

## George Jones and Colin Copus Introduction

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## **Introduction**

In June 2009 an event was held at De Montfort University to mark the then imminent retirement of Professor Steve Leach of the Local Governance Research Unit – a retirement that came after 38 years of academic service. That event brought together Steve's friends and colleagues to celebrate the contribution that Steve had made, and the impact he had had on both academia and local government. It was held to publicly recognise the skilful way in which he had shown how academic work could be of use to practitioners, and how an analysis of practice could enhance academic understanding. It is only right that, as the leading local government academic journal, *Local Government Studies* should recognise through its pages the influential and important work that Steve Leach has contributed throughout his career as an academic. As a consequence, this issue of the journal is dedicated not only to highlighting and celebrating Steve's own work, but also to marking how he has driven forward much academic debate and research.

Steve was a sociologist and town planner by training, and he had a solid background in local government practice, initially in local government as a planning officer at Manchester and Cheshire – a county borough and a county, from 1964-1971. In 1971 he moved to academic life at Liverpool Polytechnic, but kept his foot in local government practice by lecturing in town planning. In 1976, inspired by the writings of John Stewart to broaden his area of interest from town planning to local government, he undertook the M.Soc.Sc course in Public Policy at Birmingham University's Institute of Local Government Studies (INLOGOV). On completion of this course, he was employed as a research fellow, and he went on to spend nearly 20 demanding but rewarding years at INLOGOV working on various projects with John Stewart (with whom he co-authored *The Politics of Hung Authorities* in 1992) and with organisational sociologists Bob Hinings and Royston Greenwood, with whom he worked on the SSRC research programme on central-local government relationships. His involvement in this research programme in the early 1980s led to a meeting with Professor George Jones, who was chair of the programme. Steve acknowledges the profound influence of George Jones and John Stewart on his thinking about local government.

In 1996 Steve moved to De Montfort University as Professor of Local Government. Here he worked with a new set of colleagues, including David Wilson, Lawrence Pratchett and Vivien Lowndes, on a range of research projects, many of which focused on the Labour Government's post-1997 democratic renewal agenda, until his retirement in 2009.

## **Politics, Parties, Leadership and Management**

Steve Leach is a qualitative researcher and delves, in great depth, into the rich, complex, dynamic, often chaotic and always fascinating world of local politics and local government. Through his dedication and his focus on understanding how they work, he has illuminated and strengthened our knowledge of the internal structures of local authorities, showing how elected members and officials work individually and together, and particularly illuminating their interactions. His quest to understand the way officers and members work has taken him into issues of politics and management, indeed political management – above all political leadership. Together

with David Wilson, he produced the classic authoritative volume: *Political Leadership in Local Government* (2000). His concern for the roles of elected members led him to examine how they were recruited, and their career patterns, and to make insightful assessments of their new roles of overview and scrutiny. Indeed, Steve helped us all to understand exactly what overview and scrutiny were, and the potential they displayed, when many were still trying to make any sense at all of this new element in the political decision-making processes of local government. He recognised, before many, that the councillor's role as a scrutineer had long gone unrecognised and unarticulated; Steve filled that gap in our knowledge.

Steve has emphasised that local government involves politics and local parties, and that there are different types of politics in different types of authority. He has assessed various management fashions and central government initiatives, and their impact on local government. He has made an important contribution to our understanding of the consequences of the Local Government Act of 2000 and the internal political management structures it imposed on local authorities. A major lesson of Steve's work is that local government is permeated with politics; the political pressures cannot be ignored. One of his most important books is *The Changing Role of Local Politics in Britain* (2006), which sums up much of his past work and is a thorough and authoritative account of party organisation and dynamics

He has also focussed on the relationships of local authorities with one another, exploring how authorities can work collaboratively in joint committees and joint boards, and suggesting that such cooperation is preferable to structural reorganisation. He has assessed the consequences of structural reorganisation, from organic change and the abolition of the metropolitan county councils to more recent attempts to impose unitary authorities on local government. Here a recent example shows yet again how Steve has never been an ivory-tower academic; rather, he is someone prepared to roll up his sleeves and to launch himself into the fray when necessary and when an obvious wrong has been committed. Together with Michael Chisholm, in *Botched Business* (2008), he took the Department of Communities and Local Government to task for its misleading methods and for dubious figures produced to support the setting up the new unitary authorities in England in April 2009. In this case, Steve displayed a characteristic mix of academic rigour, professional expertise, concern for local government and local democracy, passion for doing the right thing and an indignation at what he saw as an underhand disregard for the 'local' in local government.

### **A Distinctive Approach to Exploring Local Government**

Steve Leach's approach to his work is rooted in reality, in deeply probing and exploring what happens in local politics and local government management. He collects empirical detail about the way local government works and his research is a fine example of the evidence-based approach, refining theory with the reality test, and in so doing building his own theories, but expressing these with caution, aware of their dependence on specific conditions. His preferred method has been not to rely only on a paper trail or the use of formal structured surveys, but to interview and closely observe how individuals and organisations behave, what they think they are doing, and what they actually do. He uses informal interviews, observations and an

immersion in the world he is studying to get inside organisations and into the minds of practitioners of politics and management. Steve refuses to reduce the complexities, dynamics, interactions and activities of local politics and local government management to sterile figures and charts. Rather, he shows a depth and richness of understanding that can only come from close association and affinity with the world that is the focus of his study.

Steve has won considerable external funding from numerous consultancies over the years, and he has worked closely with local authorities of all types, solving problems, offering advice, producing comprehensive and authoritative reports on how councils have been conducting their business. The councils that have been lucky enough to have Steve work with them may not all have liked what he had to say – but they knew that his reports and recommendations were based on a thorough and rigorous understanding not only of their council but of the spectrum of local government. He has been much in demand from the world of local government, and from central government; and he has been skilled in devising research projects that gain grant money from foundations, commissions of inquiry, SOLACE, IdeA, and ESRC.

Local authorities and their associations have liked the way Steve set their work in context and gave them advice that helped them tackle pressing problems. They valued him not only for the quality of his work, delivered on time, but also for the way he wrote, without jargon, in clear direct prose that everyone could understand. Steve has an encyclopaedic knowledge of local government that can only be garnered from experience, a depth and breadth of understanding, and a passionate concern for the well-being of local government and its role in society and the governance of the country.

## **Conclusion**

Steve Leach played a major role in *Local Government Studies* and helped to make it the leading academic journal for the study of local government. He was editor of *LGS* between 1997 and 2003, and always had a clear vision for the journal, insisting that others have it as well, and that the journal should maintain high academic standards. He managed to create a journal that speaks to both academia and the practitioner world in a way that few other journals do. He still sits on the editorial board, and is valued and respected by his fellow board members and by the current editors of the journal. It is only fitting that this issue is dedicated to Steve and his work

Steve is a good colleague and collaborator, generous in sharing his findings and approaches and in answering queries. He has produced much with others, and has shown himself to be a team player, listening to others' suggestions, and even taking their advice. He is marvellous as a source for keeping up-to-date, as can be seen in his masterly surveys of the year's events in local government contributed to the Palgrave Macmillan annual reviews of British politics. He is not just focused on the present. He raises his eyes above the current nuts and bolts and is adept at futurology, laying out scenarios for different futures, not just carrying on with present trends but ingeniously plotting possible developments. Many organisations have found his presentations at seminars and conferences compelling as he probes expectations and challenges conventional assumptions.

It is impossible to adequately sum up or do justice to the contribution made by Steve Leach to academic work and local government in a necessarily brief editorial introduction to an issue of this journal. In this issue, we are simply trying to recognise and celebrate the work of a valued, trusted and close friend, someone who is a colleague to all of those exploring and working in the world of local government.

We do this in two ways: first by publishing two papers from Steve himself, one at the beginning and one at the end of the issue. The first paper is a review and analysis of the six themes that have dominated the Labour government's thinking and actions in regard to local government: local executive government; strong local leadership; partnership working; the performance/inspection culture; community cohesion (primarily at the neighbourhood level); and further moves towards a unitary structure of local government in England. Steve takes these themes and explores the impact they have had on the relationships between officers and members in local government. In his second paper, Steve explores the process of de-politicisation and enhanced managerialism which he describes as a 'government-led process'. He tackles this with reference to a particular view of local politics that developed at the Audit Commission and which was displayed through the CPA process. Here, Steve defends the right of local government to be political and for councils to develop a policy agenda that reflects the priorities and wishes of local people.

Secondly, in this issue we publish a number of papers that reflect themes and areas of study that Steve has focused on throughout his career, and on which he has had a considerable impact. The second paper in this issue is written by two of Steve's colleague at De Montfort University, Vivien Lowndes and Catherine Durose, who have worked with Steve on numerous projects. The paper explores how civic, social, political and economic rationales for neighbourhood working have been taken up at different levels within the City of Manchester. They throw light on the definitional problems that beleaguer notions of 'neighbourhood' and alight on a definition that depends on the purpose for, and the recipients of, a transfer of power within a locality. They also highlight the importance of politics and political power in understanding notions of neighbourhood.

In the third paper Michael Thrasher and his colleagues set out the results of research amongst local election candidates that sought to explain the nature of the current composition of the councilor population. It also examines the role of political parties in the recruitment of councillors and the effect parties have on local elections. The paper sets out to explain why the councilor population is as it is and whether the under-representation of certain groups is a deliberate result of political exclusion or whether it is a result of a greater or lesser inclination on the part of some to become involved in local politics and political parties.

The fourth paper, by Stuart Wilks-Heeg, was originally presented at an ESRC seminar as part of a seminar series award made to Steve Leach and Colin Copus. In the paper, Wilks-Heeg uses case-study material from Burnley and Harrogate to examine the state of local party politics and to account for the condition in which he finds those parties. He highlights the problems associated with a dislocation between local party politics and local political participation, and sees the development of a local political pluralism – more players in local politics – as a possible solution to the problem identified.

The next two papers provide a welcome indication of how Steve Leach has informed, and been part of, international academic debates. In the fifth paper, which explores another theme which Steve has made very much his, Merel De Groot, Bas Denters and Pieter-Jan Klop examine, from a Dutch perspective, the affect on the role of the councilor of reforms introduced by the Dutch 2002 Local Government Act. They examine particularly how a set of central government inspired reforms have influenced – or not – the role orientations of councillors in the Netherlands, and whether or not the scrutiny role is seen as a valuable and effective activity for the councillor. It appears that the Dutch debate in this area is much the same as that in England.

In our sixth paper, Ulrik Kjaer and Jørgen Elklit focus on other issues close to Steve Leach's heart, this time from a Danish empirical base, as they discuss the relationship between municipal size and party politics at both local and national level. The paper examines how, in the larger municipalities, the political system comes to resemble the national political system and the effect this has on local politics and government. The paper offers us an interesting and useful tool to consider the 'localness' of local politics.

From the collection of papers in this issue we see the breadth and depth of current approaches to those areas of local government studies that have particularly benefitted from the influence and involvement of Steve Leach. Those familiar with these areas will be able to recognise the many points on which he has influenced academic thinking and conceptualising – points that together delineate a major role played in the study of local government.

On a personal note, and as someone following in the footsteps of Steve Leach as editor of *Local Government Studies*, one of the authors of this introduction would like to add a personal note of thanks to Steve for the support, encouragement and friendship he has shown him over the years. Colin Copus remembers the first paper he wrote for *Local Government Studies*, which was submitted while Steve was editor: a paper that was roughly hacked from Colin's PhD thesis, and which was hugely over-long, showed no recognition of the style guidelines for the journal, and displayed much of his own personal bias about party politics in local government. Any other editor would probably have rejected that paper and possibly ended a nascent academic career; but Steve saw something in the paper that was worth saving, and with his careful guidance Colin got not only my first publication, but publication in *Local Government Studies*, no less. That, and Steve's support, time generously given, and patience and advice over the years, have resulted in Colin being where he is today.

It is our great good luck that Steve Leach, although now retired, has begun the sort of retirement that the best academics embrace – academics like George Jones (co-author of this introduction) John Stewart and Michael Goldsmith to name but a few. Now Emeritus Professor of Local Government at De Montfort University, Steve just keeps on going academically. And we should be thankful for that.

Professors George Jones and Colin Copus