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Elected Mayors in England: Leaders or Managers?

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Themes of Leadership

Leadership qualities are all very well, but they do not compensate for bad decisions or a weak grasp of practical constraints (Spicker 2012: 44).

Since ancient times philosophers and political thinkers have grappled with the questions of what constitutes political leadership, how political leaders achieve their greatness or otherwise, and which attributes political leaders may require. The aim of this paper is to explore this issue through a study of directly elected mayors in England. Its focus is twofold: first, to assess critically the concept of leadership through the lens of key texts from the philosophical and business literature and, secondly, to use original empirical evidence to evaluate the role of elected mayors as leaders or managers.

In the 4th century BCE Plato identified three types of political leadership in his Politicus/The Statesman (Annas and Waterfield 1995). The first is the Shepherd, who guides the flock wither he or she wants the sheep to go and is thus a relatively autocratic figure who "assumes the mission to protect and feed the flock" (Makridimitris 2014: 22). The corollary of the shepherd's leadership is a certain passivity amongst the flock, embodying a relatively limited definition of citizenship as "a rather weak" notion (ibid). This falls well short of Aristotle's definition of a citizen as one who has the right and duty to participate in the government of their community. Secondly, there is the therapist or physician who cures people's ailments and is "virtuous enough and has been equipped with the knowledge and capacity to tackle collective problems and maladies" (ibid: 124), The citizen, by corollary, "is very likely (to) be viewed as suffering from certain ailments and sicknesses

that cannot be healed by themselves alone" and is "regarded as no more than a patient succumbing willingly or not to the treatment delivered by the authoritative medico" (ibid: 124, 125). Thirdly comes the weaver, who "is capable of co-ordinating and relating in a harmonious manner the various threads of interests in society to the common good and prosperity" (ibid: 125). Since "the essence of politics is weaving" (ibid), the citizens play a more active role - equating more closely to a role defined for them by Aristotle - as participants alongside the leader in "fine weaving of the diverse elements of society" (ibid). Hence Plato identified the art of network management (Rhodes 1995) centuries before modern scholars' interest in the "weaver" leadership role. Plato regards this weaving process as the core *politike techne*: the statesman's art: "....the only task the weaver-king has to do…is to ensure that restrained and courageous characters never drift apart; he has to weave them together by having them share beliefs, respect and disrespect the same qualities…as to form them into an even and…well textured fabric" (Plato 1995 edition: 85). This is the essence of network management. Over the centuries other writers have explored these issues further. Niccolo Machiavelli explored the combinations of virtue and luck (*virtu e fortuna*) that the Prince requires in order to govern the kingdom successfully, while Max Weber (1948) identified three sources of a leader's authority: accepted tradition, personal attributes of charisma, and the powers conferred on leaders by laws and regulations – the 'legal-rational' source of authority which underlies political leadership in Western societies.

Disputing Leadership

In more recent times writers on business leadership have related the nature of leadership to organisational requirements. For Mintzberg, there are two types of leader: first, the transformational or task oriented leader - "the single, forceful leader who creates a new organisation and then guides it through good times and bad" (1988); secondly, in a stable organisational environment, leadership by a mature group which is used to working together – relationship motivated leadership. Handy (1993), like Plato, developed three leadership theories, based on a combination of the leader's

personality and the roles they are expected to pursue: leadership by traits wherein the leader possesses the attributes necessary to secure a dominant role; leadership style where the leader's role depends on their personal approach; and contingency theory, where the balance between autocratic or democratic leadership is determined by the task at hand. This theory proposes that dangerous tasks require autocratic leadership, for example in armies or police forces, while the consensus building or "log-rolling" commonly required in governments requires democratic leadership. These can clearly be related to Plato's shepherd and weaver leadership styles.

In academic business literature, a focus upon leadership has latterly seemed more fashionable than a concern with management and administration. It is easy to account for both the prominence of leadership and its elusive character. Its prominence arises from its assumed status: it is a tempting conceit for managers and administrators to claim that they are 'leading', engaged in a higher-order activity (ostensibly based in their strong personal traits) that is more powerful than mere line management or rule-based administration. Its elusive character is related to this status: leadership cannot readily be learned in the manner of managerial or administrative skills; it is assumed to contain extra ingredients not accessible to everyone. Leadership is worthy and is about the person not the role. Hence one might refer approvingly to born leaders, but rarely (and certainly less positively) to born managers or born administrators. Maccoby (2003) argued that while management is a functional activity, concerned with administration, planning and performance, leadership is about motivating and generating change. This is important: management and administration can co-ordinate a stable and static organisational environment, but leadership is assumed to be about change. The world is unstable and in flux. Being able to tolerate ambiguity while adhering to strategic aims is a key leadership element, particularly applicable to the role of elected mayor.

Are Leaders Special?

There have been four principal approaches to leadership in orthodox business and management. The first, *heroic leadership*, has a long history, including the 19th century contribution of Thomas Carlyle (1841). This approach emphasises the leader as hero: succeeding against the odds, coming through in the end to deliver success. Heroic leadership perspectives are promoted by leaders who emphasise their own importance, presupposing that leadership is about possession of strong individual characteristics. Leaders are special. Heroic leadership is but one incarnation of wider theories of trait leadership, wherein individual characteristics are seen as the most important elements in defining leaders. In political terms, the great men and great women of history possessed such special traits. This conception, as Maccoby (2003) emphasised, is essentially narcissistic. The tragedy of Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, whose mistaken belief that he was a world-historical figure led him to believe that murdering his landlady was justified, is a case in point.

Such heroic leadership has it limits. Grint (2005) has argued that we need to learn how to lead effectively *without having authority*. We also need 'responsible followers' with minds of their own. Notions of charismatic inspirational leaders detract from this. Partly in recognition of this changed world, a second approach - *authentic leadership* - places values at the centre of debate. George (2003) refers to the "purpose, values, heart, relationships, and self-discipline" of the authentic leader who is aware of the impact of their actions on others and has an awareness of ethics and a concern others' feelings. The leader here is not heroic in the usual senses of extroversion and assertion, but leads through the quiet heroism of the person in tune with the values of those who are 'led': political examples are those of Mary Robinson, Mahatma Gandhi, Aung San Suu Kyi and even Clement Attlee whose unassuming national leadership styles were arguably no less effective – indeed, were perhaps more effective - than those of the assertive demagogue. Diamond and Liddle (2014) refer to the reflective powers of urban leaders, learning from beyond their own experience. Leadership has also been located more firmly within a normative base where public interest,

selflessness and a values-based approach are emphasised (Brookes 2014, 2016).

The third and fourth approaches to leadership – *transformational* and *transactional* – are commonplace terms of academic debate and are generally contrasted. It has been claimed that public sector managers should strive to be transformational (Orazi, Turrini and Valotti 2013). Transformational leadership is about initiating the process of change, perhaps associated with heroic models based on individual traits but not necessarily so: transformation could just as well be based in post-heroic authentic leadership models. Transformational leadership is clearly distinct from management, yet it sits unhappily with public sector structures and cultures of bureaucracy. Transactional leadership, as may become evident in our discussion of elected mayors, is based on exchange, division of labour and achievement of specified goals. It fits public sector bureaucracy more readily than other approaches to leadership. Yet 'transactional leadership' remains a curious term, as in essence it resembles management and administration rather than leadership proper.

Some commentators dispute the value of 'leadership' altogether. Spicker (2012) has argued that leadership is vague and often meaningless, denoting motivation and influence, personal attributes and traits, management, hierarchy, authority, rules and relationships, all of which he finds 'indistinct'. "There is a disturbing side effect of the uncritical acceptance of the idea of leadership: its potential to justify and validate bad practice" (Spicker 2012: 43). Smircich and Morgan (1982) saw leadership as a construct wherein 'followers' give up their 'mindfulness' to a leader, producing helplessness. After all, one might add, if we follow we do not need to think.

Leading in the Public Sector

In the public sector, local authority leadership of external partnerships (Hayden 2003; Fenwick, Johnston Miller and McTavish 2012) brings a further element to the leadership puzzle. Leadership may be more important than management in encouraging learning in a cross-sectoral "networked

environment" (Brookes and Grint 2010: 6). In a service context where the public, private and third sectors increasingly have to work together, the nature of leadership is one of co-ordination, pulling together a range of actors in the pursuit of common objectives. Where central government takes on leadership of this kind it is underwritten by control, principally of resources. Where community actors adopt this role it tells us how leadership may operate in the absence of hierarchical power or control – "enabling" rather than "running" the partnership (Hayden 2003: 170). This is perhaps a clue to understanding how leadership may be distinguished from management and administration: it does not necessarily embody control. Managers and administrators invariably have a measure of control, whether this is over resources, access or the application of rules. Leaders may have none of these things yet still be leaders. Morse (2007) referred to public leaders as "boundary crossers", involving collaboration and partnership working, while Morgan and Shinn write of networks, partnerships and the transition from a narrow New Public Management to a wider New Public Governance, fostering agreement between "wide ranging stakeholders" (2014: 5).

Rhodes and 'T Hart (2014) ask how we can know political leadership when we see it. The question is deceptively simple: while it is possible to conceive of political leadership in terms of the formal, informal and personal attributes required of political leaders, and also the governmental, governance and allegiance roles they are expected to play, performing these roles may be problematic. Balancing public popularity with fulfilment of leadership is a conflict much more evident for political leaders than for business leaders. Collective leadership may produce more carefully considered policies and decisions, but there are dangers in collective leadership too. If a cabinet or committee develops a cosy consensus that causes them to reject dissenting voices, it may develop 'groupthink'. Centuries ago Machiavelli (1513) advised his Prince that he should have a plurality of advisers and not ignore unwelcome or dissident advisers who insist on telling him what he does not wish to hear.

Are Mayors Leaders?

It is our intention, next, to assess the role of the elected mayor in England as a local leader: first, by identifying emergent patterns of leadership derived from interviews amongst the first crop of mayors elected in 2002; and, secondly, by considering the lessons of leadership to be drawn from speaking to mayors a decade or so after the mayoral system was introduced.

The directly elected executive mayor – quite distinct from traditional ceremonial mayors who have no executive power – has been a feature of English local government for over ten years. It was one element of wider changes to the 'political management' of local authorities under the Local Government Act 2000, including new roles for councillors in the scrutiny of executive decisions and new forms of executive leadership either through an elected mayor or through a leader and cabinet model. Direct public endorsement through local referendum was truly innovative. There was a view across the political spectrum that nineteenth century committee systems were no longer fit for the purpose of running local government. A concern with leadership was central to government policies of modernisation (Hartley and Allison 2000).

The take-up of the elected mayor system has been slow, and some of the incumbents have been controversial. In 2012, the government instituted mayoral referendums in ten English cities, but in only one case was there public support for introducing an elected executive mayor. In two cities the mayoral regime was adopted by council resolution rather than referendum. Salford opted for the elected mayor in 2012 after a referendum initiated by public petition. In 2016 there are only sixteen mayors in post (excluding the London mayor, a different post with differing powers) in England, and none in Wales.

Methodology

This article uses information drawn from the authors' continuing research into mayoral leadership

following the enactment of the Local Government Act 2000 and its refinement by further legislation in 2007 and 2011. The research began with a three part study of changes in the role of elected councillors after the new political management arrangements were introduced in 2000. Postal questionnaires were sent to all the members of four councils in Northern England. The response rate was 43%. Twenty councillors were selected from the returned questionnaire for semi-structured interviews using a discussion guide agreed among the researchers. From this it appeared that issues of accountability and inner-organisational relationships were arising from the introduction of directly elected mayors. The researchers interviewed four out of the eleven directly elected mayors then in office, issuing a discussion guide which was used, and incrementally developed, in all further interviews with mayors. Two additional mayors were interviewed subsequently, followed by a further three in 2012. The interviews focussed on the perceptions of directly elected mayors of their governmental, governance and personal views of the office. Interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended topics designed to prompt responses around common themes of, for instance, relationships with senior officers, councillors and external partners, leadership and challenges arising from making the new system work. Methodologically the approach was not hypothesis-testing. It was inductive and exploratory, focussing upon the "human interpretive, subjective processes" (Johnson 2015: 321) underlying the experience of mayors. The guiding issue under scrutiny was the experience of, and lessons arising from, a wholly new role in English local government.

The elected mayoralty is by no means 'settled' in formal terms. Its existence was challenged successfully in Hartlepool in 2013 (now run by a leader and committees) and unsuccessfully in Doncaster and Middlesbrough. In 2016, referendums in North Tyneside and Torbay resolved to retain the mayor in the former case and abolish the post in the latter. Thus the position is not stable even amongst the relatively small number of mayoral councils. Moreover, plans are in place for the extension of elected mayoral systems to the leadership of Combined Authorities in major English

city regions from 2017: such "metro mayors" will not have an elected body to which they are directly accountable yet are likely to be significant figures in sub-national governance.

What do Mayors Do?

"The mayor leads... this is my raison d'etre". A number of themes emerge from interviews with the first cohort of English mayors. There was, first, a ready acceptance amongst the mayors that they possessed an individual leadership role. One mayor referred to a 'personal vision', another said 'I have tried to create a vision': aspects perhaps of the heroic leader. Marking out the new mayoral role as distinct from that of the outgoing council leader, mayors did not see themselves as leading on behalf of a political group. Instead, they saw the job as that of an individual leader and decision-maker. Reference to 'vision' suggests an aspiration toward the exercise of transformational leadership. This is to be contrasted to the transactional style of managing a public bureaucracy. The second theme to emerge from early interviews with mayors was that such leadership acquired its legitimacy direct from the public rather than through the prism of local party political structures: this was certainly an intention of central government in its advocacy of mayoral leadership. A third theme was that the existence of the new English mayor with a new leadership role found highly mixed responses amongst local elected councillors, still coming to terms with executive positions in the newly-constituted mayoral cabinets or backbench roles in scrutiny of executive decisions.

The early interviews with the new mayors in England also raised the issue of how far they can facilitate policy co-ordination, 'weaving' a form of leadership alongside the public. This involved what a mayor referred to as leadership "out in the field" as well as within the council. Internal co-ordination seemed to be based on strong mayoral leadership and an effective senior officer network, an aspect of government that is distinct from the exercise of formal power alone. Yet one mayor reported that there has been a need to "break through" the established officer group: clearly, co-ordination may have been happening in a manner inconsistent with the mayor's priorities. "I define

the corporate policy objectives and ensure their delivery" said one mayor unambiguously, essentially a shepherd in Plato's terms.

The early mayoral interviews suggested a pattern of self-defined strong leadership and independence – not least from local parties – which would broadly be consistent with what the Blair Government expected of its new system for running local councils. Yet it would not turn out to be quite so simple. One Independent mayor from the initial cohort, for instance, suggested that there are too many backbench councillors with "not enough to do"; hence some seek to make mischief, a view echoed by another independent mayor and a third who referred to some councillors being "in denial". Looking back, this may be ascribed to the loss of powers previously familiar to councillors but now moving into the hands of the newly elected mayor. Enhancing a leadership role for mayors served to diminish the role of elected councillors. Several years have passed and the previous role of councillors sitting in decision-making committees may no longer be familiar to many councillors today. Yet the view of the superfluity of many councillors was a persistent theme, echoed by another Independent mayor who emphasised the mayoral co-ordination role, especially in Local Strategic Partnerships and other networks of the New Labour years.

Relating to the central distinction between management and leadership, a Conservative mayor saw the mayoral role as "policy and political" whereas the role of Chief Executive was "operational". In contrast, an Independent mayor saw the role as "a manager first and a politician second", adding that although not a politician, the mayor sets "political direction". Setting strategic priorities – certainly a formal part of the mayor's duties – is necessarily a political task but it does not make the mayor a politician. Yet there was continuing tension around the differences between leadership and management, and the interviews with the initial group of mayors demonstrated the ambiguous nature of this distinction in theory and practice alike. One view from a mayor was that the elected politicians in the new cabinet had begun to think and act "like managers": this was meant positively

and, again, seems to be an intended effect of the legislation setting up the new political management arrangements. Another English mayor perceived management quite differently, noting that he was "wresting control from the officers and giving it back to the politicians". This introduces another element to our discussion: transactional paid officers – who are by definition managers – were being encouraged to make way for transformational political leaders. Policies may be turned into strategies by public managers (Joyce 2016) but the problem is that mayors tend to see themselves as strategisers as well makers of policy. Thus local managers (even Chief Executives) become merely implementers.

Early interviews suggested that weaving a pattern of leadership beyond the local authority – the wider governance of the area with external partners, co-ordinating within partnerships – was taken up keenly by holders of the new mayoral office. The strong political leader of a wider network of stakeholders appeared to have been something genuinely new in English local public sector management. The later interviews largely confirmed these themes and also added to them, revealing in particular a considerable variation in the way mayors addressed their governmental, governance and allegiance responsibilities. In terms of the internal government of their authorities, their approach to the Chief Executive's office varied greatly. One mayor had declared from the beginning a determination to abolish the post. Other respondents had few or no problems with their Chief Executives. One claimed "a good relationship" and this mayor clearly depended quite extensively on the Chief Executive. A Conservative mayor told us that "I would not want to get rid of the CEO. My relations with him are really good. I asked him to look at (the borough) and then work to improve it". Thus some but not all respondents felt the need to aim toward being transformative leaders in tackling the internal government of their councils: some respondents argued that the Chief Executive's role had to be confined to administration rather than policy: "the Mayor has to prevail over the CEO: politicians must win every time".

However, mayors seem to have been less successful in addressing an enduring deficiency of English local government: poor co-ordination across the various specialist and professional departments that constitute local authority administrations. Mayors generally claimed to have speeded up decision making but they were less sure that they had managed to improve co-ordination. One mayor felt that co-ordinating the various organisations that serve the local community was more important than internal co-ordination. Amongst our earlier respondents, one felt that "co-ordination is better but it is still pretty poor. There is too much of a departmental culture. They work in separate cultures and are not truly joined up. This is very challenging" but another declared that "everybody works well together here – there is no problem with co-ordination. I am lucky to be cutting my teeth with such a good authority".

Mayors interviewed were unanimous in their support for the Overview and Scrutiny function allocated to non-executive councillors, although they wanted it to be more proactive in assisting policy development, not just criticising the effects of their policies after decisions had been taken. One respondent declared firmly that "good scrutiny equals good governance". This was a theme repeated by most other respondents, all of whom felt that Overview and Scrutiny was an important means to ensure that the mayor and the administration governed properly; another mayor declared that Overview and Scrutiny "can hold us to account". Among our respondents there was an acceptance of their democratic accountabilities and the need for Overview and Scrutiny to keep them up to the mark.

There was little variation in mayors' approaches to wider governance. All respondents attached great importance to their relations with the local business community; indeed this relationship was often emphasised to the point of partially eclipsing their other links with voluntary, trades union and other groups, especially in communities with an urgent need for redevelopment and regeneration. One respondent met the Chamber of Commerce monthly and stressed "the key priority is

regeneration of the Borough. Partnerships and apprenticeships are very important: we assist business". Another respondent emphasised the good relations with the CEO of the Chamber of Commerce: "we work together and politics are not there". A third holds regular business breakfasts. All respondents recognised external contacts as important, including other council leaders and local Members of Parliament. Local NHS bodies were also significant contacts. In all these relationships the Weaver function was very much in evidence.

In terms of allegiance, mayors were concerned to ensure that their promises to the electorate were carried out. They sought to practise the authenticity so important to theorists, yet Teles suggests that a "...problem of the allegiance role is that leaders must ensure that they keep their formal position without jeopardising their vision for the organisation" (2015: 24). Several stressed that their campaigns for re-election began on their first day in office: one asked whether he intended to stand for re-election declared "yes, campaign hard. I started the day I got elected". Many of them were party politicians but they tended to stress that they were not biased, one commenting that "I came up with and am loyal to my party but I have never been tribal". Another was more frankly partisan: "I am a Labour mayor so I'm not above politics. I believe in socialist policies but I'm here for (the area)". Where the mayor belonged to the same party that controlled the council, relations were usually but not always smooth. Independents and mayors whose party did not control the council found life more difficult. The North Tyneside area of England has had a Conservative council with a Labour mayor, and vice-versa: this does not assist timely decision-making.

Mayors generally placed great importance on their relations with individual citizens, attaching importance to citizens' complaints, problems and demands. Mayors generally found parish councils and area committees useful for bringing local issues and problems to their attention. Our respondents confirmed the importance of the high level of personal recognition detected by Randle (2004), attaching value to their relative fame compared to councillors. Machiavelli's virtue and luck

remain important. Another common basis for believing that they had the support of local people was their local roots: the mayor who said he "was born and bred here and I want to be about improvement – an ambition is to see the place I grew up in improve" was typical.

Conclusions

To conclude, it is instructive to recall Mintzberg, who suggested that in place of the common assumption that we are today "overmanaged and underled", we are in fact "overled and undermanaged" (2009: 9). This exposes once more the contested nature of leadership which, for Minzberg, inevitably emphasises the individual: "...whenever we promote leadership, we demote others, as followers" (Mintzberg 2009: 9). Our findings, derived from primary research with elected mayors in England, provide no easy solution to the problem of whether elected mayors are truly leaders. Yet although the intractable issue of leadership is not wholly resolved, we suggest there are several elements which, if disentangled, begin to advance our understanding of the English mayor as putative leader.

Practice and Public Support

The implications of the mayoral system for the practice of local leadership are under-examined but are potentially of major significance. Whatever the perceptions of mayors themselves, it is a form of leadership without clear evidence of public support. Although the turnout in mayoral referendums has been very low (reaching only 10% in Sunderland), and with little evidence of public support, the prospect of more elected mayors (with enhanced powers) remains popular with central government. Perhaps in response to public indifference, legislation enacted in 2007 permits the mayoral system to be adopted by council resolution without direct public endorsement. Schoeller (2015) refers to political leadership in terms of demand for it, and its subsequent supply. For us this raises the question of how much demand exists for directly-elected mayoral leadership. The answer appears to be very little. Mayors are therefore supplying something for which there is no significant

demand, other than from central government. The extent to which there will be public support for the proposed 'transition' to elected mayors for aggregated Combined Authorities in English regions (HM Treasury/Greater Manchester Combined Authority 2014) remains to be seen. Some of the nascent Combined Authorities have agreed to mayoral governance (Sandford 2015) while others (such as the North East) have dissenting views amongst their constituent councils.

Leadership and Place

It is essential to be clear about what mayors are leaders *of*. The administrative areas of England are not natural places corresponding to common understandings of locality. There are no discrete administrative areas corresponding to many places with which people identify as a focus for belonging, such as the Midlands or the North. As a local authority manager remarked to one of the authors in a public consultation meeting prior to the establishment of an elected mayoral system, the problem with the area concerned is that "it is not a place". This is a crucial insight. Mayors can only truly lead areas that are recognised as places by people in them. There are important recent debates about place-based leadership (eg Hambleton and Sweeting 2014, Hambleton 2014, Gibney 2011) but the nature of the places under mayoral jurisdiction remains in some cases problematic. The leadership role of the elected mayor (whether for cities or for larger Combined Authorities) must now also be seen in the context of English devolution (House of Commons 2016) which has become politically much more significant than it was at the inception of the mayoral experiment.

Management and Leadership

As we have seen, the boundaries between management, administration and leadership have no definitive resolution, especially in relation to political leadership. In the case of directly elected mayors we conclude that they are (or at least aspire to be) both managers *and* leaders, and that there need not be a contradiction between the two. The words of one mayor, suggesting that they may provide political leadership without themselves being politicians, constitutes an acute observation

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for a role which, within English sub-national governance, remains an innovation after many decades of committee-based public bureaucracy.

The location of the directly elected mayor within local public sector structures also remains a major factor. However extensive the individual powers of individual mayors may be, in England they are part of a structure of public responsibility and accountability. This fundamentally shapes the nature of leadership. Indeed, there is a plausible argument that leadership is quite simply incompatible with public sector bureaucracy: that the concept of leadership in this context is bound to be incoherent (and hence the focus must be on management or administration). Does political leadership shape events, or is it a consequence of other factors such as who becomes a mayor, and how? (Rhodes and 'T Hart 2014: 8-10).

As to whether mayors are leading in any of the senses suggested by leadership theorists, there is evidence of the shepherd and of the weaver alike, of the 'heroic' leader and the physician at times, and also of individual mayors who seek to transform their areas. However, all such leadership is within strict limits as the role of (transactional) manager also has to be fulfilled. Few mayors can plausibly be seen as charismatic in the Weberian sense.

In addressing these difficult questions there is value in returning to the classic theorists with which we began. Political leaders such as elected mayors have to be shepherds, physicians and weavers all at once because the nature of their tasks is so varied. Hence they must aspire to be both transformative and consensual leaders in their different contexts. They need to manage and to lead. English local government has not yet found itself at ease with this major change.

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