The Role of Residents,
Non-Government Organisations and
Quasi-public Agencies in Local government:
The United Kingdom

by

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I. Introduction

      Local government within one country is by its very nature not one
subject but many; the local government for each locality. Consequently,
to make authoritative generalisations concerning contemporary local
government one requires a wealth of recent case studies. Unfortunately,
the majority of case studies of local government in the United Kingdom
are from over ten years ago. This would not be so important if the
last decade or so had not seen so many legal, political, economic and
social changes with vast potential for effecting changes in local
government. We cannot be certain about the nature, extent and relative
significance of these changes, or of the principal determinants of
change. We cannot be sure in what ways and to what extent the findings
of older studies may still be useful. Similarly, there have been a
number of stimuli for considerable change in the behaviour of residents,
non-government organisations (NGOs) and quasi-public agencies (QPAs).
Local studies again remain deficient to make authoritative conclusions
concerning dominant trends in their operations, or indeed their
relationships with local government. We have not one but several moving
targets.
      Hence, a discussion of answers to any question concerning
contemporary local politics must remain equivocal. Further, it is
important to note that in order to shed light on specific problems with
regard to United Kingdom local government and the role of residents,
NGOs and QPAs - concerning the nature and extent of local government
co-operative participation with these external agencies and actors;

the methods employed by local government to gain co-operative
participation; and local government strategies for overcoming their
resistance — we need to address primarily the more generalised question
of what is the framework in which local politics is conducted. Given
the difficulties posed this essay may only seek to offer an introduction
to answering such a question, and, by extension, only possible answers
to the more specific questions. It will, first, define the generally
agreed terms for discussion of the framework in which local politics
is conducted; secondly, it will summarise the main findings of studies
carried out in the period up to the early 1980s; thirdly, it will
summarise the fruits of recent research, taking a variety of
methodological foci, which posit forces for change in the last decade
or so. Fourthly, the essay will consider how appropriate it is to not
merely revise empirical views of local politics in the light of recent
change, but also to revise the terms of discussion: to re-conceptualise
local politics in a way which removes the principal focus upon local
government. In contrast to most of the recent literature which with
due caution stresses change, the essay concludes by emphasising the
need to recongnise continuities from the orthodox models of local
politics proposed between the 1950s and early 1980s in contemporary
local politics.

II. Local Government, Public Policy and Local Politics

Local government is potentially a highly ambiguous term. It may
variously embrace the field agencies of central government, non-elected
local boards or indeed local quasi-public agencies. In the United
Kingdom it specifically refers to local authorities, directly elected
by the franchise within their area boundaries. There is, therefore,
no confusion with other forms of govrernment. There are immediate
problems, however, in assessing any aspect of local government in a
United Kingdom context. There are separate systems of local government
for England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, involving
variations in structure, finance, functional responsibility and political
culture. Northern Ireland is the most distinct; local authorities being
single tier, having few executive functions and primarily only a role
as a consultative forum for expressing public opinion to the United
Kingdom Government. Such a role is also governed by the particular
sectarian politics which divide the province (See Connolly, 1986).

Greater similarities in terms of structure, finance and functional responsibilities may be found between the system pertaining in England and Wales and that in Scotland. There remains, however, a passionate debate concerning the distinctiveness of the political culture in Scotland, fuelled by advocates of and opponents to devolution of political power from the United Kingdom to Scotland and Scottish independence (See, for example, kellas, 1989). To discuss local government behaviour in Scotland in the same context as the rest of Great Britain is to dangerously ignore this controversy. It is most safe, therefore, to take as the primary focus local government in England and Wales, be mindful of the potential applicability of its discussion to Scotland, and ignore Northern Ireland.

The recent history of the local government system in England and Wales is complex (See, for example, Keith-Lucas and Richards, 1978). The current structure was largely established in 1972. Prior to 1972 territory was divided between town and county. In the large towns single all-purpose county borough councils were the local authorities. Outside of the county boroughs were the administrative counties, in which a two tier system operated: county councils forming the upper tier; and non-county boroughs and urban and rural districts the lower tier. London was the single metropolitan area with special provision for a two tier system. By contrast, since 1972 territory has been divided into non-metropolitan and metropolitan areas. Initially both had two tiers of local government. However, now only non-metropolitan counties have a two tier system: forty eight county councils form the upper tier and 433 district councils the lower tier. In the metropolitan areas the Parliamentary Act of 1972 originally provided for a two tier structure but in 1986 the seven metropolitan county councils – Greater London, West Midlands, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire, Tyne and Wear, Greater Manchester and Merseyside – were abolished, and the lower tier of metropolitan district and borough councils is now all that remains, providing some of the former metropolitan county council services, generally on a joint basis, as well as their own.

Despite such structural distinctions and changes different local authorities have shared common features. They are wholly made up of councillors elected by a franchise residing within the local authority area on a first past the post basis. Once elected, councillors serve without monetary reward except for those expenses which they incur. Only in a minority of cases have expenses amounted to the equivalent of a salary. All those who hold leadership positions are elected by

councillors from among their own number. There is, therefore, no separation of council and executive functions. Elected councillors conduct their work through the committee system. Committees of councillors produce policies for individual services which are then put to a meeting of full council, where they may be resolved, amended, rejected or referred back to committees. In the detailed formulation and implementation of council policies the elected councillors are aided by departments of professional salaried officers wholly employed by the local authority. Local authorities gain their income from a mixture of central government grants and local taxation as well as capital finance. Until 1990 local taxation was based upon rates on property. Since then the rates have been replaced by a community charge, a form of personal taxation. This is due to be replaced again by a revised form of the rates, but on present reckonings this will not be until 1994.

Local authorities have extensive functional responsibilities in terms of development and social welfare services. It is important, however, to note the particular functional distribution between local authorities. Upper tier non-metropolitan authorities have responsibility for strategic planning, education and social services, and the lower tier for local planning and housing functions. In the English metropolitan counties virtually all of these functions are now provided by the metropolitan districts or boroughs. Strategic planning necessitates the creation of a structure plan to guide the location of different types of development. Local planning involves decision-making upon development planning applications, theoretically, in the light of the structure plan. The education function covers principally all publicly-funded primary and secondary school provision. The social services function involves provision for the elderly, children in need, mentally and physically handicapped and the mentally ill. Finally, the housing function provides for public housing for rent, and includes a responsibility to house the homeless (See, for elaboration, Loughlin, Gelfand and Young, 1985). As a consequence of these responsibilities it is also customary that local authorities take a wider interest in the economic, infrastructural and welfare interests of their areas.

Given the extensive and important nature of functions which local authorities embrace — they amount to the bulk of what Bulpitt has termed the 'low politics' of domestic public policy (Bulpitt, 1983) — it is customary to conceptualise local politics as essentially the politics

of local government, and the relations between local government and other agencies and actors within a locality. The assumption is that the local authority is the focus of the attention of local interests to get what they want for the very reason that the power of dispensation is more often than not in the hands of the local authority. Hence, local government should also be the academic's focus of attention in observing the convergence of local politics. To flesh out the terms for discussion of local politics in this context it is of course, also important to define the other agencies and actors within a locality; what is understood by the terms resident, NGO and QPA.

These terms do not as such raise problems of definition. Residents we may define as the mass of unorganised individuals within a local authority area, NGOs as organised interests within a local authority area and QPAs as organised institutions originating from public enterprise and finance but operating beyond public control. What is needed, however, is definitional flexibility with respect to each. By residents one may mean the general public, the electing franchise, the local tax payers, the consumers of individual local authority services, or the consumers of local authority services within a particular area of a local authority. There are overlaps between these categories, but it is important to remember, for example, that not everyone resident within a local authority area for one reason or another has the vote, under the rates not everyone paid for local services, and that people do not enjoy equal benefit from local services.

Similarly, NGOs may take a variety of forms. Attempts to produce a typology are fraught with difficulty given the huge variety in size, form, interest and strategy of organisations. Grant distinguishes between non-political and political, permanent and impermanent, and national and local NGOs (Grant 1989). He characterises the world of NGOs as constantly changing as old ones disband and new ones emerge. However, in defining those NGOs which are political, reasonably permanent and local, Stoker has distinguished between economic and producer groups such as local chambers of commerce and trade union branches; community user groups such as housing tenants associations; issue groups concerned with the defence or promotion of their interests in relation to any local policies, such as local branches of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE), the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), women's groups and ethnic minority groups; voluntary associations, such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) concerned with both lobbying for local provision

for child care and aiding in the making of that provision; and private
profit-motivated agencies such as residential homes, contracted by local
authorities to provide care for the elderly (Stoker 1988).

QPAs are less numerous than both residents and non-government
organisations and at first glance it seems that each should be treated
in their own right. The most important in each area is without doubt
the district health authority of the National Health Service. However,
a more general distinction needs to be made between those local QPAs,
for example in the regional development field, which are created by
central government such as urban development corporations, and those
developed by local authorities themselves such as economic development
agencies, the former being more of an external actor in relation to
local authorities and their behaviour (See Stoker, 1990). In sum it
may be pertinent to note that in recognising the definitional flexibility
necessary to a treatment of residents, NGOs and QPAs, whilst the
distinctions between them are still clear, the overlaps between them
are also exposed. Similar political, economic or social interests may
be promoted by the same people when acting as residents, in NGOs and
through QPAs. Indeed this suggests that the realities of culture and
process in local political activity may render the institutional
distinctions between residents, NGOs and QPAs and even between them
and local government as secondary to a discussion of how local government
in the United Kingdom works.

Ⅲ. Orthodox Models

The normative case for local government has generally been made
on the grounds that it provides the basis for local democracy which
in turn is the cornerstone of the development of a democratic pluralist
polity (See Sharpe, 1970). However, studies of local government,
primarily between the 1950s and 1970s, created the basis for a consensus
that local authorities were in reality highly elitist institutions of
government. Generally, local authorities retained a monopoly over the
direct discharge of their service responsibilities. They did not
actively seek co-operative participation with external interests in
either the formulation or implementation of local policies, and were
unresponsive to interests which sought such participation. Questions
concerning local government methods and success in gaining popular
participation in their activities, therefore, simply were not relevant.

An elitist approach was most particularly the case with regard to residents. The studies revealed that council committee meetings and papers were habitually closed to members of the general public whether they were local tax payers or not. Consultation with the users of local authority services concerning their needs was aschewed. For instance, in relation to the provision of council housing a distant bureaucratic approach to allocation was generally preferred to a hands-on social work approach which sought to ascertain needs and create co-ordination with social service departments of local authorities and welfare agencies of central government. Similarly, local residents were rarely consulted in any organised way concerning the formulation of local plans and planning development decisions. Symptomatic of a reciprocal indifference between local authorities and local residents was the high incidence of uncontested seats in local elections and low voter-turn-out relative to national elections. There was very little case for the existence of any recognisable form of local democracy established at the ballot box. (See, for example, Bulpitt, 1967; Bradbury, 1989).

Unresponsiveness to local NGOs centred on the inadequate provision of channels for all organised interests to be represented to a local authority. Local authority elites instead commonly gave privileged access to chosen NGOs. According to Dearlove (1973), choice was based upon the original sympaties with the NGO of the elected members and the extent to which even an NGO given a hearing was able to present its views in a helpful manner. Newton (1976), in his study of Birmingham, suggested that officer approaches to NGOs were similar. Only those which shared the majority of the pre-existing aims of the officers were allowed to participate in policy discussions. A number of other studies confirmed these general conclusions, suggesting in addition how the nature of local authority elites varied between local authorities in relation to the relative and qualitative power for members and officers (See, for example, Darke and Walker, 1977; Saunders, 1980).

Particular studies of privileged co-operative participation also established that it was principally primary producer NGOs which gained a role in local government. Simmie (1985) reported on a long-term drift in the twentieth century towards corporatist practices in physical planning by local authorities, in which representatives of both labour and capital would be consulted but no-one else. Other writers, however, reported that local authorities were more likely to give privileged access to one side. This could occur on a formal basis. Hampton (1970),

for instance, reported how the Labour Party-led Sheffield County Borough
Council established a close relationship with the trade union movement,
and allowed the trades and labour council constant access to policy
discussion. It could also occur on and informal basis. In Suffolk,
for instance, the local agricultural interest was so synonymous with
the economic development interests of the county council that formal
relations between county council members and officers and members of
the local National Farmers Union and the County Landowners Association
were not thought necessary (See Newby et al, 1978). Dunleavy (1977)
further emphasised the informal network of elite actors, subsuming
members of local authorities, magistrates benches, rotary clubs and
freemasonry lodges, which often constituted the bases of wider debate
on local authority policy making. Nothing so vulgar as formal machinery
for popular participation in local government was deemed necessary.

In this context it may be seen that co-operative participation
served little concrete purpose in policy formation. NGOs accessed appear
to have been primarily insider groups whose interests were so closely
intertwined with those of the local authority elite that their access
primarily served to confirm local authorities in their existing policy
orientation rather than serve as constraints or stimuli upon policy.
By contrast, outsider NGOs, who sought to change local authority policies
considerably were excluded. Often exclusion was made possible because
the NGOs lacked the requisite organisation or resources. The 1970s
ratepayers associations, women's and ethnic minority groups floundered
for these reasons. Newton (1976) concluded an enormous variation in
the capabilities in the Birmingham NGOs which militated against all
but the best organised and most persistent making very much impression
in local politics.

Of course, NGO and, indeed, resident activity has to be seen in
the context of the portrayal of Britain until the 1960s by many writers
as a deferential society: more prepared to concede that those in power
in local government – as in any other governing institution – knew what
they were doing 'without our help' than to systematically even attempt
to intervene. People were inclined to shut up and make do rather than
fight for their interests (See, for example, Beer, 1982). Such popular
deference was an essential component of the success of the governing
strategies of local authorities, which sought both to create service
policies in an exclusive elitist policy process and implement them
without regard to the plurality of local interests but also without
receiving resistance and opposition. Simply, there was no need for
local authorities to enter into co-operative participation to gain
legitimation of policies and put an end to possible resistance.

It should also be noted that local authorities sought to remain aloof from QPAs. This even involved a reluctance to co-operate in the National health Service. The 1946 National Health Service Act had made local authorities one arm of the National Health Service, thus requiring their co-operation and co-ordination with regional hospital boards and district health authorities, both local QPAs. However, as late as the 1960s there had to be central initiatives to bring this about in practice. Local authority indifference to even these initiatives was a principal contributory factor to the removal of the majority of their health responsibilities to QPAs in the early 1970s (See Webster, 1988).

The principal conclusions from most empirical research on local government in England and Wales before the 1980s, therefore, undermined the normative case for local government as a vital component of a developing democracy. Different writers responded to the conclusions in different ways. Liberal pluralists sought to explain the lack of development of supply of and real demand for popular participation in local government in terms of correctable defects in local government. Local authority areas were too large and their responsibilities too heavily constrained by central administrative and financial control, thus, deterring the flowering of communitarian local democracy. .It was argued throughout the Post-Second World War period that reform of structure, role, finance and the internal workings of local authorities could yet leave local authorities nearer the normative democratic ideal (For a good summary of a large literature see Dearlove, 1979).

Elite theorists of both radical and libertarian persuasion in their different ways poured scorn on such liberal developmental notions and variously explained why the elitist nature of local government served both dominant interests in society at a national level and at a local level, interests which would always seek to remain paramount over those of democracy (See, for example, Dearlove, 1979, and Bulpitt, 1983).

It is, however, primarily the work of liberal pluralists which still underpins a good deal of the discussion of local government and local politics in the early 1990s: judging to what extent local authorities have moved towards or further away from pluralist ideals of local democracy; and what impact this has had on the strength and legitimacy of local decision-making. Indeed orthodox elitist models of the nature of local government and its relationships with residents,

NGOs and QPAs are under considerable attack. Whilst a lack of empirical research and a period for reflection forbids suggesting equally firm conclusions upon the period since the late 1970s, the forces for change may be analysed to reveal possible ways of reaching new conclusions.

IV. Forces for Change

An assessment of the changes in the nature of local government and its relationships with residents, NGOs and QPAs depends upon the methodological focus employed. Many writers place the focus for locating the nature of and reasons for change in local politics on the locality. Other things being equal one would expect a continuing ascendancy for orthodox models of elitist unresponsive local government. However, it is clear that other things have not remained equal. Political scientists have made some attempt to focus on both of the key variables in the local context: first, change emanating from within local government in relation to responsiveness to external interests; and secondly, change emanating from within civil society in relation to public participation in local government.

There is considerable evidence that local authorities have democratised their processes of governing to allow for more participation by external interests. First, this has involved changes in general procedure and a move towards more open government. Since 1972 committee meetings have been open to the general public and the appropriate papers available beforehand. The concept of open government at a local level was then formalised in the 1985 Local Government Information Act. Consultative procedures have become more prevalent. For instance, the formulation of county structure plans in the 1970s and 1980s both involved recourse to public meetings, invited discussions with key NGOs concerned with planning, leafletting and opinion surveys (See Smith, 1985). Gyford draws attention to the catalytic effects of the 1981 urban riots on general local authority approaches. There followed a much greater readiness to consult with ethnic minority groups on their needs vis a vis local authority policies. He cites the most common forms of consultation to come through the creation of new ethnic minority committees or through co-option of representatives onto existing committees. Some Labour local authorities have also created women's committees in order to ensure women's needs are taken into account (See Gyford, Leach and Game, 1989).

Secondly, there is considerable evidence of change in professional approaches by local government officers. During the 1980s local authority officers were trained in the ethic of 'public service orientation': to provide services less for their own sake and more explicitly for their consumers (See Stoker, 1988, and Gyford, Leach and Game, 1989). At the same time performance review procedures were developed in order to evaluate how well local services were meeting the needs of their consumers. This public service orientation has had an impact not only in relation to consumers of individual services but, through the decentralisation of much local authority work to local area offices, on local residents in particular areas too (See, for example, Seabrook, 1984). It should also be noted that a public service orientation has been further promoted in response to central government attemps to prise service responsibilities away. The tenants choice provisions in the 1988 Housing Act, which provided local authority tenants with the opportunity of opting for an alternative landlord, gave local authority housing departments an incentive to work much more closely with their tenants and respond to their needs (See Institute of Housing, 1990).

Finally, since 1972 when the present local government system was largely formed, party organisation has become fully the orthodoxy in local government. By the late 1980s over 80% of local authorities were controlled by majority or coalition party members (Stoker, 1989). This has affected the nature of electoral contests, the development of local authority policies and the mechanism for member organisation and executive selection. The greater clarity with which individual members and majority party groups which run local authorities can be observed and judged by the local voter means that member administrations like officers have become more public orientated. Contested local elections, voter turn-out and local election voting on local rather than national issues have all markedly increased during the 1980s and early 1990s (See Widdicombe Report, 1986; Gyford, Leach and Game, 1989). Political parties have also explicitly campaigned locally for greater accountability to local voters and for greater popular participation in local government. This has been a policy theme of urban Labour Party-led local authorities (See Boddy and Fudge, 1984) as well as Liberal Party and Independent councillors.

Consequently, analysts have been able to point to changes within local government during the last decade. These have embraced a democratisation and a public service orientation of local government

service policy formulation and a decentralisation of its implementation by officers; and a move towards greater political accountability and popular empowerment by local authority members. This has had some tangible results in terms of widening the basis of policy formulation. Flynn (1983) and Smith (1983), in relation to land use planning, and O'mahony (1984) in relation to economic policy making, found evidence of an end to preference in consultative access to primary producer NGOs. Lowe and Goyder (1983) further emphasise the fact that many local authorities have now established close relations with environmental groups in the making of planning policy in order to gain their knowledge and legitimise planning decisions when finally taken. It has also had tangible results in relation to service implementation. For instance, in Northamptonshire such is the accepted role in social service provision of voluntary organisations that they are now given three year contracts by the county council to allow for forward planning. In 1988-1989 the social services committee made grants totaling #1.5million to over 340 organisations (Bradbury, 1989).

Pressures within civil society for greater participation in local government have also developed in a number of ways. Change within civil society since the 1960s has occurred in its most general sense in a move away from an homogeneous and deferential society to one where there is greater ethnic variation and social and spatial mobility (See Beer, 1982). There are more varied social interests, and, there is a greater need, therefore, for citizens to have a self-confidence and a preparedness to formulate and articulate self-interests against each other and against institutional interests in order to get what they want. This has manifested itself in the emergence of more NGOs and a greater readiness for resident participation in local politics. For instance, Bishop and Hoggett (1986) revealed that the number of NGOs in Kingswood District Council in Avon far exceeded the number found by Newton in Birmingham ten years earlier, and that 1,000 out of a total population of 78,000 were members of committees of one sort or another.

A more specific development which has led to greater activity by residents, NGOs and QPAs is the increased availability of informational resources. By the mid-1980s, for instance, there were over 5,000 community workers, who gave advice to local people on how to best go about getting what they could in order to serve their needs. Claimants unions, planning aid services and a These reforms were preceded and to a large extent caused by lengthy confrontations over finance and local authority autonomy between the centre and notably London, Liverpool

and Sheffield local authorities. The controversy that these reforms
provoked in discussion of national politics is not at issue here. It
is more important to stress the potential significance of the reforms
for local government. First, the abolition of the metropolitan
authorities meant that a number of their former services have been
administered on a metropolitan-wide basis through the joint operations
of borough councils. Joint boards composed only of nominees of the
borough councils are not directly accountable to residents and are
similarly hard for NGOs to lobby on individual issues. Consequently,
structural reform has tended to diminish popular participation in local
government in London and the six other metropolitan areas rather than
increase it (See Leach, 1987). In a somewhat contradictory manner, the
community charge was intended to ensure that by having everyone pay
a contribution to the cost of local services, rather than only property
holders liable for the payment of rates, then all residents would
actively hold their local authorities to account. This was based on
the theory that he who paid the piper called the tune. Where structural
reform reduced local authority accountability to local residents and
NGOs, the community charge sought to increase it (See Department of
the Environment, 1986).

The implications of the community charge reform for local
government-resident relations were potentially enormous. However, it
quickly proved to be very costly and administratively very difficult
to implement. In addition, it was opposed by the many residents who
had not paid a local tax directly before, and those who objected to
its principles of distribution. Numerous public disturbances,
culminating in the so-called 'battle of Trafalgar Square' in July
1990, helped to put pay to the community charge. It remains to be seen
how the community charge's replacement currently being developed will
impact upon resident-local government relations. Currently, therefore,
of more importance in evaluating the impact of the centre on
resident-local government relations are the numerous service reforms
passed during the 1980s which have born similar intentions to that of
the community charge. There have been two principal themes in centre
reforms of local government affecting service provision.

First, there has been a trend towards the privatisation of local
authority services. This began in the 1980 Local Government, Planning
and Land Act which bound local authorities to put certain road contracts
out to tender on the open market. Competitive tendering has spread
to a number of other services, and the situation is now reached where

roads, cleaning, school meal and refuge services, for example, are no
longer directly provided by local authorities but instead are contracted
out to private agencies. A second development is the marketisation
of the internal relations of local authorities. This has been both
promoted by central government and taken up voluntarily by local
government as a response to privatisation. Initially, direct labour
organisations within roads departments set themselves up as private
agencies within local authorities to compete for tenders. Such behaviour
was replicated by sections of departments affected by other competitive
tendering legislation. The result is a trend towards the development
of market relations within local authorities, with the elected council
as buyer, and privatised local authority sections as the seller of
services. Such relations are based upon payment for all services
rendered rather than co-operative relations based upon a sense of common
membership of the same corporate institution. The extent of this trend
in practice can be questioned but the scenario of even core local
authority functions such as legal and financial work being provided
to certain other sections of local authorities on a contract basis rather
than for free is surely not that far away (See Stoker, 1989).

The apparent aim of privatisation and marketisation is to increase
the awareness in local authorities of the need to provide services
economically and to give value for money vis a vis the contribution
paid by local residents in local taxation. This aim rests upon the
assumption that services provided on a market basis, with potential
competition from alternative providers, are more responsive to demand
than services provided by an unaccountable bureaucracy, with no
alternative providers. Even for those functions where privatisation
and marketisation are not easily applicable, such as social services,
the value for money ethic has made great inroads. On top of the already
mentioned performance review procedures, there has been a patchy but
unarguably significant third trend, bolstered by the interventions of
the Local Government Audit Commission, towards the slimming of management
structures to provide for fewer managers more obviously accountable
to member committees for the expenditure of given sums of money. This
creation of pseudo-autonomous agencies within local authorities is to
a large extent a replication of the reforms of the centre civil service
during the 1980s which have reached a climax in the 'next steps' reforms
(See Greenwood and Wilson, 1989).

Consequently, one may conclude that local authorities have been pushed in a number of ways by the centre towards accountability towards local residents, or elected members on their behalf, on a market based firm-customer basis. This consumer democracy is entirely consistent with the flippantly stated desire of Nicholas Ridley, Secretary of State responsible for local government between 1986 and 1989, to model local government upon the great western retailers Marks and Spencers (See Ridley, 1988). On the other hand it is entirely contradictory to the representative democracy model assumed at a local level. In pushing local government towards consumer democracy the centre during the 1980s has eroded the basis upon which NGOs may have enhanced their influence within the concept of NGO influencing local government as service provider in policy formulation. In the consumer democracy scenario it is principally residents who are in the box seat.

A fourth important trend has been central legislation to allow individual units of service provision and local authority customers to opt out of local authority control altogether. This trend has been seen most consistently during the 1980s in relation to council housing. The 1980 Housing Act gave council housing tenants the right to buy (RTB) their houses rather than to have to continue renting them from their local authorities. Take up of the RTB legislation during the 1980s has been extensive and local authorities have been left with much depleted housing stocks, a consequence exacerbated by severe capital spending. restrictions on the building of new local authority houses.

In the late 1980s remaining council tenants were given the further option of using a tenants choice procedure in order to vote for a landlord different from their local authority, principally either a private landlord or voluntary sector housing association. Tenants choice has so far had limited success but the centre's encouragement of the voluntary housing sector in both new building for rent by those on low incomes and to take over remaining council housing is still strong. In particular, the centre's gradual squeezing of local authority financing which was put on a new level with the ring fencing of local authority housing accounts in 1989, thus preventing general local tax subsidy of local authority rents, has meant that local authority rents are being pushed up towards market levels. Those on low incomes are to be subsidised by cash payments (housing benefits) rather than in rent levels. By these means the centre is increasingly loading the dice against local government, and tenants being given less of a reason to stay in the local authority council housing sector (See Balchin, 1989).

These developments have encouraged the local authority response, noted above, of trying to be more conscientious in meeting tenants needs, but such have been the fears of local authorities at losing their rental housing stocks altogether that some have even set up their own new housing associations and with tenants consent transferred direct control to them. These new associations are in effect local authority initiated QPAs, but importantly like all QPAs they have some autonomy. It appears that the only realistic alternative to consumer as opposed to local authority control of housing is the creation of new QPAs. In either case the orthodox model of local authority as provider and policy maker, and, therefore, the focus of resident, NGO and QPA influence has been or is being eroded. Indeed one may say that the roles are being reversed.

Similar trends are observable in relation to local authority provision of education. After a decade of national debate, curriculum and examination reform, the 1988 Education Act marked a watershed in the local provision of education itself. The Act principally allowed for the devolution of budgets to primary and secondary schools and allowed them to opt out of local authority control, to be run instead by school boards of governors and headteachers. In addition the emphasis in restructuring school boards of governors has fallen upon the encouragement and involvement of parent governors. Even whilst fully opted out schools remain in a minority these changes taken together point towards consumer control over the direct provision of education; parent governors not local authority officers and members decide how school budgets should be spent, schools resourced and staffed, and in co-operation with school staffs, decide how their pupils should be taught. A scenario presents itself where the local authority is left with the provision of advice and support services for schools that they once owned, funded, staffed and administered themselves – what one might call an enabling role – and then local authorities may yet come to face competition even in that role.

The occurrence and spectre of privatisation, marketisation, cost-centre internal reorganisation and opting out, all trends of the last decade caused by the intervention of the centre in the affairs of local government, point towards a need for considerable adjustment in our view of local government and its local external relations. The nature of local government operations, viewed in terms of this centre-focused perspective, is clearly changing in form. One may also argue that there is change in the nature of local government; that such change enhances the potential of local democracy. Privatisation,

marketisation and cost-centre internal re-organisation all clarify members' role in securing economy, efficiency and standard maintenance in service provision. If these aims are not attained then members may through the market mechanism seek a new provider, reform internal local authority structure further or find a new cost centre manager. If the members do not do this then through the market mechanism of the voting system then the electorate will change the members. In a much more direct way opting out gives control to the consumer of local authority services, cutting out the need for representative local government for a participation by local residents in the running of, for example, their own schools and their own housing. The extent to which consumer democracy has been attained on these bases is, of course, unclear.

A general observation may be made from this discussion of the forces for change. The assessment of different methodological foci produces different factors to consider, and if one were to establish no constants and treat local government, civil society and the centre-local dimension all as important variables at the same time a coherent picture of what the most important changes were and from whence they had originated would be very difficult. It is this academic minefield that students of local government currently walk through. A methodological approach to walking through that minefield provides us only with the tools for forming a coherent picture. Making sense of local politics from whatever perspective is currently made all the harder if one also takes into account the possible conceptual and empirical weaknesses of continuing to view the local political arena in terms of the area of the local authority, and local government as the principal focus of local politics.

V. Changing Conceptions of Local Politics: The Open Polity and Local Governance

Closed and distinct urban and rural settlements in which people live and work, and between which there is little mobility, lend themselves to the establishment of self-defining local authority areas. In this context discussion of the local political arena in terms of the area of the local authority may be fully justified. However, it is dubious whether such a situation really existed even before industrialisation and urbanisation from the late 18th century. Certainly in the period since the late 18th century the relationship between patterns of population settlement and local authority areas has been highly problematical, and the independence of local authority areas as political arenas from other non-centre influence highly questionable.

Local authority areas in the late twentieth century are more properly seen as amalgamations of settlement which are further highly integrated within regional, national and international communications networks. People may live in one local government area and work in another. Local authorities consider their economic and social responsibilities in relation to regional labour and housing markets; in relation to the operations and decisions of national and multi-national companies with important subsidiaries in their areas; in relation to patterns of labour mobility and national economic trends. Those who serve as members on local authorities have contact with regional and national party members and may act more out of motivations inspired from outside the local authority than within. In short, from a basis of integration with economic and social activity elsewhere, which has become a more legitimate reality since the 1960s, one must view the local authority area not as a closed local political arena but as an open polity, the degree of openness of which depends upon the degree of integration with and dependence upon the outside world.

The most obvious external context to be considered is that provided by the degree of central control of local affairs, not in terms of reforms affecting the nature of local politics, as discussed above, but in terms of central government taking away powers hitherto in the locality. Indeed, much literature suggests a trend towards centralization since the First World War. As the importance of central grants to local authorities has increased then so too has central control over local expenditure (See, for example, Crowther, 1988). More recent literature suggests a more substantial onset of centralisation since the mid-late 1970s, partly as a result of crises over public expenditure levels, and, therefore, a need to control local spending, and partly as a result of a multi-faceted pseudo-constitutional onslaught on the powers of local authorities (See, for example, Jones, 1988, Travers, 1989 and Harding 1989). If this literature is to be taken seriously then it must be concluded that in various ways in the past, present and future local authorities, locally elected or not, should be treated as little more than field agencies of central government. The scope for and importance of local politics becomes marginal.

In this context it becomes clear that a discussion of the key determinants of political decisions within a local authority area needs to be extended to the constraints imposed and stimuli advanced by events,

actors and interests external to the local authority area. Analysis of local politics by means of a traditional model of local government as provider with residents, NGOs and QPAs considered as influences on policy making; or by more up-dated models of local government as either a provider with residents, NGOs and QPAs considered for their role in both policy formulation and implementation, or enabler with more central roles being accorded to residents, NGOs and QPAs, at the very least will be flawed to varying extents by omission of a consideration of the external context. Indeed the role in local govrernment of residents, NGOs and QPAs in local government and their importance could be entirely misinterpreted. What remains unclear, however, is the nature and extent of centralisation, and what relative importance should be attached to other factors external to the local authority area in determining local politics.

Analysis of local politics which took local government as the principal object of study within a local authority area may in any case by flawed. Three trends, gathering pace since the 1970s, suggest that local government should be seen just as one of a number of political institutions in a local authority area, more important on some issues than others, but certainly not always the primary institution overall. Two of these trends have been mentioned above in different contexts. First, developments in civil society have included the flowering of alternative political institutions looked towards to deliver the requirements of different social groups. Here one means primarily the development of the voluntary sector. Secondly, the reforms of local government over the last ten years have changed the form of provision of many services to include residents, NGOs and QPAs in unprecedented ways. In short, as the heart of local government is being sucked from underneath by civil society it is being pushed from above by the centre.

Finally, there is a further trend in which government explicitly creates alternative dispensers of local government responsibilities. This involves, first, the by-passing of local government by the centre in order to gain the kind of policy implementation in localities that the centre wants. The classic example of by-passing is the crop. of urban development corporations (UDCs), which have been set up by the centre during the last ten years in key areas of the country. They have taken over all local authority responsibilities in areas where rapid economic development is desired. Led by centre-appointed board members and newly staffed, the UDCs are not directly accountable to local residents through the ballot box. Their very importance, however, ensures that residents, NGOs and QPAs focus their attention upon them and not on elected local government.

In a similar way with regard to economic development, local authorities have also sought new means to attain goals which have involved by-passing normal patterns of policy formation and service delivery. For example, local authorities have also initiated QPAs — economic development agencies — which in embracing other institutions, companies and individuals in an effort to bring about economic development, become merely one contributor to policy among a number of others. Even urban Labour Party dominated local authorities, who to varying extents were committed to empowering the people during the 1980s, thus looking for development and provision through a greater public participation in local government, in the late 1980s and early 1990s have suggested a harsh note of realism with a different concentration upon the creation of American style urban growth coalitions; local authorities looking to co-operate with other elite interests outside of local government to achieve wider gains rather than looking to lead or go it alone in the achievement of these gains (See Harding, 1989).

By-passing, therefore, further suggests the need to recognise that there are more foci for local political decision-making than local government and that analysis of the relationship between local government and residents, NGOs and QPAs may as much concentrate on the role the former has in the decisions of the latter as vice versa. This leads us to consider whether a more helpful understanding of the local political arena would be gained if we employed the concept of local governance rather than a principal focus on local government. The concept of local governance suggests that there are a variety of political institutions in a local political arena which respond to the locality's desire for self-governance, each of which should be considered in relation to substantive issues. An end to the concentration on local government as the meeting place for different interests and pressures could also bring an end to distorted views of local politics. Employment of the concept of local governance to underpin analysis would allow more useful pictures of local politics to emerge.

However, apart from current problems of knowing how and with what implications for understanding the nature of local politics the concept of local governance could be employed, a local political arena defined by the concept of local governance rather than by the local authority area could also, of course, introduce us to new problems of definition

as to what constitures locality and what constitutes the institutions
and actors of local governance. One may interpret the social organism
which desires self-governance on a scale from the smallest neighbourhood
to the whole of the territorial periphery, the institutions and actors
varying accordingly. Further, whatever definition is arrived at the
area of local governance will still have to be considered as an open
polity.

VI. Conclusion:Local Government and Elite Approaches to Local Politics

The essay began with a need to admit the paucity of recent research
findings regarding the role of residents, NGOs and QPAs in local
government in the United Kingdom. Such findings as exist are all the
harder to generalise from given the unprecedented period of change that
has overtaken local government and local politics since the 1960s and
particularly since 1979. What the essay has offered is the generally
accepeted view of the nature of local government and the role of
residents, NGOs and QPAs in the period before the 1970s, and a political
science of how to go about assessing the implications of recent change.
A summary of the micro-findings on the absolute implications of the
forces for change and the relative importance of the different forces
for change, and in terms of re-conceptualising local politics, in
relation to the 1980s and early 1990s in the United Kingdom will have
to remain for a future researcher, with the benefit of a historical
perspective.
However, there remains a need for the presentation of a sceptical
approach to the analysis of change in local politics which avoids
normative assumptions concerning the liberal pluralist capabilities
of political reform. This stems from an assessment of the changes to
be only at a superficial level: changes in structure and form but not
underlying nature and substance. It may be argued that what remains
is a concentration of power in the local political arena which determines
that local politics is still profoundly elitist, underscoring any greater
role in local government that residents, NGOs and QPAs may consider
that they may have gained from whatever source. This assessment may
be advanced in terms of either, first, the original conception of local
politics as local government-centred, or secondly, in terms of the
re-conceptualisation of local politics as local governance open to
external contexts.

There are general reasons why local government may still be considered elitist, which have been identified through international comparison with local government systems where participation rates are still much higher. First, the local government structure both berfore and after the 1972 Local Government Act has been based on large units of local government. Whilst there is no regional tier, there is no very local tier of local government either. Even metropolitan boroughs and districts merge many communities, with different policy agendas and territorial interests. This ensures that local authorities remain distant from their constituent parts. The distance between local interests and local authority is further potentially exacerbated by the fact that the system has a low number of councillors per head of the population. Therefore, even if there has been a democratisation of the form of local politics in absolute terms the communitarian basis for strong local democracy remains in relative terms weak (See Batley and Stoker, 1991).

Secondly, the structural constraint is no more than part of a wider United Kingdom political framework in which local self-government is weakly valued. Far from local government being enshrined in a written constitution, the United Kingdom's stress in an unwritten constitution on national parliamentary sovereignty means that local government may be reformed by Parliament, and must observe the doctrine of ultra vires i.e. it may not act beyond powers and duties conferred on it by Parliament. This formal basis for the role of local government in the national political system has allowed an instrumental view of local government to emerge. As a result, the political imperatives of the centre have been allowed to place upon local government more extensive functional responsibilities than have been allowed in many other countries, in particular, in regard to education, generally a national responsibility. The extensiveness of local authority operations ensures a lack of time for large-scale participatory local politics and a necessity for the bureaucratisation of decision-making. Local authorities responsibilities may have diminished in absolute terms during the 1980s. However, they remain big service providers relatively; as well as generally being one of the largest employers in their areas. The capacity for more participation in local politics – the politicisation of local service provision – therefore, remains severely constrained.

There are, furthermore, obvious differences between formal change/intentions and process/implementation within local government. It is unclear what effect open government has upon the process of policy making. Consultation procedures, which potentially provide the best avenue for residents and NGOs to influence local government, can be just as easily managed by local authorities to suit their own purposes as if they did not exist. For example, in consultations with black ethnic minority groups it is suggested that the local authority's key power to set the agenda provides an effective obstacle to any controversial conflict between local authority and group aims (See, for instance, Saggar, 1991).

One would not expect this problem to arise if both local government officers and members had become more publicly oriented but there is alternative evidence to suggest that they have not. As local authority officers have become more publicly oriented they have also embraced to a lesser or greater extent in the last twenty years the ideals of corporate management. This implies a much greater concentration and co-ordination of officer power than hitherto existed with the highly separate departmentalist culture in local authorities, and a much more coherent basis for the deployment of local authority resources for the attainment of senior officer aims. Even within individual departments public orientation lends its own possible justification for officer imperatives over those of members. Grant (1989) admits the continued force of a technocratic model of local government.

As a parallel to this, party organisation has allowed the emergence of highly organised party governing elites, sometimes on a cabinet style basis, which with whipped party support also represents a formidable concentration of power and resources, a far-cry from the idealised pluralist committee system where each committee made its own policy in its particular set of responsibilities. In these circumstances, government by a party elite merely serves to provide a new basis for the determination of the selection of accessed interests rather than generalised more pluralist access structure. Stoker, for instance, creates a typology of local authorities and public access to decision-making based upon a distinction between far-left Labour Party authorities, centre-right Labour Party authorities, moderate conservative-centre Party authorities and New Right Conservative Party authorities. Each type has its privileged accessed interest groups, rather than a commitment to equal or generalised access (Stoker, 1988). Additionally, of course, elite groupings may be formed from elements of both the technocratic and party models of local government; joint

elites which transcend formal member and officer structures (See, for
example, Bradbury, 1989).

There are further difficulties in establishing that local
authorities have been able to or had to pursue governing approaches
which meet the interests of more sections of society as a result of
changes within the local political context. First, local government
has been financially squeezed by government cuts in public expenditure
since the IMF crisis in 1976, and, consequently, has had less capacity
to take account of the expenditure implications of the demands made
by any greater popular participation in local government. In a world
of diminishing budgets local authorities are concerned less with taking
account of new and more varied active interests and more with preserving
existing achievements. An increase in NGO and resident activity to
preserve existing budgets may be an interesting phenomenon but only
serves to confirm local authorities' existing priorities.

Secondly, whilst the resources available to residents and NGOs
may have increased absolutely it is doubtful whether they have compared
relatively to those at the disposal of local authorities. Local
authority officers, in particular, have far greater information at their
disposal with which to outwit procedurally and persuade external
interests to follow their proposals. Finally, one needs to raise the
question as to how much British society has been transformed. The
transformation from a deferential society to a questioning one may have
a resonance measured completely within the British experience, but in
international comparison, the British remain people marked by their
ability for quiescence rather than protest. Local authorities, it may
be said, may just have had to make small adjustments to small changes
in order to maintain the successful management (in whatever interests
dominate the local authority) of their external relations within their
locality.

There are further reasons for being sceptical of change from a
centre-based perspective as from either of the local-based perspectives.
First, the concept of consumer democracy via privatisation, marketisation
and internal local government reorganisation, rests on the questionable
assumptions of rational choice theory in voting behaviour. One may
not easily assume that residents will fully hold elected members to
account for their behaviour in relation to contracting or organising
service provision, and if they do that it will be on the grounds of
rational self-interest. For instance, the majority of votes in local
elections are cast on the basis of national party political preference.

Consequently, elected members may retain an autonomy in the provision of services, the contracting out of services, and in relations with officers which potentially mitigate against the realisation of the general aims of optimum service provision and in favour of further self-interested elitist local government. A contributory factor to the invalidity of applying rational choice theory to local government voting behaviour is the inadequacy of the voting system for voters to make optimum use of their votes. Proportional representation systems are mooted but continue to be ignored.

In addition, it is important to remember that the community charge reform was to be the cornerstone of the creation of a consumer democracy: where all local residents would pay a local tax and, therefore, be interested in holding their authorities to account over expenditure. The collapse of the community charge must be a crucial factor undermining any success the lesser privatisation, marketisation etc reforms may have in allowing local residents and NGOs to constrain the activities of their elected local authorities. The tenacity with which local authorities seek self-preservation against change of these sorts should also not be under-estimated. The privatisation of housing and education is hotly contested by the majority of local authorities.

Furthermore, even if the existence of change from a centre-based perspective is acknowledged, it would be hard not to mistake the concept of consumer democracy for the revival of making a virtue of social inequality. Council houses sales and the general principle of opting out may be interpreted as being directed more towards some interests rather than others, a subversion of democratic interests. Council house sales, for instance, tended to favour the employed upper working class, and in their wake left huge shortages of council housing for the homeless, poorly paid and unemployed, and for those wishing to move from one house type to another. In particular, RTB has predominantly been exercised on family size houses. This means that very few family size council houses remain for a couple who start in a one-bedroomed flat but then have children. Council house sales also mean that those who remain for whatever reason in the council housing tenure may be or may feel socially stigmatised (See Forrest and Murie, 1988).

Similarly, the education reforms essentially promote the idea of competition between schools to be the most efficient and provide the best service, thus attracting high application rates from parents, a situation in which the best schools may select the best pupils. This is counter to the goal of comprehensive education, first instituted

as government policy in 1965, and threatens the scenario where a sub-standard school system develops as the natural corollary to the advancement of an elitist system. This has the potential for the very social and educational polarisation which was observed after the Second World War and which comprehensive education was intended to erode (See Whitty and Menter, 1989). It could also be argued in relation to education reform, as for other central reforms, such as for housing, the principal local beneficiaries were intended to be and are likely supporters of the Conservative Government (See Bulpitt, 1989).

One may also question whether an essentially elitist approach to local politics should be abandoned even if local politics were re-conceptualised in terms of the open polity and local governance. First, these conceptual innovations should be considered sceptically. Whilst the trend may be towards greater economic and social integration, and uniformity in political practice, within the United Kingdom, confirming a utility for the concept of the open polity, the current reality of local politics still embraces considerable variation. The sharp distinctions in the politics of Manchester and Liverpool, the two great north-west England conurbations, is an example of the powerful evidence of the continued primacy of local factors in local politics. Studies of the relations between, for example, NGOs and local government further generally conclude that it is local NGOs rather than national ones which have the principal role on the local scene.

Of particular importance in this respect are weaknesses in the centralisation arguments. Bulpitt (1983) exposed the fallacy of directly equating central funding with centralisation. The latter requires a further injection of resources to control local expenditure. Whilst accepting that between the 1960s and 1970s central government became more involved in local politics, principally out of a need to constrain local government in public expenditure, he further questioned why central government even if once interventionist should want to remain so. He portrays the consumer democracy reforms during the 1980s as the principal thrust of central government: not to centralise but instead to put local authorities in thrall to their residents, thereby achieving a local means of controlling local authorities to the tastes of the centre, whilst returning to the centre a relative autonomy from the business of local politics (Bulpitt, 1989). As has been suggested above this thrust has largely failed.

Other writers who accept the centralising intentions of central government during the 1980s, nevertheless, dispute their success. Dunleavy and Rhodes suggest that in the period since the mid-1970s it is only the funding of local government which has come strongly under the control of the centre. Preliminary implementation studies of a variety of service responsibilities, including education, social services and housing indicate more evidence of local autonomy and distinctiveness than of convergence to centre norm-prescriptions (See Dunleavy and Rhodes, 1986). Therefore, even in relation to the most fiercely advanced theory of how local politics is externally constrained, there is considerable doubt as to whether one should depart from a principal focus on the locality for the origins of local politics.

Re-conceptualising local politics as local governance may also have over-stated implications. For example, a minority of local authority areas have seen urban development corporations during the 1980s and the centre has no plans for the permanent operation of those currently in existence or for the creation of new ones. Even within this new and still often weakly formulated approach to local politics analysts must generally still conclude that local authorities are the dominant actors in local politics. If they are not what is there to suggest that local politics has not become profoundly more elitist. Studies of the urban development corporations, for example, show them as secretive, unaccountable to their local populations, and primarily benefactors of population moving into their areas rather than that already resident (See, for example, Aldridge and Edwards, 1989).

Consequently, irrespective of the conceptualisation of local politics chosen, the methodological foci taken and the factors cosidered, an assessment of the 1980s and early 1990s may establish that while the form of local government and its external local relations has changed the nature and substance of outputs has not. Even in new apparently democratic frameworks for local politics, certain interests, regrouped and with new strategies, may still predominate. In the context of the above discussion it seems reasonable to assume that this is the case, although to do so is to open discussion again to those liberal pluralists, and elite theorists of radical and libertarian persuasion, who variously seek to explain, criticise or defend elitism in different ways. "Plus ca change plus c'est la meme chose"

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