4 Objectives and Strategies

It is possible to identify from the interview material, and from observations of the behaviour of party groups and chief officers in hung authorities, a number of basic objectives which underlie chosen courses of action. In pursuit of these objectives, strategies are deployed which determine the approach of the group to particular situations.

There are two important points to emphasise before we identify the objectives and strategies typically encountered. The first is that the processes of identifying and weighting objectives and developing strategies are rarely as explicitly identified and systematically undertaken as the use of the terms may seem to imply. Many party groups would not use these terms in discussions about how to operate in the hung situation. Links between explicit or implicit strategies and party objectives were in several cases not clearly thought through. It would be quite wrong to imply that party groups, or indeed leading officers, consciously followed the familiar stages of the rational model (objectives; alternatives; choice of action; implementation; review) in deciding how to operate in a hung situation. Nevertheless it is in our view both possible and productive to identify the implicit objectives and strategies which influence such decisions, even when actors are not themselves able to articulate them explicitly.

Secondly, it should not be implied that initial identification of objectives and the deployment of strategies necessarily continue unchanged over the life of the council. Hung authorities invariably exhibit learning, re-assessment, adjustment and change among the parties and individuals concerned. It is not unusual for objectives, or more typically their effective prioritisation, to change over time; it is certainly not unusual for explicit switches of strategy to be made. Hence when we refer to objectives and strategies it can be assumed that we are dealing with a ‘moving picture’ and not a static position. In what follows we deal first with the objectives and strategies of political parties, and then with those of officers.

PARTY OBJECTIVES

In principle at least four different fundamental objectives of party groups can be identified. Each party group will normally put greater

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weight on one (or more) objective than on the others. These weightings may and often do change over time, either explicitly or implicitly.

Programme Achievement

Each political group will wish to ensure that as much of its party political programme (as set out in a party manifesto, and/or as subsequently developed in response to particular situations) is implemented as is possible in the situation. In this connection it is important to recognise that some party groups – but particularly the Liberal Democrats – have important political objectives concerning the way in which business should be conducted in the authority. Thus in talking about programme achievement we are not concerned only with policies for services or for specific issues, and approaches to expenditure; we may also be concerned with procedural issues such as the introduction of conventions, equal briefing rights for all parties, a more open style of government, and so forth. It should be noted, also, that the larger the party group on a hung council the more it is likely to expect to be able to achieve a substantial proportion of its programme, although that is by no means always the way things work out.

Future Electoral Success

All parties aim to maximise their chances of success at the next local election. This may not necessarily or realistically be seen in terms of achieving a majority of council seats. The Labour groups in Devon, Kingston and Somerset, and the Alliance groups in Cumbria, Humberside and Hillingdon know that given the traditions and social geography of their areas, a breakthrough of those proportions is, to say the least highly unlikely. But they will certainly wish, as do all party groups, to increase their representation at the next local election, or at the very least to hold on to what has been gained. Time horizons are important. In the counties, London boroughs and Scottish authorities, and in the majority of shire districts, the next elections may appear quite distant, particularly in the period immediately after the last one. In the metropolitan and some shire districts, however, the next election is usually at most one year away (although every fourth year there is a two-year gap). Thus the impact of this objective is likely to vary depending on the proximity of the next local election.