

REVIEW: STRUCTURAL REFORM OF BRITISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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Michael Chisholm (2000), **Structural Reform of British Local Government - Rhetoric and Reality**, Manchester University Press, ISBN 071905771X, £40, 205pp.

This book has a claim to uniqueness. It is the only single-volume discussion of local government re-organisation in the mid-1990s which examines experiences in England, Scotland and Wales.

Michael Chisholm, a former Professor of Geography at Cambridge University, was a member of the Local Government Commission - the body which oversaw the re-organisation in England (and which had no counterpart in Scotland and Wales). His perspective is that of 'insider' rather than academic. The book discusses, in turn, why the Government initiated structural re-organisation of local government in the early 1990s; the 'review' process in England, including the role of the Local Government Commission; the different experiences of re-organisation in Scotland and Wales; the costs and benefits of re-organisation (in England only); issues relating to services, communities and public opinion; the costs of re-organisation; and finally the major conclusions from this three-countries analysis.

Chisholm begins with the confluence of developments which led to the late-Thatcher Conservative government initiating re-organisation. It emerged in the immediate wake of the Poll Tax fiasco. He is clear on the 'happenstance' of developments which facilitated the rapid build-up of momentum for re-organisation - the need to scrap the Poll Tax; the departure of Thatcher; the decisive role of Michael Heseltine, the incoming Environment Minister under new Premier Major, not only in the introduction of the Council Tax which succeeded the Poll Tax but also in giving the re-organisation in England a kick start; and the secondary spread of the momentum for re-organisation to Scotland and Wales. Chisholm's re-analysis of developments confirms contemporary suspicion that gerrymandering was also part of the inspiration for the re-organisation - in particular for the dismantling of large councils

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(which were opponents of Government) and the creation of possible new council havens for Conservatism.

This analysis also permits an early introduction of Chisholm's central theme - the sharp contrast between the rhetorical justification for re-organisation (that removal of one of the two tiers of local government under the previous structure would both increase popular accountability and bring cost savings) and the reality (that this claim was at odds with increasing central Government control over councils, and that the cost case was under-examined).

Chisholm's discussion vividly revives the controversies associated with the re-organisation which had created such a souring effect. Scottish readers will recognise the roll call which caused this effect - the resistance to establishment of an independent Commission; the stage management of consultation by Scottish Office ministers; the controversies attaching to Government-commissioned estimates of the costs associated with its consultative models; superficial discussion of accountability; the whiff of gerrymandering, and the comedy of the minutiae of the political cartography of new councils such as East Renfrewshire.

In the event, hoped-for political advantage not only failed to materialise, but the Conservatives were routed in the elections to the new councils, in Scotland and beyond. These effects were more shock wave than ripple. They were felt beyond the municipal realm of government and affected the environment in which the case for devolution was re-emerging: 'With the benefit of hindsight, it seems clear that the way the structural reform of local government was handled in both Scotland and Wales contributed to the erosion of the general acquiescence to [English] political authority and thus augmented the pressure for elected bodies in both countries' (p. 103).

Chisholm's territorial material is not equally distributed. The sustained discussion of Scotland and Wales comprises a single chapter. As is perhaps inevitable, much greater attention is given to the position in England. This is explained by the more complex re-organisation which took place there - and not by the author's location and membership of the Local Government Commission. This greater attention to England is largely justified, and the author's references to Scotland and Wales (outwith the chapter dedicated to those two territories) are not so infrequent as to justify regarding them as tokenistic, are generally penetrating rather than superficial, and are not merely descriptive but also evaluative.

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In his analysis, Chisholm draws perhaps five main conclusions. All are sober and sobering. First, the three re-organisations were designed as 'structural' re-organisations, an objective which was not related to other considerations such as the purpose of local government, mechanisms for funding it, and councils' arrangements for internal organisation. Second, the Government was willing to embark on re-organisation without adequate information on the key issues in whose name the re-organisation was initiated - in particular, accountability arrangements, communities, the cost-effectiveness of different sizes of councils; and the costs and savings of moving to different the structures. Third, the use of an independent commission to advise on re-organisation, in England but not in Scotland or Wales, brought mixed blessings in each of these territories - but on balance was beneficial because it provided a check on Parliament. Fourth, he suggests that the new structures may not be stable. Reasons for this include the more modest resources the new and generally smaller councils command, their greater reliance on making joint arrangements to ensure effective service delivery, and their vulnerability to intervention (including further loss of responsibilities) at the hands of central government. Fifth, overall, the re-organisations do not inspire confidence in the role of national government in re-making local governance. The author ends with a conclusion which is telling and well-located in a public policy context. The serious deficiencies in the management of the re-organisations which he identifies - in particular, focussing on structural re-organisation without also considering councils' powers, financing and internal management arrangements - was certain to lead to change which was poorly justified. However, Chisholm emphasises that these lessons are not new. What is striking about the re-organisations, he argues convincingly, is that 'the events chronicled in this study allow one to assert this conclusion with particular vehemence'.

The book offers two benefits in particular. First, it provides a useful synthesis of cross-border material and analysis. There are numerous examples where this has obvious benefits for the reader. In some cases, a brief and direct comparison provides arresting observations - for example, in England the Government estimated the costs of re-organisation over four years, in Scotland it was three years, and in Wales six years (p. 112). Similarly, sustained analysis (e.g. of the differences between the expectation of the costs of re-organisation and the actual costs; his analysis of the use and non-use of a commission in different countries) is equally effective in realising the considerable advantages of this cross-territorial perspective.

Second, the book focuses on questions which received insufficient attention at the time of re-organisation - for example, the twin issues of the cost of

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structural change and the effectiveness of the new arrangements. Revisiting these issues offers an analytical potential Chisholm has also done much to realise.

Overall, Chisholm is to be applauded for managing to make complex issues accessible. His discussion is lucid. His expression is sure. He clearly cares for his subject, and has invested a commendable effort in grasping the story of re-organisation experience outwith the English scene which he must have known closely, extending his analytical reach without sacrificing analytical depth. His willingness to admit that the Commission of which he was a member on occasion erred in its judgement reveals an openness to persuasion by the facts that provides a nice contrast with the behaviours (e.g. jostling for advantage by central government and - it should be recalled - also by local government) he often describes.

These public policy issues should be on the list of 'essentials' for consideration the next time structural re-organisation is attempted - which, if the experiences of the twentieth century are a guide, can be expected within another 20-30 years. For the architects of any such future re-organisation, Chisholm's book should be required reading.

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