

Who is to blame? Where does the power lie?

There is little limit to what you can achieve in politics as long as you are happy for others to take the credit. Some people have considerable influence but are happy to let others take the starring roles and to decide and implement the new ideas. Some with influence are civil servants, some are consultants, some are serving politicians. Much of government is a slave to the ideas of old economists and other thinkers. Much of modern government is driven by consultants who come in to recommend courses of action, design media strategies, and then take on the role of helping implement the decisions. The public never knows who they are.

Some politicians define their roles by the media. This became an acute preoccupation with New Labour, and has continued with many in government since. Some politicians have the strange idea that they can manage the media. They get upset when their agenda is displaced by events or someone else's agenda. Too much concentration on the media can divert their attention from the day job. Often the reason they are doing badly in the media is not media mismanagement, but mismanagement of a part of government which then attracts justified public anger. They need to spend more time trying to fix the real problem, and less time trying to fix the media.

Advisers advise, and politicians decide. The media reports decisions and reactions to them. That is the constitutional theory. Sometimes it works out like that. There are frequently other models. Sometimes officials decide and politicians do not realise what is going on. Sometimes officials recommend strongly and politicians acquiesce. Sometimes politicians do query an approach but are told it is the only technical, legal, practical or safe way to proceed. It then takes a strong minded and well informed politician to insist on a different way of proceeding. Sometimes the media have their own agendas and want to make the politicians follow them.

There are government Ministers who take a Manifesto or political agenda and drive it through, using officials to improve and implement. There are other Ministers who are but actors and actresses voicing the lines of departmental officials, both within and outside government.

We see in the questions about who is to blame for the Tower inferno these same issues of responsibility, knowledge and advice in local government. Is an elected Councillor allowed to rely on the technical expertise of his Council's Building Regulation Department and the Fire Department? Does he or she ever need to challenge their technical advice and decisions? If he is told of what they are doing does that make him to blame if it is wrong? Or is he to blame even if he was not informed and it was handled as a delegated matter? Should a Councillor approving expenditures to improve the thermal insulation and look of a building have to do enough research to satisfy himself of the safety, or can he rely on the professionals designing and

procuring the building to do that? The Councillor wants to take the credit for the improvement, so should he therefore take the blame if it goes wrong?

These are difficult issues. I would be interested in your views. The danger is we make the role of the Councillor too difficult so no-one good will want to take it on. The other danger is we expect too little, and the Councillors' collective power to challenge and to improve the work of professionals and officers lapses or fails to do its job. In the worst cases in the public sector no-one is to blame. They all become good at laying off the risk, because they can claim that no one person ever took the decision. It just happened.