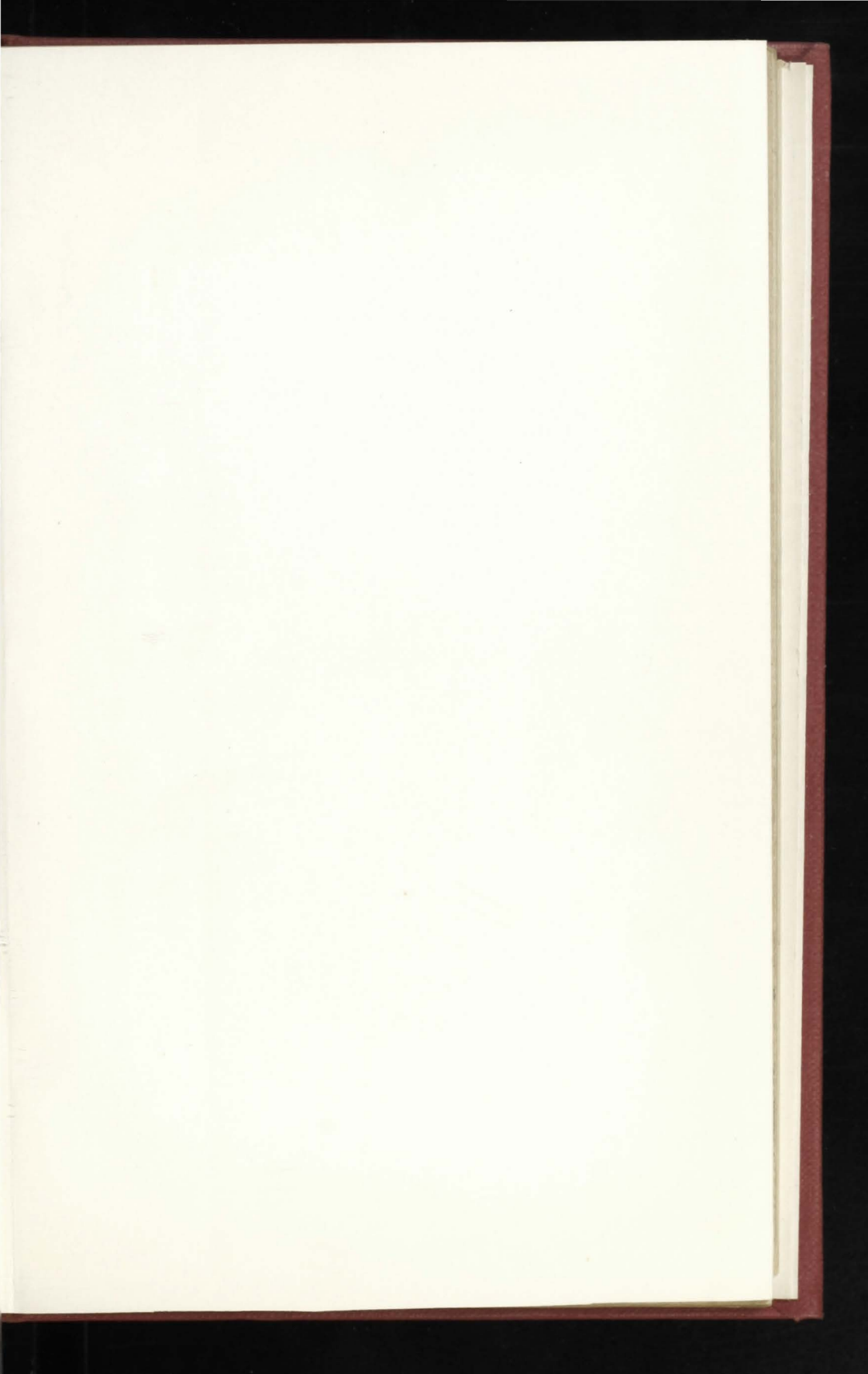
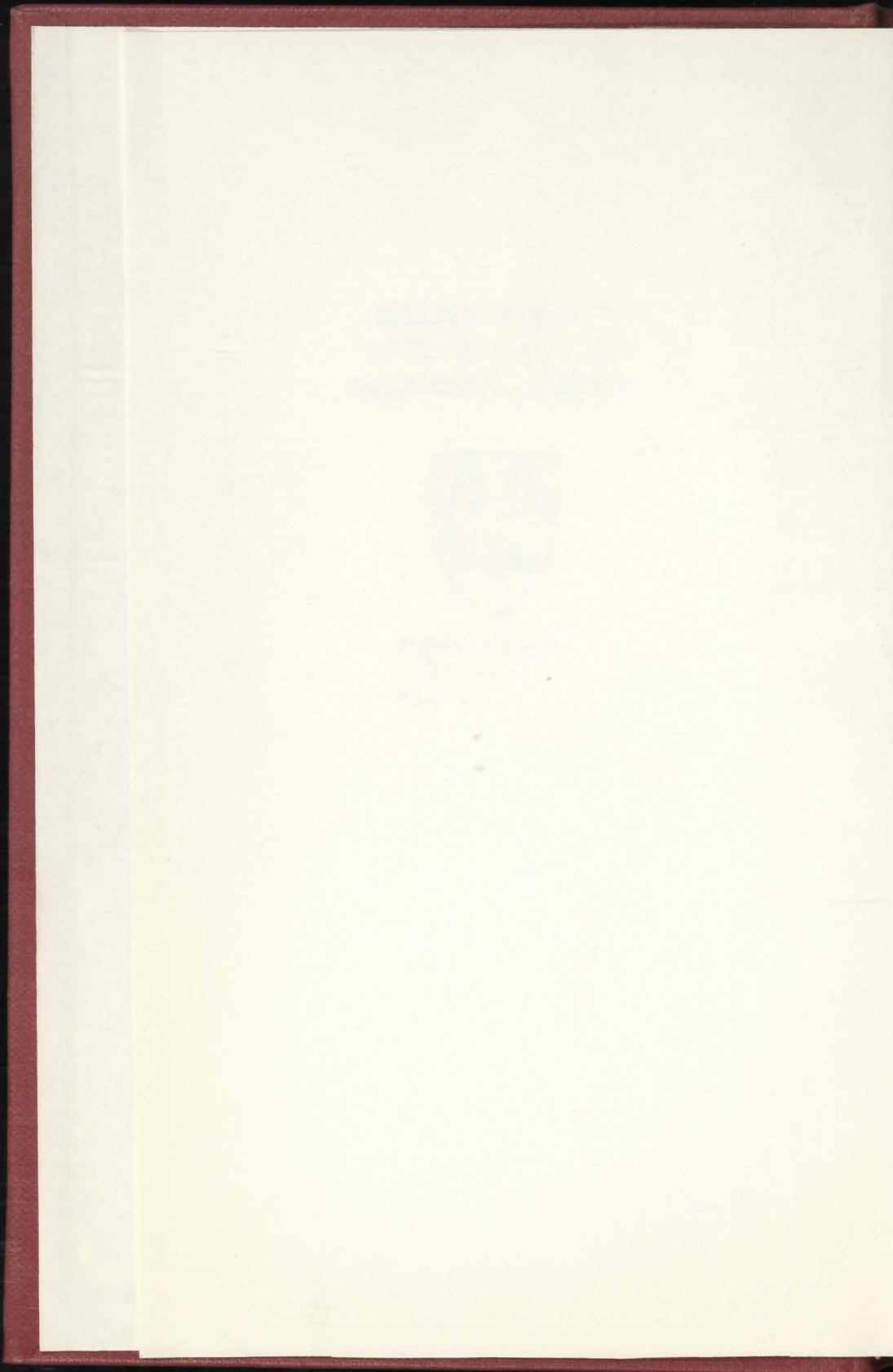


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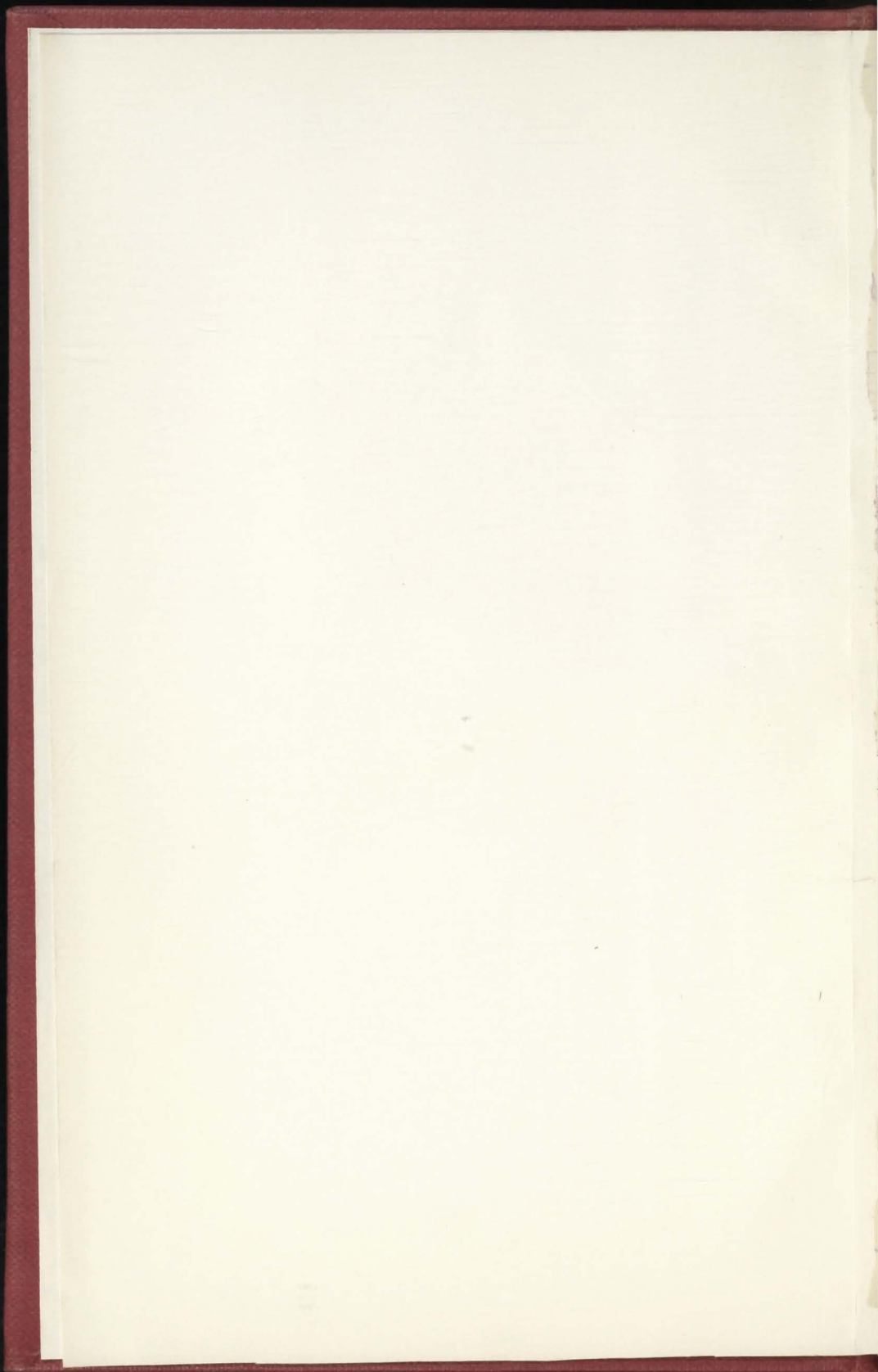
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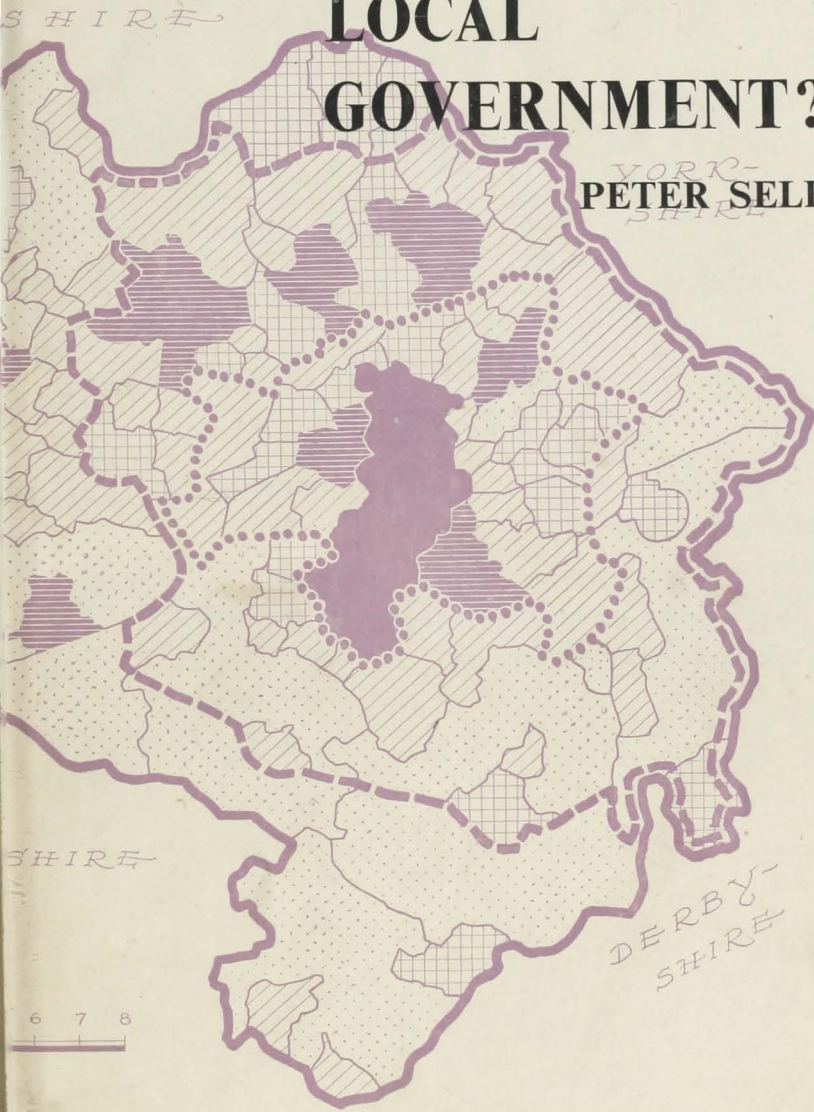




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WHITHER LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

BY
PETER SELF



FABIAN SOCIETY TRACT No. 279
ONE SHILLING

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January, 1950.

PREFACE

The exit of the Local Government Boundary Commission does not mean another indefinite postponement of the reform of our local government system. The Minister of Health has announced that the Government is working on major proposals for the overhaul of the system, and presumably legislation can be expected early in the life of the New Parliament. Meanwhile, the wartime moratorium on changes of boundaries and statutes has been further extended—another reason why reform must come soon.

There is no need to emphasise the importance of the subject. Local self-government is an essential part of a live democracy; upon its efficiency hangs the success of our expanding social services, upon its vigour depends the reality of popular participation in the everyday tasks of government. It is a vital mechanism for ascertaining the needs of the people as citizens, and for redressing their grievances as consumers. It is not for nothing that the early Fabians laid stress on the great potentialities of local government. Their beliefs have been amply fulfilled by the enormous expansion of locally-controlled services. But the system itself has not moved with the burdens which it has assumed. It is this fact which—now that a further era of expanding public services has begun—makes reform so crucial and so urgent.

It is also fatal to conceive local government in static terms. What is wanted is a system which will not only perform its allotted tasks with due competence, but which will have within it the seeds of further improvements and innovations. It is a mistake to let all progress wait on Parliament. Enlightened councils have often in the past led the way in social reform and in the introduction of new forms of public enterprise. Today there is an equally great need for initiative and experiment in the field of public administration. It is important that this point should be recognised, and that local government should be encouraged to make the great contribution in this field of which it is capable.

What is wanted, then, is a reform of the local government system which will not only raise its general standard of efficiency, but will do so in a way that liberates new social energies. This is no easy task, but it is capable of achievement. It is sad to observe that the various local authority associations have been quite unable to agree on the general lines of reform. It is natural for each type of local authority to be conscious of its own achievements and advantages. But the spirit of democratic self-government does not depend upon any particular form of institution, however venerable, but reaches its best and fullest expansion through continuous adaptation to changing needs. The needs and conditions of today are far removed from those of sixty years ago, when our system was set up. Our local institutions have to face

a corresponding adaptation—otherwise they will slowly perish in favour of more centralised and less democratic arrangements.

It is unfortunate that there is no body to speak for the cause of local self-government as a whole. Almost the nearest approach to one is N.A.L.G.O., whose attention is naturally concentrated on administrative efficiency. But if we are to have a satisfactory new system it must not just be imposed from above—it must be based on the practical needs and desires of the citizens who will work it and live under it. Someone must speak for them. Now that time is short, I hope that the present local councils will desist from sectional warfare and self-protective forays and join together to refashion the system in the general interest. But whether they will or no, it is essential to get the maximum amount of constructive ideas and suggestions from the local level.

My own proposals owe a great deal to two reports. The Labour Party's plan for local government, issued during the war before it came to office, is still, I believe, fundamentally sound. It can be improved and amplified by adopting some of the recommendations of the Local Government Boundary Commission made in its 1947 report—in particular, its idea of the 'most-purpose' authority which would embody many traditional advantages of county borough government in a new setting. In addition, I believe that greater attention is necessary than is given in either report to the special problems of our densely-populated industrial conurbations, and to securing the revival of the lower tier of local authorities.

One subject which needs more investigation is the relative advantages of local authorities of different sizes. The drawbacks of the small local government unit of a few thousand population are today obvious enough. These small bodies have not the money, or the range of consumers, to meet the needs of modern administration. They cannot afford to employ expert or specialised staff wholetime. Even a basic requirement like the supply of pure water is beyond the capacity of many small rural district councils, valiantly as they have striven to meet it. On the other hand, the drawbacks attached to some of the largest units of local government are less well known. The accusation that these large authorities are "run by their officials" is sometimes (by no means always) justified. The big authorities are often heavy spenders. As towns increase in size beyond a certain point, the expenditure of the local authority per head of the population tends to rise also. How far these rising costs reflect the inevitable diseconomies of large-scale urbanism, how far they are compensated for by improved standards of service, or how far they are caused by inefficiencies of large-scale administration, it is not easy to tell. There is evidence that some large authorities suffer from unduly large overheads.

It is dangerous to jump to conclusions on this matter. A great deal depends upon what services the authority in question is to perform. There are some services which can be done cheaply and efficiently only by a really large authority; and there are other services again for which the tiny local authority still has advantages. Again a distinction needs to be drawn in some services between planning, which can only be carried out efficiently over a wide area, and detailed administration which needs a more intimate and local touch. However, a sound general principle to apply in the case of any service is to operate it at the most local level that is compatible with reasonably efficient administration. However, the vast forward development of the public services has made unavoidable a steady increase in the size of the basic unit of administration. In most services today, the right basic unit is not very large or remote, it may still fairly be described as local in character, but it is undeniably different from and larger than many traditional units of local government.

Our local government system today is like a wood which has faced a westerly gale for some sixty years. The smaller trees in the front facing the full force of the gale have lost their branches and become bent and bowed; some of the larger trees behind have also lost topmost branches which have been blown off them. The simile is, I think, a fair one. The changing needs of the public services cannot be gainsaid. They have therefore been met, in the first instance by the removal of functions from minor to major local authorities and in the second phase (which is now occurring) by the transfer of functions from local government as a whole to new agencies. It is worth repeating again that all this has happened (and will go on happening) because our local government structure has been more or less static, inflexible and unresponsive to the great developments in the services for which it is responsible.

This pamphlet is in no way a eulogy of large-scale administration or of the big authority. In some respects, on the contrary, it seeks to make local government more local than it is at present. What it does insist is that a proper system of local government must be attuned to the functions which it is to carry out; and that Burke (who was anything but a radical) was after all right in saying that a state without the means of change is without the means of its own conservation. Local self-government in this country has long been the State's handyman or jack-of-all-trades. Will it continue to be so?

* * *

Nomenclature causes some difficulties. The word 'regional', for instance, has unfortunate associations with the wartime system of Civil Defence, and is usually associated with the devolution of

central administration. I do not use it in this sense. The 'regional' councils I propose would be directly elected and cover smaller areas than the Government's regions; they would be the major authorities of a reformed local government system. Similarly, a careful distinction has to be drawn between the present county boroughs and non-county boroughs and the new sort of 'borough' which I (following the Boundary Commission) propose.

Any scheme of local government reform must necessarily pay attention to administrative requirements. Our present system has grave defects in this direction, and the new needs of public services cannot be overlooked. But I am aware that changes in its population and rateable value do not necessarily make a local council more efficient—let alone more popular. No scheme of reform can be successful which fails to pay the closest attention to local needs, local conditions and local sentiments. All that follows is subject to this proviso. It is one thing to lay down general principles of local government reform—it is quite another thing to work out this application to particular localities, a task which can only be done satisfactorily after careful and detailed investigation on the spot. Some part of the work of local investigation has already been carried out by the Local Government Boundary Commission; but still more is needed, and only by eliciting the prompt co-operation of councillors and citizens can the task succeed.

I have set out my own views at greater length in a Fabian booklet, "Regionalism" (price 3/6), which was published only recently and which contains a more detailed analysis than is possible here. If my proposals are sometimes dogmatically stated, my hope is that they will at least provoke discussion on an important and pressing subject.

I—WHAT IS WRONG WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

In this section I shall set out the main weaknesses which at present afflict local government. I do not think there will be much disagreement with my diagnosis—it is the nature of the right cure which causes controversy.

(a) Decay of the Minor Authorities

The minor local authorities consist of the three types of county district—non-county boroughs, urban districts and rural districts—and the parish councils in rural areas.

These minor authorities—there are as many as 1,384 county districts and 11,100 parish councils and meetings—constitute the vast majority of all local councils and in many respects the core of the whole system. They represent local government at its truly

local level, and their sickness is undermining the health of the whole system. Parish councils and meetings perform valuable work as a focus of village life, as upholders of village rights and advocates of village needs. They perform important educational and advisory duties. But necessarily, because of their size they have for a long time had few executive functions. It is, accordingly, the county districts with which I am chiefly concerned in this section.

For a long time the county districts have been losing functions to the counties. But the process has been enormously accelerated during the last five years. They have yielded up their fire services under the Fire Act (1947); they have ceased to be planning authorities under the Town and Country Planning Act (1947); and most non-county boroughs have lost their police forces under the Police Act (1946). These three transfers were probably unavoidable. What is more disturbing is the elimination of the minor authorities from the new educational system and the national health scheme. Apart from 44 'Excepted Districts' (mainly in outer London), the boroughs and urban districts, which were Part III authorities for elementary education, have lost their powers (Education Act, 1944). All county district councils have had to surrender their powers over maternity and child welfare, midwifery and the other preventive health services under the National Health Act (1946).

The main functions now left to county district councils are housing, water supply (scheduled for nationalisation), main drainage and sewage disposal, street lighting and paving and minor roads in urban areas, baths and washhouses, small parks, museums, allotments, and a host of regulatory powers. There are all important duties—and a valuable new function (when funds permit its exercise) is the provision of theatres, concerts and entertainments. But (apart from housing) is there much on the list to inspire the enthusiasm of the local residents? Are the responsibilities wide enough (especially in view of tightening central control) to retain the services of really competent officers and specialists? Is there a big enough job to inspire the other citizens to stand for the council?

I think that in each case the answer is in the negative. Already many of the minor authorities are having difficulty in finding or keeping good officials, who do not after all want to work in a complete backwater. The root mistake, to my mind, is that those services which intimately concern the citizen as consumer—such as health, education and old peoples' welfare—have been wholly transferred to a higher level. Until the minor local councils are given some sort of participation in the social services (what sort will be discussed later) they will go on decaying.

The position bears especially hardly on a fairly large non-county borough or urban district, which in the last few years may have lost its powers for health, elementary education, town planning and fire services, its police force and (under nationalisation schemes) its gas, electricity and transport undertakings. This is a formidable list indeed. Yet many such authorities are as populous and as rich as the average county borough. In the London region, for example, the average metropolitan borough has 120,000 citizens, and the average urban district or non-county borough over 75,000. Cambridge has 80,000 residents and Luton 109,000. Yet these are all minor authorities, with small and dwindling powers, while county boroughs—many of which are smaller—run all their own services. It is an illogical arrangement.

I do not mean to suggest that this transfer of functions from county districts—sad as it is—has not (for the most part anyhow) been unavoidable—*given the system as it now is*. Our great social services cannot be entrusted to units which are administratively inefficient. Even the average urban or rural district has too small a population (about 15,000) to run the services in question with proper efficiency (although it does not follow that they could not be associated with some aspects of the work). But in any case it is not the average authority which counts. The Government cannot be blamed for refusing to entrust important services, requiring highly specialised staff, expensive equipment and an adequate range of consumers, to tiny county district councils with populations of a few thousands. It has had to use the existing system, and this has left it with little real choice. The result—reversing the usual law of nature—is that the stronger county districts have had to suffer for the defects of their weaker brethren.

The Tories, who prattle a great deal about keeping local government local, completely overlook this point. They do not explain how they would restore vigour and strength to the local councils whose decay they lament. They know perfectly well that it is impossible to hand back powers to the minor authorities as they are at present constituted. But they have not the honesty to say so.

It is important that the Labour Movement should show more courage. It is no good having a second tier of local authorities that have been stripped of most of those duties for which local contact is especially important. It is no good letting boroughs keep their ancient pomp and panoply if behind it is an empty shell. It is no good bowing to tradition and custom at the expense of democratic reality.

It is obvious that an effective system of minor authorities cannot be produced without changes in the resources, the population and the status of most of the existing units. But it does not

follow that such changes need make local government 'more remote' or 'less democratic'. On the contrary, many services which at present are carried out at county level could then be administered, or partly administered, by elected councils operating at a much more local and intimate level. This would be a distinct advance in making local government 'convenient' as well as 'effective'. Such a reform would also, of course, involve some loss of local roots and traditions. This must be frankly faced. But which is preferable—to die in quiescence, or to face the pangs of a new birth?

(b) Conflict Between Counties and County Boroughs

The major local authorities consist of the counties and county boroughs. These bodies were set up in 1888. The 61 administrative counties were based on the ancient judicial shires, and even at their inception differed enormously in population and resources—e.g., in 1891 Lancashire had 1,768,100 and Rutland 21,000 citizens. These differences are even greater today. A special defect of the counties is that, dating back to the pre-industrial age, their areas have no relation to the great economic and social concentrations brought into being by the Industrial Revolution—for instance, the Birmingham conurbation sprawls across corners of Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Staffordshire.

The 1888 Act which created the counties allowed the larger towns—those with populations of over 50,000 and a few under—to become completely autonomous authorities for local government purposes. They were to be 'counties unto themselves'. Towns of their size were—to some extent, still are—good units for running most services. They are a convenient size and have solid local roots. Unfortunately, the effect of this arrangement on the counties has been unsatisfactory. It has been the aim of every fair-sized town to achieve the cherished county borough status, and, in fact, the number of county boroughs has increased from 61 in 1888 to 83 today—and would have increased further had the status not been illogically refused to many suitable aspirants. At the same time, as England's towns have spread outwards, often in a sprawling and chaotic manner, the county boroughs have made repeated claims for extensions of their boundaries, which have usually been granted—though often tardily and reluctantly.

The effect on the counties has been to deprive them of some of their richest urban and suburban areas, and gravely to impair their efficiency. For instance, if Luton and Cambridge were given the county borough status which they deserve as much as most of those now holding it, the administration of the present counties of Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire would be completely wrecked. To protect the counties, Parliament tightened the procedure for becoming or extending a county borough as long ago as 1926. The war has brought a further moratorium on changes.

However, the problem was only postponed. At the present time at least half the county boroughs need additional land for purposes of housing and proper planning. If it is denied them it will not be possible to overcome the overcrowding, traffic congestion and lack of playing-fields and amenities which afflict so many of our cities. The winding-up of the Local Government Boundary Commission, which was dealing with the more urgent aspects of this situation by way of provisional orders, is a severe blow to such towns as Plymouth and Sunderland. Also there are a number of towns of over 75,000 population seeking county borough status. These claims cannot, under the present system, be logically denied. But their concession would upset the fabric of county government.

The conflict between county and county boroughs has two root causes. The system set up in 1888 assured a rigid and narrow distinction between town and countryside which is no longer applicable. In the second place, that system has proved completely rigid as far as the major authorities are concerned. Our present counties are the same as sixty years ago; our present county boroughs are also the same with three deletions and 25 additions. There are more major local authorities today than sixty years ago. Over this period, however, the scale and extent of public administration has become enormously broader and more specialised. Many authorities which had the population and rateable value to operate their services efficiently in 1888 can no longer do so today. The result is a kind of Balkan struggle for *lebenstraum* between the counties and county boroughs, each trying to get an adequate area and resources. It is obvious that in this struggle neither side can be the winner—so long as the status of each and every county or county borough which now exists is regarded as sacrosanct.

(c) The Loss of Powers to Local Government

It has been found necessary, over the last few years, to take a number of important services which traditionally belong there right out of the sphere of local government. Public assistance—so far as cash payments and relief in the home is concerned—has gone to the National Assistance Board; hospitals have been transferred from the counties and county boroughs to the Regional Hospital Boards; municipal gas and electricity concerns have been handed over to the new Area Boards, and municipal transport undertakings are liable to be 'regionalised' under national control. Other transfers include the loss of civil airfields and of many miles of roads which have become trunk roads under the Ministry of Transport. The list is not yet complete. Water, an important local government service, is scheduled for some brand of 'regionalisation'; other services may follow. Moreover, where powers nominally remain with local authorities, their effective responsi-

bility has been sometimes diminished. For instance, control over town and country planning is carried out to a considerable extent by the regional offices of the Departments—thus bringing into being an elaborate and expensive five-tiered hierarchy covering the national, regional, county, sub-county and county district levels. On all sides central control has tightened.

Not all of these changes need necessarily be regretted. Even when local government has been reformed, some of these services might be better run outside it. But, taken together, this formidable list of lost and truncated powers—with others yet to come—does reveal the damaging weakness of our local government system. We cannot answer this argument by saying—as is certainly true—that important new duties have also been handed to local authorities. After all, local elected councils should be more democratic and more accessible bodies than appointed regional boards. In the former case the chain of responsibility goes straight back to the local electorate; in the latter case it proceeds via devious and loose links to the Minister concerned, the Cabinet, Parliament and the national electorate.

The control of Parliament over the regional boards is shadowy in the extreme; the protection given to consumers is dependent on nominated (not elected) consultative councils. In terms of public accountability, this compares very poorly with the well-tryed machinery of local self-government. It is in the social services—hospitals, for instance—that a proper and immediate democratic control (the best way of remedying consumers' grievances) is especially desirable.

It is sometimes said that the best results are obtained if each service is organised in the manner most appropriate to its own technical requirements. This is the pattern which is being followed (at present experimentally) in the cast of new nationalised and regionalised services. It has obvious advantages, and is certainly appropriate in some cases. The trouble is that if this theory is pushed too far it may mean the end of effective democratic control. For what citizen could find his way amidst a mass of special authorities for different purposes, even if he were (which he is not at present) to be given some part in electing them? He is somewhat lost already in the mazes of the health service. Moreover, the growth of numerous special authorities has administrative drawbacks as well as advantages. It means, for instance, considerable duplication of legal and accounting staff. It puts up the total cost of government—for each board or agency is anxious to push rapidly ahead and develop its service in an expert manner, and there is nobody (short of Parliament itself) to count and co-ordinate the total cost. Ultimate Parliamentary control of public expenditure is no remedy. Parliament has not time, knowledge or effective authority to compare and bring together the local expendi-

tures of numerous special authorities. The scrutiny of a local council, responsible to the ratepayers, is far more effective. The transfer of services out of local government has already put up the costs of public administration.

The basic trouble is, of course, the incapacity of *some* of our major local authorities—the counties and county boroughs—to run services which traditionally and properly belong to local government. The great range in their size and resources needs to be remembered. While there are 3 county boroughs with over half a million inhabitants, there are 20 with less than 75,000; while 7 counties contain over a million residents there are 13 (largely in Wales, it is true) with under 100,000. Do not think that I am any worshipper of size as such; in the contrary, my aim is to keep local government as local as is administratively possible, and the aim of this pamphlet is to show how that can be done. But no local authority can be left to administer services which exceed its capacity and resources. As with the county districts, the stronger members among the counties and county boroughs have to suffer for the defects of their weaker brethren. There are many individually efficient local authorities; but the system is not collectively efficient.

A multitude of evidence is available to support this statement. Here one point must suffice. The Local Government Boundary Commission came to the conclusion that no local authority with a population under 200,000 can run *all* the major services with full efficiency. This figure disbars a third of the present counties and four-fifths of the present county boroughs. Possibly it is put too high. Even if the much lower criterion of 100,000 population is substituted, over a third of the present major local authorities fail to satisfy the test. Attention should be paid to the word *all*. The smaller county boroughs, for instance, are mostly capable of administering the majority of their powers in a satisfactory manner. But there are some services, or parts of services, for which a wider conception is essential—and the lack of it is making local government as a whole the loser.

(d) Financial Problems

I have space only to allude briefly to two financial problems of local government.

In the first place, it is sometimes said that the new Exchequer Equalisation Grant has cured the problems of the poorer local authorities. In one sense, it has done so. It has brought the rateable value per head of these authorities up to the average for authorities of the same class. But the need for an adequate *total* revenue still remains vital. To administer any services efficiently an authority must have a large enough population to raise the necessary finance. The true effect of the Equalisation Grant is to

make the financial resources of an authority roughly correspond to the size of its population (which, so far as it goes, is a change for the better).

In the second place, there is the problem of rates. Rates, being to some extent regressive in their incidence, are an unsatisfactory form of taxation. Unfortunately, there is no suitable alternative available. It is essential to prevent the burden of rates from becoming too heavy. This means that most of the increased expenditure of local authorities has to be derived from other sources. It is not desirable—from any angle—that all this additional finance should take the form of Government grants. Therefore, it is necessary for the local authorities to find new sources of revenue. This should be done in two ways. Local authorities should be permitted, and encouraged, to develop trading concerns which may yield a profit. We are still tied too closely to the tradition that it is only the non-commercial, unprofitable activities that are a fit subject for municipal enterprise.* In the second place, the proceeds of certain taxes at present collected on a national basis—such as entertainments duty and motor vehicle licences—might be earmarked for the use of local authorities.

CONCLUSION

The unsatisfactory condition of the present system of local government can be judged by three symptoms:—

- (a) The decay of the minor local authorities (the county district councils). Here is local government at its most local going to seed.
- (b) The continuation of the profitless controversy between counties and county boroughs.
- (c) The transfer of powers and responsibilities away from local government as a whole.

These symptoms are indicative of an underlying weakness. Our system of local government was set up sixty years ago, and the system was not wholly satisfactory then. Public administration has been revolutionised since that date; its needs have changed vastly—so has the physical face of Britain, and its economic and social patterns; but our system of local government remains virtually unchanged.

* Incidentally, it is a pity that the public management of licensed premises has been treated as a matter of central, instead of local, control. From the social viewpoint, local councils should be more responsive to public opinion than the system of State management; from the financial viewpoint, the ratepayer is a more suitable beneficiary than the Exchequer. It may be said that, since the system applies to only a few areas, the benefit would accrue to a small group of ratepayers arbitrarily selected. But this objection would not apply if municipalities everywhere were permitted to run hotels or public houses in competition with private enterprise. There is more to be had from a wide dissemination of municipal enterprise than from the construction of a Government monopoly in one or two localities.

II—REFORMING LOCAL GOVERNMENT

1.—GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this section I want to set out briefly two general considerations that should be taken note of by any scheme of reform. They are additional to the points that have already been made.

(a) Simplicity of Structure

We must beware of too complex a system of local government. There are two main reasons for this. To create too many kinds of local authorities, or offshoots thereof, is to build up an elaborate and expensive machine, which the country cannot afford, especially under present conditions. In the second place, an elaborate system confuses the electorate and divides or frustrates the energies of councillors.

The ordinary citizen already finds it difficult to take an interest in the doings of both a local council and a county council. He is inclined to vote for the council nearest home and to forget about the larger authority. This helps to explain why county council elections have so far attracted such low polls, although there are signs that the position is slowly improving, as the public become aware of the great powers which county councils now possess.

To have too many types of local authority is to blunt the edge of public responsibility. Nobody knows who is really responsible for what. By the same token, it is always less satisfactory for an authority to administer delegated powers than for it to perform the same service in its own right. The delegation of powers from a major to a minor local authority is sometimes the only way of enlisting the participation of the smaller body. In suitable cases it is a useful device, which needs to be used more widely and imaginatively. (I will return to this point later). But it must be recognised that, in principle, delegation is a less satisfactory arrangement than direct responsibility. Especially is this so where the body exercising the delegated function is not itself an elected authority. Our present system of divisional executives in education gets the worst of both worlds.

Therefore, the new system of local government should be reasonably simple. I believe that some sort of two-tier system over most, or all, of the country is now completely unavoidable* unless indeed more functions are to be removed altogether from local democratic control. But I do not think we should allow these to be *more* than two tiers. There are certain political advantages in keeping all the present types of local authority in being, and adding a new tier of regional authorities at the top—but it would make the system too cumbersome and muddling.

* It is worth noting that the most widely-quoted scheme in favour of all-purpose government (that drawn up by N.A.L.G.O.) involves, in effect, three tiers.

For the same reasons, the number of joint or special bodies formed out of the local authorities should be kept to a minimum. There must be some such bodies for services like main drainage and water supply, which no local government pattern can fit exactly; but a proliferation of *ad hoc* agencies is undesirable. It is still more important to try and avoid a system in which special agencies have to be inserted in between the upper and lower tiers of local authorities.

(b) Varying Needs

We need an efficient system of local government which is reasonably simple and self-contained. But it does not follow that the same system will do for all parts of the country. At present, the pattern of regional and local administration over England and Wales is becoming exceedingly complex. But the same *types* of local authority do service for all parts of the country. An urban district, for instance, may consist of a large, compact community living within five miles of Charing Cross or of a small, scattered population dwelling up a mining valley. A county borough may be a small planet attached to some great sun, or it may be the sun itself. Even a rural district is sometimes so-called only in name.

I am not suggesting that each part of the country needs a separate system of local government. However desirable in theory, such an arrangement would be administrably unthinkable. What I am pointing out is that our present distinctions assume that an area is either a compact town (in which case it is, or hopes to be, a county borough) or else is mainly rural (in which case it is administered on the two-tier system). But this is now very far from being the case.

There have grown up enormous industrial concentrations which have completely swamped our traditional local government distinctions. Take, for instance, the more or less continuous conurbation consisting of Birmingham and the Black Country, which covers only 200 square miles, but has a population of two million persons packed closely together. What, under our present system, is the appropriate form of government for this region? It is much too populous and differentiated to be merged in a single county borough. In point of fact, it contains five county boroughs of very different types. There is the giant Birmingham, which has over one million residents; Wolverhampton and Walsall, medium-sized industrial centres; Smethwick and West Bromwich, largely suburbs of Birmingham; and Dudley, an ancient but small county borough. The urban areas which lie between these five county boroughs are ruled over by 8 municipal boroughs and 10 urban districts, whilst over these are set no fewer than three county councils, whose areas happen to converge on the conurbation.

Thus the government of this industrial region is shared among four different types of local authority, is split between the all-purpose and the two-tier systems, is partly carried on from three different centres that are thirty or more miles distant, and presents such spectacles as the co-existence side by side of two authorities (both of them urban) with populations of 1,052,900 and 2,836 respectively.

A similar story can be told of the other great industrial concentrations. The two banks of the Tyne are administered by four county boroughs of varying sizes, two county councils and a large number of non-county boroughs and urban districts. Manchester itself is a single large county borough of three-quarters of a million persons; but within seven to eight miles of its centre live a further two million persons who are ruled over by six county boroughs, three counties, nineteen non-county boroughs, thirty-nine urban districts and several rural districts. The local government problems of the metropolis itself are so complex as to beggar quick description. Suffice it to point out that five county councils are concerned in the administration of the Metropolitan Police District, together with three county boroughs, twenty-eight metropolitan boroughs, twenty-seven non-county boroughs and twenty-four urban districts.

The point I am making is basically quite simple. Almost half of the nation's population live today in a half-dozen regions (Greater London, Tyneside, Merseyside, the Manchester area, the Birmingham area, the industrial West Riding), each of which covers a comparatively small land surface but contains several millions of closely-packed inhabitants. Our local government system is incapable of coping with this situation. Its general conceptions predate the Industrial Revolution. It is assumed, for instance, that a fair-sized town (one of over 50,000 or 75,000 inhabitants) is entitled to an independent form of administration. But what is to be done when populations mount up which are 20, 50 or 100 times the size of the typical county borough? Our present system provides no answer; and the result is a welter of local authorities of different types and sizes, striving manfully to cope with the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution and bringing with them the kind of feuds and ambitions which were appropriate to early nineteenth-century England.

I am suggesting that the important distinction in local government needs to be, not that between town and countryside, but a new distinction between the few really big industrial concentrations and the rest of the country. I believe that the same system of local government—the same types of authority and divisions of functions—will not serve in both instances. In saying this, I am not departing from the general aim of simplicity which was laid down earlier. Our new system needs to be reasonably simple and

straightforward, both inside and outside the conurbations; but the local authorities need to be built along different lines and allocated functions on a different basis in the one case than in the other. The result will be no more confusing to the electorate, or awkward to the Government, than the arrangements into which we are now drifting; and I shall try to demonstrate that the distinction which I propose is essential to both good and democratic government.

2—TOWN AND COUNTRYSIDE

Outside the large industrial conurbations (that is, over most of the country) the problems of local government revolve around the relationship of town and country. It is a sociological fact, needing little description, that urban and rural interests are bound up much more closely today than was the case sixty years ago. The ambit of daily travelling, for instance, has expanded enormously—fantastically so, in the case of centres like London.* Many urban workers have their homes in country districts, or escape thither at weekends, whilst the rural population visits the town for shopping and amusement with increasing frequency. Industry and housing has spread outwards from the city centres, here has invaded the countryside, there has created a kind of no-man's land betwixt town and country. Community links have become much wider and vaguer.

This process has been accompanied by much social and economic waste. It is to reduce this waste, to ensure a wiser use of our limited resources of land, and to rebuild—if possible—the sense of community that a new conception of town and country planning has recently grown up. Planning, in this new sense, involves a general control of all types of physical development. It needs to be positive as well as negative—to bring about desirable types of development, as well as preventing undesirable ones. Major schemes of redevelopment, the building of new or satellite towns and large housing schemes, the construction of main roads, the enhancement of scenic beauty, the provision of major open spaces, the co-ordination of water supply, main drainage, and other public utilities—all these services are essential aspects of satisfactory planning.

Town and country planning, in this new sense of general physical planning for the social good, can show little practical achievement to date. There are many reasons for this—among the foremost being its belated recognition and the cramping effect of current economic exigencies. But a further reason is that our present local government areas do not correspond with the needs of this important new service and its associated functions. Town and country planning—almost by definition, certainly by observation—cannot be carried out by authorities which are narrowly urban or mainly rural.

* A large number of workers in the city travel the equivalent of round the world every year to and from work.

The recent Local Government Boundary Commission argued with good reason that there ought to be an integration between county and county borough for certain important services. The services which it specified included town and country planning (in its main features, but not in its detailed execution), police, fire services, and the finance of main highways. These are all services which require a fairly large area of operations and which are best spread over a mixed urban and rural unit. The Commission's proposal is a sound one. It should be made clear that the planning functions to be exercised over this wider area would not stop at the making of a plan, but would include as well the actual execution of major schemes of development. Otherwise, there would be no appropriate local authority to carry out such schemes, their finance would not be equitably shared, and there would be a dangerous gap between theory and practice.

There is therefore a strong case for a greater integration of town and countryside at the level of the upper tier of local government. But the need for such integration is equally—or more—urgent as regards the lower tier. In this case, indeed, the driving motive is a stronger one, since the minor authorities cannot survive effectively—may not be able to survive at all—in their present shape.

The need is to give the minor local councils more worthwhile powers than they possess at present, and in particular to give them some participation in the great scheme of social services from which they are at present excluded. Otherwise, they will sink further into obscurity and dudgeon. How can this aim be realised? Clearly, it must involve the amalgamation of many of the weaker minor authorities, and the creation of a higher administrative minimum. There is only one practical way of doing this—the union of rural districts with urban districts or non-county boroughs. A very little reflection will show that no other method is workable.

This proposal will, of course, be opposed on the grounds that it will make our minor authorities "remote." But will it really? Admittedly, many rural districts already cover a large and scattered area, which should not be further enlarged. But it would not need to be. The new units would, on the average, be no larger than our present rural districts. Only in place of the existence side by side of two separate councils, occupying two separate offices—one for a small town and the other for surrounding countryside, there would be a single council and offices for the whole unit. Not only would there be a clear advantage in administrative convenience, but new links would be forged between town and country from which both should gain.

Practical objections will also be alleged. For instance, town councils commonly meet in the evenings, rural councils in the daytime. Some subjects (e.g. housing) produce different problems and

need different treatment in the country from in the town. Again, the interests of urban and rural ratepayers might frequently differ—there is a danger of the country sponging on the town, and of the town denying proper services to the countryside. I am at pains to state these practical problems. But, without doubt, given goodwill, they can be overcome. On some matters, for instance (Housing might be an example) separate committees should be set up for urban and rural areas, which could meet at the times most convenient to their members.

In any case, it is necessary to remember the alternative. Many of our present minor authorities have done excellent work in the past; and some of these are capable of carrying on, with enhanced powers, after comparatively small alterations. But the majority require regeneration. It is a sham adulation of local democracy to keep these in being, shorn of their powers, sooner than face the difficulties of reorganisation.

The new town and country councils, on the other hand, could be given some worthwhile duties. The larger among them would be capable, for instance, of operating primary and secondary education, either (and preferably) in their own right, or else as the agents of the major authority*; they would also be capable of undertaking the welfare of old people and of children, and of playing a part in the National Health Service. The smaller among them, besides discharging their present powers more efficiently, would be better placed to act as agents for a number of other services. The general principles of delegation ought to be laid down centrally and approved by Parliament; actual schemes of delegation should be worked out locally. The new minor authorities, as responsible elected bodies, should be given a genuine discretion in the exercise of their powers. Finally, the new mixed authorities would be much better able to finance and support museums, art galleries, theatres, swimming-baths and other cultural and recreational activities, which will become of increasing importance; and also to undertake new trading ventures, such as local authority laundries, and to extend social facilities, such as baths and wash-houses.

3—THE INDUSTRIAL CONURBATIONS

In this section, I shall indicate a solution for the special problems of the large industrial conurbations. There are three reasons for giving special attention to these areas: (a) they contain over 40% of England's population, (b) our present system of local government was not designed to cope with them, and is working

* In the latter case, it is essential that they should be allowed more discretion than the present divisional executives. Lady Simon of Wythenshawe recently maintained, however, that an authority of 40,000 population is quite capable of running primary and secondary education in its own right. Many of the new minor authorities would satisfy this criterion.

badly in them, (c) because of their concentrated population, they present special difficulties and also special opportunities.

The best approach is to consider the proper organisation of services in a concentrated industrial region. There are, to start with, a number of services which need to be provided and financed for the region as a whole. They include town and country planning, major development projects, main roads, the principal public utilities (including water supply, main drainage, sewage disposal and refuse destruction), and the protective services (fire, police, civil defence).

The case for integrating many of these services over wider areas was argued in the previous section. But the case is especially strong—indeed, overwhelming—where a large industrial conurbation is concerned, for land is extremely scarce, and close co-ordination of physical development and public utilities is essential. Moreover, all our big industrial centres suffer from serious congestion and overcrowding. Their physical condition is sometimes appalling, their living conditions often disgraceful.

Slums must be cleared, roads must be widened, derelict land must be restored to productive use, city centres must be rebuilt, and surplus population must be settled in new or satellite towns.

Great projects such as these concern and benefit each industrial region as a whole. But there is at present no appropriate body to finance and execute them. Responsibility for carrying these out is divided amongst a medley of major and minor local authorities, whose interest is sometimes too narrow (as with the smaller county boroughs) or too dispersed (as with many counties). The lack of an appropriate elected local authority is causing more and more of the work to be carried out by the Government or special agencies. But to rely on Government intervention is a poor solution—even if it worked, which it does not at the present. It means doing without the driving force and the skill and knowledge which can only spring from a genuine local (or rather regional) patriotism.

In the case of the principal social services, our system of local government in the conurbations is equally unsatisfactory and illogical. But here the trouble is of an opposite kind—the present system is too remote and is *not local enough*. For instance, the bodies responsible for education, health and social welfare in Greater London include the London County Council (population 3½ million), Middlesex (over 2 million), Kent, Essex and Surrey (all over a million); in Greater Manchester they include Manchester County Borough (750,000), Lancashire County Council (2 million); and so on. Many of the counties concerned have responsibilities which stretch far beyond the conurbation in question. I do not mean to question the efficiency with which these authori-

ties carry out their work, which is often very great. But why is it necessary to carry on these services, in which local contacts are especially important, over such enormous units of population? Certainly it is necessary (as I have stressed earlier) to have a population which is adequate to the technical requirements of the services in question. But even the most stringent technical requirements do not necessitate populations of more than half a million; and in the view of the Local Government Boundary Commission, an authority of 60,000 or over is competent to run *most* local social services efficiently.

There is no need to discuss technical requirements in detail. The point is that where population is fairly concentrated, it is possible to form local authorities of at least 60,000 population (in some areas 100,000 or 200,000) which are reasonably small and compact yet which are strong enough to run important services in their own right—in other words, to get a system which is genuinely local (where being local is of most account) and properly efficient. This could be done in all the main industrial conurbations.

A far more rational system would result than the present medley of major and minor authorities of all kinds and sizes. Those services which concern the whole conurbation would be planned and partly executed by a single major authority. The main social services would be entrusted to a uniform layer of lesser authorities, of much greater power and independence than those which now exist. At present in a conurbation the major authorities are inadequate for some purposes and too big for others, whilst the minor authorities are weak and underprivileged. Both these defects would be removed, and a much sounder system—regional where it should be regional and local where it should be local—would be substituted.

CONCLUSION

A reformed system of local government should be reasonably simple and comprehensive, and should not contain more than two tiers.

On the other hand, local government arrangements for the large industrial conurbations need to be rather different from those introduced elsewhere.

Outside the conurbations, certain major services need to be operated over wider areas embracing both towns and countryside. The minor authorities can only be put back on their feet by means of the union of urban and rural districts.

Inside each conurbation local government should be reorganised along rational lines. A single major authority should have general charge of physical planning and development, but the social services should be mainly administered by smaller authorities having local roots.

III—THE NEW SYSTEM

Local government is a complicated subject. The aim of this chapter is to try and make clearer the general conception outlined in the last chapter, and to tackle some outstanding issues.

The general pattern of local government which I envisage is as follows:—

REGIONAL COUNCIL

|
—|
BOROUGH COUNCILS TOWN & COUNTRY COUNCILS

Regional Councils

I use the word 'regional' to mark the difference from the present two types of major local authority. But I do not mean to imply that the regions in question would be as large as the Civil Defence regions. There would be considerable continuity between the new regional authorities and some at least of the present counties.

I cannot describe the exact areas which these regional councils would cover. But I can indicate their *minimum* size. In the first place, each distinctive industrial region should fall wholly within the area of a single regional council. For example, the regional council administering Greater Manchester should cover *at the least* a radius of 12 to 15 miles from the city's centre. It *might* cover a considerably wider area. (The Boundary Commission built its proposal for a 'Manchester County' on an almost parochial scale.)

Outside the main conurbations, the new regions should be based as far as possible on the present counties. They would include (for certain purposes only) the towns which are at present county boroughs, with a few possible exceptions. A few very large towns, which stand more or less in isolation and which can run all their services with full efficiency *without detriment to the surrounding area*, might continue to be wholly or almost wholly autonomous for purposes of local government. Examples are large ports, such as Bristol, Plymouth, Southampton and Hull.*

A number, at any rate, of the present counties would be amalgamated to form the new regions. How far this process ought to go is an interesting point. Many *geographical* counties (e.g., the present counties inclusive of their county boroughs) would form—after minor changes—moderately satisfactory administrative units for the purposes in hand. To keep a majority of the present counties in being would also help to appease sentiment and tradition. On the other hand, by ignoring county boundaries, more rational regions—conforming better to economic and social areas—

* The Boundary Commission distinguished 18 large towns in this position.

could be produced. Again, by taking wider areas, the regional councils could undertake a wider range of services, including a number of services now carried out by nominated boards or departments.

I will risk taking two examples. In South-East England there would be a regional council for Greater London, which should cover an area not far short of the Greater London plan (perhaps excluding N.E. Herts and S. Surrey). To the West of it, a new region might be formed out of the three small counties of Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Berkshire (excluding those parts in Greater London). To the South, Sussex, South Surrey and Kent might form a new region. On the other hand, Essex, outside Greater London, together with a corner of Hertfordshire, might stand on its own. So might Hampshire.

The North of England presents different problems. Here, were we to build our regions on the wider of several possible scales, there would be much to be said for creating five regions—(i) the whole of Yorkshire, (ii) Northumberland, Durham, (iii) Cumberland, Westmorland and N. Lancashire, (iv) Merseyside, (v) Greater Manchester. Tyreside would form a sixth region within the framework of region (ii). Teeside might be wholly included in (ii). The West Riding industrial conurbation might either be merged in region (i) or given a separate regional authority.

I only throw these suggestions out by way of illustration. Whether they are acceptable or not (and they are inevitably controversial) does not affect my general argument. The number of local government regions in England and Wales would be more than the Civil Defence regions, and less than the present counties. There might be anywhere from 20 to 40 regions, depending on which of several possible plans is adopted.

The functions of a regional council would vary for the different parts of its area. Over the *whole* of its area, it would be responsible for the main lines of town and country planning, major development projects and new towns, main roads, the co-ordination of water supply and main drainage, river conservation, fire services, police (except in a few large boroughs), civil defence, and the more specialised social services—for example, further and technical education. This list is not, of course, exhaustive. The regional council would also have supervisory powers in many fields (e.g., libraries, street lighting standards).

Inside the conurbations (as we have seen) the regional council would need to exercise a much stronger control than elsewhere over many of these services. It would itself undertake many important housing and redevelopment projects, and would operate (and not merely supervise) the main public utilities.

Over *part* of its area a regional council would be generally responsible for the general system of social services (education, health, social welfare) as well as the more specialised aspects. This responsibility would not extend to the boroughs (see below), or to the conurbations which would be subdivided into boroughs. Elsewhere, there would be a partnership between the regional council and the town-and-country councils for the administration of these services. The stronger town-and-country councils should be able (like the boroughs) to administer most or all of these services in their own right; the weaker ones would be given a share in their administration—which would be varied according to their capacity—through schemes of delegation. Since conditions vary so much in different parts of the country, it might be best to draw up a separate scheme of administration for each region.

One of the great advantages of this system of regional councils is that it would make unnecessary any further removal of powers from local government. For instance, the regional councils would be suitable bodies to operate a nationalised water service. The new system would enable local government to measure up to its enormous tasks in the field of planning and housing where it is at present badly slipping. But it could do even more. Some lost powers could be restored. For instance, the regional councils would be perfectly competent to run the hospitals, and thus reintegrate the Health Service into local government in place of its present divided control.

Borough Councils

A borough council would possess a large measure of authority and independence. It would be wholly responsible, within its area, for a majority of local government services, including primary and secondary education, maternity and child welfare and other preventive health services, and welfare of the aged; it would plan its town and house its inhabitants within the framework of the plan laid down by the regional council; and it would discharge (with a few exceptions) the various powers which *all* boroughs at present possess.

I describe it simply as a 'borough' in order to distinguish it from both the county borough and the non-county borough as at present existing. It would, in fact, possess less powers than the former type of authority, but considerably more than the latter type. It would be akin to the new conception of a 'most-purpose' urban authority invented by the Boundary Commission. But my conception differs from the Commission's in at least one important respect. This is that I want a wide extension of the idea to the large conurbations. Each main conurbation would be subdivided into a number of boroughs. To some extent, these boroughs would consist of existing local councils under a new name and

with new (and usually enhanced) powers. For instance, in the Greater London region there are a great number of authorities of all sorts (metropolitan boroughs, county boroughs, non-county boroughs, urban districts) mostly capable of becoming new authorities of the sort I am describing, with the uniform appellation of 'borough'; although, for certain special reasons, a good deal of re-organisation (e.g., of the metropolitan boroughs) may well be desirable. In each of the other main conurbations there is at present a medley of great and small county boroughs, non-county boroughs and urban districts. To form a complete and satisfactory system of new 'boroughs' it would be necessary to amalgamate many of the smaller authorities and it might be desirable to subdivide the larger county boroughs (although this latter step need not be taken where it is repugnant to established convenience and sentiment).

The application of the Commission's general idea to the conurbations would make administration not only more efficient, but more genuinely local. The division of functions, however, would be rather different in a conurbation, because it would be essential to give the regional council responsibility for such matters as sewage disposal, refuse destruction and street lighting.

It is essential that each borough has an adequate population. The Commission suggested that towns of over 60,000 residents are capable of running most services efficiently. The minimum standard should not be put any lower. If this figure is taken there would be *outside the conurbations* about 50 towns entitled to borough status. The number of boroughs *inside the conurbations* cannot be precisely stated. Greater London, for instance, might comprise anything from 35 to 100 boroughs, depending on the basis adopted.

This new conception of a borough embodies and extends the traditional advantages of municipal self-government in a form appropriate to modern conditions. It is no longer possible or desirable to give complete independence to the compact urban authority, since certain key services have a wider spread. What is possible is to give a special status and a large measure of autonomy to every fair-sized town, and to extend these advantages across areas which have suffered the evils of urbanisation without getting the advantages of municipal self-rule.

Town and Country Councils

I have already described these bodies in the section on town and countryside, and it is only necessary to summarise.

Each council would cover a mixed urban and rural area, corresponding in many cases to the union of two or more existing authorities. In some cases, the new authority would be mainly urban or largely rural.

So far as possible, each town and country authority should have a reasonable minimum population—say 20,000. Some would be considerably larger. This arrangement would enable the whole class of authorities to possess wider powers than the existing minor authorities. In particular, they would be given important duties in the main social services (see above).

Some minor matters remain to be cleared up:—

Elections

All three types of council (regional, borough and town and country) would be directly elected (preferably annually). There have been suggestions that the council of the major authority should be chosen indirectly from the members of the minor authorities. I do not regard this as being satisfactory. It would tend, in practice, to diminish the authority and independence of the regional councils, cause regional issues to be looked at from a narrow standpoint, and prevent the growth of a regional patriotism. At the outside, a third of the members might be chosen in this way. But the majority, if not all, of the regional council should be directly elected.

Finance

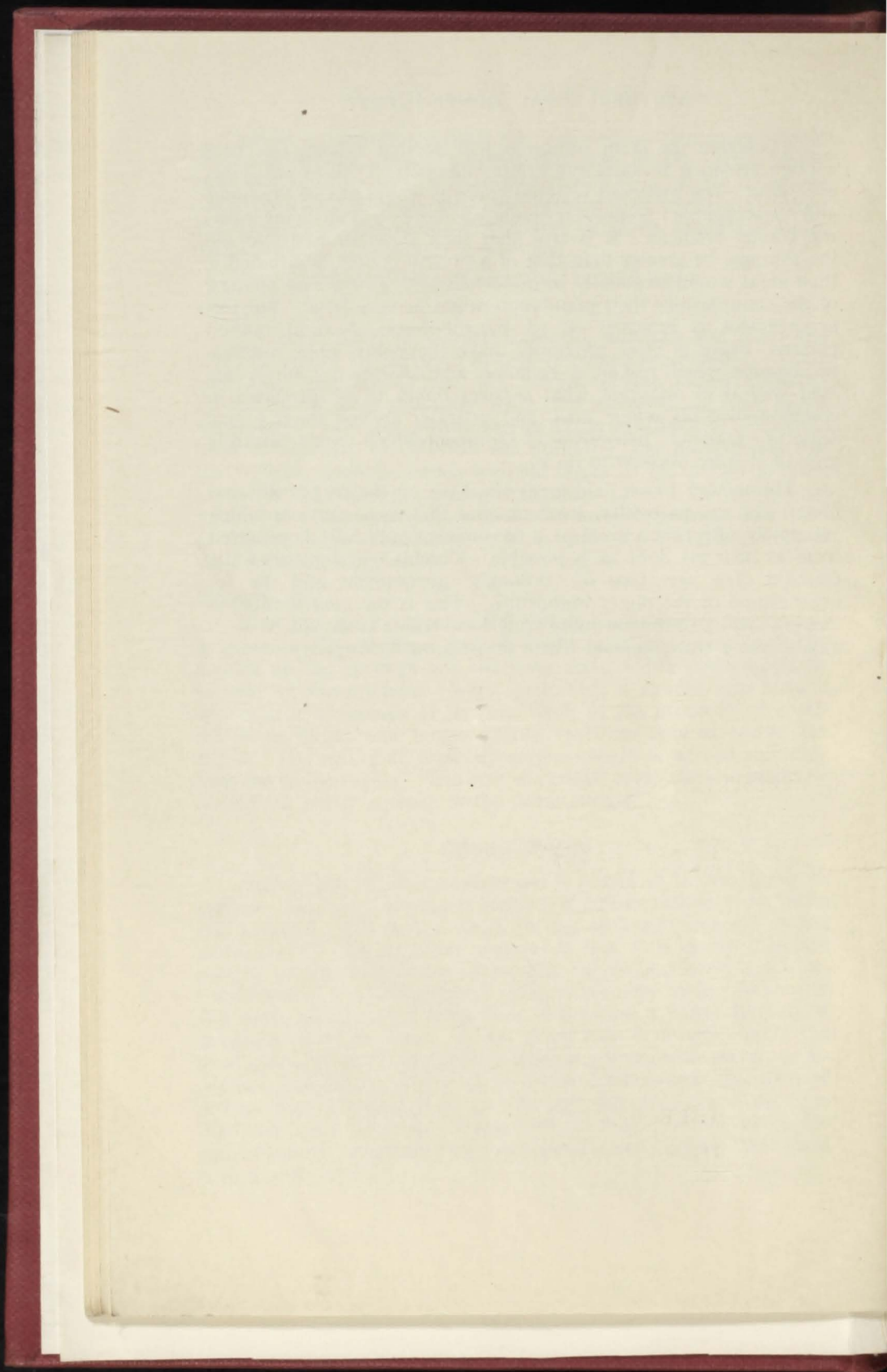
The lesser authorities would remain the rating authorities, as at present. The regional council would raise its finance partly by precept on the borough and the town and country councils, partly by way of Government grants; preferably it should also have a new source of finance of its own, such as the proceeds of entertainments duties and motor licence revenues secured within the region. The cost of all regional services should be spread equitably over the whole region. The cost of certain other services might be spread (or partly spread) in the same manner.

CONCLUSION

Any system of local government is bound to be very far from perfect. There are too many conflicting considerations to be taken into account. The most I claim for my system (which, of course, owes a great deal to other sources) is that it is better than the present system while being reasonably simple and understandable. I believe that it would produce more satisfactory major authorities and more active minor authorities, and secure a better division of functions between them. I also think that it would enable the local authorities to exercise their present powers with greater competence, and that it should stop—and indeed reverse—the drift of powers and responsibilities to new and less democratic agencies than our local councils. I also believe that it would make for administrative simplification both inside and outside the local government system.

I imagine the main objection will be that I have not paid enough attention to local and traditional roots. This is not, however, true. The proposed regional councils would not be 'remote' and 'inaccessible' bodies—certainly no more so than many existing county councils. It is true that their population would, on the average, be greater than that of a present county, but, equally, their areas would frequently be more rational. In the case of some of the conurbations their population might be very large. But this arrangement is imposed on us by the facts. Several million persons, living in close proximity, have inevitably many interests in common which require a common administration. Surely the best way is to ascertain what services ought to be provided in common over the whole area, and to foster around them a new sense of 'regional' patriotism—a sentiment which would certainly grow if it were allowed to do so.

Throughout I have laid great emphasis on the proper division of services. In particular, I am anxious that those services which intimately affect the citizen as a consumer should be administered from as near his door as is possible. To this end I propose the creation of a new type of 'borough' government and the re-organisation of the minor authorities. This is my contribution to making local government more truly local where it should be so—as also more truly regional where that course is necessary.



FABIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

PAMPHLETS

- PARISH AND DISTRICT COUNCILS by M. Pease 6d.
- COUNTY COUNCILS by H. Samuels (Revised) 9d.
- BOROUGH AND URBAN DISTRICT COUNCILS by C. R. Attlee 9d.
(Revised by A. E. Lauder)
- METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCILS by J. E. MacColl 6d.

A REPORT ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

REGIONALISM

by Peter Self

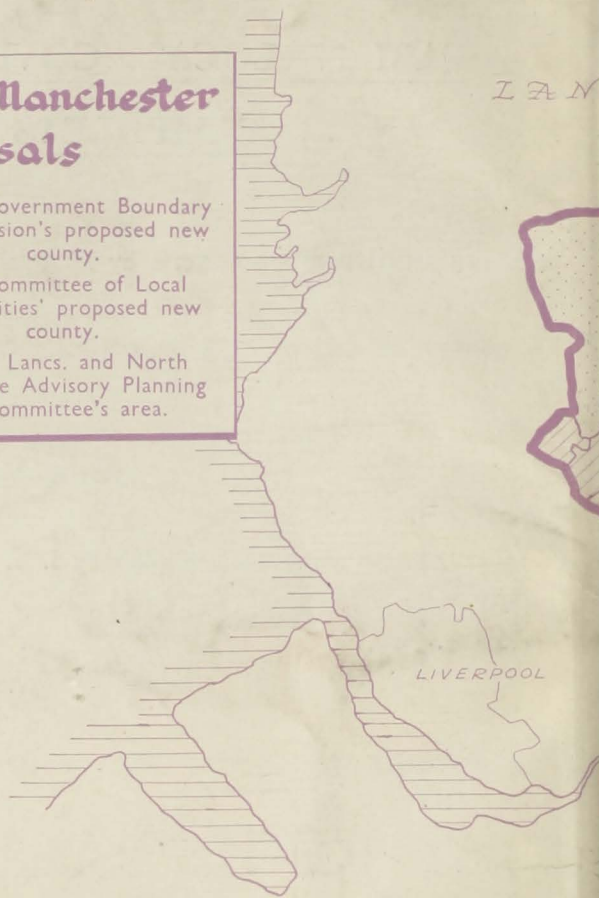
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Greater Manchester Proposals

- Local Government Boundary Commission's proposed new county.
- - - - - Sub-Committee of Local Authorities' proposed new county.
- South Lancs. and North Cheshire Advisory Planning Committee's area.



-  County Borough of Manchester.
-  Other County Boroughs.
-  Municipal Boroughs.
-  Urban Districts.
-  Rural Districts.

