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Des Staple,

You asked me for a note on the state of opinion among Conservative Councillors. The first obvious point is that opinion varies! Very broadly I would divide the factions into: the "Old Guard" - Conservatives with a very strong "Independent" flavour who tend to be elderly and are often dominant in the shires and shire districts; the "Young Turks" - more politically committed councillors who tend to be in the cities rather than in the shire areas, but growing in strength there too: the businessmen in their 'forties' who fall somewhere in-between. There are differences between them and also between Conservatives in control and Conservatives in Opposition.

On the whole I think that most Councillors are quite optimistic about our prospects in the Local and General Elections. There is a willingness and confidence to go "canvassing" which is being borne out by the good local by-election results.

Morale is also good in general where Conservatives are in opposition - where they can blame the ruling group for everything that goes wrong rather than the Government. They are right behind Government Ministers' attacks on Opposition Parties and are generally helpful, and share our sense of moral outrage at the "loony left".

While morale is not too bad in Conservative controlled areas because opinion polls look good, there has been deep dissatisfaction over several years with the Government's policies towards local government. The overwhelming perception is "We've down what you have asked us to do - we've been efficient - we've sold council houses and you've kicked us in the teeth." They think that they should be rewarded for financial prudence with extra RSG (or at least not lose grant) but of course the system tends to be redistributive. So they see high spending Labour Councils getting more grant, while their grant gets cut year after year. They also think they should be allowed to spend "their money" ie the capital receipts from council house sales (they can now spend 20% per annum) where of course the problem is that the more they are allowed to spend their receipts, (which are mostly not in the form of 'cash' but have been used to repay

debt or lent internally) the less is available through housing allocations to high need, low receipt areas in the inner cities. One gets this complaint over and over again. Though few would disagree with the proposition that priority should be given to high need areas, they find the practical consequences very difficult to take.

That view is I think shared by nearly all Conservatives in control, be they "Old guard" or "Young turks", but there is also hostility to the Government on other issues over which the factions are a bit more divided.

The traditional "Old guard" Conservative in local government has a very paternalistic view of his role. He believes he runs a "tight ship" but is not prepared to test the market by putting services out to tender - typically because his officers have told him that it would cost him more to do so but also because of a strong sense of loyalty to the council workforce. He believes in selling council houses but also believes in holding rents down and building more council houses for sons and daughters of local people and in building more "high profile" projects like leisure centres and so on. (Hence the concern over the 20% limit on use of capital receipts). No Councillor I have ever met - apart from the County Councillors in Hereford and Worcester where there was a bus trial area - liked the bus policy one bit. The more politically aware - typically younger councillors - are keener to follow the Government's lead and be more radical but on the whole there is deep seated resistance to the Government's efforts to introduce market disciplines. It is noticeable at ADC Conferences how the concept of contracting out gets applause from one small section of the audience while the majority listen in stony silence punctuated with a few cries of "rubbish"! They do not like being lectured on the need for efficiency and value for money or being told about the virtues of the market.

While the younger element is more politically aware about Left-wing extremism, the Old Guard in the shire counties tend to fail to see what the Urban Left has to do with them. While Tories in Opposition especially in the cities support the proposals of the Widdicombe Committee to deal with abuses in local government, Tories in control oppose them as they think they will be an irritant to them.


There is also deep unease about the Green Paper proposals. Though there is no agreement on an alternative, councillors have been convinced by their officers that the system will be a 'nightmare' to administer and police. There is also a deeper concern at the political perception that it will be unfair for the "poor man at his gate" to pay the same as the "rich man in his castle". This has not yet become acute, but the leaders of local authority associations have all been in to see Ministers and voice their concern.

Finally I would say that many Councillors are hyper-sensitive about the Government's view of local government. We have had complaints from Conservatives about Ministers attacks on the "loony left" because they think that some of the criticism rubs

off on local government as a whole. They always complain that the Government has nothing to say in praise for local government, but they always ignore or forget the praise they do occasionally receive (perhaps they think it is praise through gritted teeth - perhaps they are right!). They complain about Government interference, but resent it when they feel they are not being listened to.

So it is not surprising with all this that when John Cunningham makes speeches at Local Government Conferences promising more freedom from interference and more money and free use of capital receipts he gets a warm reception from his own side and I regret to say from many Conservatives as well.

I hope this is not too depressing. Despite all this, as political workers out in the constituencies they do sterling work canvassing and propping up the local Conservative Associations, and as Councillors they run their councils moderately efficiently and are not paid for doing so. So any words of appreciation would I am sure be welcome - though they will no doubt come back for more!



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