Arguments for and against the traditional model of local governance, for and against the innovations of the 1979–97 Conservative governments or for and against New Labour’s reforms all raise questions about identification with locality, the proper purposes and objectives of a system of local governance, perceptions of the performance of different institutions and preferred prescriptions for institutional structures.

The test of public opinion

These questions can be investigated in many ways – for example, by looking for internal contradictions in the logic of theories of local governance or by empirical studies of how the old and the new systems worked in practice. But they should also be tested against public opinion. Of course the test of public opinion is only one element of any well-rounded assessment of alternative models. Margaret Thatcher often took the view that she should act first and win the support of public opinion afterwards. Public support for traditional systems may reflect nothing more than a conservative (with a small ‘c’) reluctance to contemplate change. The public may come to like a radical new system only after its virtues have been demonstrated in practice. But, as the public reaction to the Poll Tax showed, public opposition may also reflect a ‘settled will’ of the people, a genuine position on the substance of the issue in question. In a democracy we should at least take note of public opinion about the structure of government. Public acceptability lies at the moral heart of democratic legitimacy. And in purely practical terms, public acceptability makes a system much easier to run. Moreover, the public’s collective judgement may be better than that of a handful of enthusiastic ideologues in a ‘think tank’.

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Public opinion is relevant in two ways to the arguments about local governance that we presented in the previous chapter. First, and most obviously, the public has its own preferences about the aims, structure and institutions of local governance, and these may conflict with the prescriptions of rival theoretical models. Does the public feel, with John Stuart Mill, that elected local government should contribute to national democracy by training people in democratic methods or by dispersing power throughout the land? Does it accord legitimacy to the decisions of locally elected authorities? And, if so, is that primarily because these authorities are local, or because they are elected? What rights should be granted to the minority within a locally elected authority? What is the public’s attitude to market provision of local services? Or to user charges? Or to user or provider control of local services? How does the public weight the competing claims of local autonomy and national standards?

But there is a second way in which public opinion is important. Prescriptive models of local governance are usually based in part on assumptions about the public’s perceptions and perspectives as much as on their institutional preferences. Thus, for example, it matters whether people really are willing to move house just in order to live under a preferred local service/tax regime as some public choice theorists suggest. And it matters whether they really do feel a strong sense of local identity as some of the defenders of traditional local government suggest. It matters whether the public really does regard the traditional locally elected authorities as representative. Or as corrupt. And it matters whether the public really does regard the new appointed boards as more or less representative, more or less corrupt than the elected councils. Or more efficient than elected councils. There is no point in designing a system to fit assumed local identities that do not really exist, nor to meet an assumed public discontent that does not really exist. In so far as prescriptive models are designed to fit the contours of public perspectives on local governance, it is important to know what those perspectives are.

Levels of opinion: the general public and rival local governance elites

But in addition to outlining the views of the general public, we will contrast their views with the views of those who participate in the process of local governance at a higher level, the local governance elite. More than that, we will contrast the views of rival local governance