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RATIONALIZATION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN BRITAIN

THE White Paper on Local Government in England and Wales during the Period of Reconstruction* may be pragmatic, but no one could claim that it is bold or imaginative. The assumption that opposition to any drastic innovation such as regional government makes such a step inexpedient during the reconstruction period may be well founded. Furthermore, it is probably true that some improvement in administration might be achieved without abandoning the main features of the county and county borough system, subject to the establishment of appropriate machinery where it is shown to be necessary for combined action by neighbouring areas. But the central, and indeed only, recommendation of the White Paper is the establishment of a Local Government Boundaries Commission. The field of joint authorities is regarded as the most suitable for the development of units of administration where large areas are required, and within its limited field the proposed commission may have considerable advantages. Centralizing in one body, subject to review, all boundary questions, would promote the accumulation of an unrivalled fund of experience and enable the relations of county and county borough, of town and country, to be seen clearly and regulated as a whole. It would also be an advantage to have much of the work done on the spot with a full use of local knowledge, and if the commissioners are skilful in promoting local agreement, it should lead to substantial economies in the cost of boundary alterations.

Part 2 of the White Paper, forming the major section, is devoted to this procedure for adjustment of local government areas. It is frankly recognized that the system of counties and county boroughs cannot be static, but must be capable of adaptation by changing boundaries to meet changing conditions. The proposal to improve the effective machinery for periodic review has been hailed as a solid and promising advance, and the proposed boundary commission appears to meet the conditions put forward in the White Paper; namely, it must command public confidence; it must work smoothly and expeditiously; it should be such as to reduce to the minimum the cost of making the adjustments, and it must ensure that all the proposals affecting a county, whether for adjusting county districts or altering the boundaries between county and county, or county and county borough, are properly correlated and not considered in isolation.

It is not for this positive proposal that the White Paper is to be regarded as weak and disappointingly cautious. It is because the proposal, however sound in itself, only touches the fringe of the problem, and because the analysis of the problem is hesitant and shallow. Nowhere are the fundamental issues laid bare. There is no contribution to that fundamental thinking about the relations of local and central government which is indispensable if we are to evolve

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machinery adequate to serve the needs of to-day, either at the centre or at the circumference. Finally, as a contribution to the education of public opinion on the issues involved, the White Paper compares unfavourably with those that have been issued on other questions such as employment policy, education, health—with all of which this issue of local government reform is closely concerned. The White Paper, for example, indicates the two main arguments for large units: that many local government authorities are too small to provide the new and extended services required in these and in other fields; and the inadequacy of the present system of local authority finance, based upon property rates, to maintain existing burdens or ensure their independence. But it fails conspicuously to point out that if regional development is inexpedient at the moment, it is on account of local prejudices which have no sound or rational basis, but which it should be the work of time and education to remove. Nor is there any reference to that scientific study of the rating system and its variations in incidence, sponsored by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, in which Prof. J. R. and Mrs. Hicks have shown the tangle, also disclosed by the Fitzgerald Committee, which must be unravelled before the system can be brought back to life and the independent income of the local authorities substantially increased.

The White Paper, indeed, compares poorly with reports like that of the committee of the National Association of Local Government Officers on the reform of the local government structure, or of the Labour Party on the future of local government, or with Dr. D. M. Goodfellow's "Democracy and Local Government" issued by the Association for Education in Citizenship as No. 12 in the Handbooks for Discussion Groups series. While Dr. Goodfellow only deals incidentally with some of the reasons that are forcing the reconsideration of the relations between local and central government, he indicates clearly enough the weaknesses of the existing system and the questions that should be asked. His pamphlet is admirably designed to stimulate that closer discussion and wider public interest which are indispensable conditions of effective local government reform and of the continued functioning of our democratic institutions. He is concerned with the general question; and while he brings certain aspects of it into clear focus, for example, that of the entry to, and staffing of, the local government service and the reasons for regional proposals, he does not enforce consideration of the problem as an urgent practical issue in the same way that recent Government proposals have done in such fields as those of town and country planning, health and education. Moreover, it is scarcely so suggestive in regard to constructive proposals as Guy Hunter's admirable pamphlet, "The British Way in Local Rule", in the British Way series. Writing before the publication of the Beveridge Report, Mr. Hunter contributes a critical review of our present social services under

local government and also anticipates strikingly some of the proposals and implications in this field of the Beveridge Report, and the White Papers on Educational Reconstruction and a National Health Service, for example.

In its scheme for educational reconstruction in Britain, the Government could not avoid some revision of the present system of local educational administration to meet the needs of a new statutory system of public education. Whether or not the proposals of the White Paper on local government are those best calculated to preserve and stimulate local interest in educational matters and at the same time secure both efficiency and a really national system, the proposal that the councils of the counties and the county boroughs only shall be the local education authorities, with powers to combine for educational purposes, is advanced from departmental considerations alone. It has no relation to the grouping that might be most profitable from a general or national point of view, and it is already evident that the proposed system offers no safeguard that the outlook and resources of the local education authorities will ensure uniformity in such a matter as the salaries and status of the teachers.

The existence of such dangers is shown very significantly in independent surveys such as McColvin's report on the public library services, and it is particularly apparent in proposals for a national health service. The Government's White Paper on health starts with the view that there is no case for departing generally from the principle of local responsibility, coupled with enough central direction to obtain a coherent and consistent national service; but it recognizes the need within the administrative structure for some largely professional body which can concern itself with the professional welfare of medical practitioners who take part in the service. None the less, for the future hospital service, it will be essential to obtain larger areas than at present, both for planning and administration. Most of the areas of the existing authorities fail to meet the essential needs of an organized area, namely: a population and financial resources sufficient for an adequate service to be secured on an efficient and economical basis; a type where town and county requirements can be regarded as blended parts of a single problem and catered for accordingly; and definition as to allow of most of the varied hospital and specialist services being organized within its boundaries, leaving for inter-area arrangement only a few specialized services. Outside the hospital and consultant service, the Government holds that existing organizations should be upset as little as possible consistent with achieving a unified health service for all. While still conducted locally with all the advantages of local knowledge and enthusiasm, they should be regarded in future as the related parts of a wider whole, and should fit in with all the other branches of a comprehensive service in their planning and distribution. To secure this, the Government proposes a new joint authority, again presumably responsible for planning from a purely departmental point of view.

The argument for some comprehensive regional plan is set forth even more cogently by Sir Arthur MacNalty in the Nuffield College paper "The Reform of the Public Health Services". Sir Arthur indicates the imperative need for a large administrative area in respect of the maternity and child welfare services, the school medical service, infectious diseases, tuberculosis, venereal diseases, cancer, rheumatic diseases, as well as hospital services and general practitioner services. He proposes to provide the co-ordinated effort between local authorities by a system of regional health councils; and there is much to be said for such an arrangement, coupled with a Government undertaking to tackle the whole problem of adapting local government machinery to modern needs as soon as circumstances permit.

In health, as in other fields, an adequate programme of reform and reconstruction cannot be executed without creating the appropriate planning machinery at the centre, and forming units large and competent enough to administer and execute the policy over areas large enough for efficiency. The debate on the Town and Country Planning Act in the House of Commons showed how urgent in that field is the need for some adjustment of local government boundaries and resources, or some further measure of Government support.

It must also be recognized that we cannot continue to frame policies for re-building, for town- and country-planning and for the re-organization of education, health and other services, without giving thought to the repercussions of such policies on the structure of local government as a whole. Constructive thought about the principles and whole relation of local administration to the central government is required. It is not sufficient to recognize that certain public services require for their efficient operation administrative areas substantially larger than those of many of the existing local authorities. We must distinguish clearly the contribution which local support and interest can make to the effectiveness of those services; and we must see that departmental proposals are duly co-ordinated and harmonized with one another and with the needs of the situation as a whole. This the report of the Liberal Party Committee on Local Government conspicuously fails to do. The report is disturbing as well as disappointing, not merely for the absence of any constructive proposals, but still more for the refusal to recognize the necessity of some form of regionalism.

Much of the material proper to an inquiry into local government reform and basic to a decision on policy has already been collected and is available in such reports as those of the Barlow Commission and the Uthwatt and Scott Committees. The facts are largely displayed already. The need now is rather for clear and constructive thinking about the facts, analysis of the evidence, the formulation of principles and policy, and the courage to take the necessary decisions to execute a reasoned policy, whether or not that appears to conflict with what may be regarded as the traditional or vested interests of a particular professional body or local council.

In the attempt to view as a whole the effect upon the general structure of local government of the changes in administrative areas which are inherent in the extension of the scope of particular social services, there must first be faced the main question: Should the present tendencies to mark out large administrative areas for each main service, mainly on purely technical considerations, be permitted to proceed unchecked, or should an attempt be made to find a single comprehensive area of large size which would serve tolerably well for the administration of all or most of the extended services? But a decision on this point of area is bound up with questions of the constitution and powers of the new regional authorities. For those there appear to be three possible types: an *ad hoc* authority, a joint authority or a compendious primary authority of the type of the existing local authority. Here again, as in the choice between an elective or nominated body, exercising either executive or advisory powers, the decision must be determined by the view we take of the relation between local and central government, and of the way in which that relation can best give expression to the democratic ideal.

The decisions to be taken do indeed depend on first principles, and whatever intermediate forms of government are evolved must conform to those principles laid bare in the Machinery of Government Report nearly three decades ago. That is what presumably is being considered *inter alia* by the Committee of Ministers and the interdepartmental committee of permanent heads of departments, which already in 1943 were understood to be at work on the machinery of government. It is with that in mind that the present White Paper on local government appears to be so disappointing; so far from laying bare the fundamental issues, it is at pains to cover them up and to temporize.

Given the assurance that the fundamental issues were really being faced and that a serious attempt was being made by the Committee of Ministers and the interdepartmental committee to arrive at a comprehensive solution and not to postpone decision or action, the proposals of the White Paper might be accepted without prejudice so far as they go. Some real effort must, however, be made to deal constructively and nationally rather than departmentally with the outstanding questions, pending the reports of these committees. It must be remembered that it is no bad thing in itself that we should retain the wider freedom of experiment at this juncture that is possible, for example, with local administration, or even with regional administration, in such fields as education and health, as compared with a fully centralized national system, where the consequences of a mistake may be so much more serious. Again, the effectiveness of local government clearly depends on the extent to which it can attract the right type of men and women and secure the wider interest and support of the community. It is part and parcel of that process of re-integration in which civil defence has already shown the way in promising experiments and on which the report of the Commission of the

Church Assembly in "The Church and the Planning of Britain" rightly laid such stress. There above all lies the real solution of the problem of town- and country-planning and the location of industry, of central and local government. Handled wisely, the new extension of the social services, as Sir William Beveridge has been quick to note, gives us opportunities of harnessing to the evolution of a constructive democracy new interests and new forces in an increasing proportion of the population. If that is to be achieved, however, there must be proceeding at the centre, the careful thought, inquiry and analysis necessary to lay down the pattern of organization within which those new interests and forces can function and find effective expression.

Regional government is now inevitable; but it is essential that it should not be a form of provincial bureaucracy, and that it should be viewed and established in the right relation to the local councils and authorities and to the central government, and that there should prevail the spirit of co-operation and goodwill without which no organization can function effectively. It should be remembered that it is the multiplicity of independent local authorities that is the problem: the local council provides and must continue to provide, as Mr. Guy Hunter points out, the local leadership, the inspiration to the citizen to make the plan for Britain a plan for his town and street; to give his service voluntarily and with zest; to see a tangible result of local rule and take his part in it. Only at this level can we hope effectively to harness to our post-war purposes, the enthusiasm and unselfishness which have found expression in civil defence; and on the local authority, too, must lie a large measure of responsibility for the execution of our plans for better education, health and other social services. Again, not only will there come locally, within the limits of the regional plan, the internal planning of the town or district, but also the capacity for experiment and variation which is so much harder for the central government to attempt.

At the regional level will come those plans which must cover a wider area, as emphasized in the debates on the Town and Country Planning Act, particularly with reference to the replanning of destroyed cities and the problem of 'overspill', or of population as in Sir Arthur McNalty's proposals for the health service. Here we should seek to achieve the proper balance between town and county, industry and agriculture, between central and local control. Finally, at the national level, under the eye of Parliament, the broad national plan and lines of policy must be determined, the balance held between regions, and the solution of legal and financial obstacles to planning found. Here alone can we look for the slow adaptation of the whole system to the changing needs of the national community, and ultimately of the world as a whole. This can never be achieved without the continuous devolution of local responsibility for the execution of policy as far as possible. If regionalism is required to provide the resources for tackling some of our urgent post-war problems, it is equally required to relieve the central government of some of its burdens. But that

can only be done when there is creative thinking about the first principles of the machinery of government, and the clear enunciation of policy and the taking of decisions which will allow regional and local authorities to proceed in their own sphere with confidence. Hitherto there has been little sign of this at the centre; the Requisitioned Land and War Works Bill is the latest of a series of measures in which national planning is conspicuously absent and in which the Government has eschewed any attempt to see that departmental views and prejudices do not override the general interest even to the thwarting of a national plan.

Courage and vision are the first requirements: courage to grapple with whatever private or vested interests obstruct progress; and vision to see the possibilities of a civil or local government service fitted by training and experience to concern itself with the achievement of immediate concrete purposes. The fear of bureaucracy typified in the Liberal Party report will never allow us to achieve the possibilities inherent in a 'positive' Civil Service wholeheartedly with the people and eager in its struggle for a fuller human life. As John MacMurray has pointed out, under positive government there must be a considerable extension of local rule, and the new conception of the Civil Service and of the functions of central government depend on a lively and effective participation in self-government by the general body of citizens. But without courage and the readiness to shed prejudice, we shall never achieve the forms of government which make such participation effective, and at the same time secure the continuous application of scientific knowledge and technique to the betterment of the conditions of human life. To be timid, no less than to be weak, is to be miserable.

BIOCHEMISTRY OF PROTEINS

Advances in Protein Chemistry

Edited by M. L. Anson and John T. Edsall. Vol. 1. Pp. xi + 341. (New York: Academic Press, Inc.; London: H. K. Lewis and Co., Ltd., 1944.) 5.50 dollars.

FEW would deny that protein chemistry, in all its aspects, is one of the most important branches of biochemistry. Not only do the proteins constitute a unique group of related compounds containing numerous types and perhaps an infinity of individuals, but also their functions are many and diverse, each type appearing to be adapted to one particular function. They form, for example, hormones, antibodies, genes and, either alone or in association with prosthetic groups, enzymes and respiratory pigments. The proteins clearly offer for investigation a wide field and a multitude of problems, the complete solution of which would probably yield the key to the elucidation of the nature of living matter. On these grounds we welcome this, the first of a series of volumes to be devoted exclusively to advances in protein chemistry. Nevertheless, when we reflect that there already exists an extensive review literature on biochemistry and related subjects, and that much of protein chemistry is inseparable from other branches of biochemistry, we foresee some danger of a considerable duplication of subjects in the various