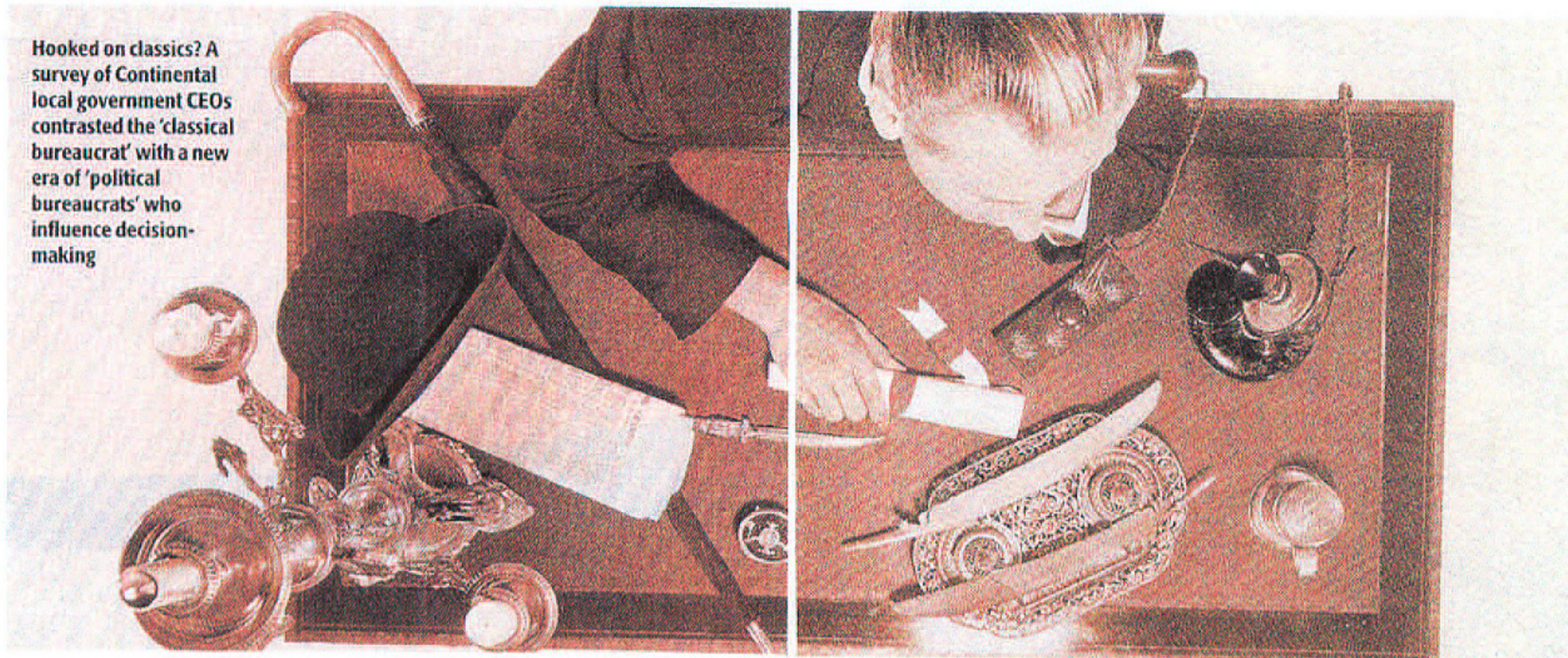


# Leading to a new era

For the latest in his series looking at local government from a global perspective, Professor Robin Hambleton offers a European take on the relationship between chief executives and members

Hooked on classics? A survey of Continental local government CEOs contrasted the 'classical bureaucrat' with a new era of 'political bureaucrats' who influence decision-making



## LEADERSHIP



### Public Service Futures

At long last, local government leadership is getting some serious attention.

All credit to the IDeA for giving emphasis, over a number of years, to the importance of strengthening local leadership. The well-respected programmes provided by the IDeA Leadership Academy have advanced the skills of many practitioners.

Praise too to central government. Deputy prime minister John Prescott is surely right to argue in the recent ODPM policy paper, *Vibrant Local Leadership*, that, 'Effective local leadership is at the heart of our vision for sustainable communities'.

This ODPM paper is both thoughtful and on track in relation to many of the key issues now facing local politicians, although it is weak on managerial leadership.

Enter the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, with a commission on 'Managing in a political environment'.

Chaired by East Sussex chief executive Cheryl Miller, president of SOLACE, this commission is well placed to fill the major gap in *Vibrant Local Leadership*.

And it is just possible that the commission will address the taboo subject of the role of the chief

executive in political – not managerial – leadership.

But the commissioners will need to be bold.

Five years ago, I carried out a small study for SOLACE of the implications of local government 'modernisation' for the role of the chief executive.

Launched at a reception at the House of Lords in 1999, the report – *Modernisation: Developing Managerial Leadership* – argued that chief executives played a key role in leading change and developing the organisation of the authority.

Based on discussions with around 20 leading UK chief execu-

## The well-run authority enjoys strong political and managerial leadership

tives, the report, written in advance of the Local Government Act 2000, identified four leadership roles for the chief executive, in addition to leading organisational development.

The four strands identified were – providing strategic advice to politicians; managing processes relating to decision-making; taking decisions on behalf of the

council; and influencing other agencies.

All the chief executives I spoke to suggested that the fourth role was expanding rapidly – the growth of 'partnership working' and 'relationship building' was accurately foreseen.

In 1999, it was, however, less easy to imagine how the relationships between chief executives and senior politicians would unfold. The legislation proposing new leadership models – directly-elected mayors, council managers and cabinets – was still taking shape, and there was much uncertainty about the 'executive' responsibilities councillors might want to exercise within the new political structures.

Some councils – Bristol provides an unfortunate example – failed to grasp the nature of the interplay between political and managerial leadership, and took the view that they could do away with the role of chief executive.

This negative view about the role of the chief executive is misguided. Experience tells us that the well-run local authority enjoys strong political and strong managerial leadership.

Now the Local Government Act 2000 legislation has been in place for some years, it is surprising to find the role of the chief executive in political – as distinct from managerial – leadership is still viewed as off-limits in some circles. No doubt, some traditionalists will protest that this is not an issue. They will claim 'politicians lead and officers manage', and that the role of the chief executive is crystal clear. Within the law, they do what the councillors tell them to do, and they certainly don't have a role in political leadership.

In my view, this position is based on an out-of-date and flawed conceptualisation of member-officer relations.

Cross-national research on the role of the chief executive may be able to help refresh debate.

A survey of chief executive officers in European local government provides some pointers. This can be found in *The Anonymous Leader. Appointed Chief Executive Officers In Western Local Government* by K K Klausen and A

### The political bureaucrat

- Formulate idea and visions
- Promote and encourage new project in the community
- Provide the mayor with political advice
- Be informed about citizens' viewpoints
- Develop and implement norms concerning the proper roles of politicians vis-à-vis bureaucrats
- Influence decision-making processes in order to secure sensible and efficient solutions

### The classical bureaucrat

- Guide subordinate staff in day-to-day handling of activities
- Manage economic affairs, accounts and budgetary control
- Ensure that rules and regulations are followed
- Provide the mayor with legal, economic and other kinds of technical advice

Magnier\*. The Continental authors draw a distinction between two role models for the top officer – the 'classical' bureaucrat and the 'political' bureaucrat – see table. This is a simplification of a much more complex reality, but it remains a useful starting point for examining options for managerial leadership.

The classical bureaucrat tends to be a relatively invisible figure. Sometimes unfairly criticised for being faceless and unadventurous, chief executives adopting this approach tend to focus their attention on the internal operation of the local authority.

'The CEO runs a tight ship' may be an accolade or a jibe, depending on how you view the 'classical' model.

The political bureaucrat has a more proactive style, and is likely to be more noticeable in the local community.

Enter the outgoing, even colourful, chief executive, who is a visible figure in local partnerships and community settings.

It would be unwise to suggest that features of the classical bureaucrat are simply old hat, and can be discarded in favour of the more political approach.

Rather, the fascinating challenge now confronting all local government leaders – whether they are politicians or officers – is how to strike the right balance.

The interplay between political and managerial leadership needs

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to be suited to local circumstances, and this is as it should be in a democratic society.

Some may even argue that this is a 'non-debate' from a national point of view – leave it to the locals is their view.

However, one drawback with such a localist argument is that it runs the risk of sliding this important topic off the national agenda.

There is a danger with the 'it all depends on local circumstances' argument that the crucial matter of how to develop strong approaches to political and managerial leadership becomes a topic for private discussion in the bar at conferences rather than a topic for sustained examination.

These are sensitive matters, but we neglect them at our peril. Hopefully the new Local Government Leadership Centre, led by Wendy Thomson, will foster some creative lesson-drawing in this next period.

And experience abroad may be helpful in unlocking new thinking.

In particular, I believe UK chief executives – and aspiring chief executives – have much to learn from chief executive officers and city managers in other countries.

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\* Odense University Press, 1998