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#### 4

## COALITIONS IN BRITAIN: administrative formation in hung councils

Colin Rallings, Michael Temple and Michael Thrasher

Based on a survey of 151 local authorities in Great Britain where no single party had an overall council majority, this article examines the administrative arrangements which form when political parties unused to compromise have to negotiate with each other for a share of power. It also considers the attitudes of the actors involved to the different ways of working that emerge in these 'hung' councils. The survey shows that hung councils experience a wide variety of political partnerships. Contrary to earlier surveys concerning the type of administration which forms, it was discovered that open power-sharing arrangements have replaced single-party minority government as the most common response to a hung situation. The sharing of committee chairs has also become more widespread.

*Basé sur une étude de 151 autorités locales en Grande-Bretagne où aucun parti politique n'avait réussi à avoir une majorité au conseil, cet article examine quels accords administratifs sont conclus quand les partis politiques peu habitués au compromis se trouvent dans l'obligation de négocier entre eux pour se partager le pouvoir et considère l'attitude des acteurs impliqués devant les différents façons de travailler de ces conseils sans majorité. L'article montre qu'il y a une grande variété d'associations politiques dans ce genre de conseils. Contrairement aux études précédentes sur le type d'administration qui se forme, on a découvert que la réponse la plus courante à une telle situation est le partage de pouvoir plutôt que le gouvernement par un parti minoritaire. De plus, il semble que le partage des fauteuils est plus répandu.*

**Introduction**  
In recent years the British political system, with little tradition of the phenomenon at either local or national level, has had to accommodate an increasing number of 'hung' or 'balanced' local authorities, where no one political party has an overall majority. After a brief pause in their growth from 1989, recent local elections have continued to produce further crops of freshly-hung councils, until well over a quarter of all local authorities are now hung.

This article examines the types of administrative arrangement that form when political parties unused to compromise have to negotiate with each other for a share of power, and considers the attitudes of the actors involved to the different ways of working that emerge in hung councils. In late 1993 and early 1994 we sent detailed questionnaires to the chief executives and group leaders from all political parties of 151 local authorities in Great Britain. These councils had been identified as hung councils from a database detailing the political composition of all local authorities in the country. The questionnaires sought information about such matters as the nature of administrative arrangements and the allocation of committee chairs. Initially, we received written responses from 86 authorities. Those councils which had not returned any questionnaires, from either chief executives or party leaders, were then contacted by telephone, and information on an additional 65 local authorities was obtained in this manner. Using these methods, we were able to survey a total of 151 authorities comprising nearly all known hung councils and constituting almost 30% of local authorities in Britain. Our findings show that hung councils generate a wide variety of political partnerships, with the Liberal Democrats particularly successful at gaining a share of power. There are significant differences with earlier surveys

concerning the type of administration which forms, with open power-sharing arrangements replacing single-party minority government as the most common response to a hung situation. The sharing of committee chairs has also become more widespread. Compared with previous surveys, there is generally a more favourable response to the quality of the decision-making process and the policies emerging.

#### Problems of identifying hung councils

Identifying hung councils is not without problems: local government election results sometimes fail to describe properly a councillor's party, and both by-elections and changes of party allegiance are more frequent than at national level. There are councils which, while lacking overall control for any one party, consider themselves as only nominally hung, in that there is a less partisan approach than is now the norm. For example, while no party has an overall majority in both Kennet District Council and Gwynedd County Council, their respective chief executives do not consider that their council is hung, arguing that the relevance of party groups is less important because a more independent style of working prevails. Wolverhampton Metropolitan Borough Council's chief executive has an unusual perception on the politics of coalition making. Despite the clear arithmetic of Labour (29 seats), Conservatives (28), and Liberal Democrats (3), he argues that:

Wolverhampton is *not* hung. The Conservatives and LibDems have formed a 'Majority Group', formally registered with me, which is opposed by the 'Labour Group'. So far as normal council service is concerned, the Majority Group acts like a normal controlling group. The LibDems and Conservatives sort out their differences (if any) *within* the group and not in front of officers. [his emphases]

Despite the chief executive's comments, Wolverhampton is clearly a hung council ruled by a formal coalition (as categorised by its chief executive), and it is included in our analysis, as are Kennet and Gwynedd. To exclude them from our examination would give an incomplete picture of the variety of responses to a situation in which no one party has overall control.

Whatever the difficulties of precise measurement and definition, it is indisputable that well over a quarter of all the 525 local councils in Britain are now hung. Hung councils necessitate the formation and maintenance of coalitions, how-

ever constituted, between local political parties. They should provide us with readily observable evidence of party cooperation, especially in the nature of office 'pay-offs' in the form of committee chairs.

#### Problems of identifying administrations

However, discovering the administrative arrangements that exist in hung councils can also be difficult. First, it is not unknown for the actors involved to disagree on the composition and nature of the administration; one leader's 'coalition' is another leader's 'informal arrangement'. Secondly, while it might be supposed that office pay-offs will be readily apparent, agreements to share chairs may be purely for technical purposes, with no agreement to cooperate legislatively. Thirdly, many partners will not take committee chairs, preferring to extract policy concessions (Laver, Rallings and Thrasler, 1987). Policy pay-offs are less easy than office pay-offs to distinguish. Political parties may have a vested interest in hiding their policy deals with erstwhile and future rivals, especially if elections are approaching (Strom, 1988). Election campaigns demand a distinctive party programme which policy agreements with another party may blur.

Central party disapproval of coalition politics is another good reason for blurring the nature of any agreements. Local Labour and Conservative groups (in particular) who do cooperate may be in conflict with central party instructions, and therefore reluctant to admit such arrangements publicly. However, while Clause 6 of Labour's model standing orders comes close to forbidding local pacts and some groups have acquiesced to central party pressure (Carter, 1986), the party appears to have adopted a more pragmatic response in recent years. For local Labour groups, especially in the shire districts and county councils long held by Conservatives, the lure of office or a share of power after a long time in opposition is obvious (Mellors, 1989). Similarly, while Conservative Central Office might feel it has little to gain nationally by proving the efficiency of coalition politics at any level of British politics, local Conservatives are noted for their independence and pragmatism. As the Conservative group leader in Rochdale Metropolitan Borough put it, getting and then holding on to power is the "only virtue" in politics; her group has a power-sharing arrangement with the Liberal Democrats (*The Independent*, 23rd September 1986, p 11).

Essex County Council's Liberal Democrat leader told us that he would terminate the power-sharing arrangement his group had with Labour if instructed to do so by party headquarters, but he appears to be the exception. Local Liberal Democrat groups value their relative autonomy. What is often disparagingly referred to as 'pave-ment politics' has played a major role in the current prominence of the Liberal Democrats in local government, which prominence in turn has contributed to the revival of the party's fortunes at national level since the electoral lows of the 1950s. Local groups are well aware of their importance, and are unlikely to be as constrained by their national party when seeking policy or office pay-offs in hung councils as the other main parties. After all, their central party has a great deal to gain by demonstrating that coalition politics can work.

#### Administrative arrangements

Table 1 lists the administrative arrangements in British hung councils. The wide variety of political responses to hung government accords with previous surveys which found that local political parties in Britain selected partners across the range of the political spectrum (Rallings, Temple and Thrasler, 1988; Leach and Stewart, 1992). As one might intuitively expect given their position in the centre of the two other main parties (a factor discussed later), the Liberal Democrats are the most successful of the three main parties at gaining power in hung councils. Excluding those councils with 'no administration' or where the chief executive has answered that there are 'no formal party groups', they are involved in 74 of 120 councils (61.7%). Labour is the next most successful, with involvement in 65 (54.2%) of hung councils, although the Conservatives are only just behind Labour's level of participation, forming part of the administration in 62 (51.7%) local authorities.

Whatever the views of their national parties, it is clear that at local level Labour and Conservative are actively and openly engaged in coalition politics with a variety of partners. Labour form administrations with the Scottish Nationalists, the Liberal Democrats, and Independent groups, and even participate in government with their long time 'enemies', the Conservatives. This is normally in an 'all-party' arrangement, which usually involves all the three main parties and an independent group of some sort. In such cases, three or four parties have agreed to work together and share responsibility (although they do not

Table 1: Administrative arrangements in hung councils

Administrative arrangement	Number of administrations
Conservative minority administration	14
Labour minority administration	18
Liberal Democrat minority administration	14
Independent minority administration	4
All-party administration	27
Conservative/Labour	1
Conservative/Liberal Democrat	9
Conservative/Independent	6
Labour/Liberal Democrat	15
Labour/Scottish Nationalist Party	1
Independent/Liberal Democrat	3
Independent/Ratepayers	1
Labour/Liberal Democrat/Independent	2
Conservative/Liberal Democrat/Labour	1
Conservative/Liberal Democrat/Independent	4
No formal party groups	5
No administration	26
Total	151

always share committee chairs) for the regular administrative functions of their local authority.

Previous studies have often found a propensity for Liberal Democrats to seek agreements with Labour rather than the Conservatives (Leach and Stewart, 1992). However, Kellner's view that because the Liberal Democrats are much closer ideologically to Labour than Conservative at national level they are therefore more likely to make deals at local level with Labour to "force the Tories into opposition" (Kellner, 1993) is simply not supported by our evidence. In some cases it is true that the long-term "traditional ruler" (overwhelmingly the Conservatives) will suffer from deals made by the Liberal Democrat group leader in Lincolnshire County Council whose party has a formal coalition with Labour put it, "it is great to be in power after 100 years of Conservative rule". Another Liberal Democrat leader in an ex-Tory council felt that "after 12 years shut out

contemptuously in opposition, it is wonderful to be able to participate constructively".

The tendency for Labour and the Liberal Democrats to work together locally may be nothing more than the natural desire not to allow long-term traditional rulers to remain in power. As Table 1 shows, the Conservatives are less successful than Labour in coming to an arrangement with the Liberal Democrats, but they are active participants in administrators in hung councils and still form a number of two-party administrations with Liberal Democrats. They also have two-party coalition arrangements with independent groups in six hung councils, as well as co-operating with Labour in a number of multi-party governments. In Cleethorpes District Council, while an 'all-party' administration exists, Labour and the Conservatives (the two largest parties) share all the major chairs. While there is only one authority (Tandridge District Council) where they work together formally to hold power, there is at least one other case (examined below) where the two parties also cooperate without including other parties.

#### Labour and Conservative — an 'unholy alliance'?

A previous survey posited a large number of such Labour/Conservative alliances (*New Statesman*, 30th August 1985) and the Liberal Democrats remain convinced such practices are widespread. They complain that such deals are a "gigantic con trick on the voters", arguing that:

Labour and Tory councillors in a string of local authorities across England have entered unholy 'Old Pals' pacts in order to exclude Liberal Democrats from power. (*Liberal Democrat News*, 29th May 1992, p 1)

There is some support for this belief, but the evidence is far from overwhelming. In response to our survey, one Liberal Democrat group leader of a north-east district council who wished to remain anonymous suggested that the Tories and Labour in his council have a "tacit agreement" designed to allow Labour to keep minority control of the council. In Chorley District Council, where a Labour minority administration rules, the Liberal Democrat group leader says there is really a "secret coalition" between Labour and the Conservatives. He alleges that the terms of the deal are "unknown", and that decisions are pre-agreed between them and emerge only after a "laughable debate or shadow-boxing", however, both parties deny that there is a deal between them.

In public support of such allegations, the Conservatives in Hampshire County Council recently offered to give £5 m to support Labour's spending plans in return for remaining in power (*The Independent*, 27th May 1993), and other cases of the "unholy alliance" are far from unknown (Leach and Game, 1989). In what the local press referred to as an 'extraordinary alliance', the two parties voted together in a no confidence motion to defeat the Alliance minority administration in Devon County Council in 1987. This was despite the absence of any alternative administration to assume control and despite over two years of, successively, a Labour/Alliance 'working arrangement' and then support from Labour for the Alliance budget. In effect, the county council was left to drift largely "rudderless" until the elections of 1989 returned it to Conservative control (Temple, 1993). That electoral outcome could be offered as a vindication for the Conservative tactics in Devon, at least in the short term. The 1993 county council elections, however, returned Devon to both hung status and to a Liberal Democrat minority administration in which neither of the two main parties have committee chairs.

It is certainly the case that Labour and Conservatives often have a negative attitude towards hung government, and are 'unhappy' about the power such a situation can give 'smaller' parties. When one of them does enter into a partnership which includes the Liberal Democrats, there may be a feeling that Liberal Democrats cannot be trusted to 'deliver' the necessary council votes. In Oldham Metropolitan Borough, a minority administration of 29 Labour councillors relies on the votes of 7 Conservatives to maintain control. The large Liberal Democrat group (23 councillors) is frozen out because of "personality clashes" between them and Labour. The Labour leader's complaint that "it is easier to work with the Tories [because] the Liberal Democrats are obsessively individualistic" (*The Independent*, 23rd September 1994, p 11) echoes not only a well-documented history of Liberal reluctance to toe a party line (Middlecombe, 1986), but also previous allegations from frustrated local coalition partners (Temple, 1993).

Normally, the extent of Labour and Conservative cooperation is difficult to assess, as any arrangement tends to be low key and (as in Chorley) sometimes denied altogether. There is no doubt of the genuine hostility shown by Labour and Conservatives to local Liberal Democrat tactics in some areas. However, in our one open case of

Conservative-Labour power sharing (Tandridge), the Liberal Democrats had previously shared chairs with both the groups but had withdrawn from the arrangement, so the two parties had entered into the arrangement by default. There is little substantive evidence to support the belief that Labour and the Conservatives are regularly acting in concert to prevent Liberal Democrats from exerting influence. If they are trying to exclude Liberal Democrats, the continued success of the party in hung councils suggests that Labour and Conservative local parties are generally failing in their aim.

That said, Liberal Democrats have sometimes overestimated their bargaining position. Their frequent belief that Labour and the Conservatives are too far apart ideologically to reach any coherent agreement overlooks the annoyance the traditional ruling parties can feel at seeing a disproportionate amount of power going to the often small centre party. There is a shared resentment of a party that is often seen as responsible and inexperienced. In such cases the two parties may make a deal allowing one or the other to rule alone, especially where there is a tradition of good relationships between them (Leach and Stewart, 1992). It must be pointed out that there is no reason, except perhaps the historically adversarial nature of their relationship, why the two parties should not engage in cooperation to ensure local communities have an effective delivery of services. Liberal Democrat complaints of an "old pals act" often appear to have a whiff of sour grapes about them, as if the Liberal Democrats are in favour of 'coalition politics' only when they are not excluded from the partnership.

#### Types of administration — a movement away from minority rule

The term 'coalition politics' implies a degree of cooperation and formality that many of the arrangements in hung councils do not begin to approach. However, a move towards more formal and clearly agreed relationships does appear to be happening. Respondents to our earlier surveys often believed that a "return to normality" would come at the following election, but many local politicians and chief executives are having to learn to live permanently with the politics of hung councils. The change from the norm of minority government towards more open power-sharing deals is probably a reflection of what one local Conservative calls a recognition of the "realpolitik" of hung councils.

We need to be careful about our definitions of local coalition activity. Coalition studies (especially those from a theoretical perspective) have often tended to cite any instance of cooperation as a 'coalition'. Local leaders would never agree that abstaining from voting, thus allowing a minority administration to pass policy, means they have formed a coalition with that minority party. Therefore, we need a definition of the administrators that form which describes the actuality and is acceptable to the perceptions of local actors. Following the important study of Leach and Stewart (1992), we have classified administrators under four types:

- (i) formal coalitions, with shared chairs and some policy agreements, usually with an agreed time limit;
- (ii) power-sharing, with shared chairs only;
- (iii) minority administrations, comprising one or (less usually) more parties;
- (iv) no administration in place, for example, no permanent chairs, rotating chairs or purely technical chairs.

Respondents were given these classifications and definitions and asked to place their current administrators in one of the four categories.

Our survey has found considerable differences from previous surveys concerning the type of administrators which form. For example, Leach and Game (1989, p 15) discovered that 'minority administrations' were by far the most common administrative form of hung authority, a finding supported by Leach and Stewart (1992), who classified two-thirds of all administrators as minority. It is quite clear from Table 2 that this is no longer the case, supporting Temple's argument that some form of coalition or power-sharing administration is becoming the most frequent response to hungness (Temple, 1992). Given that the basic definitions we adopted were based on Leach and Stewart's classifications, this difference appears to be of some significance.

In contrast to Leach and Stewart's assessment that two-thirds of all hung councils were controlled by a single minority party, our findings indicate that just over a half (51.1%) of all hung councils now have a formal coalition or power-sharing administration in control.

However, while it appears that power-sharing (practised in 39.5% of hung councils) is now the most usual response to hungness, formal coalitions are still a relatively rare form of administration in hung councils, accounting for only

**Table 2: Type of administration (n=86)**

	n=	%
Formal coalition	10	11.6
Power-sharing	34	39.5
Minority government	30	34.9
No administration	12	14.0

Note: Given the complexities of obtaining reliable information over the telephone about the exact type of administration in place in a local authority, we have relied solely upon the data provided by the written questionnaires.

11.6% of all administrative arrangements as defined above. Also, despite the decline of minority administrations over a third of hung councils are still run by a single party. In those councils where chief executives have said that "no administration" best describes the situation in their authority there is often all-party cooperation, usually in the form of an agreement to rotate the chairs or have purely technical chairs. The important point that the difference between a "power-sharing" arrangement of all parties and "no administration" may be merely one of definition needs to be kept in mind. Not only that, but in the London Borough of Redbridge the official response was that there was "no administration" in charge of the council, yet all the chairs were held by Labour, which was the largest minority party. Such problems of interpretation and definition are inevitable, but do not obscure the rise in what are clearly "coalitions" in practice.

The increasing numbers of coalition and power-sharing administrations may indicate a learning process at local level, with initial mistrust of local coalitions giving way to a greater political sophistication. On the other hand, it may merely indicate a greater openness by politicians about the realities of life in hung councils. The increase in coalitions is likely to be a balance of these and other reasons. In a political culture where coalition politics is seen as abnormal and distinct party platforms and identities seem as essential, cooperation with another party will tend to be hidden or informal. To a large extent, the large number of "minority administrations" found by previous surveys may have reflected an unwillingness to admit to coalition deals for many reasons. For example, if the anticipated "policy drift and impasse" (Blowers, 1987, p.32) materialised, politicians may have feared the electorate

would punish their party at the next election for cooperating in an ineffective council, by preventing them from regaining or gaining control of the council. In a political system where hung legislatures become the norm, the stigma of formal agreement with another party probably lessens. However, more investigation is needed into the individual history of each hung council before such ideas can be tested systematically.

**Minority administrations — support parties**

Inevitably, examinations of administrative formation in English local government tend to concentrate on the phenomenal success enjoyed by the Liberal Democrats. If previous accounts are accurate (Mellors, 1989) one would expect to find that the influence of the party is even greater than their participation in over three-fifths of hung councils indicates, for Liberal Democrats will be helping to maintain in office many of the 18 Labour and 14 Conservative minority administrations listed in Table 1. Some party or parties must be supporting the minority party even if only negatively, for example, by abstaining from voting against the party in control. Of the 50 minority administrations listed in Table 1, we have information on the support party in 25 cases (5 Conservative, 9 Labour, 8 Liberal Democrat and 3 Independent minority administrations).

Table 3 lists the support parties to those 25 minority administrations. From these responses, it appears that the Liberal Democrats are more likely than any other party to support a Labour or Conservative minority administration in power. However, in only two cases is the reward for the Liberal Democrats a committee chair or chairs. It is the same for other support parties, with only an independent group who support the Labour minority administration in Dinefwr Welsh District council receiving committee chairs. It appears the rewards for support will normally be either policy concessions or the negative reward of allowing one party to rule in order to deny even more disliked opponents a share of power.

**The allocation of committee chairs**

Previous surveys have found that the sharing of committee chairs is unusual in hung councils, with in most cases one party taking all the main committee chairs (Laver, Railings and Thrasher, 1987). Unsurprisingly, given the decline in the number of minority administrations, this is no longer the case. Table 4 shows that while it is still

**Table 3: Support party(s) to minority administration (n=25)**

Party of Administration	Supporting Party					
	Con	Lab	LibDem	Ind	All-party	Other
Conservative	0	0	2	1	1	0
Labour	1	4	4	2	2	1
Liberal Democrat	0	4	0	1	2	1
Independent	1	0	1	0	1	0

**Table 4: Allocation of chairs in hung councils (n=147)**

	n=	%
Chair sharing	65	44.2
Technical sharing	14	9.5
Single party chairs	68	46.3

true that in a plurality of hung councils a single party takes all the chairs, in a majority of cases the chairs are shared, and such an arrangement is not normally a purely technical issue. In less than 10% of all cases is there a technical arrangement to share chairs, and even then it can be an agreement among parties involved in power sharing to take chairs on a rota basis.

Unsurprisingly, over 90% of single party minority administrations keep chairs to themselves. Conversely, and also as expected, there is only one local authority we know of in a power-sharing arrangement where all the committee chairs are taken by one party. Even in councils where there was said to be "no administration", two-thirds of them had shared committee chairs.

However, there was a surprising finding in some administrations where a formal coalition was in place. While chair sharing between coalition partners was the norm, in three cases the junior party in the coalition (Liberal Democrats in all three councils) did not hold any of the major committee chairs (policy and resources, planning, education, social services, leisure, housing). However, in the two cases we have further information on, that is not to say they did not receive some benefit. In Shropshire County Council, for example, while the numerically greater Labour group have all the important chairs, the Liberal Democrats hold the vice chairs on four major

committees, including policy and resources. In the Metropolitan Borough council of Wolverhampton (as we have already noted) there is a formal coalition between Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in which the Tories hold all the chairs. The tiny group of 3 Liberal Democrats could form a winning coalition with either the 28 strong Conservatives or the 29 opposition Labour councillors, and in such a balanced situation it is highly likely that Wolverhampton's Liberal Democrats will wield considerable power over policy issues whichever partner they decide to support.

Very occasionally, committee chairs are taken by someone in a party outside the ruling administration or support parties. In Reigate and Banstead District council, the Conservative minority administration receives support from the local Residents Association representatives (who do not have a chair), yet gives the chair of the planning committee to a Liberal Democrat. Such behaviour is very much the exception, and may be a reflection of the chief executive of Reigate's comment that the advantage of working in a hung council is that "extremism is tempered". Given the widespread view that the Liberal Democrats are a centre party then the party's overall success when councils become hung may be attributable to their perceived ideological position and their moderating influence.

**The importance of a central position**

It is clear that the Liberal Democrats have enormous potential power in hung councils, and their success will feed the fears of those who feel small 'pivotal' groups exert disproportional power in (especially) proportional electoral systems. Mellors (1989) found the party was the most successful at achieving its budgetary objectives in 19 out of 20 hung county councils. The importance of a 'median' position (whether on a uni-

multi-dimensional policy scale) in achieving objectives in hung situations has been frequently noted in mathematical studies of coalition formation (Laver and Schofield, 1990). Proximity in ideological (or policy) terms is also an important factor. When there are only three major groups on the council, there is no winning and connected (on a uni-dimensional policy scale) 'coalition' that can form without the participation of the Liberal Democrats, assuming that party is ideologically sandwiched between Labour and Conservative (Laver and Hunt, 1993).

In an examination of the importance of the median actor, Temple (1995) found that in councils where all the parties could be placed on an ideological scale, the Liberal Democrats were a member of all the extant coalitions, and highly successful in achieving their policy aims. In three-party systems, where the absence of an independent group prevents the Conservatives from seeking what might be a natural alliance, the party is enormously influential whether a minority administration or majority coalition forms. Temple found the Liberal Democrats were usually the most influential opposition party in minority administrations controlled by the two main parties. This present study again shows their success in hung councils. However, while the Liberal Democrats' ideological position is an important factor, their positive attitude towards the changes a hung council brings could be equally important.

#### Policies and the decision-making process — a gradual change of opinion

Previous studies have noted that the Liberal Democrats are far more likely to believe that the quality of the policy process and the policies emerging have improved since their council became hung. Of course, for many Liberal Democrat groups it has been their first taste of power: the two main parties, especially when they have formerly ruled the council, have been far more likely to see the process as having deteriorated (Rallings and Thrasher, 1986; Rallings, Temple and Thrasher, 1988). The attitude of Labour and Conservative leaders was that hung councils were a temporary nuisance and that normal majority control would eventually return. Comparisons between this survey and our earlier 1988 survey are instructive, in that Labour attitudes have changed.

Conservative leaders remain overwhelmingly negative, over three-quarters feeling that the quality of the decision-making process has deteriorated and two-thirds believing the quality

of the policies emerging was worse than before. Such negative results may reflect the fact that nearly two-thirds (64%) of all the hung councils in our survey were formerly ruled by the Conservatives. In the circumstances, the antipathy normally displayed by Conservative leaders to political and administrative changes is understandable. However, this survey shows that a majority of Labour leaders now believe that both the quality of policies made is better (52%) and that the decision making process has improved (56%). As one would expect, Liberal Democrats remain positive about the process of government in hung councils. Two out of three Liberal Democrats think the decision-making process has improved and seven in ten believe the policy made is better than before.

In comparison with our earlier surveys, chief executives have become twice as positive about the quality of decision making, and very few remain negative about the changes in their councils. Only 18% believe the decision-making process has deteriorated and just 10% feel that the quality of the policies made has deteriorated since their council became hung.

#### Conclusions — and pointers for a hung parliament?

With some exceptions, chief executives and Labour and Liberal Democrat leaders have responded positively to the changes a loss of overall control brings. Disraeli's dictum, 'England does not love coalitions' still generally holds true for local Conservatives. That said, despite their generally negative view towards the decision-making processes, Tory leaders are realists enough to recognise that compromise is essential if they are to retain a share of power. All three parties engage in a number of different coalition arrangements with a variety of partners. However, the suspicion remains among some participants that the Conservatives and Labour's commitment to consensus politics is skin deep. As the Liberal Democrat leader in Leicestershire County Council notes, 'the other two parties (particularly the Conservatives) don't want a hung council to work and are therefore destructive instead of being constructive'.

Unusually pessimistic for his party, he believes that "the political culture in Britain is not ready for coalition government" and that his party has yet to convince people that "majority rule is the antithesis of democracy". Opinion polls indicate that his assessment is generally correct, in that there is no broad popular movement for electoral

reform (Kellner, 1992). Of course, even without electoral reform, there could still be a hung parliament, as indicated by the growth of hung councils under the 'first-past-the-post' electoral system. Speculation on the possibility of a hung House of Commons was rife before the 1992 election, and has continued following Labour's tentative moves toward electoral reform.

Events such as the Lib/Lab parliamentary pact in the late 1970s and the decision at the 1994 Liberal Democrats Annual Party Conference to review the policy of "equidistance" to the two main parties lends support to the view that the Liberal Democrats are closer nationally to Labour than to the Conservatives (Bogdanor, 1992; Dent, 1993). While local groups have been able to reach agreement with both Labour and Conservatives, Paddy Ashdown's national party has far less freedom of movement than its local counterparts, and it is probably the case that his past pronouncements have made a coalition with Labour inevitable. Joining forces against the long term ruling Conservatives may be the only feasible option. That said, any Labour/Liberal Democrat coalition would have to be more stable than some of those at local level (Temple, 1994). The party must avoid allegations of irresponsibility — it has to prove its ability to rule in order to safeguard its future electoral prospects and perhaps replace Labour as the natural opposition to the Conservatives.

Hung councils, although interesting in their own right, may also reveal possible responses by both national politicians and civil servants should a general election result in a hung parliament. Local actors share the same political culture and many of the attitudes of their national counterparts. Whatever the institutional and behavioural differences, a permanently hung House of Commons could not continue to run in its present elitist and adversarial way. Our findings indicate that a learning process is taking place at local level — more sophisticated coalition politics are emerging and a greater appreciation of the possibilities of hung government is evidenced. Local politicians are learning to cooperate with their former rivals, and there is overwhelming support for the new and more consensual ways of working from chief executives and from all politicians bar the traditional rulers (a possible warning for John Major's party). Faced with a permanently hung legislature, national politicians and civil servants would no doubt prove to be as adaptable as their local counterparts.

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## 5

# JOINT COMMISSIONING: organisational revolution or misplaced enthusiasm?

Bob Hudson

One of the paradoxes of the shift towards markets in health and social care has been the renewed emphasis upon more effective collaboration between the professionals and agencies involved. This has led to a search for ways of developing a range of joint ventures such as information sharing, joint community care planning and joint assessment of needs. However, the most ambitious collaborative vehicle is the emergence of joint commissioning between health and social care and possibly additional agencies. This article explores the background to the development of joint commissioning and the nature of joint commissioning, and examines some of the obstacles which will need to be overcome if the new joint commissioning ventures are to succeed. It concludes that joint commissioning is more than a merely 'technical' purchasing activity, and that the political dimensions also need to be confronted.

*Un des paradoxes qui a résulté du changement vers un système de marché dans le système de protection sociale a été l'importance accrue accordée à une collaboration plus efficace entre les professionnels et les organismes impliqués. On a donc essayé de trouver comment développer une gamme de coparticipations, comme le partage de l'information, la planification en commun de l'assistance sociale communautaire et l'évaluation ensemble des besoins. Toutefois, le moyen de collaboration le plus ambitieux se concrétise par l'apparition de commissions mixtes entre les organismes de santé, de protection sociale, voire d'autres encore. Cet article explore les raisons de fond du développement des commissions mixtes, leurs caractéristiques et quelques uns des*

*obstacles qu'il va falloir surmonter. En conclusion, l'article affirme que la commission mixte est plus qu'une façon purement technique d'acquisition et que les dimensions politiques doivent être prises en considération.*

The background to joint commissioning The developing case for joint commissioning can in large part be seen as stemming from the long-standing criticism of fragmentation in and duplication of service provision, but this argument has been given additional impetus as a result of the reforms in both health care (Department of Health [DoH], 1989a) and social care (DoH, 1989b). Webb (1991, p 229) has noted how "... exhortations to organisations, professionals and other producer interests to work together more closely litter the policy landscape ... yet the reality is all too often a jumble of services fractionalised by professional, cultural and organisational boundaries and by tiers of governance." The health and personal social services are seen as having major structural barriers rooted in history and bureaucratic politics, and as exhibiting different cultures and styles of management. Joint commissioning can offer several improvements upon this position: an avoidance of wasteful use of resources; an end to arguments over service responsibility; and a way of curbing attempts to shunt costs between agencies.

Much of the literature on fragmentation focuses upon inter-organisational interfaces, but inter-professional realities can be equally problematic. In her study of health and social work professionals, Dalley (1991) found differences in beliefs and behaviour to be widespread. Differences in professional ideologies existed over such issues as the role of families in community care and the value of institutional care, and this was compounded by cultural perceptions of their own and other professions. These mutually hostile