



By David Wilshire, MP  
and Dr. Warren Kinston

'Some people even fear that if current trends continue, local elections may eventually be discontinued.'

In the wake of the recent stormy debates on the numerous legislative changes to local government, suggestions for a total reorganisation are likely to come from all parties. Here, David Wilshire, MP and Dr. Warren Kinston put forward their reasons for a radical reform.

We should not be surprised that the idea of reorganisation is in the air. Removing, redefining, reassigning, reshaping and refinancing local government services are bound to make politicians ask whether there are implications for the shape and form of Local Government. Such thoughts bring on either a sinking feeling or a sense of relief - depending as much on personal attitude as ideology.

One thing is clear - there is widespread dissatisfaction with the current state of local government. It is seen as 'weak' by those who favour decentralisation, 'misguided'; by those who believe that local councils should not disagree with central government or 'ineffective' by those who read Audit Commission reports. Some people even fear that if current trends

## A LOCAL REVOLUTION

continue, local elections may eventually be discontinued and councils replaced by branch offices of Whitehall ministries or government-appointed local boards.

However, our research suggests that elected 'governance' at local level is essential and almost inevitable in a mature democracy. Therefore, everything possible must be done to ensure that it performs well. A new approach is needed, and it must be more radical than anything suggested in the Widcombe report.

The commonest proposals heard in the lobbies are 'abolish one tier' or 'set up a regional tier'. Although these ideas are understandable, they are but responses to the fact that something is wrong and they do not explain how such changes will effect a cure. A more fundamental approach is to go back to what governance is all about and, to do this, we must understand how decisions about territory affect the forms of governance.

Observations and analysis of governance in countries throughout the Western world show that there are three strong levels of social or communal territory. The smallest is the home, and the political form in which it finds expression is usually termed the 'household'. At the other extreme, the territory is the country, and its political form: the nation state.

The third readily recognisable territory is that within which people shop, get most of their services, such as education and health care, enjoy leisure activities and expect to travel about daily. This urban or rural territory naturally generates a desire for local governance.

These three strong and unambiguous levels of governance—household, local and national government—are separated by two forms of governance corresponding to intermediate social territories which vary from country to country.

Just beyond the household, but firmly below the territory of local governance, is the easily recognisable small locality in which people walk about and know their neighbours. This territory leads to the development of neighbourhood governance—the

community or parish council in the UK.

Between local and national levels lies another social territory usually called a region or province. Such a territory is recognised by specific sub-cultural and socio-geographic features which fuel popular local desires for a formal governance structure to preserve the area's distinctive characteristics.

We can use this five-level framework to identify the real issues and test the proposals now being made. Firstly, should our third level, local government, continue to be split into two tiers? Because the framework described above is based on people and how they live on the land, it shows that there is room for only one tier of governance per level. You could not, for example, have a 'sub' household within a household, any more than you could have a nation state within a nation state.

The same argument applies to local governance. Two tiers of local government duplicate councillors and administration, generate unhelpful conflict between tiers, and lead to inefficiency, ineffectiveness and waste of money. This logic tells us that local government should not be subdivided but leaves open the desirability of either of the current two tiers. We suspect that radical reform, rather than the simple abolition of one tier, is necessary.

The current two-tier arrangements resulted from an excessive focus on issues of administration, rather than on community and political realities. However, administrative issues can be effectively dealt with in a variety of other ways. If "natural" local government territories are too small to handle a service, they can form consortia (e.g. the fire brigade in London). If 'natural' territories are too large for a particular service, the service can be decentralised (e.g. the social services department in most Shire counties).

The second distinct issue is whether our nation-state should be divided into regions. When considering this, it must be clearly understood that regional governance is not a tier of local government, nor an administrative

convenience for handling large numbers of councils. Smuggling in a new sub-division of local government with the new label of 'regional council' would simply recreate the existing mess and generate needless additional costs and disruption.

The proper administrative handling of large numbers of local authorities is, of course, a valid concern. Insofar as local governance is expected to implement national legislation and provide services within specified frameworks, some workable form of regionalisation is essential. However, this is a job for the civil service and definitely not for regional governance.

Regional governance characteristically involves legislative powers, because its primary aim is to preserve a distinct sub-culture. In large countries like the US and Australia, there are state governments with full legislative and judiciary powers. In smaller countries like Italy and Portugal, there are regional governments which can propose legislation. In the UK, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland currently form our regional governance territories since specific legislation may be brought for each, and all except England have their own ministers with statutory powers.

If we are to develop our regional level further, we must address both constitutional and territorial issues. The first are fascinating but require another article. The latter boil down to one question: should England be considered as more than one region? For example, should Greater London be treated in the same way Vienna is in Austria, as a distinct region for legislative purposes?

The test is, does the region require a continuing flow of distinctive legislation to preserve its sub-culture? To create the elaborate paraphernalia of elective regional governance for administrative convenience or partisan advantage would make a mockery of democracy and would be costly and ineffective.

*David Wilshire MP is co-director of Brunel University's Political Management Programme; Dr. Warren Kinston is the Director, and a senior research fellow at Brunel..*