The Chief Executive as a Political Animal

Introduction

It is axiomatic that chief executives must become immersed in the world of politics, as it operates in their authorities: they could not operate effectively if they were not. Several important dimensions of this immersion have already been emphasised; understanding the (party) political dynamics of the authority; understanding where the leader is coming from politically (and his or her standing within the party group and executive); building bridges to opposition groups; supporting new leaders who are struggling with their role; and (where appropriate) exchanging information about the internal dynamics of party group and management team respectively. All these are ways of picking up relevant political information – or responding to it – and would generally be regarded as uncontentious.

Yet one or two of the examples of chief executive behaviour discussed in earlier chapters indicate a rather more contentious ‘political’ role for chief executives; the way one chief executive bargained with a party leader in a (successful) attempt to persuade him to agree to the idea of ‘political assistants’; and the way another chief executive provided information and support to a councillor who was challenging for the leadership of a party group (and, by implication, of the council).

As we shall see in this chapter, the interviews revealed several more examples of chief executives behaving in ways which other chief executives might regard as inappropriate. Why inappropriate? Because there is a broad agreement ‘in principle’ in most local
authorities that the political leadership deals with the party political side of the council’s operations, whilst the chief executive deals with the managerial side, the leader/chief executive relationship providing the essential conduit between the two worlds (paralleled by a set of cabinet member/chief officer relationships). From this perspective the behaviour of a chief executive who supported and briefed one leadership contender (but not others) could be seen as an unwarranted intrusion into a world that should be left exclusively to the political group concerned.

The principle of mutual separation of managerial and political worlds can be breached (and often is) in other ways. We have already seen how the ‘members make policy officers implement it’ maxim is sometimes disregarded. Chief executives (and other chief officers) sometimes in effect ‘make policy’, which members agree, and then seek ways of becoming involved in its implementation. It is a general principle not a hard and fast rule (see Chapter 10 for further discussion). In this chapter, it is the involvement of a chief executive in the task of maintaining a stable and cohesive political environment that is the main focus of discussion.

Whilst acknowledging the inevitability of a degree of political uncertainty that an election-based system of representative democracy inevitably brings, it is in the interests of both a council leader and chief executive to do as much as they can to ensure a stable political environment, or perhaps more realistically to avoid an unstable political environment (with the level of uncertainty that this entails). Particularly in terms of long-term planning, chief executives are advantaged if they can anticipate with some confidence that key decisions which contribute to the council’s strategy are not going to be reversed arbitrarily. Unstable alliances in hung authorities, or internally divided majority groups, are particular threats to this stability. Similarly leaders will want to do as much as they can to maintain and strengthen their position in the face of such threats (or more generally). There is thus a common interest between leader and chief executive, assuming they have a reasonably good working relationship, to seek to secure, or to sustain a stable decision-making environment, within the limits of the possible.

There are various ways in which chief executives can be drawn into the political world (and hence operate as political animals) which go beyond the relatively uncontentious activities listed at the start