is why we insist on creating a political movement based on relationships and a concept of a political structure which emphasise the maximum participation of every individual in



the political process. This is the fundamental political, as distinct from the strategic, argument for the community politics approach.<sup>1</sup>

The first practical step towards creating the politics based upon relationships described in the above passage was for Liberal representatives to develop a new and distinct representational role based upon much greater responsiveness to their constituents. Liberal councillors were to be at the vanguard of this change. One of the first councillors to be elected using what became known as the Community Politics method, Michael Meadowcroft, described the new role envisaged for Liberal Party representatives in local government:

[W]e wish to see the councillor in a quite different role to the traditional. He must be the political arm of his people, the encourager of a measure of direct democracy, and the channel of effective participation by the people in the physical task of developing the different facets of a Liberal society.<sup>2</sup>

The councillor, then, was not simply to be the distant representative of the people, dogmatically supporting a party line in the town hall regardless of the views of their constituents. Instead, the councillor was to assume a more varied and sophisticated role firmly grounded in the area represented: providing people with information, linking different local groups together, encouraging and facilitating greater popular

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<sup>1</sup> National League of Young Liberals, *Eastbourne '70: A Strategy for Liberals*, p.5.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Meadowcroft: Quoted in Lishman, *Community Politics Guide*, p.i.

participation, and providing broader political leadership on policy questions. This view of the different role of the councillor was inextricably linked to the Community Politics approach:

Since the Liberal Party is committed to a community politics approach, Liberal Councillors should act in a different way to other Councillors... The main difference is one of attitude. Too many councillors regard themselves as the supreme authorities on their wards in terms of what is needed and what should be done. Liberal Councillors should regard it as their duty to involve all the members of the community, and should welcome the opportunity to work with residents and a community group.<sup>3</sup>

The techniques of the Community Politics approach, such as the Focus newsletter, the petition, the survey, the advice surgery, and the public meeting, were all essential features of this representational style, intended to bridge the perceived gulf between representatives and represented.<sup>4</sup> Community Politics, then, aimed to provide a distinctive quality and style of representation.

The previous chapter demonstrated that those Liberal Democrat councillors who were elected using Community Politics techniques, continue to be drawn from a narrow stratum of society. Nevertheless, the core claim of the strategy to be a new politics lies in a change of

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<sup>3</sup> Smithson, *Community Campaigning Manual*, p.17.

<sup>4</sup> Lishman, *Community Politics Guide*; Smithson, *Community Campaigning Manual*; Mole, 'The Liberal Party and Community Politics,' pp.259-60.

representational styles and ways of working. It is on this measure that the second claim of the distinctiveness of Community Politics will be addressed. Indeed, more generally, it may be that the problematic nature of resemblance in terms of its negative implications has heightened the relative importance of the roles adopted by all representatives in the study of representational relationships.<sup>5</sup> Before assessing the representational roles adopted by Liberal Democrat councillors, however, this chapter will consider the existing literature and theoretical perspectives on representation and the possible roles that may be adopted by local government representatives.

### **Representational styles and councillor roles**

The starting point of any theoretical analysis of the role of the representative must be Burke's classic address to the electors of Bristol following his election as their Member of Parliament in November 1774. In his speech, Burke accepted that the wishes of a representative's constituents should, 'have great weight with him; their opinions high respect, their business unremitting attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasure, his satisfactions to theirs – and above all, ever, and in all cases to prefer their interest to his own.'<sup>6</sup> Burke argued, however, that in spite of this, the wishes or views of constituents did not have precedence over the representative's view of what actually constituted their best interests, the greater, national interest or the common good:

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<sup>5</sup> Rao, 'Representation in Local Politics: a Reconsideration and some New Evidence,' p.35.

<sup>6</sup> E. Burke, 'Speech to the Electors of Bristol,' in R. J. S. Hoffman and P. Levack, eds., *Burke's Politics* (New York, Alfred Knopf, 1970), p.115.

Parliament is not a *congress* of ambassadors from different and hostile interests, which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate, against other agents and advocates; but Parliament is a *deliberative* assembly of *one* nation, with *one* interest, that of the whole – where not local purposes, not local prejudices, ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole. You choose a member, indeed; but when you have chosen him he is not a member of Bristol, but he is a member of *Parliament*. If the local constituent should have an interest or should form a hasty opinion evidently opposite to the real good of the rest of the community, the member for that place ought to be as far as any other from any endeavour to give it effect.<sup>7</sup>

Burke, then, provided the classic rejection of the role of the representative as a mandated delegate of the represented. Rather, Burke argued that the representative was the trustee of the constituents' interests and of the national interest. It was not the role of the representative blindly to follow the wishes of their constituents in Parliament, but to use personal judgement and wisdom to take what they believed to be the right decisions. In this view representation can be seen as an elite occupation, undertaken by rational, intelligent individuals, capable of rising above narrow, parochial interests and seeing the broader picture. The representative must pursue the interests of the represented even if they do not perceive where their interest lies. As Pitkin notes, in Burke's view, 'Since interest is objective, and

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<sup>7</sup> Burke, 'Speech to the Electors of Bristol,' p.116.

rationally discoverable, and since people's wishes are usually based on their opinions, which are often wrong, the representative may have to pursue the interest of his constituency even against their will.'<sup>8</sup>

Although the Bristol constituency that Burke represented was as close as the eighteenth century House of Commons came to providing a contemporary free electoral contest, the franchise was extremely small by modern standards and Burke effectively owed his election to the city's powerful merchants who wanted (and may have expected) him to pursue policies favourable to their trading interests. Burke began his address by stating that, 'I owe myself, in all things, to *all* the freemen of this city,'<sup>9</sup> and his rejection of the mandate role may have been a rejection of representatives being mandated by those – in Burke's time inevitably a minority of the population – they owed their position to. Burke's model sought to avert the dangers of Parliament consisting solely of subservient placemen and of populism: 'the perilous extremes of servile compliance or wild popularity.'<sup>10</sup>

Burke's conception of the representative as the trustee of his constituents, relying on, 'his unbiased opinion, his mature judgement, his enlightened conscience,'<sup>11</sup> over their opinions and wishes, might be judged the antithesis of the Community Politics ideal. It would be incorrect, however, to caricature these two positions as diametrically opposed. In practice, Burke's attentive representative, seeking out and paying attention to the views of his constituents, but ultimately relying

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<sup>8</sup> Pitkin, *The concept of representation*, p.176.

<sup>9</sup> Burke, 'Speech to the Electors of Bristol,' p.114.

<sup>10</sup> Burke, 'Speech to the Electors of Bristol,' p.116.

<sup>11</sup> Burke, 'Speech to the Electors of Bristol,' p.115.

on personal judgement to guard the common interest, is not completely removed from the Community Politics model of the representative described by the theorists of the strategy as enjoying a close, two-way relationship with the represented, but ultimately not bound by their opinions when they propose illiberal actions.<sup>12</sup>

The representational role envisaged by Burke is further complicated in a modern democracy by the third partner in the representational relationship: the political party.<sup>13</sup> The representative has an additional loyalty to the political party that he or she is a member of and also represents. In a modern democracy it is extremely rare for a representative to be elected without a party label.<sup>14</sup> Party membership also implies a view of the local and national interest and therefore identification with and commitment to a particular set of policies. It can be argued, therefore, that party membership restricts the independence of the representative:

The party presumably has a program on national issues; by electing the member of a certain party, the voters in each constituency express their wishes on this program. The legislator is then bound to this program because of his duty to party and his duty to his constituents' wishes, and

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Meadowcroft, *Success in local government*, pp.3-10; National League of Young Liberals, *Eastbourne '70: A Strategy for Liberals*, pp.4-12; Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, pp.2-5.

<sup>13</sup> Sartori, 'Representation: Representational Systems,' p.472.

<sup>14</sup> Seyd, 'In Praise of Party,' p.198, illustrates the importance of party in contemporary British politics.

(presumably) because it accords with his view of the national interest (why else is he in that party?).<sup>15</sup>

The importance of political party in modern democracies may reduce the independence and autonomy of representatives. Although a representative can act according to his or her own wishes once elected, the party can and frequently does impose sanctions to ensure its representatives support an agreed party line, such as withdrawal of access to party resources, removal of committee places, and ultimately de-selection. The question of party group loyalty and discipline within Liberal Democrat local authority groups will be addressed in the next chapter.

There is an extent, then, to which a representative may be considered, in terminology derived from Hobbes, an 'artificial' person. Rather like an actor on a stage, a representative only exists to perform specific actions directed by others and, 'this means that their actions are considered not their own but those of someone or something else.'<sup>16</sup> In the same sense that a priest's sermon derives its authority not from the priest him or herself, but from the priest's position as a representative of God, and therefore the supposed divine origin of the sermon, an elected representative's elevated position arises by virtue of the fact that he or she embodies the views of their constituents or party. Burke's model of representation may preclude this existential aspect of representation by making the representative a 'real' person whose

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<sup>15</sup> Pitkin, *The concept of representation*, p.148.

<sup>16</sup> Pitkin, *The concept of representation*, p.25; H. Pitkin, 'Hobbes' concept of representation,' *American Political Science Review*, 58 (1964).

views have a weight or authority beyond those conferred by their position. The view of the role of the representative proposed by Burke, then, is not without its problems or controversies. It remains, however, the most enduring starting point for any discussion of representational styles.

In the contemporary study of representation, Eulau and his collaborators made important developments of Burke's original formulation, based upon empirical investigation of the decision-making activities of representatives in the United States. Eulau *et al* divided the representational role into three 'styles' of representation: the trustee, the delegate and the politico.<sup>17</sup> The three styles can be summarised as follows: the trustee follows the classic Burkean model, relying on his or her own judgement, taking into account the views of constituents, but is not bound to follow them; the delegate is mandated to act in accordance with the wishes of those represented irrespective of his or her personal views, while the politico will adopt both roles at different times and be informed by a more strategic, political approach.

The representational style adopted, it was argued, was determined in part by the 'focus' of representation in which a decision took place. That is, whether a decision was authority-wide, only related to a small geographical area or was purely administrative, whether there was pressure group or party involvement, and how each different focus was valued by the representative. The nature of the decision in question will influence the approach of the representative. Eulau *et al* noted the

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<sup>17</sup> Eulau, Whalke, Buchanan and Ferguson, 'The Role of the Representative: Some Empirical Observations on the Theory of Edmund Burke,' pp.749-50.



relationship and interplay between different foci and different representational styles, stating that, 'different foci of representation need not be mutually exclusive, they may occur simultaneously and appropriate role orientations may be held simultaneously.'<sup>18</sup>

In Britain, where case studies of representation have focused upon local government rather than national politicians, empirical investigation of the representational styles of trustee, delegate and politico has demonstrated the difficulties of translating an enlightening theoretical model to the real world of local politics. Newton concluded from his study of councillors and aldermen in Birmingham that the delegate, trustee and politico styles, 'are not distinct, they fuse, merge, and overlap one with another, representing tendencies and clusters, not rigid facts of political life.'<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, there is strong evidence that decision or policy-making is a very small part of the councillors' role in contemporary British local government.<sup>20</sup> The councillors' role orientation, then, may relate more to how they regard the various aspects of their public work than to how they approach actual decision-making. To understand the roles councillors adopt in their public work, and how the styles of trustee, delegate and politico are utilised in these roles, a different approach is therefore demanded. Such an approach begins by identifying the

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<sup>18</sup> Eulau, Whalke, Buchanan and Ferguson, 'The Role of the Representative: Some Empirical

Observations on the Theory of Edmund Burke,' p.745.

<sup>19</sup> K. Newton, *Second City Politics* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976), p.143.

<sup>20</sup> R. E. Jennings, 'The Changing Representational Roles of Local Councillors In England,' *Local Government Studies*, 8 (1982), p.73; G.W. Jones, 'The Functions and Organisation of Councillors,' *Public Administration*, 51 (1973), pp.140-1.

possible roles members of a local authority may adopt. In a study undertaken prior to the major local government reorganisation, Hecló identified three roles performed by the elected member in local government: the roles of committee member, constituency representative, and party activist.<sup>21</sup> These three roles correspond to those of politician, board member and representative named by the Audit Commission as legitimate councillor roles two decades later.<sup>22</sup> A slightly more sophisticated model was proposed by Jennings, who set all councillors within a party political dimension, then outlined the four primary roles that a councillor may devote time to as: casework, area (ward) representation, specialisation (committee work), and authority-wide policy.<sup>23</sup> A similar approach was taken by Stewart, who identified six areas a councillor may be concerned with in a local authority: policy-making for the authority as a whole, policy-making for particular services, the effective operation of the services, the performance of the services, the grievances of constituents, and the needs of the area represented.<sup>24</sup> The roles identified in slightly different ways by the above writers can be divided into two distinct categories: those concerned with authority-wide policy and services, and those concerned with individual and ward representation. This is the division made by Young and Rao in their 1993 study for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.<sup>25</sup> If the Community Politics claim to provide a distinct

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<sup>21</sup> H. Hecló, 'The Councillor's Job,' *Public Administration*, 47 (1969), p.187.

<sup>22</sup> Audit Commission, *We Can't Go On Meeting Like This* (London, HMSO, 1990).

<sup>23</sup> Jennings, 'The Changing Representational Roles of Local Councillors In England,' pp.70-4.

<sup>24</sup> J. Stewart, 'The Role of Councillors in the Management of the Authority,' *Local Government Studies*, 16 (1990), p.25.

<sup>25</sup> Young and Rao, *Coming to Terms with Change? The Local Government Councillor in 1993*, pp.17-21.

quality and type of representation is accurate then it might reasonably be expected that Liberal Democrat councillors devote a greater proportion of their time given to public life to the representational aspects of their role than do councillors of other parties.

### **Liberal Democrat councillors' role orientation**

There was evidence from the interviews undertaken by the author with Liberal Democrat councillors that many of the councillors regarded the distinctive appeal of the Liberal Democrats in local government to be the quality of direct representation they, and their party colleagues, personally provided to their constituents. A City of York councillor described the distinctive nature of his approach in these terms:

*In our area, we have deliberately chosen to make ourselves available and known. We, obviously, like the rest of the country, put out our Focus newsletters and by that sort of work, getting ourselves known, getting involved with the community, and being known in the community for what we are and who we are, and being contactable and responsive to people's needs, is why we were elected in the first place in my ward, because the other councillors were elected and that was the last you saw of them.*

A similar description of the distinctive quality of individual representation offered by Liberal Democrat councillors was provided by a London Borough councillor also serving in opposition to the Labour Party:

*What's on offer in the ward I represent, or the ward one of my colleagues represents, is not on offer in other wards. There is a level of dedication, commitment, conscientiousness with casework, and so on, that is distinctive... I'm in difficulties in saying what we're actually offering that is different from anyone else, other than representation that is by and large not on offer from Labour and Conservative councillors.*

Throughout the last three decades, one of the most visible, and perhaps most important, components of this distinctive approach has been the Focus-style leaflet. This campaigning tool was an intentional departure from the glossy election addresses of the major parties. It was a cheaply printed black and white leaflet produced by ward activists and distributed within their ward at regular intervals in the electoral cycle. Its aim was to inform residents about issues directly affecting their locality and in doing so provide an alternative source of information to the local and national media. The success of the Focus leaflet can be judged by the fact that it is now produced throughout the country, while its style and content are frequently imitated by the Labour and Conservative Parties. The 1997 quantitative survey of Liberal Democrat councillors found that 83 per cent of Liberal Democrat councillors or their ward parties produced a regular Focus-style newsletter. Indeed, all the respondents serving on Metropolitan and London authorities produced a regular Focus-style newsletter. To what extent, though, is there a specific role orientation underlying the distinctive approach articulated in the Focus newsletter? Is there any

objective evidence that Liberal Democrat councillors have a role orientation distinct from that of councillors of other parties?

Attitudinal data from the 1997 survey of Liberal Democrat councillors illustrates the importance Liberal Democrat councillors attribute to the representational aspects of their role. The data presented in Table 5.1 below shows that the respondents rated the most important aspects of their roles to be ‘helping individual constituents’ and ‘looking after the interests of the ward,’ which 86 per cent and 79 per cent respectively judged very important, whereas only 18 per cent rated ‘carrying out the party programme’ as very important.

**Table 5.1: Liberal Democrat councillors’ grading of the importance of different aspects of their role in 1997**

	Very Important %	Important %	Not Important %	(Base)
Helping individual constituents	86	14	1	(861)
Looking after ward interests	79	20	1	(858)
Involvement with particular services	38	57	5	(852)
Overall running of the council	38	48	14	(847)
Carrying out the party programme	18	65	17	(848)

The importance of the individual and ward representational aspects of their role was also reflected in the interviews undertaken with Liberal

Democrat councillors. A number of the respondents expressed the sense of strong personal identification they felt with the area they represented. One London Borough of Southwark councillor, for example, described her relationship with her ward as follows:

*I love my ward and I want it to be the best ward in Southwark. Politically I'm not too clever, I'm not an academic or anything like that. I class myself as a community councillor... That's what I like, I like casework, I like being nose-y, I like listening to people, I like visiting people and I love it even more when I try to solve their problems.*

The interviews underlined the fact that for many Liberal Democrat councillors the areal focus of their ward came before an authority-wide policy-making or overtly party political focus. One South Somerset District councillor with a long history of party and public service explained his position as follows:

*I'm quite clear in my own mind, my first duty is to the people who elected me. No question about that whatsoever. My first representational role is to represent the people of my ward. There isn't any conflict of interest and everybody in the party will know that I will speak up in their interest even if it brings me into conflict with other members of the Liberal Democrat group or other members who serve on the same committee... After that, I suppose, yes, to the District Council and their general interest. Arguably, the Liberal Party, as such, third on*

*that list. I think I've always been a Liberal with a small l first and a large L afterwards. That would be my philosophy.*

This data may support the view put forward by Corina that to describe the majority of local authority members elected under party labels as 'party politicians' is to misconstrue their motivation and role orientation.<sup>26</sup> Certainly, the quantitative attitudinal data from the 1997 survey suggests that party political motivation is secondary to an areal, locality-centred motivation for the majority of Liberal Democrat councillors. The majority of Liberal Democrat councillors appear more concerned to further the interests of the area rather than the party they represent.

Gaining knowledge of the opinions of political actors is illuminating and helpful towards achieving an understanding of the area of political life under investigation. Finding more objective measures of councillors' role orientation, however, has proved greatly problematic, particularly because attitudinal questions in previous surveys have been found unreliable and subject to skewed responses.<sup>27</sup> Analysis of councillors' time allocation between different aspects of their role, however, has proved a more reliable, if indirect, indicator.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> L. Corina, 'Elected representatives in a party system: A typology,' *Policy and Politics*, 2 (1974), p.86.

<sup>27</sup> Rao, Young, Lynn and Hurrell, 'Place, Personal Characteristics and Councillor Roles,' p.35.

<sup>28</sup> Rao, Young, Lynn and Hurrell, 'Place, Personal Characteristics and Councillor Roles,' pp.31-42; Young and Rao, *Coming to Terms with Change, the local government councillor in 1993*, pp.17-29.

The re-analysis of the time allocation data from the Widdicombe Committee's 1985 national survey of councillors undertaken by Rao *et al* did find evidence to support the hypothesis that Liberal Democrat councillors adopt a distinct role orientation based upon an outreach approach to their constituents.<sup>29</sup>

The categorisation of councillors' time allocation, for management and representative duties, first developed by Rao and used in the re-analysis of the Widdicombe data by Rao *et al* was replicated and applied to the 1993 survey of councillors of all parties and the 1997 survey of Liberal Democrat councillors, to test the impact of Community Politics method and critique of representation on the representational roles adopted by Liberal Democrat councillors.<sup>30</sup> Of the eight measures of average monthly time allocation collated in each study, two were discounted. These were: time spent meeting with officers, which could relate to meetings regarding managerial issues or meetings regarding constituents problems, and time spent travelling. Of the remaining measures, three were judged to relate to managerial aspects of the councillors' role: time spent attending council meetings, time spent preparing for meetings and time spent attending party meetings. The remaining three measures were judged to relate to representational activities: time spent representing the authority, time spent on public consultation, and time spent dealing with constituents' problems. The time spent on these six activities was calculated as the total time spent

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<sup>29</sup> Rao, Young, Lynn and Hurrell, 'Place, Personal Characteristics and Councillor Roles,' pp.31-42.

<sup>30</sup> Rao, *The Making and Unmaking of Local Self-Government*, pp.164-5; Rao, Young, Lynn and Hurrell, 'Place, Personal Characteristics and Councillor Roles,' pp.31-42.



and the time devoted to representational activities was calculated as a proportion of this total figure.

Comparison of the proportion of time devoted to representational activities by councillors of different political parties in 1993 and 1997 found no evidence to support the hypothesis that Liberal Democrat councillors had a distinct role orientation based upon an outreach approach to their constituents. The data presented in Table 5.2 overleaf shows that, on the contrary, Labour councillors were found to devote the greatest proportion of their time and the most actual time to representational activities.

The data also shows that although Liberal Democrat councillors reported giving more time overall to their public work in 1997 compared to 1993, the proportion of that time that was devoted to representational activities decreased during this period. This was not, as might be anticipated, a consequence of their taking more executive roles in local authorities. In 1997, members of Liberal Democrat majority groups devoted a little under 36 per cent of their time to representational activity, compared to the 37 per cent given by members of Liberal Democrat groups in opposition. This data is presented in Table 5.8 and discussed in detail below.

**Table 5.2: Councillors' time allocation to different aspects of their role in 1993 and 1997 by party**

	Labour Councillors 1993 (average monthly hours)	Cons. Councillors 1993 (average monthly hours)	Liberal Democrat Councillors 1993 (average monthly hours)	Liberal Democrat Councillors 1997 (average monthly hours)
Representing council externally	8	7	6	6
Dealing with electors' problems	16	10	12	11
Consultation	4	3	2	2
Attending meetings	24	20	19	20
Preparing for meetings	11	9	8	10
Party meetings	7	4	4	5
Total time	70	53	51	54
<i>Proportion of total time devoted to representational activities</i>	40%	37.7%	39.2%	35%
(Base)	(492)	(561)	(250)	(836)

The Community Politics hypothesis advanced by Rao *et al* cannot be said to apply to all Liberal Democrat councillors. There is evidence, however, that the roles adopted by local government representatives may be influenced and determined by a number of variables, notably, 'the characteristics, the dispositions and the perceptions of the members as well as the constitutional structures within which they

operate.’<sup>31</sup> It might be reasonable to suggest, therefore, that certain categories of Liberal Democrat councillors might conform more closely to the Community Politics model than others. Following the precedent set by Rao and her colleagues, the variables that might influence role orientation in this way can be divided into two broad strands: personal characteristics and locality variables. Personal characteristics describe the features of the members themselves, such as their age, level of education or seniority as councillors, that might influence their role orientation. Locality variables describe the features of the areas represented, such as the type of authority, representative ratio or political management of the council.

*Personal characteristics, locality and councillor roles*

Previous empirical studies of local government representatives have found difficulty in providing any definite link between personal characteristics and councillors’ time allocation or role orientation. The re-analysis of the data from the Widdicombe Committee’s survey undertaken by Rao *et al* and the 1993 study undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found evidence of a link between two variables, income and age, and the total time devoted to council duties. The 1985 data suggested that the higher a councillor’s income, the less time he or she devoted to their council work. It may have been assumed that income was a proxy measure of spare time, but this assumption was not supported by occupational status data, which found no evidence of a relationship between occupational status and total time devoted to

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<sup>31</sup> Rao, Young, Lynn and Hurrell, ‘Place, Personal Characteristics and Councillor Roles,’ p.32.

council work.<sup>32</sup> The 1993 survey data supported the link between income and time spent on council business, and also found that the time devoted to council work increased with each ascending age category correlated.<sup>33</sup>

Newton's study of councillors and aldermen in Birmingham found evidence of a link between length of council membership and role orientation. Although his study was based solely upon attitudinal data and therefore should be treated with caution, Newton found that, 'the most junior and inexperienced members prefer dealing primarily with individual problems, and the most senior members prefer general policy matters.'<sup>34</sup>

Respondents in the 1997 survey of Liberal Democrat councillors completed a number of questions that collated their personal characteristics. Cross analysis of these characteristics with councillors' time allocation to different aspects of their public work found a number of minor differences, although none was important enough to support the application of the Community Politics hypothesis advanced by Rao *et al* to one group of councillors identifiable by a particular personal characteristic.

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<sup>32</sup> Rao, Young, Lynn and Hurrell, 'Place, Personal Characteristics and Councillor Roles,' pp.36-7.

<sup>33</sup> Young and Rao, *Coming to terms with Change? The Local Government Councillor in 1993*, pp.19-20.

<sup>34</sup> K. Newton, 'Role Orientations and Their Sources Among Elected Representatives in English Local Politics,' *Journal of Politics*, 36 (1974), p.625.

Little difference was found between the time allocation of male and female councillors in the 1997 survey of Liberal Democrats. Table 5.3 below shows that female Liberal Democrat councillors devoted 36 per cent of their time to representational work, compared to the 35 per cent devoted to this aspect of their role by male Liberal Democrat councillors. Both of these proportions of time were lower than those reported by both Labour and Conservative councillors in the 1993 survey.

**Table 5.3: Liberal Democrat Councillors' time allocation to different aspects of their role in 1997 by gender**

	Male Liberal Democrat Councillors 1997 (average monthly hours)	Female Liberal Democrat Councillors 1997 (average monthly hours)
Representing council externally	5	6
Dealing with electors' problems	11	12
Consultation	2	3
Attending meetings	19	21
Preparing for meetings	10	11
Party meetings	5	5
Total time	52	58
<i>Proportion of total time devoted to representational activities</i>	34.6%	36.2%
(Base)	(574)	(288)

Given the relative position of women in the labour market,<sup>35</sup> it might be reasonably assumed that the small differences in the time allocation and overall time devoted to council work by male and female Liberal Democrat councillors reflected the amount of spare time available for public work. When the survey data was sorted by economic activity, the overall time devoted to council work by those employed in some capacity outside of the home and those not working outside the home supported this hypothesis. Liberal Democrat councillors working outside the home devoted on average 50 hours a month to their council work, compared to the 61 hours devoted by those not employed outside the home. Table 5.4 overleaf shows that the proportion of that time that was allocated to representational activities, however, did not vary at all with both categories devoting 36 per cent of their time to this aspect of their role.

The data presented in Table 5.4 suggests that Liberal Democrat councillors with more spare time available for council work did not become more involved with representing their constituents or ward, but devoted more time to all aspects of their work as councillors.

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, *Social Trends 29*, p.72.

**Table 5.4: Liberal Democrat Councillors' time allocation to different aspects of their role in 1997 by economic activity**

	Liberal Democrat councillors 1997	
	Employed outside the home (average monthly hours)	Not employed outside the home (average monthly hours)
Representing council externally	5	7
Dealing with electors' problems	11	13
Consultation	2	2
Attending meetings	18	22
Preparing for meetings	9	12
Party meetings	5	5
Total time	50	61
<i>Proportion of total time devoted to representational activities</i>	36%	36%
(Base)	(503)	(348)

Marginal differences in the total time given to public work and the proportion of that time devoted to representational activities were also found when the 1997 data was sorted by the educational attainment of the respondents. Table 5.5 below shows that those Liberal Democrat councillors with a degree or professional qualification gave slightly less time on average each month to their council work, and a slightly lower proportion of that time was devoted to representational activities.

**Table 5.5: Liberal Democrat Councillors' time allocation to different aspects of their role in 1997 by educational attainment**

	Liberal Democrat councillors 1997	
	With degree or professional qual. (average monthly hours)	Without degree or professional qual. (average monthly hours)
Representing council externally	6	6
Dealing with electors' problems	11	13
Consultation	2	2
Attending meetings	19	21
Preparing for meetings	10	10
Party meetings	5	5
Total time	53	57
<i>Proportion of total time devoted to representational activities</i>	36%	36%
(Base)	(594)	(255)

More striking differences in the proportion of time devoted to the representational side of their role were found when the 1997 data was sorted by the age of the respondents. Table 5.6 below shows that although Liberal Democrat councillors in the middle age range devoted broadly similar proportions of their time to representational work, there was a wide disparity between the time allocation of the youngest and the oldest Liberal Democrat councillors.



**Table 5.6: Liberal Democrat councillors' time allocation to different aspects of their role in 1997 by age**

Liberal Democrat Councillors 1997					
	Aged Under 35 (average monthly hours)	Aged 35 – 44 (average monthly hours)	Aged 45 – 54 (average monthly hours)	Aged 55 – 64 (average monthly hours)	Aged Over 64 (average monthly hours)
Representing council externally	4	4	5	6	6
Dealing with electors' problems	13	11	12	12	9
Consultation	2	2	2	2	2
Attending meetings	16	17	20	20	22
Preparing for meetings	9	9	10	10	10
Party meetings	6	4	5	5	5
Total time	50	47	54	55	54
<i>Proportion of total time devoted to representational activities</i>	38%	36.1%	35.1%	36.4%	31.5%
(Base)	(40)	(136)	(270)	(258)	(153)

Liberal Democrat councillors aged below 35 years devoted 38 per cent of their time to representational activities, while those aged over 64 devoted less than 32 per cent of their time to this aspect of their work. This data supports Newton's hypothesis that the more senior councillors are more interested in the general policy-making aspects of their work, while junior members prefer involvement with individual representation.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Newton, 'Role Orientations and Their Sources Among Elected Representatives in English Local Politics,' p.625.

When the 1997 data was sorted by length of council membership, however, Table 5.7 shows that the most senior and most junior members, in terms of length of service, devoted broadly similar proportions of their time to representational work. Although, the total time given to public work did increase proportionately with length of council service. Here Newton's assumptions find little support.

**Table 5.7: Liberal Democrat councillors' time allocation to different aspects of their role in 1997 by length of council service**

	Liberal Democrat Councillors 1997			
	0 – 3 years service (average monthly hours)	4 – 7 years service (average monthly hours)	8 – 11 years service (average monthly hours)	Over 11 years service (average monthly hours)
Representing council externally	5	6	6	7
Dealing with electors' problems	10	11	14	13
Consultation	2	2	2	2
Attending meetings	18	19	23	25
Preparing for meetings	10	10	10	11
Party meetings	5	5	5	6
Total time	50	53	60	64
<i>Proportion of total time devoted to representational activities</i>	34%	35.8%	36.7%	34.4%
(Base)	(383)	(218)	(117)	(139)

Overall, then, analysis of the 1997 survey of Liberal Democrat councillors in the context of the respondents' personal characteristics found that no single factor determined how well a councillor might fit the Community Politics model. All categories of Liberal Democrat councillors in the 1997 survey devoted lower proportions of their time to representational activities than the 40 per cent all Labour councillors reported in the 1993 Joseph Rowntree survey of councillors.

Previous empirical studies of councillor roles have found variables relating to locality and the structure of authorities to have a more significant influence upon the amount of time councillors devoted to their public work and to the representational aspects of their role than personal characteristics. Rao *et al*'s analysis of the data generated by the Widdicombe Committee's survey of councillors found that members representing wards with a medium representative ratio (2,001 to 6,900 electors per councillor) spent a significantly greater proportion of their time on representational activities than councillors representing wards with either a low representative ratio (up to 2,000 electors per councillor) or a high representative ratio (over 6,900 electors per councillor). Type of authority was also found to be a significant variable, with District councillors spending a greater proportion of their time on representation than County councillors.<sup>37</sup> The 1993 survey of all councillors also found type of authority to have an important influence upon the time spent on council business, with County and Metropolitan councillors spending much greater time overall on their

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<sup>37</sup> Rao, Young, Lynn and Hurrell, 'Place, Personal Characteristics and Councillor Roles,' p.38.

public work than members of District and London Borough authorities.<sup>38</sup>

Evidence drawn from case studies of local authorities has shown how the structure, organisation and political management of a council will impact upon the roles available to, and chosen by, councillors.

Charters, writing from the perspective of a former member of the Liberal group that controlled the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, noted that decentralisation changed the councillor's role by increasing the profile of individual members, both in terms of their influence upon policy-making and their increased accessibility and visibility to the public.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Lowndes and Stoker's case study of the same authority noted the heightened importance of individual councillors in decision-making and operational matters after decentralisation.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, a number of the members of South Somerset District Council interviewed by the author reported that their casework burden fell dramatically after devolution and the creation of one-stop-shops, allowing them to allocate more time to strategic planning. One member described how the quantity of casework problems brought to her attention had decreased and the nature of the remaining problems had changed:

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<sup>38</sup> Young and Rao, *Coming to terms with Change? The Local Government Councillor in 1993*, p.18.

<sup>39</sup> S. Charters, 'Participation and the Role of Councillors in a decentralised authority: the case of Tower Hamlets,' *Local Government Policy Making*, 20 (1994), pp.24-30.

<sup>40</sup> V. Lowndes and G. Stoker, 'An Evaluation of Neighbourhood Decentralisation. Part 2: Staff and councillor perspectives,' *Policy and Politics*, 20 (1992), pp.147-51.

*It's [devolution] made my life a lot easier, because a lot of people go direct now, they don't come through me, whereas before they'd come to me because they didn't want to go all the way to Yeovil. So they go direct, they go direct to planning people, direct to environmental health people... generally people now come when it's a last resort... so it's made it more of a negotiating role than just sorting out humdrum problems.*

There is evidence, largely drawn from qualitative sources, to suggest that structural, managerial and organisational factors within a local authority do impact upon the role orientation of its members. These variables, related to locality, may influence a councillor's role orientation.

The 1997 survey of Liberal Democrat councillors investigated a number of variables related to locality. The data suggested that a councillor's position in relation to the political management of their authority did not influence the amount of time they devoted to their work overall as a councillor, though it did influence how that time was allocated to the different aspects of their roles. Table 5.8 below shows that Liberal Democrat councillors devoted very similar amounts of time to their public work whether they were members of groups with control of their authority, were in opposition, or served on authorities without any overall control. The members of Liberal Democrat groups in opposition devoted a slightly higher proportion of their time to representational activities than members of groups in control or serving on hung authorities. Opposition Liberal Democrat councillors devoted 37 per cent of their time to representation, compared to 36 per cent

given by members of controlling groups, and 34 per cent by members of groups on authorities where no party held overall control.

**Table 5.8: Liberal Democrat Councillors' time allocation to different aspects of their role in 1997 by political management of their authority**

	Liberal Democrat Councillors 1997		
	Controlling groups (average monthly hours)	Opposition groups (average monthly hours)	Hung authorities (average monthly hours)
Representing council externally	6	5	6
Dealing with electors' problems	11	13	10
Consultation	2	2	2
Attending meetings	20	19	20
Preparing for meetings	9	10	10
Party meetings	5	5	5
Total time	53	54	53
<i>Proportion of total time devoted to representational activities</i>	35.8%	37%	33.9%
(Base)	(265)	(305)	(270)

There was little evidence, then, to suggest that Liberal Democrat councillors in opposition were more likely to adopt an outreach

approach to their constituents than their counterparts who held overall control or served on authorities with no overall control. The differences between the three categories were small, and in comparison to the time allocation of Labour councillors found in the 1993 survey, all the categories of Liberal Democrat councillors shown in Table 5.8 devoted a smaller proportion of a smaller overall time to representational activities than their Labour counterparts.

The new survey of Liberal Democrat councillors supported the findings of Rao *et al* from their re-analysis of the Widdicombe Committee data suggesting that representational ratio is an important influence upon the amount of time devoted to representational activities, and, specifically, that councillors representing areas with a medium representative ratio will devote the highest proportion of their time to the representational aspects of their role.<sup>41</sup> Table 5.9 below shows that Liberal Democrat councillors representing areas with a medium representative ratio devoted 37 per cent of their time to representational activities, compared with the figures of 34 per cent and 30 per cent respectively for those representing areas with low and high representative ratios.

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<sup>41</sup> Rao, Young, Lynn and Hurrell, 'Place, Personal Characteristics and Councillor Roles,' pp.38-9.

**Table 5.9: Liberal Democrat Councillors' time allocation to different aspects of their role in 1997 by representative ratio**

	Liberal Democrat Councillors 1997		
	Low Rep. Ratio (average monthly hours)	Medium Rep. Ratio (average monthly hours)	High Rep. Ratio (average monthly hours)
Representing council externally	5	6	7
Dealing with electors' problems	10	14	12
Consultation	2	2	2
Attending meetings	19	21	27
Preparing for meetings	9	11	15
Party meetings	5	6	7
Total time	50	60	70
<i>Proportion of total time devoted to representational activities</i>	34%	36.7%	30%
(Base)	(520)	(276)	(42)

Representative ratio is a complex variable that is connected to rurality and type of authority. A high representative ratio usually indicates a large County council ward, whereas a medium ratio is usually found in urban and Metropolitan wards. The influence of representative ratio on the role orientation of councillors is also not straightforward, as Rao *et al* noted from their analysis, 'Time spent on representational activities increases with the size of electorate up to a point, beyond which it



begins to fall again.<sup>42</sup> Cross tabulation of the impact of representative ratio on the time allocation of Liberal Democrat councillors, supported the findings of Rao *et al*'s more complex multivariate analysis, that councillors representing areas with a medium representative ratio will spend a greater proportion of their time on representative activities than those representing areas with a low or high representative ratio.

The influence of representative ratio on councillors' time allocation may indicate that the type of authority on which a councillor serves has an important influence upon how they divide their time to the different aspects of their role, and the 1997 survey of Liberal Democrat councillors supports this hypothesis. Table 5.10 overleaf shows that significant differences were found when the responses of Liberal Democrat councillors were cross tabulated with type of authority.

Members of London boroughs devoted 41 per cent, members of Unitary authorities 40 per cent and members of Metropolitan councils a little less than 40 per cent of their time to the representational aspects of their role, whereas Liberal Democrats serving on County councils devoted only 32 per cent and District councillors less than 35 per cent of their time to representation. It would appear, then, that there are important differences in the role orientations of Liberal Democrat councillors serving on different types of authority. Unfortunately, the sample of Liberal Democrat councillors in the 1993 survey (before the creation of the new Unitary authorities) was too small among certain

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<sup>42</sup> Rao, Young, Lynn and Hurrell, 'Place, Personal Characteristics and Councillor Roles,' p.40.

categories of authorities, notably Metropolitan and London boroughs, to allow comparative analysis.

**Table 5.10: Liberal Democrat Councillors time allocation to different aspects of their role in 1997 by type of authority**

Liberal Democrat Councillors 1997					
	District (average monthly hours)	County (average monthly hours)	Met. (average monthly hours)	London (average monthly hours)	Unitary (average monthly hours)
Representing council externally	5	7	6	4	7
Dealing with electors' problems	10	12	17	17	16
Consultation	2	3	2	2	3
Attending meetings	18	27	20	17	22
Preparing for meetings	9	14	11	11	11
Party meetings	3	6	7	5	6
Total time	49	69	63	56	65
<i>Proportion of total time devoted to representational activities</i>	34.6%	31.9%	39.6%	41%	40%
(Base)	(526)	(109)	(63)	(44)	(40)

The analysis shown in Table 5.10 did find two categories of Liberal Democrat councillors, namely those serving on London and Unitary authorities, who devoted a higher or equal proportion of their time to representational activities than all Labour councillors reported in the 1993 survey. The differences between Liberal Democrat members of

London Boroughs and Unitary authorities, and all Labour councillors were marginal, however, and cannot be construed to validate the application of the Community Politics hypothesis to these categories of Liberal Democrat councillors above others.

### **Community Politics and role orientation**

In summary, then, there is no evidence to support the blanket application of the Community Politics hypothesis originally identified by Rao and her colleagues to all Liberal Democrat councillors. Indeed, on the contrary, analysis of the quantitative survey data generated by a sample of all local government representatives undertaken by Young and Rao in 1993 and a sample of Liberal Democrat councillors undertaken by the author in 1997, suggests that Labour councillors devote a greater proportion of their time to representational activities than Liberal Democrat councillors. The quantitative survey data did, however, support the findings of previous studies suggesting that locality variables in the form of representative ratio and type of authority exert an influence on councillor role orientation, while personal characteristics were not found to be important.

The interview data did find strong evidence of many Liberal Democrat councillors with a strong commitment to the ward they represent and a belief that they provide a distinct service to their constituents not on offer from councillors of other parties. Undoubtedly, many Liberal Democrat councillors will be surprised to learn that more objective evidence suggests that it is their Labour counterparts who devote more

time, both in real terms and as a proportion of their total time devoted to public life, to the representational side of their work as a councillor.

**PART III: THE LOCAL AUTHORITY CONTEXT**

## **6. THE LIBERAL DEMOCRAT COUNCILLOR AND THE PARTY GROUP**

The previous two sections of this thesis placed Community Politics within its historical, theoretical and representational contexts. This third section will now place Community Politics and the Liberal Democrat councillors elected under its banner within the context of the party groups in which they operate in the real world of local government. The way in which Liberal Democrat councillors act and make policy as party groups is crucial to an assessment of the claims of Community Politics to provide a new style of politics. The next chapter will analyse, via a case study approach, the practical application of the ideas of Community Politics in local government.

This chapter uses new qualitative and quantitative research data to investigate two key aspects of the relationship between the Liberal Democrat councillor and the party group. First, the level of internal democracy and the ability of all group members to participate fully in policy-making. Second, the impact of the group on the representational behaviour of councillors when there is a conflict of loyalty between the perceived interests of the ward represented and a decision of the party group.

A key component of the original Community Politics approach to local government was that councillors elected via the strategy would not dogmatically pursue a party line once elected, as councillors of other parties were perceived to do, but would be more responsive to the views

and aspirations of their constituents, even if it brought them into conflict with other councillors or party colleagues.<sup>1</sup> This chapter will examine the extent to which Liberal Democrat councillors are able to represent the views of their constituents without recourse to an agreed party line.

There has to be a question mark, however, as to the actual contribution local authority party groups do make to the policy of a council. Party groups do not operate in a wholly autonomous manner within an isolated political environment. Rather, they exist in an arena that is subject to pressures and demands from a number of external sources. There is strong evidence that the major policy initiatives within local government policy in the last twenty years (and arguably longer) have been driven primarily by central government.<sup>2</sup>

Yet without doubt the political control of a local authority can make a difference to the policies pursued by that authority, within those constraints imposed from outside. Gyford's study of local socialism, for example, details a number of local authority groups that were able during the 1980s, with varying degrees of success, to provide an alternative approach to local administration than the one being advanced by central government.<sup>3</sup> Very often the response to national legislation by local authority party groups is determined by the stance of their national party

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<sup>1</sup> Lishman, *Community Politics Guide*; Smithson, *Community Campaigning Manual*, p.17.

<sup>2</sup> Young and Rao, *Local Government Since 1945*, pp.265-99; Rao, *Towards Welfare Pluralism*, particularly pp.173-80; Walsh, *Public Services and Market Mechanisms*, particularly pp.120-37.

<sup>3</sup> J. Gyford, *The Politics of Local Socialism* (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1985); Gyford, 'Diversity, Sectionalism and Local Democracy,' pp.114-9.

organisations and Parliamentary parties rather than internal group processes. The role of the party group may be further diminished by the fact that those policy decisions which are still taken within a local authority may not necessarily be made within the majority group. An equally, if not more, important policy forum may be the 'joint elite' of senior members and officers.<sup>4</sup> In theory, officers are civil servants, implementing policy decisions made by members. In reality the boundaries are less distinct, particularly between senior members and officers, who may share high levels of specialist expertise and work closely together over a number of years. Jones' analysis of the Labour group controlling Wolverhampton Town Council, for example, concluded that the formal party group did not initiate or formulate policy, but was required to register or reject policy developed from more informal negotiation between leading members and senior officers.<sup>5</sup>

In the most recent study of organisational change in local government, for example, only seven per cent of chief officers reported councillors as 'leading the change process,' although councillor involvement in other areas, notably environmental and local economic policy, was reported to be greater.<sup>6</sup> Yet the majority group remains one significant decision making forum within any local authority and the operation of party

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<sup>4</sup> G. Stoker, *The Politics of Local Government* (Second Edition, London, MacMillan, 1991), p.92-5.

<sup>5</sup> Jones, *Borough Politics*, pp.175-6.

<sup>6</sup> K. Young, *Portrait of Change 1997* (London, Local Government Management Board, 1997), pp.16-8.



groups should, therefore, provide an insight into the distribution of local power.<sup>7</sup>

The Liberal Democrat councillors interviewed by the author were frequently conscious of the constraints upon their role in the policy process. One leading member of the London Borough of Richmond explained that strategic thought and policy development were not principal concerns because of the pre-eminence of national political realities coupled with local financial constraints:

*Policy issues are mostly driven centrally from national government. Our reaction to those is determined by the stance Liberal Democrats are taking nationally on it, which is a given that we'll be debating that particular issue, but only to a secondary extent are we concerned with its application in the borough. So by and large we are not sitting worrying about policy all the time. There isn't time for it when you are actually running the show. I'm afraid I am cynical about that.*

Similarly, a senior London Borough of Southwark councillor expressed doubt that this Liberal Democrat group had actually entered into a policy-making process at any time:

*I think over the years the amount of local policy that we've discussed... the only thing I can remember is housing*

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<sup>7</sup> Blondel and Hall, 'Conflict, Decision-Making and the Perceptions of Local Councillors,' p.322.

*allocations... I can't say in ten years that we've actually had a strategy on anything specific. We have the manifesto which indicates a lot of things that we would hope to achieve, but largely they are a mix of national policy and what the difference is between Sutton and Southwark, if you like.*

Although the party group may not be the paramount decision-making forum within a local authority, for the majority of councillors who are members of the controlling group, it will provide their best opportunity to influence the authority's policies. Empirical studies of party groups in local government, however, have found little evidence to support the contention that they function in a recognisably democratic manner. Perhaps the most striking study of the workings of a party group is Green's participant study of the Labour group controlling Newcastle City Council which documents an extremely poor level of policy debate and scrutiny within a group dominated by a narrow oligarchy of leading members.<sup>8</sup> This chapter will examine the extent to which Liberal Democrat party groups can claim to be different and to operate along open, democratic lines that facilitate the participation of all members in the policy-making process.

The impact of the party group upon the representational behaviour of Liberal Democrat councillors may be further illuminated by the demands the group places upon the loyalty of its members. Given that the political

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<sup>8</sup> D. G. Green, *Power and Party in an English City* (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1981), pp.49-89; D. G. Green, 'Inside Local Government: A study of a Ruling Labour Group,' *Local Government Studies*, 6 (1980), pp.33-48.

party may be judged the third partner in the representational relationship, along with the represented and the representative,<sup>9</sup> the party group will clearly influence the representational behaviour of councillors as their most immediate connection with the national party. As Copus has stated, 'The organising of councillors into definite party groupings... means that councillors often act differently from the ways in which they would act as independent representatives.'<sup>10</sup> There is a traditional or popular perception that Liberal Democrat party groups tend to be excessively individualistic in comparison to Labour and Conservative groups and are therefore more prone to internal splits and disunity.<sup>11</sup> Copus' empirical study of the influence of the party group on the representational behaviour of councillors of all political parties, however, concluded that a strong loyalty to the party group was common to councillors representing all three main political parties, who were all unwilling to oppose the group in public:

The importance of the party group within the processes of local democracy and its influence on the activity of the councillor as a representative of an electoral area is not specific to any one party. An expectation of loyalty to the group exists for all councillors, whether Labour, Liberal Democrat or Conservative. As the research for this thesis has indicated, councillors of all parties are willing to grant it that allegiance. In all parties the option for

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<sup>9</sup> Sartori, 'Representation: Representational Systems,' p.472.

<sup>10</sup> C. Copus, 'The Political Party Group: Model Standing Orders and a Disciplined Approach to Local Representation,' *Local Government Studies*, 25 (1999), p.18.

<sup>11</sup> M. Temple, 'Power in the Balance,' in D. MacIver, ed., *The Liberal Democrats* (Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), p.232.

public dissent from group decisions on a local issue and for the councillor to publicly 'represent' the electorate exists. Yet most councillors do not choose this route, preferring to take the electorate's views to the closed group meeting rather than the open council meeting.<sup>12</sup>

Following the model of Copus' questionnaire, new quantitative survey data from the 1997 survey of Liberal Democrat councillors undertaken by the author will be used to examine the extent to which Liberal Democrat councillors will remain loyal to their party group where they disagree with their group's policy on an issue internal to their ward. The respondents' willingness to oppose the group in a number of private and public arenas will be quantified in order to illuminate the impact of the party group on the councillor's representational behaviour.

### **Political parties, democracy and local government party groups**

From the very outset of research into political parties doubts have been expressed with regard to the quality of democracy within avowedly democratic political parties. In an extremely detailed, contemporary study of the birth of modern political parties in Britain and the United States, Ostrogorski argued that political parties had succeeded in creating the structure of democratic government, but not the essence. Although political parties appeared to operate along democratic principles, in practice the necessities of mass political campaigning meant that the

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<sup>12</sup> Copus, *The Influence of the Political Party Group on the Representative Activities of Councillors*, p.414.

serious debate essential to a democracy came second to populist electioneering methods geared towards the advancement of the leading personalities within the party.<sup>13</sup> The requirement upon political parties to appeal to the mass of the population led to the dilution of democracy to the point that political parties hindered rather than advanced the growth of democracy and democratic principles within society. Ostrogorski argued that the franchise had been extended to the urban poor before they were sufficiently educated to understand the complex political issues put before them, and, 'it simply succeeded... in bringing into glaring prominence the contradiction between the capacity and the power of the masses, a contradiction which can only disappear gradually.'<sup>14</sup>

The analysis of the operation of political parties within democratic societies made by Ostrogorski prefigured both economic, median voter theories of democracy, such as that proposed by Downs,<sup>15</sup> and elitist critiques of democracy, notably the classic study of the internal organisation of political parties made by Michels. In a work that became the starting point of many subsequent studies of the internal workings of political organisations, Michels undertook a detailed empirical analysis of the German Social Democratic Party at a time when it was considered to be the most radical and democratic Socialist party in Europe, if not the world. Michels demonstrated the oligarchical nature of its internal structure and organisation, with the small, middle class leadership of the

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<sup>13</sup> Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the organisation of political parties Volume 1*, pp. 580-1.

<sup>14</sup> Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the organisation of political parties Volume 1*, p.581.

<sup>15</sup> A. Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York, Harper and Row, 1957).

party dominating it via their superior skills and experience, directing it away from revolutionary aims towards minor, incremental gains that entrenched the leaders' position. Michels argued that the party was incapable of achieving its goal of a democratic society if it could not achieve democracy within its own organisation. Michels further extrapolated from his study that any political party or organisation must inevitably be oligarchical in nature and organisation. The necessities of bureaucratic organisation and the leadership of the few over the many were conservative forces that created vested interests and impelled parties away from democracy:

Organisation is, in fact, the source from which the conservative currents flow over the plain of democracy, occasioning there disastrous floods and rendering the plain unrecognisable.<sup>16</sup>

Michels' analysis has been dismissed by McKee as inappropriate and in part outdated to be usefully applied to the Liberal Democrats.<sup>17</sup> I would argue, however, that not only does Michels' model provide a valuable insight into the Liberal Democrats, but study of the Liberal Democrats may equally offer insight into the work of Michels. In the same respect that Michels chose to study the Social Democrats because of their egalitarian and democratic aims, the quality of internal democracy in Liberal Democrat party groups is of particular interest and importance because of the party's commitment to local democracy and the extension

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<sup>16</sup> Michels, *Political Parties*, p.62.

<sup>17</sup> V. McKee, 'Factions and Groups,' in D. MacIver, ed., *The Liberal Democrats* (Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), pp.156 and 166.

of political participation. In a party so fundamentally committed to democratic practice, democracy should be expected to be at the core of internal structures and policy-making at all levels of the party.

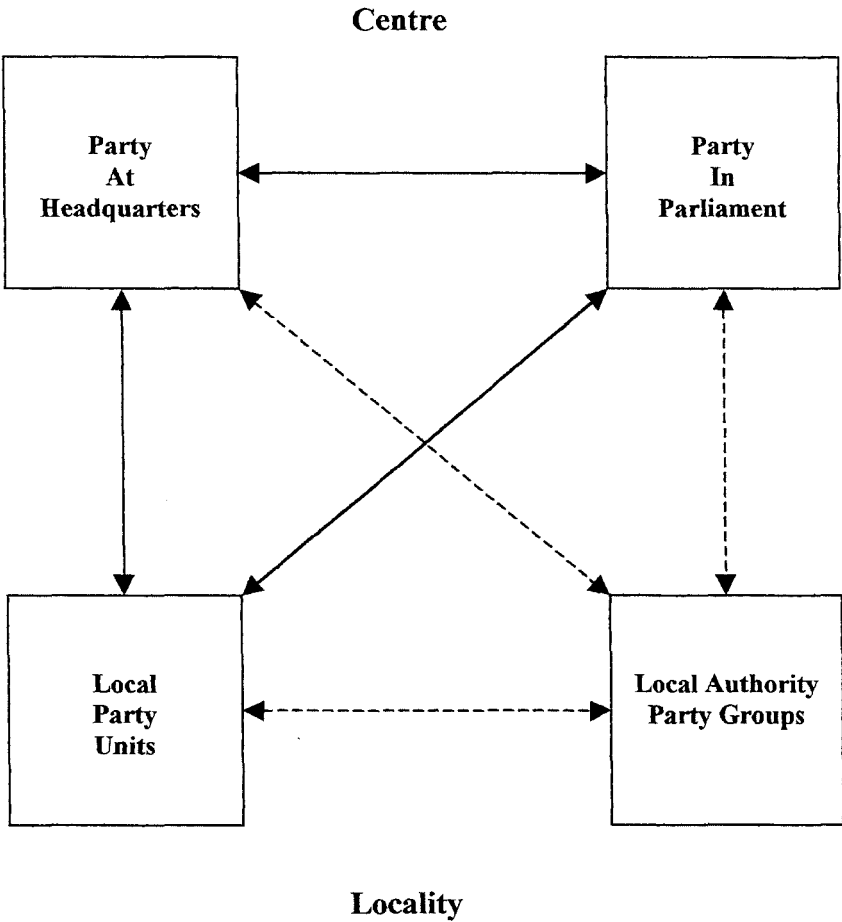
One insight into the work of Michels offered by study of the Liberal Democrats is that Michels' division between the single, elite or leadership and the mass of the party is overly simplistic. Study of a modern party clearly shows that a number of elites exist and overlap in different sections and regions of the party, as opposed to Michels' model of a single elite or leadership with control of the party. Michels was greatly influenced by Marxist theory,<sup>18</sup> and just as Marx's division of society into two distinct classes can be seen as a crude oversimplification of the complex divisions and distinctions within modern society, Michels' distinction between the leadership and the mass of the party does not provide a truly accurate picture of a modern political organisation. In reality, the power structure of a political party like the Liberal Democrats more closely resembles the model of local and national party linkages proposed by Gyford and James,<sup>19</sup> and reproduced in Figure 6.1 overleaf. Here, a number of different elites within the party can be identified; the national party organisation and headquarters, the Parliamentary party, and the leadership of local parties and council groups.

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<sup>18</sup> D. Beetham, 'From Socialism to Fascism: The Relation between Theory and Practice in the Work of Robert Michels, I. From Marxist Revolutionary to Political Sociologist,' *Political Studies*, 25 (1977), pp.3-24.

<sup>19</sup> J. Gyford and M. James, *National Parties and Local Politics* (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1983), p.7.

**Figure 6.1: Party Linkages**



Source: J. Gyford and M. James, *National Parties and Local Politics* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1983), p.7.



There is evidence that in the old Liberal Party local associations and groups enjoyed considerable autonomy,<sup>20</sup> but the increasing politicisation of local government and the capacity of local parties to embarrass their national organisations have meant that steps have been taken within the Liberal Democrats to ensure this is no longer the case. The Liberal Democrats should now be considered as much a national party as Labour or the Conservatives.<sup>21</sup> This may have implications for the application of the Community Politics strategy in contemporary local government.

When set within the context of Gyford and James' typology, Michels' analysis can be applied to elite behaviour within the local leaderships of the Liberal Democrats. Michels argued that the skills required for the leadership of a political party were skills that the majority of the membership would not possess. Once an individual had acquired and mastered those skills it was near impossible for a member without similar experience and expertise to challenge their position of power and authority. The leadership was indispensable to the party and this was a conservative force because the leadership must pursue minor, incremental gains ahead of longer-term, strategic objectives to justify their position, while also acquiring a vested interest in the maintenance of their position of eminence and therefore the status quo.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> W. P. Grant, "'Local' Parties in British Local Politics: A Framework for Empirical Analysis,' *Political Studies*, 19 (1971), pp.202-3.

<sup>21</sup> S. Ingle, 'Party Organisation,' in D. MacIver, ed., *The Liberal Democrats* (Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996).

<sup>22</sup> Michels, *Political Parties*, particularly pp.107-72.

There was evidence to support Michels' view of the permanence of elites who attain leadership positions within the Liberal Democrat party groups studied. David Williams, for example, became Leader of the London Borough of Richmond when the Liberal Party took control in 1983 and has never been challenged internally for his position. Lord Tope became Leader of the London Borough of Sutton when the Liberal Party took control in 1986, and likewise has not been challenged. Other authorities, for example, South Somerset District Council have experienced more frequent changes of Leader, but here it can be argued that all the leaders of the authority since the Liberal Party gained power in 1987 have been drawn from a relatively stable group of leading members. There is evidence that the longevity and perseverance of local political elites within the Liberal Democrats matches the model proposed by Michels.

What control, then, do the leaders of Liberal Democrat party groups exercise over the decision-making process? The policy decisions that party groups make can be divided into two broad categories: the manifesto or long-term strategy, and day-to-day policy questions, primarily concerning operational matters. No group decision is taken in isolation, but as noted above, officers, central government, national party organisations and the local party beyond the authority, will all influence the internal policy process.

The qualitative interviews investigated the respondents' subjective perceptions of the operation of and relationships within the Liberal Democrat party groups of which they were members. At many of the local authorities visited it was clear that the majority of Liberal Democrat

councillors did not consider the manifesto to be a document of particular importance. The manifesto was very often left – due to lack of interest – to one or two key activists or councillors to produce immediately prior to the local elections, usually modelled closely on the previous document. A senior Worthing Borough councillor gave the following account of the manifesto process within that controlling group:

*That, I think, is a weak point in many organisations. We decide, as a group, that we need a manifesto, or the manifesto needs updating for the coming year, so we pick two or three people to draft out a manifesto, knowing what the past feelings of the group on policy have been and having the benefit of the previous manifesto. So that draft manifesto is done by two or three activists within the group.*

The draft manifesto was then circulated to the group for comment and any proposals for changes put to a group meeting. Substantial changes to the draft would be time consuming and therefore unwelcome. The agreed manifesto was then printed and circulated. Similarly, Green reported from his time as a Labour councillor in Newcastle that attempts to raise questions of policy and strategy at group meetings were often resented by his colleagues simply because of the time such discussions demanded.<sup>23</sup>

In the London Borough of Sutton the manifesto was secondary to more informal processes of policy development led by members of the Policy

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<sup>23</sup> Green, *Power and Party in an English City*, p.57.

and Resources Committee and leading members of the local party. In Sutton, the manifesto was produced by one or two key local party members based on submissions from the different committee groups on the authority, following a group weekend when the entire group met at length to discuss the manifesto and strategy. The group weekend was utilised by the group leadership to discuss policy and strategy, and also to strengthen group unity and cohesion through more broad based philosophical discussion around the wider objectives, values and motivations of members. The extent to which the group weekend did more than legitimise a largely prepared manifesto, however, was questioned by some of the councillors interviewed. One member expressed the following view of the purpose of the weekend:

*If you are a councillor within the group, you are told that there is a group weekend that every one is going to to discuss the contents of the manifesto. I'd say that's a load of old bull, they already know what's going to be in the manifesto, but they'll probably be a lot of fine tuning.*

As will be discussed in the case study of the authority presented in the next chapter, the real crisis within the Liberal Democrat group controlling the London Borough of Sutton occurred during the 1990 to 1994 electoral cycle. During this period the senior leadership of the authority, notably Lord Tope, sought to adopt a programme of area based decentralisation close to the model being actively pursued in the neighbouring borough of Kingston. Amid much internal feuding and discontent, however, the proposal was defeated by a combination of the

senior committee chairs and more cautious junior members.

Consequently, the authority did not embark upon any form of devolution until 1995 when a slight shift in the balance of power within the group facilitated the approval of some area based working, though once again, only after a close, though less acrimonious, vote. Despite the efforts of the more senior leadership and radical younger members, the committee chairs were still perceived by many as a block preventing greater reform of the structure of the authority, as one junior councillor explained:

*I think some councillors forget that they're there to represent people and they see themselves as chair of this and chair of that, and once you've got a powerbase like that and you're an experienced councillor who's been going for a long time, there is sometimes a reluctance to change. So it's up to some of us to force that along.*

The Liberal Democrat groups studied appeared to write their manifestos on a somewhat ad hoc basis and did not attach great importance to this formal process as the means by which policy decisions were reached. Perhaps the one exception to this pattern was South Somerset District Council, where the Liberal Democrat group fought two rounds of local elections on manifesto commitments to alter radically the structure of the authority: in 1991 to decentralisation to area based committees, and in 1995 to devolve much greater budgetary powers to the Areas. In South Somerset, the group had sought a clear electoral mandate for radical policy proposals and therefore the manifesto occupied prime importance. In practice, however, the real decision-making in the majority of Liberal

Democrat groups took place incrementally in the same fora in which day-to-day operational decisions were made.

Within the Liberal Democrat group controlling the London Borough of Richmond policy-making was formally distributed between three fora. In ascending order of importance they were, the Leader's Committee (comprising the Leader of the Council, the two Deputy Leaders, and the Chair of Policy and Resources), the Chairs' Group or frontbench committee (consisting of the Leader's committee plus the other ten committee chairs), and the full group. Whereas the frontbench committee met twelve times a year, the full group only met eight times a year. One senior councillor gave the following account of policy-making within this system:

*Issues get thrashed out at each level. The most important level is the cabinet level: the fourteen. Things either go on from there to the full group or they don't, and the group sometimes get quite cross about that, because there may be people who would want to push those things forward, but they don't happen. There's a tacit acceptance that that's where things happen in terms of new developments. That's the strategic cross-council way in which things are done.*

The agenda was set by the frontbench committee and decisions on policy – and, indeed the manifesto itself – were often simply presented to the full group for approval, or, in theory, rejection, as another member of the frontbench committee explained:

*I would have to say there are one or two councillors who are key to sort out the conceptual basis of our work. The bulk of councillors are more doing things with gut response and less theoretically minded. Each time the manifesto is produced it is produced by a small group and then it is brought to the full group, and I think the last one we had one member of the backbenchers made one extremely telling criticism of one point, which we were very happy to respond to, at the time it was a very worthwhile contribution. Apart from that the manifesto was accepted.*

Clearly, this raises the question of the ability of all group members to contribute to policy, particularly if their role is confined to responding to an agenda set by the group leadership. One backbench councillor who wished to be able to contribute more to policy was frank in her appraisal of the power relations within the group and the control exercised by a small ‘cabal’ of leading figures:

*I think it would be very helpful for this council to be more equal. I think we'd get better debate. I find that the level of debate here is really quite poor. It's fixed in advance and I think that's the result of the enormous majority... you have a middle of the road, benevolent dictatorship, basically. Now that is actually pretty effective. It may not be very representative, and, depending on your viewpoint, you may or may not think it's fair. But that's really what it is. They are good-hearted and they are middle of*

*the road, and they are in such a position of power that it is in effect a dictatorship, and you have a council that is actually run in quite a centrist fashion.*

Not all backbench members, however, felt that they were excluded from the policy process, but rather, as another argued, those who did not contribute were insufficiently motivated to do so:

*There are a lot of backbenchers who probably aren't that interested in policy. You always tend to feel if you're a backbencher that you're not contributing that much, but it's probably because really, fundamentally, you don't feel that strongly about it. I think if you do feel that strongly you'd be heard.*

Of course, control of policy-making by the leadership becomes a *fait accompli* when the group is electorally and practically (in terms of running the council) successful. One member of the Chairs' Group conceded:

*The group has tended to be dominated by a small caucus and most of the time people have been happy to go along with it because we've been successful. If we hadn't been successful I'm sure they wouldn't. It's quite difficult to sit on the backbench saying, 'this is all going hopelessly wrong, we must have changes here,' when demonstrably that isn't the case.*



Many of the dissatisfactions expressed by backbench members of the London Borough of Richmond were echoed by junior members of South Somerset District Council. Councillors without long service on the authority often felt excluded from the decision-making process by more senior colleagues. One member related his own experience of the poor level of debate within the group and on the authority as a whole:

*I've been disappointed with the lack of actual political debate in the council about issues, I would have welcomed more... I very often don't think that we're addressing the issues which we should be addressing, like environmental issues, which I do think are important... I think it has something to do with our dominant position. Any party which is in power for a long period without being particularly challenged, which frankly is the situation for us here locally in South Somerset... that means that there isn't perhaps the incentive to focus on policies that there might be in a rather tighter situation, a bit more under the microscope.*

Undoubtedly there were fora where debate took place in South Somerset, but this member, and certainly a number of his colleagues, were excluded from them. Although, in common with other authorities, there were backbench members who did believe that opportunities to contribute existed for those who wished to take them:

*You have to understand that there are people who always attend group meetings, people who occasionally attend group meetings, and people who never attend. Therefore, by definition, the*

*business of drawing up policy is very much a group within a group. Now, that sounds cliquy, it isn't. It's open, fully open. But too many people don't come, don't contribute, and that's sad.*

In common with, for example, Dearlove's study of the Conservative group controlling Kensington and Chelsea,<sup>24</sup> new councillors joining a group that had held majority control for some time were expected to serve an apprenticeship, when they were not expected to make a significant contribution to the group. The councillors who were most critical of the internal group mechanisms were frequently those who had either decided not to seek re-election or had yet to make up their minds as to their future plans. Backbenchers who planned to serve a second term and appeared happy to serve an apprenticeship were often those who argued that the internal processes were open. This pattern also matches that found by Prewitt and Nowlin's study of city councilmen in the San Francisco Bay Area: that representatives will not criticise or seek to reduce the power of a position they aspire to hold.<sup>25</sup> Junior councillors planning to continue in local politics may expect to ascend the group hierarchy, and therefore may be unwilling to criticise or reduce the power of the senior positions they hope or expect to attain.

Like Green's participant account of the Labour group controlling Newcastle-upon-Tyne, this research found that the function of many

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<sup>24</sup> Dearlove, *The Politics of Policy in Local Government*, pp.125-6.

<sup>25</sup> K. Prewitt and W. Nowlin, 'Political Ambitions and the Behaviour of Incumbent Politicians,' *Western Political Quarterly*, 22 (1969), pp.298-308.

Liberal Democrat groups was to serve, ‘mainly as a receiving shop granting legitimacy to the policies put before it,’<sup>26</sup> rather than actually to develop policy. The policies that the group were asked to approve were likely to be generated by a small sanctum of senior members who considered themselves to be exclusively qualified to direct and generate policy. One former Leader of the South Somerset District Council, for example, argued that a division between the strategic and non-strategic thinkers was inevitable, but that the crucial factor was that mechanisms were in place to enable those who wished to contribute to do so:

*I think within any council you will always have this division between the strategic or political thinkers and the active, on the ground, ward councillors, not that the strategic thinkers won't also be active ward councillors, but some people take to that role more easily and others don't – they don't particularly want to develop a new philosophy, whereas other people like that stuff. So there is always the gap and there is always the question of how you handle the potential threat of a small group manipulating the agenda, as such, and other people having to go along with it. But I think, again, that comes down to the democratic processes within the group and if all members of the group feel that they have the opportunity to contribute and generally do and that decisions aren't being taken without their consent or knowledge, then I think everything is perfectly okay.*

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<sup>26</sup> Green, ‘Inside Local Government: A study of a Ruling Labour Group,’ p.48.

This quote provides insight into the role leading members wish their less experienced colleagues to take, and their awareness that the group should appear to have democratic structures and processes in place. Leading members of all the authorities studied expressed the view that junior councillors wishing to influence policy very often did not possess the strategic overview necessary to contribute usefully, as one senior Worthing Borough councillor phrased the problem:

*I think this is a bit sad when perhaps somebody with expertise in a particular field is thinking, if you like, of the structure of the organisation or building, and the people that are opposing are thinking in terms of the colour of the paint or the flowers around the door. It's frustrating.*

Those who attain local political power were very often reluctant to relinquish it, particularly when they considered their potential successors to lack the same experience or understanding of the issues involved. In Richmond, Sutton and South Somerset, the electoral and practical achievements of those who dominated the policy-making process made their hold on the reins of power a *fait accompli*.

It may be somewhat extreme to describe Liberal Democrat groups as controlled by oligarchies, but application of aspects of Michels' classic analysis to the internal structures and dynamics of the groups sheds light on the way that local political elites come to hold and maintain power, so that a failure of internal democracy becomes almost inevitable. The lack of internal democracy illustrates the complexity of the policy process and

has serious implications for the prospect of the further extension of local democracy through a strategy of Community Politics. If local democracy cannot even be extended within the party group, how can it be extended to a much larger and arguably less sophisticated population? If elected councillors find participation in the policy process difficult, it is justifiable to ask what hope the wider public have of a participatory democracy? The claims of Community Politics to provide a participatory democracy are called into question by the evidence of the closed nature of decision-making within Liberal Democrat party groups.

### **Representation and party group loyalty**

The impact of the party group on the representational behaviour of Liberal Democrat councillors may be further illuminated by the occasions when there is a conflict of loyalty between a policy agreed by the party group and the perceived interests of the area or constituents represented by the councillor. Here, Copus argues, '[a] crisis of representation is generated for the councillor when the group demands public loyalty to its decisions whilst the electorate demands action from the councillor in opposition to the group's decision.'<sup>27</sup>

All Liberal Democrat groups adopt Standing Orders, usually based upon the model provided by the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors, that contain directions for members in these situations. The fact that the model Standing Orders for Liberal Democrat groups emanate from

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<sup>27</sup> Copus, *The Influence of the Political Party Group on the Representative Activities of Councillors*, p.54.

ALDC, rather than the central national party organisation, is indicative of the complex division of power and the importance of ALDC within the Liberal Democrats.<sup>28</sup> The Standing Orders adopted by the majority of groups allow members of the group to dissent from the party whip over a decision directly affecting their ward as long as prior notice is given. Where the party has a large majority it is doubtful that this is a meaningful concession.

The 1997 quantitative survey of Liberal Democrat councillors investigated the respondents' hypothetical willingness to break ranks from their party group over a decision internal to their ward in a number of public and private fora. Table 6.1 below shows that the vast majority of Liberal Democrat councillors were perfectly happy to speak out against group policy in group itself, in a party meeting or in a private meeting. Whether a councillor was prepared to speak out in a public forum was more closely determined by the nature of the issue itself, although Liberal Democrats were particularly reluctant to speak out against the group to any form of media. Only a small fraction of the councillors, 5 per cent and 3 per cent respectively, would never consider speaking out in full council or a committee.

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<sup>28</sup> Copus, 'The Political Party Group: Model Standing Orders and a Disciplined Approach to Local Representation,' p.23.

**Table 6.1: Liberal Democrat councillors' willingness to speak out against a group policy internal to their ward in 1997**

Forum	Likely %	Depends on issue %	Unlikely %	Never %	(Base)
Party Group	92	7	0	1	(842)
Party Meeting	87	10	2	1	(804)
Private Meeting	81	15	3	1	(803)
Public Meeting	38	46	12	4	(813)
Local Press	19	40	30	10	(819)
Local Radio/TV	18	38	32	12	(807)
Full Council	38	39	18	5	(829)
Committee	50	36	10	3	(754)

In common with Copus' empirical data, the survey found that Liberal Democrat councillors, like councillors of all parties, were more prepared to speak out against a decision of the group than to actually vote against that decision, particularly in full council or committee, although again this was very much determined by the nature of the issue itself.

Although the highest proportion of councillors would make their decision depending on the issue concerned, loyalty to the party group was strong among Liberal Democrat councillors. Table 6.2 shows that 40 per cent of

the councillors were disinclined to vote against the group in full council and 32 per cent unlikely to do so in a council committee, whereas only 20 per cent and 26 per cent respectively were likely to vote against the group in full council or a committee.

**Table 6.2: Liberal Democrat councillors' willingness to vote against a group policy internal to their ward in 1997**

Forum	Likely %	Depends on issue %	Unlikely %	Never %	(Base)
Party group	81	15	3	1	(836)
Party meeting	75	19	4	1	(802)
Full Council	20	40	29	11	(829)
Committee	26	42	24	8	(796)

Comparison of the data shown in Table 6.1 and Table 6.2 with that generated by Copus' much smaller sample of Liberal Democrat councillors, suggests that Copus' study, undertaken in 1994, overestimated the extent to which Liberal Democrat councillors were prepared to break ranks from the party group. Copus found that 59 per cent of Liberal Democrat councillors were likely to speak out against the group in full council, 66 per cent would speak out in a committee meeting, 56 per cent would in a public meeting, 44 per cent would in the local press, and 37 per cent would speak out in the electronic media. A



similarly high figure of 43 per cent would vote against the group in full council, while half were likely to vote against the group in committee. The results generated by the larger 1997 survey of Liberal Democrat councillors bare much closer comparison with Copus' results for Labour and Conservative councillors.<sup>29</sup>

Conflicts of this nature had arisen for a majority of the Liberal Democrat councillors (56 per cent) who responded to the 1997 survey. The vast majority of councillors who found themselves in a situation where they opposed a group decision internal to their ward had spoken out against the policy in group, at a party meeting and a private meeting. This may give credence to the view that the majority of members were able to make a contribution to policy-making in the group when sufficiently motivated to do so, or alternatively, it may show that formal mechanisms enabled full discussion of ward-based representational issues, but not of broader questions of strategy and authority-wide policy. Table 6.3 below also shows that a majority of the councillors had spoken out against the decision at a council committee, but only a minority did so in other public forum. The majority of councillors did not speak against the group in full council.

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<sup>29</sup> Copus, *The Influence of the Political Party Group on the Representative Activities of Councillors*, pp. 169-75.

**Table 6.3: Liberal Democrat councillors actually speaking out against a group policy internal to their ward in 1997**

Forum	Yes %	No %	(Base)
Party Group	99	1	(446)
Party Meeting	84	16	(396)
Private Meeting	84	16	(383)
Public Meeting	34	66	(369)
Local Press	21	79	(366)
Local Radio/TV	11	89	(347)
Full Council	40	60	(409)
Committee	64	37	(416)

The pattern shown in Table 6.3 was replicated when councillors were faced with the prospect of actually voting against the group. The vast majority did so at a group meeting and a party meeting, but only 39 per cent had broken ranks at full council and a narrow majority, 51 per cent, had opposed a group decision at a committee meeting. This is shown in Table 6.4 below.

**Table 6.4: Liberal Democrat councillors actually voting against a group policy internal to their ward in 1997**

Forum	Yes %	No %	(Base)
Party Group	92	8	(425)
Party Meeting	78	22	(377)
Full Council	39	62	(413)
Committee	51	49	(405)

Opposing the group on a matter relating to their ward may bring a councillor into conflict with the wider group, and particularly, the leadership. This can be a traumatic experience, leading them to question their commitment to the party and the group. One South Somerset councillor with a long history of service to the Liberal Party and Liberal Democrats described how his opposition to a group decision in favour of a planning application within his ward led him to question the efficacy of party politics in local government:

*I was still opposed to it because I saw it as a loss of open space and it was on a piece of land that had been earmarked in the Local Plan for no development. At our pre-meeting it was put to us that the officers had made considerable progress and it was much better than it was a month ago and they hoped that no one would 'rock the boat.' I said, 'I don't know about rocking the*

*boat, but I don't agree with it.' There wasn't a strong political line, but I had to break ranks with my colleagues. The result was never really in doubt, I suppose, so I was one of a few, but for the first time I thought life might be easier if I wasn't standing on a political label... I actually felt unhappy about it and if I had been a total independent and not been to the pre-meeting there wouldn't have been any inhibitions about speaking my mind.*

For some councillors, however, voting against the group was little more than a 'show' for the benefit of the press and their constituents, with the tacit approval of the leadership. This was particularly apparent on planning issues, where the council may be effectively legally bound to approve an application, as one Sutton councillor explained:

*There are times when we would have to put on a reasonable show on behalf of the ward residents and we would feel that we must do that because we understand their views. But at the same time, we recognise that from the borough standpoint we haven't got a great deal to stand on, in other words, very often you can be advised by the planning officers, 'look here, there's no way if this went to appeal would we stand a chance of winning it.'*

A similar situation was described by a member of the South Somerset Liberal Democrat group, who explained that members of this group may oppose the party line to give the impression of a degree of autonomy to their constituents when they knew they had no prospect of winning the vote:

*There are times when you say and do things for the press rather than for the purpose of the meeting. That's putting it hard and crude, but you do that because you support the people in your ward, but overall if the balance goes against you, then you've made your point.*

This evidence may suggest that the image of Liberal Democrats councillors as more responsive to their constituents and more prepared to defy the party whip when their constituents' interests are threatened may owe more to effective public relations or propaganda than to any truly distinctive approach. On the whole, Liberal Democrat councillors were reluctant to oppose the party group in public and were prepared to accept the constraints of group loyalty unless given special dispensation by the leadership.

### **Community Politics and the party group**

Michels wrote that, 'democracy is inconceivable without organisation',<sup>30</sup> yet he also argued that political organisation heralded the death of democracy. Michels' analysis, then, pertains to the limitations of representative democracy. The necessities of political organisation required to win elections and run a local authority do not sit well with the requirements of democratic organisation. For the individuals involved in the running of a local authority or a party group, often at great personal cost and with great time constraints, how democratically a decision was

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<sup>30</sup> Michels, *Political Parties*, p.61

reached may be less important than that the 'right' decision was reached. This belief may be compounded by the fact that they may judge that those seeking to influence decisions do not possess comparable skills, expertise or judgement. The Liberal Democrat groups studied were not dominated by a single 'boss' figure, but were controlled to a large degree by a small clique of leading members, usually consisting of the Leader and committee chairs. They were able consistently to achieve their desired outcomes from group meetings, often through the force of their personalities, the credibility they had gained from bringing electoral success to the group, and the lack of an alternative power-base or source of ideas.

A senior London Liberal Democrat councillor, provided a vivid description of his own experience of policy-making through two decades of party activity that was representative of Liberal Democrat groups throughout the country:

*There is no elaborate policy-making machinery. I don't know if other people would put it this way, but the predominance of two or three individuals is so great and the credibility that their relative, modest, local electoral success gives, means that policy-making is essentially a Moses-type operation. I regard myself as a safe pair of hands, I don't agree with every dot and comma of Liberal Democrat or previously Liberal Party policy, but broadly speaking what I take to be the party's principles are very much adjacent to my own... An intimate knowledge of the policy wisdom of local party members suggests to me that if they were*

*more engaged as they ought to be in our local policy-making process it wouldn't be a lot more sophisticated than it is with a small band of people essentially responsible for making most of the policy statements. Our local election manifestos have been written, all of them, by me... There is no very sophisticated policy machinery unless you consider my intellect and that of a small number of other colleagues. It reflects a disappointment and a failure, that it simply hasn't been possible to find the time, find the people, within the party to generate sufficient enthusiasm or interest, other than one or two members who have particular bees in their bonnets, and on their pet subject there have been some interesting local discussions. I'd be quite surprised if the vigour of local party discussion rises above our pretty meagre effort anywhere in the country.*

The practical success of the Community Politics method in local elections in the last two decades has brought the Liberal Democrats into a position of dominance in many local authorities on a scale previously only enjoyed by their Labour and Conservative opponents. Community Politics has not succeeded, however, in making the internal processes of Liberal Democrat party groups fully open and democratic. The agenda upon which groups operate, and who participates in determining that agenda, are usually controlled by a small sub-group of leading players. Liberal Democrat groups demand and receive a high level of loyalty from their members to decisions that many frequently feel they did not take.

## 7. COMMUNITY POLITICS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT POLICY AND PRACTICE

The final test of the claim of Community Politics to provide a distinct approach to, and quality of, representation must be an analysis of those areas where the Liberal Democrats have held some form of local power during the last three decades. Liberal and Liberal Democrat controlled authorities have certainly been at the forefront of moves to extend participation and increase decentralisation in local government during this time.<sup>1</sup>

The most extensive decentralisation programme undertaken in British local government was carried out by the Liberal Party in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets after the party took control there in 1986. Elsewhere, councils controlled by the third party have pioneered initiatives in the areas of participation and devolution. Liberal controlled Medina District Council pioneered time set aside at the beginning of meetings for the authority to receive delegations and petitions. Pendle Borough Council provided an opportunity for members of the public to ask questions as each agenda item is reached. Many authorities, including Somerset County Council, Adur District Council and Worthing Borough Council, introduced public question time at the beginning of all their meetings. The London Borough of Kingston, while under Liberal Democrat control, enshrined public question time, with or without formal notice of questions, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Gyford, 'Diversity, Sectionalism and Local Democracy,' pp.114-22; Burns, Hambleton and Hoggett, *The Politics of Decentralisation*, pp.18-9; MacIver, 'Introduction,' p.5.



standing orders of its neighbourhood committee meetings. Extensive budget consultation, seeking detailed feedback on spending plans, was pioneered by Somerset County Council and the London Borough of Sutton. Other authorities have tested innovations such as telephone voting and local referenda. For example, when Liberal Democrat controlled Taunton Deane Borough Council conducted a 'televote' in partnership with a local newspaper on the question of Sunday trading in the borough.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter assesses the success of the application of the ideas of Community Politics to local government. It will also consider, from this analysis, if a common approach to the application of Community Politics in local government practice by Liberal Democrat controlled authorities can be identified. The primary method employed will be empirical case studies of two leading Liberal Democrat controlled local authorities: the London Borough of Sutton, and South Somerset District Council. This chapter will measure the success of these two councils within a narrow band of the broad range of their activities. It will not seek to measure, for example, quality or level of service provision, or success in attracting economic investment. It will only seek to judge success within the unique goals of the Community Politics strategy. Community Politics did not set out to provide more frequent refuse collection or higher standards in education, rather its stated aim was to give people greater power to influence the decisions

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<sup>2</sup> J. Ballard, *Beyond Public Question Time* (Hebden Bridge, Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors, 1995) pp.3-37.

that affected their lives.<sup>3</sup> To measure the success of the authorities' attempts to increase local control and participation, the 'ladder of citizen empowerment' developed by Burns *et al* from Arnstein's original typology will be employed.<sup>4</sup> This model, shown in Figure 7.1 overleaf, identifies three possible levels of empowerment: citizen control, citizen participation, and citizen non-participation, with twelve intermediate steps dividing the three levels, ranging from 'civic hype' and 'cynical consultation' at the lower end of the scale, to 'independent control' and 'entrusted control' at the top of the ladder.<sup>5</sup> Although this measure does not relate exclusively or specifically to Community Politics, it is a useful standard to test progress towards empowerment and citizen control.

Innovations in local government practice now associated with Community Politics, such as decentralisation and enhanced consultation, have not, of course, been restricted to Liberal Democrat controlled councils. Two of the pioneers of decentralisation in the 1980s were Labour controlled Walsall Council and the London Borough of Islington. Indeed, the most recent study of organisational change in local government showed that 79 per cent of local authorities have public consultation forums, 54 per cent have some form of area-based working and 39 per cent have decentralised to some extent.<sup>6</sup>

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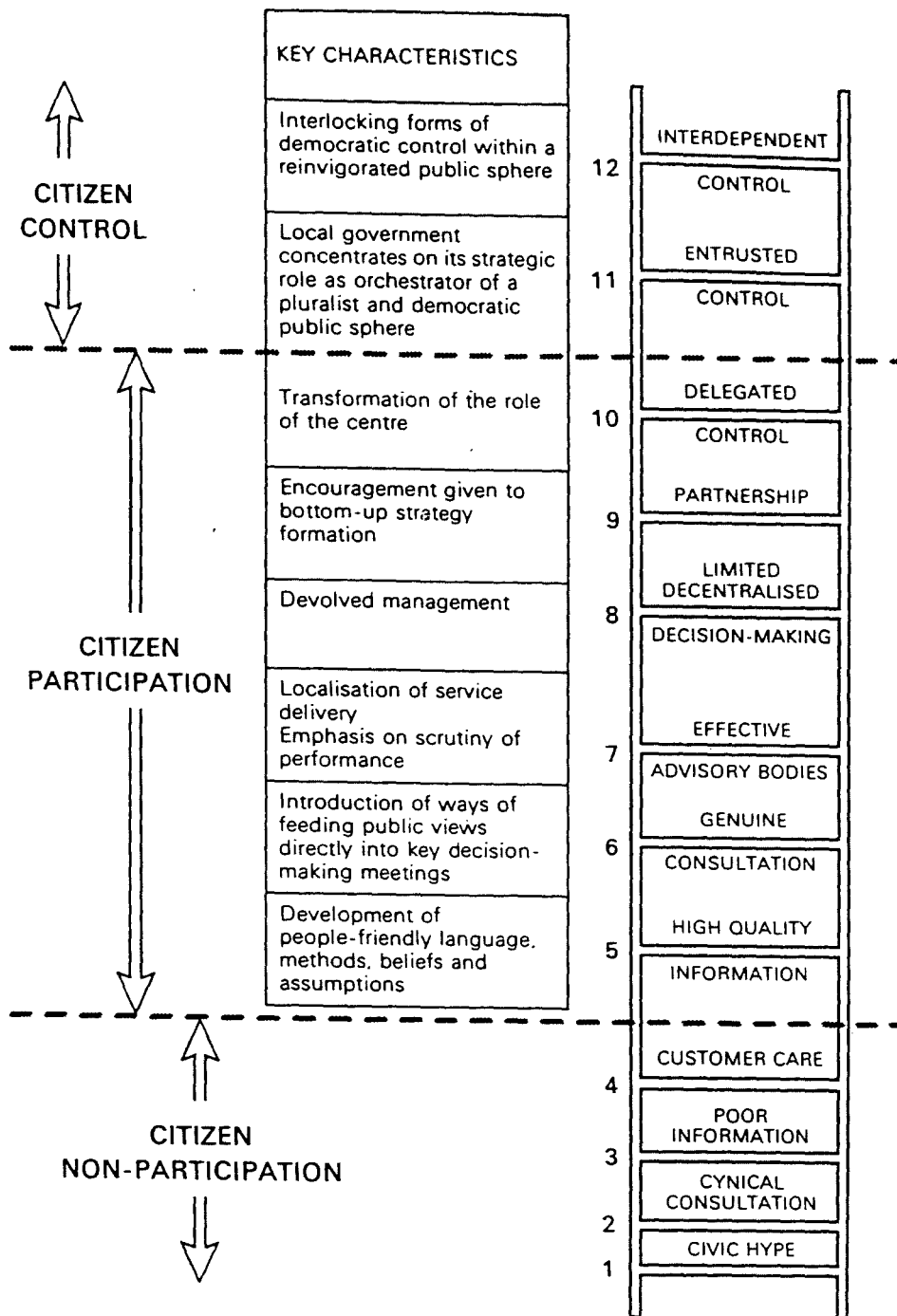
<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the 1970 Community Politics Resolution reproduced in Chapter 2; Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*.

<sup>4</sup> Burns, Hambleton and Hoggett, *The Politics of Decentralisation*, pp.162-3; S. R. Arnstein, 'A ladder of participation in the USA,' *Journal of the Royal Town Planning Institute*, (1971), pp.176-82.

<sup>5</sup> Burns, Hambleton and Hoggett, *The Politics of Decentralisation*, pp.162-3.

<sup>6</sup> Young, *Portrait of Change 1997*, p.40; See also the figures supplied by Wilson, 'Exploring the Limits of Public Participation in Local Government,' p.250.

Figure 7.1: The Ladder of Citizen Empowerment



Source: D. Burns, R. Hambleton and P. Hoggett, *The Politics of Decentralisation* (London, MacMillan, 1994), pp.162-3.

Although decentralisation is now relatively widespread, the first authority to embark upon a complete devolution to an area-based system was the Liberal controlled London Borough of Tower Hamlets in 1986. The nature of the organisational change there and the allegations of racism against the local Liberal party have led Tower Hamlets to enter the popular political imagination as the definitive example of the possibilities and pitfalls of Community Politics as practised by the third party.<sup>7</sup> No study of the practical application of Community Politics in local government, then, would be complete without reference to the events that took place in Tower Hamlets during the period of Liberal control. The chapter will, therefore, begin with a brief account of Liberal control in Tower Hamlets.

### **Liberal control of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets**

The Liberal Focus Team took control of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets in 1986 with an overall majority of one seat. Despite their small majority the Liberal group immediately embarked upon the most radical programme of decentralisation yet undertaken in British local government, devolving all services and related decision-making mechanisms (with the exception of social services which the authority was legally obliged to organise centrally) to seven neighbourhood mini-councils.<sup>8</sup> The Liberals' stated aim in their 1986 local election manifesto was to 'hand power back to the hamlets' and this community empowerment approach was explicitly informed by the

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<sup>7</sup> MacIver, 'Political Strategy,' p.178; Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party 1900-1997*, p.220.

<sup>8</sup> J. Morphet, 'Local Authority Decentralisation – Tower Hamlets Goes All the Way,' *Policy and Politics*, 15 (1987), pp.119-26.

Liberal Party's Community Politics strategy.<sup>9</sup> For many within the Liberal Party, taking power in a traditional working class Labour heartland and giving that power back to the people represented the very essence of Community Politics.

By the time the Liberal Democrats suffered a crushing defeat in the borough at the 1994 London elections, however, Tower Hamlets had ceased to be a beacon and was instead a source of serious embarrassment to the national party. Accusations of racism had been made against the local party in the national press, political opponents blamed the authority's policies for contributing to the atmosphere in which the British National Party had won their first ever principal authority seat in the country in a by-election within the borough in September 1993, and a report produced by the national Liberal Democrat party organisation accepted that the local party had pandered to racism for electoral advantage.<sup>10</sup> The success of the programme of decentralisation undertaken in Tower Hamlets during this period has been evaluated effectively by Lowndes and Stoker, and Burns *et al.*<sup>11</sup> Given that it was dismantled after the Liberals' defeat it cannot be considered an unqualified success. Equally, any achievements of

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<sup>9</sup> Tower Hamlets Liberal Association, *Handing power back to the hamlets: a radical programme for Bethnal Green, Poplar and Stepney* (Tower Hamlets Liberal Association, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> Liberal Democrats, *Political Speech and Race Relations in a Liberal Democracy: Report of an Inquiry into the conduct of Tower Hamlets Liberal Democrats in publishing allegedly racist election literature between 1990 and 1993* (London, Liberal Democrats, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> V. Lowndes and G. Stoker, 'An Evaluation of Neighbourhood Decentralisation. Part 1: Customer and citizen perspectives,' *Policy and Politics*, 20 (1992), pp.47-61; Lowndes and Stoker, 'An Evaluation of Neighbourhood Decentralisation. Part 2: Staff and councillor perspectives,' pp.143-52; Burns, Hambleton and Hoggett, *The Politics of Decentralisation*, pp.52-6 and pp.136-49.

Tower Hamlets Liberals in developing innovative local government practice were overshadowed by the local party's unravelling amid the allegations of racism. To what extent, then, was the pandering to racism that apparently did take place facilitated, encouraged or influenced by the local party's style of Community Politics and local administration?

The Liberals who took control of Tower Hamlets faced a unique set of challenges with the potential to cause severe problems and difficulties if not handled correctly and sensitively. The borough was almost unique in inner-London in 1986 as a Labour controlled authority that had not come under the influence of the new urban left. Tower Hamlets was run by an old-style corporatist Labour Party whose position of seemingly unassailable control over many decades had led to a slow decline in service delivery and responsiveness, to the extent that by 1986 it was generally agreed that Tower Hamlets was a 'rotten' borough.<sup>12</sup> The borough was also unique in inner-London in having a bi-racial rather than multi-racial population. Two different groups, the Bangladeshis and the white working class, lived in distinct concentrations in the West and East of the borough. According to the 1991 census the Bangladeshi population of Tower Hamlets amounted to 22.9 per cent of the total, representing a dramatic influx of people into a relatively compact geographical area in a short space of time.<sup>13</sup> This created many tensions and challenges, both for the local authority as a service provider (for example, in 1994, 60 per cent of the

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<sup>12</sup> Burns, Hambleton and Hoggett, *The Politics of Decentralisation*, p.65.

<sup>13</sup> Burns, Hambleton and Hoggett, *The Politics of Decentralisation*, p.55.

borough's schoolchildren did not have English as their first language<sup>14</sup>) and for race relations in the borough.

The tensions within Tower Hamlets were further exacerbated by the collapse of the docks and the related industries that were the traditional source of employment for the white working class population.

Unemployment in the borough was among the highest in the country, with one in five people out of work. Central government sought to regenerate the docklands by attracting international investment to prestigious developments, such as Canary Wharf on the Isle of Dogs. It facilitated this policy by taking planning control for this part of the borough from the local authority and placing it under the auspices of the London Docklands Development Corporation.

This redevelopment, however, created little employment for the traditional working class community, but did contribute to a dramatic rise in property prices in the South of the borough along the Thames. The upwards pressure on the private housing market coincided with the arrival of Bangladeshi families in need of homes, placing increased demands on public sector housing. The council was legally required to house homeless Bangladeshi families in the borough, whereas many members of the traditional population, for example the children of council tenants with a residency dating back generations, were unable to obtain accommodation through either the private or the public sector. Coupled with the high unemployment rate in the borough, this created a siege mentality among the white working class. One solution

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<sup>14</sup> Tower Hamlets Liberal Democrats, *Tower Hamlets: The East End Success Story* (London, Tower Hamlets Liberal Democrats, 1994), p.1.

that the Liberals advanced to the above housing problems was the controversial Sons and Daughters Policy. This policy reserved a small proportion (2 per cent) of the council's housing allocations for the sons and daughters of existing tenants.

All political parties in the borough tried to make political capital from the Sons and Daughters Policy. In December 1993 the internal Liberal Democrat inquiry concluded that the local party had pandered to racism on a number of occasions between 1990 and 1993. The offences involved election and campaigning material and a press release, relating to immigration from Bangladesh and the Sons and Daughters Policy. The inquiry found of particular concern to be: an election leaflet produced in 1990, that was a 'mock' Labour leaflet criticising the Sons and Daughters' Policy as racist and discriminating against Bangladeshi families; a press release issued in 1991 by a Liberal Democrat councillor, who was also Prospective Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Candidate for Bethnal Green and Stepney, announcing his visit to Bangladesh to distribute disaster aid collected locally, when he also planned to ask Bangladeshi families not to travel to the borough because the council could not house them; a leaflet published by the same Liberal Democrat councillor during the 1992 General Election that depicted a black boxer beside text regarding crime in the borough, and leaflets produced in the Millwall by-elections of November 1992 and September 1993 primarily concerning Bangladeshi immigration and the Sons and Daughters Policy.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Liberal Democrats, *Political Speech and Race Relations in a Liberal Democracy*, pp.29-46.



The actions of the Tower Hamlets Liberals ultimately stemmed from the level of autonomy enjoyed by the local party. In common with most local associations, they produced their own literature, wrote their own manifestos and developed their own procedures and policies. The local party actively sought to distance itself from the national party, fighting elections and governing as the Liberal Focus Team rather than as the Liberal Party or Liberal Democrats. They had an intensely localised perspective, ruling that all councillors must live in the ward they represented. Ingle has noted the lack of organisational support traditionally offered to local Liberal Democrat parties by the national party,<sup>16</sup> and this autonomy potentially allows the party label to be exploited by those who do not share its core values or are willing to allow political opportunism to override those values.

Local autonomy further extended to individual councillors, many of whom were found by the national party to operate as if they were accountable to no one but themselves or vocal groups of constituents. The programme of decentralisation contributed to this process by increasing the power of individual councillors. At the neighbourhood level the views of individual councillors came to carry great weight and importance. Where a decision that had previously been made by fifty councillors was now made by seven, the views of each councillor clearly attained greater significance. Centrally, a small number of leading councillors drove the decentralisation programme with a ruthless determination, often by authoritarian means. The break-up of the traditional central officer structure contributed to an increase in the

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<sup>16</sup> Ingle, 'Party Organisation,' pp.126-8.

power of those councillors with positions at the centre and a lack of proper democratic accountability.<sup>17</sup>

The events in Tower Hamlets illustrate the importance of definitions or constructions of community where ‘community empowerment’ is the stated aim. Many Liberal councillors in Tower Hamlets equated the community with the traditional working class East End. This was reflected in the geographical structure of the seven neighbourhoods created in the decentralisation programme. Burns *et al* noted that, ‘The Liberal initiative drew heavily upon cultural traditions within the locality,’<sup>18</sup> cultural traditions that were not necessarily shared by the Bangladeshi community or those drawn to the new developments established by the LDDC. The local party did not seek to celebrate or even allude to the benefits of multi-culturalism or diversity in its literature and policies, but rather drew upon and emphasised differences and tensions. The report of the internal inquiry commented:

They [the local party members] did not attempt in any of the leaflets we have seen to promote a sense of community or of community of interest, irrespective of colour or ethnic or national origins.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> G. Stoker, ed., ‘Reflections on Neighbourhood Decentralisation in Tower Hamlets,’ *Public Administration*, 69 (1991), pp.373-84; Lowndes and Stoker, ‘An Evaluation of Neighbourhood Decentralisation. Part 2: Staff and councillor perspectives,’ pp.144-52.

<sup>18</sup> Burns, Hambleton and Hoggett, *The Politics of Decentralisation*, p.72.

<sup>19</sup> Liberal Democrats, *Political Speech and Race Relations in a Liberal Democracy*, p.46.

The form of Community Politics and local authority decentralisation practised in Tower Hamlets created a momentum towards 'community empowerment' within a narrow definition of community and a climate in which it became acceptable for issues to be addressed in terms defined by local residents, even if those terms were racist. Where councillors were no longer seeking to lead the community, but to be led by it, an opportunity arose for a vocal, unrepresentative minority to determine the nature of the policy agenda.

Burns *et al* provide a telling cameo of the way that public participation developed in one neighbourhood so that discussions took place in overtly racist terms that went unchallenged by officers or Liberal councillors present.<sup>20</sup> The momentum towards racial tension and a politics based upon race was further enhanced by the language of crisis used by the Liberals in their literature and public statements. They consistently argued that they were dealing with a crisis, where one might reasonably judge that boundaries of acceptable behaviour and acceptable policy are altered. Rather than seeking to calm tension they tried to exploit and benefit electorally from it. This was in part a consequence of the electoral dynamics within the borough, where the growth of support for the British National Party meant that the Labour Party and the Liberals both needed to appeal to British National Party supporters in order to win seats. The internal inquiry into the actions of Tower Hamlets Liberals concluded that they were not a product of racism, but of populism and opportunism, 'a belief that the end (winning power so as to govern for every one) justified the means

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<sup>20</sup> Burns, Hambleton and Hoggett, *The Politics of Decentralisation*, pp.229-34.

(bidding for votes of discontented white voters by pandering to their resentment and anxiety about the Bangladeshi section of the local community).<sup>21</sup>

Pandering to racism obviously does not necessarily follow from local authority decentralisation. A programme of decentralisation based upon a homogeneous construction of community can, however, contribute to a situation where a section of society is marginalised. Equally, decentralisation can increase the power and autonomy of individual councillors, creating a vacuum of accountability and democracy that can be exploited for illiberal ends. The combination of these factors with the autonomy of the local party and the particular problems facing Tower Hamlets in terms of unemployment and patterns of global migration, problems beyond the control of the authority and its members, led to serious mistakes and misconduct.

Many of the difficulties that arose in Tower Hamlets may have been avoided or minimised if decentralisation had taken place in a slightly different form, that is, not based upon the boundaries and aspirations of the traditional working class population. A construction of community that did not seek a return to an imagined pre-war idyll, but one which sought to create a modern, cosmopolitan and multi-cultural community was required. Indeed, if all the democratic political parties had used their position to advance a heterogeneous definition of community and to oppose or challenge a homogeneous definition, a different atmosphere and policy agenda could have been sustained.

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<sup>21</sup> Liberal Democrats, *Political Speech and Race Relations in a Liberal Democracy*, p.6.

It is unfortunate that the positive achievements of Tower Hamlets in local government policy innovation have been overshadowed by the actions of a minority of local party members. The events that took place in Tower Hamlets during the second four year term of Liberal Democrat control undoubtedly sullied the reputation of Community Politics and the third party's commitment to participation on an equitable basis. This chapter will now investigate two more contemporary and, arguably, successful examples of the practical application of Community Politics: empirical case studies of the London Borough of Sutton and South Somerset District Council.

### **Liberal Democrat control of the London Borough of Sutton: Community leadership and consultation**

#### *Background*

Sutton is a relatively small London borough, covering only two Parliamentary constituencies in the South West suburbs of the capital. It has identifiable urban areas, but for the most part fits the classic model of the leafy suburb, with its fair share of parks and civic amenities, libraries and inevitable traffic congestion. National comparison shows Sutton to be a prosperous borough, with a high proportion of professional and managerial workers, and a particularly well paid electorate. Unemployment in March 1997 varied across the borough from two to three per cent, against a national average of

nearly four per cent. Population density is relatively high and in some parts comparable to inner London.<sup>22</sup>

Sutton occupies a special place in the history of Community Politics within the Liberal Party, as it was the scene of Graham Tope's victory in the 1972 Sutton and Cheam Parliamentary by-election. This result was known as 'the Community Politics By-election' because it was the first successful application of a primarily locally orientated campaign in a Parliamentary contest. Although the constituency returned to the Conservative Party in February 1974, Graham Tope was elected to the council three months later, beginning a gradual process of growth that led to the Liberal Party taking control on the mayor's casting vote in 1986. By 1994, 47 of the 56 councillors were Liberal Democrats. Throughout the years of Liberal control Lord Tope has been Leader of the Council. The importance of Sutton to the Liberal Democrats was further enhanced by the capture of the two Parliamentary seats in May 1997, and the loss of neighbouring Kingston and slight fallback in Richmond in 1998. Along with South Somerset District Council, Sutton has become one of the two key flagship Liberal Democrat authorities, because of its history, location and attempts to provide a distinctive and innovative approach to local government.

The Conservative administration of Sutton prior to 1986 was generally regarded as competent but paternalistic and reluctant to change. The Liberal group sought to instil a new set of values to the authority, based upon an open, responsive, community orientated approach, that was

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<sup>22</sup> Butler and Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1997*, p.269, constituency profiles.

unafraid of innovation. This approach was underpinned by the broader desire of the leadership of the Liberal group to make progress towards a realisation of the values they believed to be inherent in the Community Politics strategy. Whilst Member of Parliament for Sutton and Cheam, Lord Tope had argued, with Tony Greaves and Stuart Mole, that Community Politics was not simply an election winning technique, but that it could harbour the development of a new politics:

Community Politics is far more than a technique for winning elections. It is the beginning of a new kind of politics. In part operating on the system from outside, in part reforming it from within, its fundamental aim is to involve ordinary people in the taking of decisions at all levels. As an up-to-date application of traditional radical thought, it offers the possibility of a new, exciting, and potentially revolutionary role for the Liberal movement.<sup>23</sup>

In practical terms, this meant a representative style that was involved with people at the grassroots level, dealing with the issues that affected their day to day lives, and developing the structures and institutions of effective popular participation:

In practice, we are concerned with individual and community grievances, with solving them by collective action and by involving people in the techniques of creating and fighting for alternatives. In the longer term, we want to create institutions

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<sup>23</sup> G. Tope, T. Greaves and S. Mole, *Liberals and the Community* (Todmorden, North West Community Newspapers, 1973), p.15.

whose structure and style is conducive to continuing participation... Our initial commitment, however, is to starting the process at the most basic and relevant levels.<sup>24</sup>

Although some of the idealism and radicalism of this time may have waned in the intervening years, the Liberal leadership that took control of Sutton in 1986 wanted to change the structure and style of the organisation they had inherited to create a more inclusive, open and transparent institution that would encourage and facilitate greater participation in local government. They wanted the authority to become, in the words of Lord Tope in interview with the author: ‘*a little bit more than just a good administration.*’

The change in corporate values fostered by the leadership of the Liberal group also aimed to set the policy and work of the authority within a broader context by adopting and developing a distinctive ‘style of government.’ The authority aimed to take a lead on political issues, often outside its direct remit, and to allow this lead to inform its overall approach to local governance. Sutton made policy and value statements on issues that it may not otherwise have been able to influence or address, such as local and global environmental policy, equal opportunities and race relations. Sutton was, for example, one of the first authorities in the country to adopt a statement of environmental policy. Community Politics, then, means that the council represents its population more comprehensively in broad,

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<sup>24</sup> Tope, Greaves and Mole, *Liberals and the Community*, p.9.



political terms as well as through the creation of opportunities for participation and its traditional role as a service provider.

The attempt to develop a distinctive Community Politics approach were somewhat hindered, however, by a combination of the demographic profile of the borough and the internal politics of the party group. The relatively high population density and compact geographic nature of Sutton meant that to many councillors a programme of area based decentralisation did not appear the obvious route to further popular participation. Although, high population density had not prevented Tower Hamlets in 1986 and Kingston, a borough of comparable size and density, from decentralising to a similar area-based structure in 1990, Sutton was prevented from taking this path despite winning a comprehensive electoral victory in 1990 by a strong body of opinion within the party group that opposed devolution to an area-based system on the principle that it was not suited to the authority. The internal opposition to area-based working when proposed by the group leadership prevented any form of devolution until the creation of four Area Environmental Sub-Committees in 1995, nine years into Liberal control.

The policy impasse that arose in Sutton between 1990 and 1994 may represent an inherent weakness of the Community Politics strategy as it is often applied. Although the core leadership of a local party or group may have a good idea and understanding of the beliefs underlying locally based campaigning, the techniques used to recruit candidates and win elections may not necessarily communicate those ideas to the wider membership and main body of councillors. One senior Sutton

councillor recalled in interview her shock when she realised the majority of her colleagues did not share what she considered to be the core Liberal belief in taking power in order to give it away. Yet where recruitment and campaigning are not given an overtly political or philosophical dimension it may be inevitable that the core values as understood by the leadership will not be shared by the wider group.

### *Community leadership and consultation*

In the absence of an extensive programme of decentralisation, Liberal Democrat controlled Sutton has aimed to achieve the goals of Community Politics by developing the authority's Community Leadership role in building partnerships and dialogue between agencies, service providers in the public and voluntary sectors of health, education, transport and housing, and local groups, and through the extension of popular consultation, and therefore participation, in the council's decision-making processes.

The authority's means of consultation with local groups can be illustrated by the annual budget consultation process. Recent budget consultation in the borough has involved the distribution of an options document to over 1,000 local organisations, including Residents' Associations, GPs, the council's own staff, voluntary agencies, interest groups and public libraries. The document set out the possible options available to the authority and requested contributions to the budget setting process. The consultation was supported by a series of public meetings held around the authority. Sixty-four per cent of those who

responded to a consultation on the consultation exercise felt that they had influenced the authority's final decisions.<sup>25</sup>

The creation of devolved structures to facilitate greater public participation in decision-making centred upon four Area Environmental Sub-Committees, created in 1995, with responsibility for planning, transport and environmental policy, with the exception of parks and library services. Membership of each Area Sub-Committee is restricted to the councillors representing wards in each area. Small budgets are devolved to the Sub-Committees to prioritise, for example, between different traffic schemes. A public question time is held at the beginning of each Sub-Committee meeting (although twenty-four hours notice is required for each question) and facilities exist for individuals and groups to make delegations and presentations.

The Area Sub-Committees offer the public in Sutton consultation rather than direct participation in the authority's decision-making. The actual decisions on the matters before the Area Sub-Committees are taken solely by the councillors who sit on each Sub-Committee. The committees do offer more thorough and (arguably) more effective consultation, and much greater transparency, as decisions are taken closer to the public and by councillors who more closely represent their part of the borough. One senior councillor explained in interview that the Area Sub-Committees offered only a contribution to the eventual decision made by councillors:

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<sup>25</sup> See, Ballard, *Beyond Public Question Time*, p.13.

*One thing that we are very clear on is that consultation is a contribution to the decision-making process. At the end of the day the elected councillors have to take the decision because they are the only ones who are representative and accountable and responsible for that. Consultation doesn't take that away, all it does is give them a better base of information to take that decision on.*

How great, then, has been the impact of the Area Sub-Committees within the borough? There was widespread cynicism among Sutton Liberal Democrat councillors about the level of popular interest and enthusiasm. Typically, public attendance at the Sub-Committees was low unless there was a controversial planning issue affecting a large number of people, as one councillor described:

*Our own Area Committee is not well attended. You get people come for their one and only issue on the agenda, which is a planning issue no doubt, and as soon as that is over they get up and walk out, either pleased or disgusted as the case may be. Which shows a great lack [of interest] within the public of what's going on around them.*

A number of councillors alluded to the low turnout in local elections as a further example of the lack of popular interest in their work, arguing that if people could not be bothered to turnout once every four years there was little prospect of them making a greater commitment to attend regular meetings that may last a number of hours. It was felt, perhaps with some justification, that to expend time and energy

extending participation to people who demonstrably did not wish to participate was a fruitless exercise. Other Liberal Democrat councillors, however, advanced a counter position, arguing that it was important in principle that mechanisms for participation existed for the public to use at their discretion.

It can also be argued that people will only participate if they believe their participation will influence the outcome of a decision. There is certainly evidence, for example, that participation in European national and sub-national elections is higher where a system of Proportional Representation is in place and therefore no votes are deemed 'wasted.'<sup>26</sup> As Batley has written in the context of non-participation in planning, 'The citizen's statutory right to information and consultation means little if he doubts that his involvement can have any impact on planning, and if the local authority feel they have nothing to gain from hearing his views.'<sup>27</sup> To make popular involvement in the decision-making process truly meaningful, however, may imply that the public should be able directly to influence the decisions taken. This was an idea that all the Sutton councillors interviewed were extremely reluctant to consider, as it raised the possibility of unelected and unaccountable groups or individuals influencing or taking decisions. The councillors were conscious that whereas an interest group represents its own interest, a councillor has, in the words of Hill,

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<sup>26</sup> Rallings, Temple and Thrasher, *Community Identity and Participation in Local Democracy*, p.17: all other factors being equal, turnout in PR systems is 7% higher than in first-past-the-post systems.

<sup>27</sup> R. Batley, 'An Explanation of Non-Participation in Planning,' *Policy and Politics*, 1 (1972), p.95.

‘wider responsibilities to the council, his committee and the electorate.’<sup>28</sup>

The unwillingness to extend participation beyond a purely consultative role may be characterised as undemocratic, but for the councillors concerned it was exactly the opposite, as they believed that it would be undemocratic to extend decision-making to the unelected and unaccountable, as one councillor bluntly stated:

*You can't have a public meeting or any group of the public that hasn't been elected actually taking decisions, even if it's only a recommendation on to some other committee. I don't quite see how that would work.*

This view has important implications for the theory and practice of Community Politics. It suggests that traditional democratic structures are essential and that a more informal, ‘round table’ approach, moving closer to direct democracy, is in practice unworkable and even potentially dangerous. A number of the councillors interviewed expressed the view that the Area Sub-Committees had encouraged nimbyism (Not In My Back Yard-ism) and parochialism, particularly in respect of planning issues. Batley did argue that the accusation of parochialism is very often used by councillors, professionals and officers to justify the dismissal of the views of local people from the decision-making process,<sup>29</sup> and, indeed, there may be a fine line between councillors taking their role as elected representatives

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<sup>28</sup> Hill, *Participating in Local Affairs*, p.108.

<sup>29</sup> Batley, ‘An Explanation of Non-Participation in Planning,’ p.105.

seriously and needlessly discounting genuine local opinions and concerns.

Sutton's experience of participation and increased consultation had led many councillors to conclude that consultation served a more useful purpose as a means through which the authority could educate and convince the electorate of the correctness of decisions which had effectively already been taken. One senior Liberal Democrat councillor explained his perception of the role of consultation in this light:

*At the beginning we used to come under a lot of attack for consulting, because we would consult and then we wouldn't necessarily do what people wanted; because you couldn't or because it wasn't practical or because whenever you consult not every one is going to agree anyway, so you're always going to upset someone. So that was often said, that means that you're consulting wrong or it means that you shouldn't consult... Whereas, my thought was, well actually that's the reality, life isn't that simple, every body isn't going to agree. Part of consultation is an education process. The information side and the explaining side are very important... you've got to have an educated electorate, it's no good asking a complicated question without any back-up.*

This may be an example of the classic way in which, as Verba argued, participation can be seen as referring, 'not to a technique of decision

but to a technique of persuasion.<sup>30</sup> This may be an essential component of the practical application of Community Politics, but it may be judged a long distance from the ideal of community control and empowerment that was originally envisaged.

### *Evaluation*

In the twelve years since the Liberal Party first took control of Sutton the party has achieved a position of dominance that now extends to the Parliamentary level, suggesting high levels of popular satisfaction with the council's policies and approach. This chapter, however, is concerned with the extent to which the Liberal Democrats in Sutton have realised the goals of Community Politics. One councillor argued that Sutton had, '*achieved Community Politics*,' that the authority had successfully engendered a sense of interest in the local environment and a realisation that people want different things and compromise should be reached. If one judges the achievements of Liberal Democrat rule in Sutton against Burns *et al*'s ladder of citizen empowerment shown in Figure 7.1, however, the council must be placed quite low on the ladder, at the bottom of the citizen participation category.<sup>31</sup> There has been the development of people-friendly language, methods, beliefs and assumptions, and also attempts to feed public views into the decision-making process, but the authority has not devolved its management, has not developed an entirely bottom-up strategy, nor has it transformed the role of the centre to a purely strategic one.

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<sup>30</sup> S. Verba, *Small Groups and Political Behaviour* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961), p.220.

<sup>31</sup> Burns, Hambleton and Hoggett, *The Politics of Decentralisation*, pp.162-3.



According to this model, then, Sutton has some way to go before it achieves a high level of citizen participation, and a long way to go before it nears a degree of citizen control.

The members of the authority have, however, begun to grapple with the dilemmas and contradictions of increased participation and consultation. It is a disappointment for many Liberal Democrat councillors that their colleagues were over cautious in the past and therefore did not begin to develop techniques for achieving greater participation earlier. There is a need to develop new mechanisms to facilitate participation appropriate to an area like Sutton, where the population is articulate and informed, not facing great poverty or deprivation, but possibly able to manipulate the system to its own advantage. It is possible, for example, that devolving greater responsibility will lead residents to behave more responsibly.

Lord Tope conceded in interview that the goals of Community Politics had not been achieved throughout the country as much as he had hoped when he supported the Community Politics Resolution at Eastbourne in 1970. An opportunity may exist in Sutton for the techniques and mechanisms for achieving greater community participation, control and empowerment to be more satisfactorily developed. If the opportunity is not taken, participation in the borough may become not empowerment, or even a two-way dialogue, but a more cynical one-way process of education and persuasion.

## **Liberal Democrat control of South Somerset District Council: The administration of place**

### *Background*

South Somerset District Council was created (originally as Yeovil District Council) in the local government reorganisation of 1974. The authority was Conservative controlled from its inception until the Liberal Party took minority control in 1983 and overall control in 1987. Although Somerset has a tradition of Liberal representation in local government dating back to the nineteenth century, the Liberals who gained power in 1987 were in fact a departure from the landowning, agricultural class who had previously dominated civic life in the county. The Liberals represented a new middle class of professionals, notably teachers and other public sector employees, who became the governing elite throughout Somerset during this period, as a result of social, cultural and demographic changes combined with the politicisation of local government.<sup>32</sup>

South Somerset District Council covers an extremely large geographical area of 370 square miles, taking in the small towns of Yeovil, Chard, Crewkerne and Wincanton, each with a strong sense of its own identity. South Somerset is not a particularly prosperous area, though it does not have an unemployment problem of the magnitude found in many urban areas.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> M. Woods, 'Discourses of power and rurality: Local politics in Somerset in the 20<sup>th</sup> century,' *Political Geography*, 16 (1997), pp.453-78.

<sup>33</sup> Butler and Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1997*, Parliamentary constituency profiles, p.277.

The Liberal leadership that took control of South Somerset District Council in 1987 were, as noted above, very much drawn from the educated, public sector orientated middle class. They perceived their interests to be in conflict with those of the Thatcher government in power nationally, which they viewed as dogmatically and ideologically opposed to the public sector and to the values of community they sought to defend. This new generation of highly politicised members brought a new set of corporate values to the authority.

Control of local administration in the county provided the opportunity to oppose Thatcherism both electorally and practically. Taking council seats and ultimately Parliamentary seats from the Conservative Party was a contribution to their removal from national power. Moreover, local power provided the opportunity to demonstrate an alternative to Thatcherism, by showing that it was possible to provide effective and efficient administration without recourse to the use of market mechanisms, and for that administration to be organised around the idea of community and communal values rather than individualism and consumerism. They wished to oppose what Philips has described as, ‘that substitution of consumer for citizen which presents the market expression of consumer “preferences” as the best way of finding out what people want.’<sup>34</sup> An illustration of this was provided by one senior member’s description of his motives for entering local politics:

*Because there was no possibility that I could see of anything else but Thatcherism [nationally], focus at the local level and*

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<sup>34</sup> A. Philips, *Local Democracy: the Terms of the Debate* (London, Commission for Local Democracy, 1994), p.22.

*do what you can at a local level, where you can. I think that's been quite clear, where, say, with this authority some of the key issues have been to improve local access for people, local democracy, local participation.*

In practical terms, then, the Liberal Democrats sought a radical transformation of the authority along lines that fitted more closely with a Community Politics model of community empowerment:

There was a desire to organise the authority in a way which promoted the idea of working with the community, to match organisational capacity with political aspirations and to improve corporate cohesiveness through improved member and officer relationships.<sup>35</sup>

The actual recipe for reform evolved from the authority's unsuccessful bid for unitary status in 1990. During the first four year term of Liberal control the council sought, in conjunction with neighbouring Mendip District Council, to become a unitary authority in the East and South of Somerset. Their bid was successfully opposed by the Liberal Democrat controlled Somerset County Council. The application for unitary status had involved a far reaching internal review of the authority's structure and working practices. One of the more radical ideas to emerge from this process was complete devolution to an area-based system. After the failure to become a unitary authority, the Liberal Democrat group sought and won an electoral mandate in 1991 for a complete

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<sup>35</sup> South Somerset District Council, *Lessons from Change at South Somerset District Council* (South Somerset, 1993), pp.1-2.

restructuring of the council and its services to an area based system, to bring the authority 'closer to the people.'

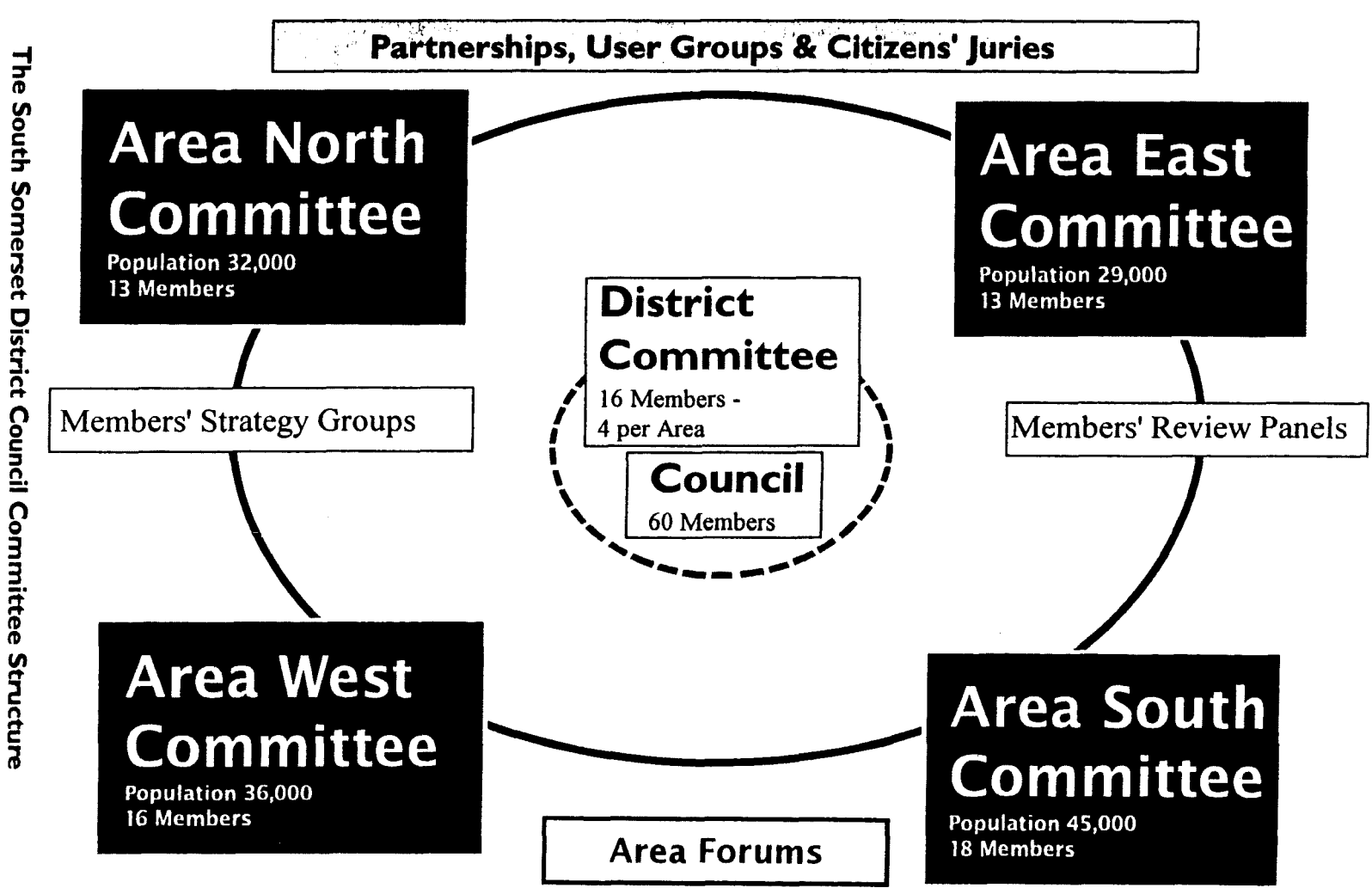
*The administration of place: Area-based decentralisation*

In May 1991 South Somerset District Council dismantled its existing committee structure and moved to an entirely new way of working. The traditional service based departments were replaced with four Areas, covering the geographical North, South, East and West of the District. The majority of staff were moved out of the central offices in Yeovil to their Areas. Initially, four corporate committees were left at the centre, though these were later replaced by a single District Committee of 16 members, four from each Area. It was not only a dramatic organisational change, but also a huge change of style and culture, particularly for many officers who had spent their entire careers within a fixed departmental structure.

Many councillors, however, believed that the original decentralisation did not go far enough in devolving power to the Areas, and that without devolved budgets local control could not be achieved. In 1995 the Liberal Democrat group sought and won a further electoral mandate to devolve further power and budgetary control to the Areas. In addition, the authority joined with the larger County and smaller Town councils to create One Stop Shops in each Area where the public could access all local services. Within the authority, four permanent district wide strategy groups of members to formulate policy on key areas (environment, land-use, economic & transport, social and equality, and scrutiny) were created, along with temporary review

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# South Somerset District Council Committee Structure



The South Somerset District Council Committee Structure

Figure 7.2: Structure of South Somerset District Council

Source: South Somerset District Council

Concern was expressed, however, by Liberal Democrat councillors with regard to the relationship between the centre and the periphery in South Somerset. A number of councillors expressed the view that leading members and senior officers with roles at the centre attempted to exercise control over the business of the Area Committees, to the exclusion of the councillors within each Area. One Liberal Democrat councillor argued in interview:

*It's an issue I feel a little bit unhappy with, talking at Area level. What happens is that the Area Chairman meets with the Area Director and the Area Administrator, and I'm not sure who else because I've never been in. They have their pre-agenda meeting and put it together. To some extent I feel a bit excluded from that process.*

An important implication here was that if councillors found it difficult to influence the agenda of an Area Committee, the influence of the public might be considered minimal. Indeed, although the public could ask questions without notice and raise issues through Public Question Time at the beginning of each meeting, there was a month delay before an issue raised appeared on the agenda.

There was a question mark, then, in the minds of a number of councillors, often the more junior members of the Liberal Democrat group, as to the extent to which the Area Committees had been granted autonomy. There was a perception that the centre was unwilling to release its grip on the Areas. This, of course, is a problem which may be faced by any devolved authority. When the role of the centre is



reduced to minimal, strategic one, the periphery may resent its involvement in any aspect of their business, for example, where it seeks to intervene to ensure equitable standards throughout the authority. A paradox of decentralisation is the need for strong central control to drive the initial change.<sup>38</sup> Those members and officers with corporate roles may find their power and influence increases and is unchallenged as the majority of the authority recedes into the periphery. In addition, decentralisation may reduce the casework burden on councillors as many constituents took problems direct to identifiable officers at One Stop Shops, increasing the opportunity for members with responsibility at the centre to further develop the strategic aspects of their roles. Councillors who did not sit on the District Committee very often felt excluded from the strategic and long term planning within the authority. One junior Liberal Democrat councillor expressed the sense of exclusion he and a number of colleagues felt from much of the important business of the council:

*It's the District Committee that is the powerhouse. Full Council has almost become redundant, we are scrabbling around sometimes to find things to go on the Full Council agenda. Because the real 'biz' that Area Committees cannot deal with, corporate issues, are dealt with at District Committee. So there is a bit of a feeling among some of my colleagues that if you're not on the District Committee then you're impotent, because the power lies on corporate matters on the District Committee.*

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<sup>38</sup> Lowndes and Stoker, 'An Evaluation of Neighbourhood Decentralisation. Part 1,' p.49.

To extend participation further, the council has undertaken a programme of pro-active consultation, seeking to overcome the perennial danger facing every local authority of only consulting with and therefore responding to the minority of the public who will usually participate in consultation exercises. A conscious attempt has been made to seek out the views of the wider population through telephone canvassing, focus groups and written enquiries to the 3 per cent of the local population without a telephone. Of course, the quality of such measures will depend on the questions asked, but the intention and willingness to be pro-active may be judged significant.

How great, then, has been the impact of the decentralisation and organisational change on the lives of the population of the district? If one again takes the 'ladder of citizen empowerment' proposed by Burns *et al*<sup>39</sup> as the criteria to judge success, then the impact can be judged very significant, as the authority can be placed on the borderline between citizen participation and citizen control. A form of delegated control has been established where the centre concentrates on its strategic role within a pluralist and democratic public sphere, with management and service delivery devolved wherever possible.

On the other hand, although the mechanisms and opportunities for citizen control exist, the actual use that the public have made of them has been limited. Although there have been large attendances at Area Committees dealing with specific planning applications, internal figures show an average public attendance of between 20 and 28

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<sup>39</sup> Burns, Hambleton and Hoggett, *The Politics of Decentralisation*, pp.162-3.

people per committee in 1995/6, suggesting that less than 0.07% of the local population of 140,000 regularly attend their Area meetings.

### *Evaluation*

In many respects South Somerset District Council presented the Liberal Democrats with an ideal opportunity to put into practice many of the ideas discussed and advanced within the party in the local government field. As a District Council within a two-tier structure the authority did not have responsibility for education or social services, two services that it would legally have been unable to devolve, leaving a rump of departments at the centre. As a rural council spread over a wide area decentralisation was an innovation well suited to the authority. This opportunity was grasped and thus far a combination of evolution and revolution has enabled South Somerset to become an example of best practice in local government, winning the Local Government Association's prestigious *Council of the Year* Award in 1997.

South Somerset shows that the ideals of Community Politics and the commitment of an articulate and talented core of members to it can drive a local authority to achieve excellence in many areas. South Somerset has also shown that the idea of community can be a potent and inclusive force in local politics. The evaluation of the achievement, however, has to be tempered by the fact that they have not succeeded in involving the majority of their citizens in the mechanisms created to

facilitate their participation. Popular participation within the structures provided by the authority remains a minority activity. Clearly, there are limits to the impact of participation within local government structures can have on a locality or a population. Participation alone cannot reduce inequality or change economic circumstances. It may, though, reduce feelings of powerlessness and isolation and in doing so empower people to go on to work for more consequential change.

### **Community Politics in policy and practice**

The case studies of the London Borough of Sutton and South Somerset District Council suggest that a distinct Community Politics approach to the practice of local government can be identified. The key features of the approach are to change the style, language and culture of the authority to create an open, accessible and transparent organisation, and to bring the authority closer to the public through area-based devolution. These two authorities have travelled different distances down this path and their relative success in developing the structures for citizen participation and citizen control reflect this fact.

Extending participation in decision-making and devolving the structures of a local authority involves an engagement with a number of dilemmas, contradictions and tensions. As Wilson has noted, ‘there is a major tension between participation as a goal and public apathy,’<sup>40</sup> and both these authorities have struggled to attract the participation of more than a small minority of the local population. The heightened

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<sup>40</sup> Wilson, ‘Exploring the Limits of Public Participation in Local Government,’ p.257.

importance of unaccountable local groups or the more autonomous and strategic role taken on by the centre may mean that initial moves to increase consultation or devolve structures appear to weaken democratic controls and processes rather than enhance them. The case studies of South Somerset and Sutton under Liberal Democrat control show that it is important that these dilemmas are confronted and not avoided if progress is to be made towards developing innovative local government practice. Councillors must not lose their nerve, or faith in local democracy, if there is to be further realisation of the goals of the Community Politics strategy.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The original architects of the Community Politics strategy within the Liberal Party, the small coterie of young idealists, inspired by the counter-culture of the late 1960s and known as the Red Guard, set very high, perhaps impossible, goals for the strategy. They wanted Community Politics to be a means of achieving social transformation.<sup>1</sup> The critique of representation made by the original advocates of the strategy raised a number of telling points regarding participation, authenticity and passivity in contemporary culture, that retain their salience to this day. They argued that modern society was increasingly characterised by a culture where people allowed others to act on their behalf in many important areas of life. So that, for example, sport was the realm of the professional athlete, conversation of the talk show host, politics of the politician, whom the majority passively observed acting on their behalf. True authenticity would only be regained if people acted for themselves, by playing sport rather than being a spectator, engaging in conversation rather than watching television, and participating in decision-making rather than leaving politics to the professional politicians.<sup>2</sup> The Community Politics critique of representation went to the very heart of that concept.

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<sup>1</sup> Hain, *Radical Liberalism and Youth Politics*, p.19; Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Greaves, 'A New Perspective,' p.10; National League of Young Liberals, *Eastbourne '70: A Strategy for Liberals*, p.5.

Community Politics, then, was related to cultural changes in society. The decline of deference put a strain upon existing power relations within society. The inequality of power and status inherent in the relationship between the representative and the represented was a widespread contemporary concern among activists and academics alike.<sup>3</sup> Community Politics aimed to address this unequal power relationship by bridging the divide between representatives and represented, and involving such a proportion of the population in decision-making, that the boundaries between representatives and represented became blurred and, finally, meaningless. It was this participatory society that the architects of the strategy wished to create. Community Politics can be seen, therefore, as a radical attempt to address the unequal distribution of power within society, not through the traditional means of adjusting economic mechanisms, but through the political means of adjusting representative relationships.<sup>4</sup>

To judge Community Politics by the yardstick of whether it has or has not transformed society would, of course, be an entirely futile exercise. In this thesis more mundane indicators have been employed to assess the impact of Community Politics. How distinctive Liberal Democrat councillors are in terms of their social and personal background characteristics, in their representative style, and the way in which they govern and manage are the issues on which such an assessment is based. In addition, the historical development of Community Politics and its

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<sup>3</sup> Eulau, 'Changing views of representation,' pp.36-7.

<sup>4</sup> See, Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, pp.1-5.

impact on the third party, and the theoretical implications of the strategic emphasis on community and local campaigning for the Liberal Democrats, were examined.

### **Community Politics and the third party**

Liberal parties exist in most European democracies. Although their electoral fortunes tend to fluctuate, they generally have a very low level of core support and frequently poll below the 10 per cent mark.<sup>5</sup> It is unlikely that the Liberal Party in Britain would have ceased to exist without the benefits of Community Politics. But if the pattern of European Liberal parties is a guide, then the party would hardly have achieved a level of national support to give it a credible long term presence in the House of Commons under the first-past-the-post system. The Community Politics methods and the local electoral success they brought sustained the third party for many years and gave it the strength on the ground and credibility to take advantage of the ebb and flow of the national electoral tide, notably the Labour Party's dismal performance in 1983 and the Conservative collapse in 1997. Although tactical voting to oust the Conservatives may have been the single most important factor behind the Parliamentary breakthrough achieved in 1997, the Liberal Democrats' local government base and experience made them a credible alternative, and provided them with an election winning political infrastructure.

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<sup>5</sup> E. J. Kirchner, 'Introduction,' in E. J. Kirchner, ed., *Liberal Parties in Western Europe* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp.9-11.



The adoption of the Community Politics strategy by the Liberal Party at Eastbourne in 1970 was a turning point in the history of the third party. It is probably no coincidence that the 1970 Assembly was the last occasion that the continued existence of the third party was seriously questioned by its own members. The leading article in *The Times* the day after the Resolution was passed argued that the strategy might provide the third party with a new *raison d'être* as, 'the national patriots of community action,'<sup>6</sup> and, indeed, this proved an accurate prediction. Community Politics has enabled the Liberal Party to develop a distinctive style and approach, characterised by the Focus newsletter, that has brought unprecedented local electoral success and whose style has been imitated by the major parties.<sup>7</sup> The research by Dorling *et al* has shown the impact of campaigning factors over demographic and other variables in the spread of the Liberal Democrat vote at local elections.<sup>8</sup>

The electoral impact of the Community Politics strategy and the uncompromising idealism of its original aims have, however, created serious complications for the third party. Throughout the three decades that the party has embarked on the strategy there has been a serious tension between those who believe that the strategy is little more than a very effective means of winning local elections and the radicals who view it as 'an ideology, a system of ideas for social transformation.'<sup>9</sup> This tension between these two groups has often polarised, particularly during

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<sup>6</sup> *The Times*, 26/9/70, p.13.

<sup>7</sup> MacIver, 'Introduction,' p.5.

<sup>8</sup> Dorling, Rallings and Thrasher, 'The epidemiology of the Liberal Democrat vote,' pp.45-70.

<sup>9</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.1.

the years of the alliance of the Liberal Party and SDP, into a conflict between the Westminster based leadership of the national party and the campaigners centred on the Association of Liberal (Democrat) Councillors. The fact that the original architects of the strategy furnished it with unrealisable aims has exacerbated this tension. Those not wholly committed to the strategy felt sure it was an unworkable pipe dream, while its advocates and practitioners championed an uncompromisingly idealistic strategy, arguing it was the most viable expression of contemporary liberalism.<sup>10</sup> There was often little middle ground between the two positions. There has not been, in the last two decades, an attempt to re-evaluate the strategy theoretically and furnish it with more realistic goals. Those practising the strategy on the ground have very often been left to develop and interpret it as they see fit. While this can be a strength, allowing the approach to be tailored to fit different localities and circumstances, it has also been a weakness, meaning that there is no agreed understanding of what does and does not constitute Community Politics. Consequently, as MacIver has pointed out, critics of the strategy have been able to argue that it is frequently reduced to the populist manipulation of discontent for electoral gain:

According to these critics, the political theory on which Community Politics is based is poorly understood by those who practise it; it is thus reduced to a mere technique for gaining political advantage by the manipulation of local grievances,

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Greaves, 'The Alliance: Threat and Opportunity,' pp.19-23.

which can be easily mishandled by the unwary, as in Tower Hamlets.<sup>11</sup>

If those undertaking political activity in the name of Community Politics in the future are to avoid falling into the trap of reactionary populism that befell the Tower Hamlets Liberal Democrats, then new, realistic goals will have to be developed for the strategy that connect it inextricably with liberalism.

### **Community Politics and liberal theory**

The passing of the Community Politics Resolution in 1970 and the subsequent practical acceptance of the strategy by the third party's activists completed the reconnection of the Liberal Party with the Social Liberal tradition of Thomas Hill Green and L. T. Hobhouse that began during Jo Grimond's leadership of the party. Before Grimond ascended to the leadership in 1956 the Liberal Party was undoubtedly closer to the Conservative Party than the Labour Party in outlook and approach, and indeed owed a number of its six Parliamentary seats to local agreements with the Conservatives. In the last three decades, however, the Liberal Party and now the Liberal Democrats have become a definite party of the centre-left, to the point that they now share much common ground with the Labour Party. This fact was acknowledged by Paddy Ashdown's abandonment of the policy of equidistance between the two main parties in his Chard speech of May 1992 and the decision to accept the new

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<sup>11</sup> MacIver, 'Political Strategy,' p.178.

Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair's offer of places on a Cabinet committee to oversee constitutional reform.<sup>12</sup>

The reconnection with the political tradition exemplified by Green does raise a number of important theoretical dilemmas and questions. Community Politics places an exceptionally problematical concept, namely community, at the heart of the third party's strategy. Community is an extremely ambiguous term that will no doubt always elude exact definition, yet its continued use in many different contexts clearly demonstrates that it retains a strong ideological force. The call for a renewal of community has long represented a deep seated desire to achieve a level of fraternity and communality that often appears absent from modern, urban society. This can be seen in Green's emphasis on community in the nineteenth century,<sup>13</sup> and Tony Blair's present location of community as a central tenet of the Third Way which he wishes to introduce to British politics.<sup>14</sup> There have been long standing doubts since the process of industrialisation began that the idea of community is compatible with urban society.<sup>15</sup> There is strong evidence, however, to suggest that friendship and kinship are important components of urban societies, but that these social networks are dependent on the exclusion of the vast majority of people a city dweller will come into contact with

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<sup>12</sup> A. Leaman, 'Ending Equidistance,' *Political Quarterly*, 69 (1998), pp.160-9.

<sup>13</sup> Den Otter, "'Thinking in Communities",' pp.67-84.

<sup>14</sup> T. Blair, *The Third Way: New Politics for a New Century* (London, Fabian Society, 1998), p.4.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*; Wirth, 'Urbanism as a Way of Life,' pp.12-3; Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, pp.346-70.

each day.<sup>16</sup> There is a difference, therefore, between the social relationships found in small rural and complex urban environments. The implications of this fact for contemporary politics were set out by Jo Grimond when he argued that he was necessary for politicians to connect with the 'new communes' to which people held allegiance in modern society.<sup>17</sup> The spatial organisation of local government and elections have made the connection with non-geographic communities hard to achieve and often seemingly irrelevant. Very often, Community Politics has seemed to be little more than locality politics. Community Politics evolved from modern concerns and circumstances, yet its application has been frequently concerned with a primarily traditional concept of community bound to a homogeneous construction of geographic locality.

Community can represent a positive desire for common purpose and connection with others, but it may also articulate an equally powerful but negative emotion. It is an idea that when linked to our constructions of identity can include or exclude certain individuals or categories of persons from belonging to a place, nation or culture.<sup>18</sup> There is a sense in which, when people speak of community they are often referring to themselves and others they consider to be like them. Indeed, the events that took place in Tower Hamlets during the period of Liberal control, described in the proceeding chapter, illustrate the very real dangers of

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<sup>16</sup> Milgram, 'The Experience of Living in Cities,' p.1464; Kasarda and Janowitz, 'Community Attachment in Mass Society, pp.328-9; Hill, 'Community concepts and applications,' pp.107-8.

<sup>17</sup> Grimond, 'Community Politics,' p.141.

<sup>18</sup> Frazer, 'The Value of Locality,' p.100.

narrow and populist constructions of community in contemporary local politics.

Placing an idea founded upon the collective rather than the individual at its core has serious implications for a liberal party. Green's conception of community, for example, was founded upon the idea that within society there was a common good more valuable than the interests of any one individual. It has been argued, for example by Berlin and Richter, that although Green's own liberalism should not be doubted, such a conception could be used to justify the denial of liberty to the few in the name of the many.<sup>19</sup> Equally, as Dahrendorf has argued, the protection of elementary human rights founded on a belief that, 'individual human beings are inviolate,' is the first prerequisite of liberalism and a liberal society.<sup>20</sup> When a liberal party places the collective good above individual rights, or develops a philosophy that may allow this to happen, then there is a risk that it will lose sight of the essential, core values of liberalism.

Community Politics was originally conceived as a strategy with global implications and perspective, to be 'relevant in any social group, from the family to the world.'<sup>21</sup> Yet over the last three decades it has been applied almost exclusively within narrow geographical localities, usually defined by local authority ward boundaries. A politics based on a restrictive

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<sup>19</sup> Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty,' p.133; Richter, *The Politics of conscience*, p.211.

<sup>20</sup> Dahrendorf, *The future tasks of liberalism*, pp.8-10.

<sup>21</sup> Greaves and Lishman, *The Theory and Practice of Community Politics*, p.1.

construction of community or grounded in the idea of geographic locality may prove antithetical to the liberal tradition. As Bauman has eloquently described, a central tenet of modernity – of which liberalism was the core – was that individuals should be encouraged to break free from the communities into which they were born in order to develop and realise their true potential:

[M]odernity spent most of its time and a lot of its energy on fighting communities – those larger than life groupings into which people are born, only to be held inside them for the rest of their lives by the dead hand of tradition strengthened by collective surveillance and blackmail. From the Enlightenment on, it has been seen as a commonsensical truth that human emancipation, the releasing of genuine human potential, required that the bounds of community should be broken and individuals set free from the circumstances of their birth.<sup>22</sup>

The narrow application of Community Politics may mean that its primary purpose very often seems to be the defence of the very communities that trap individuals, preventing them from transcending the circumstances into which they were born. Such a position represents an antithesis of liberal values.

The reconnection of the Liberal Party, and now the Liberal Democrats, with the tradition of Social Liberalism has combined with eighteen years

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<sup>22</sup> Z. Bauman, *Alone Again: Ethics After Certainty* (London, DEMOS, 1994), p.30.

of right-wing Conservative government and internal changes in the Labour Party, to bring the third party closer to Labour than at any other time in the post-war era. At present, the Liberal Democrats are reaping the benefits of this shift with participation in the highest echelons of government. If the Liberal Democrats are unable to articulate a distinct liberal alternative, however, they may find the Labour Party exerting a magnetic pull on its supporters and members to the point that its independent existence is once again called into question. A liberal party that does not understand or advance the cause of liberalism will prove unsustainable.

### **Community Politics and representation**

At the core of the Community Politics strategy was a critique of contemporary representation. The original advocates of the strategy argued that existing representative arrangements produced an elite of remote representatives disproportionately drawn from a narrow stratum of society who paid little attention to the views or wishes of their constituents. Representative democracy only served to entrench the powerlessness of the vast majority of the population. The Community Politics solution was a new type of representation, founded upon subsidiarity to facilitate popular participation in all levels of decision-making and a new form of representative relationship founded upon more responsive and conscientious representation. The involvement of more people in decision-making implied a breaking down of the traditional boundaries between representatives and their constituents, and that



representatives should be drawn from all sections of society. Community Politics, then, implied a distinctive quality and type of representation.

How far do the results of this study address that claim? The new empirical data generated by this study provides little evidence to support the contention that Community Politics has succeeded in this respect. First, the evidence shows Liberal Democrat councillors to fit the socio-demographic profile of representatives found in all modern democracies. The vast majority are male, middle aged and well educated. In comparison with Labour and Conservative councillors, Liberal Democrats comprise a higher proportion of women; in other respects, notably age and education, they are even less representative of the general population. It is, then, reasonable to conclude that Community Politics as a strategy has not yet realised its intended aim of achieving greater popular participation in representative politics. Rather, local government is still the preserve of a narrow stratum of society.

Secondly, there was no evidence from the data presented in this thesis to show that those who became Liberal Democrat councillors behaved differently towards their constituents than councillors of other parties. Indeed, when the 1997 survey of Liberal Democrat councillors undertaken by the author was compared with the survey of a sample of all councillors undertaken for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 1993, it was found that Labour councillors devoted a greater proportion of their total time and a greater amount of actual time to representative activities than Liberal Democrat councillors. There was also empirical evidence to suggest that Liberal Democrat councillors were as prepared as their

counterparts in other parties to put the party group's demands for loyalty before the interests or wishes of their constituents when a conflict of loyalty arose concerning an issue internal to their ward.

Thirdly, when Liberal Democrat councillors were studied within the context of their party groups, it was found that the strategy of Community Politics had not created the new approach it aimed to develop. There was strong evidence from interviews with senior and junior Liberal Democrat councillors to suggest that decision-making within Liberal Democrat party groups on most local authorities was dominated by a small, closed group centred around the leadership. Liberal Democrat councillors had not succeeded in extending full participation in decision-making within their own party groups. This evidence supported the conclusions of the classic studies of political parties undertaken by Ostrogorski and Michels that there is an unavoidable conflict between the necessities of political organisation and the essential components of democratic decision-making.<sup>23</sup>

With respect to local government practice, however, Liberal Democrat controlled authorities have been at the forefront of moves to extend participation and devolution. A number of the most radical and thorough reorganisations of local authorities around these principles have been undertaken by Liberal and Liberal Democrat controlled councils. Due in part to the advance of the third party in local government, however, such reforms are now relatively commonplace, to the extent that 'officially

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<sup>23</sup> Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the organisation of political parties*; Michels, *Political Parties*.

sponsored participation has become a standard element in the process of local decision-making.<sup>24</sup> Because Community Politics is being absorbed into the mainstream, a degree of reinvention may be needed to ensure its place at the cutting edge of local government practice and democratic renewal.

Since the election of the Labour government in 1997, the tone, and to some extent the substance, of the local government debate has altered dramatically. The idea of a future for local government as the providers of a more diverse form of community leadership appears to be gaining ground.<sup>25</sup> The low turnout in recent elections and the Blair government's commitment to devolution and constitutional reform have moved the debate about the shortcomings of existing democratic institutions and the need for a more participatory democracy into the political mainstream.<sup>26</sup> Although the development of Community Politics thus far has taken place within a largely hostile political environment, it may now be possible for the strategy to develop further in a warmer political climate.

### **Ideals and realities**

The record of Community Politics, then, is mixed. It has not changed the nature of representation in this country, but it has led to innovations in

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<sup>24</sup> G. Stoker, 'Local Political Participation,' in *New perspectives on local governance* (York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1997), p.181.

<sup>25</sup> M. Clarke and J. Stewart, *Community Governance, Community Leadership and the New Local Government* (York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> Wilson, 'Exploring the Limits of Public Participation in Local Government,' pp.247-9.

local government practice and policy. Analysis of the ideals and realities of Community Politics exemplifies the gap between the theory and the practice of political activity. The seemingly inevitable gap between ideal and reality, as Weber argued, does not mean that political activity is futile. On the contrary, an underlying ideal, belief or faith must be present if actions are not to be meaningless:

The final result of political action often, no, even regularly, stands in complete inadequate relation to its original meaning. This is fundamental to all history, a point not to be proved in detail here... However, some kind of faith must always exist. Otherwise, it is absolutely true that the curse of the creature's worthlessness overshadows even the externally strongest political success.<sup>27</sup>

Community Politics, then, may not have had the dramatic impact on representation in the United Kingdom that its original advocates hoped. But what Community Politics has achieved, in terms of the revival of the third party and a contribution to the development of local government practice in the areas of participation and devolution, would not have occurred without the principles laid down as the foundations of the strategy three decades ago. The achievement of Community Politics has been to turn an ideal into some form of political reality. The future of the third party may depend on how well it develops in the forthcoming years.

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<sup>27</sup> M. Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Trans. and ed., H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills, London, Routledge Kegan and Paul, 1948), p.128.

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## **APPENDICES**



## **APPENDIX 1: THE QUESTIONNAIRE**



**QUEEN MARY**

AND WESTFIELD COLLEGE  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

**SURVEY OF LIBERAL DEMOCRAT COUNCILLORS**

Public Policy Research Unit  
August 1997

## SURVEY OF LIBERAL DEMOCRATS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The study seeks to explore the background of Liberal Democrat councillors, how they came to enter local politics, and their experiences of serving on local authorities.

This part of the study is based on a questionnaire to Liberal Democrat councillors like yourself. We should be very grateful if you would take a few minutes to complete this short questionnaire, mainly by placing a tick in the appropriate box.

*All information given will be treated in absolute confidence.* Your replies will be seen only by the research team, and no individual will be identified in the study report. If you would like to know more about the study, or have any queries about completing the questionnaire, please do not hesitate to contact John Meadowcroft on 0171-231-3822, or Professor Ken Young on 0171-975-5006.

Please return your completed questionnaire in the reply-paid envelope, within two weeks of receiving it.

Thank you for your time and help.

This questionnaire relates to the Authority to which you give the greater part of your time as a councillor. Please state the name of this Authority and answer all the following questions for this Authority:

---

## SECTION ONE: YOUR PUBLIC LIFE

1. Please state the name of any other Authority on which you presently serve:

---

2. Please describe the overall political management situation in the Authority.  
Is there:

Please state the party/parties

- |   |     |       |
|---|-----|-------|
| A controlling party with an overall majority                        | [ ] | _____ |
| An 'administration' formed by one party without an overall majority | [ ] | _____ |
| An 'administration' formed by a recognised coalition of parties     | [ ] | _____ |
| Or some other way of organising Council business, eg. non-party     | [ ] | _____ |

3. In which year did you first join the Liberal Democrat Party? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Before joining the Liberal Democrats, were you a member of any other political party?  
(Tick all that apply)

- |                         |     | Dates of membership |
|-------------------------|-----|---------------------|
| No                      | [ ] |                     |
| Yes:                    |     |                     |
| Liberal Party           | [ ] | _____               |
| Social Democratic Party | [ ] | _____               |
| Conservative Party      | [ ] | _____               |
| Labour Party            | [ ] | _____               |
| Green Party             | [ ] | _____               |
| Plaid Cymru             | [ ] | _____               |
| Scottish Nationalist    | [ ] | _____               |
| Other (please specify)  | [ ] | _____               |
- 

5. In which year did you first stand for election to the Authority? \_\_\_\_\_

6. In which year were you first elected? \_\_\_\_\_

7. Are you a member of any of the following organisations, and/or were you a member before being elected as a councillor? (Tick all that apply)

	Now	Before election as Cllr
Community Association	[ ]	[ ]
Tenants' Association	[ ]	[ ]
Residents' Association	[ ]	[ ]
Parent/Teacher Association	[ ]	[ ]
School Governors' Committee	[ ]	[ ]
Church or religious organisation	[ ]	[ ]
Voluntary Service Group	[ ]	[ ]
Trade Union	[ ]	[ ]
Professional Association	[ ]	[ ]

## SECTION TWO - YOUR WORK AS A COUNCILLOR

8. Please indicate roughly how many hours in a typical month you spend on the following:

	hours per month
Attending meetings of the Council, committees/sub-committees	[ ]
Preparing for meetings	[ ]
Travelling to and from meetings	[ ]
Dealing with electors' problems, surgeries & pressure groups	[ ]
Attending party meetings relevant to Council duties	[ ]
Meeting officers on official business	[ ]
Public consultation meetings	[ ]
Taking part in organisations/bodies on which you represent the Council	[ ]

9. Please indicate how important the following activities are to you:

	Very Important	Important	Not Important
Dealing with the concerns of individual constituents	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Representing the interests of your ward	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Being involved with particular services through your committee membership	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Being involved in the overall running of the Council	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Carrying out the Party programme	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

10. Do you live in the ward/division you represent?

Yes [ ]  
No [ ]

11. How many electors in total do you have in your ward/division? \_\_\_\_\_

12. How many members represent your ward/division? \_\_\_\_\_

13. Does your ward party produce a regular FOCUS style newsletter?

Yes [ ]  
 No [ ]

14. Do you personally hold advice surgeries?

Yes [ ]  
 No [ ]

If no, please go to Question 15.

15. If yes, how frequently are your advice surgeries held?

More than weekly [ ]  
 Weekly [ ]  
 Fortnightly [ ]  
 Monthly [ ]  
 Every six weeks [ ]  
 Less often [ ]

16. If a group of electors from your ward were opposing a decision or policy of your Liberal Democrat Group on the Council and you agreed with them on the issue please indicate by ticking the appropriate box, how likely you are to:

a) Speak out against the decision or policy of the group in the following places:

	Very likely	Likely	Depends on the issue	Not very likely	Not at all likely	Never
Party Group Meeting	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Party Meeting	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Private meeting	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Public meeting	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
The Local Press	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Local radio/TV	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Full Council	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Committee Meeting	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Other (please specify)						

b) vote against a decision or policy of the Liberal Democrat Group in the following places:

	Very likely	Likely	Depends on the issue	Not very likely	Not at all likely	Never
Party Group Meeting	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Party Meeting	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Full Council	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Committee Meeting	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Other (please specify)						

17. Have such issues ever arisen in your Liberal Democrat Group?

Yes [ ]  
No [ ]

If no, please go to Question 18.

18. If yes, did you take any of the following steps?

a) Speak out against the policy or decision in any of the following places:

	Yes	No
Party Group Meeting	[ ]	[ ]
Party Meeting	[ ]	[ ]
Private Meeting	[ ]	[ ]
Public Meeting	[ ]	[ ]
The Local Press	[ ]	[ ]
Local Radio/TV	[ ]	[ ]
Full Council	[ ]	[ ]
Committee Meeting	[ ]	[ ]

b) vote against the decision or policy of the group at the following places:

	Yes	No
Party Group Meeting	[ ]	[ ]
Party Meeting	[ ]	[ ]
Full Council	[ ]	[ ]
Committee Meeting	[ ]	[ ]
Would never vote against the group	[ ]	[ ]

### SECTION THREE - ABOUT YOURSELF

19. Are you: Male [ ]  
Female [ ]

20. How old were you at your last birthday? \_\_\_\_\_ years

21. At present, are you:

Tick one box only

In full-time paid employment (30 hrs per week or more)	[ ]
In part-time paid employment (less than 30 hrs per week)	[ ]
Self-employed	[ ]
Unemployed	[ ]
Retired	[ ]
Permanently sick or disabled	[ ]
Looking after a home/family	[ ]
Not working for some other reason	[ ]

22. If employed, which sector do you work in?

Public	[ ]
Private	[ ]
Voluntary	[ ]

23. Which of the following educational qualifications have you obtained?

Degree/higher degree	[ ]
Professional qualifications	[ ]
Higher National Certificate/diploma	[ ]
GCE A Level/Scottish Higher Grade	[ ]
Ordinary National Certificate/diploma	[ ]
GCE O Level/school certificate	[ ]
CSE (other than Grade 1)	[ ]
No school or educational qualifications	[ ]
Other (please specify)	[ ]

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24. During your 'teens, were your parents members of any political party?

	Yes	No	Don't Know
Mother	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
Father	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

25. If yes, which party were they members of?

	Mother	Father
Liberal Democrats	[ ]	[ ]
Liberal Party	[ ]	[ ]
Social Democratic Party	[ ]	[ ]
Labour Party	[ ]	[ ]
Conservative Party	[ ]	[ ]
Plaid Cymru	[ ]	[ ]
Scottish Nationalists	[ ]	[ ]
Ecology Party/Green Party	[ ]	[ ]
Other (please specify)	[ ]	[ ]

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Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

Please return the questionnaire in the SAE provided to:

John Meadowcroft, Research Assistant,  
Public Policy Research Unit, Vice-Principal's Office,  
Queen Mary & Westfield College, University of London,  
Mile End Road, London E1 4NS.



## **APPENDIX 2: THE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

## **INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

Tell me a little about the ward you represent.

How did you first get involved with the Lib Dems?

Before becoming a councillor where you involved with any voluntary or community organisation, such as a trade union or tenants' group?

Do your family share your political beliefs? Parents?

Interesting thing about the Lib Dems is that people are prepared to give so much in terms of time and effort to a party that is so far from national power. How do you account for this?

How great is your interest in national politics?

How did you make the transition from activist to councillor?

Details of selection process (and re-selection where relevant).

Turning to your present work as a councillor, what do you think the Lib Dems offer people locally that the other parties don't?

Most satisfying aspects of work as a councillor?

Most frustrating aspects of work as a councillor?

Are there times as a councillor when conflicts of interest arise? How are these resolved? How would they be resolved?

Balancing vocal and vulnerable constituents (also option for discussion of responding to possibly racist groups).

(At mention of community or Community Politics, or other suitable moment) What does the phrase Community Politics mean to you, if anything?

Is there a particular way that you seek to judge the success of Community Politics here?

(Discussion here or earlier if appropriate of council specific issues).

Can you tell me how the Lib Dem group here on the council goes about deciding and making policy? First, the manifesto and then those matters that arise day to day.

Do you plan to continue as a councillor? If so, why? If not, why not?