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978-0-521-13453-8 - Politics and Land Use Planning: The London Experience

Stephen L. Elkin

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521134538

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First published 1974

This digitally printed version 2010

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 73-80486

ISBN 978-0-521-20321-0 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-13453-8 Paperback

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PREFACE

Studies of land use planning in American cities have generally emphasized the difficulties and shortcomings of the enterprise. Indeed some observers have said that planning cannot be successfully carried out in the context of American cities. Yet it has often been claimed that in London planning has been successful. How then is this claim to be understood and evaluated? It was this question that prompted the following study.

The initial question was gradually encompassed by a more general interest in the problems of social choice and rationality. Public planning of any kind is basically an attempt to improve the quality of the choices communities make for themselves, i.e. to improve the level of rationality. Together, the various aspects of the problem of rational choice for communities form one of the threads of the study. The empirical analysis of London planning and the evaluation thereof, as contrasted to the situation in American cities, is meant as a case example to advance the discussion of problems of societal choice.

A second thread is provided by comparisons between politics in large American cities and London. The concern with such a comparative perspective arises out of a general interest in British–American contrasts, but it also has a more theoretical basis. Over the past 15–20 years, American political scientists have given considerable attention to politics in American cities. But increasingly the need for non-American cases has been felt so that questions of the existing and proposed theoretical content of the study of urban politics can be sensibly addressed. This study is meant to aid this inquiry: one useful mode of theorizing is the confrontation of hypotheses with the rich empirical material generated in case examples.

The theme of social choice (and that of the status of the study of urban politics) does not depend for its development on an analysis of the present (1973) practices in London. If a concern is theoretical, then evidence from different time periods is appropriate and even essential. However, if the interest is in description of present day London politics, then a study of the city in the early and mid 1960s might seem to be only of historical value. This issue is particularly pressing if the political arrangements have been substantially altered, as is the case in London. The present study is of politics and planning under the London County Council, the general purpose

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authority for the city, which was supplanted in 1965 by a metropolitan area government, the Greater London Council. Nevertheless, if the continuities and changes from political patterns under the LCC to those under the GLC can be isolated, then the understanding of contemporary London politics will be enhanced. A discussion of the LCC is then a useful benchmark for the analysis of present patterns.

The principal change in London politics from the early 1960s to the early 1970s is a citizenry growing more knowledgeable of and involved with local government decision-making. This is associated with higher levels of conflict both in and outside of government and with an increase in expertise on the part of locally appointed officials in the analysis of public policy alternatives as decisions have to be justified more often in public forums. The context of these features, which also exacerbates conflicts and puts a greater burden on experts, is a declining resource base for the city. Under the LCC, the economy of London was buoyant and the general resources available to the city at an acceptable level, but the GLC is in a generally weaker position. On the continuity side, the most prominent features are, not unexpectedly, in the area of norms and values. Although there is evidence of a changing political culture, manifested in an increase in citizen organization, emphasis on a community-wide perspective in policy-making (as contrasted to a focus on aggregating the interests of particular neighborhoods) remains in evidence. In the same vein, the legislative role which emphasizes deliberation as against bargaining also has persisted. In short, there seems to be a juxtaposition of a citizenry becoming more concerned with issues and more active in local politics with a set of institutional arrangements and political patterns appropriate to a more hierarchical politics. This tension and its development may well be common to other areas of English politics and to the degree that this is so, political patterns under the LCC are suggestive of English politics more generally in the early 1960s just as the changes from this point are also of more general interest.

The principal sources of data for the study are interviews with London officials and the files of the London County Council. In addition, some leaders of community organizations and central government officials were interviewed and some use made of the files of the Chelsea Borough Council. The interviews were conducted in 1965 and in 1969–70; the overwhelming number of those interviewed in the latter period were also interviewed in the former. Virtually all senior local officials involved with planning in the early 1960s were interviewed, as were a considerable number of councilors similarly involved. In the body of the study, quotes from interviews conducted in 1965 which refer to practices under the LCC are given in the present tense; those from 1969–70 interviews are given in the past tense.

All told some 500 hours of open-ended interviews were conducted. This

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format was employed because, aside from using those interviewed as informants, the principal concern was to elicit information on role conceptions, views of the public interest and other norms. In general, the aim was to comprehend how participants understood their job and their organization. It was important to be sure that those being interviewed comprehended the distinctions involved, and this could best be accomplished by loosely structured interviews. In the absence of extensively tested instruments, more structured interviews run the risk that distinctions are in the questionnaire and not in the mind of the interviewee. The relatively unfamiliar cultural setting in one sense defines the problem and in another may be said to simply complicate the task of eliciting meaningful responses in interview situations.

The interviews and particularly the files were used to develop six case studies, two of which are presented here. The cases supplement the data from the interviews, particularly with regard to decision-making procedures.

Unless otherwise indicated all quotes in the study are either from interview documents or from local authority files. No names are provided, either for the source of the quotes or at any point in the analysis. This was the understanding under which access was granted.

The study would not have been possible without the generous assistance of the officials of the London County Council and the Chelsea Borough Council. I am also grateful to the considerable number of people who commented on various versions of the analysis. James Q. Wilson and Sam Beer of Harvard University and Oliver Williams of the University of Pennsylvania bore the principal burden of commenting with patience and grace. Others who helped include Edward Banfield, Robert Backoff, David Donnison, J. A. G. Griffiths, Peter Hall, Russell Hardin, Brian McLaughlin, Rhodri Morgan, Richard Rose and Jim Sharpe.

I should also like to thank my wife for her emotional and intellectual support. She bore the greatest burden of all.

The study was supported by grants from the Joint Center for Urban Studies of Harvard and MIT and the Centre for Environmental Studies, London.

October, 1973

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