



David Wilshire MP (right) and Dr Warren Kinston, Senior Research Fellow at Brunel University, say understanding social territories is essential to create effective forms of governance



Is restructuring the answer to better performance?

The only surprising thing about the Association of District Councils' report on abolition of county councils is it has surprised some people.

Yet, by reforming local government services and finances and letting David Widdicombe loose on its party politics, the government has made a debate on its shape and form inevitable. Whether agreeing with the ADC or not, it is sensible to think through how to approach an issue which cannot be avoided.

The general dissatisfaction with local government must first be acknowledged. It is seen as weak by those favouring decentralisation, misguided by those who believe councils should not disagree with central government and ineffective according to Audit Commission reports.

None of these conditions make for social or democratic health. Some people even fear local elections may be discontinued and councils replaced by branch offices of Whitehall ministries or appointed local boards. It is not surprising some practitioners argue the cure lies in reorganisation.

However, it is essential to consider the true nature of local government — abolishing one tier or setting up a regional tier does not explain how reorganisation will cure the situation.

DEMOCRACY

Research suggests elected governance at local level is essential and almost inevitable in a mature democracy. But if local government is ineradicable, everything must be done to ensure it performs well. The ADC echoes the widely held view that it does not perform well and will not unless it is reorganised.

To understand the real status of local government, governance and how decisions about territory affect the forms of governance must be understood.

There are three strong levels of social or communal territory. The smallest basic territory is the home and the political form corresponding to it is usually termed the household. At the other extreme, the territory is the country and its political form the nation state. The third recognisable

territory is that within which people shop, get most of their local services and expect to travel about regularly. This urban or rural territory naturally generates a desire for local governance.

These three levels — household, local and national government — are separated by two forms of governance corresponding to intermediate social territories which vary between countries. Between the household and local governance is a social territory in which people walk about and know their neighbours. This leads to neighbourhood government — in the UK, the community or parish council.

Between local and national levels lies the region or province. Recognised by distinct sub cultural and socio geographic features it drives a popular wish for a formal governance structure to preserve its characteristics.

This five level framework can be used to identify the issues and test current proposals.

Should the third level — local government — continue to be split into two tiers? Because the governance framework is based on people and how they live, it indicates there is only room for one tier of governance per level.

It would be unthinkable to have a household within a household or a nation state within a nation state. In the same way two tiers of local government within one level of governance duplicates councillors and administration, generates conflict and tension between tiers, and leads to inefficiency, ineffectiveness and unnecessary expense. Thus local government should not be sub divided.

But this leaves open whether either current tier is desirable. Rather than abolishing one tier radical reform may be required.

Why a two tier system was considered appropriate in 1974 must be understood. It seems to have resulted from an excessive focus on administration, rather than community and political realities. However, administrative issues can be effectively dealt with in other ways.

If natural local government territories are too small to handle a service, they can form consortia like London's fire brigade.

If too large, a particular service can be decentralised like social services departments in most countries.

But the ADC proposal is not the only one to have arisen. Just as fashionable, but quite distinct, is the idea for the nation state to be divided into regions. However, the true nature of regional governance is not as a tier of local government nor an administrative convenience for handling large numbers of councils. Smuggling in a new sub division bearing the regional council label would simply recreate the existing mess and generate needless additional costs and disruption.

CONCERN

Proper administrative handling of large numbers of councils is a valid concern. In so far 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 civil service job and is not regional governance.

Regional governance involves legislative powers, because its primary aim is to preserve a distinct sub culture. Large countries such as the US and Australia have state governments with full legislative and judiciary powers. Smaller countries like Italy and Portugal have regional governments which can propose legislation. England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland form the UK's regional territories since specific legislation may be made for each and all except one have their own minister and statutory powers.

The territorial issues concerned with the regional level leave one question — should England be considered as more than one region? For example, should London be treated in the same way as Vienna in Austria — as a distinct region for legislative purposes? The answer lies in whether it requires 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 be costly, ineffective and make a mockery of democracy.