1 Approaches to the Community

Local government has recently received unprecedented attention from both politicians and academics(1) and this is a convenient time at which to stand back and assess the operation of the system and the emphases which have been applied to its study. A review of the literature on local government suggests that our knowledge is limited and an inadequate basis for the thoroughgoing reorganisation of the system which has been proposed. The substantial volume of research currently under way may do something to remedy this state of affairs, though there are signs that much of it falls within the traditional framework of local government studies of limited value.(2) This general inadequacy may be due in part to the fact that many social scientists have accepted the prevailing attitude among both students and some practitioners that local government is intrinsically uninteresting and perhaps substantively unimportant. They have accepted the thesis of centralised government in Britain and have chosen to examine central government, paying little attention to the work of local authorities.

This has meant that much of the work done in the field, itself limited in quantity, has been promoted by government or by others with an 'interest' in the current system.(3) Whether this interest is favourable or unfavourable to the existing arrangements, the general orientation has obvious implications for the questions asked and the techniques used to answer them. This is most apparent when one compares the proportions of work devoted to understanding or explaining the system with that devoted to formal description or to elaborating proposals to 'improve' the existing arrangements in accordance with the writer's values or interests. In fact there have been studies of local communities, though these have not usually had the local authority as their major focus. None attempt a thoroughgoing account of the processes of policy formation in the local authority, though some approach much closer to this than others.(4)

The absence of hard knowledge about local government implicit in these comments has two consequences. It facilitates the making of recommendations for change as the available information permits a good deal of flexibility. At the same time, it imposes limitations on action, as decision is difficult in the absence of adequate and conclusive evidence, particularly where many interests are inevitably in conflict. The fate of the Redcliffe-Maud Report is a further example of the problem.

In fact one outstanding feature of the local government literature is the prescriptive tone of much of the writing.(5) Prescription of itself is not a bad thing, but creates difficulties when it arises out of a priori assumptions about the system or is based on rather flimsy evidence. Part of this tendency to prescribe is the direct result of the circumstances in which work was carried out. Some of it was explicitly designed to make recommendations for changes in the system. In other cases the researchers themselves
seemed convinced that local government was becoming extinct and argued as though their major task was to save it from such extinction. This gave a stimulus to prescription which in retrospect seems detrimental to research effort.

It is not this prescriptive tendency by itself which is harmful, but its association with other preoccupations of a limiting kind. One such characteristic, not surprising in Britain, is the preoccupation with the formal legal-institutional arrangements of local authorities. The number and areas of authorities and the complicated hierarchical structure within counties are dealt with repeatedly. The legislative basis of the whole system is discussed at some length, with increasing stress being laid on features such as the doctrine of ultra vires.(6) The formal distribution of powers is outlined together with exhaustive catalogues of services which authorities may, and invariably do, provide. These are, however, little more than lists of functions and do nothing to clarify the wide diversity concealed behind the formal façade.

What is not investigated, or less often at any rate, is the way in which legal powers are utilised and the extent to which legislative criteria may be satisfied by widely varying kinds and qualities of service. This is of vital importance given the absence of specific guidelines in much of the legislation or the tendency to legislate for minimal provision.(7) The duty of certain local authorities to provide schools is well known, as is the formal influence of the Secretary of State in local education. Little is known, however, about the variations between, and within, local school systems and the causes and consequences of such variations. Similarly with the two-tier administration of counties. Much has been written about its merits and demerits, but the only close assessment of its impact reveals the lack of strong basis for any firm judgement.(8) Current thinking seems to be against second-tier administration, but the evidence is by no means conclusive.

This catalogue of particular emphases and omissions could be continued for many areas within the legal-institutional context. Given the rather traditional orientation of many students they are almost certain to appear. A further characteristic of the literature, which may also grow out of the traditional view, is the tendency to highlight the 'problems of local government'. One example of this tendency may suffice. It involves W. A. Robson's treatment in 'Local Government in Crisis'(9) a title with obvious connotations, of the whole question of local finance, but most particularly of the implications for local authorities of the ratio between central grants and local rates. No evidence is produced about the substantive changes caused by the increasing proportion of central grants, but that increase is observed to be undermining local autonomy by providing central government with increasing capacity for control.

The only evidence which is produced, apart from the details of changing rate/grant ratios, relates to the views of Local Authority Associations about such ratios, and these directly contradict Robson's own view.(10) They do not see any danger in a greater proportion of central finance. This presents no problems for Robson, however, as such views are only being cited as evidence of the unwillingness of the Associations to recognise implications in rate/grant ratios which he can detect. Local authorities and their associa-
tions are 'short-sighted', the County Councils Association in particular showing great capacity for self-deception, and all have 'failed to understand the political advantages of enlarging the basis of local taxation'.(11) This is not the point at which to judge the issue, one point of what follows being to test the evidence for each of the positions. In the absence of such tests both positions are equally tenable, and one's choice becomes a matter of value judgement. One potential danger in such a position is clear from Robson's work. Having adopted a particular view he himself makes certain evidence to the contrary inadmissible. He talks of ministerial attitudes towards the local tax base being the product of 'a conscious or unconscious desire to keep them [local authorities] in leading strings'.(12) In other words, any failure to admit this as their aim merely reflects a lack of conscious self-awareness on the part of officials.

In addition to the absence of knowledge about many features of the system, there is an apparent unwillingness to investigate some questions. Simplifying somewhat, and ignoring some exceptional work, (13) local finance, local areas and functions, and central-local relations have been the predominant concerns. This limited perspective is a greater handicap than it might be because of the rather formal legal-institutional approach of the work in these areas. Local finance and areas and functions are important, but not all-important, and there is some doubt as to whether they have always been treated in the way best suited to revealing their importance. In some ways, in fact, it is almost possible to see all of this work as in some way derived from the preoccupation with central-local relations, and more will be said on this below.

Concern with local finance has led to the lengthy consideration of alternative sources of local income,(14) with much less study of the potential elasticity of the rate as an income source, or of its different use by different authorities. The overriding concern, as it was with Robson, has been to seek financial independence from the centre. This is expected to follow from a reversion to ratios of centrally to locally derived income like those of the 1930s. As we have seen there is some doubt about the implications of such ratios, and this view tends to ignore the transformation in the economic system since the war.

Questions immediately arise about the consequences of different income sources, as well as about the rating system itself. Does the source of money necessarily control the way in which it will be spent, and if so, to what degree? Would local authorities spend differently from the way they do at present if the bulk of their finance was provided from local sources, and, if so, on what services? Would the imposition of new local taxes modify public reactions and would this affect policy? Tentative answers to some of these questions are suggested by examination of discretionary use of rate-levying powers, like those for arts and entertainment. It would be unfair to take these as indicative of any local attitude towards major services financed in this way. What they do show is the need for more information about the significance of sources of finance before any decided stand is taken on the central-local issue.

On the issue of rates themselves, there is some evidence about their impact on ratepayers,(15) but no extensive analysis of their application by
local authorities,(16) or about the potential of the tax, should one wish to exploit it. The tax is clearly regressive and this may have important implications for its use, but is not of itself a sufficient reason for condemning the tax. As has been observed, one important complication is that local financial resources are often judged in terms of their capability in the context of a desired balance between central and local contributions. If the aim is to find some local income capable of providing sufficient revenue to reduce dependence on central funds, then the rate is almost certainly inadequate. If, on the other hand, the aim is to provide only a part of total revenue from local sources, then the rate on property may well be adequate. It may be that established attitudes towards the use of the rate by local authorities are as important as the nature of the tax itself. The elasticity of the rate levied may be reduced by an objective appraisal of the impact of an increase, or by a subjective 'anticipation' of public reaction.(17) Left with discretion over some new tax, local authorities would perhaps vary as widely in their exploitation as they do now. Any subsequent attempt at equalisation would simply be a blow at the local discretion which is seen as a most desirable feature of a modified tax system.

There is now a wide variation in the rate levied by local authorities, in part as a result of their different taxable capacity. Thus one finds an obvious tendency for the rate to fall as the per capita rateable value rises. However, this general tendency hides a good deal of variation, and there is also wide variation in the amount of rate income raised per head of population. Thus while authorities are affected by the basis of the only tax available to them they are also influenced by the amounts which they wish to spend. There are authorities which levy low rates, in spite of having low rateable values, with their resultant revenue being well below the average.(18) It is of course difficult to determine whether expenditure decisions dictate rate levels, or vice versa, but an examination of local authorities reveals widely varied practice. Certainly there is evidence to suggest that this form of tax could be exploited much more than has hitherto been the case, in spite of its inherent properties.

Like finance, the question of allocation of functions among local authorities has suffered from a preoccupation with the loss of functions to central government, and with how to avoid further loss. The loss of public utilities and of the hospitals is well charted, and is often cited as evidence of more general central ambition. This preoccupation among students has tended to withdraw attention from what is left with local authorities, perhaps contributing to the lack of public interest in local elections. More than that, however, it has meant that attention tends to be devoted to keeping services in local hands, rather than to considering where they might most appropriately be controlled.(19) One result is a lack of knowledge about the many services for which local authorities are responsible. Political scientists have tended to follow the legal-institutional question of which authority performs which task, and of how functions should be allocated formally. This discussion has been marked by the absence of firm evidence on performance with the issue of local status and its functional implications looming large. Little effort has been devoted to discovering the desirability, or the cause, of
variations between authorities in terms of services, with the result that any rational re-allocation becomes difficult.

Where such efforts have been made the traditional explanatory variable has been population size, though current evidence shows it to have a varied effect and often no apparent effect at all.(20) This preoccupation with size is partly produced by the tendency, already referred to, to seek means by which local autonomy might be developed, large authorities being assumed to be more independent of central government. In part it is also produced by a preoccupation with largely administrative concerns where efficiency is the major yardstick, and where economies of scale are invoked as the solution to many problems. Satisfactory examination of this issue is important but is also difficult. The tendency for it to dominate much discussion is perhaps caused by the much greater difficulty presented by analysis of other questions of democracy or public involvement. This is usually seen as the major alternative criterion by which local government might be judged and the choice between them is rendered more acute by the fact that they tend to work in reverse directions. Economies of scale in terms of administrative efficiency tend to produce diseconomies in terms of democracy and participation.

A further explanation of the preoccupation with size is that political scientists have been seeking solutions to the failings of the local government system. Had they been seeking explanations for what local authorities actually do it is likely that they would have considered a number of factors other than size. Indeed it may also be necessary to ask about what is done before one asks about how efficiently it is done. Efficiency is of course relevant, but what happens is just as important as whether it happens efficiently.

Closely related to the question of size, is the question of area, which, as the Local Government Commission recognised,(21) cannot be dealt with in isolation. Implicit in their view was the idea that area and function must be considered together, though two different arguments may give rise to such a view. One is the traditional argument by which status and function were related, with area and status being similarly interdependent. Thus county borough status was sought and granted when the population reached an appropriate figure (100,000 most recently), with the functional responsibilities following almost without consideration as to their relevance. The other argument would be that certain areas are relevant to the performance of certain functions, and that this coincidence should determine their allocation. Both arguments relate closely to the issue of size, but the second acknowledges more fully the complexity with which the notion of area is endowed. Area is not simply a matter of extent or population size, in spite of the traditional view. It is also related to the economic base, social composition, age and nature of a community. The introduction of such factors into the notion of area, gives it much greater significance, though also making it much more complex to analyse.

This complexity and its relevance were very apparent in the controversy over the proposed extinction of Rutland County Council. Judged in traditional size and areal terms it was not a viable autonomous unit, but the case could not be sustained on those grounds alone. More complex considerations
were invoked and the absence of firm knowledge made it difficult to challenge the County's claims authoritatively. A rational assessment was not made, but perhaps it would not have been even with more evidence. Indeed the existence of such a rational case would have put a number of other local authorities under threat. Rutland's major deficiency related to the traditional size criteria. It was too small, perhaps for service viability, certainly to retain its independence from the central government. Its continued existence raises interesting questions about the validity of such a view.

A further issue in the context of size, area and function has been the pressure to simplify the whole local government structure. The large number of authorities and the complex relationship between counties and districts are often seen as militating against popular understanding and involvement. While simplification and clarification may both be laudable aims, there is not much evidence about the relation between structure and popular interest and involvement. What there is raises some doubts about the benefits of any change. Nor is there much evidence about the impact of a complex structure on other questions, such as service provision, professional competence among officers or party conflict. It has already been indicated that the optimal definition of area is complicated and it may be that some two-tier system would be most appropriate to cater for a diverse range of services, whatever its popular implications. (22)

It has been evident in talking about these substantive concerns that relations between central government and local authorities figure prominently in each discussion. Some of this preoccupation with central control may be traced to the recurrent 'theoretical concerns' of students of local government. W. J. M. Mackenzie's review of such concerns (23) brings out very clearly the concern with central-local relations as well as stressing that local self-government has become one of the 'inarticulate major premises' supporting the system. This must also be read against his review of the history of varied centralising and localising tendencies since 1830. It is interesting against this background of tension between centralising pressures and localising pressures, to consider two general views of the function of local government. (24)

'The first sees local authorities as mediating between central departments and the people who receive government services and controlling the local officials who administer them, a role which must be performed by an elected body.

The second sees local authorities as pressure groups acting on central government and the central bureaucracy as representatives of consumer interests.'

Neither of these functions is altogether compatible with Mackenzie's observation that in some sense or other local self-government is now part of the English constitution, the English notion of what proper government ought to be. (25) The first emphasises the subordinate position of local authorities while the second sees them simply as an element in central government. Both reflect closely the view of Britain as a homogeneous country which naturally gives rise to a unified and centralised system of
government. Indeed it is such a view that gives rise to many of the pre-
occupations dealt with above. It may even account for the low public interest
in local government, a rational reaction in a highly centralised system.

It is our contention that another view is equally tenable given the fact
of the current system. Local authorities can be studied as 'authoritative
allocators' within defined but reasonably wide limits. If one looks at them,
not as adjuncts or agents of central government, but as independent govern-
ments in their own right, different orientations become possible and new
questions suggest themselves. Aspects of government and politics which
have normally been studied in national systems become relevant at the
local level. The greater number of units of analysis available makes more
sophisticated techniques possible and insights can be obtained into politics
at other levels which are less amenable to research.

Support for such a view comes mainly from the United States, which
may have prevented its early adoption in Britain. The same reticence would
apply to many other areas of political analysis.

It is, of course, understandable in the United States, partly because of
its federal arrangements and very strong traditions of local autonomy;
partly, however, it is also due to the developments which have taken place
in the study of politics, and the wish to develop these in a suitable research
setting. Local government provides more units of analysis at the govern-
mental level and also an extensive and perhaps more available array of
sub-units. For whatever reason, it is rewarding to examine the American
literature for its implications for Britain. The volume of literature is
extensive and many lessons might be drawn. In the context of what has
already been said about English local government, however, two general
lessons are of particular importance. One concerns the substantive ques-
tions which have been considered, questions which have considerably changed
over the past ten years. A number of these have already been mentioned,
including a more detailed analysis of the main features of an area and their
impact on politics via decisions to tax and spend. The other, closely related,
concerns the theoretical principles and the methods and techniques which
may be used in examining these wider substantive concerns. Examination
of particular decisions or issues and resultant comments on the power
structure are now seen as only one line of approach. Collection of aggregate
data and the use of multivariate analysis is proving equally fruitful, and
permits the examination of much wider and more general questions. If for
no other reason, the dearth of empirical work in Britain, a feature not res-
stricted to local government, gives the American experience great signi-
ficance. At least it may prevent major errors of omission and commission
in British work.

The two main developments being considered here represent only a
segment of American experience, particularly ignoring the important but
somewhat arid controversy between the elitists and pluralists.(26) This is
ignored in part because of its reduced relevance in the British context where
formal decision-makers assume greater significance than they do in the
United States.(27) It is also less relevant for what have been suggested as
the less understood areas of local government and it is on these that our
attention is concentrated. It is difficult at this point to determine clearly
whether the change in substantive concerns preceded or followed the theoretical and methodological developments. The two are in any case closely interrelated and the substantive changes will be considered first only because they relate more obviously to what has already been said. Indeed the change in substantive concerns becomes obvious as soon as local authorities are seen as 'independent' political systems. The tendency in Britain in any work not in the traditional mould, has been to examine certain political phenomena which occur in a local setting. (28) It has not really sought understanding of the local political system as such, except in an implicit sense.

The substantive change in the United States may be summarised as the movement from concern with Who Governs? to concern with Who Gets What When How? This change of emphasis was called for very clearly in the urban context, and neatly summarised by James Q. Wilson in his observation that 'Urban politics now demands a concentration on ends and not means'. (29) Such an observation by itself has a revolutionary ring in the British context where legal forms occupy so much attention, and where what is seen to be done often appears to be as important as what gets done. Wilson, however, goes much further in spelling out what he has in mind, and already a good deal of substantive work has been done along the lines he was advocating. (30)

Starting from the need to investigate outcomes he emphasised the need to investigate the system as a whole rather than the individual or group level as in the past. There is work on local groups and local parties but this seldom relates them to the system in which they exist or measures their impact on political outcomes from it. (31) In the same way Wilson drew attention to the lack of attention given to the tracing of community features and their implications for political outcomes. Moser and Scott (32) began the first part of this process and more recent studies have continued this work. (33) Unfortunately the range of variables included did not embrace important features of the political system, nor was the link to policy outcomes carried very far.

Implicit in this appeal for examination at the systemic level, and recognised by Wilson, was the need to examine outcomes in terms of regular patterns of action rather than as particular issues or decisions. He took as the essential unit of analysis 'the routine behaviour of the city as it provides certain services or as it conducts its political affairs'. This helps to meet one of the problems met in issue-oriented research which could not account for action that never came up for discussion for one reason or another. (34)

In the British context the relevance of this is clear. There is a danger that more will be known about the limited issue of comprehensive reorganisation than about decisions taken in the remainder of the educational system. The inadequacy of this is obvious at the moment with controversies arising over local control of art education and the development of polytechnics. More importantly it does not fully reflect reactions to major policy suggestions, such as those of Crowther, Newsom and Plowden (35) to say nothing of the designation of educational priority areas (36) and it certainly tells us little about the disposition of the large funds spent by local education authorities. When one considers that in 1962-3 they spent £980 million on current account and £139 million on capital works, the gap in our understanding
becomes very significant. Both the routine and the non-routine decisions which together produce these totals need to be understood.

This appeal for a substantive reorientation coincides with the more 'scientific' approach of modern political studies. The development of more general understanding, even on a probabilistic basis, demands more than case studies of issues. It is at this point that the substantive and theoretical strands coincide and this was clear in comments made before Wilson wrote. Some years earlier Peter Rossi had summarised the dilemma of community studies, while at the same time outlining what might become the salient theoretical concerns. Going even further than those who criticise the consideration of particular issues, he argued that 'case history after case history of communities will lead nowhere and has led nowhere'. (37) This unequivocal call for comparative study of whole communities has found a full and varied response in the United States, but has not really been met in the British context. Rossi himself spelt out some of its implications and they have as much relevance in Britain as in the United States. These were:

(i) the absence of a good conceptual scheme for identifying the crucial elements in the community structure;
(ii) the absence of knowledge about the relation between economic and ecological exigencies and social structures;
(iii) the absence of knowledge about the impingement of social structure on important social institutions, and,
(iv) the absence of knowledge of the effects of local government structure on community. (38)

The filling of such gaps which has taken place in the United States confirms their relevance, particularly for the substantive interests which Wilson has proposed. It is the relationship between Wilson's proposed dependent variables and Rossi's suggested independent variables which is of crucial importance and has been closely developed by Robert Alford. (39) He emphasises the need to relate variables at the same level when seeking explanations. In seeking the explanation of a particular decision it may be that particular decision-makers are most important. If, on the other hand, one is seeking to explain general activity in a particular field, then particular individuals have less impact and structural characteristics of the area involved will have much greater relevance.

This view is developed and Wilson's notion of policy as a dependent variable is elaborated, together with the idea of an even more general role of government. And, more importantly, Alford specifies very precisely the nature of the independent variables applicable when explaining policies and roles of government, developing a more precise formulation of the major structural and cultural determinants. Such an approach has obvious relevance as soon as one accepts local authorities as autonomous decision-makers for reasonably important purposes. Once this has been done any attempt to examine policy or the role of government demands an extension of the factors which have normally been considered relevant to the study of English local government. Problems remain, both theoretical and opera-
tional, but more detailed drawing on American experience can help to overcome these. In spite of differences between the two political systems, many of the concepts used and the detailed operational measures are interchangeable.

Before embarking on a more elaborate theoretical scheme for looking at local politics, it is perhaps necessary to provide some further support for the claim to local autonomy. Given that all that follows rests on this major premise, and given its novelty in the context of much writing on the subject, it will be dealt with in a separate chapter. Succeeding chapters will be taken up with the development of a theoretical model and the examination of some of the relationships to which it gives rise.