Ideology or Realism in Local Governance: A Case of RealLokalPolitik in English Local Government

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The paper reports the results of research conducted among councillors in England which explored how they operate in complex governing networks with a range of public and private bodies. Councillors cannot control such networks or their members. Rather, councillors are faced with devising strategies to exert influence over and to try to shape and direct the policy decisions taken by the individual players and to draw a myriad of decisions into an overall direction and coherence. Councillors can either act ideologically (a key set of political principles and goals) or pragmatically (an assessment of what it is possible to achieve). The paper explores the approaches councillors have developed to engage in governance networks and assesses whether or not they act ideologically or pragmatically. It introduces

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the concept of *RealLokalPolitik* to explain the tension and choice between these approaches. The paper also explores how the need to operate in governance networks re-shapes our understanding of councillors as trustees, delegates or party loyalists.

Key words: local politics – England, local governance, councillors, RealLokalPolitik

1. Introduction

Councillors are central to any conceptualisation of local representative democracy but no longer inhabit centre-stage in the locality, rather they face a struggle for engagement in a complex series of governance networks as well as challenges from their own neighbourhoods (see, Sorensen, Torfing, 2005a; Lowndes, Sullivan, 2008). The shift from local government to local governance places an additional burden on councillors who must now engage in and exert influence over complex multi-layered networks, within which they confront higher-level players (Wilson, 1999; 6P et al.*,* 2002; Stoker, 2004; Denters, Rose, 2005). Councillors however, by virtue of holding an elected office, have a legitimacy and moral leverage lacking to most of those with whom they must now work within the complexity of modern governance networks (Saward, 2003; Bekkers et al., 2007; Klijn, Skelcher, 2007). The paper reports the findings of research among councillors in England which explored how the demands of working within governance networks, as elected representatives, is re-shaping the role of the councillor.

As councillors, and leading councillors in particular, increasingly act within multi-layered governance networks which operate on different spatial levels they are presented with the task of channelling to a range of public policy players, their own views (as a trustee), the citizen view, however articulated (as a delegate), or the decisions and polices of their party (as a party loyalist) (Eulau et al., 1959; Egnar et al., 2013 *passim*). Moreover, councillors face a choice of either approaching these interactions with agencies in governance networks from an ideological and rigidly partisan stance, or more pragmatically and incrementally to use their political leverage and position to influence others into making certain decisions, taking certain actions, or adopting preferred policies.

The paper explores how councillors engage with the complex world of public and private bodies and interests beyond the council to assess what strategies are developed and employed to enhance councillor influence in an arena where they have little or no control. Indeed, rather than making decisions as authoritative politicians with powers to enact change, councillors must interact in networks of different size and scope to exert pressure, pursue influence and use local political diplomacy to attempt to shape the decisions and policy of a vast range of organisations. The task for councillors is to develop the approach which best enables them, as elected politicians, to shape the behaviour and decisions of others.

The paper examines whether councillors act ideologically or diplomatically within governance networks and how, if at all, they employ their electoral mandate as a resource through which to express and use their political authenticity as elected representatives to effect action. The paper is based on research conducted among councillors in England which consisted of 38 separate interviews, six focus groups of seven councillors, 12 paired discussions with councillors and observations of public and private meetings. In all 104 councillors took part in the research throughout 2013 and 2014. Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Independent, UKIP and Green councillors were represented in the research sample in proportion to their representation in local government; all types of English councils were included in the sample: Counties, districts, unitary councils and London and metropolitan boroughs. The councillor sample also included executive councillors (leaders and cabinet members) and non-executive back bench members. The research data and findings provide a rich and deep well of material from councillors across the political spectrum of English local politics and the depth of the empirical data provides for theoretical conclusions to be drawn. The paper also draws on interviews with councillors conducted for other related research projects. The sample quotes used in the paper are provided to elaborate and illuminate the general conclusions drawn from the overall data.

The next section of the paper introduces the concept of *RealLokalPolitik* as an exploratory tool to understand whether councillors act ideologically or diplomatically within governance networks to secure influence. The third section explores the various sources of councillor legitimacy and how the electoral chain of command (Dearlove, 1973) provides leverage to councillors in governance networks. The fourth examines the process of governing through influence rather than power and explores councillors' experiences in this regard; the fifth returns to examine the basis of councillor action within networks and to ask whether it is based on ideology or

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influence. The paper concludes by drawing out the lessons for strengthening the role of the councillor as a governor who cannot govern and how the idea of *RealLokalPolitik* can help us understand the actions taken by councillors.

2. *RealLokalPolitik*

The world of international relations and diplomacy provide us with the theories and practices of *Realpolitik*, a concept which emerges from a framework of international policy making that operates on considerations of power, practical politics, and what is possible to achieve, rather than what an ideological world view would set out to secure (see Williams, 1989; Wayman, Diehl, 1994; MacNiell, 2000). A component of *Realpolitik* is that it operates on the basis of a self-interested set of objectives that lack ethical or moral direction or indeed concerns about what might be 'right' or 'wrong' but is about achieving objectives through the use of power (see Kratochwil, 1993). The realism of *Realpolitik* (Rahe, 1995) stands in stark contrast to operating from a set of ideological views about the good life and how to secure it through international policy and diplomacy, and *Realpolitik* is orientated towards achieving movement and goals while at the same time appreciating the practical limitations on those goals. *Realpolitik* need not, however, be seen as a purely negative, power-wielding concept as it also poses realistic aims and possible achievements against unrealistic aims driven by unswerving, ideologically focused principles (Grant, 1997).

Realpolitik can provide a framework for understanding political interactions that take place outside of the world of international policy and action around political issues that have a location in national and sub-national politics (Lane, 1998; Harris, 1998). The idea of *RealLokalPolitik* therefore is presented as a way of exploring how councillors reconcile the tension between acting from a party-centric view-point in the context of party-dominated local government, with the need to interact outside the council with those not part of the party political world or familiar with operating from a party-based ideological view. When councillors operate on a realistic assumption of what can be achieved through co-operation within governance networks and when they engage in inter-network diplomacy from a sense of what can realistically be achieved, they step away from the ideological certainties of the party and the party group and thus

require a frame of reference within which to locate their activities: *Real-LokalPolitik* provides that frame of reference to understand the basis on which councillors construct and maintain links with a wide range of individuals and organisations within and beyond their localities and how they approach the task of mediators of conflicting and competing interests across the locality. Operating in governance networks requires councillors to formulate not only a view of the local public interest but also the best way of achieving it while interacting with other agencies. Indeed, governance interactions face councillors with pressures to compromise their ideological or party-interest principles and to operate outside of any fixed or established procedures, processes, or ways of thinking.

RealLokalPolitik is not a predictive tool. Rather, it is a way of understanding how councillors act in circumstances that challenge their ideological or party commitment and which demand realistic political exchanges within networks: do they operate with a strict adherence to party principles, or do they negotiate, compromise, seek agreement, and achieve the best in any given circumstances for the general local interest? It is to that question we now turn by examining the role of the councillor within a governance framework.

3. Councillors: Legitimacy and Governing within Governance

At the time of writing, in England, the main three national political parties – Conservative, Labour and the Liberal Democrats hold just over 90 per cent of all council seats; in a party politicised system of local government councillors can pursue party policy by claiming that votes are 'absolute trumps' when acting in governance networks (Green, 1990; Phillips, 1994). Thus, there is a link between councillors and parties which is sustained by the act of voting and the transference of a legitimacy to act politically from the voter to the councillor. Holding the office of councillor is the product of local elections which provide a link between the authoritative body of the council and the citizen. The electoral chain of command however, has been criticised by Dearlove (1973: 25–31) because it often ignores the attenuating role of political parties in local democracy. Yet, the chain of command provides a starting point for understanding how councillors can operate in governance networks. As Dearlove (1973: 26) explains, with the electoral chain of command: 'causal connections are

posited between electors, councillors and officers and the vote is regarded as the starting point of a chain of command'. However, parties act as links in the chain at more than one point, and our chain must now be extended beyond the council as an institution, thus: 'voters-parties-councillors-parties-council chief-officers-parties-councillors-external governance networks/agencies/actors-parties.'

Parties at one and the same time weaken the link with electors, but also provide electors with a clear reference point for understanding the actions taken by their councillor, thus also strengthening the link. When parties are placed between councillors and officers, they act as a source of strength for councillors in facing a powerful, well resourced, and professional administrative machine, but when parties are placed between councillors and external networks, they can provide a source of reference which potentially weakens the councillors' room for manoeuvre. Councillors' actions within networks of policy and decision-makers require of them to have an outward focussed style of interaction when influencing the behaviour of those developing public policy and spending public money, but doing so without a mandate from the citizen. Moreover, effective engagement within governance networks requires councillors to forge alliances and coalitions (Cole, John, 2001; Stoker, 2004).

Given the decline in the status and role of local government, which has been well documented (see for example, Jones, Stewart, 1983; Young, Rao, 1997; Stoker, 2004; Reynaert et al., 2005; Denters, Rose, 2005; Chandler, 2007), and given the relative lack of discretion that rests with English local government (see Page, Goldsmith, 1987; Hesse, Sharpe, 1991; Goldsmith, Page, 2010), councillors attempting to influence higher level players in governance networks do require a source of legitimacy for their actions. An electoral mandate provides councillors with something that few, if any, other players within governance networks hold; but is that mandate sufficient when trying to convince others who hold the resources to solve policy problems of the way in which their resources and actions should be employed (Perri 6 et al., 2002)? Equally, will the councillor stress the party element of that mandate, which would result in approaching governance interactions from an ideological stand; or is that mandate used in a more Burkeian frame and councillors seek to influence others as a trustee rather than a party delegate?

The office councillors hold and the electoral chain of command is a source of legitimacy for them to act outside the council, to negotiate, persuade and to influence how others behave and the decisions they make. As a

councillor summed up in an interview: 'what's the point of being elected if it doesn't count for anything? It [a mandate] enables me to be present and take part in decision-making, outside the council, which I would otherwise have no way of influencing as a citizen'. The chain extends from the voter to governance networks to provide councillors with a legitimacy to influence all players in a complex set of interactions between a range of public and private players outside the council. Despite the complexity of governing networks and despite the low level of political and governing power held by councils and councillors in England, elected local representative democracy has a role in shaping what unelected and often unaccountable networks do. Indeed, it may be fast becoming the only role left to local government in some contexts.

Councillors, when operating within networks outside of the council, will find that that they act in circumstances and *theatres of representation* (Copus, 2004) where there has been no pre-party agreed line, but that does not mean, however, that they focus any less on their party group or are any less loyal to it. Indeed, there is little evidence to suggest that councillors are turning from their parties. Recent evidence has shown that councillors who are members of the national political parties are no less inclined to promote a party line or to be loyal party members, even when operating in governance networks (see Egner, Sweeting, Klok, 2013). Councillors continue to represent their parties in networks because of the contract of loyalty that they have with them (Copus, 2004). They simply have to develop new ways of promoting the views of the party from a non-ideological and pragmatic basis and by employing diplomatic skills, because in governance networks the ability to persuade and convince, rather than act as a unified bloc of party colleagues as in council meetings, is the way to ensure some degree of successful influence over network outcomes. Stoker (2004: 15) points out that the 'governance account' of the competition experienced by the elected councils in governing an area and the complexity of the interactions that now make-up the local policy landscape, show local government no longer has the dominance it once experienced and no longer *acts on its own* (Stoker, 2004: 16) across a range of policy-fields. Stoker (2004: 16) identifies the weakening of *overhead representative democracy* where citizens controlled councillors who in turn controlled managers and administrators (the electoral chain of command) and its replacement – although not totally so – by forms of political decision-making that stretch into a range of *intergovernmental networks* (Stoker 2004: 19). While Stoker refers to *new lines of accountability* (p. 17), the councillor still has a legitimacy that others lack – the open and inclu-

sive electoral process that delivers a mandate to govern that no others can claim. Moreover, we cannot take parties out of the electoral chain of command outlined above simply because councillors operate outside the council. Indeed, councillors' membership of a national political party provides them with a constant reference point for their activities and anchors them into a representative institution which in turn provides them with the legitimacy to act within governance networks; operating within governance network challenges councillors' behaviour, not party loyalty (Copus, 2014).

Councillors are now faced with the emerging role of being a conduit for the views of local citizens and their parties, or transferring such views for reasons of their own when operating in governance networks using their office as a mechanism for the political accountability of public and private agencies within those networks. Indeed, such a relationship with external bodies logically extends an import role of the councillor into new territory. It is how councillors interact to achieve accountability and influence in networks collectively and their network partners, individually, that the paper now turns.

4. Councillors: Authority and Influence

As elected politicians granted a mandate by the voters, councillors are faced with the task of influencing the decisions and actions of independent players within a web of external relationships (Klijin, Skelcher, 2007) and so the sovereignty and authority of the council has to be employed in new ways (Sorensen, 2006). The notion of democratic anchorage seeks to explain the democratic performance of governance networks and how the democratic deficit of governance networks can be overcome (see Skelcher, 2005; Sorensen, Torfing, 2005b; Torfing et al., 2009; Sorensen, Torfing, 2014). What is explored here is the councillor's role in that process of democratic deficit reduction. The role of the councillor becomes two-fold. First, holding network players accountable and answerable for their actions; and second, attempting to mould the activities of actors within networks to match the policy preferences and political vision of the council as an elected body (see Stubager, 2003). Or, as one councillor in an interview very clearly posed it: 'how can we as councillors who have been elected, be relegated behind those who haven't and how without the

power to get them to do what the people who have voted for us want, can we control them?'

A strong local democracy would indeed enable elected councils and councillors to control the activities and policies of those that casually operate within governance networks, developing public policy and spending public money, with no real democratic mandate – anchored or otherwise. Currently however, councillors must settle for influence over their unelected counter-parts and the difficulties involved in securing any influence over those with whom they engage in governing the locality is a major source of frustration for many councillors. That frustration is displayed in following comments about councillors' input to the Local Enterprise Partnerships (formed in 2011 as regional partnerships between local government and business focussed on an economic development and growth agenda):

> 'The LEP (Local Enterprise Partnership) is not elected so how do we hold it to account? I worry that the presence of councillors on the board only gives the LEP a legitimacy it doesn't have or deserve. It is doing the work of the councils and its money ultimately comes from what should be with the council. What I do is to give a voice to the community at the LEP, not just to the council ... the LEP area is so big that it tends to overlook local areas or worse does things that will in the long run affect some areas very badly. Councillors have to be part of the LEP as a strategic body, but we have to make sure that what it does reflects the needs of our own areas and the views of our voters.' (Labour County Councillor)

> 'The LEP is just an example of where councils are being engineered out of any responsibility or control over what goes on and we are the ones that have been elected! The LEPs are not answerable to us or to anyone really.' (Conservative County Councillor).

> 'I go to these LEP meetings and they are extremely important and it is right that the people that are there, business leaders, have an important input to the issues that are being considered. But, you can't give our election to those that have been appointed ... it should be elected councils that make the final decisions.' (Conservative District Councillor).

> 'Yes, I attend the board meetings, but I find I get more say over what happens by meeting and discussing things privately with board members, separately. I meet the chair of the LEP regularly, outside the meetings, and we discuss problems and solutions and the needs of the area – not just my council either. It is much more conducive to

being able to help his [the LEP chair] thinking develops.' (Conservative County Councillor and District Council Leader).

It was often in the informal interactions with members of partner organisations that councillors felt they had an opportunity to exert effective influence. A councillor sitting on a probation trust commented:

> 'I'm the only councillor on the Trust and therefore the only one that has been elected to anything, but that appears to count for nothing at formal trust meetings. It is very difficult to get others to recognise not only that I represent a council, a party and my voters but that I come to the table with a mandate and ... the council has a range of polices about community safety and other related service areas that address what we are trying to achieve for the people that use the probation service... The Trust is one way we can achieve those objectives but only if it comes along with us.' (Labour Borough Councillor).

The same councillor admitted to the importance of private meetings with the chair of the Trust, individual board members, and Trust officers as a more effective way of shaping thinking about policy and decisions than taking part in formal meetings. Indeed, the research for this paper indicates that councillors operate in governance networks in similar ways to how they operate within their councils. Formal meetings are the place for formal debate of business and decision taking; it is in more private interactions that they attempt to encourage, convince, and influence others of the rightness of a preferred policy option. They do so however, without the certainty of outcome from the formal setting that is provided by any private pre-council meeting of councillors. Such informal influence extends to the managers, not just the members, of network partners and councillors interact outside of official meetings with managers to build support and convince them that a particular decision should be made or policy developed. As one councillor reported in an interview:

> 'I meet privately with officers, talk to staff and the experts here and try to convince them of what I'm thinking – or, let them convince me otherwise.' (Liberal Democrat Borough Councillor).

It is no surprise councillors operate within governance settings in the same way they operate at their council. If an informal approach to influencing works in the council, then it is a reasonable assumption for councillors that informal influence will work in non-council settings. Yet, if councillors are unable to effectively influence, or hold to account, those organisations on which they sit by virtue of being elected to the council, the sense

of democratic distance and lack of accountability of the trust or board will be starkly felt. Here councillors fall back on their role as an external scrutineer of an unelected body, as a councillor summarised in interview:

> 'I question, challenge and ask for explanations and use it [a water customer liaison panel] to stand up for local people and try to get the best possible service for them. But, they have to answer questions.' (Liberal Democrat Councillor)

What must be kept in mind is the sheer range and variety of purposes, shapes, scale and interest of the bodies on which councillors find themselves sitting and attempting to influence and of the shifting landscape of the governance agencies with which they engage. As a Labour councillor commented in an interview: 'I was on the RDA [Regional Development Agency] now I'm on the LEP [Local Enterprise Partnership]; all that's changed is the initials they use.'

As public agencies are reformulated and reshaped the only body with a democratic mandate to act, remains the council. But, whatever the shape of that landscape, the councillors navigating the array of partners and actors they now interact with to seek to influence and to pursue preferred policy options, means they are also able to try to strategically join together the disparate decisions taken by others. The situation here then is that an elected official is attempting to influence unelected officials rather than the other way around, but in so doing they become metagovernors (Jessop, 1998; Sorensen, Torfing, 2009). To operate as metagovernors, there must be cohesive action on behalf of the councillors scattered across various bodies and an attempt by councillors to co-ordinate action, otherwise there is no governing strategy.

The success of democratic anchorage and metagovernance rests on the existence of actual not perceived influence by councillors and certainly not on their mere presence alone within networks or on partnership boards (Sorensen, Torfing, 2014). It also rests on the existence of cohesive strategies for influence and accountability developed and employed by councillors and the effective use of an electoral mandate to shape the policy preferences of actors external to the council (see Sorensen, Torfing, 2005b). Without that, there is not so much democratic anchorage, but councils and councillors acting as democratic breakwaters which merely reduce the intensity of the waves of un-democratic, unaccountable, and unelected organisations that control great swathes of public policy. As a result of the assessment of the way councillors operate in governance networks and the purpose of that activity, it is now necessary to return

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to the source of the motivating factor for their action: Ideology or *Real-LokalPolitik.*

5. Ideology or Influence?

'We have 150 outside bodies on which to appoint our 48 members and only half of those members are on outside bodies. The problem is in a lot of cases the member doesn't even get notification of meetings, let alone have the chance to think about what they are doing on these bodies.'

That comment, by a Conservative County Council leader, summarises the challenge faced by councillors and councils when it comes to structuring and focusing their interactions within governance networks. The sheer scale of the task faced by councils in providing shape and direction to governance networks is not insurmountable, however. A council leader of a large urban authority in England commented:

'It is a central part of what we do as politicians to work with key partners in the city to generate growth and the local and regional economy. As a council we don't have the power or resources to do it alone, so we broker deals between partners and provide them with a set of policy objectives that match what they want and need to achieve. As a socialist I'm working all the time with business leaders and trying to attract private enterprise – I leave the political knock-about and proselytising for the council chamber – it would scare the horses otherwise.'

The comment above summarised the view of the overwhelming majority of councillors, across the political spectrum interviewed for the research, who, when seeking to influence and shape the activities of governance networks, left the party (though not the politics) at the council. Conservative and Liberal Democrat councillors echoed the comments from the Labour councillor above: 'I don't preach politics'; 'I'm not looking for voters or to convert, just to get things done'; 'You can't batter someone around the head with your political views and then expect them to meekly do what you want; you have to be cleverer than that': these comments were indicative of the views expressed by councillors to describe the approach they pursued in governance interactions. Indeed, the councillor who could be said to be acting as a *governor* recognised the interrelated nature of the actions of bodies on which they sit and actively attempted to draw them into alignment with the overall policy direction of the council. That in itself is a political act, but it is not pursued in a party or ideological

fashion. The councillor operates so as to shape the policy agenda across a number of bodies and the councillor particularly skilled in this approach may have little need to openly employ, as leverage, the mandate that attaches to the office of councillor.

On the other hand, there are councillors who take a far more ideological view of their actions within networks and with partner agencies even though *RealLokalPolitk* may be the dominant approach. It was clear from the research that a more ideological edge in governance interactions existed for some councillors. That ideology displayed itself over issues such as women's equality, multi-culturalism, and the employment of local labour which were pursued by Labour councillors pursuing a broader ideological set of objectives than the immediate subject of the interaction with which they were engaged. A Labour council leader commented: 'I overheard a remark in a break in a meeting about this area being like the 'United Nations' so I said I won't work with racists'. That comment indicates how close to the surface ideological and political views can operate even in circumstances that demand a pragmatic and more restrained approach. Conservatives also espoused Conservative values but as the focus on much local government activity in England is currently economic growth and development their preference for private sector activity seems to have less of an ideological edge and to be operating on the basis of a more practical, pragmatic set of objectives when pursued in governance networks.

Those councillors that sought to achieve ideological goals did so by focusing not only on the services that their councils provided as a way of promoting the interests of the sections of society they saw as the client group for their political action. Ideologically inclined councillors, driven by a clear set of political goals focussed, for example, on altering the local balance of power in favour of certain client groups, also operated in networks to pursue those broad ideological objectives while recognising a limit to the extent they could pursue those ideological goals when attempting to shape the policy of other organisations. There is a difference in recognising those limitations but remaining focused on an ideological objective to operating from a more pragmatic and realistic perspective. For the ideologically driven councillor, all network interactions are an opportunity to espouse an ideology and that opportunity is a positive outcome from network interactions; for the pragmatic councillor, any shift by network players towards a direction which they favour or which is favourable to other policy objectives is the outcome that matters.

All councillors from political parties interviewed for the research, without exception, claimed they were loyal party members but that did not result in them pursuing raw party advantage within governance networks, or a set of objectives that could not be diplomatically pursued within and through other organisations. It was for all councillors, results that mattered and in the current climate of austerity results were often focused on economic growth, development, and employment opportunities. Thus, local political policy was centred on a very narrow perspective during the time of the research but one which required councillors to operate outside of their council, to indulge and embrace the uncertainty of network based interactions, and to shape the policy of a disparate range of organisations to achieve the best possible movement towards a desired set of objectives (see Sorensen, 2006).

Governance may now be the only game in town for English local government and one which replaced ideas of a sovereign council delivering all the important public services in its area and making all the important public decisions (see Young, Rao, 1997; Stoker, 2004). That is not to say that local government does not have an important delivery role in public services, as it still provides a range of infrastructural and welfare services vital to modern industrial societies. In England, public service responsibilities are open to being transferred in and out of local government by the centre as it seeks to re-shape the landscape of public provision to suit its own policy objectives. Additionally, the current period of austerity has seen central government reductions in council budgets of 40 per cent across local government from the 2011–12 financial year to the financial year 2015–16. Indeed, the Local Government Association estimates that central funding support for some council services will have been reduced by 66 per cent over a decade (LGA, 2014a, 2014b). Moreover, local government lacks the financial and legal powers to simply replace that loss of central support to fund the public services for which they are responsible.

The research for this paper shows, however, that there is a positive outcome from the squeeze on public finances and austerity, the legal, constitutional, and financial constraints on local government and the gradual loss of its primacy as a service providing body. Councillors report that they are responding to these circumstances by becoming more aware of the need to operate outside the council – within governance networks – and to attempt to influence and shape the decisions made by others. Thus, councillors are developing a role that encompasses attempts at governing through interaction within networks. Indeed, we can see that

councillors, and particularly leading councillors, are jettisoning – even if reluctantly – ideological politics focused on exchanges in the council and embracing network interaction and by wielding influence within governance networks are governing through diplomacy. As a Labour council leader summarised the situation in her council:

> 'I focus my time meeting with business, public bodies, a lot of time talking to the health people, government agencies, trying to get them to respond to the problems we have here and trying to join up what they all do separately. You have to be very aware of what they all think of each other, what their priorities are, who gets on and who doesn't; it must be like making deals at the UN; what can be achieved through which deals with which partners.'

Councillor diplomacy within governance networks, however, is only effective if conducted through a process of negotiation, compromise, and the willingness to accept limits on the successes that can be obtained. But by accepting such limitations and by engaging with networks are councillors acting as metagovernors (Sorensen, Torfing, 2009)? The research for this paper suggests that the mere presence of councillors operating in governance networks is no guarantee that those bodies will be anchored in any democratic fashion or necessarily responsive to messages that arrive *via* the route of a democratically elected councillor. Indeed, councillors reported that they experienced resistance and that the process of attempting to shape policy preferences (Ward, 2006) was not an easy or automatically accepted as being an appropriate role for them when interacting within networks. In formal settings councillors reported that they were viewed by others as simply members of a board and their democratic mandate counted for little in formal interactions. In more informal settings however, it was clear that being a councillor was what gave an individual entrance to the informal setting in the first place and the council as an authoritative and legitimate body was as one councillor put it: 'like an aura around us [councillors] not that it made me special, far from it, but I can refer to the council and the chief executive and what the council has done and does and it adds weight to my position.'

What is also clear is that the mere presence of councillors in governance networks is no guarantee that they will take on the role of metagovernors. Councillors as individual politicians will undertake the roles, responsibilities, and functions that they play outside the council in ways which suit their own conceptualisation of those roles. Unless governing through other bodies and bringing some order to the chaos of governance networks,

or holding such networks and their players to account is part of councillor's governing assumption, then there is little chance of that councillor being engaged in a process of bringing democratic oversight to governing networks. Moreover, we must move beyond democratic oversight, which rests on councillors' ability to employ diplomatic skills and assess the realistic and achievable goals within the particular networks within which they operate, to a situation where councils and councillors are granted the powers to provide democratic direction and control over networks.

If local government faces competitors in the world of service provision and by consequence a lightening of the load of public service delivery, then the alternative that remains for local government is to focus on government through governance networks. If this relies on the individual councillor's skills and on them making a realistic assessment of the *RealLokalPolitk*, then the success of democratic oversight will be marginal and thinly spread. Indeed, much democratic anchorage could be said to be left to luck, or more charitably to the development in any one council area of a critical mass of councillors that recognise a broader political role beyond the council and dedicate themselves to such a task. In addition, that critical mass of councillors would require the support and resources of their council to be able to conduct a strategically focussed approach to shaping and controlling network activity; councils as well as councillors must see their role as using networks to govern and therefore commit the resource to such activity.

Councillors must be both willing and able to establish strong links with external partners at all levels and to transfer the policy preferences of the democratic body that is the council, to good effect, within those bodies. Without that willingness and ability, councils and councillors merely attenuate the power of unelected governance networks, rather than direct or control them. But they must engage in networks with a clear understanding of the diplomatic skills required and of the consequences for shaping policy preferences of those with whom they engage by taking an ideological or realistic approach to political interaction.

6. Conclusion

Local government is confronted with a continual struggle for influence over the decisions, policies, and resource expenditure undertaken by unelected operators within their locality that make up the networks through

which much public policy is developed and implemented. The council and its councillors have a mandate granted by the voters in an electoral chain of command, which links voters to parties, councillors, and the council and then into the disparate and diffuse governance networks. The idea that the council is a sovereign political body within any one locality has been replaced by its role as one player among many in any locality that develop and implement public policy – it is also questionable whether the idea of the sovereign council was ever a reality in the English context. Yet, with the numerous agencies that operate alongside local government the council is the only body with any direct link to the community through the mechanism of the public vote. It is commonplace today to criticise that link and claim that public agencies that are not elected are somehow better placed to make decisions about key areas of public policy than an elected council. But, none of those claims can replace that direct line of accountability that rests with the council and its members.

Councillors are well aware that their office is sanctioned by the public vote and that this provides them with a moral and political lever to be used within governance networks and to shape the actions of particular public agencies. Within those networks, they can either operate as a delegate of the voters or party, or act as a trustee. The diplomatic skills required of councillors attempting to influence the decisions and shape the policy preferences of those organisations over which they have no control, will mean that they will act largely as trustees of the wider public good. However, that wider public good is assessed by the councillor through the lens of party political membership. What is then required for the councillor to successfully shape the decisions and preferences of organisations beyond the council is a willingness to operate outside of a strict ideological set of objectives and within a framework that recognises what is achievable, how far and when to move in an incremental fashion towards a strategic political goal: *RealLokalPolitik*.

Governance may describe the process of interaction between independent but interconnected agencies but the implication with a term that sounds like 'government', is that there is something democratic within those interactions, but it is just that: an implication. The existence of councillors within networks can at best add an element of direction and bring the activities of those bodies into some form of alignment with the direction preferred by the elected council. The task, however, is made all the more difficult when the boundaries of the network and the public agencies of which it consists extend spatially beyond local government boundaries. Where networks extend beyond a council boundary, councillors must in-

teract with councillors from other councils and indeed even other regions, as well as with network players with a greater spatial reach than a single council. In such interactions, a grasp of the *RealLokalPolitik* and a shift from the certainties of ideologically driven politics becomes all the more necessary.

Time, resources, advice, and support are required to enable councillors to use networks not just to provide a veneer of democratic accountability, but to be able to shape and direct networks and to influence their policy preferences. Moreover, to govern through governance, councillors must see their role as more than injecting a vicarious element of accountability to networks and their players and move from the assumption, where it exists, that the presence of a councillor within a network or on the board of a partnership is sufficient to democratise it and its decisions. There are indeed councillors highly skilled in local diplomacy that operate as strategically focused politicians operating beyond the scope of their councils to govern through governance networks. But such engagement cannot be left to a scattered pattern dependent on particular councillor's ability and willingness to see governing through governance as now a foundation to local politics and that the place for sterile ideological discourse is the council chamber and not the network. If governance networks and their players are to be democratically anchored and local government able to govern in the broadest sense, then the role of the councillor as a governor within governance networks must be fully embraced as an operating principle for local politics and government.

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IDEOLOGY OR REALISM IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE: A CASE OF REALLOKALPOLITIK IN ENGLISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Summary

The paper reports the results of research conducted among councillors in England which explored how they operate in complex governing networks where they interact with a range of public and private bodies. Councillors cannot control such networks or their members. Rather, councillors are faced with devising strategies to exert influence over and to try to shape and direct the policy decisions taken by the individual players and to draw a myriad of decisions into an overall direction and coherence. Councillors can either act ideologically (a key set of political principles and goals) or pragmatically (an assessment of what it is possible to achieve). The paper explores the approaches councillors have developed to engage in governance networks and assesses whether or not they act ideologically or pragmatically. It introduces the concept of RealLokalPolitik to explain the tension and choice between these approaches. The paper also explores how the need to operate in governance networks re-shapes our understanding of councillors as trustees, delegates or party loyalists.

Key words*: local politics – England, local governance, councillors, Real-LokalPolitik*

CROATIAN AND COMPARATIVE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

IDEOLOGIJA ILI REALIZAM U LOKALNOJ VLADAVINI: REALPOLITIKA *U ENGLESKOJ LOKALNOJ SAMOUPRAVI*

Sažetak

Rad analizira rezultate istraživanja provedenog među lokalnim vijećnicima u Engleskoj koje se bavilo načinom na koji oni djeluju unutar složenih mreža vladavine u kojima se nalaze u međudjelovanju sa širokim rasponom javnih i privatnih tijela. Vijećnici takve mreže ni njihove članove ne mogu kontrolirati. Naprotiv, suočeni su s potrebom stvaranja načina da ostvare utjecaj na njih i pokušaju oblikovati i usmjeravati odluke o javnim politikama koje donose pojedini akteri te tom mnoštvu odluka dati zajednički smjer i koherentnost. Vijećnici mogu djelovati s ideoloških stajališta (skup političkih načela i ciljeva) ili pak pragmatično (procjenjujući što je moguće ostvariti). U radu se razmatraju pristupi koje su vijećnici razvili da bi se uključili u mreže vladavine i procjenjuje se ponašaju li se oni ideološki ili pragmatično. Rad uvodi koncept realpolitike na lokalnoj razini (RealLokalPolitik) kako bi se objasnila napetost koja vlada te izbor između tih dvaju pristupa. Također se istražuje na koji način potreba djelovanja unutar mreža vladavine preoblikuje naše poimanje vijećnika kao upravljača, delegata ili pak stranačkih lojalista.

Ključne riječi: *lokalna politika – Engleska, lokalna vladavina, vijećnici, realpolitika na lokalnoj razini* (RealLokalPolitik)