

## The changing nature of activist engagement within the Conservative Party: A review of Susan Scarrow's task-orientated approach to party membership

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## Original Article

# The changing nature of activist engagement within the Conservative Party: A review of Susan Scarrow's task-orientated approach to party membership

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**Abstract** Scarrow highlighted two questions concerning party members: The level of engagement required and the extent to which this occurred within formal party structures. She proposed a task – rather than a people-orientated interpretation. Her framework is applied here to the British Conservative Party. A qualitative research design was adopted, which focused on the views and behaviour of local activists. This permitted an understanding of how the party organisation actually functioned. The findings revealed notable deficiencies in activity levels, member skills, member attitudes towards performance improvement and local managerial capacity. This meant reduced fitness for purpose. Hence, a shrinking of activists' responsibilities and a simplification of their role has occurred, thereby changing the nature of engagement, but equally modifying the nature of political voluntarism. Increasing emphasis is being placed upon developing networks of supporters, with the implication that there has been a movement towards the American model of party organisation, but with the continuation of membership parties in a looser form. As such, the findings also reveal how the party is managing its declining membership organisation. Overall, Scarrow's task-orientated approach was found to be apposite for the purpose of measuring local activist engagement. *British Politics* (2014) **9**, 93–119. doi:10.1057/bp.2013.10; published online 29 April 2013

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## Introduction

Susan Scarrow posed two fundamental questions concerning party members: What level of engagement was required of members that a party viewed as assets, and to what extent did such engagement occur within formal party structures? Scarrow suggested task-orientated solutions, with parties tailoring the mix of incentives for

activism to the specific tasks they needed accomplishing. Functional requirements would thus determine how parties organised and whom they wished to recruit (Scarrow, 1994, pp. 50–52). Organisational strength would be measured by activists' capacity to undertake a fixed menu of local tasks, rather than by focusing upon member numbers; membership reduction may therefore not necessarily impair the capacity to compete effectively. Member shortfalls could be counterbalanced by professionals, who filled gaps where local organisations were not fully equipped (Scarrow, 2000, pp. 95–96). Indeed, the electoral-professional model put forward by Panebianco (1988) to explain the evolution of party organisations pointed to career-minded professionals with specialist knowledge being necessary to manage election campaigns effectively. The inference was that modern parties should be controlled from the top from where all local activity would be directed. In this way, Scarrow's task-orientation was equally pertinent to renewed academic interest in the importance of local campaigning for general election outcomes (Denver and Hands, 1992; Whiteley *et al.*, 1994; Johnston and Pattie, 1995, 2003; Denver *et al.*, 2002; Whiteley and Seyd, 2003; Pattie and Johnston, 2010; Fisher *et al.*, 2011a).

Importantly, later research pointed to electoral success being a function of an alignment of national and local campaigns through greater central co-ordination, focusing resources upon key constituencies and modernising local organisations (Denver *et al.*, 2003; Fisher *et al.*, 2006). Nevertheless, the consensus was that local activity mattered: if local activists were allowed to wither, future problems would emanate. This was reinforced by Fisher and Denver (2009), who demonstrated that traditional campaigning methods (for example, posters, leaflets, canvassing, public meetings, 'knocking-up') retained greater electoral impact than modern techniques (for example, telephone canvassing, computer activity, direct mail). Although the latter were gaining acceptance, human contact with voters was the critical aspect.

Scarrow's (1994) task-orientated approach to activism derived from an assessment of the strategic value of members reflecting what they actually contributed. There were systemic and organisational dimensions (Maor, 1997, p. 95). In the political system, members enabled the continuation of democracy; they provided an indication that the party was embedded within society and hence served to legitimise it (Beer, 1965), or at least allowed the leadership to present the image of a mass party for this purpose (Pierre and Widfeldt, 1994). Organisationally, voluntary work was essential for party politics to succeed. Scarrow (1994, pp. 46–49) noted a number of benefits, suggesting that members: gave financial help through subscriptions and fundraising, provided valuable ideas for policies, engaged in the electoral tasks of canvassing and leafleting, offered themselves as candidates at both national and local levels, were loyal voters and multiplied votes through everyday contacts. In this latter role, members performed the important function of 'ambassadors to the community'. This manifested itself in two ways: first, through personal contacts with family, friends and work colleagues, and second, by assuming the mantle of opinion leaders in local communities; for example, through becoming school governors, and



attending community centre events and local radio discussions. Scarrow (1994, p. 48) suggested that such contacts were valuable for parties who were seeking to regain public trust. However, members also incurred costs. These included establishing representative committees, maintaining offices for recruitment and management, and organising meetings and conferences to accommodate their needs (Maor, 1997, p. 96). Such activities consumed resources that could alternatively be employed on communications with the electorate (Scarrow, 1994, p. 46).

The balance of the costs and benefits of retaining a voluntary membership was inevitably affected by the persistent decline of membership numbers. This led Scarrow to offer two scenarios of how parties would treat their declining organisations: first, an Americanisation of party life that negated local, membership-based organisations; and second, the retention of membership organisations, but with less meaningful involvement as members lost rights and influence. In either case, the 'texture of political life' would change, as the civic participation ethos would diminish (Scarrow, 2000, pp. 79–80). This was the fear of Seyd and Whiteley (2004, pp. 363–364) who contended that parties would become susceptible to the greater influence of special interests, to the detriment of responsible government; weaker upward communication would render party leaders less accountable to voters.

This article employs Scarrow's task-orientated interpretation to examine member engagement within the British Conservative Party. Its membership declined from some 2.8 million in 1953 to 750 000 in 1992, and to a mere 247 000 in 2006 (though activists believed it was closer to 180 000).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Whiteley and Seyd's study, conducted in 1992, highlighted a de-energisation process by revealing a marked reduction in time-consuming activities such as canvassing and meetings (Whiteley *et al*, 1994; Seyd and Whiteley, 2004). This article builds upon their work. First of all, it will assess the deficiencies of the local organisation by using critical task-orientated indicators. The evidence presented will thus permit an evaluation of local fitness for purpose and will enable an understanding of the level and nature of activist engagement. A second objective is to assess the implications for the membership organisation, thereby addressing Scarrow's question concerning the extent to which such engagement was occurring within formal party structures. In turn, this will permit an evaluation of future activist engagement and of the party's approach to its declining membership.

A qualitative research design was adopted in order to delve more deeply into the party organisation and to understand how it actually functioned. Previous qualitative studies of the Conservative Party have been comparatively few and have involved single constituency associations (for example, Bealey *et al*, 1965; Holt and Turner, 1968; Tether, 1980). By contrast, the focus of this study was upon four target constituencies that the party needed to win at the 2010 general election; here, local engagement and task deficiencies would be of great concern to the party centre. Diversity in case selection was needed to enhance the credibility of the data. Hence, constituency choice reflected a mix of Labour- and Liberal Democrat-held, northern and southern, and urban and rural seats (see Table A1 in the Appendix for constituency

election information). The four constituencies were: the affluent market town of Cheltenham, which contains large service companies, and defence and electronics concerns; Derby North, which is part of a large industrial city; the rural constituency of High Peak, which is notable for tourism as well as agriculture; and Somerton and Frome, the largest constituency in England, which principally relies on agriculture but which also contains a substantial population of retired people.

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews with local officers and activists, together with agents where present, and area chairmen; regional professionals were also interviewed in order to acquire the counter perspective. A total of 43 interviews were conducted (see Table A2 in the Appendix for interview sample information). In this article, activists are defined as members who devote some time to the party each month. However, where appropriate, a distinction is made between local officers who were people serving in some capacity in the constituency association officer team and activists who were either no longer officers or had never actually taken up an officer position. Moreover, regional professionals were specialist political staff appointed by Conservative Campaign Headquarters in London, but located in regional offices or regional campaign centres. These people, and frequently local officers, were readily able to articulate the views of the central political professionals. The latter are referred to as 'the centre'. In addition to the interviews, a short self-completed questionnaire was administered to the constituency association interviewees to discover their personal skills and level of political activity. Finally, it needs to be acknowledged that the interviews were carried out in 2007, a time when the Conservative Party was in the political doldrums.

## **Evidence from the Local Constituency Associations**

This section employs empirical evidence from the Conservative Party to highlight local deficiencies in four task-orientated indicators consonant with Scarrow's (1994) approach to party membership: local activity, member skills, member attitudes towards performance improvement and local managerial capacity. These permit an assessment of fitness for purpose of the local parties.

### **Local activity**

Deficiencies in local activity were identified in four areas: activity rates, membership recruitment and retention, fundraising, and campaigning performance.

#### *Political activity*

A notable deficit was recorded in local political activity. Local officers reported that only 15–20 per cent of members were active in some way, but many believed the true



figure was towards the lower end of this range. Activism was described as ‘loose’, depending upon the task or event. Attendance increased significantly for the Annual General Meeting, a high-profile guest speaker and particularly for the final candidate selection meeting; in Somerton and Frome, for example, this attracted around 30 per cent of members. However, from a campaigning perspective, these were not politically productive activities. Encouraging members to become politically active was difficult, with no more than 10 per cent contributing. Political responsibility therefore tended to fall upon the same few people. Essentially, it was the senior officers and councillors who were regarded as ‘political animals’; for them, politics was a way of life. This core group alone were continually aware of party developments, issues and events. They were very active in fundraising, leafleting, canvassing, newsletters and campaign planning, but contribution tapered off when it came to member recruitment and political debate. Nevertheless, it was clear that an insufficient amount of quality political time was being expended within local associations. Importantly, there were marked deficiencies in the three primary constituency activities of membership, fundraising and campaigning.

#### *Membership recruitment and retention*

Membership recruitment and retention activity was particularly deficient. Local officers and activists who had been in the party for many years commonly attested to a lower member turnover rate than other parties; once committed, people tended to stay. Inducements included personal contact, newsletters and traditional political and social stimulants such as leafleting and coffee and luncheon clubs. Nonetheless, retention was undermined by the connection to fundraising. Many complained of an implicit assumption that ‘you will put your hand in your pocket’. This financial obligation deterred some members from activity, and led others to exit. It could also result in them being unwilling to recommend their friends to join. Younger members were a particular concern. There was a marked rebalancing of the social–political mix in that they were felt to have greater political expectations from their membership than before: some resigned if their political ambitions were not realised within a reasonable timeframe. Morale was an additional factor, being linked strongly to the political fortunes of the party. Activists were often personal friends of councillors; their loss in the years when the party was unpopular adversely affected both retention efforts and willingness to recruit. Furthermore, the importance of the party leader was stressed. Many officers alluded to a positive ‘Cameron effect’ following David Cameron’s accession to the party leadership, although Whiteley (2009, p. 249) pointed to recent membership loss peaking in 2006, suggesting grassroots’ dissatisfaction with his modernisation strategy.

Membership recruitment was sporadic. Although local officers and professionals both talked avidly about boosting numbers, recruitment was afforded a low priority. Unlike fundraising and campaigning, it was curiously omitted from the constituency

association ‘objects’ in the party constitution. Moreover, although association executive council minutes acknowledged membership concerns, they devoted little attention to specific recruitment initiatives. The primary strategy remained face to face, manifested in the co-option of family, friends, neighbours and work associates. However, these methods typically resulted in the attraction of like-minded people, reflecting both age profile and political outlook. Other recruitment vehicles included social events and ‘cut-off’ invitations in campaign literature, and attempts were sometimes made at large events such as fairs, although these were isolated departures. Importantly, recruitment opportunities were lost through voter pledge databases being out of date or else underutilised, and associations did not make the best use of central databases that they were permitted access to for the purpose of targeting potential high-value local Conservatives. One officer noted that this meant anonymous letters being sent to 1000 people, which did not elicit any ‘sense of community’. In addition, there was a distinct lack of national–local coordinated membership activity: periodic initiatives occurred, but with little enthusiasm. Ultimately, presence in the community was deemed critical for membership growth, but local officers alluded to the lack of ‘ambassadors’ needed. Essentially, there were insufficient active members to induce recruitment through everyday workplace and social contacts, and moreover, to perform the opinion leader role for the purpose of attracting interest. Hence, one local officer concluded that ‘we almost expect people to turn up and ask to join’. Overall, the view that membership drives embarked upon by parties were ‘more symbolic than real’ (Seyd 1999, p. 384) was apposite within the Conservative Party.

### *Fundraising*

Fundraising is a core component of local Conservatism, but was suffering from a lack of innovation. Activities ranged in price from cheaper quiz evenings, coffee mornings, sausage and mash suppers, pig roast and garden parties to the more expensive annual dinner and functions with high-profile political speakers, usually senior MPs. The two southern constituencies had more success than their northern counterparts in attracting the political elite; for the former, such visits were an expectation, for the latter they were a bonus, particularly in Derby. Associations ran coffee and luncheon clubs, and the perennial 200 club in which non-member supporters often contributed; such people often formed part of the leaflet delivery network.<sup>2</sup> Finally, appeals at election time were solicited from a network of local contacts, both individual and corporate, and were often linked to specific events. Nevertheless, professionals were alarmed at a sharp fall in the number of fundraising-orientated events and were actively trying to address it. One regional professional stressed that ‘it’s a mantra I’ve been preaching to associations ... there has been a big decline in the number of social events ... 20 years ago, there were many, now it’s a few’. Professionals lamented that as local government had become more political,



and as the 'permanent campaign' had ushered in an increased number of elections, so local activism had become less social and hence less financial.

The fundraising shortfall can be explained politically and organisationally. The absence of an MP was cited as the key political factor, as local interests, particularly the business community, had little incentive to attend events. Golf days, for example, were cancelled due to lack of support, but routine events, such as coffee mornings, also suffered without an MP, as there was an expectation of his or her attendance; the loss of councillors could have a similar, though lesser, impact. Moreover, political relationships had become more media sensitive: many companies no longer wished to be identified with the party.

A key political fundraising vehicle was local Patrons' Clubs.<sup>3</sup> Their primary purpose was to attract 'new money' from wealthy people in the constituency. Hence, they were avidly promoted by the centre, which recommended that clubs should be 'unashamedly exclusive' with members' businesses being used for shadow cabinet tours (Conservative Party, 2008). Patrons contributed profits from their functions and made donations, but officers also noted qualitative benefits from their position as higher-powered people who possessed contacts and experience; for example, media assistance for the parliamentary candidate. The business link, though, revealed their fickleness. Somerton and Frome had 25 participants and High Peak 30. This was less than desired, but did ensure that members acquired meaningful access to politicians. Officers and activists were sympathetic to Patrons accruing expected benefits from their participation. One officer stressed that 'it's a Patrons' Club for business people in essence ... an active way for us to get into industry'. This motive suffered with the party being out of power. Furthermore, their affection for a free market philosophy meant that officers and activists did not feel discriminated against by Patrons who typically had the better events. However, concern was expressed about the damaging image of elitism; this was felt to deter some younger members.

Organisationally, 'diminishing returns with diminishing members' articulated the problem. This was exacerbated by the age profile: functions were often geared to the elderly, thereby discouraging younger members. Moreover, fundraising was easily neglected because, contrary to popular belief, it was not well liked. Some of the more politically motivated activists avoided it. Indeed, one officer asserted that 'a politically astute person, if he didn't quickly become a parliamentary candidate or local councillor, or achieve an active role on the political side, would have nothing of interest in the average fundraising event: politically, it's as dull as dishwater'. This was reinforced by another officer who added that 'it's a shock to people when they go into politics and find that they have to get involved in fundraising'. Critically, successful fundraising organisers were dedicated individuals who often had experience in other voluntary organisations, but their numbers were dwindling. This shortage revealed a funding trap that was also linked to the presence of agents: no agent meant reduced activity, but reduced activity meant no agent. Staleness was apparent, as fundraising tended to be historically driven. Local parties were very



complacent in asking the same people to contribute to the same events each year. Attitudes were hence frequently negative. An area officer lamented that officers ‘don’t make enough effort, they don’t plan. We put lots of suggestions to them, but it’s always done that, tried that, they don’t want to do it ... they cancel events if the money doesn’t come quickly ... it’s just a negative, negative attitude’. Cheltenham, a relatively progressive association, did try new kinds of events, but progress was slow. Finally, local fundraising efforts were further undermined by central appeals to members, which garnered frustration through ‘tapping’ local money. Hence, although the centre was encouraging the localities to raise more money, it was, to some extent, simultaneously undermining them.

### *Campaigning performance*

Local campaigning performance was as discordant as that of membership recruitment and fundraising. Notably, there was a shortfall in face to face communication, with insufficient activists to canvass even half of the constituency electorate. Hence, for practical reasons, they focused on selected wards with the aim of demonstrating a presence in a specific area. Canvassing provided voter reassurance that the party was visible and relevant, and helped to offset accusations of elitism. An officer noted that the aim was ‘to create an impression that the party was active, alive and had some vitality’ at the local level. It also mattered for local morale, with most officers and activists reporting a friendly reception. Nevertheless, central professionals deemed it necessary to increase the party’s telephone canvassing capacity, although officers reported a mixed impact. Importantly, canvassing weakness affected get-out-the-vote capability. Both local officers and regional professionals lamented the lack of committed members available on polling day, a function that was seen as increasingly critical because of lower electoral turnouts.

By contrast, local officers and activists were comfortable with leafleting as it did not involve engaging with the electorate. For many, campaigning equated leaflet production and dissemination. Moreover, they believed in its effectiveness: even if the focus were on basic issues such as potholes, it showed an on-going local presence. An agent articulated the professional viewpoint that ‘the number one priority is to increase our ability to deliver leaflets ... in a marginal seat, 500 or 1000 votes, the organisation really is the key to ensure coverage in every town and village ... we need local leadership because at the margin it’s how that organisation gives that extra per cent’. Electronic communication was not a substitute because e-mails were usually ignored. For leaflet distribution, the centre desired complete constituency coverage annually and target wards quarterly. However, to boost competitiveness pressure was exerted for an intensification of this, thereby questioning the commitment of voluntary deliverers. In Derby, leafleting was uneven because of the ageing membership profile. In the villages of Somerton and Frome, two-thirds coverage was seen as good because of its geographical size, but there were still



inconsistencies, as some strategically important areas were deficient. Leafleting could be demoralising as it was observed that nine times out of ten the recipient would discard it, but if voters received a Liberal Democrat leaflet and not a Conservative one it would reflect badly on the party. The activity was thus vital, but it merely required organisation rather than political engagement.

The key to improving leafleting capacity was the engagement of outside non-member supporters. Some of these would deliver leaflets to a few streets, whereas others would give more extensive service. Supporters either believed it unnecessary to make a full commitment to join the party or were, for example, local traders not wishing to reveal a political allegiance. Their contribution was incalculable. In addition to assisting with leafleting, regular attendance at social events boosted fundraising, and in rural areas particularly they permitted reach to outlying areas. Networks of supporters were a fundamental component of local Conservatism, particularly among the elderly. The centre encouraged their growth as they were devoid of political influence. It would also have preferred more members, but was not disposed to offer meaningful, policy-orientated, political incentives to attract them. However, constructing supporter networks required contacts throughout the constituency, in every village in rural areas. One agent complained, 'the lesson that we're just beginning to learn is that it is not just members who are prepared to do the work ... the Liberal Democrats have always understood the need for involving other people'. Moreover, an officer asserted that the Liberal Democrats were 'very proactive' in this respect and 'used their imagination: they have a lot of enthusiastic supporters'. Critically, supporter networks were largely assembled by a core group of local officers, activists and councillors; when such people declined, so did the supporter networks. Nevertheless, without active supporters, local parties would not be fit for purpose. Even then, there remained a shortage of people on the ground.

## Member skills

The appraisal of local skills requires a consideration of the outlook adopted by national party professionals as well as that of local people. From this point, the local skills position will be addressed leading to the important aspect of local leadership.

### *Local skills outlook*

The local position regarding activist skills was uneven. Officers reported that sufficient talent was available to fill the officer roles: a broad cross-section of occupational expertise was present, many individuals having professional, managerial or supervisory experience, some at director level. However, this masked latent capability locally. Officers reported appropriate skills that they had not transferred to the party. In addition, some had links to occupational organisations and had held office in a range of voluntary associations. Conservative activists were often people

who were widely active in the local community, but their experience was not fully recognised and embraced. That the party was not making the best use of their expertise and contacts was essentially because the centre did not require or wish them to become creatively involved. Local officers and activists were seen ‘as boring and amateurish’, and were ‘simply people to be encouraged’ rather than being equal political partners in the quest for electoral success. Hence, many depicted the centre as having a poor regard for local capabilities. Its trained professionals alone were deemed to possess the necessary expertise. An officer asserted that ‘the professionals at Central Office think they are the only ones that know how to do it ... they don’t tap into the innovative potential at the local level and the knowledge of how to promote the party locally’.

Professionals were seen as having their own agenda, such that they did not spend time in the constituencies looking for campaign feedback. This outlook was also a precursor to activist deskilling. New technology and the ageing membership profile meant that this process occurred naturally, but there was a purposeful element too, as, for example, professionals were increasingly influencing the design and production of campaign literature. This was politically motivated for policy alignment purposes and to ensure that the national Conservative brand was reinforced. A regional professional commented that ‘we try to take as much off the associations as possible in templates and leaflets’, and another added ‘we have to have the (Conservative) brand coming across strongly ... the media is not based upon a single constituency ... we have to have a national standard’. Inevitably, leaflet content disputes were common, but local parties were now subject to policing by regional professionals. Nevertheless, many officers lacked the skills to produce an eye-catching, coherent leaflet. In addition, inadequate membership recruitment letters and voter surveys indicated that even in basic communications, professionalism could be lacking.

### *Skills position*

Despite the shortfalls alluded to above, local officers and activists retained a capacity to add value locally through the accumulation of knowledge and the development of a network of local contacts; these competences were not replicable by professionals. They knew the local history, the local climate and the salient contemporary issues. They believed that they could more effectively translate national policy for the local electorate and advise the parliamentary candidate on the choice of issues to emphasise. An officer added that local people ‘give a fresh insight ... it’s not a party with a solely metropolitan outlook ... there is a need for bottom up’.

Competent local councillors were crucial local actors. Both local officers and professionals attested that good councillors impacted positively on the turnout for national elections. They comprised the core campaigning base, helped maintain the local branches and built political networks of family, friends and supporters. In addition, through their commitment to, and their visibility in, the local community,



they reinforced the national Conservative brand. Furthermore, councillors formed an important link to the MP, whose presence strengthened campaign capability further. An officer observed that ‘after we lost councillors, and then the MP in 1997, things turned quickly, people drifted away ... it was the perception of not having a presence’. In Somerton and Frome, officers alluded to a two-way flow of information from Parliament. The loss of their MP meant that this was now channelled through the MP in the neighbouring Wells constituency, but the content was inevitably restricted and diluted; there had previously been a good working relationship with their own MP. However, despite the benefits of councillors, councillor complacency was identified as a key problem and was being increasingly monitored by professionals. Following defeat, local knowledge and contacts diminished; activists who were personally associated with them often also lost interest as they felt a lack of purpose. Moreover, councillor knowledge and contacts were insufficient for countering opposition tactics in, for example, electoral boundary reviews. Along with the need for a greater alignment of national and local interests over the distribution of winnable seats, this was a primary reason for the process being brought under professional control. Hence, councillor commitment and effectiveness was now being increasingly professionally assessed.

Local officers revealed some fundamental skills deficiencies. Notable ones were campaign law, marketing, media and information technology. For example, in the core task of parliamentary candidate introduction to the electorate, the onus was increasingly placed upon the individual candidate. Press relations, in particular, were lacking. Moreover, a survey of association Websites revealed a wide disparity from excellent to mediocre, using the criteria of attractiveness, political content, ease of navigation and links to wider organisations.<sup>4</sup>

A major skills deficiency was in canvassing. The lack of available activists was noted above. However, the activity was not popular and there was a natural aversion that reflected the middle-class disposition of the membership. This was indicated by officers alluding to many active members either holding, or previously being employed in, managerial or professional occupational positions. In addition, an area officer confirmed that ‘very few members are comfortable with door knocking and discussing politics with anybody’; indeed, strikingly, they were encouraged not to talk politics with voters.<sup>5</sup> Essentially, canvassing required confidence, dedication and political knowledge, but policy detail was not a traditional role for local parties, a notion officers reconfirmed. Voters were also deemed to be sharper politically than previously, such that apart from the highly committed who professed to a fairly deep understanding of political affairs most local activists could not compete with their more ideologically motivated Labour and Liberal Democrat counterparts. As a result of these member characteristics, Conservative activists were not adept at addressing tactical voting, which was commonly regarded as a national problem.

The canvassing shortfall was reinforced by a dearth of local training. Other than the Website-based Conservative Training College, there was little formal assistance.

Training was acknowledged as a function of political success, but would have been more valuable when the party was struggling. This was recognised by professionals, but courses were infrequent and were designed to address basic campaign skills such as get-out-the-vote, postal voting and ‘half-a-minute’ canvassing, rather than more comprehensive political skills. Moreover, attendance was poor. This mirrored the political discussion vehicle: the Conservative Policy Forum (CPF).<sup>6</sup> It was regarded as lightweight and ineffectual, involving peripheral subjects and being too much dictated by the centre; some regarded it simply as a vehicle for policy ‘anoraks’. An officer put it tersely that ‘Central Office may see our reports, but whether they take any notice ... my experience is that they’ve got their own agenda and the rest is just trying to keep people (members) encouraged’. Turnout figures supported the CPF’s innocuousness. Cheltenham reported no more than 15 people, less than 2 per cent of its membership, Derby and High Peak similarly around 12 individuals, and Somerton and Frome acknowledged just ‘a few’ of its 1100 members.

### *Leadership*

Instead of activist expertise, professionals regarded leadership as the primary local competence. A very sophisticated set of skills was essential to be an effective local leader; in this, individuals holding senior officer positions were expected to transfer skills from the business world. Strong leadership was required to provide a sense of direction, for decisiveness in decision making and to overcome vested interests and branch-level cliques. It was the softer skills, though, that were difficult for professionals to replicate. Understanding the nuances of local issues, communicating decisions and explanations effectively, and leading by example, so that ‘people became a part of what you are doing’, were identified as important. Motivating members to canvass, deliver leaflets and fundraise was deemed a ‘balancing act’ of encouragement and applying gentle pressure. Diplomacy and empathy were vital, as activists needed to feel appreciated; in the emotive arena of local politics, managing some was a challenge. Nevertheless, viewing skills holistically, there was a shortfall within local Conservative parties. Activist capability was thus measured by professionals more in people numbers (including supporters) than skills; proactive leadership was critical to enhancing their effectiveness.

### **Member attitudes towards performance improvement**

Local officers and activists were not wholly attuned to the centre’s outlook of how local performance could be improved. Two significant problems were attitudes towards targets and parochial tendencies.



### *Local targets*

Professionals inculcated a target culture upon local associations. Membership targets were based on the M/V calculation: party members as a percentage of party voters at the previous general election. The centre ambitiously sought 10 per cent, but locally 5 per cent was deemed realistic. However, in Gloucestershire where significant electoral gains were expected, two associations only exceeded this threshold, the majority being located in the 1–2 per cent category, and figures were lower in some cases. As noted above, membership recruitment was afforded a low priority: outwardly, most local officers treated membership and fundraising activity equally, but in practice were reluctant to divert campaign money towards achieving membership targets. Moreover, they had little confidence in their ability to boost numbers, even though fundraising potential would be enhanced. There was wide acceptance of the membership decline thesis, with many citing other leisure pursuits, a lack of interest in politics and scepticism towards politicians. For professionals, gaining the co-operation of associations regarding membership could therefore be difficult. A flexible approach was thus adopted that accommodated the historical position and salient local factors. Nevertheless, membership deficiencies in affluent constituencies where an MP was present were increasingly seen as unacceptable.

In the light of the explanations for the marked decline in fundraising activity articulated above, attitudes towards targets were varied. Equivocal views meant that some associations set challenging targets and others easier ones. Moreover, some officers took them seriously, but others recognised that volunteers would only give what they desired or were able. In Derby, members were generally either oblivious to targets or simply ignored them. Hence, an area officer confirmed that ‘targets were more of an accepted standard to aim for ... I cannot direct them’. If members felt they were unachievable, there would be a shortfall; exertion of pressure would not work. Nonetheless, although the goodwill of voluntary members was still appreciated by some higher officials, the desperation to return to government was beginning to corrode this.

Professionals, in addition to providing support, were engaged in monitoring fundraising activity to benchmark associations against each other for the purpose of encouraging improvement. It was an area role to facilitate this: ‘the number of members, how many leaflets and press releases they’ve put out, extent of constituency coverage, amount of funds raised ... we compare so that we can encourage them’. Critically, officers pointed to a professional view that local parties should be run like small businesses. This created a tension between those members who concurred, arguing that associations had to change to get into the twenty first century, and those who stressed that local parties were campaigning organisations concerned primarily with ideas and policies. In turn, this dichotomy questioned the purpose of membership, manifested in a monetary or people orientation. Some saw it largely (and sometimes desperately) in fundraising terms, reflecting a belief that money wins elections, and hence that it should be ruthlessly pursued. An officer

suggested that ‘the expensive dinner ... if you lose 20 people, you still make money’. Expensive events that precluded poorer members were therefore justified; member contact and socialisation were relatively unimportant. Others disagreed, arguing that people liked to socialise and get together politically. The need to make money out of an event was not sustainable; members needed something in return. There were complaints that the ‘£50 dinner’ segregated members and produced ‘a two-tier local party’, an officer asserting that ‘people like me don’t go to these events ... pressure has been put on me and I have to say no’. Fundraising targets could therefore undermine local cohesion.

### *Parochialism*

The centre’s quest for improved performance was further undermined by parochialism. Three types were identified: activity, financial and structural. Activity parochialism was indicated by members declining to fundraise and campaign beyond their own vicinity. To many members, party membership meant helping in their own neighbourhood only. However, refusal to participate elsewhere could be a product of personal antagonism against members in other branches or inter-village rivalries. Parochial attitudes tended to be stronger in rural areas, where distance was also a factor. They could also be ingrained and hence difficult to break down. The result was that only committed activists were usually prepared to travel; even then, reciprocation was often expected from the beneficiaries of assistance. In Cheltenham, the association formed a ‘flying squad’ of people who were generally younger and willing to be deployed in areas where the Conservative Party was weak, but they were comparatively few in number. Critically, activity parochialism undermined campaign performance and rendered electoral targeting strategies difficult.

Financial parochialism, manifested in the ownership and use of local funds, was a particularly serious problem. Regional officers despaired at branches retaining money to be spent in their own wards, rather than it being contributed to a pooled association fighting fund. A frustrated officer stressed that ‘branches wouldn’t give the association money because they needed it ... they don’t need it, none of them should have bank accounts ... if they were made to pay the money they raise directly to the association, they would stop fundraising’. However, there was natural resistance from members who had worked hard to raise the funds to their distribution to perceived inactive branches; it was also more rewarding if they saw them being spent locally. At the constituency level, the problem could be even more acute. Some local parties stockpiled assets to the detriment of other associations that needed money to campaign effectively against well-financed incumbent MPs, thereby compromising resource flexibility and disadvantaging the Conservative Party as a whole. An area officer asserted: ‘I remind constituencies regularly that they don’t own any assets, they are the assets of the Conservative Party ... until these assets are translated into the Conservative Party being in government, none of us should rest’.



The critical component of financial parochialism was property ownership. Regional and area officials, both voluntary and professional, acknowledged a responsibility to persuade associations to sell in order to raise money for campaigning. Many officers and activists agreed. They viewed it as bizarre that in the twenty-first century associations could retain properties to the detriment of the party's efforts to return to government. However, a bitter struggle in Somerton and Frome revealed the counter perspective. The proposal for sale of the constituency office, which was closed following a controversial move to joint working with the neighbouring Wells constituency, was at the centre of local divisions that spilled over into campaigning activity. As an underutilised asset, professionals exerted pressure for its disposal. Most of the officers acquiesced, but there was despair at the hostile attitude of a number of die-hards, including some vice presidents and ex-chairmen, united under the banner of 'the old and the bold'. They doubted whether a successful campaign against the Liberal Democrats could be conducted from outside the constituency and believed that they would make political capital out of the office closure. The building was deemed a key voter focal point and a safe haven for local activity; any sale would impact on local morale. Moreover, it provided long-term financial stability, but importantly it was believed to ensure that local parties received their 'share of the cake' in relation to central initiatives. Furthermore, there was an assumption that the money raised from sale would be usurped by the centre and subsequently poured down an electoral 'black hole'. The depth of animosity meant that a short-term compromise had to be agreed with professionals to avoid the loss of activists for the general election. This involved refurbishing the property to earn rental income. Officers in High Peak were equally committed to their property, but it was in constant use as the constituency office and was accruing rental income. Many officers and activists stressed the benefits of a physical presence, but professionals countered that an office did not get more leaflets onto the streets and critically could distract activists from the key purpose of raising funds: campaigning. Nevertheless, property was a sensitive issue and was indicative of associations jealously guarding their financial rights. Any change could lead to members exiting the party.

Ingrained stubbornness was further highlighted by structural parochialism, manifested in attitudes towards a central initiative to group constituency associations together. This was advocated by the consultation document *A 21st Century Party* to reduce costs, increase local critical mass and thereby boost campaign resources. Grouping would permit the funding of modern equipped offices with trained staff and agents (Conservative Party, 2005, pp. 6–7). Association mergers were preferred, but local obstinacy meant that a more flexible solution evolved. Derby represented a merger of Derby North and South, with the subsequent addition of the new constituency of Mid Derbyshire. Without it, officers believed that activity would diminish and the constituency office would close. However, the two city associations had tried previously to merge, but had failed due to conflict based on unequal monetary resources; tension remained beneath the surface. Scope was an additional



concern, with the new enlarged association spread across three local authorities – Amber Valley, Derby City and Erewash. An officer reflected a common feeling that this ‘led to lots of conflicting loyalties with compromises needed to reconcile an association based upon the parliamentary structure, which is only partly related to the local authority one ... you have to have strong leadership to make that work’. Such conflicts rendered campaign alignment between national and local parties difficult.

By contrast to Derby, High Peak remained a discrete entity because it was seen by local officers and activists as unique: although it was located in the East Midlands, geographically it had more in common with the North West. It was also performing well. In Somerton and Frome, structural parochialism was an extension of the property issue noted above. The joint-working arrangement with Wells was supported by the majority of the executive council as essential to win at the general election, as it would reduce duplication through sharing an office and agent; access to an MP was an additional benefit. Both constituencies retained their independence. Nevertheless, strong local leadership was again vital to manage the intense and protracted conflict. An officer asserted that ‘we said we would review how the arrangements are going ... they are going well, there is no way of going back ... there is a ground swell of people who say we are playing second fiddle to Wells, but it isn’t true’. Moreover, another added that ‘to the “old and the bold”, we are losing our constituency, but we are not ... it is still Somerton and Frome, it is only the office that is involved’. The strength of activist opposition was contrasted with the party leadership’s reform of local candidate selection procedures, in that it was the office sale and joint-working that had the potential to bring about member resignations.

In Gloucestershire, joint working was viewed positively. Cheltenham was part of a loose grouping of six associations which retained their identities, and which were supported by a single office containing three agents. The group espoused mutual aid: Cotswold, the wealthiest and with a large membership, assisting the weaker constituencies. Campaign leaflets combined issues concerning all them with those relating to a specific ward and council candidate. This provided a consistent message and reinforced the Conservative brand. A Cheltenham officer stressed that ‘we had to come up with something to enable us to battle against the well-resourced Liberal Democrat operation’. The arrangement reflected the belief that the optimum structural model combined efficiency gains with the projection of local identity. The latter was an important tension in local politics, manifested particularly in the need to preserve rights over candidate selection. Only where this was not compromised, for example in some cities and towns, was the merger solution politically acceptable. It was recognised that the right signal had to be sent to members, who took pride in their local area. Hence, although for the centre the principle of grouping was non-negotiable as the structural solution for improving local campaigning capability, the stronger associations, measured by member and financial strength, could influence the form adopted. The ultimate decision was thus that which was deemed to work best on the ground. Regional professionals were charged with finding the solution



and hence devoted much time to grouping, one commenting that ‘diplomacy was essential as merger becomes inexorably linked to the idea of take-over and loss of identity and anything that erodes the perceived authority of local associations could quickly turn into (campaign) disaster’. Nevertheless, structural parochialism, along with the activity and financial forms, and the attitudes to targets potentially undermined the party’s local campaign capability and overall fitness for purpose.

### **Local managerial capacity**

Despite the attractiveness of becoming a constituency association officer, there were notable deficiencies at the apex of the associations and in terms of officer recruitment and development.

#### *The constituency association apex*

Leadership was alluded to above as being critical to local effectiveness. This translated into a strong managerial capacity to deliver results. For this purpose, there was an officer team of up to ten people, headed by the chairman and two deputy chairmen responsible for membership and fundraising, and political activity and campaigning. An analogy was presented by an area officer of these three senior officers ‘forming a strong nucleus’ and ‘sticking to their brief in the manner of a small business’. They were provided with central instruction guides, detailing the objectives, roles and responsibilities to reinforce this.<sup>7</sup>

The performance of the senior officers was enhanced if an agent were present. Agents were employed locally, a practice the centre pursued because of financial imperatives; this reversed a long-held leadership desire for their central employment. However, agents received professional training, most notably in constituency management, campaign management, electoral law, political structures, media and communications, fundraising and personnel development.<sup>8</sup> This programme enabled the centre to inculcate them with its campaign vision and also influence local activity, expenditure and management. Politically, agents were deemed by local officers and activists to increasingly lean towards the centre. As a result of this trend towards a greater central orientation and in the light of the party’s movement towards a more electoral–professional stance (Panebianco, 1988), it might have been expected that the centre would aim to increase their numbers. Instead, though, there has been a waning of agent numbers, as the centre neglected their maintenance: from a position of 207 in 1994 (Tether 1996, p. 123), there were believed to be just 82 agents in early 2006,<sup>9</sup> the majority being employed in safe seats and hence underutilised. This position has not markedly improved in the interim because of local monetary constraints. The centre’s relative disregard for agents can be explained by the belief that campaigning could be executed more effectively by the national party; the party leadership only belatedly recognised the importance of local campaigning and hence

agents to both control the local campaign and manage activists. Indeed, a regional professional stressed that ‘in the late 1990s, the decision to run down our field force of agents was a terrible, terrible mistake ... it is a quite easily established fact that our highest membership is in the constituencies where we employ professional agents’. Where an agent was absent, the administrative and campaign burden was endured by local officers, and ‘organising secretaries’ who were administrative personnel that were often employed on a part-time basis and given scant training. In High Peak, though, financial considerations meant the agent role was being performed by the prospective parliamentary candidate, which was electorally unsustainable. Moreover, other candidates sometimes had to organise events to raise campaign funds, which questioned the definition of their role.

The importance of the officer team reflected the centre’s preference for small group decision making and control. Hence, an area officer affirmed that ‘considering what is at stake (general election victory), you can’t allow a situation to develop where important decisions such as constituency grouping and the sharing of facilities would be overturned by the association executive council’. This body would instead be relegated to the task of approving officer proposals. For example, the annual constituency association plan was an officer team responsibility to prepare and was subject to professional influence. It contained campaign objectives and an activity schedule involving leafleting, fundraising and so forth for the forthcoming year. Amendments could be made by the executive council, but to its implementation rather than to the broad strategic thrust. However, smooth local management was not always assured. A consensus decision was preferred, as it would have motivational benefits for voluntary activists; democracy had to be seen to be working and as an agent stressed, ‘it was important to take it down to the lowest possible level’. In practice, though, the decision-making process was fluid. Consonant with the evidence presented above, the traditional executive council model remained important to activists in Somerton and Frome. A consensus was usually reached, with officers’ recommendations upheld, but sometimes only after lengthy and fractious discussion. With 23 branches, up to 50 people could attend, many of whom had pet agendas that rendered agreement difficult. Despairingly for officers, a protracted debate occurred over the central instruction to raise the membership subscription from £15 to £25. This happened when the newly selected parliamentary candidate was attending her first executive council, thereby presenting a poor collective impression. This example highlighted the tension between the need for efficient decision making and the quest to involve as many people as possible, as it was the members who facilitated political outcomes.

The officer team itself could be inefficient. Officer non-attendance was a perennial problem. In Derby, time constraints were apparent, as officers were laden with other commitments. This could result in a lack of professionalism in performing important functions. Moreover, in Cheltenham, an officer alluded to ‘deliberations resulting in a vacuum, with much dithering leading to a shortfall in campaign funds’. Furthermore,



there were complaints from each of the constituencies that the party was good at talking and poor at follow-up action. Despite this, the focus of responsibility upon the three senior officers often led to activists being omitted from the communications loop, with the result that they were ignorant of developments until after decisions had been effected. This might facilitate disgruntlement, which could be exacerbated in situations where a strong chairman was able to guide or manipulate officer team decision making in a preferred direction. Indeed, chairmen retained the power to set an agenda (agreed with professionals) for achievement during their tenure and if necessary could circumvent the executive council to realise necessary change. For example, in Derby, members generally accepted restricted decision making following the 1997 election defeat, as the association was in a fairly moribund state, action being urgently required.

#### *Officer recruitment and development*

Local management was further subject to personnel problems. It was noted earlier that although associations were attracting enough competent individuals political responsibility tended to fall upon the same few people. Officer positions were for a mandatory 3-year tenure, designed to encourage a healthy turnover for improved management and the generation of fresh ideas, but in practice 'musical chairs' often occurred, which served also to discourage new blood. An officer summed up the problem as 'the same people going round and round as if they have a need to feel they are a senior part of the ship'. This was exacerbated by the tendency of local politics to attract 'title seekers': individuals who were enticed by 'status' incentives in order to accumulate power and enhance their own personal standing in the community; they had little interest in actually working for the party. Moreover, senior officer positions were frequently occupied by local councillors, which led to unease through a conflict of interest of performing a dual role. Importantly, though, the workload burden of the three senior officers meant that it could be difficult to persuade activists with professional or managerial experience to take on these roles or continue in post. Even in Somerton and Frome, with its large membership, there were few to choose from. Most activists were content to undertake lesser tasks or else free ride on the efforts of others.

Furthermore, behaviourally, the attraction of senior officer positions was reduced by an increasingly formal central management style. Professional involvement had brought a movement towards greater mechanistic control, backed by the threat of intervention for poor performance; this meant that local officers had less room for manoeuvre than before. The result was frustration; for example, 'they're trying to make us function like a business and we're not, we are a voluntary organisation, more like a charity ... they should respect that and let us do the job in our own way'. This position was exacerbated by the outward manner adopted by professionals and higher officers towards the localities. Condescending language was often employed, officers

and activists being associated with amateurism in an increasingly professionally orientated political climate. This was indicated by, for example, 'all the constituencies have to do is follow the plan' and an exhortation of team working to an audience of local officers with much business and professional experience. Such comments pointed to activists being competent to perform mundane tasks only. Most officers shrugged off the patronising approach, but there was little doubt that it was sapping the vitality of some. The evolving management style formed part of a wider activist view that the centre assumed that the local associations could be managed in a standardised form.

Local party management to the professionals concerned the identification of people who could manage effectively, build relationships and develop a network of local contacts. Hence, they were constantly on the lookout for strong and competent individuals who could assume the leadership roles, particularly for the office of local chairman. A gradualist approach was adopted to nurture suitable activists, in the hope that they would be more susceptible to influence once in position. Critically, a regional officer coined the term 'professional volunteer' to define the type of person being sought for senior association positions. Although many officers and activists were not so enamoured, as it was deemed to be the antithesis of political voluntarism, it did give a clear indication of central thinking regarding the future management of local parties. It also reflected an earlier aspiration of the 1997–1998 *Fresh Future* reform programme for young professional people to become chairmen. The inability to recruit such individuals was attributed to a lack of individual preparedness to take responsibility generally; here, parties were in a similar position to other voluntary and community organisations. Nevertheless, local Conservative parties were also failing in the socialisation process, as it could be very difficult for younger activists to integrate themselves into the association and adjust to meetings dominated by older people.

## **The Implications for Membership Engagement**

The evidence presented in the previous section pointed to local parties being not wholly fit for purpose. Generally, the findings were applicable to all four constituency associations, such that whether the association was northern or southern, urban or rural and Labour- or Liberal Democrat-held was not significant. There were nuances: activity parochialism, for example, was more extensive in rural constituencies because of the physical distance between towns and villages, but the problem itself was manifest in all four of them. The personalities and interests of members impacted upon attitudes and behaviour. Strong leadership thus acted as a key mediating factor.

Nevertheless, in the cost–benefit ratio, local officers and activists were providing fewer organisational benefits for the party, as measured by, for example, finance,



canvassing and leaflet activity. In addition, in the vital community ambassadorial role, manifested through everyday personal, social and professional contacts, and indeed opinion leading, they were lacking. Importantly, professionals were increasingly assuming their organisational and decision-making duties, so that even the officer team's responsibilities have been reduced. Both officers and professionals recognised that few significant decisions were now taken locally. Hence, it can be concluded that the menu of local tasks has shrunk and the activist role simplified. For Scarrow's (1994) first question, which concerned the level of engagement required of members, the party's requirements had polarised. A core group of activists was required to fill the officer positions and manage the association. Leadership skills were particularly sought, with the notion of professional volunteer a creeping inevitability, although problems such as the workload of senior officers were highlighted. For all other members, their existence was increasingly mundane. Organisational strength now reflected this dichotomy, but was expanded to include external supporters. Although the party leadership would have preferred more members, it was comfortable with the growth of supporter networks, as they had no tangible political stake in the party. Moreover, there was professional, and some activist, support for such networks providing the legitimacy that the party needed at the system level of benefit (Maor, 1997). Supporters helped to offset the political deficit in key local activities.

Scarrow also suggested that member shortfalls could be counterbalanced by professionals. Here, though, they had taken a proactive role by increasing their control over the localities and through a purposeful deskilling of activists for political reasons. Nevertheless, there was a significant political deficit among local activists, and indeed some natural deskilling through information technology. This meant that some professional intervention was essential if performance were to be improved. As a result, the evidence pointed towards a strengthening of Panebianco's (1988) electoral professional approach, but in a different form to what he envisaged. There was enhanced professional direction and the introduction of performance targets, but local officers and activists could still add value as, for example, networks of supporters required local co-ordination and the acquisition of local knowledge and contacts likewise. Critically, the importance of strong local leadership was manifest.

The findings from this article add qualitative data that strengthens the argument of contemporary writers who point to increased central co-ordination of local campaigns being the basis for electoral success (Denver *et al*, 2003; Fisher *et al*, 2006). However, it was evident that the party is some way from achieving an optimal alignment between professional management of local campaigns and local activist acquiescence and motivation. The problem of parochialism in its activity, but particularly in its financial and structural forms, curtailed professional efficiency aims. Moreover, the employment of performance targets undermined voluntarism. These difficulties reflect a tension between a managerialist approach adopted by the centre and the outlook of most party members who became active for political

reasons. Noted deficiencies in local management, as indicated by the shortage of professional agents and local officer shortcomings, further exacerbated the professional–local alignment. Fisher *et al.* (2011a) suggested that the Conservative local campaign at the 2010 general election was less successful than that of Labour because the party targeted a large number of seats, thereby spreading campaign resources too thinly. The evidence presented here adds an organisational dimension to their explanation by pointing to significant people and structural problems within the local parties themselves.

The evidence also has implications for Fisher and Denver's (2009) conclusion that although modern campaign techniques were increasing in use and importance, traditional techniques still had a greater impact on voters. The authors pointed to personal contact with the public, but a big decline in human contact between Conservative Party members and voters was reported here. Non-personal leafleting was now the preferred form of communication, canvassing being eschewed by many activists. In 1992, Whiteley *et al.* (1994, p. 74) calculated that about 135 000 or 18 per cent of members canvassed at the general election. If 10 per cent of members now canvassed, and this is likely to be an upper range estimate, then there would be no more than 24 700 members engaged in canvassing. As a result of this trend, it is likely that the employment of modern campaign techniques will increase further for future campaigns.

The incidence of leafleting becoming the primary campaign weapon has coincided with the growth of non-member supporter networks. This development addresses Scarrow's (1994) second question, which concerned the extent that engagement occurred within formal party structures. In this, network reflected the direction adopted by the centre regarding the future of party organisation. The party leadership desired greater organisational flexibility in order to provide a sharper and broader campaigning capability, but members were seen as rigid, being susceptible to parochial tendencies and not enamoured with professional direction. In a close electoral contest, vibrant local parties were needed, but they could be re-configured to include supporters. Typically, they will readily indulge in non-voter-contact activities such as leafleting and fundraising; they are also unlikely to question instructions issued by campaign professionals. In addition to supporters engaged for fundraising and leafleting purposes, the role of Patrons' Clubs was highlighted for improving local capability. Moreover, in earlier work, Low (2009) identified the engagement of outside expertise to ensure that the local candidate selection process was more representative and to assist with the organisation of the local general election campaign. Hence, the engagement of external supporters is likely to increase in future as the party membership continues to wither; Fisher *et al.*'s (2011b) research also pointed in a similar direction.

Structurally, the notion of the local party as a network was graduating towards Epstein's (1967) optimal local solution. He advocated local parties of 50–100 members with further capability added to meet immediate electoral needs. The



majority of members were passive, merely contributing subscription income. They did not campaign and were not functional in an electoral sense. Hence, the core activist base combined with networks of supporters fulfilled the electoral need. As a result, the modern Conservative Party can be said to have become located between Scarrow's two scenarios for the future of party organisation. It was moving in the direction of the American model, but it still retained its membership organisation in a revised, looser, supporter-enhanced form. This development, however, had the potential to realise Seyd and Whiteley's (2004) fear that parties would become more susceptible to undue influence of special interests, as the looser local form would potentially strengthen the power of local elites. Furthermore, the strategy of maintaining a critical local hierarchy and a pool of outside supporters was potentially flawed. In leaner times following an election defeat, supporters would be more difficult to find or be reluctant to participate, and there would be a reduced core membership to fall back on. There would be a lack of local depth, leading to a shortfall of both campaign and fundraising activity. Moreover, a smaller core would risk activist insularity and hence a strengthening of parochial tendencies. The natural consequence would be that the Conservative Party would become even less embedded in local communities.

The evidence presented in this article suggests that Scarrow's (1994) task-orientated approach to membership engagement is apposite for the purpose of analysing local party members. Furthermore, it permitted an insight into how the Conservative Party was adjusting to the decline of its membership organisation. Members were still welcomed, but there was little concern about the withering membership base. Essentially, for anyone other than people with councillor or officer ambitions, or retired people desiring a social function, there was little to indulge in; meaningful political participation was waning. Moreover, the shortfall in fundraising activity meant that local Conservative constituency associations could no longer be perceived as 'social organisations'. Even up to the early 1990s, the local associations had a well-developed social programme, in that there was an extensive and varied event programme that contributed to fundraising (Tether, 1996). In addition, a regional professional noted that at this time there were vibrant luncheon clubs, and women and youth branches were still functioning effectively, thereby providing much campaign support. The findings here, however, point to Whiteley *et al*'s (1994) de-energisation trend continuing apace. The worry from the party's perspective is that they may reach a position whereby there will be insufficient skills and experience among existing activists to perform the necessary local tasks effectively.

Importantly, a business orientation was being pursued by the professionals, reinforced by an increasingly formal and control-centred approach to party management. The mix of incentives for membership was geared towards obtaining a core activist group who, through their connections, could engage and mobilise supporters: a management rather than a political approach in essence. The professional stance was loosening engagement: enhanced control of, and restrictions upon, activists



reduced incentives for activism, which in turn reduced fitness for purpose; an increasingly mundane existence did not encourage talented individuals to join and become active, so that the skills base was reduced further. A spiral of disengagement could thus be construed from the evidence. The texture of political life locally, and hence the nature of activism, was changing.

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## Notes

- 1 Conversations with local officers in 2011 suggested that party membership is now less than 180 000.
- 2 The 200 club aimed to get 200 people to contribute to a monthly prize draw. Half of the income was for the prizes, whereas the other half went to the association. However, Somerton and Frome, for example, were having difficulties in retaining 200. It dropped to 176 at one point.
- 3 A Patrons' Club comprises a small group of elite people who reside in the constituency. It is managed by the constituency association officer team, but is kept separate from the association mainstream; it is sometimes afforded branch status. The link to local business interests is prominent, although not exclusively so. Members typically receive better social events and dinner speakers in exchange for their greater financial contribution.
- 4 A random sample of 40 constituency association Websites was selected from the Conservative Party's top 100 target seats.
- 5 Reported by several Somerton and Frome activists. This advice was given by the speaker, a senior frontbench politician, at an area dinner.
- 6 The CPF was a vehicle for local policy discussion, whereby members could communicate their views and ideas to the centre. Locally, it was established and maintained by the association deputy chairman responsible for political and campaigning. However, it was co-ordinated centrally by a director of the CPF and a small team. They decided the topic for discussion, presented as a policy brief with accompanying questions for discussion and answer and circulated it to the constituency associations on approximately a quarterly basis. Local members were not permitted to suggest additional questions or issues.
- 7 Conservative Training College 16 March 2005. The documents relate to 'chairman', 'deputy chairman political and campaigning' and 'deputy chairman membership and fundraising'. They stress adherence to party rules and detail all the officer functions and ways to proceed.
- 8 Training to be a Conservative Party Agent, Conservative Training College, 28 September 2005.
- 9 Somerton and Frome Constituency General and Political Report 5 March 2005–3 March 2006. The report attributed the low number of agents to the financial position of the local parties after the 2005 general election and to constituency grouping. Somerton and Frome complained that finding an effective agent, should they have the money, would be difficult because of the shortage. The accuracy of the figure of 82 agents is given some credibility by a steering committee briefing in January 2006, which stated that 'we expect to have 200 agents in the field by summer 2007, double our present number'. This suggests a figure of no more than 110 (Briefing about FRAC meeting on 12 January 2006). Senior politicians were present at the meeting.



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## Appendix

**Table A1:** Constituency election information

*Size of electorate at the 2005 general election*

Cheltenham	71 541
Derby North	68 173
High Peak	75 275
Somerton and Frome	77 806

*Labour and Liberal Democrat majorities at the 2005 general election*

	<i>Votes</i>	<i>Percentage of the vote</i>
Cheltenham	2303	5.28
Derby North	3757	8.57
High Peak	735	1.47
Somerton and Frome	812	1.51

*Swing to the Conservatives at the 2010 general election*

Cheltenham	-4.32%	Liberal Democrat hold
Derby North	+7.39%	Labour hold
High Peak	+6.54%	Conservative gain
Somerton and Frome	-0.94%	Liberal Democrat hold

<i>Number of Conservative councillors in 2007</i>	<i>Pre-2007 election</i>	<i>2007 election</i>	<i>Full council</i>
Cheltenham	17	No election	40
Derby	11	12	51
High Peak	10	24	43
Mendip (Somerton and Frome)	27	24	47
South Somerset (Somerton and Frome)	15	17	60

Sources: *The Times* 7 May 2005 and 8 May 2010; BBC.co.uk Website.

**Table A2:** Interview sample information

<i>Membership 2005 and number of interviewees</i>	<i>Membership</i>	<i>Interviewees</i>
Cheltenham	789	8
Derby (North and South)	458	8
High Peak	555	8
Somerton and Frome	1149	9

*Breakdown of interview respondents*

Local officer team members	23
Prominent activists	10
Agents	2
Area chairs	4
Regional officials	4

*Response rate for the self-completed questionnaires*

31 out of 33 (94 per cent)

Interviewees were requested to complete the questionnaires immediately after the completion of the interview. Two interviewees did not have the time to do so, and hence declined.