

## 6 THE DOVER SOCIETY'S SUBMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Dear Professor Grant,

It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance on Friday Jan 28th at Witton. As Chairman of the Dover Society I now have the honour to submit the views of my Committee and members on the proposed reorganisation of local government.

### 1.1 'Locus standi' of the Dover Society

The Dover Society was formed in 1988. Its constitution includes a commitment "to promote high standards of planning and architecture" and the Society gives Awards for improvements to the area, monitors planning proposals and supports, joins in or initiates civic projects and arts events. It has established and maintained continuous dialogue with Dover District Council and our Planning Committee scrutinises and comments upon all planning applications. It is also in contact and dialogue with Temple Ewell, River and St Margaret's Bay Parish Councils. Independently and through its membership of the Kent Federation of Amenity Societies it has also established and maintains dialogue with Kent County Council, with the Sussex Federation of Amenity Societies and with the other countywide environmental organisations (including Hants and Herts) in SETFOR (South East Transport Forum) which, in turn, is represented on SERPLAN. Through its MP, David Shaw, it is in regular contact, not to say conflict, with various ministries concerned with roads and harbours and has successfully appealed to the Ombudsman against a second violation by the Home office of established planning procedures at its penal establishment on Dover's Western Heights.

1.2 Its membership of some 400 indicates that it represents a wide swathe of responsible local opinion. On the subject of the reform of local government, committee members have been addressed by the Dover District Council Chief Executive, by University of Kent and Canterbury speakers and by Kent County, District and Parish Council officers and representatives. Two Members' Meetings in Dover, both addressed by county, district and parish council representatives, have each been attended by over seventy participants and at the second of these, in addition to an address by the Member for Dover, David Shaw MP, group discussions were held and reported back and are embodied in this submission, itself circulated and amended before publication. The Dover Society may claim to be well experienced in and well briefed on local government.

## 2. The Future of Local Government

2.1 Although the matter is not within the remit of the Commission, it would be misleading to imply by silence on the subject that the Dover Society, some of whose members were actively involved in the local government reorganisation of 1974,

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acquiesces in the continuous centralisation of power at the expense of local government since 1979: the abolition of Metropolitan Councils and of the Greater London Council, the centralisation of rate setting by the Unified Business Rate, rate capping (since 1984), the sequence from rates to poll tax to council tax, increasing recourse to non-elected quangos and executive agencies and the incremental removal of responsibility for education, health, housing and policing, etc from local authorities; that is to say from local democratic control. In such circumstances it is not difficult to account for increasing apathy at local elections.

2.2 In contrast, we note the very different attitude to local government and control in our fellow members of the European community and their very much more impressive achievements in implementing coordinated transport policies, in educational provision at inter-communal level in France or urban regeneration at Kreis level in Germany, for example.

### 3. The Local Government Commission

3.1 The Committee has noted in detail and with interest the sequence of events leading to the appointment of the Local Government Commission, notably to the distinctive treatments of Scotland and Wales as compared with the division of the English shire counties into tranches, the nature of their groupings and the order of their treatment. It has also noted the sequence of findings, retractions and proffered rethinks, the brief consideration of 'opting in', the drastic speed-up, and the need for 'early wins' as revealed in the correspondence with the Dept. of the Environment. The committee is aware of the High Court actions of Derbyshire, Lancashire and now Somerset querying the independence of the Commission, and of the Nottinghamshire attempt to manipulate the review.

3.2 The pursuit of party political advantage at every level from Westminster downwards is inevitable, and consequently the Committee is encouraged by some evidence of Commission independence in the variety of recommendations from the status quo for Lincolnshire and parts of Derbyshire and the reversion to Ridings in Yorkshire on the one hand, to the unitary Isle of Wight and the dismantling of Cleveland on the other. The Committee is also aware of the fragility of government majorities, threats of back-bench revolt and the rival commitments of the Liberal Democratic and Labour Parties to regional government.

### 4. Comments on the Procedural Advice on the Preparation of Proposals

1.6 Local communities and effective local government are incompatible. Dover is a historic community but cannot *per se* provide effective local government. An area as small as Dover District Council contains three historic communities and the rivalries of Dover, Deal and Sandwich have been endless since 1974.

2.3 Agreed proposals at the county level are unattainable and at the district level unlikely. It is *ipso facto* impossible for competitors for survival to agree on who is to be eaten last. We have observed the competition between county and districts and

8 are aware of the backstage negotiations and disagreements between district councils. Latest information is that Ashford prefers the status quo, Sevenoaks would prefer to be unitary but would otherwise join with Tunbridge Wells and Malling. There were boundary disputes involving Swanley, Faversham and Malling. Nothing surprises us.

2.8 We hope to be persuaded that the Secretary of State's Guidance will not automatically override acceptance of alternative proposals.

2.18 We look forward to receipt of evidence on community identity not already known to us.

2.19 On the issue of a single proposal we hope that the District Council etc will agree with us.

4.2 Whether or not reorganised structures will be less costly in the long run is speculative. In the short run the costs of reorganisation, including transitional arrangements, estimated at £60-100 per ratepayer, will not expedite savings.

## 5. MEMBERS' VIEWS

Members' Views as expressed by chairmen of 5 discussion groups after addresses by county, district and parish councils and by the Member for Dover.

1 Do you accept existing local government powers as adequate?

There were differences of emphasis between those who thought that the existing system needed improvement, notably the need for greater power at the local as opposed to the county level, with better communication and less overlapping; and those who lamented the erosion of powers, with special emphasis on the iniquity of rate capping.

2 Do you think that the status quo is acceptable?

Four groups out of five accepted the status quo, with improvements.

3 Do you favour a unitary County Council (which the Commission disfavours)?

There was no support for a unitary county council, although assurances were desired on the safeguarding of such county initiatives as IMPACT, such matters of countywide importance as the East Thames Corridor, and such matters of local concern as the the East Kent Initiative.

4 Do you favour a unitary District Council (which the Commission disfavours)?

In addition to the Member for Dover, one group considered that district councils, now settled down and showing their worth, should not be disbanded. It was the county council which was remote and regional bodies which should be strengthened.

5 If existing district councils are to be merged into 7 unitary areas, do you favour amalgamation with Canterbury/Thanet/Shepway/Ashford?

Although a clear majority opted for the link with Canterbury and Thanet, there was a small minority for linking with Shepway and Ashford on the ground of similarity of economic interests and problems, with emphasis on transport rather than tourism. There was one voice for linkage with the Pas de Calais.

6. Alternatively, do you think that a division of Kent into North, East and West areas makes more sense? 9

Three groups out of five regarded the East/West/ North subdivision as too large but two groups saw some sense in it and one of these favoured it, observing that East Kent is an identifiable geographical and historical unit. Dover, Shepway, Ashford, Canterbury and Thanet have much in common and could be one of three or four units.

7. In any case do you think that Dover should have a town council with enhanced parish council powers?

This was generally supported. An important proviso was that it was premature until it became clear that it would be the only possible voice for Dover as a historic community. The words "consolation prize" were used. A second proviso was that merely ceremonial functions were insufficient and that powers would be necessary, that they must be statutory, and that agency agreements should be mandatory. It was also observed that this would be reversion to a two-tier system. Nevertheless Commission support for the proposal is desirable and welcome.

8. How should county-wide strategic issues including transport and relations with EC be handled?

It was strongly agreed that this was vital. Although their weakness was recognised, joint boards or an adaptation of the Association of District Councils were considered and preferred to 'quangos' because they are elected rather than imposed. If SERPLAN were the alternative it must be strengthened and not transformed into a quango, unelected and unanswerable. Reference was made to the Liberal-Democratic and Labour Party commitments to regional government. It was clearly felt that the county of Kent was not a mere historic relic but a community with common interests, especially in its role as national transport corridor for road and rail and for its decisive proximity to mainland Europe and its established status within the European Community.

9. Any other suggestions?

One group reverted to the possible improvement of the status quo. Another emphasised the need for collaboration within East Kent itself. It should have its own Euro-MP.

## 6. Summary

- a. The Dover Society is not convinced that reform of local government is necessary.
  - b. The Dover Society regards the twin concepts of community representation and economic delivery of services as mutually exclusive and unlikely forseeably to reduce rates.
  - c. The Dover Society sees the status quo as acceptable and improvable.
  - d. If there must be change to unitary authorities, union with Canterbury and Thanet is preferable to other linkages.
  - e. A town council with enhanced parish council powers would then be necessary. The Society is aware that this is only the beginning of the dialogue and looks forward to further participation when the Commission, assuming it survives, has suggested preferential options. The Society further notes that 2-tier authorities are no longer to be regarded as "the exception".
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