

# Political Studies

## WHATEVER HAPPENED TO COUNCILLORS? PROBLEMATISING THE DEFICIENCY NARRATIVE IN ENGLISH LOCAL POLITICS

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Abstract:	<p>Calls for councillors to change are nothing new, even from staunch defenders of local democracy. But one critical question has been sidestepped: Why have councillors been persistently constructed as a 'problem' for local government? This paper draws upon Foucault to detect the emergence and sedimentation of an overriding problematisation of councillors. Our genealogical analysis of a range of public commissions and inquiries, policy documents and academic discourses reveals a 'deficiency narrative', forged during the managerialist turn in the 1960s and subsequently reframed in the 1990s and 2000s through the lens of community leadership. We show that the exclusions and methodological limits of this imaginary blinker studies of councillors, leaving an unhelpfully normative stance within local government studies. Such deficits also lead to a 'smoothing out' of the complexity of local politics, downplay local dynamics and political work, and miss important insights into the practices of local democracy.</p>

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## 1 2 3 **WHATEVER HAPPENED TO COUNCILLORS? PROBLEMATISING THE** 4 **DEFICIENCY NARRATIVE IN ENGLISH LOCAL POLITICS<sup>1</sup>** 5 6 7 8

9 In an age marked by austerity and public spending cuts, often directed at the local  
10 state, councillors have become the target of competing pressures and demands. They  
11 have been urged to adopt new positions and behaviours to meet shifting patterns of  
12 service delivery, evolving community needs and changing institutional landscapes. Of  
13 course, these demands are not new. For many years there has been sustained debate  
14 about the roles and role orientations of councillors, both within the field of local  
15 government studies and the wider public domain. Over time, various institutional  
16 redesigns of the office of the councillor have mirrored the twists and turns of local  
17 government reorganisations.  
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31 However, in our view, such interventions and public deliberations have tended to  
32 sidestep one critical question: *Why and how have councillors been persistently*  
33 *constructed as a ‘problem’ for local government?* Drawing on Foucault’s method of  
34 problematization, our answer to this question focusses on the emergence and  
35 crystallisation of a series of problematisations of councillors in different conjunctures  
36 during the past fifty years. Our genealogical analysis detects a ‘deficiency narrative’,  
37 which was forged during the managerialist turn in the 1960s, and then reframed in the  
38 late 1990s and early 2000s through the lens of community leadership. We show that  
39 the exclusions and methodological limits of this collective social imaginary blinkers  
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53 constructive comments and engagement with our work, as well as their helpful  
54 suggestions in the development of our arguments.  
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3 studies of councillors, pointing to an unhelpfully normative stance within local  
4 government studies. We also argue that such limitations result in a ‘smoothing out’ of  
5 the complexity of local politics, while downplaying local dynamics and political  
6 activity, so that we miss important insights into the practices of local democracy. We  
7 conclude by calling for a new agenda in the study of - and approach to - the work of  
8 councillors.

## 19 20 **THE ARGUMENT**

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24 Our argument is developed in three steps. We first stress that our objects of inquiry  
25 are discursively constructed, so that the practice of problematisation is the necessary  
26 starting-point of any critical explanation (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). Drawing on  
27 Foucault, we show how his idea of problematisation is an effective research strategy  
28 for unearthing and challenging the fundamental assumptions of different fields of  
29 study. Problematisation thus allows us to contest particular accounts produced in a  
30 discipline, while questioning how a specific object of study has been forged in a  
31 particular context.

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44 Secondly, we investigate and distil the dominant problematisations of the office of the  
45 councillor. Here we focus mainly on the official policy discourses, public inquiries,  
46 and reports from expert committees; when taken together, as Ashforth argues, such  
47 problematisations are concerned, not only ‘with the making of substantively true  
48 propositions about material and social reality’, but also about ‘elaborating practical  
49 means to achieve specific ends within the context of that reality’ (Ashforth, 2014, p.  
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3 8). In the context of English local government, we describe the way that existing  
4 representations of councillors and their work depict them as suffering from the  
5 'wrong' personal attributes, the lack of managerial skills, political shortcomings, and  
6 so forth. In this picture, councillors are invariably seen as behind the times, overtaken  
7 by events, and resistant to attempts to get them to professionalize or 'modernise'. In  
8 both academic discourses and government policy, we argue that such  
9 problematisations are intimately connected with – and shaped by - what we call a  
10 'deficiency narrative', which emerged during the managerialist turn in the 1960s and  
11 1970s, and was sedimented in the 1980s and 1990s.

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24 This deficiency narrative serves to reframe deeply embedded attacks on the personal  
25 qualities of councillors, thus connecting their shortcomings to the administrative and  
26 service delivery challenges facing councils. Indeed, the 'failings' of councillors were  
27 crucial in the drive to improve the performance of local government and subsequent  
28 proposals to address this entrenched imaginary. Functioning as a horizon for  
29 understanding the role of local councillors, a further discursive transformation  
30 occurred during the late 1980s and 1990s, as demands for democratic renewal were  
31 gradually incorporated into the deficiency narrative through the rhetoric of  
32 community leadership. Here the new rhetoric created equivalences between  
33 democratic renewal, community leadership, new forms of management, and the  
34 perceived inadequacies of local councillors. Opposition to the deficiency narrative  
35 was thus negated and incorporated, because demands for democratic renewal were  
36 increasingly reframed through the normative characterisation of councillors and  
37 parties as obstacles to reform. Such discourses sought to 'fix' councillors, while  
38 focussing attention on how councillors may become 'better'.  
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5 Thirdly, we expose the limits and exclusions of this deficiency narrative - and the  
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7 problematisations it has partly shaped - thus foregrounding how it has clouded various  
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9 studies of councillors. We argue that it has also yielded overly normative inquiries,  
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11 which fail to grasp the inherent messiness of politics, as well as the practices of  
12  
13 political work. Inquiry into the activities of councillors is thus occluded. Indeed, the  
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15 narrative defines local councillors as part of the 'problem' facing local government,  
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17 while its normative focus on the roles and categories of councillors contributes to  
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19 their being overlooked in explanations of local political change. In elaborating our  
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21 argument, we begin with the concept of problematisation.  
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## 28 **THE METHOD OF PROBLEMATISATION**

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33 Foucault develops the idea of problematisation as a method to capture the way a  
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35 puzzle or anomaly (in phenomena or in theory) is registered and explored in the  
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37 domain of thought. The practice of problematisation involves 'a movement of critical  
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39 analysis in which one tries to see how the different solutions to a problem have been  
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41 constructed; but also how these different solutions result from a specific form of  
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43 problematisation' (Foucault, 1997, pp. 118–9). It begins with pressing and unsettling  
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45 issues in the present, which then elicit thought and critical engagement. It then  
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47 involves the mobilization of Foucault's archaeological and genealogical modes of  
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49 analysis.  
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3 The archaeological component brackets the causal determinations and conditions that  
4 constitute a phenomenon, so that its particular identity can be discerned and  
5 described. This involves laying-bare the *rules* that enable the discursive construction  
6 of the forms that are investigated. The genealogical dimension is then employed to  
7 explore the historical emergence of the investigated phenomenon, where emphasis is  
8 placed on its 'descent' – the evolution of an identity in a field of contingent events -  
9 coupled with the different political struggles and relations of domination that shaped  
10 its trajectory (Foucault, 1984a, pp. 81-3).

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22 Foucault's motivated genealogies destabilise narratives that present a simple  
23 continuity where none actually exists. Yet he also interrupts apparently clear-cut  
24 breaks, which separate a 'backward' or problematic 'pre-historical' past from a new  
25 beginning, so that past injustices or outmoded beliefs are erased. Instead, Foucault  
26 uses his historical sensibility to discern subtle rhetorical redescrptions, linguistic  
27 changes and power relations to expose false continuities *or* misleading discontinuities  
28 in dominant or taken-for-granted narratives. Events and practices can be viewed in  
29 their appropriate perspective (Foucault, 1984a, pp. 81-83).

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42 In this practice of critical reflection, the researcher not only identifies the different  
43 problems and solutions that exist - for example, the redesign of the office of the  
44 councillor - but also uncovers the conditions that enable such strategies to co-exist  
45 simultaneously. Problematisation thus discloses 'the point in which their simultaneity  
46 is rooted; it is the soil that can nourish them all in their diversity and sometimes in  
47 spite of their contradictions' (Foucault, 1984b, p. 389). So when Foucault speaks of  
48 writing a 'history of the present' his goal is to examine the contingent emergence of a  
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3 particular identity or form that is encountered in our current practices, where the task  
4 is to extricate the 'lowly origins' and the complex 'play of dominations' that produced  
5 it.  
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11 As an analytical tool, Foucault's genealogical approach thus focusses on the role of  
12 power relations and logics of exclusion in determining discourses, institutional rules  
13 and systems, as well as the different roles, subject positions and identities that  
14 individuals can occupy in those systems. His method investigates the rhetorical  
15 operations that frame institutions and agents in particular ways, allowing us to show  
16 how rhetoric makes it possible for institutions to be reinforced or changed in line with  
17 competing discourses. Importantly, genealogy is concerned to map out the intricate  
18 linkages between different forms of scientific knowledge and academic expertise, on  
19 the one hand, and the exercise of power over particular institutional forms and the  
20 roles they define on the other. Potential and actual resistances to such projects are also  
21 highlighted. Excavating the role of power, rhetoric and the clash of forces that are  
22 complicit with the formation and transfiguration of a phenomenon can also show  
23 possibilities that are excluded by the dominant narratives. This genealogical  
24 accounting of a problem and its ensuing identity thus lays bare excluded possibilities,  
25 which can in turn form the basis for alternative problematisations and projects.  
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48 **PROBLEMATISING THE PROBLEMATISATIONS: COUNCILLORS AS**  
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50 **COMMUNITY LEADERS**  
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3 Our 'history of the present' begins with the current problematisation of councillors as  
4 community leaders from the 2010 coalition government onwards. The roots of this  
5 problematisation stretch back to the late 1990s and early 2000s, when it was broached  
6 and then embedded by successive New Labour governments. Since 2010, there has  
7 been no challenge to its dominance. Indeed, in the face of waning government interest  
8 in the top-down redesign of the office of the councillor, the model of community  
9 leadership continues to be actively promoted by councils, practitioners and think tanks  
10 alike, not least the Local Government Association (LGA) (see LGA, 2018). Calls for  
11 'more community focussed' councillors repeatedly associate such roles with the need  
12 'to have high, performing councillors' (CLG Select Committee, 2013, p. 42). In so  
13 doing, they fuse together at least three 'problems', which have permeated the  
14 everyday discourses of local government (CLG Select Committee, 2013, p. 42; LGiU,  
15 2013; Parker and Smith, 2013; Puleston, 2013, p. 38; Shafique, Kippin and Lucas,  
16 2012; LGA, 2017). These are the problems of: (1) democratic representation, which is  
17 perceived to be the bedrock of councillor legitimacy; (2) the appropriate role of  
18 councillors within networks and partnerships; and (3) the attitudes and behaviours of  
19 councillors. We consider each in turn.

### 41 *1. Democratic Representation*

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43 In this problematisation, it is claimed that in the contemporary era of 'anti-politics',  
44 political disengagement and declining turnouts (Hay, 2007), the primacy of  
45 councillors as elected representatives of geographically-defined localities has been  
46 increasingly brought into question, as 'their' democratic legitimacy is challenged by  
47 the emergence of competing deliberative and participatory 'post-elected' forms of  
48 representation (Pycock, 2017). For some, the upshot is that continued investment in  
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3 'traditional' representative roles is the equivalent of 'flogging a dead horse'  
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5 (Richardson, 2012). In this context, political party loyalties and declining  
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7 memberships are perceived to be part of a growing democratic deficit. Repeated  
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9 concerns are thus voiced that councillors remain wedded to an out-dated form of  
10  
11 adversarial and tribal politics, which is unsuited to citizen engagement and  
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13 empowerment (Copus, 2010). Such sentiments are encapsulated, for example, in the  
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15 Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government's call for councils to be  
16  
17 'practical and pragmatic, not doctrinaire' (Clark, 2016). Typically, they are  
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19 materialised in training programmes for councillors, which foreground the need for  
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21 'political aspects' to be 'left' in the Town Hall, if a councillor 'is to adequately and  
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23 successfully build their relationship, work and reputation with the whole community  
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25 they have been elected to serve, not just their political supporters' (LGIU, 2018).  
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## 31 2. *The Growth of Networks*

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33 Pressures associated with democratic representation are seen to be related to - and  
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35 compounded by - problems associated with the growth of partnerships and networks.  
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37 Distributed governance has left councillors as just one player in a complex system of  
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39 local governance, requiring them to invest in new skills, while taking-up new 'non-  
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41 traditional' externally-facing roles. Here, they must represent and negotiate competing  
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43 demands of the council, place, party and ward in networks and complex governance  
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45 arrangements, while ensuring their democratic 'anchoring' (Copus, 2016). Indeed, in  
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47 response to the Kerslake review of its management structures, Birmingham Council  
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49 advanced the need for ward councillors to refocus on shaping and leading their local  
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51 area through influence, representation, and independent challenge and scrutiny of  
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53 public services (2015, p. 6).  
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5 To fulfil such expectations, councillors are also required to adjust to changed societal  
6 expectations and modes of service delivery, where citizens demand more ‘connected’  
7 councils which offer more engagement in the delivery of services. Networks are thus  
8 said to necessitate a move from hard to soft power (Mulgan, 2012), as well as  
9 privileging local knowledge and practices of co-production, in which citizens do more  
10 of the ‘heavy lifting’ themselves (Carr-West, 2013), while councillors are required to  
11 adopt more ‘relational’ and facilitative roles (Bussu and Galanti, 2018). As Howe  
12 (2013, p.14) puts it, ‘this is good for democracy, but only if democracy ... and  
13 democratic actors [councillors] evolve and adjust to these changes.’  
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### 26 3. *Questioning Attitudes and Behaviour*

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28 The injunction to ‘evolve’ also evokes the third ‘problem’ underpinning current  
29 problematisations. Here it is alleged that while changes in the external environment  
30 have been largely imposed on councillors, leaving them out of step with shifting  
31 political and social demands, the failure to respond to these changes can be explained  
32 in part by their intractable attitudes. Despite years of cajoling and reform, their  
33 alleged stubbornness and opposition to change is conceptualised as a prime reason for  
34 the failure of local government reforms (Lepine and Sullivan, 2010; Copus 2010).  
35 This well-documented irritation that councillors refuse to budge is often inflected with  
36 a strong normative dimension: resistance by councillors is associated with the pursuit  
37 of ‘less honourable’ goals, self-preservation and short-term interests, particularly as  
38 the party remains the key focus of councillor loyalty. In other words, councillors ‘tend  
39 to display a lukewarm, unenthusiastic attitude towards many participation  
40 mechanisms’ (Sweeting and Copus, 2013: 121).  
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5 In fact, the ‘localist’ rhetoric of the Coalition and Conservative governments  
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7 demanded a change in the behaviours and orientations of councillors. Addressing the  
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9 Local Government Association (LGA) in 2011, Eric Pickles, then Secretary of State  
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11 for Communities and Local Government, urged councillors to step up to the  
12  
13 challenges of reduced budgets and new freedoms. He derided the established statutory  
14  
15 duties of councils as a ‘comfort blanket’, reminding delegates that ‘our communities  
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17 are looking to you to be their champions’ (Pickles, 2011). Speaking to the same  
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19 conference seven years later, Sajid Javid, then Minister for Housing, Communities  
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21 and Local Government, went so far as to identify a propensity amongst councillors to  
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23 operate in ‘comforting shadows, behind closed doors’ as contributory factor in the  
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25 Grenfell Tower disaster (Javid, 2017). Advocating such behavioural change has been  
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27 regularly coupled with the need to recruit new ‘talent’ to stand for election. For  
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29 example, speaking before the publication of the Localism Bill in 2011, the Minister of  
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31 State for Housing and Local Government, Grant Shapps (2010), declared that ‘we  
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33 need talented people who can seize the opportunities this seismic shift in the balance  
34  
35 of power presents. So my message to school gate mums and dads and other  
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37 community champions is clear. Your Community Needs You.’  
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#### 46 **THE ‘IGNOBLE’ ORIGINS OF A ‘DEFICIENCY NARRATIVE’**

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50 The current problematisations of councillors assemble a series of inter-related  
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52 deficiencies in personal capabilities and attitudes, as well as perceived social and  
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54 political changes, to redesign the role of the councillor as a community leader. What  
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3 brings these elements together is the construction of the office of the councillor as one  
4 that needs 'fixing', or even sidelining. Councillors are exhorted to recognise the  
5 undesirability of political conflict, and the necessity for consensus. They are called  
6 upon 'to put aside [...] political differences and work together to engage the public in  
7 a great debate about the future shape of their communities and the role of local  
8 government' (Parker, 2013). For executive councillors, increasingly engaged in  
9 networks that extend beyond the council, this involves adopting the role of a  
10 metagovernor and various practices designed to create a 'post-ideological consensus'  
11 at a strategic level. For 'backbench' councillors, such community leadership is to be  
12 exercised in individual wards, engaging local communities to identify needs and  
13 shape service delivery; thus 'finding' a role for backbench councillors who  
14 increasingly believe that they exercise little influence over decision-making (APSE,  
15 2014).

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33 Yet such problematisations of councillors are not new (Copus, 2016, p.1). For more  
34 than five decades, government white papers, select committee and expert inquiries,  
35 not to mention think-tank reports and sundry media representations, have questioned  
36 the perceived inadequacies of councillors, either through institutional reforms, or  
37 through exhortations to change behaviour through processes of socialisation and  
38 training. Although it is tempting to search for the pristine origins of this 'deficiency  
39 narrative', our genealogical approach, inspired as it is by Foucault, cautions against  
40 this desire. Instead, we shall simply pierce a point in time - the cycle of interventions  
41 that sought to 'fix' the office of the councillor from the mid-1960s onwards – while  
42 accepting that this analysis taps into deeper roots and longer-standing lamentations  
43 about the poor quality of councillors (Chandler, 2007).

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5 In a typical characterization voiced in 1948, Hasluck lamented ‘the illiterate babblings  
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7 of local worthies’ found in council meetings, and such statements can easily be  
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9 multiplied (Gyford, Leach and Game, 1989, p. 39). But, despite these intermittent  
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11 interventions about the ‘quality’ of councillors, the *aptitudes* and *skills* of councillors  
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13 were not considered before the 1960s to be fundamental problems associated with  
14  
15 local government. Rather, from the 1930s onward, there were increasing calls for the  
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17 ‘modernisation’ of councils in line with the latest managerial thinking, which  
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19 stemmed from the ‘administrative efficiency’ movement. These interventions tended  
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21 to concentrate more on issues of organisational structure, coordination and the skills  
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23 and roles of officers (Stewart, 1985; Chandler, 2007).  
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29 The post-war period saw Labour and Conservative governments instigate various  
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31 investigations, predicated on the increasingly prevalent view that there were too many  
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33 councils of too small a size, which were poorly equipped to deal with the increasingly  
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35 technocratic, strategic and welfare service delivery requirements. The need for more  
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37 executive cohesion in local government had been stressed as early as the 1940s  
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39 (Collinge, 1997, p. 352). But it was not until the reform of London Government in  
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41 1963 that these concerns began to be addressed comprehensively via the creation of  
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43 fewer and larger councils, in what Hebbert (2008, p.30) describes as ‘triumph of  
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45 public administration over politics’. Over the years, the ‘problem’ of administration  
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47 had become the ‘problem’ of management. Yet, despite the changing language, there  
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49 was a pervasive continuity in the identification of the central issue.  
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3 By the mid-1960s, however, it was clear that the separation of the managerial problem  
4 from the 'quality' of councillors could no longer be maintained as perceptions of  
5 councillors - and the expectations of them – began to evolve. The 1960 Herbert  
6 Commission report on London government concluded that administrative efficiency  
7 and the demands of a 'healthy local democracy' required councillors of a 'high  
8 standard of intelligence, experience, personality and character', who were 'devoted to  
9 the public interest in a disinterested way' (quoted in MacIntosh, 1962, p.241). At the  
10 same time, Lee's (1963) study of Cheshire County Council identified a new  
11 generation of councillors – so-called 'public persons' - who were confident of  
12 working and socializing alongside professional officers. Indeed, in the 1960s, a cohort  
13 of charismatic leaders emerged, who seemed to possess the right mix of political and  
14 managerial skills (exemplified at one time, perhaps, by T. Dan Smith, council leader  
15 in Newcastle).

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33 Demands for councillors to develop managerial skills gained further traction in the  
34 shifting context of local politics. Throughout the twentieth century, the growing size  
35 of local government, increasingly charged with the delivery of the goods and services  
36 provided by the welfare state, led to a 'nationalisation' of local politics. This logic  
37 gathered pace in the 1960s and 1970s and resulted in the majority of councillors being  
38 elected on party labels. Despite evidence to the contrary, this politicisation prompted a  
39 growing unease that the increasing influence of party politics in local elections was  
40 leading to the election of more working-class and less formally well-educated  
41 councillors, often at the expense of 'local notables' (Clement, 1969; Chandler, 2007).  
42 Dame Edith Sharpe thus noted in 1962 that she did not think that 'enough people from  
43 business, from industry, from agriculture and the professions' were entering local  
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3 government (cited in Chandler, 2007, p. 232). On the other hand, local government  
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5 had become 'big business' - now a key deliverer of welfare - with council leaders  
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7 viewed as key strategic players. In-depth studies of local councils (Jones, 1969)  
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9 identified the key role of leading councillors and their changing relationships with  
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11 professional officials. These shifting conditions, rules and interventions made  
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13 possible, and cemented, calls to tie the 'modernisation' of local government to that of  
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15 councillor roles.  
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## 22 **PRODUCING THE MANAGERIAL COUNCILLOR**

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26 By the time of the deliberations of the Redcliffe-Maud Commission (1966-69) and the  
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28 report of the Maud Committee on the Management of Local Government (1967), the  
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30 professionalisation and managerialisation of local councillors, alongside an increase  
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32 in the size and scale of local authorities, was thus seen to be the key in meeting the  
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34 challenges of party dominance and the increasing scale of welfare services. Such  
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36 challenges were anchored in the problematization that councillors either lacked  
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38 managerial skills, which would be redefined in subsequent decades, or that councillor  
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40 roles and council structures did not allow the necessary scope for these skills to  
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42 flourish. Indeed, the Redcliffe-Maud Commission (1969), the Wheatley Commission  
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44 in Scotland (1969), the Maud Committee (1967) and the Bains Report (1972), all  
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46 focused on the requirement for more rational planning, which, to some extent, had  
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48 already been developing in cities such as Newcastle, Liverpool, Stockport and Hull  
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50 (Chandler, 2007, p. 221). For example, the internal management system introduced in  
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52 Newcastle in the early 1960s was widely seen as an innovative response to the  
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3 demands of 'modern' decision-making. In 1965, the council leader, T. Dan Smith,  
4 spoke of the introduction of a City Cabinet and City Manager, and noted the urgent  
5 need to 'modernise', expressing the view that 'only democracy with efficiency will  
6 lead Britain forward' (1965, p. 417).  
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13 Together with greater allowances for key position holders, and an added clarity and  
14 enhanced status for important leadership roles, it was argued that the requisite  
15 managerial and professional skills should now be nurtured in councillors (and not  
16 only officers). Redcliffe-Maud (1967, p. 351) thus noted the need to 'get people of the  
17 right calibre for local government in the future', highlighting an expectation that the  
18 larger authorities proposed by his Commission (and later those less large ones that  
19 were created by the 1972 Local Government Act), would, in light of their increased  
20 size and importance, attract a better standard of councillor, which Maud felt would  
21 increasingly come from 'the Universities' (p. 352). Peter Walker, Shadow Minister  
22 for Housing and Local Government, also argued along these lines (see Young and  
23 Rao, 1997).  
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40 In fact, the Maud Committee was critical of the committee system for discouraging  
41 the recruitment of 'policy orientated' councillors. It recommended the creation of  
42 executive management boards with the 'residual' councillors, reduced in number,  
43 performing a scrutiny role. Such suggestions were 'presented as a means of finding  
44 attractive opportunities for able people' (Young and Rao, 1997, p. 221). They were  
45 rearticulated in the conclusions of the Redcliffe-Maud Commission which stressed the  
46 need for fewer committees, as they encouraged councillors to focus on 'detail', in  
47 favour of a 'central vantage point' supported by 'new and more sophisticated  
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3 techniques of management' (Redcliffe-Maud, 1969, p.125). The then Labour  
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5 Government supported such demands, stating that larger councils would mean  
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7 councillors spending less time on detail 'than was appropriate in modern conditions'  
8  
9 and that councillors needed to re-orientate themselves more to strategic policy making  
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11 (DLGRP 1970, p.26). Indeed, Jones (1973, p.145) noted that the logic of re-  
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13 organisation would 'demand a higher quality of member ... by making *him* more  
14  
15 professional, *he* is more likely to make more impact on the public and so increase  
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17 public interest in local government'; there was thus a need to 'create and support a  
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19 class of professional politicians'.  
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24 The Bains Report - the result of a working party looking into internal management  
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26 structures for the new councils created by the 1972 Act - was again concerned that  
27  
28 certain types of people, 'particularly professionals and businessmen', were unwilling  
29  
30 to serve as councillors due to the time-consuming nature of committee work and  
31  
32 detail (Bains, 1972, p. 30). The solution to this dilemma, and the problem of growing  
33  
34 politicization more generally, was to be found in stronger corporate management led  
35  
36 by a centralised political leadership and streamlined decision-making procedures. In  
37  
38 1974, a Department for the Environment consultation paper was able to state with  
39  
40 confidence that 'current trends in management in local government are liable to  
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42 absorb the individual councillor into the general work of the council to a greater  
43  
44 extent' (DoE, 1974, p.1) and most councils formally adopted internal structures based  
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46 on Bains after 1972.  
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52 By the late 1960s, then, the required personal qualities of councillors were being  
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54 reframed in terms of the managerial and/or professional skills associated with the  
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3 corporate planning and coordination then popular in the business world. In an  
4 extension of traditional arguments that councillors should pursue the 'public interest',  
5 leading councillors were thus to become more technocratic, with the 'managerial'  
6 councillor offered up as a response to the need for local government to respond to its  
7 increasing budgetary responsibilities and party political control of decision-making.  
8 Stanyer (1971), for example, was quick to point out how questions over the  
9 deficiencies of existing councillors were increasingly framed by the uncritical  
10 acceptance in governing circles of the 'systematic selection' approach of Taylorist  
11 scientific management. In this regard, improved organisational outcomes were tied to  
12 the recruitment and training of high-performing individuals (1971, p. 77). As such, the  
13 'managerial' councillor was a 'modernised' re-production of earlier ideal types that  
14 stressed the distinction between local politics and administration and reframed the  
15 shortcomings of councillors. But, importantly for our analysis, it tied the deficiencies  
16 of councillors to the administrative challenges facing local authorities. In so doing, it  
17 reshaped the terrain of argumentation, such that the deficiencies of councillors  
18 became one of the fundamental lynchpins of the rhetorical charges against 'under-  
19 performing' local government.  
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#### 44 **TOWARDS THE ENTREPRENEURIAL COUNCILLOR**

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48 From the mid-1970s onwards the highly technocratic managerial skills that were  
49 understood to be beyond both politics and (it was commonly assumed) the wit of most  
50 councillors were supplemented by demands for a different set of skills as the deficit  
51 problematisation shifted in line with new developments in managerialist and neo-  
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3 liberal thinking. During the Thatcher administrations of the 1980s, and then into the  
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5 1990s, with the emergence of New Labour - an era of competitive tendering,  
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7 outsourcing and competition - corporate planning was now constructed as an  
8  
9 unnecessary overhead. Managerial skills were thus related to the logic of competition  
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11 based on efficiency and contracting skills, with councillors expected to develop  
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13 commercial or 'enabling' functions and capacities.  
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18 In this sense, the 'neo-liberal' councillor required skills that would allow them to  
19  
20 implement the 'roll back' neo-liberalism associated with new public management, as  
21  
22 well as the 'retreat' from the post-war welfare state consensus (Peck and Tickell,  
23  
24 2002). Ironically, the Widdicombe Report (1986) identified the emergence of a group  
25  
26 of 'higher calibre' councillors in London and the metropolitan councils, who were  
27  
28 generally better educated and younger than the average councillor. On the face of it,  
29  
30 this generation of councillors, who emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, possessed the  
31  
32 qualities which had long been deemed necessary. However, these councillors mainly  
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34 belonged to the 'New Urban Left'; they were ideologically opposed to the  
35  
36 managerialism of Thatcher governments, and advocated advocating radical  
37  
38 alternatives (Gyford, 1985). In short, they were still deemed to lack the 'right kind' of  
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40 'responsible' skills articulated within the new dominant problematisation, which was  
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42 increasingly shaped by neo-liberal ideas and values.  
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48 The required managerial skills also drew on revised understandings of 'strategic'  
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50 capabilities. These drew on critiques that suggested councillors spent too much time  
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52 on detail, and that some had gone too far in interfering in the managerial domain of  
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54 officers. For example, the Audit Commission (1990) lamented the amount of time  
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3 which councillors continued to spend on detail (often with respect to constituency  
4 duties relating to individual cases) and recommended separating out the policy  
5 making and 'operational' roles. These themes were repeated in a report published by a  
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7 Department of the Environment Working Party in 1993, which inquired again into  
8  
9 internal management structures. Reframed through the discourse of new public  
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11 management, council leaders were now encouraged to focus on strategy, while others  
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13 got on with the (supposedly) differing task of representing their wards (DoE, 1993).  
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20 Successive New Labour governments made such charges against councillors explicit;  
21 indeed, they were often amplified. Renewed emphasis was placed on institutional  
22 reform and concerted efforts to change the behaviour of councillors via exhortation,  
23 training and self-responsibilisation (Hale, 2013). Labour's 'modernisation' agenda  
24 thus re-cast the deficits facing councillors in line with a revamped managerialist  
25 rhetoric, which stressed transformational leadership and coalition-building skills, but  
26 remained favourably predisposed to strong, individual leadership (Leach and Wilson,  
27 2008). Councillors were seen to require a new skill set associated with collaborative  
28 working. This model would favour a small, strategic executive core, which would  
29 'steer, rather than row', mainly by directing a series of detached, arms-length  
30 operational and delivery units. Councillors were deemed to lack the 'soft skills' of  
31 networking and coalition building, which were now the fundamental competencies for  
32 a more fragmented system of local governance.  
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50 Fostering this new bundle of competencies went hand in glove with the emergent  
51 image of the 'neo-liberal' councillor, who was required to negotiate and implement  
52 the 'roll out' of neo-liberalism (Peck and Tickell, 2002). In this conception,  
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3 leadership, networking and individual responsibility became cardinal virtues of the  
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5 new councillor. This movement resonates with Foucault's account of neoliberalism  
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7 (Foucault, 2008). His genealogy of neoliberalism emphasizes the way that this  
8  
9 discourse comprises a novel series of governmental technologies and rationalities,  
10  
11 which are designed to influence behaviour and practice via a series of 'technologies of  
12  
13 the self' in what Rose (1999, p, 456) calls 'a double movement of autonomisation and  
14  
15 responsabilisation'. In this strategy, endeavours are made to constitute individuals  
16  
17 with particular assemblages of attributes, which are underpinned by a logic of  
18  
19 entrepreneurialism. The neo-liberal councillor was thus to be a risk-taker,  
20  
21 entrepreneur, innovator and facilitator; characteristics that were consistent with the  
22  
23 now popular 'excellence' school of managerialism, which placed more emphasis on  
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25 cultural controls and 'softer' skills.  
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31 Amidst an explicit and ongoing irritation with councillor 'quality' (Stoker, 2004),  
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33 New Labour used a mixture of direct and indirect approaches to engineer change.  
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35 Indirectly, they employed a range of agencies and interventions aimed at the 'self-  
36  
37 responsabilisation' of councillors, including training programmes via the  
38  
39 Improvement and Development Agency, and the apparatus of the Comprehensive  
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41 Performance Assessment, monitored by the Audit Commission, which sought not  
42  
43 only compliance with the government's agenda, but also particular attitudes and  
44  
45 dispositions towards it (Barnett, 2003). As Hale (2013) notes, these attempts became  
46  
47 increasingly prescriptive, as they evolved into the role descriptors, councillor  
48  
49 contracts and performance reviews which have become common in recent years. In  
50  
51 2013, the Communities and Local Government Select Committee recommended that  
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53 councillors produce annual self-assessments of their achievements in office (2013, pp.  
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3 59-61). Echoing the recommendations of the Select Committee, Oldham council also  
4 introduced annual performance reports of councillors, together with ‘support  
5 functions’ to facilitate the work of councillors, including a Local Leaders Programme  
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7 (Shafique, Kippen and Lucas, 2012).  
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13 More direct interventions sought to address the persistent issue of the clarity of roles  
14 through legislation. For the first time, the Local Government Act (2000) created  
15 different classes of councillor - executive/cabinet members and  
16 backbenchers/scrutineers – with councils given the possibility of having a directly  
17 elected Mayor. This increased the profile of leading councillors, but also led to the  
18 further marginalisation of the rest (APSE, 2015). At the same time, strategic skills  
19 were again seen to be in short supply, particularly the type required for the ‘joined up’  
20 local governance required by introduction of mechanisms such as Local Strategic  
21 Partnerships and Community Strategies, which New Labour embraced as part of its  
22 discourses of ‘community leadership’ and ‘place shaping’. Councillors were  
23 increasingly called upon to ditch outdated party political practices and to adopt a new  
24 form of politics, which stressed that they assume the role of ‘a conflict broker’ (James  
25 and Cox, 2007: 22).  
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44 Developing a theme from the 1998 Modern Local Government White Paper, the idea  
45 of community leadership served to articulate new managerial thinking about the  
46 importance of vision, leadership and coalition building, effective service delivery  
47 through user participation and learning, as well as the agenda for democratic renewal.  
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49 In so doing, it encapsulated the new role orientations of councillors, which were  
50 associated with the logics of ‘roll back’ neoliberalism. Visions of councillors acting as  
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3 mini-mayors or champions of neighbourhoods thus emerged in the 2006 White  
4 Paper *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, as well as the LGA's *Closer to People*  
5 *and Places* campaign. Councillors were to act as 'civic entrepreneurs', or, to use the  
6 words of the leader of Hertfordshire County Council, they should become  
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11 'community activists', whose status would be 'one among equals' (Communities and  
12 Local Government Select Committee, 2013, p.9).  
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18 Yet, ironically, this shift to community leadership further embedded the dominant  
19 narrative by pinpointing the deficiencies of councillors in two ways. First, appeals to  
20 community leadership incorporated demands for 'community-orientated' models of  
21 local government in opposition to the Thatcherite 'enabling authority'. These former  
22 models resonated with a conception of local leadership that enabled councillors to  
23 retain control over the political purpose and direction of an authority (Leach *et al.*,  
24 1994; Stewart and Stoker, 1988). But such demands were reframed within the  
25 discourse of community leadership and were thus connected to the problematisations  
26 of the leadership role and the role of the party group. Indeed, attacks on the working  
27 of party groups acted as a proxy within deficiency narratives for an attack on  
28 councillors. Parties were singled out as a cause of constant frustration, charged with  
29 never really fitting into the formality of council business, and creating what Copus  
30 (2004) calls a hidden 'partyocracy'. Leach (2004), a strong advocate of councillors,  
31 thus problematises the continued attachment of councillors to party politics, with such  
32 criticisms serving as a proxy for councillors being out of step with the shifting context  
33 of politics and demands for new forms of post-representative politics.  
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3 Secondly, community leadership resonated with demands for new types of politics -  
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5 deliberation and co-production - which arose from increasingly accepted narratives  
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7 that plotted the shift from local government to local governance through networks and  
8  
9 partnerships. Community leadership discourses, often from a perspective of seeking to  
10  
11 defend councillors and fit their representative roles into these demands for local  
12  
13 democratic renewal, thus continued to draw on a deficiency narrative and could be  
14  
15 incorporated within it. For example, John Stewart (2003), consistently one of the  
16  
17 staunchest defenders of councillors, in seeking ways to utilise them fully within a  
18  
19 community leadership model for local government, drew on the need for councillors  
20  
21 to adjust to other types of democratic engagement. In short, opposition to the  
22  
23 dominant narrative was confined to the effectiveness and emphases of the reforms  
24  
25 rather than the underlying problematisations of councillors (Stoker, 2011). At the  
26  
27 same time, community leadership invested communities with democratic legitimacy -  
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29 and with it many of the roles and responsibilities of councillors - thus paving the way  
30  
31 for Cameron's Big Society initiative.  
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37 Over time, therefore, the exact nature of the required skills and functions of  
38  
39 councillors has changed to suit the central government's reform agenda, including the  
40  
41 implementation of both 'roll back' and 'roll out' neoliberalism, and various  
42  
43 management fads. However, the deep-seated 'narrative of deficiencies' exudes an  
44  
45 embedded logic of continuity, which is evident from Redcliffe-Maud in the 1960s  
46  
47 through to the current problematization. Indeed, the underlying rhetoric sustains a  
48  
49 mythical narrative of local politics that is repeatedly predicated on the collective  
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51 investment in the office of the councillor 'to come'. Equally, this overriding  
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53 problematization ensnares the field of local government studies, and indeed  
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3 government policy, in a metaphorical cul-de-sac of its own making. The discourse is  
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5 thus gripped by a series of logics and perspectives that persistently exclude or  
6  
7 downplay the critical examination of the salient challenges facing councillors and  
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9 local government under conditions of austerity.  
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16 **LOCAL COUNCILLORS AS OBJECTS OF SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION:**  
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18 **METHODOLOGICAL AND NORMATIVE SELECTIVITIES**  
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22 It is an axiomatic feature of Foucault's genealogical approach that power and  
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24 knowledge are intricately connected in various ways. In *Discipline and Punish*, he  
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26 urges us to 'abandon a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can  
27  
28 exist only where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop  
29  
30 only outside its injunctions, its demands and its interests' (Foucault, 1977, p. 27).  
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32 Instead, we 'should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by  
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34 encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that  
35  
36 power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation  
37  
38 without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that  
39  
40 does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.' What Foucault  
41  
42 names 'power-knowledge relations' should not be analysed 'on the basis of a subject  
43  
44 of knowledge who is or is not free in relation to the power system'; instead, 'the  
45  
46 subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be  
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48 regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge  
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50 and their historical transformations' (Foucault, 1977, pp. 27-8).  
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3 In the final step of our argument, we use the results of our genealogy to challenge the  
4 underlying assumptions of the field of local government studies. Here we expose and  
5 delineate the limitations of three interconnected research protocols that derive from  
6 the deficiency narrative. These relate to: (1) a particular set of methodological and  
7 normative commitments; (2) the smoothing out of the complexities of politics with its  
8 implications for institutional design; and (3) the limited engagement with political  
9 practices.

### 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 *1. Analytical and Evaluative Selectivities*

21 It is striking that the deficit problematisations we have discerned are symbiotically  
22 related to a series of analytical deficits and normative biases lodged in the research  
23 designs of studies of local councillors (Copus and Wall, 2017; Mangan *et al.*, 2016).  
24 Consequently, the study of elected members has migrated towards overly normative  
25 inquiries in which their skills and role orientations are evaluated against the backdrop  
26 of a pre-defined set of normative principles, institutional designs and behavioural  
27 changes, which it is assumed that the office of the councillor 'to come' will be  
28 required to embody. Studies have thus focussed on the development of categories that  
29 prescribe diverse ways of working for councillors. They are thus littered with  
30 references to different 'types' of councillors, and the multiplicity of roles and subject  
31 positions they occupy: 'representative', 'steward', 'facilitator' and 'advocate', as well  
32 as 'scrutiniser' and 'community leader'.  
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50 Typically, such analytical models enable researchers to undertake three tasks: first,  
51 they establish the roles of councillors that are deemed to be necessary to meet the  
52 demands of changing social and democratic demands; secondly, these roles are  
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3 mapped against existing practices, so as to delineate the alleged shortcomings of  
4  
5 councillors; finally, a call is made for councillors to take on new roles and behaviours  
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7 (Kirklees Democracy Commission, 2017; Mangan *et al.*, 2016). Exemplifying this  
8  
9 range of roles in their study, the *21st Century Councillor*, Mangan and her colleagues  
10  
11 articulate a set of research questions devoted to: the ‘roles that the 21st Century  
12  
13 councillor is required to perform’; ‘the competencies and skills that councillors  
14  
15 require to undertake these roles’; and the available ‘support and training for these  
16  
17 roles’ (Mangan *et al.*, 2016, p. 4). Indeed, the study foregrounds how the ‘roles, skills  
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19 and relationships [of councillors] are shifting in response to a range of contextual  
20  
21 challenges’ (Mangan *et al.*, 2016, p. 24), and concludes that ‘there is a challenge for  
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23 elected members too to think about how they want to be supported so they can  
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25 actively engage in shaping the future rather than letting austerity wash over them’  
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27 (Mangan *et al.*, 2016, p. 24).  
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33 Importantly, deficit problematisations of the office of the councillor have led studies  
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35 away from the vitally important tasks of critical interpretation. Existing studies thus  
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37 run the risk of descriptivism, in which they categorize the functions of councillors at  
38  
39 the expense of explaining political outcomes and the dominance of specific practices.  
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41 In fact, such overly normative inquiries, often driven by a set of principled  
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43 engagements in support of local democracy, can take a broad brush to the analysis and  
44  
45 evaluation of particular exercises of power and domination. For example, aside from  
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47 a few notable exceptions (Allen, 2013; Barron *et al.*, 1991), gender and power  
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49 imbalances within accounts of local councillors are often rendered ‘invisible’ or  
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51 focussed on questions of representation (Rao, 2005).  
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## 2. *Smoothing out the Complexities of Politics*

What we have characterised as overly normative enquiries into the roles and categories of councillors are often rooted in understandings of politics which emphasize practices of consensus-building. Discourses inciting councillors to assume the subject positions of ‘community leaders’ or ‘facilitators’, which emerge and are articulated within the deficiency narrative, thus generate normative demands for councillors to embrace new deliberative or communicative ways of working. Such calls place responsibility on elected members to resolve clashes between local representative and participatory democracy, as well as to meet increasing demands from service-users for more engagement and flexibility in local provision (see our discussion above; Carr-West, 2013; Lepine and Sullivan, 2010; Sweeting and Copus, 2013). But, at the same time, such discourses are also critical of the capacity of councillors to address such demands, blaming their embedded behaviours and attitudes for the failings and fragmentation of local democratic governance. Here, councillors’ allegiances to party politics are constructed as a barrier to change, with councillors ‘seen as outdated elements in a system that has moved on, and they are simply behind the times, in the main unable or unwilling to take on the broader aspects of democratisation in local politics’ (Sweeting and Copus, 2012, p. 32).

By privileging consensual politics, such analyses function as a condition of possibility for the reiteration of deficit problematisations. This is because they typically associate conflict, and the inherent heterogeneity and multi-dimensional character of political practices, with the failings of councillors. For one thing, the shortcomings of councillors are highlighted in order to explain the failure to resolve local conflicts and tensions. The lack of ‘fit’ between, on the one hand, their existing skills and, on the

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3 other hand, their ‘stubborn adherence’ to traditional modes of representation (Copus,  
4 2010, p. 588) are identified as key barriers to change. The result is that political  
5 tensions and paradoxes, which are integral to the practices of elected members,  
6 become indicators of the failings of local politicians. In turn, this leads to calls for the  
7 construction of ‘responsible’ and ‘enlightened’ councillors, who are willing to leave  
8 behind outmoded forms of engagement in favour of deliberative and communicative  
9 principles. Indeed, even those rare accounts which shy away from blaming councillors  
10 for the failings of local democracy, while recognising the complexity and contingency  
11 of politics, still look to councillors to display a revised political sensibility and  
12 perform as facilitators of conflict resolution. For example, Lepine and Sullivan (2010,  
13 p.105) conclude that in order to forge new patterns of democracy ‘we have to start  
14 somewhere – why not with the local councillor as a harbinger of grown up politics?’  
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31 However, in this argumentative process, and as conflicts and tensions across localities  
32 become synonymous with the deficits of local councillors, the critical examination of  
33 political practices in the major studies of elected members and the workings of local  
34 government is subsumed or marginalised. Consider, for example, the recent  
35 discourses on community leadership in which councillors are repositioned as  
36 ‘community facilitators’. Such new subject positions are often advanced as opening  
37 up new responsibilities for communities and councillors, while generating new spaces  
38 of representation and participation. Yet such opportunities are too often seen to be  
39 constrained by frequent appeals to the individual failings of local councillors, which  
40 are then corrected by institutional ‘fixes’ to the office of the councillor. Too  
41 frequently, proposed changes are thus married to an inadequate consideration of what  
42 forms of practical politics can advance new forms of community leadership, while  
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3 simultaneously advancing utopian notions of depoliticisation, as councillors ‘of the  
4 future move to play a supportive rather than an unnecessarily antagonistic role’  
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7 (Copestake, 2011, p. 50).  
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11 So, framed through the dominant deficit problematisations, there is little consideration  
12 of the essentially contested nature of politics. Instead, the failings of councillors  
13 operate as the explanation of why community leadership roles have not been taken up  
14 as anticipated or embedded. Blame is thus put on councillors. Indeed, as Richardson  
15 notes, ‘if alternative roles [community leadership] for local members are not working,  
16 then one answer would be to have fewer members’, although she goes on to suggest  
17 that ‘the way forward for local government is [perhaps] to welcome a wider range of  
18 forms of representation’ (Richardson, 2012, p. 34). In short, there is a danger that  
19 concerns about the lack of ‘fit’ between councillors’ skills and adherence to  
20 representative modes of accountability and engagement, masks assumptions about the  
21 desirability of both political conflict and consensus, which militates against the lived  
22 experience of councillors and their understandings of political work (APSE, 2015).  
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### 41 *3. Limited Engagement with Political Practice*

42 The failure to acknowledge the political nature of many of their activities leads us to  
43 the third of our interconnected concerns, namely, that it resonates with a top-down  
44 institutional orientation, which underplays the significance of the everyday practices  
45 of local politics and fails to engage with them. As we have argued, deficit  
46 problematisations construct councillors as objects of external intervention. Such  
47 objectifications militate against the conceptualisation and investigation of their  
48 political practices, as well as the need for change to be inscribed into local contexts,  
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3 so that the scientific and expert problematisations may work with, and not against, the  
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5 grain of the lived experience of councillors.  
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9 In fact, because the production of much scientific knowledge about councillors is  
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11 structured by the way that they can be made 'fit for purpose' in particular social and  
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13 political environments, experts and academics often limit the scope of their research  
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15 to the use of attitudinal surveys or what might be termed 'time and motion' studies of  
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17 how councillors engage in specific functions and duties. Typically, they investigate  
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19 patterns of casework and scrutiny or the hours per week devoted to the duties of the  
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21 councillor, while collecting from elected members their views and perceptions of  
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23 changing roles and pressures. Hence they do not examine what Freeman (2015) calls  
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25 the 'political work' of the councillor, failing to offer a critical and 'thicker' grasp of  
26  
27 what it is that councillors 'do' when they 'do politics'. In this respect, the study of  
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29 Councillors has not pursued lines of enquiry which have become more common in  
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31 studies of the practices of other actors in local policy arenas, including front-line  
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33 workers and community activists (Griggs, Norval and Wagenaar, 2014).  
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39 An important upshot of these theoretical and methodological constraints is that  
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41 existing studies fail to explore or prioritise how the role of councillors is necessarily  
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43 bound up with, and brought into being by, the actually existing practices of local  
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45 politics. That is to say, existing studies have not taken the councillor 'in operation' as  
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47 their analytical starting point, which means they take insufficient account of the  
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49 relational nature of the 'work' of councillors and the way that their everyday practices  
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51 of assembling or configuring a heterogeneous array of roles, materials, technologies,  
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53 bodies of expertise and symbolic appeals *constitutes* the very subject-position and  
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3 lifeworld of 'the councillor'. And this lack of attention to developing thick  
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5 conceptualisations of the practices of councillors only serves to reinforce the failure to  
6  
7 recognise the essentially political role of councillors. Again, the dominant framing of  
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9 existing studies does not adequately capture or account for the inevitability of political  
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11 conflict, but merely exposes and displaces tensions in the exercise of local political  
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13 work onto attitudes of councillors and institutional fixes.  
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### 16 17 18 **CONCLUSIONS: REFRAMING THE STUDY OF COUNCILLORS** 19

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22 Our article began with a conundrum: why and how are councillors (re)presented as a  
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24 'problem' for local government? Starting from the perspective that research objects  
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26 are not immediately given, but fabricated by the practices and situated judgements of  
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28 researchers, we first characterised the dominant problematisation of councillors. This  
29  
30 dominant problematisation represents the office of the councillor - and councillors  
31  
32 themselves - as suffering from a series of attitudinal, behavioural and skills deficits.  
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34 Taken together, such weaknesses and limitations are crystallised into what we have  
35  
36 termed a 'deficiency narrative'.  
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41 Framed in these terms, the office of the councillor stands in need of 'fixing'. It also  
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43 locks local government studies into a number of overly-determined pathways.  
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45 Moreover, it leads existing studies away from critical explanation towards normative-  
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47 led inquiries, which do not offer problem-driven accounts that focus on the  
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49 explanation of local political outcomes. At the same time, the bias towards normative  
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51 studies cannot be dissociated from a failure to grasp the inherent clumsiness of  
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53 politics and the practices of political work. Even more, it has come to define local  
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3 councillors as part of the 'problem' facing local government, so that its focus on  
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5 normative discussions of roles and categories has contributed to councillors becoming  
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7 neglected in - if not entirely excluded from - explanations of local political change.  
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11 Our genealogical narrative demonstrates how the deficiency narrative emerged in the  
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13 articulation of demands for improved management across local government in the  
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15 1960s. At this point, equivalences were drawn between demands for modernisation  
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17 and the intermittent criticisms of the personal qualities of local elected members,  
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19 which had been voiced since the 1930s. From the mid-1960s onwards, the linking  
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21 together of the personal shortcomings of local councillors, on the one hand, and the  
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23 demands of managerialism, on the other, led to an embedding of the deficit  
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25 problematisation of local councillors. It also resonated with alternative  
26  
27 problematisations of the democratic and service delivery components of local  
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29 government, while reinforcing moves towards corporate management, contracting  
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31 out, strategic leadership, the executive cabinet reforms, scrutiny, community  
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33 leadership, area working and neighbourhood governance. In a spiralling movement,  
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35 the problematisation was thus reaffirmed by these reforms and the alleged problems  
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37 underlying them.  
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44 Of course, the deficiency narrative was contested. There were strong defences of the  
45  
46 'quality' of councillors based on their knowledge, commitment and skills (Stanyer,  
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48 1976). Leading academics - notably George Jones (1973) - defended the 'traditional'  
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50 committee system against the executive-style management boards suggested by the  
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52 Maud Committee. There were also weighty attacks on the corporate managerialism of  
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54 the 1960s and 1970s, with Cockburn (1977) and Dearlove (1979) dismissing it as an  
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3 attempt to de-politicise conflict and reduce the influence of more radical councillors.  
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5 However, the dominant narrative found staunch support within academic circles, with  
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7 the influential Institute for Local Government Studies embracing arguments that the  
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9 corporate approach and larger scales put local government in a better position to  
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11 defend itself (Glennerster, 1981, p. 39). And, more importantly, over time opposing  
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13 voices were progressively incorporated into the dominant narrative of the deficiencies  
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15 of councillors.  
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20 What does this imply for the study of councillors and the office of the councillor? One  
21  
22 common response to the limitations of a problematic is to call for an opening-up of  
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24 the field to new theoretical perspectives. However, the arguments marshalled in this  
25  
26 article also warn against the potential limitations of such conclusions. In pursuing new  
27  
28 avenues of research, studies of local councillors should shift their objects of inquiry  
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30 towards problem-driven research (Glynos and Howarth, 2007), focusing on what they  
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32 actually do when they engage in political work (Freeman, 2015). Capturing such  
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34 practices would also disclose the possibility of exploring rival visions on the ground,  
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36 while investigating how these excluded pathways might inform bottom-up reforms of  
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38 local democracy, rather than top-down attempts at institutional design that are based  
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40 on pre-existing normative commitments.  
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46 More importantly, calls for more pluralism do not automatically question the  
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48 dominant problematisations. Alternative perspectives will not necessarily counter the  
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50 long-embedded assumptions, concepts, questions and normative-driven principles that  
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52 have long informed mainstream studies. Challenging such underpinnings is a more  
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54 difficult exercise, because it needs to dislodge the dominant problematisation of  
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3 councillors, as well as its resonance within a chain of problematisations that structure  
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5 the field of local government studies. It thus requires a careful process of  
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7 deconstruction that can expose the tensions and contradictions of the underlying  
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9 assumptions of the dominant narrative, while enabling their critical evaluation and  
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11 reinscription. Perhaps our intervention can contribute some of the first steps in such a  
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13 process.  
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