

# LOCAL GOVERNMENT, MAYORS and PARISHES

*Can we learn from our neighbours?*

LEO WRIGHT

WHEN the Dover Society party visiting Calais was received by the maire in the Hôtel de Ville I was asked to ask him "Who decides the rates in this town?" He didn't understand why the question was being asked, so I explained about rate-capping. He then replied: "I do. I explain what I want for Calais, I estimate what the projects would cost and what this would mean in *taxe locale* and invite the people to vote for me. I am in my third period of office."

How come that Gravelines (population 13,000) could afford to build a sports complex for Fr 180 million (£21 million) with seating for 4,500 and 11 tennis courts? Why does Epinal (the size of Hereford, population of under 50,000), have its own television station, broadcasting local news? Why can Metz claim to have the most beautiful concert hall in Europe? Why are the children of Lorient all taught sailing at primary school? Why is it that France has been building museums in the way that in the Middle Ages they built monasteries, in almost every little town, sometimes in villages, so that now it has 1,200 – and local airports too?

*The questions are asked by the historian Theodore Zeldin in an article in the "Times".*

Several years in succession, driving south in France, we have staged in a *petit patelin perdu*, a pleasant commune (parish) in north Burgundy, Saint-Amand en Puisaye with a population of some 5,000 and admired the progress it was making. The chateau park restored. The ancient lavoir made into a children's play area, a new post office (and a new *bureau de perception* = tax office!), houses restored, flowers everywhere, watered every morning. And then, on our third visit, – a large technical college. I asked a mairie official how it was all being paid for. The answer again was the *taxe locale*. For the technical college three Communes had worked together.

Zeldin gives many more examples of local enterprise at commune (parish) level all over France. The process dates from 1982 when consecutive legislation gave more and more power to the maire of the commune. This attracted to the mairie notable local unpolitical, often young, men of energy and enterprise, rather than the old political parties. As at Saint-Amand en Puisaye, the small societies acquired a sense of purpose and a group of villages will work together on some large project.

Of course, this is not the order of things which has produced the impressive infrastructure at the French end of the Tunnel. That was the *région* (and central

government). Also dating from 1982, France has been divided into twenty-two regions. Each of these embraces several *départements*, so that they are huge. The Ile de France, for example, has a population as large as that of Austria or Sweden.

Opposite us the département Pas de Calais has a population of 1.5 million, virtually the same as East Kent. The arrondissement (sous-préfecture, with twenty-eight communes) of which Calais is the capital, has a population of 120,000; Dover District 110,000. This sounds like one more reason for retaining the status quo! Given our geographical situation the size of administrative units appropriate for cross-Channel contacts is very important.

The region Nord-Pas de Calais has a population of 3.8 million so that perhaps we could do with a regional authority for planning big projects, such as motorways and the Fast Rail Link. ◇

## SHIPPING NEWS

### *The Jeremiah O'Brien* ——— BRUCE LILLEY

In July the *Jeremiah O'Brien* tied up in Chatham alongside the new Chatham Maritime, an ambitious dockside development with some office blocks already occupied. (Could this development be a pointer for Dover's Western Docks?)

On the day I went to see the *Jeremiah* the ship was attracting a good number of visitors, including holiday-makers, local people and many of the staff of a nearby insurance company, who were using their lunch hour to investigate this unusual addition to their normal dockside environment.

The *Jeremiah O'Brien* is the last of more than 2,750 Liberty Ships which were built by the end of 1945. She made eleven crossings from England to the Normandy beaches in support of the D-Day landings and she had returned to Europe to participate in the D-Day remembrance.

Her crossing from the United States to England this summer was of a more peaceful nature. The fifty-year-old ship was manned by a volunteer crew with an average age of 71 years and the whole venture had a budgeted cost of \$2 million.

That the voyage was made at all is an indication of what can be done when a group of dedicated people decide that something is worth saving for the education and enjoyment of future generations. The home base of the *s.s. Jeremiah O'Brien* is San Francisco to where she will return when her present deployment ends.

