

# Organisation and Management of Local Government in Britain : An Overview

*Noore Alam Siddiquee\**

## **Introduction**

The governmental systems in Britain have been of considerable interest to the students and researchers alike for at least two important reasons. First, Britain is one of the few countries of the world to have a long and vigorous tradition of democratic government at the centre and strong, viable and effective structures at lower levels. Second, the British rule, and for that matter, the administrative systems and practices they have devised, have had a tremendous influence in shaping and designing the structures of central as well as local government in many other countries around the globe. Despite its long democratic tradition with elected local councils playing a crucial role in the delivery of public services, the British local government appears to be one of the most confusing and complex systems to most readers. This is particularly so given the variations of local authorities in different constituent parts of Britain (i.e., England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) and a wide variety of agencies that operate locally and help shape and administer, local services. Such complexity is compounded even further because of the recent

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\* *Noore Alam Siddiquee*, Assistant Professor,  
'Department of Public Administration,' University of Dhaka.

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changes brought about in the structure and functions of local government and the interface of an increasing number of **quangos** and non-governmental agencies with the local government and their influence in local policy **making**.

The main purpose of this paper is to provide a broad overview of local government in Britain and identify some of the current trends and issues. The organisation of the paper is as follows. First, a brief account of the history of local government is given highlighting some of the major changes that has taken place over the years. Then, an outline of the present structure of British local government is provided in section two. Sections three and four deal with the functions of local government and the sources of their finance respectively. Finally, section five identifies and analyzes some of its recent trends and issues in the light of the changed **situation** at the local level.

### **Local Government in Britain : A Brief History**

The foundations of modern local government in today's Britain were laid down in the nineteenth century. The Municipal Corporation Act of 1835 and three important statutes namely the Local Government Acts of 1888 and 1894, and the London Government Act of 1899 were the key legal documents that created a comprehensive system of local councils in Britain with a wide range of functions. Following these legislations, a three-tier system of local government came into existence. Though initially local authorities were primarily concerned with public utilities, public health and regulatory duties, over the years their responsibilities have expanded to include education, housing, refuse collection and disposal, planning of land use and environmental health.

There has not been any major change in the local government structure until the enactment of Local Government Act, 1972. The Act ushered in a new era in the history of British local government. Under it the local government systems in England and Wales were thoroughly reorganised in 1974. The Act Abolished the 83 county boroughs in England and Wales and reduced the 58 county councils to 47. Within these counties, 1250 municipal boroughs, metropolitan and non-metropolitan district councils were replaced by 333 district councils (Breenwood and Wilson, 1993). In major urban conurbations, six metropolitan counties (viz. greater Manchester, Merseyside, West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, Tyne and Wear and West Midlands) were created containing 36 metropolitan districts. More recently, the structure of local government experienced further reorganisation. The Local Government Act, 1985 abolished the Greater London Council (GLC) and six metropolitan county councils in England and transferred their functions to London boroughs and metropolitan district councils respectively.

The Scottish local government system, like those in England and Wales, has evolved during the last 100 years or so. Although there were no dearth of **reform** and reorganisation programmes in the past, the real breakthrough came in the 1970s with the legislation of Local Government (Scotland) Act of 1973. Hence, the present **structure** (describes in the following section) of local government in Scotland is largely the product of the Local Government (Scotland) Act, 1973 that came into effect in May 1975.

### **The Structure of Local Government**

As already mentioned, the two previous decades have been marked with changes in British local government systems. As a result if these changes, currently there are two major tiers of local government in Britain : county council and district council (FCO 1991). However,

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some parts of England and Wales do have a third but minor tier which is known as parish council in England and community council in Wales. Small parishes (with less than 200 electors) may instead hold parish meetings which all local electors can attend. Also, there are neighbourhood councils in some urban areas and island councils in large and remote islands. While the neighbourhood councils do not have any statutory functions, the island councils like that of the Isles of Scilly are unique having all the powers and duties of a county, district and parish councils.

In Scotland, a two-tier system of local government is in operation ; regional councils and district councils. The Scottish mainland is divided into 9 regions which are administratively more or less similar to English counties. Each region is again divided into a number of districts and entrusted with the responsibilities similar to non-metropolitan district councils in England and Wales. At the lowest **level, there are** community councils, **which are basically** the Scottish variety of parish councils. It is relevant to note here that like the parish and community councils in England and Wales respectively, Scottish community councils are not treated as a third tier of local government (FCO, 1991), even though they are statutory bodies. In addition to these bodies, modelled on the Council of the Isles of Scilly there are three island authorities (in Orkney, Shetland and Western Isle), which enjoy virtually all-purpose status.

It must be noted here that the Scottish regional councils cover on average much larger areas than the English and Welsh county councils and the division of powers between the higher and lower authorities are not the same, Furthermore, the Scottish local authorities are controlled by the Scottish Office in Edinburgh while those in England and Wales are controlled by the Department of Environment and several other government departments in London (Birch, 1986).

The local government of Northern Ireland did not escape major restructuring of the 1970s. Under the reorganisation that took place in 1973 in Northern Ireland most of the important functions of local government were transferred to the central government. Thus local authorities have not only been left with fewer functions than hitherto before, but also a single-tier local government has been introduced. The existing local authorities have been replaced by the district councils. At present the entire province is divided into a total of 26 districts, each with a district council responsible for the conduct of residual local government functions compared to the systems in mainland.

The structure of present local government in Britain can be summarised into a table as follows :

**Table 1 : Tiers of Local Government in Britain**

	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Top Tier	County Councils (39)	County Councils (8)	Regional Councils (9)	
Bottom Tier	District Councils (296)*	District Councils (37)	District Councils (53)	District Councils (24)

\* This figure does not include those district councils under the former GLC and six metropolitan county areas. With 69 district councils located in metropolitan area the total number of district councils in England is 365.

Source : Adapted from Rhodes (1988) and Greenwood and Wilson (1993).

Each of the local authorities identified above consist of directly elected councillors whose number varies from council to council. Generally, the county councils in England and Wales consist of 60–100 members depending on the size of the county and its population. While the district councils normally consist of 30–60 members, the parish/community councils have 5–25 members (FCO, 1991). One of the councillors acts as the civic head of the council and is known as the mayor. He is indirectly elected by the fellow councillors for a period of one year, he has very little or no executive role. Members of the majority political party elect a leader, who works as the political head of the local authority. However, the system of local government election in Britain is somewhat different from that of most other countries in that except county councils all other local councils are elected on the 'annual-thirds' basis (for more see FCO, 1991). Elected for a three-year period local councils operate through a set of specialised committees.

### **Functions of Local Government : Diminished Role in Local Service Provision**

Local government in Britain derives its power and functions from the **Acts** of Parliament. Thus local authorities can only do what the law allows them to do. Despite the recent changes in respect of local government functions the existing laws enable the local government to undertake and carry out some very important functions. Some of these functions are mandatory, meaning that local authorities must do these functions while others are purely optional meaning that local authorities have a discretion on such functions. Below are some of the major functional responsibilities of various tiers of local government.

County councils in England and Wales are **primarily** responsible for matters requiring planning and administration over wide areas

**and/or** support of substantial resources. Examples include strategic planning, transport planning, highways, traffic regulation, education and libraries, police and fire service, refuse disposal and personal social services. Regional Councils in Scotland are also responsible for a very similar list of functions. They however, do have certain reserve powers to arrange for house building by district councils and other agencies.

Below the county councils, there are district councils, which represent the only tier of local government that present in all the constituent parts of Britain. They however, do not enjoy an equal status in terms of functions and authority. For example, the district councils in England, Wales and Scotland are assigned more important functions than their counterparts in Northern Ireland. In England and Wales, district councils are to look at such important aspects as housing, refuse collection, collection of local taxes, environmental health in addition to the maintenance of museums, art galleries and car parks. The district councils in Scotland have a similar but even longer list of responsibilities. On the other hand, the district councils in Northern Ireland, though form the only tier of local government in the province, have been left with little function excepting those relating to local public health and sanitation and licensing of places of entertainment. More important public functions such as education, health services and housing are the responsibility of local offices of the concerned department of central government or the Area Boards under them.

Since the **parish/community** councils are not legally recognised as a third tier of local government, they have a very limited statutory responsibility. Nonetheless, they perform some important local functions. The Matters dealt with by these councils vary from region to region. In England and Wales, these councils are responsible for recreational provisions and cemeteries, encouragement of tourism and street lighting and so forth. As a matter of fact, the parish councils

usually perform such public functions in conjunction with district councils. They can spend, like the county councils and district councils, a certain amount of money for the general welfare of their areas. But having no fund of their own they have to depend on the district councils for financial support. The community councils in Scotland have no specific role to play ; they have been created mainly "...to ascertain, coordinate and express the views of the communities they represent to local authorities and public bodies in the area" (FCO), 1991 ; 32). However, district and island councils normally authorise them to initiate specific projects and provide them with financial and administrative assistance for such matters.

Actually, it is difficult to make any watertight division of functional responsibilities between and among local agencies since they often interact with each other. Thus the above classification of functions is too imprecise given the fact that in Britain there are many functions which are being carried out by more than one agency. Some of these important functions/services of local government are described below.

**Planning** : It represents one of the most important functions of local government in Britain. While London boroughs and metropolitan district councils are responsible for planning of their respective areas, this function is carried out by county and district councils in other parts of Britain.

**Education** : Local authorities in Britain are actively involved in primary and secondary schooling, special education for handicapped children and post-school education. District councils (in metropolitan areas), county councils (in non-metropolitan areas) and the London boroughs (in the City of London) are the education authorities and are responsible for providing all kinds of education, excepting those provided by universities and polytechnics. Though a recent legislation

allows the primary and secondary schools to 'opt out' of local authority control and to receive their funding directly from the government, most of the schools have, as on today, remained under the purview of local authorities. An important feature of British local government is that a big chunk, between 40 to 50 percent of local authorities, annual **budget** is spent for education. In the year 1989-90 local authorities in England spent 44 percent of the total expenditure for education (FCO, 1991).

**Transport** : Transport is an important area of local government responsibility. County councils in England and Wales and regional Councils in Scotland and London boroughs and the City of London are responsible for highway functions except trunk roads, maintenance of urban roads and in some cases maintenance of car parks. Certain transport functions such as provision and maintenance of **footways** are carried out by district councils. There are also passenger transport authorities mainly responsible for among other things, administration of local bus and rail subsidies and **organising** necessary fare schemes. **What** is worth mentioning is that members of these authorities are nominated by local government.

**Housing** : Until very recently, local councils enjoyed a virtual monopoly in housing. The recent policy shift of the Conservatives led to a diminished role of the city councils in matters relating to housing. Even though, currently the housing facilities are provided by an increasing number of private **firms** and **non-profit** housing associations, still the councils take the bulk of the load. With regard to housing the councils are responsible for building new houses, dealing with poor housing conditions, providing grants and to help repair and maintain standard housing, providing accommodation to homeless families and administering housing benefit scheme in order to help poor people with housing costs.

**Refuse Collection and Disposal** : As elsewhere, this has been one of the most traditional functions of local government in Britain. Both district and borough councils are responsible for the collection of household waste and much of industrial and commercial waste. Large-scale waste disposal is the responsibility of county councils and some large metropolitan district councils. This important function of local government has also been affected by recent government legislations.

**Police and Fire Services** : Unlike most developing countries, local government in Britain is responsible for police and fire services in their respective areas. The responsibility lies with the county councils in England and Wales and Regional Councils in Scotland. Thus outside London, most counties/regions have their police and fire services, though several counties may have a combined police force. In London the metropolitan police force is directly under the Home Secretary.

It is relevant to mention here that some of the important services like health, water and sewerage, and supply of gas are not provided by the local government. These essential services are provided by some single-purpose non-elected bodies. For example, throughout Britain healthcare service is currently run by authorities separate from local government. Although water and sewerage services are still the responsibility of local government in Scotland, single-purpose non-elected water authorities are in charge of delivering such services in rest of Britain.

It should also be mentioned here that while local authorities in Britain do not have a general competence to do whatever they wish to do in their respective localities, the variations in functions and standards between one authority to another are considerable which belies the simplicity of their list of services. This is more so because,

there have been a good number of initiatives by local authorities in recent years intended to improve local economy, to incur expenditure for the greater interest of the area, Widdicombe Committee observes that some local authorities are involved in non-traditional activities like promotion of cooperatives, training schemes, running of business advice centres, development of new technology and support for individual firms through rent subsidies, grants and guarantees (Widdicombe Report, 1986). Thus, any neat classification is bound to belie the reality.

The shared responsibility of certain functions (e.g. planning, housing) between local authorities, as shown above, requires a close liaison and coordination between them and others who provide related services. But this has remained a major problem area of local government in Britain as the arrangement has given rise to confusion (for consumers) and frictions between the authorities. Attempts at obtaining local coordinated action, as made under 1974 reorganisation, contributed to further confuse the situation and created acrimony between among the authorities concerned. Such acrimony has often been exacerbated because of 'competing mandates' of local authorities and their tendency to 'view the relationship between tiers as an adversary one' (Alexander, 1982a, 1982b). The use of agency agreement (under which an authority can appoint another as its agent to carry out its statutory duties) between authorities as a way of institutionalising liaison met with limited success. This is because, as Alexander notes-

'...the agency agreements, superimposed' on an already complicated allocation' of local authority functions, have added to the confusion experienced by consumers in service provision and 'ensured that the processes of public accountability and democratic control would be so convoluted as to raise serious doubts about their effectiveness' (Greenwood and Wilson, 1993 : 153)

## **Local Government Finance : Dominance of Central Grants**

Since the availability of finance determines to a large extent the level and range of services local government can provide, finance occupies a crucial position in any analysis of local government. It assumes a particular significance in countries like Britain where local authorities spend a big chunk of national budget, on an average one-fourth of all public expenditure (Greenwood and Wilson, 1993). Evidently, a significant amount of money is being channelled through the local government. The questions that need to be posed at this stage are : where do the local councils get such a big amount of money to spare ? Do they mobilise adequate revenues from their own sources ? To what extent are they dependent on the central government, if any, for finance ? Does this dependency mean increased central control on local affairs ?

This section of the paper addresses some of these issues/questions. To start with, it can be said that local authorities in mainland Britain have four major sources of revenue : **government** grants, rates, council tax and fees and charges. The details of each of these sources are provided below.

### **Government Grants**

Grants from the central government constitute the most important component of local government finance in Britain. Even though the share of government grants in the local government budget has declined over the years, still it is the single largest source providing around 50% of the total expenditure. For instance, the contributions of government grants in the 1987/88 FY in England and Wales were 46.3% and 66.7% respectively. Grants received by local authorities from the central government generally are of two types : those

specifically meant to certain services e.g., education and the police and a more general revenue support grant that is not linked to any particular service (FCO, 1991). While about a quarter of central government grant is provided in the form of specific or supplementary grant, about 75 percent of the total assistance to local authorities made as revenue support grant paid to individual agencies. The latter has two components ; (i) domestic rate relief paid to enable local authorities to relieve domestic rate payers a certain proportion of their rates, and (ii) block grant intended to supplement an authority's own finance so that irrespective of local needs and resources, it can provide a standard level of services as provided by similar local agencies in other regions.

### **Rates (Non-Domestic)**

Local rates levied on industrial and commercial property form an important component of local government finance in Britain. Rates are a form of taxation levied on local property, and are calculated on the basis of the rent at which the property might reasonably be let. Each such property, excepting those used for agriculture and forestry, government buildings and churches, is subject to a uniform non-domestic rate, determined on the basis of its annual rental value in the market. Every year, the rating authority fixes a rate in pound and the occupier of the property is obliged to pay the rates at that poundage. For example, if every pound of ratable value is 0.40 pence in a particular **financial** year and if a business property has an annual ratable value of 2,000 pound sterling, then the amount of rate due for that year would be 800 pound-sterling. The crucial elements are, therefore, ratable value and rate poundage. The sum raised as non-domestic rates is paid into central pools from where each local authority receives fund based on the size of its total adult population.

Each year local authorities produce estimates of likely expenditure for the coming year. From this figure they deduct their estimated income from charges and central government grants together with any cash balances available for the purpose. This leaves a balance which has to be financed through locally levied rates known as non-domestic rates. While there are a number of advantages of this rating system including the predictability of council income, easy collection and limited or no evasion, this has been subjected to severe criticisms. One of the most serious criticism against rates is that they are 'regressive' in that those with low incomes have to bear most heavily as the key consideration is the value of the property, rather than the ability of the occupier. There are also questions of fairness, rating basis, rate rebates/exemptions and their effect on local accountability. Though such criticisms and objections forced the government to issue green papers and look for alternatives to rates, still there is a general lack of consensus on this. Thus the government decided that rates should remain one of the major sources of local government revenue for the foreseeable future.

### **Council Tax/Community Charge**

In 1990 the government introduced a new form of local taxation (commonly known as Poll Tax) that replaced the system of domestic rates that was in vogue earlier. Under the new system, taxes were to be levied from almost all adult residents in a local authority area, excepting those in Northern Ireland. Local authorities in an area were to determine the level of community charge each year in view of their budgets for the next financial year. In areas where there were two tiers of local government, the spending of both levels/tiers were taken into consideration while determining the level of community charge. Like the rates, the community charge collected by local councils were also to be transferred to a central Collection Fund from

which spending by all tiers of local government was financed.

From the early stage of its introduction, the system of community charge became extremely unpopular. Not only the collection of community charge remained very poor, but also it triggered a serious controversy in the political spectrum. The popularity of the government reduced sharply and reached its lowest point. More importantly, the government itself was confronted with serious difficulty in tackling the popular resistance and demonstrations that at times were marked by widespread violence. All these forced the government to **climb-down** and replace the community charge by a new council tax which apparently eased public resentment and criticisms. Under the new plan, that came into effect in 1993 each household receives from the local authority a single bill rather than each adult receiving a separate bill, made on the basis of the value of the property (residence). Unlike that of the community charge, the amount of council tax payable depends on the band the property (residence) falls into.

### **Fees and Charges**

Though each local authority is responsible for providing many services free of charge, it may charge for some of the services and amenities such as leisure facilities. Obviously, the amount received by individual authorities vary widely depending on the type and range of chargeable services provided.

In addition to the sources detailed above, local authorities can also borrow money to finance their capital expenditure, e.g., purchase, construction and improvement of land, property and equipment and so forth. While most capital expenditure have traditionally been financed through borrowing, currently local authorities' income derived from borrowing is much smaller than that in the past given the tightening of central government controls on such borrowing.

Since the bulk of the local government finance is derived from the central government with a corresponding tightening of government control over local authorities, there is no denying the fact that the autonomy and freedom of local government has been eroded considerably. The government can now influence the programmes by providing advice, paying specific grants and subsidy, approving programmes under certain legislation and controlling capital investment. The central government sets expenditure targets for the authorities and can withhold grants for those exceed the targets. But it should also be pointed out here that despite all this, governmental control in Britain is not too severe to hamper the effective functioning of local government. Much of these control measures have been designed to bring local government expenditure in line with the policies and priorities of the government. For example the 1986 Local government Act limited the ability of local authorities to spend money on publicity and the 1988 Local Government Act imposed further restrictions designed to stop the use of rates for party political propaganda. Despite an increase in central directives, local government retains considerable discretion over the way in which they run their services and the level of the services they provide.

### **Trends and Issues**

The discussions in the preceding pages reveal that the local government in Britain is characterised by the enormous diversity. Each constituent nation in Britain has its own variety of local authorities. They differ from each other not merely in name, but also in terms of functional responsibilities. But they have one thing in common : they all have been touched by the policy changes, as detailed earlier. In view of the current situation of local government a number of trends and issues can be discerned :

1. One of the most important trends of present local government in Britain is its reduced role in public service provision. The Conservative government that came to power in 1979 was and continues to be deeply suspicious of the public sector and the levels of public expenditure. Consequently, the period after 1979 witnessed major policy shifts which have a significant bearing on the local government. For example, the 1988 Local Government Act sought to extend **privatisation** or 'contracting out' of local authority services. Under the Act, Secretary of State was authorised to specify by regulation local services which must be put out to tender. Services initially specified include refuse collection, cleaning buildings, street sweeping, school meals and catering and ground vehicle maintenance. This was later extended by authorising the sale of council houses and land and also by allowing schools to opt-out of council control. Since the present government is strongly committed to pursue the policies of privatisation and 'contracting out', more and more local government functions are likely to get included the list in near future. Nevertheless, despite such policy priorities, as things stand today, local authorities in mainland Britain still carry out a lot more functions than their counterparts in many other countries.

2. Local government in Britain is heavily dependent upon the central government for resources. Government grants to local authorities in Britain is nothing new- it was been a part of local government finance for more than a hundred years. However, as a proportion of local government fund, government grants started to grow following World War II and reached its peak in 1975<sup>176</sup>. Since then the central government policy of public expenditure restraint contributed to a significant reduction in the amount of government grants paid to local authorities as a proportion of their total budgets. **Notwithstanding** this, most local authorities in Britain still derive a large proportion of their money from government grants. The predominance of central grants

does not mean that local government has become an agent of central government. It must be borne in mind that through the provision of grants and other instruments, the central government only narrows the scope of decision making, it does not determine it.

3. Local government in Northern Ireland is unique in that since the mid 1970s there has been only one tier of local government in the province. Under the reorganisation of 1974, the existing local authorities were replaced by a single tier local government, district councils. Even the district councils have been rendered ineffective by withdrawing most of their functions that are being performed by central government departments of single-purpose agencies. This is clearly an act of centralisation, but given the prevailing situation in the province and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) insurgency, the government in London can justify it as a special case that requires **effective control from above. However, the recent dialogue between the government and Sinn Fein (the political wing of the IRA) and progress made so far about the political future of the province gave ground for optimism about a new beginning of democratic government in Northern Ireland.**

4. Another important trend of local government in today's Britain is the process of fragmentation. As noted earlier, the abolition of GLC and the six metropolitan counties was accompanied by the distribution of their functions to a wide variety of agencies. More important than this was the creation of their functions to such agencies. As a result of this fragmentation, local services are now provided by numerous different authorities, often giving rise to acute coordination problem. Among the various types of organisations, regional bodies<sup>1</sup> have become most prominent assuming public services like electricity

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<sup>1</sup> An estimate suggests that there are 523 different regional organisations in England alone (Hogwood and Lindley, 1982).

supply, hospitals, gas undertakings, water supply and treatment and community healthcare. What is striking is that these boards/authorities are not only non-elected but they retain a remarkable degree of freedom. They have remained immune to electoral control as they are not directly accountable to anybody at the local level.

5. One of the characteristics of local government in Britain is the absence of executive head in local councils. To many it is a serious defect of British system (e.g. Barber, 1972) which leads to a host of problems in the management of local authorities. Therefore, it came as no surprise when the Widdicombe Committee proposed for a powerful chief executive with statutory powers to ensure councils' legal probity and managerial effectiveness. But the proposal was rejected by the government as politicians were cautious of such powers in the hands of one official (Greenwood and Wilson, 1993). Thus local government in Britain continues to operate in the old fashion with various committees playing a pivotal role. It is pertinent to point out here that the Mayor/Chairman of council is ceremonial **head of local authorities**. He certainly exercises some influence over the functioning of local council, but the extent of his influence depends largely on his personality rather than his position (Muttalib and Khan, 1982).

6. As elsewhere, central government in Britain possesses an impressive arsenal of instruments of control the use of which shapes the actual character of central-local relations. Since the 1970s and particularly since the early 1980s the central-local relations have seen new dimensions. The policy shift by the conservative government and the subsequent enactments they made regarding local government have considerably modified the existing relations between the central government and local authorities. The Local Government, Planning and Land Act of 1980, The Local Government Finance Act of 1982 and the Rates Act of 1984 are important legislations that have had

profound impact on central-local relations. For example, the Local Government Planning and Land Act, 1980 which introduced block grants, allowed the government to assess how much each authority needs to spend and to allocate grant in terms of how far those assessments were breached. This, in particular, led to an increasing central-local tensions during the 1980s as central government sought to impose and reinforce where necessary, controls over expenditure or individual local authorities. However, as already indicated, central control in Britain is not so tight and overwhelming as to jeopardize the self-governing character of local government.

7. Unlike in the past, local elections are now increasingly fought on party lines. Though the turnout on local elections is much lower than in national elections, these are well contested and all the major political parties take an active interest in such elections. The Widdicombe report on local government showed that 85% of councillors are elected in the name of a political party (Widdicombe Report, 1989). Thus political parties have now become an integral part of local authorities, with a considerable influence on the operational styles, spending patterns and overall policy decisions.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, it can be said that local government in Britain has been in a continuous state of flux. During the early 1970s and 1980s local government in Britain has undergone major transformations in terms of structure, functions and resources. The policy being pursued by the present conservative government has resulted in some degree of centralization that drastically reduced the sphere of local authorities. The transfer of local government functions to central department, sale of council houses and land, and permission given to local schools to 'opt out' of local authority control are all indicative of the diminished role of local government in local service provision. These have

coincided with the tightening of central control over the expenditure of local authorities. Noting its recent trends Stewart has come to argue that local authorities are in danger of losing community perspective, lacking flexibility and adaptability, weakening public accountability and neglecting public service ethics (Stewart, 1989). While Stewart is not entirely incorrect, local government in Britain still enjoys a considerable latitude in the management of its own affairs. Despite an increase in central directives and local government receiving the bulk of its resources from the center, local government in Britain has remained far more simply an agency of central government. More importantly, it plays a significant political and administrative role. Given the fact that each locality is a miniature political and administrative unit with a vital role in upholding democratic values and norms, local government will continue to remain an important conduit of British government and democracy.

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