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Local Government Re-organisation the Welsh Way: A Personal View

MARCUS LONGLEY

LOCAL GOVERNMENT RE-ORGANISATION in Wales has moved more quickly than in many parts of England, and many of the arguments which have arisen will find echoes in Dover as elsewhere. In particular, the clear implication is that the new councils will actually provide very few services themselves, and that privatisation and joint working will be the new order.

'ABOUT AS WELCOME AS A RAT SANDWICH!' THAT WAS HOW THE WELSH NATIONALIST MP FOR ANGLESEY described the new Secretary of State for Wales, John Redwood. Of course, Secretaries of State for Wales who come from England, with constituencies in the home counties, are not immediately welcomed with open arms by many Welsh people. In this instance, the reaction was also affected by the difficult situation here with regard to local government reform. Before his recent elevation to the Cabinet, Mr Redwood was the local government Minister in England, and he inherits in the Principality a considerable political storm concerning the future of local government.

In Wales, responsibility for local councils lies with the Welsh Office and not the Department of the Environment. Mr Redwood's predecessor, David Hunt (now Secretary of State for Employment), decided that a commission to consider all the relevant issues was not necessary in Wales, and so, after rather a fraught period of consultation during which the counties and districts fought tooth and nail to prove their superiority, he published a White Paper* in March of this year. Unfortunately, in the view of many impartial (as well as partisan) observers, this failed to settle many of the very difficult arguments.

Some of these arguments may be of interest to Dover, because although the circumstances of Kent and Wales are different in many respects, there are also some important similarities. There may be something of a more personal interest, too, since John Redwood himself was born in Dover and went to school in Canterbury!

So why re-organise? Wales, with a population of about 2.8 million, has since 1974 had 8 counties and 37 district councils. They fulfil the same functions as their counterparts in England, but the counties are smaller (Mid Glamorgan, the largest, has

a population of only half a million, for example). The new structure envisages 21 unitary authorities, which, because of the mixture of rural and urban communities in Wales, will range in size from Cardiff (almost 300,000) to Cardiganshire (66,700). The intention of the re-organisation is to create authorities

- which are based on established communities;
- which are clearly accountable to the people they serve;
- which can operate efficiently and responsively *'by taking full advantage of the enabling rôle of local government'*; and
- which *'will work with each other, and with other agencies, to promote the well-being of those they serve'*

There are many issues here, but it will perhaps be most useful to concentrate on what many see as the fundamental contradiction between these four aims. It is argued that it is almost impossible to achieve the first two aims and at the same time achieve the last two; to reconcile local communities and local accountability, with efficiency and joint working. The first two seemed to demand (in most cases) small councils, with populations certainly no greater than 100,000, and perhaps even fewer (MPs represent about 60,000 people, for instance). But how is any council to deliver services for education, social services, highways, economic development, cultural and leisure services, emergency planning, trading standards, and the rest, if they are so small? How will they each be able to justify the overheads of employing expert staff, computer systems, purchasing organisations? If local government is already burdened with bureaucratic costs, how much worse will it be if there are many more councils? The answer lies, as they say, in the small print. Each council simply cannot be allowed to 'do its own thing'—they will be *'enablers'*. In other words, almost all services will be provided in the future in one of three ways:

- by the private sector, or by direct labour forces which have survived competitive tendering, *or*
- by 'opted out' bodies—there will be very few schools, for instance, left in local authority control in a few years' time; *or*
- by adjacent councils working together.

We are already familiar with the first two of these—and they will become ever more common—but we have relatively little experience of the last. The assumption, in Wales at least, has been that each new council would have control over its own destiny, and could if it so wished run its own Social Services, Education, Highways and other departments. It was on this basis that Welsh district councils fought so hard to make the boundaries of the new unitary authorities as close as possible to their own. But the realisation is now dawning, with the publication of the White Paper, that their apparent

victory may prove to be pyrrhic. The White Paper calls for the new authorities to reach voluntary agreements with their neighbours for the joint provision of these services, where they are too small to provide them themselves. But there is an implicit recognition that this may be expecting too much of the newly-created gung-ho councils, and the 'small print' says...

There may be occasions when authorities are not able to work together on terms which are mutually satisfactory. This must not be allowed to affect the delivery of services; the Secretary of State therefore proposes to have available to him reserve powers, for use as necessary to ensure that proper service delivery arrangements are in place'

These two words 'reserve powers' should not be under-estimated. There are other indications, too, as to how this may work. For example, the statutory bar on one authority providing an education service for another is to be removed by the Education Bill; the White Paper similarly proposes to remove the statutory requirement for each authority to have its own social services provision; particular authorities will be nominated to develop expertise on behalf of the others in highways; and there are many other instances.

Of course, this is not entirely new, and counties in Wales, for example, have been working jointly on the Principality's four police authorities for many years. But the vision of the future offered here is for a major extension of this principle.

The outcome in Wales, therefore, has been to satisfy neither of the two main protagonists: the counties are to be abolished, and the districts, who thought they stood to inherit the new world, suddenly find themselves with much less autonomy than they had thought.

The key message from all this for the people of Dover would appear to be a note of caution. Do not become obsessed with issues such as size and geographical boundaries, but rather ask the simple question: what will the new councils actually be allowed to do?

* Secretary of State for Wales (March 1993), *Local Government in Wales: a Charter for the Future*. London HMSO.

IN MEMORIAM:

*The Society is sad to have to record the death of
Mr David Church, of 50 Lower Road, Temple Ewell, Dover
whose Membership No. was 119
and sends its condolences to his family and friends.*