

NATURE

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN BRITAIN

MORE than three years have now passed since the appearance of the White Paper of the Coalition Government on the reform of local government, and in presenting its second annual report the Local Government Boundary Commission, set up as a result of the sole recommendation of the 1945 report, has now reached the conclusion that in many areas of Britain—and these covering the great bulk of the population—the present powers and instructions of the Commission do not permit the formation of local government units as effective and convenient as they should be. In this report the Commission has chosen to set out its views and to detail recommendations which, if accepted, will require legislation and amendment of the 'General Principles' laid down by Parliament for its guidance. Much of the report is occupied by a discussion of the functions of local authorities, although the Commission has no jurisdiction in this aspect. Its experience has demonstrated the futility of considering functions and boundaries separately, just as it has shown the weakness of the original White Paper in refusing to contemplate any significant change in the existing structure of local government or the introduction of some form of regional development.

The first comment on a report which is characterized by realism and boldness, however strongly the application of some of its principles may be challenged in detail, is one of surprise that such a report could not have been produced in place of the original White Paper more than three years ago. There were then already available reports on local government reform from the Labour Party, the National Association of Local Government Officers and the Liberal Party, as well as numerous proposals from all the main associations of local authorities. The memorandum on local government areas, outlining the problems and opportunities of the Boundary Commission, issued over the signatures of Viscount Astor, Lord Simon and Mr. A. W. S. Burgess, the ex-Lord Mayors of Plymouth, Manchester and Bristol, and also several books which have been published since, ranging from Mr. G. D. H. Cole's "Local and Regional Government" (London: Cassell and Co., Ltd., 1947. Pp. xvi+295. 15s. net) to Mr. J. Blackburn's "Local Government Reform: the Two-Tier System" (Altrincham: J. Sherratt and Son, 1947. Pp. 146. 6s.), differ rather in the emphasis than in the character of their recommendations. In their analysis of the causes of weaknesses in local government and their criticism of the conditions for adequate reform, they foreshadow very closely the Commission's own recommendations, which might have been equally well forecast from a study of the numerous schemes for the reconstruction of the cities of Britain, or the planning studies of Herefordshire and other counties.

Agreement is now general on the need for far-reaching overhaul, and on the defects of the existing system and their causes; but there is probably less

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prospect than in January 1945 of agreement on the nature of the changes required, or of ready acceptance of a scheme agreed by the majority. General reform is now even more likely to be contested hotly, while at the same time the deadlock now threatens the survival, not of the forms, but of the essence and spirit of self-government in local affairs. The multiplication of new public services and duties over the last thirty years and their concentration upon the major authorities to the detriment of the boroughs and district councils, with the tendency to remove altogether from the backward local authorities tasks which reformed authorities could well execute, is sapping the very foundations of local democracy upon which the effective working of democratic institutions upon a national scale depends.

The Boundary Commission's report is first and foremost an indictment of this neglect, of the policy of drift and of allowing piecemeal alteration of the responsibilities of local government authorities to distort the structure, so that it becomes less and less suitable for its task. The Commission has now, as already indicated, rightly decided that local government cannot be properly recast under the piecemeal terms of reference to which it is subject, and in the main the reasons given are endorsed by the large body of evidence already indicated.

At the outset, indeed, the Commission comments on the surprising adaptability of the system as a whole in practice, in spite of the fact that there has been no thorough-going overhaul of local government in Britain since the present system was established in 1888. The strain, however, is heavy, and is increased by various defects such as the disparity between individual counties and individual county boroughs in population and resources. This disparity is due partly to historical causes but mainly to the failure of adjustments of the local government structure to keep pace with changes in either population or functions; and the Commission observes that unless this defect in the system is remedied, Parliament may well hesitate to entrust to local authorities new functions which are in themselves entirely suitable for local administration.

Next, due partly to the weakness of the smaller units in all types of authorities, central control of local administration has increased and, if carried much further, will cut at the root of local government.

The report then reviews the types of local government units, discussing the relative merits of the 'one-tier' system, administered by a county borough council, or 'all-purpose' authority, and the 'two-tier' system, administered by county councils and county district councils. Finally, it recommends the creation of a new type of authority the area of which would form part of the county, but the scope of the functions of which would be intermediate between those of an 'all-purpose' authority and those of a 'minor-purpose' authority.

The broad outlines of the Commission's proposals and the general principles on which they are based have much in common with what has been advanced elsewhere, although most administrative authorities would regard the population limits suggested for the

new county boroughs as too low for the autonomous conduct of some of the services, such as education and health, which it is proposed to entrust to them. In the memorandum on local government areas issued by the ex-Lord Mayors of Plymouth, Manchester and Bristol, the principles which it is suggested the Boundary Commission should bear in mind when determining the character of a major authority include the possession by each authority of the minimum standards of population, area and finance for the provision of services on an adequate and economic scale and for the employment of an efficient and specialized staff, and also the value of a satisfactory balance in each area of occupational classes and income groups. Each authority, too, should so far as possible form a satisfactory planning unit and should be based on the area of local political and civic consciousness.

The quantitative result of the Commission's proposals would be the division of England into sixty-seven new counties, none of which would have a population of less than 200,000. Twenty of these would be 'one-tier' counties, that is to say, large towns with precisely the same status as that of a county borough to-day. The remaining new counties would be administered on the two-tier system, with lesser authorities beneath them. The complete picture involves the elimination of seven counties and the insertion of five new two-tier counties, but three-quarters of the existing county boroughs would cease to be all-purpose authorities. On the other hand, there would be created initially sixty-three new county boroughs, authorities for most purposes; and while this may increase the acceptability of the scheme it introduces serious weaknesses and dangers in two-tier county administration. Even the importance of local interest can scarcely balance the reduction of the administrative unit for education and health to one of 60,000, and the attempt to please too many existing authorities, with disregard of administrative opinion, is unlikely entirely to avoid creating fresh jealousy and dissatisfaction between counties and expanding towns.

If this limit of 60,000 were raised to 100,000 or 150,000, a much more confident welcome might have been given to this scheme of reform, although it is still somewhat timid in dealing with the very difficult problems of the provincial conurbations, particularly in the face of such opposed views as those of Manchester or Liverpool and Sheffield or Bradford. It can also be urged further that at the other end the Commission has not faced squarely the real task of securing a more homogeneous lower tier of authorities with responsibilities which will attract the services and interest of the best elements in the local communities. Nor can it be said that the Commission's proposal to create an intermediate type of second-tier authority dealing with most purposes does anything to check the transfer to joint boards or nominated agencies of many functions which are suitable for democratic local control, but which require large administrative units.

It is the invasion, or erosion, of local government in this way that is the gravest danger to-day, and

the great merits of the scheme and the careful study which the report undoubtedly merits should not be allowed to conceal that danger and the urgent need for dealing with it. It would undoubtedly have been better had either the Coalition Government or the present Government the courage and the time to reconstruct local government before the changes introduced by the recent education, health and planning Acts took effect. As it is, disappointment with the Commission's proposals as they affect individual towns or counties, or a possible feeling that the Commission has been excessively devoted to arbitrary standards of size, should not be allowed to stand in the way of a careful and objective study of what is a realistic and imaginative plan which calls for action without delay.

The opening chapters of Mr. G. H. D. Cole's book "Local and Regional Government" afford the student much assistance in appraising the Commission's proposals. Mr. Cole is inclined to eschew the intermediate unit, and urges that we need to create and to give real power to both larger and smaller units of administration than have been favoured by the trends of evolution of local government in Britain in recent years. In detail, for all his vision, he is sometimes unrealistic and discards the entities from which transition must be made; but the criticism that may justly be made of his own scheme does not affect the value of his book as a clear and interesting introduction to the problems of local government.

Mr. Cole himself describes his book as an attempt to influence the Boundary Commission in arriving at its plans for recasting local boundaries. It is much more correctly described as an important and valuable contribution to the formation of an intelligent public opinion capable of appraising the Commission's proposals impartially and securing prompt action upon them in so far as they meet the needs of democracy rather than suit the views and prejudices of local councillors and officials. His account of the growth of the existing system of local government is clear and concise, and the various approaches to local government are set out in a way which indicates not only the need for large-scale administrative units for some purposes, but also the immense possibilities in the preservation and recreation of really small communal units for other purposes closely related to the everyday lives of the people. The book is a useful contribution to the understanding of all the factors that are involved in the 'new towns' policy of the Government as well as of those that affect local government itself. It points to positive ways in which the community spirit might be revived and encouraged, and while giving a clear idea of what regionalism is, the different approaches to it and the dangers to be avoided, it should stimulate constructive and independent thinking about the nature of such authorities as well as of the technical and national boards dealing with water supply, power, transport and the like. Although, as already noted, the treatment of the problems of the great provincial cities or conurbations is not entirely adequate, at least the principles are indicated which could form the basis of more fundamental thinking about those problems.

Two of those main considerations emphasized by Mr. Cole are the immediate concern of scientific and technical workers and their professional associations. Recent debates on the Water Bill and the River Boards Bill have shown how technical development continues to call for the conduct of a number of essential public services under unified management over large areas. Water supply and drainage, sewage disposal, the control or prevention of flooding and pollution, fisheries, power supply and transport all present problems which may on occasion make impracticable for particular services the reconciliation of technical requirements with the adoption of areas of management that are suitable for other purposes of regional or local government. The tendency may be unavoidable, but Mr. Cole's book should help the technician concerned to keep aware of the dangers inherent in such unification, and of the desirability of keeping it to the minimum consistent with genuine technical requirements.

Other services, such as gas and health and consultant services, may require to be co-ordinated and planned, but not administered, nationally; and it has already become apparent how much a professional body can contribute towards the solution of the problems involved in regional and local administration when national standards of service are to be observed and professional ideals and traditions maintained.

Primarily, the scientific and the technical worker is concerned with technical aspects of the problems which arise in local or in national government, and with seeing that technical requirements of efficiency are met. While, however, they must not be deflected from an impartial appraisal of the technical requirements by professional bias or sectional prejudice, they must be imaginatively alive to the human problems of government no less than to what is administratively practical. Something more than technical or professional competence is needed to resolve the deadlock in local government. Doubtless in time the British Institute of Management may be able to make its own contribution to the clear thinking that is essential, and especially by assisting in applying the lessons learnt under the stress of war in civil defence, the community centre and like fields.

Fundamentally, however, the second report of the Local Government Boundary Commission touches the scientific worker not so much because of its relation to special fields of professional responsibility but for its challenge to the constructive forces of democracy. On our response to that challenge now the future of local government and even of democratic government in Britain may well depend. The problem of relating knowledge and action in ways which satisfy both the technical need for planning over wider areas and the democratic need for execution of the plans by far smaller communities in which the personal touch, local knowledge and patriotism can play their vitalizing part, is an old one. Goodwill and active support of every scientific worker will be required, individually, through his professional associations, and perhaps not least in assisting the universities to recognize and discharge their regional responsibilities.