

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

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(The powers of Local Government, which used to include such matters as tram or bus transport, gas and electricity supplies, health, fire and police etc, have been and continue to be curtailed for a variety of reasons, some more reasonable than others. The present division between County and District Councils dates only from 1974 but is again to be reorganised. Although the subject is not sensational, we should be as well-informed as possible on the options and their implications.)

THE DOVER SOCIETY COMMITTEE was addressed, with characteristic calm lucidity, by JOHN MOIR, Chief Executive of Dover District Council, on the impending reorganisation of local government, on Thursday, 14th January. The views he expressed were his own and not those of the District Council.

Mr Moir said that the Government, having decided that there should be a review of local government, had published a number of consultation papers, with considerable differences between those dealing with Wales and Scotland (whose Secretaries of State have said that there *will be* unitary authorities) and those dealing with England. The present two-tier system of County and District Councils was regarded as wasteful, confusing as to the location of responsibility, with a lack of accountability, and remoteness from the people served. There would be no changes in the single-tier metropolitan authorities in London and elsewhere, but all the counties had been put into five *phases* of review and although the government expected a majority of *unitary, single-tier, all-purpose* authorities to emerge from the process, no solution was ruled out. There could be no change, or there could be unitary authorities based on present counties or district councils, or on altogether different areas. There was very much room for argument.

Kent was in the third phase of review which meant that the Local Government Commission, (chaired by Sir John Banham, with Chief Executive Martin Eastal and twelve members including Robert Scruton, Chairman of the Kent Association of Parish Councils from Womenswold) would be examined in 1994 and the changes, if any, would be operative from 1st April 1996. Dover District Council and Kent County Council, therefore, might become extinct on 31st March 1996 and be replaced by a new authority with completely new members and completely new senior officers. The senior ten per cent of new senior officers would be chosen by the new authority. The remaining 90% of existing staff would be transferred *en bloc*.

At the same time, a review of the internal management of local authorities, by a Working Party from the Department of the Environment, was in progress because working practices were considered to be hidebound survivors of the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. Mr Moir thought that this should have been determined in

advance of a review of structure, and he hoped that the new authorities would presumably work under the new guidelines.

In the first phase were all the obvious candidates for change. The report on the Isle of Wight had already, as promised, been published and both the two District Councils and the County Council wanted a unitary authority, so that there was no argument. This may have explained why the report appeared to be superficial, not to say sloppy. Also in the first phase were other areas where the 1947 reorganisation had never been accepted, like Bristol and the Counties of Avon and Gloucester, Lincolnshire and Humberside, Cleveland and Durham, and Derbyshire. In the second phase were major cities like Plymouth, Derby and Nottingham, all considered suitable for return to the old, County Borough system. In phase three were the shires, including Kent.

The Commission required clear expression of the feelings of local groups, including Parish and Town Councils, amenity groups, trade unions, nature conservancy councils, and the public. On the Isle of Wight the Commission had received only twenty-seven letters, which suggested that people's attention and concern had not been grabbed. The man in the street did not understand Local Government and was not much interested in it. He simply wanted his dustbin emptied and other services provided without much argument.

Mr Moir was surprised by two conclusions. The first was that it had been known all along that the real problem was ward boundaries, which was a political problem. No government would create a new tier or type of authority nationwide which would be electorally disadvantageous. The second was concerned with Town and Parish Councils. Late in the process the Government realised that they had forgotten the Parish Councils. A Consultation Paper was rushed out which raised a number of issues and then knocked them flat and implied that nothing would be done about it: a token gesture. On the Isle of Wight new ward boundaries were proposed but Parish Councils and Town Councils were side-stepped as a matter for the new authority to consider.

What might happen in Kent and what might happen in Dover? Mr Moir doubted the wisdom of employing consultants further before more was known about Phase One, from which he hoped that a clear pattern of unitary authorities in areas much smaller than present counties would emerge. Otherwise the argument would continue until the end of the century. Kent County Council was saying it ought to be a unitary authority based on the county, with various responsibilities and activities sub-contracted to between sixty and eighty bodies, yet to be determined. This sounded like the old Rural and Urban District Councils before 1974. The District Councils were saying there ought to be fourteen unitary authorities based on existing District Council boundaries, including Dover District Council.

This attitude might have to alter because of the findings of the first phase, and already the Medway Towns, for example, were considering merger and Tonbridge, Malling and Sevenoaks were a bit nervous. The problem in East Kent was *community identity*, that is to say of communities which people relate to, the names of which they use in reply to the question: "Where do you come from?" It was this which the Government wished to promote. People in the north of Dover District were very reluctant to say that they had any identity with Thanet. Thanet appeared to stand alone on community identity.

6 Mr Moir wondered what solution here would be politically acceptable. It would be disastrous if a new authority was to emerge which was based on a depressed coastal strip. If the new authority had to be bigger it was essential to include other parts of East Kent such as parts of Canterbury District. Otherwise there would be an under-powered, under-financed authority with very serious structural problems as far as employment was concerned. The resources would go to the area with the worst problem, which was in Thanet. It was difficult to see how Dover would go in with Folkestone because the only remaining link, seamen (i.e. maritime employment), was disappearing. Both Dover and Folkestone people stayed in their own places although this tendency might be changed by the opening of the new A20, also linked with Ashford. It had also been suggested that the new authorities might be based on Health Authority districts, although Health Service boundaries were also changing.

Dover District Council believed it had been relatively successful, efficient and open towards the people and the community. Decisions should be taken locally, here, rather than at Canterbury or, worse still at Maidstone with some sort of pretence of regional committees or sub-committees. He thought a mistake was made in Kent in 1974. The original recommendation that Kent should be split into two counties should have been implemented because there was nothing at all in common between East and West Kent. They had completely different aspirations, types of community and employment bases. Consequently the needs of East Kent had never been properly addressed. With new unemployment problems arising it had been necessary to set up a completely new organisation to cope with the situation, the East Kent Initiative.

The basic building block for new areas would be existing District Council areas (with circa 100,00 population) and not Parish or Town Councils. New Dover or Deal Councils would not emerge. The new authorities would be responsible for what was left of education, social services, libraries and highways with joint boards for police and fire, probation and court work. Police and Fire Services were also under review by the Home Office and it was unlikely that local government would continue to be relevant to them.

In answer to questions Mr Moir thought it unlikely that Kent County Council would long survive its 100th birthday. Councils were already doing less themselves and contracting work and services out, becoming enabling authorities. It was not surprising that Derbyshire was in the First Phase and he expected it to be dismembered. Smaller than counties seemed to be the trend. Councils were being more and more tightly controlled financially on specific services, with less and less authority to move money around. It was difficult to square this with government talk of strengthening local democracy and it might be that the new authorities would see themselves more as champions in all fields, such as health services, gas, electricity, the railways etc. Employment in Local Government was likely to diminish. Dover District Council had a hundred less staff than a year ago. Reducing the number of tiers of government would obviously save money.

Mr Moir concluded by saying we should obviously talk again later.

We should also (I think) hear what Maidstone has to say.