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Councillors in Crisis

The Public and Private Worlds of Local Councillors

Jacqueline Barron

Gerald Crawley

Tony Wood

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JACQUELINE BARRON
GERALD CRAWLEY
TONY WOOD

Guide to Reading the Book

Why have local government? What contribution does it make to the good government of the country? What contribution should it make in this regard? What is the value of local elections? These are some of the questions which are increasingly asked today and which are the outcome of the challenges that local authorities have faced for more than a decade.

If these questions are to be answered with conviction and authority, the informed public need to know more about the person who should be the focus of these discussions – the democratically elected councillor. We hope that this book makes a valuable contribution to the debate about the place of local democracy in the British political system of the 1990s.

We have divided the central part of the book into two sections: **THE PUBLIC WORLD** and **THE PRIVATE WORLD**. We, however, see this conventional distinction between the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ merely as a starting point and as a way of structuring the book. We hope that readers will come to share the views of many of the people to whom we spoke that the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ worlds of local politicians, both men and women, are closely interrelated.

Why do a small minority of people in Britain today take part in local political activity? In Chapter 2 we summarise the main reasons people gave us for entering local politics – primarily a wish to serve the community or to serve the party – and outline the ways in which they were recruited. Others explained why they were not prepared to stand for the council and their remarks throw light upon the unrepresentative nature of council membership and in particular the low proportion of women members. We suggest, in conclusion, that councillors are carried into office on a tide of party persuasion often in the absence of alternative prospective candidates.

And how do those councillors who get elected manage their workloads? This is the starting point of Chapter 3. We argue that

earlier official studies of the work done by councillors grossly understated the work that members did. By meticulously collecting detailed information from councillors, we established that workloads are nearly twice that of official estimates.

How is the family affected and what kind of support does the local politician receive from the partner? These are two of the questions which we consider in Chapter 4. We have found that the nature of that support depends upon whether the partner is a husband or wife and whether the politician is a member of a 'political household'. The ways in which political activity can enrich the lives of politicians (and their partners) is the subject of Chapter 5. We also examine the ways in which politicians draw boundaries (or choose not to draw them) between their public and private lives. In both these chapters, we also consider briefly the reported consequences of political activity for the children of the household.

The financial and employment costs of political activity are the subjects of Chapter 6. As politics can take up a large part of an individual's life, it is difficult to combine this with a paid job. Councillors receive attendance allowances, but these do not compensate, for example, for the loss of promotion. Some people are content to see their activity as a 'career-substitute' but others have to juggle their paid work and their public responsibilities in ways which please neither their employers nor their political colleagues.

In the last part of the book we draw together a variety of themes. Chapter 7 spells out a typology of roles that councillors play: those for whom politics is a part-time hobby; those who see it as an all-consuming vocation; and those who regard political work as a full-time job which should be paid. Chapter 8 puts forward recommendations and looks at how some other countries are trying to resolve similar problems. We compare the different situations of local and national politicians and argue that councils could do much to support the diversity of roles which councillors play. We comment on how far recent legislation is likely to widen the pool of potential council recruits.

Note: We make considerable use of verbatim quotations, and have given each of our informants a pseudonym.