

# **SHIPS IN THE NIGHT: SCOTTISH POLITICAL PARTIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM**

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## **THE ORIGINS OF REFORM**

The departure of Margaret Thatcher in 1990 opened up the opportunity for a re-examination of the local government structure. Influenced by Michael Heseltine, one of the first decisions taken by the Major administration was to review the potential for structural change. In England, a rolling commission was established under the chairmanship of Sir John Banham, while in Scotland and Wales, ministerial reviews were conducted following lengthy consultation processes.

In Scotland the Government had previously distanced itself from suggestions about reorganisation that emerged in the professional world and political parties. This article will show that the Scottish Office was also cautious about reform. This had been displayed when there was no attempt to follow the abolition of the English Metropolitan Counties with a similar review in Scotland (indeed, Lord Younger suggested to us that, in his view, Strathclyde Region was a 'very well run' authority).

At a CIPFA Conference on the future of Scottish local government in 1989, the Minister, Lord James Douglas-Hamilton, confirmed the cautious civil

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service line, arguing that there would have to be 'tangible benefits' to any reform:

Reform would undoubtedly be disruptive and could be costly if experience of the last reorganisation is anything to go by...one would need to be confident that any changes proposed would outweigh the difficulties of implementation and would yield tangible benefits for Scottish society. (Douglas-Hamilton 1989).

However, professional bodies, such as SOLACE, expressed an interest in reform (1990). This interest in single-tier change was in line with the arguments in favour of the managerial, functionally integrated, strategic, multi-purpose authorities put to the Wheatley Royal Commission (1969). It can be argued that Wheatley had at most suggested a 'one and a quarter tier system' rather than equal partners in a two tier system. The SOLACE document was partly prompted by the concern of chief executives with the 'simplistic thinking' within the Labour Party. It was thought that Labour was flirting with reform without sufficient preliminary analysis. The SOLACE paper was an attempt to set out the implications of reform, raising issues for all political parties to address.

Therefore, in contrast with the Government's scepticism about reform, many other voices in the late 1980s seemed to suggest it was desirable. The reorganisation of the 1970s had not in fact been uniformly welcomed: the Liberal Democrats and the Nationalists had long been committed to further reform (SDP/Liberal Alliance 1987; Scottish National Party 1983 and 1987).

Within the Labour Party there were at least two sources of 'single tier' enthusiasm. From quarters such as Aberdeen where the traditionally Labour city was submerged in a non-Labour Grampian Region, there were long-standing pressures for a change to all purpose cities. Even more importantly, in the post-1987 period, Labour gradually moved to support change within the context of a devolved Assembly. In response to criticism that devolution would lead to 'over governing', the simplest policy reaction was to advocate the scrapping of a local government tier. In this sense advocacy of local government reform for some Labour politicians was incidental: it was the price to pay for improving the presentation of the Devolution case.

Following the announcement of the Government's review in 1991, Wynn concluded:

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If during the general review of finance and structure of local government instituted for the UK by Michael Heseltine, the Conservative party in Scotland abandons its long reiterated view that there is no need to change the basic two-tier structure there, all political parties would be in agreement that the future pattern should be single tier. (1991, p.71)

In 1994, the reality is very different. The Government is committed to single-tier reform in Scotland, while the Opposition parties reject the specific proposals for change, without necessarily supporting the status quo. This suggests that Wynn was wide of the mark, but any error is understandable. The 'noise' from the non-Conservative parties and from senior local government personnel in the 1980s did appear to suggest that there was a single-tier bandwagon for the Conservatives to join. Scottish Office Ministers thought that they were joining in a Scottish consensus - and perhaps stealing the politically attractive clothes of their opponents.

This article examines why the main political parties switched position on this issue - passing each other like 'ships in the night'. It is an assessment of the political process and the nature of the development of this policy within the political parties. The views of non-party bodies are considered elsewhere (Boyne, Jordan and McVicar 1994).

The article is developed from work (supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation) on the reform process in Scotland in Wales. It is derived from an analysis of published reports and journal and newspaper articles, together with observations from an interview programme with senior local government officers and politicians, central government officials, and ministers chosen for their contribution to the current reforms. More than 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted between July 1993 and March 1994. Some were confidential and non-attributable.

### **THE CONSERVATIVES**

The change in the official position of the Scottish Conservative Party is striking. The central argument in this article is that the story of local government reorganisation is not the implementation of a coherent Conservative strategy to increase their control of local government but a contested process within the party about the need and nature for reform.

In 1987, an internal Conservative Party paper made no reference to local government reform, confining discussion to the abolition of domestic rates

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and the extension of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (SCUA 1987). However, elements in the grass-roots of the party were always dissatisfied with the post-1975 system. While those in Westminster and St Andrew's House may have been uninterested in change, some activists in the Scottish party (like some Labour activists) believed that the post-Wheatley reforms had damaged their local opportunities for power, and had pushed for a single-tier option. They believed that two-tier had robbed the party of political representation in the Regions and created large Labour fiefdoms such as Strathclyde and Lothian (although the latter's political history is not exclusively Labour). Support for change may also have come from Conservative local associations, who recognised that their best opportunity for political success could only be satisfied by a system-wide reorganisation that resulted in small unitary authorities.

At the 1988 Scottish Conservative Conference in Perth, a pro-devolutionary motion was defeated by a margin of more than 50:1 (Jones and Scott 1988). However, the conference overwhelmingly supported a motion in favour of reform of local government and, in particular, abolition of the two-tier system. The motion proposed that:

This Conference believes that consideration should be given to a reform of local government with a view to the introduction of a single-tier system throughout Scotland. (Jones 1988)

Malcolm Rifkind cautioned that advocates of reform would be required to highlight the faults of the existing system and to explain alternatives:

Those who want to argue for reform will have to do a great deal of homework on these matters if they want the debate to be taken further (Jones 1989).

Rifkind agreed that the conference had put reform on the agenda but warned party members that any reform might be years away. Ian Lang, then junior minister, emphasised that local government reform must not become a 'Trojan Horse' for a devolved assembly: 'if we decide on the reform of local government, it must be done on its own merits' (Jones and Scott 1988). It is clear from our discussions with officials and politicians of the time that reform was not a high priority in the Scottish Office.

The push towards local government reform was favoured by the moderate wing of the party. But right wing activists were also interested in change. In

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1989, the Adam Smith Institute published **Shedding a Tier**, which advocated a radical reform of local government structure, finance and functions (ASI 1989). The Institute argued for a reduced role for local government and increased contracting out, a greater reliance on markets and increased user charges, and an end to monopoly provision of services. It also advocated a large number of small authorities made up of 'natural communities'. Critics would say that the Adam Smith report relied much on rhetoric and assertion. Despite the shockwaves the report caused, had this ultimately been influential the reform of local government would have been distinctively different from the changes contained in the Bill going through Parliament in 1994. If some in the party favoured this as a model for adoption by the Government (and the first draft of the report of the SCUA committee adopted similar themes), they will have been disappointed by the final proposals from their Government.

A Scottish Office civil servant has stressed that one other pressure in support of reform came from Ministers who had superintended the failure of the Poll Tax. That had been seen by its advocates as an effective means of introducing real accountability into local government. Its failure led Ministers to conclude that other means had to be found for establishing the kind of direct accountability that they were seeking, and they concluded that single-tier (and, quite possibly, smaller) authorities were the best means of achieving this. This reflected the 'small is beautiful' approach, supported by many at the grass-roots of the Party.

### **COMPETING INSTINCTS**

In the debate there have been two broad models of reform. Thus, two sets of aspirations for reform represented two Conservative instincts: 'managerialism' and 'localism'. On the one hand there is what can be termed the 'anti-bureaucratic urge' that wanted less planning, small local authorities, and low spending, and was suspicious of large authorities as being remote and wasteful. On the other hand there was the belief that one could make savings and deliver a better quality of service by moving to large strategic authorities, better able to plan and coordinate services.

The policy as delivered in 1994 was a compromise (or 'balance') between extreme localist and managerialist solutions, but towards the latter pole. In Scotland the major services and 85% of net spending will move to authorities smaller than the regions, but this is some way from the ambitions of those pursuing localist change in which the preferred authority size was probably at

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sub-district council scale. But the Conservative Party might not have engaged in the exercise had there not been a tide of support for the 'localist' model. The 'head of steam' behind reform came from an assumption that reform would enhance localness, diversity and a diffusion of power, although steps towards these were absent in the 1993 White Paper itself. The reform process might not have 'rolled' had there not been a belief that the new authorities would be more efficient and that reorganisation would reveal 'a pot of gold' (ie demonstrable cost savings). By the time of the Bill, this belief was not credible. The Touche Ross costings of the Scottish Office options have been pilloried by many sources (COSLA 1993; Midwinter 1993), and Ministers have abandoned claims that major savings will result from reform.

### **THE 'ANCRAM' COMMITTEE**

Following the 1988 Scottish Conference motion, Conservative Central Office established a working group, the Scottish Conservative Local Government Review Committee, under the chairmanship of former minister Michael Ancram. Membership has included Struan Stevenson (Kyle and Carrick District Council), Michael Hastie (Aberdeen District Council) and Christine Richard (Edinburgh District Council). The remit was to review local government *structure*, but not to consider constitutional alternatives, thus quashing devolutionists' hopes (Duncan 1989). In fact, the review committee met infrequently, making little contribution to the debate. It was internally divided - a result, Struan Stevenson has argued, of including too wide a representation of views (Jones 1989). Some committee members rejected the need for reform. Allan Stewart, now Minister for Industry and Local Government, claimed that reform would increase costs and create practical problems in devising new boundaries. At the Conference of the Scottish Conservative Women, he stated:

I also think it is a diversion. We should be concerned with Conservative issues and winning on those issues. I am not suggesting there are no changes which might be sensible to make, but the idea there are great political gains from moving to a radical restructuring into single tiers is very dangerous...*We all know why a lot of people in other political parties are arguing for a single-tier system* . They want to make it easier to bring in a Scottish Assembly. (Jones 1989; emphasis added)

He later argued that there was no consensus within the party for single-tier as an alternative (Horsburgh 1990). On the other hand Struan Stevenson advocated the political need to offer the electorate local government reform

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falling short of devolution and he called for single-tier councils (Stevenson 1990). By 1990, the review group had produced little of substance and party chairman, Michael Hirst, concluded that he had been unable to detect a groundswell for change within the Conservative Party. As recorded below the conclusions of the committee did not appear to shape the evolving debate but tended to alter in response to Ministerial 'steer'.

Other Conservative views included those put forward by Bill Walker, Conservative MP for Tayside North, who proposed establishing an indirectly elected Senate, with responsibility for roads, water and sewerage, and to advise the Secretary of State on strategic planning, transport and European Community funding (MacAskill 1991). The Regions would be abolished and police and fire services transferred to the Scottish Office. Walker argued that the proposals would head off the demands for an elected assembly. Wynn (1991, p.70) connects the Walker scheme to the No Turning Back group of Conservative MPs and says that it had been discussed with Allan Stewart (now the responsible Minister), and his then counterpart at the Department of the Environment, Michael Portillo who was also a member of the group. The No Turning Back Group itself proposed single-tier authorities on a model similar to that of the Adam Smith Institute (McEachran 1990).

In November 1991 (after the first consultation paper) the Scottish Conservative review committee (now chaired by David McLetchie) published its preliminary conclusions. These suggested a radical reform, shifting local government firmly into the enabler role and removing responsibility for many services, including education, housing, strategic planning and water and sewerage, away from local authorities altogether. The group advocated 40 to 50 single-tier authorities (SCUA 1991). But these views were later revised to favour a total of between 25 and 40 councils (Horsburgh 1993). David McLetchie explained that reform costs had caused the group to reconsider: there is no doubt that the party committee wanted to avoid embarrassing Ministers. The initial draft conclusions of the committee appeared to confirm a right-wing radical agenda. The later proposals were far weaker and much closer to the Government's final White Paper.

### **A DIVIDED TEAM**

The divisions on the Scottish Conservative committee were probably inevitable given the tensions in the party as a whole. The Thatcher memoirs (1993) make clear that there was disharmony among Ministers in the Scottish Office team at the end of the 1980s. It is impossible to understand the

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Governmental decision process on Scottish local government without understanding that the Forsyth/Thatcher axis was a brake on the sort of professionally inspired change pushing towards a small number of multi-purpose authorities.

Thatcher regarded the then Secretary of State, Malcolm Rifkind, as highly strung and unpredictable, with erratic judgement. She said that: 'the real power-house for Thatcherism at the Scottish Office was Michael Forsyth' (1993, p.620). In January 1989 Rifkind opposed the appointment of Forsyth as chairman of the Scottish party, but Thatcher says:

In July, I overrode Malcolm Rifkind and appointed Michael Chairman and Bill Hughes his Deputy. (1993, p.622)

Thatcher relates how pressure to get rid of Forsyth mounted in the summer of 1990: 'he himself was becoming depressed at the constant difficulties with Malcolm Rifkind and the unrelenting campaign pursued against him and his supporters' (p.623). In October 1990 she replaced him with Lord Sanderson and promoted Forsyth to be Minister of State with responsibilities for Education. An appreciation of policy development within the Scottish Office team in this period needs to accept these schisms. Kemp (1993) also emphasises the divisions within the Scottish Office at this time.

We would argue that ministerial tension led to decisions being taken piecemeal, as ministers battled over the direction of change. This may provide one reason why no commission on reform was set up - the fear that it would report along lines opposed by the Forsyth faction. Ministers were not united in their attitude to the outcome.

The Conservatives, therefore, were involved in an internal battle, but the leadership remained unconvinced about the merit of any particular plan. Before Rifkind left the Scottish Office the view was that he intended to release a general consultation document - without any predefined preference or commitment. The Government, as late as that date, was displaying greater caution than the Opposition parties.

In 1986, UK-wide reorganisation had been raised and rejected in the Government's own green paper, **Paying for Local Government**:

It is true that there could in theory be some gains in accountability if there were to be all-purpose local authorities throughout the country...But

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this gain would be achieved at the cost of the enormous disruption which a further large-scale local government reorganisation would cause. (DOE 1986, p.8)

Three years later, David Hunt, then minister for English Local Government, ruled out structural change in England. The political environment in England altered in December 1990 however with the appointment of Michael Heseltine as Environment Secretary. Heseltine's views on local government were well-established and his brief to provide an alternative to the community charge opened up the possibility of reform of structure. At a meeting with local authority associations in England and Wales in December 1990 single-tier change was put forward as one of a list of possible changes (Lambert and Bramley 1991). The DOE switch meant that the Conservatives in Scotland (now free of the scepticism of Mrs Thatcher) could run with the single-tier 'ball'.

### **THE 'MCCRONE REVIEW'**

In many ways the Scottish Office was more advanced in their thinking about reform than the DOE. In 1988, when the Conservative Scottish leadership endorsed the idea of a party committee to look at the issue of reform, there were suspicions that the outcome could be too much in line with the anti-bureaucratic urge and too radical along 'Forsyth' lines. For this reason Rifkind created a concurrent internal and confidential Scottish Office inquiry into local government structure lead by Dr Gavin McCrone, then the Chief Economic Adviser to the Secretary of State. Dr McCrone, whose planning background made him an advocate of large planning authorities, consulted Regional chief executives, District Council Chief Executives and some senior politicians.

The review concluded that structural change was justified and that the two-tier system was best seen as an intermediate step between the pre-Wheatley system and single-tier. It advanced various arguments against the current system - that local government is remote, unaccountable, wasteful of resources, with duplication of functions. However, it also recognised the importance of large authorities for certain functions, such as strategic planning, transport, fire, police and water. The study proposed that the two-tier system should be replaced by single-tier councils, all of which should have a population size large enough to support the direct provision of an education service (this meant a minimum population of 100,000).

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The review found near unanimity among those consulted in local government. However, the consensus only extended to agreement on a single-tier system, and not to any specific pattern. It confirmed considerable friction between tiers in some areas, even where the ruling groups were from the same political party. A provisional map of proposed areas emerged, indicating that some areas were politically simple to reorganise, but that some were fraught with political and operational difficulties. The McCrone review seemed to push towards a scheme of no more than 24 single-tier authorities. The conclusions were not publicly endorsed by Rifkind. They were too contentious within the Ministerial team. Forsyth did not favour the McCrone sort of reorganisation, enshrining as it did an essentially large-scale planning version of local government.

When the Government released its two consultation documents (Scottish Office 1991 and 1992) there was still no ministerial agreement that they should adopt a McCrone-type managerialist line. The options in the 1992 paper (15, 24, 35 or 51 authorities) represented conflicting views within the Ministerial team (and within the minds of Ministers). In the words of one civil servant: 'Ministers went into the consultation with genuinely open minds and the outcome they arrived at was based very substantially on the responses to the consultation which were sent to the Scottish Office late in 1992 and 1993'. The policy 'bottomed-out' at the central-to-lower end of the range because of a conclusion by Ian Lang that the cost-saving argument was more credible with fewer rather than more authorities.

### **OTHER PARTIES**

In contrast with official Conservative policy in the late 1980s, the Opposition parties supported structural reform. In their opposition to the Government's proposals of 1993/4 these parties have been obliged to distance themselves from their earlier positions. Both the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish Nationalists were committed to a unitary system (Midwinter 1989; Scott 1989a). The Nationalists argued that they had been the only political party to challenge the original Wheatley proposals (Scott 1990a).

A commitment to move to single-tier had been in the joint SDP/Liberal Alliance Scottish manifesto for the 1987 general election which stated that Alliance policy was to 'transform local government to a single-tier', with a devolved assembly having the responsibility to carry this through. It also recognised the creation of the all-purpose Islands authorities as 'one of the successes of the last local government reform' (SDP/Liberal Alliance 1987).

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In 1991, the Scottish Liberal Democrats pre-empted the publication of the first Scottish Office consultation paper by publishing a discussion document, confirming a commitment to reform in the context of broader constitutional change. Certain local government functions were to be transferred to a Scottish Parliament (Scott 1991) while the successor multi-purpose councils were to be similar to the existing district councils:

The democratisation of central government services which would follow that transfer of the Scottish Office to the Scottish parliament would allow for some key services to be transferred to the Scottish parliament; at the same time we might see local government being asked to undertake enhanced responsibilities in other areas.

A further document later confirmed the party's intention to reform local government within the context of a Scottish parliament (SLD 1992a) and the general election manifesto committed it to single-tier councils to 'end confusion' (SLD 1992b).

Following Labour's defeat at the general election of 1987, policy review groups were established to cover individual policy areas. Local government was part of the Home Affairs group chaired by Roy Hattersley and Jo Richardson. Draft proposals by this group envisaged major Constitutional changes, including single-tier local government and a Scottish assembly. The Scottish Labour Party held a local government conference early in 1989, producing a consultation document that advocated a restructuring of local government and a Scottish Assembly (Labour Party Scottish Council 1989). The document emphasised support for 'active local councils with a major role in serving their local communities' and asserted a preferred number of fewer than 20 authorities.

A Scottish working party established the previous year to examine local finance was widened to include a discussion of local government structure and functions. The analysis led to the publication in 1990 of a report, **The Future of Local Government in Scotland**. This second document highlighted new responsibilities of local government and the need for a reformed structure in the context of a Scottish Parliament. It argued that the existing two-tier system plus a Parliament would lay the Party open to the charge of over-government (p 9). It also argued that the two-tier system was confusing and less accountable and that all-purpose authorities might 'assist in the development of local government as an enabling coordinator at the centre of a network of providing agencies' (p 9).

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However, it was careful not to discuss new boundaries, leaving them to an independent Commission of Inquiry which would report back to the Scottish Parliament (p 9). This process, while helping with the presentation of the devolution issue, avoided the questions most likely to split the party: what size should authorities be and where should the boundaries be drawn?

Despite these policy commitments in favour of a single-tier direction, the Labour party has been hostile to the Conservative reforms since 1991. Party unity was forged around opposition to the Scottish Office consultation documents. Labour accused the Government of a hidden agenda, including water privatisation, a national police force, greater central control and loss of local accountability. Labour argued that reform was an attempt to gerrymander electoral boundaries to Conservative advantage.

But by far the most important difference with the Government lay in Labour's preference for establishing a Scottish Parliament before reforming local government structure: reorganisation would be a responsibility of the Parliament, with a commission to detail the plans for single-tier (Labour Party Scottish Council 1991 and 1993). The principles of the 1989 and 1990 documents have been maintained and the party's opposition to the Government's single-tier plan should at least in part be seen in this context. Indeed the 1989 document specifically rejected reform without a Scottish Parliament. Of course, there has always been a significant number within the Scottish Labour Party who supported single-tier with or without a Parliament, and they had a higher profile than those in favour of the status quo. Nevertheless, in understanding the shift in support by the party away from local government reform, we need to recognise the Scottish Parliament factor.

In 1992, the Labour Party in Scotland agreed a formula that allowed the party to oppose reform and criticise its short-comings while at the same time allowing individual council groups to lobby on their own behalf: a 'twin track' policy. COSLA's analysis of the responses to the second consultation paper confirmed that Labour groups in each tier advocated a different solution in the event of reform - eg Lothian and Edinburgh, although each challenged the 'need for reform' (COSLA 1992).

By the 1992 general election, the parties were on opposing sides with regard to single-tier change. The Conservatives in Scotland were now committed to reform. The manifesto stated, 'after further extensive consultation we will move towards the introduction of single-tier councils throughout Scotland' and advocated a single-tier of 'powerful and effective local authorities'

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(Scottish Conservatives 1992). By contrast, the Labour manifesto advocated that reform could only 'be effectively undertaken within the framework of constitutional change' and after an independent commission (Labour Party 1992). The lack of these provisions allowed the party to reject the Government proposals.

On 8 July 1993, the Secretary of State published his White Paper (Scottish Office 1993). It proposed only 25 single-tier mainland authorities, together with the three existing island councils. The four cities were each awarded single-tier status. The existing police forces and fire brigades were to be maintained.

The political opposition was highly charged and emotive. The Opposition parties staged separate walk-outs from the House of Commons. Labour vowed to oppose implementation and Tom Clarke, the Shadow Scottish Secretary, publicly pledged to reverse the Conservative reforms, threatening parliamentary disruption. This represented the clearest possible rejection of Government proposals. But it can be argued that this stance also owed something to the relatively weak position of Shadow Scottish Secretary Tom Clarke among Labour MPs. The Government's reform gave him a partisan issue around which all MPs could support him.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In interview, in October 1993, Allan Stewart suggested that:

In principle, reform is not a major ideological area of difference. All parties want reform. We only differ as to what kind and on where to draw the lines.

In 1991, the Secretary of State had argued that consensus in Scotland meant reform could be realised without the need for an independent commission. In practice the parties' positions have diverged to lead them to their present very different views.

The Conservatives have moved from cautiously opposing reorganisation to enthusiastically embracing the reform agenda as their own. Ostensibly, the Labour Party's change of position has stemmed from the failure to advance change in the context of a Scottish Parliament. They have also been able easily to reject a set of proposals with boundaries that are in several cases politically determined by the Government (Stirling, Eastwood-based East

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Renfrew etc). All opposition parties have been consistent in their condemnation of the lack of a commission and suspicious that this has increased the partisan-nature of the White Paper proposals.

From the start, ministers have clearly ruled out any possibility of the establishment of a Scottish Parliament. Scottish Office reform has taken place without any package on constitutional reform. The Scottish Conservative review committee's remit was designed to exclude this (despite the best efforts of some committee members, such as Struan Stevenson). In the late 1980s, the Liberal Democrats argued that reform might be possible without a Scottish Parliament. Labour has insisted that reform of the local government structure should be the responsibility of a Scottish Parliament. Much of the Party's responses to the debate should be seen in this context.

However an explanation of Labour's shift to rejecting the specific single-tier option must at least consider two other factors. First, Oppositions see it as their duty to oppose: there is something necessarily negative about the nature of Opposition. Their main priority is not to improve the Government's legislation but to improve their own prospects of power. Second, the fact that the proposals divide three Labour Regional Councils means that important elements in the party and, through the party, COSLA, are against change. Councillors on these Regions believe that the region should be the basis for any single-tier change.

'Gerrymandered boundaries' have made it simpler for Labour to unite against the Government. In this light it seems that these boundaries are a political gift to Labour, but the contested boundaries also perform an important function within the Tory party. The gist of the changes is in a direction that would have caused discontent and dismay among the anti-bureaucratic elements in the party. They do not deliver the small and 'cosy' councils that some Conservatives long favoured, but distinctly reduce the number of Councils (from 65 to 28 in the White Paper, increased to 32 by Parliament) and raise the average size of local authorities. Despite rhetoric about the new-style 'enabling council', they largely maintain the traditional range of functional responsibilities. That the White Paper had some partisan content was inevitable: the Government needed to offer some 'sops' to their supporters. Nothing quite cements the Tory party as attack by their opponents. Though the 'gerrymandered' boundaries may have the appearance of political ineptitude (and a political gift to the Opposition) they were partly a political necessity to keep the Conservative position united. Unless there was some partisan advantage it might have been difficult even for some Ministers to go along with this kind of single-tier change.

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Ministers do not introduce policies they expect to be unpopular. The Government believed that these were politically attractive and cost-cutting proposals - as long (or as briefly) as reform was seen as part of a populist, militantly anti-bureaucratic tendency. There were those on the right of the Scottish Conservative party who feared that any structural reform would lead to precisely the solution developed by the Scottish Office, ie between 20 and 30 authorities, with nothing approaching the large number of small authorities favoured by the Right. They opposed change precisely because they correctly predicted the form it would take. At the same time it should be noted that some of the criticism of the proposals by professional bodies is on the lines that the changes are too half hearted and not managerial enough.

The final outcome of local government reform will have disappointed many in the Conservative Party. Those advocating a large number of small enabling councils will have been disappointed: most councils are of a size that will enable them to continue to provide services. The Opposition remains hostile to the specific proposals, the process by which they were reached, and the lack of a constitutional debate. Local Government reorganisation may once have been an idea without enemies, but it is now a policy without friends.

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