

REGION-DISTRICT RELATIONSHIPS:
LESSONS FROM GLASGOW

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1. Introduction

The two-tier system of local government has been the focus of much criticism in the post-reorganisation period. Indeed, to the two-tier system have been attributed at one time or other virtually all the deficiencies of present-day local government, with all too little recognition of the danger of comparison of the old and new system, given the absence of adequate data, and the dramatic changes in the political climate since 1974. Public spending cuts, high inflation, and the disintegration of political consensus, would have led to conflict over rates and service levels between central and local government, whatever system was in operation.

However, through the battles on spending and policy issues, it is possible to discern a serious critique of the system on two broad counts:

- (a) The size of the new authorities.
- (b) The nature of the two-tier system.

Little empirical evidence exists to substantiate the first criticism. Although the new authorities have often been portrayed as remote, bureaucratic and inefficient, as having led to increases in rates, spending and manpower, Page and Midwinter have shown that the 1970s increases in rates and expenditure arose mainly from inflation and from reductions in central government grant.⁽¹⁾ Whilst manpower levels rose after reorganisation, this was part of a trend which began before reorganisation, and ceased around 1976, when reductions took place.

The second criticism, however, strikes at the very basis of the new system and raises a set of issues with which British government seems consistently unable to deal - how to divide power by area while maintaining an efficient and coordinated system of administration.

British liberal constitutional and political theory contains within it a set of conventions and beliefs about the role of local government in the democratic system. Local authorities should be autonomous, should be answerable to their own constituencies and should have specified functions for which they, and not central government are responsible. This rationale underlay the reform of Scottish local government, with functions divided between the two-tiers, each tier responsible to its own electorate for those functions allocated to it. The Wheatley Commission, justifying the independence of the proposed two-tiers, wrote:

"Like the region, the district exercises important functions; but the overall range of functions is quite different, and so is the place of the district in the scheme of local government."⁽²⁾

However, in a modern complex system of government characterised by the interdependence of practically all functions, this view is impossible to sustain.⁽³⁾ In the next chapter, indeed, the Commission recognise that regions and districts will necessarily share common concerns but gloss over the resulting potential for conflicts of values and interests by calling for "ingenuity, willingness to experiment and above all, patience and goodwill on the part of the regional and district authorities themselves".⁽⁴⁾ So, instead of trying to structure intergovernmental relations to turn conflict into fruitful negotiation, the Commission effectively dismissed the problem by the typically British expedient of conjuring up an imaginary consensus.

This comes out most clearly in the case of planning. Much of Wheatley's logic was based on the concept of the city-region as the ideal spatial form for strategic planning. Yet one of the most criticised functional splits in local government reform was the separation of strategic planning from local planning and development control. Here again, government attempted to square the circle. In the debate on the Scottish reform, the Minister responsible declared at one stage that the government wanted "to resist a hierarchical situa-

tion in which the second tier is subservient to the first tier".⁽⁵⁾ Later in the debate, he effectively admitted that there was a strong element of interdependence and, indeed, hierarchy in the system.

"Regional authorities have the general responsibility for planning in their area, they have a general oversight of planning as well as the preparation of regional reports and structure plans. But their proposals, no matter how well they draw them up, cannot be effective if they are not reflected accurately and in good time in local plans which will be the main means through which development control will be exercised."⁽⁶⁾

The Wheatley proposals themselves were modified by fierce lobbying in the political process, and the planning philosophy was undermined by the rejection of the Wheatley proposal that housing should be a regional function.⁽⁷⁾ This created a further area of 'functional interdependency' for housing provision is a major factor in strategic planning and infrastructure provision, and has close links with education and social work in service delivery. Writing of county-district relations in England, Leach and Moore see functional interdependency as a type of relationship which implies:

"some kind of shared function where both county and district have power, in a situation where what one of the pair does inevitably affects the other".⁽⁸⁾

This was also noted in SDD 76/1976, which stressed the necessity of close cooperation between district and region for successful implementation of housing policy. There was, as Crompton notes, about the introduction of housing plans,

"an implicit belief in the potentiality of coordination between central government, regional authorities and district housing authorities despite the fact that in 1977 many of the district authorities were already stretched to fulfil their existing functions".⁽⁹⁾

It would be unfair to claim that central government has ignored altogether the problems of functional interdependence. The Scottish Office has espoused the idea of 'partnership' and most of the 'planning systems' of the 1970s represented a recognition of the need for central-local, if not always region-district, negotiations over policy objectives, and priorities. Further, in 1979, the present Government appointed the Stodart Committee to consider possible changes in the boundaries and functions of Scottish local authorities, but without changing the basic structure. However, our contention is

that both the terms of reference of the Stodart Committee and its interpretation of those terms missed the fundamental problem.

Stodart sought within the terms of its restricted remit, to recommend changes to the existing structure which would facilitate improvements in 'working relationships' among the new authorities.⁽¹⁰⁾ This they saw as requiring rationalisation in the case of concurrent functions, and transfers in the case of closely related services. The 72 recommendations in the Report were generally consensual, the only major disagreement arising between regions and districts being over the location of industrial development. Again, like Wheatley and subsequent reports, appeals for harmonious, working relations in the interests of coordination were made where no rationalisation was deemed possible.

What was missing, however, was an appreciation of the fact that the major problem of region-district relations lies not in the small number of concurrent functions but in the much wider field of inter-dependency of the major functions. In planning, for instance, the Committee concentrated on trying to tidy up the allocation of functions while ignoring the major question of how regional and district interests should interact across the whole planning field.⁽¹¹⁾ Once again, we see the pursuit of the illusory goal of functional independence - to the point that Stodart fails even to mention Regional Reports, a Scottish innovation of considerable potential as a vehicle for corporate intergovernmental planning.

There has, of course, been much resentment shown by participants in local government over reorganisation, particularly from officers and members of the four counties of cities, and royal burghs, who transferred to district councils after reorganisation. This was particularly true of the case in point, relations between Glasgow District and Strathclyde Region, where there is still a great deal of disquiet, and in some cases resentment, at the 1975 reorganisation. Some people see a two-tier system as an inefficient replacement for the all-purpose Glasgow Corporation, and an inherent source of conflict. Others resent particularly Glasgow's downgrading to second tier status and the fact that, despite its size and independent history, the City is treated by the Region just as any other district. While these attitudes are most common in the District, especially in

those departments which can trace a lineal descent from bigger, more powerful departments in the old Corporation, there are also Regional officials who regret the passing of the Corporation and the division of the system.

In 1981, however, two important events occurred. One was the publication of the government's response to Stodart, which made clear that no return to all-purpose status would take place for the City of Glasgow. The second was the seminar on Urban Government staged by the City of Glasgow under 'Project Turin', where strong similarities in attitudes to innovative management were to be seen in the speeches made by Councillor Jean McFadden, Labour Leader in the District Council, and Councillor Ronald Young, Labour Group Secretary in Strathclyde. Discussions later took place with a view to improving relations and the 'provision of a total local government service' to the community.⁽¹²⁾ As part of this initiative, joint training programmes were instituted, and the remainder of this paper is based on empirical research carried out to diagnose the problem areas in the relationship for training purposes, and more importantly, to assist in the search for solutions. While our research was confined to Strathclyde Region and Glasgow District, we feel that many of our findings are of general application. Indeed, the choice of two authorities ruled by the same political party enables us to control for the effect of partisan division, to isolate the inter-organisational issues. Below, we set out under five main groupings, the type of problems encountered.

2. Structure and Statutory Functions

We have emphasised the ubiquity of functional interdependence in local government. This is particularly notable in planning, where there has been disagreement over responsibility for the Green Belt and over the call-in of planning applications. Eric Young's study found only 75 instances of call-in over a three-year period, half of which were by Grampian Region. On interdependence, Scottish Development Department Circular 64/1976 asserted that:

"when considering planning applications with implications for the provision of infrastructure it is important that district councils should, through close working relationships with the regional council, ensure that due account is taken of the region's responsibilities".⁽¹³⁾

As one observer of Strathclyde, Wannop, has noted:

"The number of applications 'called-in' by Strathclyde as of regional significance is fractional - one in a thousand generally. Seeking to have the Region decide such a small fraction scarcely seems a major intrusion on the District's rights although for a period, Glasgow preferred to object to the Secretary of State in principle in all cases of 'call-in'. A better accommodation between Region and District seems now to have been reached." (14)

However, call-in still continues to arouse much ill-feeling. This appears to be because it is in practice impossible to draw any functional distinction between regional and district matters. Rather, the distinction is one of the constituency and scale of vision of two authorities operating in a single functional field, a point to which we return below.

The ambiguity over responsibility was stated in a longer study by Eric Young, who noted that:

"The broad terms of the statutory provisions on 'call-in' by the regional authority leave a good deal of scope for argument as to whether or not 'call-in' is justified in a particular case". (15)

Functional interdependency is evident in the relationship of the Regional Roads Department to District Planning, which has the final say over development control matters, even when these involve roads and traffic.

There are disputes over concurrent responsibilities in leisure and recreation and over the joint use of facilities by different authorities or departments. Street cleansing, cleansing of the motorway and winter emergency work have also suffered from ill-defined responsibilities. Problems have arisen over responsibility for making grants to outside bodies. Some of these conflicts and ambiguities have been resolved by agreement since 1975 or were dealt with in the Stodart Report. However, even after Stodart, shared responsibilities will remain as an inherent feature of the system.

3. Policies and Priorities

We encountered no clear-cut examples of policy conflict between the Councils. This is not surprising, given that both are controlled by the same political party. Each council put the need to provide employment, and to tackle urban deprivation, as key elements in their corporate strategy. In the case of Glasgow, however, there was a re-

lated concern with environmental decay, and the need to stem population decline. Neither of those objectives is necessarily incompatible with the two previous objectives. Where the authorities differ is in the method of providing a policy framework within which specific decisions can be made. Strathclyde's approach was to select small geographic areas for special treatment in terms of the deprivation strategy, through the identification of Areas for Priority Treatment, and joint approaches with the District known as Area Initiatives. (16) In Glasgow, priorities of resource allocation are in broader terms, the housing department using stress indicators, and whilst priority has officially been given to GEAR (a multi-agency scheme), and the Area Initiatives, concern was also expressed for the priority of the Peripheral Estates. As one study of GEAR has demonstrated, however, the sheer size of existing problems throughout the City made positive discrimination very difficult.

"GEAR's strategy on housing appeared in 1979. The District Council's housing plans, made independently of GEAR, were unaffected by the GEAR project. Because they had been drawn up prior to the establishment of GEAR and because the Council stuck to its own strategy, which was subject to expenditure cuts, no bending in favour of the GEAR area was possible." (17)

Whilst policy differences are minimal, there are differences in standards, for instance between the District Planning and Housing Departments and the Regional Roads Department on road widths; between District Planning and Regional Water on the standard of restoration after the excavation by the Water Department of environmentally improved areas, and on parking standards. The Regional Roads and Planning departments have wanted more car-parking allocation for city private residential development than District Planning have thought necessary or possible; and in city-centre commercial developments the Region, in line with its general policy, has tried to restrict parking, leading to differences with District Planning.

Differences in priorities between the authorities have given rise to a range of problems. For example, there was disagreement over the priority to be given to traffic management schemes in local planning between District Planning and Regional Roads. The provision of infrastructure for new developments has also caused some problems as District plans do not always fit in with Regional Departments'

views of the most economical future development of their water and sewerage system. The use of vacant sites has caused controversy where the District has wanted to bring them into use immediately for industrial development but the Region has preferred to retain them for its own future use.

In the environmental field, where Region and District are operating on the same sites, differences have arisen over priorities on pedestrianisation, over the priority of safety and scenic considerations in motorway landscaping. In the programme to replace lead piping in housing, the Region has not always been able to replace its connections to the mains at the same rate as the District has replaced piping in houses. It has been suggested that this problem will be exacerbated when the District begins to receive special grants for replacement.

Such differences often reflect differing scales of vision. Given the geographical scope of the respective authorities, the Region has responsibilities throughout the district but the District does not have responsibilities throughout the Region. So a decision which might be logical in the context of the District alone may not appear so in the context of the wider Region. Problems of this sort have arisen with regard to shopping development. In its structure plan, the Region has suggested restrictions on shopping development in central Glasgow to avoid the creation of over capacity, blight and uneven access at the level of the Region. The District, basing its view of the potential of the city alone and not taking into account plans for other districts, has planned for expansion in shopping far in excess of the Region's limits. It is problems such as this, over what sort of matters constitute 'regional' or Region's 'strategic' concerns, which account for many of the disputes over call-in of planning applications. There have been similar problems in planning for industrial development, with the District complaining that the Region's wider geographical remit prevents it giving proper attention to the special problems of Glasgow. In local plan-making, on the other hand, where the District's lead responsibility is statutorily clear and universally recognised and where few strategic issues have, as yet, arisen, there appears to have been little conflict.

These sorts of problems also arise on an intra-authority basis. There is a disagreement between the District Planning and Housing departments as to whether residential development should be steered to greenfield sites or to inner brownfield sites. This complicates the District's response to the Regional Structure Plan which raises the issue. Planning departments at both levels can find themselves in disagreement with other departments acting as landowners and developers.

4. Problems of Planning and Management

In local government, there is a well-known tendency for problems to be perceived differently by different departments and different professions. The problem is compounded where the departments and professions are in different authorities. For instance, housing and social work have different attitudes towards eviction, or the problems of 'anti-social' tenants which tend to colour the approach of their respective councils. Community activism is often regarded by housing officers, as a source of opposition and trouble. To social workers, concerned with community development, it can be a positive phenomenon to be encouraged. Community development, indeed, is defined and evaluated from a number of quite different standpoints, by different departments and professions.

These difficulties of problem definition and assessment are further exacerbated by lack of adequate common data on matters like demographic forecasts, the extent of disability, or the housing needs of the elderly.

Many difficulties arise because of discrepancies in the programming of works by the two authorities, not because of consciously expressed priorities but for day-to-day managerial reasons. There is the familiar problem of the hole in the road being dug and filled in by a series of agencies in turn. In the Citizens Theatre renovation, the contribution of the Region, the improvement of the facade, lags behind that of the District (interior renovation) and the SDA (environmental landscaping). There are difficulties in the time-scale for comments by regional departments on planning applications; and the relationship amongst the procedures for obtaining planning permission, building control consent and the roads warrant for new developments has caused some confusion. Most of these problems arise at

the operational level and point to the need for better liaison and joint working amongst officers.

Agency agreements have caused difficulties because of differences in priorities, specifications and standards between the two authorities.

This has been observed over motorway and street landscaping. Agencies are also subject to change and withdrawal at short notice because of pressure for spending cuts, causing problems for long-term planning by the affected authority. An example cited was that of Ruchill Laundry where withdrawal of the Region's custom may result in job losses in the District. In purely technical matters, where relationships are stable and there is little scope for discretion over standards and priorities, agencies have been more successful, though it is apparent that there is a trend to the abandonment of the agency principle.

Costs are the most common source of disagreement arising from agencies or shared functions. Where the District has installed water and sewerage in new developments, to be adopted by the Region, payment has sometimes been held up because of arguments over specification and documentation. The cost of community facilities used by both authorities has been disputed. Transfers of plant and machinery from the old to the new authorities caused arguments for years after re-organisation. Transfer of land continues to be a vexed question with arguments over the price - previous, existing or new use value - and allowance for clearance and improvements. Efforts by Region and District to minimise their spending on maintaining and landscaping gardens for the elderly appears to have had the perverse result of making both authorities pay more than they otherwise might, because of the inefficiency of their arrangements. In the case of certification of football grounds, the Region charges a £500 fee but there is some annoyance at District level that they receive nothing, though their Building Control department puts in some of the necessary work.

Many of the cost and payment problems have arisen because, under the old Corporation, informal inter-departmental arrangements were made which now have to be formalised and costed as part of the inter-authority interchange, at a time of scarce resources.

5. Organisational Issues

The new system of local government was barely approved by Parliament when the creation of formal inter-authority links was being advocated in documents such as the Paterson Report and the Morris Report.⁽¹⁸⁾ The liaison machinery at authority level is weak, and the joint elected member committee has been described to us as "a farce with no political heavyweights involved". There is a lack of machinery for coordination of the planning of capital programmes to provide a framework for joint action at all levels. This weakness of liaison reflects the difficulties we have already reviewed and the general tendency for departmentalism and fragmentation in local government.

Cooperation at the level of service delivery is often inhibited by the fact that officers of Region and District are often not responsible for the same areas and do not have the same degree of delegated authority. Authorities, and departments within them, tend to adopt managerial arrangements tailored to their own functional requirements. Thus Glasgow's area management system is housing - led and organised territorially in accordance with this. The Region's Glasgow Education Division, on the other hand, is organised functionally and finds it difficult even to choose an officer to attend area-based committees. Even within the District, it is difficult to devise a common area basis for Housing, which is concerned with council houses and Building Control, with its largely private sector concerns, given the geographical segregation of public sector and private housing in the city.

The community development role is clearly area-based yet it depends on an input by departments which may not have an area organisation or may have an inappropriate one. There is, as we pointed out earlier, some disagreement about the nature and location of the worst problems of deprivation. This is reflected in the different initiatives undertaken, with the Region going for a form of area management only in the initiative areas, while the District has adopted a comprehensive area management system.

The lack of consistency in area delegation within and between authorities is one factor weakening formal liaison arrangements, such as the District's Area Management Committees, and the Region's Area Initiatives. Another is the political weakness of these commi-

tees in relation to departments and budgets. There is a tendency for them to concentrate on detailed matters within the limits of the authorities' policies rather than being a powerful influence on those policies themselves. There is a problem of communication of area priorities to decision-making levels.⁽¹⁹⁾

In contrast to the weakness of formal organisational links, the network of personal contact among officers is a key element in relationships between authorities. There is a strong network dating from the old Corporation in which officers of Region and District served as colleagues. This encourages informal contacts to smooth out potential problems. It has been suggested that some officers recruited since reorganisation have developed a strong identification with the new authorities which inhibits cooperation. Joint training programmes (e.g. housing/social work, area management) are seen as useful in promoting personal links and a shared approach to problems. Despite party political linkages, attitudes among councillors are frequently antagonistic. The District Labour group made a forceful case for restoration of powers in its submission to Stodart, despite Strathclyde Region's overwhelming and seemingly permanent Labour control.

6. Where Do We Go From Here?

It has frequently been suggested that the solution to the problems of two-tier local government in Scotland lies in the establishment of a single-tier system, under a Scottish Assembly. There is undoubtedly considerable merit in this suggestion but it does not provide the solution to the immediate problem, for two reasons. First, because we cannot in practice redraw the local government system on a tabula rasa. We must start from where we are now, recognising the strengths and weaknesses of the existing system and the cost of a further upheaval. Secondly, many of the problems we have identified would recur within a single-tier system. There would be the same problem of reconciling Glasgow's development needs and priorities with the strategic imperatives of the wider region of which it forms part.

A large proportion of the problems of Region-District relationships stem from different professional perspectives and priorities. These would not fade away with the establishment of a single-tier system. Crompton has noted, the problems of integration on an inter-departmental basis which exist in the development of a comprehensive

approach to housing.

"Housing plans are ambitious exercises. The problems of integrating and coordinating different departments and professions are substantial and were underestimated in the Manual. Consideration of the institutional realities (our emphasis) of the implementation process shows that policy change is not easily achieved."⁽²⁰⁾

It may be argued that cooperation is assisted because of shared political philosophy. Leach and Moore, however, found many examples of poor relations between councils administered by the same party in England.

"A party political conflict may intensify any conflict, but the forces generating the conflict usually lie elsewhere."⁽²¹⁾

Our argument throughout this paper has been that the essential problem is that of the interdependency of local government functions. It is this which has underlain much of the advocacy of corporate management in local government in recent years. What is now required is inter-authority corporate policy making, a joint approach to policy issues which recognises the legitimate differences of the two authorities but also the need to reconcile and compromise over these differences. In our view, this can best be achieved through a common emphasis on decentralisation, with coordination at the point of service delivery, to present the citizen with what he or she tends in any case to see as a single local government service. But decentralisation is not simply a bureaucratic device. It is also a means whereby the citizen and the local councillor can influence policy choice at the local level. The responses of both councils to date have been to superimpose new corporate machinery on a traditional system, with an emphasis on improving coordination rather than challenging traditional power-bases, the departmental and committee system. Future development would require not merely tinkering with area structures but also a fundamental rethinking about the role of the committee system,⁽²²⁾ in the direction of advancing the 'managerial' role of councillors in matters of broad policy, resource allocation and performance review. This would then permit more specific decisions about services to be taken locally.

Both councils have good records of innovative approaches to urban management. Given the demonstrable interdependence of the two systems, further progress in joint development is a goal worthy of pursuing.

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