Before the Flood: Local Government up to 1974

Introduction

Local government has always had an ambiguous position within the British constitution. In a unitary state, local government theoretically exists only by the good grace of central government. Our unwritten (or more accurately, ‘part-written’) constitution gives the institutions of local government no special protection, as the abolition of the Greater London Council and other metropolitan authorities in 1986 graphically illustrates. However, one of the quirks of a ‘flexible’ constitution is that practices and conventions tend to acquire an almost mystical force. Local democratic institutions may be an anomaly in a unitary system, but their long existence has endowed them with a legitimacy almost the equal of any codified mention in a written constitution. The concept of local democracy, no matter how tarnished or under siege the institutions of local government may have become, continues to hold a special place in Britain’s political culture. Central governments can attack the institutions of local government, although it’s a dangerous pastime, but the principle of local democracy itself remains sacrosanct.

After a brief review of local government history, this chapter will outline the principles which underpinned the 1974 local government reorganisation in England and Wales. I will examine the new structural arrangements which were introduced at that time and review the managerial doctrine which characterised the internal workings of the reorganised local authorities. A number of assumptions about local power and decision making, both implicit and explicit, informed the 1974 reform; those assumptions, which to some extent still dominate the public discourse of local elites, are identified and placed in theoretical...
and historical context. An assessment is offered of the decision-making practices which grew out of the 1974 reform. The chief characteristics of these practices are presented as a ‘local state’ model of power in communities, with local authorities seen as distinct, if semi-autonomous, political systems possessing considerable democratic legitimacy. This perception structured debate and action about local government for a number of years. Throughout, the desirability of ‘local democracy’ has rarely been seriously questioned, and the assumption that local services are best delivered by directly elected local councils dominated the discourse until 1979.

A brief history of British local government

This is not the place for a detailed history of the development of local government but as Byrne (1994) pertinently notes, an historical perspective enables one to go a long way towards understanding the present system. Byrne conveniently (for our purposes) divides the history of local government in four phases, concluding his examination in 1974 (1994, pp. 13–34). Utilising Byrne’s chronology, while not necessarily agreeing with his interpretations, some common characteristics can be identified.

Before 1800, ‘local government’ had evolved naturally from local communities, with leaders either emerging from local officials and worthies or being appointed by the monarch. The management of activities was carried out by networks not all that dissimilar to the public–private networks we regard today as innovative; ‘self-help groups, voluntary associations … commercial undertakings [and] formal legal authorities’ (ibid., p. 14) carried out a variety of functions, with significant local variations in both the mix of actors involved and in the ways officials and agents were appointed or sometimes elected. The ‘system’, if the ad hoc set of bodies and individuals could be so described, was characterised, like so much of state and civil society of that time, by corruption, inefficiency and unfairness.

Byrne’s second period, from 1800–1880, covers the surprisingly substantial, if incoherent, local response to industrialisation. As for so much of the history of local service provision, private enterprise was to the fore in meeting (however inadequately by present-day standards) some of the problems of society which an increasingly mobile population exacerbated, such as law and order, health and housing. In addition, further ad hoc bodies were set up, which included poor law boards and independent commissioners with powers to provide services such as