Preface

Politics, declared Aristotle, is the master science. Rather more recently, Bernard Crick described political science as either the most imperialistic or the most parasitic of the social sciences. Certainly, it is very wide ranging and no scholar would nowadays claim to be equally interested or expert in all branches of this large and fissiparous discipline.

My primary interest in politics has always been in how political decisions are taken. At first, the primary focus was international and historical: the process by which the Treaty of Versailles was written. More recently, it has been decision making in local government, both as a scholar and in practical terms as a member of the first two Humberside County Councils and a member of its leadership group.

Over the last five years, the opportunity has come my way to interview senior politicians and officials about their leadership roles in local governments in the United States of America, Germany and northern England. However, when seeking analytical frameworks to use in presenting the findings resulting from these interviews, I found that such analytical frameworks were curiously lacking, despite the repeated debates about the 'core executive' in local government which have been carried on in Britain under the general banner of corporate management. This book is an attempt to develop some of the outlines for such a framework.

This task, however, is the philosopher's stone of modern political science. Hence, to claim to have provided definitive answers to the many questions that surround political leadership would be arrogant indeed. So this effort is offered as a contribution to enabling people to think through the concept of political leadership at a time when the managerialist receipts offered by the 'New Right' may be giving way to a new political and administrative paradigm: the 'Third Way'. It is certainly no claim of mine that all the relevant questions have been satisfactorily answered here. Indeed, some of them may not even have been asked! I hope only that perhaps what follows will help make a little more sense of a complicated, greatly abused but most important political concept.

This is a book in the British political science tradition. It is eclectic in its methodology, drawing on a wide range of sources. It does not seek to formulate 'scientific' propositions about how leaders behave and what objectives they seek. The public choice theorists and their supporters in political science would

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have us treat leaders as ‘rational maximizers’ who will act in the ways which are guaranteed to maximize their support among their followers. No allowance is made for idealism and altruism, yet there is plenty of evidence that political leaders are motivated by both – and, equally, by irrational hatreds.

The debts of gratitude I have incurred in nearly 40 years of teaching and research are obviously legion. However, a few people must be singled out for special thanks. First among equals come my good friends and colleagues at the State of New York College at Fredonia, who helped me greatly both with the interviews with American mayors and in developing the ideas that underlie this book. In particular, my hearty thanks for their friendship and advice go to Len Faulk and Bill Muller in the Political Science Department, Tom Rywick in Psychology and Lee Braude in Sociology. In Germany, good friends at the Fachhochschule fuer oeffentliche Verwaltung Nordrhein-Westfalen, with whom the University of Northumbria has enjoyed scholarly links for ten years and more, have given me much help and support, notably Friedrich Schwegmann of the Fachhochschule’s Muenster campus and Wolf Bovermann in Wuppertal. Simone Kruthoff and her friend Petra Weber were invaluable and charming companions and translators during the German phase of the research.

I am also truly grateful to the very busy men and women in all three countries who gave their time to answer my questions. Since they were mostly interviewed on condition of anonymity, they cannot be named here but, if any of them read this, you know who you are and I am sincerely grateful. My fellow members and the officers of the former Humberside County Council also gave me many insights, whether consciously or otherwise!

In Britain, I must thank my colleagues and students at the universities of Hull and Northumbria for their tolerance of my eccentric teaching and other habits over the years, as well as for their own varied contributions to my ideas about leadership and management and their support of my research efforts. David Welsh, Bill Hartas and Lord Norton of Louth have been especially helpful. Other friends who have helped by reading and commenting on parts of the book include David Shaw and Judith Phillips. Lastly, this book’s dedicatee was, until his tragically early death, an invaluable source of inspiration, encouragement and challenge, as well as being a greatly treasured friend.

Of course, none of these good souls bears any responsibilities for the inadequacies and errors in what follows.

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