

Local government in England: evolution and long-term trends

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Abstract

This paper traces the history of local government in England (as opposed to the United Kingdom) since the early nineteenth century, and explores five long-term trends in its evolution. These are path dependence; the occurrence of major structural change; the phenomenon of policy reversal; the treatment of urban areas; and resistance to regional government. The author concludes that throughout the period under study, policy towards local government has exhibited a 'pendulum effect', with two opposing emphases operating in a sequential, rather than a simultaneous manner.

Keywords: County, metropolitan county, unitary authority, combined authority, official region

Introduction

Over the last 75 years, popular interest and participation in local government in England have waned. One reason for this is the fact that central government has effectively taken control of many local-government responsibilities, either directly or indirectly. This has been accompanied (and to some extent caused) by the dependence of local authorities on central government for an increasingly large proportion of their revenues, England's being among the highest within developed nations (Copus et al. 2017; Rhodes 1986). More generally, public interest has been diverted to issues such as globalisation, climate change, the Brexit question etc. It is also noteworthy that on those occasions when local-government issues *are* considered, the concern is typically with the detail of specific cases, rather than the system of public administration at the local level.

The present form of local government in England first came into existence in urban areas, to secure improvements in such areas as public safety, the protection of property, and the prevention of disease.

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Subsequently, its authority was extended to cover non-urban areas and to include numerous additional responsibilities as wide-ranging as education, housing, social policy, public transport, emergency services and planning (Chandler 2001). This paper traces the evolution of local government in England above the level of the civil parish (the lowest level) from the first half of the nineteenth century to the present, and subsequently argues that this evolution has been characterised by a number of long-term trends relating to functional organisation. The focus here on long-term trends provides an important complementary approach to existing studies of local government, which typically pay attention to specific problems or particular areas, and take an essentially short-term perspective.

Part 1: The evolution of local government in England

The beginnings of modern local government

Unlike many other countries, where local government is enshrined in a constitution, in England it is the agent of central government, functioning under its direction and supervision, and being afforded only limited constitutional or legislative protection (Bulpitt 1983; Jennings 1947; Robson 1931). Furthermore, in contrast to many other institutions of the state, the current framework of local government in England is a relatively recent creation. The first major piece of local government legislation was the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. Prior to this, towns and cities had been governed largely by local magistrates, where the influence of guilds and ecclesiastical interests was common. The Act imposed for the first time a uniform, though limited, order on urban government, allowing municipal boroughs to provide a specific range of services and to undertake certain improvements. It also partially democratised the system of local government in towns, with the establishment of councils elected by ratepayers.

Over 50 years then passed before further local-government reform of any significance took place: namely, the Local Government Act of 1888. This Act may be seen as a milestone in the organisation of government in England below the central level. The Act created ‘administrative counties’ based largely on historic counties, some of which were many centuries old. Certain counties were sub-divided, e.g. Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire, Sussex and Yorkshire. Directly-elected councils became responsible for bridge and highway development and policing, functions that had formerly been undertaken by justices of the peace at quarterly legal meetings. The Act paid particular attention to London, where a new county was formed from parts of the existing counties of Kent, Middlesex and Surrey. The government of London was placed in the hands of an elected body, known as the London County Council (LCC). This assumed a number of municipal functions formerly undertaken by parishes and the Metropolitan Board of Works. The Act represented the first attempt in England to create a county that coincided with a major urban concentration or ‘conurbation’, the term later coined by Geddes (1915).

The 1888 Act also made provision for the ‘county borough’, an urban centre typically with a population in excess of 50,000, although there were several exceptions. Municipal boroughs with populations

below this level retained their status. Each county borough was wholly independent of the administrative county in which it was located, and was responsible for most county-level services as well as some additional ones. The rationale for the separation of county borough from administrative county seems to have been the supposed impracticality of having a single political unit which could reconcile the commercial and industrial interests of the main urban centre(s) and the agricultural interests of the rest of the county. However, subsequently and to this day this division of responsibility between county borough and ‘host’ county has proven to be a source of difficulty in the areas of strategic planning and service provision.

A second piece of major legislation followed soon after, in the form of the Local Government Act of 1894. This established the ‘urban district’ (an area in which the principal centre was neither a municipal borough nor a county borough) and the ‘rural district’. Each was responsible for public health, secondary roads and other local amenities. The rural district was relatively extensive and often awkwardly configured. It was not until well into the twentieth century that this structure was rationalised, with some rural districts being merged with urban districts. Along with municipal boroughs, these newly formed urban districts and rural districts became a lower tier of local government, with the administrative counties and the county boroughs forming an upper tier. This two-tier structure was to become a prominent feature of local government in England, and continues to the present, though to some extent weakened by subsequent legislation. The two-tier principle was predicated on the distinction between services with relatively high demand thresholds for services provided by upper-tier authorities (e.g. policing), and services having low thresholds that could be effectively supplied by lower-tier authorities (e.g. public libraries).

From the late nineteenth century to the 1960s

The structure of local government outlined above remained largely unchanged well into the twentieth century. Only two policy developments of any major substance occurred in this period. One was the London Government Act of 1899, which made provision for ‘metropolitan boroughs’ within the County of London, thus creating a two-tier structure mirroring that of the administrative counties. The other was the Education Act of 1902, which transferred responsibility for secondary education from school boards to the ‘local education authorities’ of administrative counties and county boroughs.

During the period up to 1939 (the outbreak of World War Two – 1939–45) the largely static system of local government in England performed adequately, although it lacked effectiveness. Importantly, it failed to address the pressures of urban growth, particularly in the major conurbations, where problems of housing and public transport became very serious. This meant that by 1945, after two world wars and the intervening Great Depression, addressing the unsatisfactory nature of local government was long overdue. Attention was first given to the capital city, London. Over time the two-tier county of London, covering the central districts, had become surrounded by a girdle of county boroughs,

municipal boroughs and urban districts. Under this complicated structure the physical conurbation of London grew to the point where it contained more than twice the population and land area of the LCC (Mogridge and Parr 1997). This eventually led to the establishment of a Royal Commission in 1957 under the chairmanship of Sir Edwin Herbert (Great Britain 1960). Following its report, the Government of London Act was passed in 1963, and came into effect in 1965.

The Act created an enlarged county of London (approximating the built-up area), with a two-tier structure of functional organisation. The upper tier, known as the Greater London Council (GLC), was responsible for strategic planning, fire and ambulance services, highway development, flood prevention and (later) public transport. The lower tier consisted of the ‘London boroughs’, responsible for certain planning functions, environmental services, libraries and recreation. The provision of primary and secondary education was in most cases the responsibility of the lower-tier boroughs.¹ Unusually for a two-tier structure, several important responsibilities, including planning and housing, were shared between the two tiers. One consequence of the 1963 Act was that former county boroughs such as Croydon or West Ham became London boroughs (comparable to any other London borough), and as a result lost some of their powers to the upper-tier authority, namely the GLC.

The Royal Commission on local government

The establishment of a reformed local government in London drew attention to the absence of such an arrangement in the other major conurbations, where the structure of local government was still extremely cumbersome. In light of this a Royal Commission was established in 1966, and was charged with examining the structure of local government in England outside the boundary of the GLC.

Proposals of the majority report

Published three years later, the majority report of the Royal Commission (Great Britain 1969a) recommended a thorough overhaul of local-government organisation in England (Wood 1976). At the highest level, eight ‘provincial councils’ were proposed. These would take over the functions of the ‘regional economic planning councils’ that had been established in 1964 as part of the implementation of the National Plan (Great Britain 1964). The idea was that each provincial (regional) council would prepare strategic development plans, and would have the role of a coordinating body (Thomas 1969).

Below the provincial (formerly regional) council the existing two-tier arrangement of local government was to be dismantled. Counties, county boroughs, municipal boroughs, urban districts and rural districts were all to be eliminated and replaced by a non-hierarchical or single-tier structure composed of 58 ‘unitary areas’ (Great Britain 1969a, pp. 75–76). Each would be an all-purpose authority, providing

1. For the central boroughs (approximately the area of the former LCC) education was placed in the hands of the Inner London Education Authority. This ceased to exist in 1990, at which point responsibility for education within its area passed to the individual central boroughs.

both environmental and social services throughout its jurisdiction. The population of a unitary area would be within the (rather wide) range of 250,000–1,000,000, and in around half of cases the extent of the proposed unitary area bore some resemblance to the existing county. Within each unitary area the Royal Commission recommended the formation of ‘local councils’. These were to have few powers, however; rather they were to function mainly as participatory mechanisms, the primary duty of each local council being “*to voice the opinions and wishes of the local community*” (Great Britain 1969a, p. 99).

Special arrangements were proposed in the three conurbations of Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool. Instead of a unitary-area structure, each conurbation would be organised on a two-tier basis. The upper tier would cover the entire conurbation together with a generously-drawn area surrounding it, and would be responsible for emergency services, public transport, planning etc. The lower tier, comprising divisions of the upper tier, would be in charge of education, libraries, environmental services, most social services, and amenities.

The recommendations of the majority report of the Royal Commission were radical in at least three respects. First, the province (region) was to be given a role in local government, particularly with respect to the preparation of strategic development plans and the coordination of local-authority policies. Such a level of government had never previously existed in England. Second, the proposal to create unitary areas represented a fundamental departure from the established two-tier system. From an administrative standpoint this proposal amounted to the merging of ‘town and country’, i.e. a fusion of urban and non-urban spaces. Indeed, the Royal Commission made specific reference to the economic and social interdependence of town and country and the desirability of taking account of this in the reorganisation of local government (Great Britain, 1969a, pp. 25–26 and p. 65). Third, the recommendation of a reformed system of metropolitan government provided a framework for addressing the pressing economic and social problems of the conurbations outside London, particularly in the areas of transport and strategic planning.

Alternative proposals: the minority report

However, the report of the Royal Commission contained a lengthy Memorandum of Dissent (popularly known as the ‘minority report’) by Derek Senior, a journalist and strong advocate of local-government reform (Great Britain 1969b). His views were at odds with the majority report, and represented an elaboration of ideas he had presented some years earlier (Senior 1966, 1965). Rather than eight provinces, Senior’s minority report proposed five, with operations somewhat different from those of the majority report (Wise 1969). Unable to accept the single-tier unitary areas favoured by the majority report, Senior instead advocated a sweeping reform of the existing two-tier structure, in which counties and county boroughs would disappear entirely.

Senior's proposed upper tier was to consist of 35 urban-centred units, each of which was termed a 'city-region' (frequently shortened to 'region' in his minority report), and paid little attention to existing county boundaries. These units would be somewhat larger, and fewer in number, than the proposed unitary areas of the majority report. At the same time, Senior's 'city-region' was of a smaller scale than the city-region proposed earlier by Dickinson (1964, 1947). The lower tier was to be composed of 'districts', and on average each of the proposed city-regions contained four districts. The various local-authority functions were allocated as appropriate between the two tiers. Unlike the majority report, however, the minority report made no attempt to treat the conurbation areas differently: each conurbation and its environs was to consist of a two-tier city-region.

The Local Government Act of 1972

The responses of the two major political parties to the report of the Royal Commission (1969a) were different. The ruling Labour Party was broadly in favour of the proposals. By contrast, the opposition Conservative Party had serious objections, despite recognising the need for change. Following this party's victory at the General Election of 1970 it passed the Local Government Act of 1972, which adopted selected features of both reports. Becoming effective in 1974, the Act made no provision for a provincial (regional) level of government – despite this being advocated in both the majority and minority reports of the Royal Commission - and also disregarded the unitary-area principle, a prominent feature of the majority report. Instead it opted for a reformed two-tier structure.

Outside England's conurbations, the Act created the concept of a 'non-metropolitan county' as the upper tier. These non-metropolitan counties usually corresponded to the former administrative counties, and three additional non-metropolitan counties were formed: Avon, Cleveland and Humberside. In addition, there were several amalgamations of former administrative counties - for example Huntingdonshire merged with Cambridgeshire. The lower tier of government comprised an undifferentiated set of 'non-metropolitan districts', which replaced the county boroughs as well as the municipal boroughs, urban districts and rural districts. The overall effect was to reduce considerably the number of lower-tier units (Chisholm 1976).

Within the conurbations local government was also organised as a two-tier structure. The upper tier, termed a 'metropolitan county', included the three metropolitan authorities that were recommended in the majority report, but with boundaries more closely corresponding to the physical extent of each conurbation. Three additional major conurbations were designated as metropolitan counties: South Yorkshire, Tyne & Wear, and West Yorkshire; centred on Sheffield, Newcastle and Leeds-Bradford respectively. The lower tier within each of these six metropolitan counties was formed of 'metropolitan districts', replacing the previous county boroughs, municipal boroughs and urban districts. Metropolitan government had finally come to the conurbations.

For the first time, therefore, a two-tier structure of local government was in place throughout England. Generally speaking, the upper tier had responsibility for public transport, highways, strategic planning and emergency services, while the lower tier was concerned with certain planning functions, environmental services, housing, libraries etc. In the case of education this was an upper-tier function in non-metropolitan counties, but a lower-tier responsibility in the metropolitan counties.

The overall effect of the Act was substantial. With the abolition of the county borough, the non-metropolitan county came to enjoy an enhanced status, particularly with regard to strategic planning and aspects of service provision. In the metropolitan counties, meanwhile, there was a shift in the provision of particular services from the former county boroughs to the upper-tier metropolitan counties.

Developments since the 1972 Act

Little more than a decade elapsed, however, before alterations were introduced (Wilson and Game 2011). The passing of the Local Government Act of 1985 (effective in 1986) abolished the upper tier of government in London (the GLC) and the councils of the six metropolitan counties. Importantly, however, the boundaries of Greater London and the metropolitan counties were retained for legal and statistical purposes. The erstwhile lower-tier authorities (the London boroughs, and elsewhere the metropolitan districts) assumed most of the upper-tier functions, with the remainder being undertaken by joint boards. For London the situation changed again in 2000, with the establishment of the Greater London Authority (GLA). This heralded a return to the two-tier structure of the 1963 Act, although it would be some time before similar structures emerged in the metropolitan counties.

The unitary authority

Following the 1972 Act, those local authorities which had been county boroughs found themselves demoted to lower-tier districts, lacking responsibility and freedom of manoeuvre in important areas of policy-making. This caused constant friction and was brought to an end by the Local Government Act of 1992. Those districts that had been county boroughs before the 1972 Act were now designated as ‘unitary authorities’ – albeit with some notable exceptions, such as Oxford and Preston.² Each had responsibility for most local-authority services, and was independent of the non-metropolitan county in which it was located. This raised the spectre of a return to the pre-1972 situation, when county and county borough frequently failed to agree on matters that required cooperative action.

2. The unitary authority is not to be confused with the ‘unitary area’ proposed in the majority report of the Royal Commission 20+ years before (Great Britain, 1969a). The latter territory comprised an administrative centre and a substantial surrounding zone of influence. By contrast, the unitary authority formed under the 1992 Act was initially a major urban centre, having virtually no hinterland. However, some of the recently-created unitary authorities include more extensive territories, as discussed later in this paper.

Unitary authorities were also created in several other settings. First, unitary-authority status was occasionally granted to a particular lower-tier district of a non-metropolitan county: Rutland, Slough and Thamesdowne (Swindon), for example. Second, in cases where each district of a non-metropolitan county was given unitary-authority status, the process inevitably resulted in the elimination of the county for administrative purposes: a development that occurred in Avon, Berkshire, Cleveland and Humberside. In some cases the elimination of a county also resulted, if the former districts were reconfigured into fewer and larger units which were each accorded unitary-authority status; this happened for instance in Bedfordshire and Cheshire. Third, in cases where a county was allowed to take over all the responsibilities of districts, it re-formed as a unitary authority, which resulted in the disappearance of lower-tier districts: a development that occurred in Cornwall, Durham, Northumberland and Buckinghamshire.

The combined authority

The most recent organisational development in English local government has been the ‘combined authority’, as specified in the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act of 2009 and related legislation. This is a mechanism by which local authorities associate voluntarily for the purpose of taking over particular responsibilities that are beyond their individual jurisdictional or technical competence. Importantly, in becoming part of a combined authority, the individual local authority does not lose control over its existing powers. The combined authority is presided over by a directly-elected mayor (Ayres et al. 2018), and has emerged as an important means by which certain responsibilities are devolved from central government (Parr 2018).

Prominent in these developments is the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA). Formed in 2011, this consists of the leaders of the ten local metropolitan districts. The GMCA regained responsibility for functions which had been in the hands of joint bodies since 1985, including economic development, public transport and, most recently, policing. In addition, since 2014 the GMCA administers the devolved activities of healthcare, social services, vocational training and small-business development. Combined authorities have also been established in all the remaining metropolitan counties except Tyne & Wear, and may be seen as a partial replacement for the upper tier of metropolitan government which ended in 1985.

Other combined authorities comprise different groupings of local authorities, and their powers are not as extensive as those in the metropolitan counties. One such grouping concerned joint working by unitary authorities in each of two urbanised areas: Tees Valley and West of England. Another grouping involved different tiers of local government, as occurred in 2017 when Peterborough (a unitary authority) became linked with Cambridgeshire a two-tier non-metropolitan county. A more recent example of this type of grouping is the North of Tyne Combined Authority, established in 2018. This consists of Northumberland (a non-metropolitan county with unitary-authority status) together with the

metropolitan districts of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and North Tyneside.³ Discussions for additional combined authorities are currently underway. Although this innovation in local-government organisation has generally been met with a positive response (County Councils Network 2015), it is probably too early to judge whether all the anticipated advantages will materialise (Roberts 2020).

Part 2: Long-term trends in local-government development

This paper now turns to the second part of its discussion: the long-term functional trends or patterns discernible through the period, or over an extended part of it. Five such trends are considered.

Path dependence

Arguably, the most noticeable example has been the enduring presence of the county. Although the county has been subject to redefinition and amalgamation as well as incursions first by county boroughs and later by metropolitan counties, it has remained the most important unit in the organisation of English local government. As discussed above, the 1972 Act rejected the recommendation of both the majority and minority reports of the Royal Commission that the administrative counties should be abolished (Great Britain 1969a and 1969b). Instead, these were retained with relatively minor alterations, although the term ‘administrative’ was no longer used. It is also significant that the 1972 Act chose the designation ‘metropolitan county’ to describe a major conurbation. This emphasised the fact that a metropolitan county was considered to be of greater importance than a large city, and that in terms of population and economic power its standing was no less than that of a non-metropolitan county.

Another aspect of path dependence concerns the near-permanence of the two-tier structure of local government, which originally emerged over 125 years ago. Although the lower tier underwent a modification under the 1972 Act, the two-tier structure continues to be a prominent feature in non-metropolitan counties. A more general case of path dependence is the tendency for reforms to build on pre-existing structures, or to be influenced by these (Jennings 1947). For example, individual lower-tier districts have been upgraded to become unitary authorities, while on other occasions a set of lower-tier districts has been eliminated to form a county-wide unitary authority. A similar approach has been followed in the case of combined authorities. Each represented a confederation which grouped various local-authority units belonging to the same or different tiers. This use of existing local-government structures as building blocks in the establishment of new forms of local authority, usually without changing their boundaries, has clearly contributed to the evolution of local-government organisation.

3. The North of Tyne Combined Authority was formerly part of the much broader North East Combined Authority (NECA), from which it seceded due to various disagreements among the constituent authorities. NECA continues to exist, but its area is now restricted to County Durham (a non-metropolitan county with unitary-authority status) and the metropolitan districts of Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland.

Major structural change

This influence of path dependence notwithstanding, there have been periods when the system of local government has undergone a major change, representing a clear break with the past in terms of its structural composition. Not surprisingly, such occasions have tended to be relatively few and far between. The first of these occurred with the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, which imposed for the first time a measure of order on civic administration. As discussed previously, more than 50 years were to elapse before the Local Government Act of 1888. This established the administrative county and the county borough, and also made provision for a reformed system of local government in London under the LCC.

The next reform of comparable magnitude came with the Local Government Act of 1972, which introduced major organisational changes. As was seen, this Act imposed a two-tier structure of local government throughout England, creating a degree of uniformity hitherto unknown. Outside the conurbations the two-tier structure was based on the county and the newly-created 'district', the latter replacing county boroughs and all pre-existing lower-tier authorities. For the conurbations, the two-tier structure involved the metropolitan county and the metropolitan district, a structure comparable to that established in London nearly a decade earlier.

Since then various changes in the organisation of local government have taken place. These have included the establishment of unitary authorities and also the formation of combined authorities with an anticipated role in the devolution of powers from central government. However, none of the changes has been as far-reaching as those embodied in the 1972 Act.

Reversal, or the circularity of policy

A third noticeable trend in the development of local government in England has been the phenomenon of a change being made, only to be reversed at some later date. A dramatic case of this can be seen in the structure of local government within London and the metropolitan counties. Under the 1963 Act a reformed two-tier structure was established in Greater London, and under the 1972 Act a broadly similar two-tier structure was introduced in each of the six metropolitan counties. In both cases the upper-tier councils were then abolished in 1985. After an interval of 15 years, however, the two-tier structure was restored: initially with the formation of the Greater London Authority in 2000, and more recently with the creation of combined authorities in each of the metropolitan counties (except Tyne & Wear), to which certain of their former upper-tier responsibilities have been returned. This is effectively a partial reinstatement of the pre-1985 structure.

Another policy reversal concerned the county borough, which in 1972 was reduced in status to a lower-tier district in a two-tier non-metropolitan county. Following the 1992 Act, however, the majority of these districts were reconstituted as unitary authorities, with powers broadly comparable to those of the

former county boroughs. A similar situation occurred in the former counties of Cleveland and Avon. These were created as two-tier non-metropolitan counties under the 1972 Act. In 1996, however, both counties were abolished and each replaced with four unitary authorities. Twenty years later the two sets of unitary authorities were each permitted to form a combined authority, with some of the powers of the former non-metropolitan counties of Cleveland and Avon. Significantly, in terms of jurisdictional extent the Tees Valley Combined Authority of 2016 closely resembled the original county of Cleveland (with only the unitary authority of Darlington being added), while the 2017 West of England Combined Authority was similar to the former county of Avon (the unitary authority of North Somerset chose not to be part of the combined authority).

The dissociation of urban areas from their 'hinterlands'

A fourth trend, although one generally not remarked upon, has been the tendency to treat urban areas as 'islands' independent of their rural surroundings. The 1835 Act, which established municipal boroughs, gave no consideration to surrounding rural areas, despite there being significant economic and social interaction between the two. This approach was mirrored by the 1888 Act, which created county boroughs, and the 1894 Act, which established urban districts. In both pieces of legislation, urban areas were treated independently of rural areas.

In a similar vein the 1963 and 1972 Acts, respectively concerned with the governance structures of Greater London and the metropolitan counties, paid no attention to their wider hinterlands. And even today, treatment of the urban area as a separate case can be observed at the district level. Districts based on medium-sized urban centres with populations over 100,000 (e.g. Cambridge, Exeter, Lincoln and Norwich) have tightly-drawn boundaries, and are thus detached from their peripheries. At the same time, and with relatively few exceptions, predominantly rural districts based on very small centres have very far-flung boundaries.

This conception of urban areas seems to have resulted from an assumption by successive generations of administrators that types of local-government structure should be determined by differences in population density, although other explanations are possible. Alternatives to this doctrine, or modifications of it, were given little consideration. In most contexts the urban area has been viewed as a separate entity (meriting its own local authority), rather than the focal point of a more extensive unit of administration, despite this being recommended by an earlier Royal Commission (Great Britain 1969a).

Resistance to regional government

The last of the five trends to be considered by this paper is a general reluctance to adopt regional government. Two broad types of regional government may be conceptualised. The first is primarily concerned with coordination and could also be regarded as the highest tier of local government. The

second refers to a distinct level of decision-making, intermediate between national government and local government. This type of regional government involves a substantial degree of autonomy, as with the *Bundesland* in Germany, the *regione* in Italy, and each of the devolved administrations of the UK.

It has been noted above that both the majority and minority reports of the Royal Commission on Local Government (Great Britain 1969a and 1969b) recommended the province (region) as a tier of local government (similar to the first type of regional government conceptualised above). However, these proposals were not reflected in the subsequent Local Government Act of 1972. Shortly thereafter, the possibility of English regional assemblies was considered, but rejected, in the majority report of a Royal Commission on the Constitution chaired by Lord Kilbrandon (Great Britain 1973a). However, in their minority report relating to this Commission (Great Britain 1973b) Lord Crowther-Hunt and Professor Alan Peacock argued in favour of regional assemblies in England. These would have been akin to the second type of regional government conceptualised above. Unsurprisingly, nothing came of this proposal, probably because it was made too soon after the 1972 legislation which had rejected the possibility of regional government.

The failure ever to adopt any form of regional government in England is somewhat surprising. At various times since the 1950s, governments of both major political parties have shown a willingness to make use of the official region as a unit in the administration of policy – something that might have paved the way for regional government. As stated earlier, ‘regional economic planning councils’ were formed in 1964 to assist in the implementation of the National Plan at the regional level. Exactly 30 years later, in 1994, ‘government offices for the regions’ were established under a revised set of official boundaries. These bodies were tasked with coordinating the activities of central-government departments at the level of the region, and liaising with regional interests. In 1998 two further types of regional body were introduced. One was the ‘regional development agency’, the purpose of which was to facilitate improved economic performance within its region (Haynes et al. 1997). The other was the ‘regional chamber’, unofficially referred to as a ‘regional assembly’. Each assembly was required to draw up a regional spatial strategy that included a transport component, and also to oversee the activities of the relevant regional development agency.

For various reasons each of these regional bodies has been abolished, although the official regions have been retained with their boundaries unchanged. It is clear that the spatial focus of central-government policy in England has shifted from the region to the locality. This has been reflected in the creation of ‘local enterprise partnerships’, which replaced regional development agencies, and also in the devolution of certain central-government responsibilities to combined authorities in metropolitan counties (Parr 2018). It seems reasonable to conclude that such developments have pre-empted the possibility of any form of regional government for some years to come.

As matters now stand, there are nine official regions in England, whose boundaries date from 1994. With some important exceptions these multi-county units represent city-regions at the scale considered by Dickinson (1964, 1947).⁴ Far from referring to a level of government or administration, however, the official region is nothing more than a statistical unit. Official regions exist under the aegis of central government, and are used largely for the purpose of internal administration within its various departments. Official regions are also employed in the spatial organisation of central-government agencies such as Public Health England and the ambulance section of the National Health Service, where the South East region is divided into two parts. Official regions are also used where spatial disaggregation of data is important, as in many publications of the Office for National Statistics and in the organisation and reporting of elections.

Closing comments

Over the last two centuries local government across England has changed substantially, in terms of its structure and scope. During this period it has acquired important responsibilities such as planning and education, but has relinquished others, notably public utilities and income support. Attention has been drawn in this paper to five long-term trends that have characterised its development. The system of local government in England and more generally the UK continues to exercise an influence on the economic and social life of the nation. However, its ability to do so effectively has been impaired by organisational issues and, more recently, by severe financial difficulties, particularly those resulting from the ‘austerity programme’.

Throughout the period considered above, policies regarding local-government change generally follow one of two opposing emphases, depending on the era in question. One is the reformist emphasis, which strives for a rational pattern, based largely on the attainment of a symmetrical structure. This emphasis, which makes few concessions to particular cases or special conditions, is exemplified by the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 and the Local Government Acts of 1888 and 1972. This is counterbalanced by a second, pragmatic, emphasis which is reliant on expediency, with unexpected difficulties and anomalous situations responded to in an ad-hoc manner, leaving the rest of the system largely intact. The London Government Act of 1899 is representative of this second emphasis, as is the formation of unitary authorities under the 1992 Act, and combined authorities under the 2009 Act.

It is noteworthy that neither emphasis is exclusively associated with one particular political party. The first emphasis (the reformist) is typically put into effect within a few years of its sanctioning by parliament. By contrast, the second emphasis (the pragmatic) is usually played out over a much longer period, as circumstances dictate. In many processes of political development it is common for two emphases to be present over a given period, sometimes with one of the two dominating. What is

4. The exceptions are East of England, London, and South East. None of these possesses the fundamental structural characteristics of a city-region (Parr 2005).

interesting about the reform of local government in England is the fact that the two emphases appear to occur in a sequential rather than simultaneous manner – resulting in a pendulum effect. At present the discourse of reform seems to favour the second emphasis. The author speculation

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