4 The Internal Politics of Local Authorities

To understand the operation of local government it is essential to examine the internal politics of local authorities. What goes on inside towns, boroughs and county halls is vital for at least two reasons. First the administrative routines, power structures and conflicts of interest within local authorities can affect policy processes by modifying and mediating external influences. Second they may provide an independent dynamic. The internal politics of local authorities reflect not only an ability to make choices in the context of external influences, but also a facility for taking initiatives and independent action on the part of officers and councillors.

Chapter 1 identified a number of changes in the fiscal, economic, social and ideological climate surrounding local government from the mid-1970s onwards. They included a squeeze on spending, processes of economic growth and decline, changes in the social structure and shifts in public opinion leading to a more assertive and demanding form of politics in both party and pressure group arenas. These changes have affected the internal politics of local authorities in a number of particular ways which will be illustrated at various points throughout the chapter. Their overall impact has been to create a greater complexity, a larger number of points at which tension, competition and conflict can occur. The established distribution of power has come under challenge in this period of uncertainty and instability. To understand the internal politics of local authorities we need to abandon hierarchical habits of thought engendered by classical theories of organisation, habits which encourage a view that policy is made at the top of an organisation and passed down to subordinates for implementation. In reality the span of control of any one group is limited and in complex bureaucracies, which local authorities are,
there are likely to be a range of cross-cutting and conflicting influences on policy processes.

In particular it is necessary to challenge the academic consensus of the late 1970s and early 1980s which held that power inside local authorities was shared by a joint élite of senior officers and councillors. Cockburn (1977, p. 6), for example, on the basis of a case study of Lambeth argues:

> What had existed as a loose assembly of council committees and a multiplicity of small departments, their work barely co-ordinated, had become a tightly-knit hierarchy under the control of a board of powerful directors (senior officers), in close partnership with a top-level caucus of majority party members.

Saunders (1979), Blowers (1980), Green (1981) and Alexander (1982b) share, in broad terms, this vision of joint élite domination. These writers give too much credence to the impact of the introduction of corporate management structures. Following reorganisation in the mid-1970s the vast majority of local authorities appointed a chief executive and established a policy committee bringing together a range of senior councillors. This committee ran alongside a management team of chief and senior officers (Greenwood et al., 1975). Yet it is important not to see the introduction of these new structures as necessarily leading to different forms of decision-making (Greenwood et al., 1976; Clapham, 1985b). The establishment of corporate structures provided the potential for senior councillors and officers to seize the initiative in policy-making as 'close allies' (Saunders, 1979, p. 224) or 'partners' (Cockburn, 1977, p. 6). Yet this did not always occur. Moreover, as the changes in the environment began to have an impact so other forces and tensions came into play. A different approach to the intra-organisational politics of local authorities is required to capture this new complexity.

A framework for understanding internal politics

To understand the internal politics of local authorities it is necessary to recognise the potential for multi-sources of influence. Six arenas of influence are to be considered in this chapter: