Countering these assertions, R.G. W. Smith, Chairman of the London Green Belt Council, noted that although golf courses claim to be another type of landscape, they serve a leisure industry which is not tied to the land, but to profit. Courses which proved to be surplus would not be restored to the land but would be further developed into leisure centres, if not housing, thus losing for ever the natural characteristics which course builders claim to be protecting. Golf enthusiasts are demanding a doubling in the number of courses by the end of the decade — Mr Smith reminded the conference that this demand would have to be met from natural resources, with little chance of any secure return for the environment.

Report of John Butler's Address to the 19th Annual Conference

The Future of Local Government

JACK WOOLFORD

Like Dr Percival, John Butler said that he was suggesting only a possible scenario for the future of local government. The 1980s had been very eventful with major local government legislation every year. It was currently said that only two or three people in the country now understood the grant system and rumoured that none of them were currently employed by the government.

Although we should always need some form of local administration since Whitehall was unlikely (yet!) to organise dustbin collection, in the light of what had happened in the last ten to fifteen years, it could be asked if multi-functional elected authorities of local individuals, responsible and responsive to local demands, needs and wishes and financed by local taxation, as we had known (and loved?) them, had any future at all. In retrospect the turning point had been signalled by the alleged, infamous remark by the late Tony Crosland, addressing a local government conference in 1974/5, that "the party is over".

In the period of economic contraction since the mid-70s there had been increasing centralisation, increasing governmental control of the public sector because it was, allegedly, grabbing more than its fair share of national resources through wasteful overspending, which had caused excessive rises of rates, destroyed local businesses and thus generated unemployment. Granted that local autonomy could never be complete because some local services, like the police, were really national and therefore required central control, and granted, too, that reasonably common standards of service were expected and that only central government could prevent falling standards, local government had become unrecognisable from what it had been fifty years ago.

In fact it was not true that local rates had been a significant problem for local businesses: much less so, in fact, than the recent revaluation for the Unified Business Rate. Nor were

they mainly responsible either for inflation or unemployment. Excessive rises could be traced to central decisions to reduce grants, increase police pay, community care programmes, not to approve closure of schools with redundant places and high interest rates. Indeed local government had been better than central finance in maintaining a reasonable rate of growth. Then worst over-spenders, Metropolitan Councils and the Greater London Council, had in any case been abolished.

The former central/local relations of partnership had been replaced by that of principal and agent or master and servant. Tom King himself said in 1980 that centralised rate-setting would be a threat to local democracy and others, that nothing like it existed this side of Eastern Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and that (when it was introduced in 1984) rate-capping could be compared with knee-capping by the IRA. Central control had also been increased by the reduction of the proportion of local expenditure raised from local revenue, by the increase in VAT, and the reduction of Community Charge bills added to the Uniform Business Rate. It was now *less than one tenth*: and he who paid the piper called the tune.

Although the centralist trend had been started before 1979, the present Conservative government had probably done it with greater conviction, and it was not only in finance. The very nature of local authorities had been changed. A large number of services which they previously provided by direct labour were contracted out by the so-called privatisation of refuse collection and street cleaning, etc. The direct provision of housing had been reduced by the right to buy and by the tenant's charter; community care had been increasingly constrained; in education, local school management, the national curriculum and, most recently, the contracting out of inspection, all reduced local authority functions.

Developments following from the Widdecombe Report, which examined alleged local political-party jobbery but, probably to the government's disappointment, actually defended party politics in local government, should be added. The scope of disqualifications for council membership had been increased and the political activities of local government employees reduced. Added too the existing sicknesses of local government, namely minimal local participation, the notorious low turnout at local elections and voting on national rather than local issues, the question became: why did we bother to have local elections at all? The majority didn't bother to vote and complained, but did little about it, all of which could be used as a stick to beat local government and might eventually lead to its abolition, to the completion of centralisation.

Some changes had been signalled already. The new system of local government finance (i.e. the new Council Tax) had, with some justification, been dubbed "son of poll tax" so that, with hindsight, the old rating system was seen to have some advantages. It was further speculated that a whole tier of local government would disappear. Dr Butler's personal reaction to more structural changes was: "No! Not again!", even if, in the mid-70s, they got it wrong. Such changes — like the community charge/poll tax — tended only to change the problem.

Single-tier government had already existed in the old metropolitan counties and London and from the mid-70s it had been argued that larger cities should have had

more powers back from the counties into which they had been absorbed. Former county boroughs had never accepted the loss of their major functions: for example, from the point of view of Bristol, the county of Avon was nonsensical. Were we about to get the single-tier authorities which Redcliffe-Maud Royal Commission has recommended? Kent would have had (only) two, or possibly, three, local authorities.

Existing local authorities were now dancing a sort of ritual dance, each saying: "Of course, it won't be us(!)", whilst at the same time discreetly trying to stick the ritual knife into the other. On balance, Dr Butler would argue, areas like Kent County Council were more vulnerable than Districts. The etching away of services from local government meant that there was not much left for county councils to do, so that they were wasteful.

Police were largely controlled by the Home Office and the Fire Service was largely non-controversial and non-political, prime candidate for an executive agency rather than a county council. As for strategic planning, there were pressures to give more planning powers to district councils and in education, the national curriculum, opting out and local management of schools left local education authorities with very little to do. Social services could be merged with health authorities especially in the area of community care and responsibility for roads was shared between the Department of Transport and Districts (under agency arrangements). All that was left were libraries and parks (already shared with Districts), consumer protection (which could be shoved under Environmental Health to districts) and refuse disposal which could go to an executive agency. There could be nothing left!

To be fair, a similar argument could be made against district councils whose major functions of housing and local planning which (as already in part they were) could be provided by private contractors. To pay their way, libraries and parks could be privatised. No one worried about footpaths, refuse could be collected by contractors and a minor regulatory agency could take over environmental health. The Department of the Environment and its appeal process left very little local planning discretion and housing could be left to housing associations with no more that a guide-line setting authority.

Neither development was desirable but both counties and districts were vulnerable. The argument could end up with inescapable local services which *had* to be administered but no elected local government. It would be politically difficult because many of the activists in all the major political parties were local councillors who would not happily be abolished. Their vested interests (not necessarily bad) were, indeed, the strongest thing going for elected local government. What was conceivable were smaller elected pale-shadow local authorities to set guide-lines and to monitor the quality of local contractors, already canvassed in the suggestion for city-managers, like the executive agencies (on short-term contracts!) already appointed by central government to replace civil servants. There was also the suggestion for directly elected mayors, although it was unlikely that any central government would permit the emergence of major local political figures, like Ken Livingstone. There were examples in the USA of small, single-function, board-of-director type councils, meeting three or four times a year to receive reports from managers. The authorities who ran our Health Service were not elected but centrally appointed. Perhaps by 2000 the process might have been completed.

THE FUTURE OF THE PARISH COUNCIL

(One of our Vice-Presidents, Bryan Keith-Lucas, former Proffessor of Local Government at the University of Kent at Canterbury, former President of the Kent Federation of Amenity Societies and former Chairman of the National Association of Parish Councils commented as follows in the afternoon discussion.)

John Butler, he said, had committed a *monumental blunder* in leaving out the Parish Councils, saying that there were two tiers of local government because there were, in fact, three. Parish Councils *were* local authorities. They were much discussed in the Redcliffe-Maud Royal Commission where the Head of the (then) Ministry of Housing and Local Government, Dame Evelyn Sharp, had constantly pressed to make them more visible by grouping them into larger units. The National Organisation of Parish Councils had constantly opposed this because the Parish Council must represent the community of a village or small town. They were not a second-rate District Council and no less than six hundred of them had persuade Redcliffe-Maud that they should have wide powers for the good of their inhabitants, as was the case in France, and not be tied down by the doctrine of *ultra vires*. Apart from permitting them the proceeds of a 2p rate the government took no notice. They should be able to do anything for the good of the village, such as subsidise a local Citizen's Advice Bureau, provide school prizes, or accommodation for a surgery but they are not allowed.

Radcliffe-Maud also said that these should be powers and not duties because parishes varied in size from uninhabited villages to (cathedral) cities like Wells and Chichester. Their one duty should be to express the opinion of the people, or, as the NAPC said: "to raise hell when hell ought to be raised", as when higher authority wished to abolish the post office or close down the railway station, do away with the village school or turn off the street lighting. *There must be Parish Councils*, said the Professor: to much enthusiastic applause.

CHILDREN'S VIEWS

WHAT I LIKE ABOUT DOVER

The things I like about Dover are that it has Dover College and it has lots of nice shops, and the precinct. I think the white cliffs make it look quite pretty.

Dover is the nearest point to Europe. It also has one of the busiest ports in the world. It's a bit like a motorway with ferries about every half an hour.

Dover is famous for Hell Fire Corner where there are tunnels in the cliffs. It is also famous for the Battle of Britain which I expect many of our Grandfathers and Grandmothers expereiened in World WAR 2 (If you are about my age).

Dover is a very old place. It has a lot of heritage. If you go and look around you can see lots of Medieval History. The Castle and some of our school is from the 11th century. If you go up to the top of the castle there is a Roman lighthouse and an Anglo Saxon church.

The one thing I like about Dover you do not have to go very far to get into the middle of the countryside.

EMMA SCOTT (11)
Dover College