LOCAL GOVERNMENT EXPLAINED

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT EXPLAINED

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This book is dedicated to the councillors
of the former urban district of Haverhill
and the former rural district of Newport
Pagnell, with whom I had the privilege to
be associated as a chief officer.

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PREFACE

This book is aimed primarily at students of local government, whatever their discipline, but may also be of value to new and prospective councillors and officers, and to members of the public who are interested in the workings of local government.

After delving into the foundations of local government, the changes to the local government structure and functions are examined, followed by an analysis of operative procedures and techniques. The sources of finance, their deficiencies and alternative arrangements are explored, together with the powers and responsibilities of local authorities and the form and extent of central government control. Finally, current local government needs are investigated and an eye directed at the future.

Most of my career has been spent in the local government service, including some six years as a chief officer. I am proud to have served an important branch of the public service which has done so much to improve the health, comfort, well-being and education of the citizens of this country.

Views diverge widely as to the optimum local government structure for the United Kingdom and it has, sadly, become a political issue. Present experience points to the undesirability of sharing functions between different tiers and of separating interrelated activities which ought desirably to be grouped within the same authority. Some flexibility is needed as a single framework cannot be applied effectively to the whole country. Finally, a proper balance must be achieved between efficiency and democracy.

Relationships between officers and members and between central and local government need to be deeply rooted in respect and understanding one for the other. Local government would benefit from greater freedom of action and increased scope for the exercise of initiative in responding to local needs and aspirations. If local authorities were merely to become the agents of central government, it would be the end of effective and democratic local government and the country would be the poorer for it.

The operation of the local government service is dependent upon thousands of devoted elected members, who give selflessly of their time and energy in the interests of the community. As local government activities become increasingly complex they draw ever more

heavily upon councillors' time and it may become necessary in the future to pay salaries to some, if not all, councillors. Any corruption occurring in local government is given maximum publicity by the media, whereas the total number of serious cases of fraud or corruption is comparatively small, giving testimony to the integrity of the vast majority of people connected with the local government service, despite the many temptations they face.

The nineteen-seventies have seen a substantial increase in the degree of involvement of party politics in local government. Where all decisions are made by a political group outside council and committee meetings, with little or no opportunity for discussion or debate, healthy and democratic local government can easily be undermined.

The mid-nineteen-seventies have shown the vulnerability of local authorities in times of economic crisis, with such a high proportion of their funds obtained from central sources. The problem is accentuated by central government delegating new and costly activities to local authorities at the same time as it is reducing local government grants.

Improved and closer working arrangements between local authorities and the press are needed. Local authorities must allow ample access to the press and the public, while the press must endeavour to report accurately and fully. Local authorities have an important public relations function and should aim to keep the public well informed of their proposals, problems and achievements.

I would like to acknowledge the help I have received from NALGO Education Department in the supply of valuable information, the *Local Government Chronicle* and Clifford Smith, Chief Executive to Suffolk County Council, for supplying the basic data for Figure 7, and the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office for permission to incorporate extracts from Government reports. For the legal background I have drawn freely upon the well established and authoritative works of C. A. Cross and W. O. Hart. Charles Hardwick of the Trent Polytechnic Library provided a wealth of supporting information and data.

Other fruitful sources of information were the numerous journals impinging upon local government, and particularly *Local Government Chronicle*, *Local Government Review*, *Municipal Review*, *Local Government Studies*, *Public Finance and Accountancy* and *Local Government Annotations*.

I am indebted to all the officers and councillors who over the years have given me the benefit of their views and experience, for which I have been much the richer and wiser. It is on occasions beneficial for the enthusiasm of officers to be moderated by experi-

enced elected members, whose primary aim is to satisfy pressing local needs within the available resources.

Finally, I have used the term 'Minister' extensively to cover the Secretary of State for the Environment.

Nottingham
Autumn 1977

IVOR H. SEELEY