

**‘Don't worry if you are not already a member of a party’:
Discourses and attitudes to becoming a councillor**

If you are interested in being a councillor, but aren't sure whether you should be independent or party political, you will find help and support about the options at your local town hall. The local political parties are already looking for people interested in representing them. Don't worry if you are not already a member of a party as they will be able to go through all the options with you.

Thus potential candidates are reassured by a leaflet entitled *People like **you** are councillors* (London Councils 2008: 12). To someone brought up on the idea that you joined a party because you believed in its ideals and wanted to further its aims; put in years delivering leaflets, stuffing envelopes and knocking up on election day, before being accorded the honour of being allowed to stand for election under the party banner, this comes as a bit of a shock to the system. Of course, it was never really thus; in most areas most parties have at times had to actively recruit candidates, and often nominate those whose ideological commitment or even personal suitability is in some doubt – but it wasn't the done thing to be so open about it.

While party membership among local authority councillors is the highest it has ever been (see for example Leach 2006: 89-90), you would not know this from reading recent local government legislation, or from campaigns organised by various bodies to attract more people to stand for election to their local council.

Arguably, then, as party members account for more and more councillors, there may simultaneously have been a decline in the importance of party in local government. Despite – or possibly because of – the fact that more councillors than ever are now elected on a party ticket, the significance of party is seen to have reduced. These two factors may of course be linked: as local party organisations gain a greater hold over nominations and the ability to mount a successful campaign, people will be drawn into the party ambit who might previously have stood as independent candidates and whose motivation is not strongly party political.

It has been argued (Leach and Wilson 2008) that the 'modernisation agenda' for local government has at its heart an agenda of weakening the influence and importance of political parties in the local public sphere, through its emphasis on 'strong leaders' on one hand, and on community empowerment on the other.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how far this trend is reflected and possibly promoted in the official discourses of councillor recruitment. It will focus in the main

on the London Councils 'Be A Councillor' campaign (to be rolled out nationally from March 2009), contextualising this as the outcome of a series of official discourses going back to the 2006 White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*.

It will ask how the 'problem' – to which the recruitment campaign is a response – has been framed, and which aspects of it are given greater and lesser salience and, indeed, what factors are not present at all.

The methodological approach is drawn from Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003). This is a text based approach which sets out to examine the use of language in its social (and in this case political) context, and which provides insights that can complement the analysis of, for example, the process of policy formation. It can involve uncovering implicit ideologies and assumptions, although it will, of course, always involve subjective selection and judgement. This relatively brief paper will not undertake an extensive in depth analysis, but will examine a few key themes in the discourse which are directly relevant to this issue. With the exception of the concept of party, these were not selected *a priori*, but emerged from the process of analysis.

The primary source of material for analysis is the 'Be A Councillor' campaign itself. This can however be contextualised as the end result of a process which began with the 2006 Local Government White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, or even earlier. The paper will trace three key themes – the 'problem' of diversity, the perceptions of councillors' motivations, and the role of party – from an influential report produced for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Wheeler 2006), through the 2006 White Paper, the report of the Councillors Commission (2007), the 2008 White Paper, *Communities in Control* to the leaflet *People like you are councillors* (London Councils 2008).

One area that this paper will *not* be examining is the attitudes of councillors and potential councillors themselves, either to what motivates them (which has in any case been covered elsewhere, not least by Meadowcroft (2001)), or how they view the role and importance of party in their life as a councillor. This omission is deliberate. Not only is the focus here on official and institutional attitudes and perceptions, but this also reflects an overarching impression that members and potential members are very much the *objects* of these discourses, and not autonomous *subjects* helping to shape them. The voice of the councillor tends to be sidelined; either mediated or entirely absent.

A great deal of councillor recruitment, at least in the early stages, is done by written communication – largely in the form of leaflets, occasionally press releases and stories, and one would imagine, websites. Surprisingly, however, despite being likely to be the first port of call for people who have spontaneously thought of joining a party and/or becoming a councillor, none of the websites of the main three parties makes easily available any information or encouragement for people in this position. The councillor is essentially invisible at national level.

The Liberal Democrats' site has a link for people who 'want to be a candidate' – but follow it and you find yourself standing for Parliament, not the County Council.

The 'Get Involved' page lists six ways of getting involved, including donating money and using your blog to promote the party, but says nothing about standing for the council.¹ The best you can hope for is to be given a link for a local contact, who can then put into train the time honoured informal recruitment process – communications technology has not altered the process since I looked up my local party in the phone book in 1987 and a nice couple came round and signed me up.

The Liberal Democrat councillor's organisation, ALDC, is staging some recruitment events around the country, but this is in conjunction with, and using the same approaches as, the 'Be A Councillor' campaign.

Of course, personal approach is also very significant, for a slightly different group of potential candidates. These would be people who are already active in some kind of community or civic role and who are 'talent-spotted' by a local party. Even in this case, however, the handover of printed material is likely to play some role.

Personal approaches will be individually tailored to the potential candidate, their interests and circumstances, and will be as diverse and idiosyncratic as the candidates themselves. Written material, however, will have been carefully compiled to send a consistent message and is more likely to reflect the attitudes and perceptions of its various producers as well as being more accessible to analysis. Naturally it is important to be aware that recruiters in person when using this material are just as likely to say things like, 'oh, take no notice of that bit... We don't bother with that... it's not really like that' and so on, so it is important to be clear that what is being examined here is not the real recruitment process in practice, but the 'official' discourses of recruitment and what they tell us about 'official' attitudes to council membership.

The framing of the problem is to be found in discourse preceding the campaign. Of particular significance here are the Local Government White Paper of 2006, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, and the report of the Councillors Commission (2008) which was set up following the White Paper. However, the 2006 White Paper was preceded by a report (Wheeler 2006) by Paul Wheeler² for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the influence of which is strongly apparent in both the White Paper and the subsequent recruitment campaign. It is here that one of the most significant perceived problems – lack of diversity – is first explicitly set out.

The main thrust of Wheeler's work – which perhaps does not come through so strongly in the output of DCLG – is that it is parties that have the greatest responsibility to increase diversity. Because 'the three main political parties in

¹ This might not be considered surprising of course, on the 'old' model whereby you become a member first and only after spending a few years campaigning are asked to stand for the council. But if this is the reason, it suggests that there is a long way to go to get parties on board with the DCLG agenda under which they are presumed to have an important role in recruitment with the aim of widening the councillor base.

² Wheeler is an independent consultant whose main business, as the Political Skills Forum, is the provision of training for councillors.

England provide over 95 per cent of all councillors³ (Wheeler 2006: vii) they are perceived to have a stranglehold on the process of selection, and thus to be the only bodies in a position to widen recruitment and increase diversity.

It is interesting to note what is problematised here. For example, the fact that existing selection processes display ‘a preference for existing active members’ (Wheeler 2006: vii) is presented as a matter of concern, rather than being obvious by definition. Indeed, the whole paper is premised on the idea that parties should do other than this, because ‘the existing selection systems fail to provide a diversity of candidates with a severe bias towards white, middle-aged, male candidates.’ (Wheeler 2006: vii).⁴ Parties are presented here as ‘the exclusive source of candidates’ which, ‘with declining and aging memberships and limited resources, cannot provide a range of candidates, offer effective role models or effectively challenge the performance of existing councillors.’ (Wheeler 2006: vii). This last claim is particularly interesting, as no reason is given why white middle-aged men (for example) are not able to ‘effectively challenge the performance of existing councillors’ – is it being suggested that their common interests as white middle aged men would transcend ward interests or party allegiance?

Wheeler refers throughout to party selection processes being ‘closed selections’ (for example, Wheeler 2006: 4), which itself has pejorative connotations: ‘closed’ is the opposite of ‘open’ and, in politics today, ‘openness’ is seen as a virtue. What ‘closed’ means in this context, though, is merely that parties usually – but by no means always – select candidates from amongst their existing membership. What is not stated is that in almost all cases, party membership is open to all who are prepared to support the party’s aims. The indirect implication that parties should nominate people who do not support their aims – i.e. who not only are not, but could not, be members – calls into question the entire basis of the party system which, as Wheeler notes, arises spontaneously wherever there are elections for offices of governance.

Furthermore, at least one party – the Liberal Democrats, and their predecessor the Liberal Party – have, as a result of their commitment to ‘community politics’ since the 1970s, long had a policy of recruiting potential councillors from beyond their existing membership. However, as Meadowcroft (2001: 26) points out, this has made little difference to the diversity of their councillor base.

It is understandable that an independent consultant could conceive of and by implication advocate such a development, but it would be stranger if politicians at DCLG, elected very much on a party ticket, were prepared to go this far. And indeed, when we look at their take on the ‘problem’, existing party practices do not come in for a great deal of criticism, with attention being focused more strongly on other factors affecting recruitment.

³ Although not stated, this figure refers to councillors on principal authorities. Town and Parish councils still have a significantly higher level of non-party representation.

⁴ It is not clear how this squares with the claim that retired people are over-represented unless ‘middle aged’ is taken to be synonymous with ‘over retirement age’.

The 'problem' of 'closed selection' is seen as a contributing factor to the wider (and larger) 'problem' of lack of diversity. It is in framing the problem in these terms that the DCLG literature is most clearly tapping into Wheeler's work.

While there are undoubted strengths to our present system of local politics, any realistic advocates of local democracy also have to recognise its limitations. The first step to any form of recovery is to accept that there is a problem to be solved.
(Wheeler 2006: 10)

Here, Wheeler explicitly states that there is a problem to be solved. What is more, there is an element here of convincing the reader that the problem exists, or at least putting them in a position where it is difficult to deny it. Those who do not recognise it are not 'realistic' (or possibly, not 'advocates of local democracy'). This is framed as "*Government for the people, by the people*" – *the diversity question*' (Wheeler 2006: 10). The problem therefore is being presented as one of diversity: the 'continuing inability' of the existing selection system 'to select from a representative section of the community', with 'an overwhelming bias towards both age and gender' (Wheeler 2006: 10).

In much government literature, a lack of diversity is presented as *prima facie* problematic. Here however, an attempt is made to explain why it is a problem. The attempt itself, however, rests in its turn on assumptions and assertions, and, in passages like the following the author is very careful not to make any actual claims that could be challenged:

The need and benefits of a diverse councillor population may be an issue for debate. However, at a time when the alienation of significant groups from the democratic process is frequently discussed, it is instructive to know that the three million citizens from black and minority ethnic communities have just 764 councillors to represent them and in a diverse area such as Kirklees there is just one woman councillor from the large Muslim population of 45,000
(Wheeler 2006: 11)

A link between alienation and lack of diversity is implied but not explicitly stated. In fact, no *causal* relationship is claimed; rather, attention is drawn to a simple *correlation*. Who are these groups, and why are they significant? Who is discussing it? This passage also gives an insight into the way 'diversity' is being conceived. Kirklees is held up as an example of a diverse area – but actually Kirklees is not very diverse, having two main demographic groups: a large working class, culturally homogenous Asian population, and a largely working class white population. 'Diverse' here is being used as a lazy shorthand for 'large Asian population' when in fact the Asian population of Kirklees is one of the least diverse in the country.

In going on to refer to the 'possible benefits' of a diverse councillor population, the report concedes that these benefits (presumably in terms of addressing alienation)

are not demonstrated. However, the fact that 'other parts of civic society are making strenuous efforts to attract under-represented groups' is offered as a further reason why councils should do likewise. (Wheeler 2006: 11)

There may, however, be concrete benefits – but not ones DCLG would wish to advertise.

... those civic organisations that can show greater diversity and contacts with all communities are likely to have advantages with central government and the wider media and public over those who cannot demonstrate similar inclusion and diversity.
(Wheeler 2006: 11)

Leaving aside that this might somewhat overestimate the commitment of the public and the media to inclusion and diversity, this seems to provide a very different, prudential rather than principled, reason for councils to at least appear more diverse. This is not a reason that we would expect to see reproduced in the White Paper, although if there were incentives framed in those terms then that would bear out this claim of Wheeler's at least.

Although not part of the 'official' discourse, this background document has been considered at length because it clearly feeds into the 2006 White Paper and the 2008 recruitment campaign – but not all its aspects or recommendations are given equal weight in what was to follow, and to which the paper now turns.

Strong and Prosperous Communities: the 2006 White Paper

The 2006 Local Government White Paper, *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, is best known for introducing new local authority structures to promote 'strong leadership'. A large part of the problem identified is indeed the lack of 'strong leadership' (see for example DCLG 2006: 8), which has been closely examined by Steve Leach and others (Leach 2006; Leach and Wilson 2007; 2008). This problem, once identified, is called upon to explain, in part, low turnout and 'alienation', particularly among people in deprived areas (DCLG 2006: 31).

The other main 'problem' identified in this White Paper, however, has received less attention, but is framed as an equally significant an issue in the problem of low turnout, alienation and legitimacy. This, to put it in broad terms, is the question of diversity, reflecting Wheeler. The White Paper describes the 'problem' thus:

If democratic representatives are to command the confidence of their communities then they need to reflect the diversity of their local communities. Groups that are under-represented are more likely to believe that their perspectives are overlooked and disengage from the democratic process. At present councillors are not representative of the population as a whole. In 2004, only 29% of councillors in England were women and 3.5% had a non-white ethnic background

compared to 8.4% of the population over 21 years old). And very few young people are councillors (DCLG 2006: 50)

Just as little evidence is presented to support the claims made for strong leadership (and evidence militating against it is ignored (e.g. Leach and Wilson 2007, 2008), no evidence is offered here to support the claims.

Furthermore, it is not set out in any detail what a more diverse councillor body will achieve. Greater voter engagement is suggested, but there is no evidence – for example, in terms of turnout statistics – to support this. There is no suggestion that a council which more closely resembles its electorate will result in better services.

Above all, justifications for greater diversity are framed in terms of its being a good in itself, and of representation – understood as resemblance – being an end in itself. This is, of course, not the only possible understanding of representation. These understandings are made far more explicit in the 2008 White Paper, *Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power*, and will be considered in more detail later.

Having identified and framed the problem, the 2006 White Paper does not itself contain measures to address it. Instead, it proposes to set up ‘an independent review [to] look at the barriers and incentives to serving on councils’ (DCLG 2006: 9, 51) This was to be the Councillors Commission, chaired by Dame Jane Roberts, former leader of Camden Council, which reported its findings in December 2007.

Representing the Future: the Report of the Councillors Commission

The first thing to note about the Councillors Commission is the absence of any possessive apostrophe after ‘councillors’. This Commission and its report are *about* councillors; it is not *for* or *belonging to* them.⁵

The stated reason for establishing the Commission was ‘to look at the incentives and barriers that encourage and deter people from standing for election as councillors’ in order to ‘attract more able and talented people from a wider spread of backgrounds to become councillors’ (Councillors Commission 2007: 4).

The report is explicit in identifying four overarching problems: the current lack of public recognition and value accorded to local government; a lack of ‘representativeness’; ‘quality and ability’, and ‘the incentives and barriers to being a councillor’ (Councillors Commission 2007: 12-16). The second and third of these might be seen to be contradictory, but in fact the report makes clear that quality and ability is actually being perceived *in terms of* representativeness: ‘The richest qualification of good ward councillors is their ability to reflect and represent the experiences of the communities in which they live.’ (Councillors Commission 2007: 15) Clearly the 2006 White Paper’s call for ‘able and qualified’ people is open to

⁵ The alternative interpretation, that DCLG are simply illiterate in such matters, cannot, of course, be dismissed out of hand.

interpretation, and this is the interpretation which the Commission have chosen, from many possible alternatives, to adopt.

Of these four problems, it is the last, incentives and barriers, which is the main focus of the report. This is not so surprising when you consider that these are probably the most amenable to practical recommendations, which is after all what the report is about: sixty one of them. When it comes to making explicit prescriptions to lower barriers to entry, make more information available, and widen the pool of people appealed to, more than twice as many of these are aimed at local authorities than at parties.⁶ Whereas Wheeler lays the responsibility for widening the councillor cohort almost exclusively at the door of the parties, the Councillors Commission sees a far greater and more effective role for local authorities. Is this further evidence of the downgrading of parties' roles, or is it a greater awareness about what the respective bodies are capable of achieving?

'Incentives and barriers' to serving on a council are broken down further into lack of awareness, culture and negative perceptions, confidence, time, employment and employers and rules (such as politically restricted posts) (Councillors Commission 2007: 17-20). Recommendations are made in all these areas, with the greatest expectations being placed on local authorities. In all, sixty one recommendations are made, in 'key areas' identified as follow: local authorities are the key to local democratic engagement; a 'sense of efficacy' (i.e. feeling they could make a difference) is key to getting people involved; '[c]ouncillors are most effective as locally elected representatives when they have similar life experiences to their constituents' (p. 26); the relationship between councillors and constituents is the key to effective local representation, and becoming a councillor, as well as ceasing to be a councillor, should be less daunting.

It is the third of these, diversity, which remains the thread underlying all of these documents, yet no evidence has yet been offered for its decisive importance and indeed, criticisms – which will be considered in the next section – have been levelled at both the underlying concept of diversity being employed, and the claims being made for its ability to transform local government and representation.

The 2008 White Paper *Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power*

The White Paper that followed the Councillors Commission Report sends out a clear message in its title: it is communities, not councils, that will be in control.

Many of the Commission's recommendations (particularly those with financial implications) are not brought forward in the White Paper. What does come through clearly, often in exactly the same words, is the importance accorded to diversity, and to representativeness understood as resemblance. This is the clearest theme that can be seen to run through all the documents to have been examined. In a variation of the old campaigning technique, the problem has been set out in the 2006 White Paper, the Councillors Commission set up on that premiss, whose report is then used to reiterate, confirm and reinforce it with the added weight of its independent standing. Nowhere, however, is the 'problem'

⁶ Of the clearly prescriptive recommendations, ten apply to local authorities and four to parties.

interrogated, and no evidence is offered for the claim that councillors who resemble their constituents are the most effective representatives.

This calls into question how the government (or at least DCLG) understands 'effectiveness' – when it comes to fighting the corner of a poorly educated, disadvantaged tenant, say, if someone just like them was really the most effective, then they might as well do it themselves. In these circumstances, taking on a local authority or housing association, perhaps, would not a solicitor, say, be more effective?

But perhaps this is not what is meant by 'effective representation'. The claim that 'the relationship and connections between councillors and their constituents is key to effective representation' (DCLG 2008: 105) suggests that representation is an end in itself, and effectiveness applies merely to representing people (in the sense of resembling them) rather than referring to effectiveness in getting things done or bringing about change on their behalf. Furthermore, concerns seem to be at a very cosmetic level – diversity is about getting people who look different. There's nothing about ideological diversity – in fact reading between the lines it seems to be discouraged by its very invisibility. What is stressed is what all councillors are presumed to have in common – commitment to their community, for example. There is no mention of potential conflict or even difference between members.

This concept of diversity will only ever yield a very superficial and cosmetic increase in representedness; as Leach points out, '[i]f effective representation depended on having the same characteristics as those represented, then all representatives can only be partially effective, probably at best 'representing' 10% of their constituents Good representation implies a capacity to understand and empathise with the circumstances of the 90% of the local population who will inevitably be of a different gender, life-cycle stage or ethnic background' (Leach 2006:105). Nonetheless, this is the concept which is carried into the front line recruitment campaign, in which the key priorities and concerns of the preceding documents are distilled into a single twenty page leaflet.

People like you are councillors

The 'Be A Councillor' campaign was launched in London in 2008, and was 'rolled out' nationally in March 2009 (London Councils 2009). I shall be focusing on the leaflet produced by them in London in anticipation of the 2010 local elections, entitled *People like **you** are councillors* (London Councils 2008a), a pamphlet⁷ aimed directly at potential candidates. London Councils also published a booklet, *The X-Factor: A talent spotter's recruitment manual for the 2010 London Local Elections* (London Councils 2008b), which is aimed mainly at existing party groups on borough councils, and to which Wheeler was a contributor.

I acquired my copy at a session of the London Councils 2008 summit for people interested in standing for election, at which a panel of councillors, including some

⁷ A PDF version of this is available, in which some sections expanded. There is more on disability, for example, and more detail about the nomination process. However, this does not seem to be widely accessible on the web – I was able to access it only through Haringey Council's website (http://www.haringey.gov.uk/be_a_councillor.pdf 07.03.2009) so in the paper I have focused on the printed version.

who were featured in the leaflet, spoke positively about their experiences and answered questions. It already becomes apparent that there is a relatively small pool of existing members who are either willing, or chosen, to speak on this matter. They included an Asian woman (Conservative, and included in the leaflet), an Asian professional man (Labour), and a young (25) white woman (Liberal Democrat).

Party is mentioned in the pamphlet, but as a largely abstract concept. Until the 'useful contacts' page (p. 17)⁸, no party is mentioned by name except in one (of six) profiles of councillors (p. 7). One of the other profiled councillors refers to having been 'involved in the local party', but which party is not specified (p. 14). Of the remaining profiles, one mentions party negatively: 'I don't have a background in local government or party politics' (p. 16), and three do not mention party at all.

The brief 'Independent or political' section (p. 12) treats the two alternatives as essentially equal: 'There are two basic options – you can stand for election as an independent candidate or as a group/party political candidate.' This belies the statistics: of the 1861 borough councillors in London, only around thirty do not represent parties (including minority parties such as Respect, UKIP and the BNP) and of these nominally independent members, over half represent residents' associations (largely concentrated in one borough) and of the remainder a significant proportion stood on a single issue ticket rather than putting themselves, as an individual, forward. (London Government Directory 2009). Notwithstanding this, standing as an independent is given equal weight in the recruitment leaflet. Potential candidates who 'aren't sure whether [they] should be independent or party political' are told 'you will find help and support about the options at your local town hall' – where, presumably, a democratic services officer will quickly disabuse them of any notion of standing as an independent; the buck has been passed however. It is the local town hall, not the Be A Councillor campaign, that must break the news that local government in London (as indeed elsewhere) is overwhelmingly a team game.

This suggests that the leaflet is attempting to play down the role of party in local government, which leads on to the question of why London Councils would wish to do this. It is understandable that they would want to take a neutral position between parties, but not so clear why the idea of party itself is so downplayed. In the printed version of the leaflet there are seventeen references to 'party' or 'parties' excluding the listings of party contacts (p. 17). (There are 26 references in the PDF, most of which are accounted for by the expanded section on the nomination process).

Equally interesting is where party is not mentioned. For example, under 'What do councillors do?' we are told that 'Councillors are people who are elected to the local council to represent their local community' (p. 2). Only further down the page, outside the highlighted box, does it note that 'councillors have to balance the needs and interests of residents, their political party (if any) and the council.' Even

⁸ Throughout this paper, where just a page number is given, the reference is to this leaflet (London Councils 2008a)

here, the importance of party is downplayed by that 'if any', which implies that being a non-party councillor is common.

Reference is made to party interests here, and also to party groups, but there is no mention of party ideology. In a list of six possible answers to the question 'Why should I become a councillor?' (p. 11), 'wanting to pursue their political beliefs' is given as one reason 'why people decide to become a local councillor'; of the others, three mention 'local community' and a further one refers to locality. The remaining reason is 'to contribute business or professional skills' (to whom is not stated). Two of the councillors profiled refer to their party membership, but all mention community, locality or both.

Thus we can see that community is given a far higher salience within this recruitment campaign than party. (The term party occurs slightly more frequently overall, but not once technical references to the nomination process are discounted), and where party is mentioned it tends to be cast in an organisational or gatekeeping capacity. One gets a strange sense, reading the leaflet, of parties as neutral, interchangeable and purely functional entities, not bodies that define policy positions and inspire activists.

The absence of reference to policy is also noticeable. The focus is very strongly concentrated on councils' delivery functions – the services for which they are responsible, and on the potential for councillors to promote the interests of their localities, not on the possibility (which some surely might find exciting) of influencing the direction of policy. Neither is responsibility for budgets mentioned.

Moving on from party, the paper will next examine what sort of motivations the campaign attempts to appeal to, and what this says about beliefs both about what potential candidates are like, and what they should be like.

Meadowcroft (2001), in his study of Liberal Democrat councillors, identified three existing models of councillor recruitment. The 'rational actor' model appeals to individuals' self interest; the 'social psychology' model is premised on there being a type of person who is predisposed to want to become a councillor, and in the final model, people 'drift' into it. Meadowcroft identifies a fourth model based on informal interactions and negotiations between 'potential recruits and established political actors', often involving a lengthy process of persuasion and attrition (Meadowcroft 2001: 20).

Prior to putting together the Be A Councillor campaign, London's Councils commissioned research from MORI into the factors that encourage, discourage and prevent people from becoming (or remaining) councillors (MORI 2008).

In London, the most significant factor likely to make people want to become a councillor was feeling that they could make a difference (50% gave this as an important factor, and when asked to choose just one factor, 45% went for 'feeling I could make a difference'), so we would expect to see this stressed in the recruitment material – although, arguably, there is a limit to how much this aspect can be honestly promoted. The high salience accorded to this by respondents does make it all the more surprising, however, that the campaign makes no

reference to the possibility of making and changing council policy. Although it does refer, explicitly, to 'making a difference', the leaflet is rather coy about the process by which this is achieved:

The local council is the place where decisions affecting local people are made. If you care about the area that you live in and the issues facing the people who live there then you might want to find out more about how the council works and how decisions are reached..... Research tells us that , across London, the issues that concern most people are crime, schools, transport and the environment.... Your local council can make a difference on all these issues and so can you as a local councillor
(p. 10)

There are four further references to making a difference, including one in a councillor profile (p. 4), one (surprisingly low?) in the 'Why should I become a councillor' section (p. 11). The introduction, under 'What do councillors do?' (which actually says nothing about casework, meetings or any of the other things councillors do actually *do*) says that 'You will be in a position to make a difference to the quality of other people's daily lives and prospects' (p. 2). After pointing out that 'a large proportion of the work that councils do is determined by central government' prospective recruits are told that councils 'vary widely because of the style and approach they take to delivering these central government programmes, and it is here that local knowledge and commitment make a real difference' (p. 5), which sounds a bit luke warm, to say the least.

Given, then, that 'feeling they could make a difference' was the single biggest factor that people said would motivate them to become a councillor, it is given a relatively low profile in the leaflet.

The second biggest factor, at 34%, was having more information (MORI 2008) – although this doesn't give us much idea of what sort of information, and/or what awareness respondents had of what was available. The leaflet itself provides some information, within the limitations of its size and its audience. It does not, however, give many leads as to where further information about the life of a councillor may be found – there is no link to IDeA, for example. Rather, the follow-up opportunities focus on the business of getting elected, rather than of being a councillor, with email addresses being given for the democratic and electoral services department of each London borough. Apart from that, the only other 'useful contacts' provided are London Councils' own political advisers for each of the main parties and the LGA Independents group. This suggests that either the claim that having more information would encourage people to stand was not taken seriously, or perhaps, the fear that despite what they said to the MORI researcher, too much information might in fact put people off.

There are sections providing basic background information on the structures of local government in London (pp. 3-4), but most of the relevant information is in the section entitled 'What is expected of a councillor?' (p. 6) which lists seven aspects of the councillor's 'role and responsibilities' (representing the ward; decision-

making; developing and reviewing council policy; scrutinising executive decisions; regulatory duties, and 'community leadership and engagement'). There is reference to partnership boards and outside bodies, meetings with council staff and surgeries, as well as council, scrutiny and party group meetings.

It is stressed that councillors may have to attend meetings during the working day, and that 'if you are a member of a political party you will be expected to attend political group meetings. You will also normally be expected to attend political group meetings before council meetings, as well as party training and events' (p. 7) – thus creating an image of party membership as imposing additional demands on a member's time and, again, perpetuating the impression that it is very much optional.

'Having more time' was the third most significant factor (28%) that would make people consider standing for the council, and, when asked what was most likely to prevent them standing as a councillor, the largest number of people (36%) cited lack of time (MORI 2008). The Be A Councillor leaflet does not downplay the time commitment; indeed, given that new recruits, if elected, are most likely to be back bench councillors, it might be argued that the demands on their time are overstated. The Introduction concludes with what is effectively a warning:

Every day, councillors have to balance the needs and interests of residents, their political party (if any) and the council. These will all make legitimate demands on a councillor's time – on top of the demands and needs of a councillor's personal and professional lives. Before you consider becoming a councillor you should discuss it with your family and friends to ensure that they understand that you will need their support and understanding. You may be spending a lot of your spare time on council business.
(p. 2)

In the councillor profiles, one refers to giving up full time employment on becoming a portfolio holder, and three others mention the importance of the support and understanding they have from their families. Also covered in three different profiles are the dangers of taking on too much, the importance of 'striking a balance', and the 'juggling' of family and council responsibilities.

The section on 'What is expected of a councillor', already mentioned (p. 6) also makes the role sound very demanding. Potential candidates are reassured that it is possible to be a councillor and have a job (p. 12) and that 'your employer must allow you to take a reasonable amount of time off during working hours to perform your duties as a councillor', but that this 'will depend on your responsibilities and the effect of your absence on your employer's business.' However, the leaflet goes on to advise: 'You should discuss this with your employer before making the commitment' – a step that may be a disincentive to many, particularly those in non-professional jobs. I attended the Councillors Commission round table event for employers, and certainly there was not a great deal of sympathy evident for allowing time off for what was seen essentially as political activism (Territorial

Army activities, by way of contrast, were viewed much more favourably by employers).

It seems, then, that quite a pessimistic – or at least realistic – picture is being painted of the time demands on a councillor. However, this is contradicted in the section of the leaflet explicitly headed ‘I don’t think I have the time...’ (p. 10). Here the potential candidate is reassured that ‘How much time it takes being a councillor is largely up to you and the commitments you might take on as a councillor’ and quotes an estimate of ‘between five and 20 hours a week.’ The statement ‘You will be expected to attend some council committee (*sic*) meetings which are usually held in the evening so that councillors can attend after work hours’ could have been written by someone else entirely, particularly as it refers to ‘committee meetings’ which are usually associated with the old committee system, as well as downplaying the time commitment (‘some’ meetings, for example, rather than many). The section concludes:

Like most things in life, what you get back depends on how much you put in. But remember, *the amount of time you give to it is almost entirely up to you.*
(p. 10, emphasis added)

Even in this short booklet then, can be found evidence of different voices expressing contradictory positions. It is open to interpretation whether this is oversight in the editing process, or a deliberate attempt to simultaneously appeal to the large number of people who would be deterred by the time commitment of council membership while still being covered against accusations of downplaying the demands.

The final significant factor found by the MORI poll was ‘not having to join a political party’, which was cited by 16% of respondents. To someone steeped in the ‘traditional’ model of local government, this might seem a high figure, suggesting as it does that almost one person in six would like to be a councillor if it did not entail party politics. On the other hand, to someone looking for a reduction of party politics in local government, it would perhaps be a disappointingly low figure, and suggest that there was a long way to go. Either way, that sixteen per cent does not seem a very strong basis for the extent to which the leaflet minimises the importance of party membership to electoral success. If eighty four per cent of respondents were happy about joining a political party in order to become a councillor, it clearly was not necessary for the leaflet to downplay party in order to avoid frightening people off. Indeed, Meadowcroft (2001: 27-28) found that a party’s ideology or philosophy was a significant, if not overriding, factor in people’s decision to stand as councillors, making its omission here more significant.

People like you are councillors is not explicitly aimed at any particular cohort of people, despite having grown largely out of the perceived need to recruit a more ‘diverse’ councillor base. There is only one direct reference to diversity: ‘Diverse groups tend to make better informed decisions, so it is important that councils not only represent the communities they serve, but also have a wide range of skills and experience’ (p. 8). This is different in emphasis from the DCLG White Papers which prioritise representation (as resemblance) through diversity more

exclusively. It is also a completely different (and arguably more convincing) argument about the relationship of diversity to effectiveness, concerned with the effectiveness of a group rather than of individual members.

Given that the three main groups the campaign is seeking to attract – women, ethnic minorities and younger people – do not necessarily have common interests, the leaflet necessarily has to be fairly non-specific to appeal to them all. The choice of the councillor ‘ambassadors’ featured is the most explicit indication of the groups to whom they are attempting to appeal. Although their party affiliation is not mentioned (except in one profile), there are two from each of the three main parties (London Councils 2009b). Four are female, three (to judge from their photos) are young, three are white, two are black and one is Asian. There are no white middle aged men! At least two are identified as professional (a solicitor and a banker), while one works in local government and another ‘runs a busy office’; one is in a managerial position and one appears to be self employed.

Noticeably, despite assertions in the White Papers that people benefit from being represented by people who are like them, none of the ‘ambassadors’ is in a low-skilled job. Less surprisingly, given that the campaign wants to appeal to those in employment, none is unemployed. A survey by the Local Government Management Board (cited in Leach 2006: 101) found that councillors who stood down at the 1998 local elections were more likely to full time managerial/professional, and to be more highly educated than those who continued or were voted out. They were also more likely to have risen to a higher position on the council and to hold other public/civic roles. Despite assertions that councils are too white, male and middle class, those are (however much one might wish it were otherwise) the demographic group most likely to hold such positions, so there is a tension between the drive to recruit and maintain more people who bring professional skills and that for visible diversity.

One final factor that was not mentioned by anyone as a motivating factor, and does not appear in the leaflet, but which is accorded high importance currently by the government, is accreditation for councillors of their skills and experience gained in that role. The 2008 White Paper and the Councillors Commission are both keen on this and see it as something that will attract new councillors, or at least mitigate the perceived disadvantages for them, and DCLG commissioned research in 2008 into what is currently available and how it might be developed. My own research with councillors (Hale 2007) however supports the MORI findings. While councillors were keen to access training to enable them to perform their roles more effectively, the prospect of an accredited qualification was not a motivating factor, and only one organisation (no individual councillors) was attracted by the prospect of accrediting what councillors were already doing rather than providing new knowledge and skills.

Conclusions

The major problem to be addressed by councillor recruitment is framed as lack of diversity. This is problematised as being inimical to effective representation. Representation is conceived of largely as resemblance, and effective representation as synonymous with accurate resemblance. This is simplistic and

cosmetic and no evidence is presented that it will improve the effectiveness of members in promoting their constituents' interests.

The campaign itself is premised on the power of resemblance. 'People *like you* are councillors' – the very selection of the title indicates that this is considered the most significant motivating factor and/or the most desired motivation to be appealed to. Alternative titles might have been 'Councillors make a difference'; 'Being a councillor doesn't take up too much time', or even 'Councillors stand up for what they believe in'. Each one of those would suggest different underlying assumptions and priorities. Because, of course, the choice of language in a campaign like this does not reflect only what those using it believe, but also what they want to reinforce.

Although diversity is presented as desirable in itself, the diversity envisaged by the campaign is quite circumscribed. The intended appeal is to people in employment, particularly professionals; members of ethnic minorities; young people, and women. These are not the only groups currently underrepresented, and furthermore it is clear from the examples given that desirable candidates would be people who fit into two or more of these categories – not the poorly educated young, unemployed Asians, or retired women.

Party is presented as neutral and optional. It is removed from the heart of local government and sidelined into. The concept of local politics and the possibility of conflict is entirely absent. If politics are absent from local government, and conflict is marginalised, there must be a question over how currently underrepresented members of the community are to be heard above the existing consensus. Local government is seen as something that is not, or should not be, a political arena. Ideology or 'philosophy' is barely visible, and is effectively divorced from both party membership and the desire to make a difference. Where party is mentioned, it is frequently with negative connotations; for example, as something which will make additional demands on members' time.

The campaign appeals to people's desire to make a difference, but this is always couched in terms that are both abstract (no concrete examples are provided of how councillors have made a practical difference) and apolitical.

In short, this analysis of the discourse of the councillor recruitment campaign, in the context of research and other official discourses, confirms the view that party politics is marginalised in local government. It also brings into focus the government's understanding and use of the concepts of diversity and representation which, arguably, are equally significant aspects of recent local government policy.

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