

## Local Government in Northern Ireland: Areas, Functions and Finance

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The main objects of this paper are to show that local government in Northern Ireland needs to be reorganised, and to suggest some possible reforms. I begin by noting the chief landmarks in the evolution of Irish local government, and I then summarise salient changes since Northern Ireland was established. Against this background we shall, I think, be able to form a judgment about the sort of reforms that are desirable and practicable.

The pattern of local government in Northern Ireland stems mainly from the Local Government (Ireland) Act, 1898, which introduced into Ireland the structure created in England and Wales by the Local Government Acts of 1888 and 1894.

The Act of 1898 created two quite separate systems, one for county boroughs, the other for administrative counties. The council of a county borough was responsible for all local government services within its area and for striking the rate. In the counties a two-tier system was introduced. The county council discharged certain functions throughout the whole county, while other functions were the responsibility of the councils of county districts (urban and rural districts). Within the counties, rating powers also were divided. County councils struck a poor rate which covered two sorts of expenditure: county-at-large charges, to meet county expenses in rural districts, and district charges, to meet the expenses of rural district councils, since those bodies were not rating authorities. Urban district councils struck a town rate to pay for services under their own control, and, in addition, a poor rate, from the proceeds of which they contributed to the cost of county services within their areas, the county council making a demand for this purpose. This, in brief, is the system that still exists in Northern Ireland.

A feature of this legislation that must today seem rather odd is that it made a sharp distinction between town and country. County boroughs and counties were wholly distinct for administrative and financial purposes. The division between counties and urban and rural districts was not quite so sharp, since county services were provided in all districts, but the urban and rural units came under different authorities and were financed in a different manner, though their functions were very similar.

That nineteenth-century reformers should have adopted a system of

this sort may seem to require no explanation. Road transport was poor, and towns were centres in which people had common interests. Yet quite early in the nineteenth century there was a contrary development. The Irish poor law of 1838 was based on the integration of town and countryside. For the purpose of poor law administration, Ireland was divided into unions each of which comprised a market town as a centre and a surrounding rural area. It would have been quite possible to build on this pattern, but for one reason and another the reformers broke away from it. Large towns (including Belfast and Londonderry in Ulster) already had a long tradition of municipal government; and the Towns Improvement (Ireland) Act, 1854 (to go no farther back) enabled the inhabitants of small towns to be governed by elective town commissioners. Thereafter, the Public Health (Ireland) Act, 1878 divided Ireland into urban and rural sanitary districts, the rural districts being the areas of unions with the towns taken out of them. Finally, the Act of 1898 converted the sanitary districts into urban and rural districts.

When Northern Ireland was established in 1921 there were therefore five types of compendious local authorities—county boroughs, counties, urban districts, rural districts and towns with commissioners under the Act of 1854. The *ad hoc* poor law unions and boards of guardians were abolished in 1948, and this paper is not concerned with them.

#### CHANGES SINCE 1922

##### *Structure and population*

The only notable change in structure since 1922 is that town commissioners have disappeared. Their functions were limited and they had power to levy a rate of not more than one shilling in the £, though this could be increased with the consent of the Ministry. Ten non-county boroughs have been created since 1922, but their powers are similar to those of urban districts. Table 1 shows the number of local authorities in 1922 and 1965.

TABLE 1

Area	1922	1965
County boroughs ... ..	2	2
Administrative counties ...	6	6
Boroughs and urban districts	30	34
Rural districts ... ..	32	31
Town commissioners ...	4	—
Total ... ..	74	73

While structure has remained unchanged, there have been large shifts in population. The first census was taken in 1926 and the last in 1961. Detailed analysis is unnecessary for the purpose of this paper, and the

object of the following tables (in which the figures are contracted) is to bring out three main points.

The first is that urban areas have grown faster than rural areas.

TABLE 2

Area	1926		1961	
	Persons (000)	Per cent	Persons (000)	Per cent
Urban areas ...	638	51	770	54
Rural areas ...	619	49	655	46
Northern Ireland...	1,257	100	1,425	100

These figures, which are based on administrative boundaries, understate the extent of the drift to the towns, since there has been extensive development on the periphery of many boroughs and urban districts.

In the second place, the population has shifted from the west to the east. In the following table the counties are ranged in order of size in 1961.

TABLE 3

Area	1926		1961	
	Persons (000)	Per cent	Persons (000)	Per cent
Antrim county ...	192	15	274	19
Down county... ..	209	17	267	19
Tyrone county ...	133	11	134	9
Armagh county ...	110	9	118	8
Londonderry county...	95	8	112	8
Fermanagh county ...	58	5	52	4
Belfast county borough	415	33	416	29
L'derry county borough	45	4	54	4
Northern Ireland ...	1,257	100	1,425	100

Tyrone has more or less stood still, Fermanagh has declined, and Antrim and Down show sharp increases, both in absolute and relative terms. In the last two counties, however, much development has taken place round the outskirts of Belfast. The population within the city boundary today is virtually the same as in 1926. But within the area of what may be called Greater Belfast (an area bounded roughly by Whitehead, Antrim, Lurgan, Saintfield and Bangor) there lived in 1961 about 40 per cent of the whole population of Northern Ireland.

The third point is that while most boroughs and urban districts have always been, and still remain, very small, the disparity in their sizes has greatly increased.

TABLE 4

## NUMBER OF BOROUGHES AND U.D.s

Population	1926	1964
Below 2,500 ...	7	4
2,500- ...	12	11
5,000- ...	5	8
10,000- ...	7	4
15,000-20,000	—	5
Above 20,000	—	2
Total ...	31	34

Rural districts also vary greatly in size, but most of them are quite large. Of the 31 rural districts in 1964, only four had populations below 10,000.

### *Functions*

Since 1922 there have been extensive changes in functions. Generally speaking, local authorities have lost to central bodies responsibility for hospitals and certain health services, trunk roads, land drainage, the relief of poverty, and electricity and fire services. Two relatively new services which in England are entrusted to local authorities—youth employment and civil defence—are centralised in Northern Ireland. On the other hand, counties and county boroughs have been education authorities since 1923, and the counties have taken over from county districts local health and welfare services and, for the most part, public libraries. The functions of urban districts now include roads, sewerage and sanitation, street lighting and cleansing, public parks and other amenities, housing, planning and water supply. But most of the authorities are too small to provide some of these services in an economical manner and on an adequate scale. Their house-building activities are supplemented by the Northern Ireland Housing Trust, several joint water boards have been created in recent years, and the Government has proposed that planning should be transferred to central control. Add to these points the fact that town commissioners have disappeared, and it is clear that the general tendency is towards wider areas of charge and larger units of administration.

### *Finance*

In finance, one outstanding development since 1922 is that the gap between the financial resources of different local authorities within the same category has widened. In Table 5 I list the local authorities in each class with the highest and the lowest rateable value in 1922 and in 1965.

TABLE 5

Area	Rateable value (£000s)	
	1922	1965
<i>Counties</i> (including boroughs and U.D.s)		
Antrim ... ..	—	2,191
Fermanagh ... ..	244	181
Down ... ..	876	—
<i>Boroughs and urban districts</i>		
Newtownabbey ... ..	—	370
Tandragee ... ..	—	11
Bangor ... ..	50	—
Keady ... ..	3	—
<i>Rural districts</i>		
Lisburn ... ..	—	443
Tandragee ... ..	23	13
Downpatrick ... ..	187	—

Similar (though less wide) disparities would emerge if we took account of wealth in relation to population. For example, in the counties (including boroughs and urban districts), rateable value per head of population in 1965 ranged from roughly £8 in Down to £3 in Fermanagh. Thus, while counties have similar functions, they do not possess similar resources; and this applies to county districts also. These increased gaps since 1922 are, of course, due mainly to two factors: there has been extensive development in some areas, while in others agricultural derating has deprived local councils of much of their rate revenue. Since 1929 agricultural land and farm buildings have been wholly exempt from rates, and industry has been derated by 75 per cent.

Another notable development since 1922 is that local authorities have become dependent to an extraordinary degree on the central Government. In 1921-22 Government grants accounted for only one-eighth of local revenue, whereas today the fraction is almost five-eighths.

TABLE 6  
REVENUE RECEIPTS OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Year	Rates		Government grants		Miscellaneous		Total	
	£000	Per cent	£000	Per cent	£000	Per cent	£000	Per cent
1921-22	2,953	74.4	503	12.6	515	13.0	3,971	100.0
1965-66	16,489	28.8	35,387	61.8	5,388	9.4	57,264	100.0

This enormous increase in grants is due in part to derating. If agricultural land and industry were fully rated, the rateable value of Northern Ireland would rise from the present figure of £12 million to £16 million (the present net annual value). That is to say, rate revenue would expand by some £5.5 million. Even so, grants would still stand at about £30 million. We should also note that local authorities lose revenue by rating exemptions. Universities, training colleges and schools are rateable in England, while in respect of hospitals a bounty in lieu of rates is paid. All these hereditaments in Northern Ireland are exempt. The sum lost to the rates throughout the whole province must be appreciable, and may approach £1 million a year.

The financial affairs of local authorities are confused and complicated in other ways. Outside Belfast and Londonderry, the rating authorities are county councils and borough and urban district councils. As we have seen, the latter levy rates to pay for their own services, and they also contribute to county-at-large services (e.g., education, health and welfare services). These contributions have greatly expanded as county functions have increased. For example, in 1925–26 Bangor Borough levied a town rate of 11s. 3d. and a rate of only 1s. 6d. for county services. In 1965–66 the respective figures are 14s. 10d. and 14s. 2d. As a result of this growth in county expenditure which they do not control, each borough council since 1962 has had power to nominate one of their number to be an additional member of the county council. Rural district councils can do the same (indeed, they have been directly represented on the county council ever since 1898), and it seems rather anomalous that urban district councils have no similar power. These arrangements, however, are hardly in the interest of good local government. Nominated members may tend to look upon themselves as delegates rather than as representatives of the county as a whole. And ratepayers in county districts are not always clearly aware that their financial burdens are so largely determined by the county council. Local government is far too complicated, and we should aim at more simplicity and clearer lines of responsibility.

Responsibility is also blurred because central bodies are in part financed by local authorities. The latter contribute towards the cost of drainage, youth employment, civil defence and fire services, although they are not responsible for these matters to their ratepayers (Belfast Corporation does control its own fire service). Even more confusing is the device introduced by the Education Act (N.I.), 1947 by which part of the cost of education throughout Northern Ireland is shared among all local authorities according to their net annual valuation. The effect of this is that local councils have to make quite large contributions to the Exchequer. For example, in rural districts in county Antrim, it is estimated that in 1965–66 ratepayers will have to find £979,000 for county services. (This is the sum that falls on ratepayers after deducting all Government grants.) Of the £979,000, £304,000 is accounted for by the education levy. In Belfast, the total charge on ratepayers is £6.77 million, and included in this is an education levy of £1.98 million. Yet Belfast gets a specific grant for education of £4.45 million. The Exchequer pays out money with one hand

and gets some of it back with the other. Complications of this sort must make local government unintelligible to the ordinary citizen.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR REFORM

From this analysis it is clear that local government is in need of some reorganisation. The structure is virtually the same as in 1898, but there have been great changes in population distribution, functions and finance. The objects of reform should, at the least, be the following: first, to redraw areas with the aim of reducing inequalities in population and financial resources; second, to make the small units more viable and help to arrest any further erosion of their functions; and third, to diminish the excessive dependence of local authorities on central funds and make them more responsible to their own ratepayers.

#### *Counties and county boroughs*

On purely administrative grounds there would seem to be a strong case for extending the boundary of Belfast County Borough so as to bring under unified control the extensive built-up area round the city, which at present is the concern of many different authorities. "Greater Belfast" extends into Newtownabbey Urban District and into the rural districts of Antrim, Lisburn, Hillsborough, North Down and Castlereagh. (I exclude what may be termed the satellite towns within the Belfast region—Carrickfergus, Antrim, Lisburn, Comber, Newtownards, Holywood and Bangor.) Belfast is the natural centre for this area. A Greater Belfast Council would be in a position to plan and develop over the whole area such services as roads, traffic planning, housing and slum clearance, sewerage, development, and in general the planning of land use.

This would evoke resistance from counties Antrim and Down, which would stand to lose area, population and rateable value. However, the opportunity would then arise to redraw county boundaries with the object of creating counties which are less unequal in population and rateable value. One step would be to amalgamate part of Tyrone with Fermanagh into a new administrative county of Tyrone and Fermanagh. (Geographical counties could retain their identity.) Other changes would require detailed study.

However, I do not think there is the slightest chance of this. For one thing, it is not certain that a sufficient number of people of vision and ability would be elected to a Greater Belfast Council. For another, it might be thought that if Belfast were extended to include 40 per cent of the population of Northern Ireland and more than 50 per cent of its rateable valuation, it might become too rich and too powerful in an area with its own Government. Efforts to extend the city boundary have failed in the past, and now we have had the Matthew Report and the decision to limit the growth of Belfast and expand development in other centres. Further, any political party that proposed to amalgamate counties or to alter their boundaries substantially would undoubtedly

encounter intense opposition. In these matters we must be realistic. It seems that the present structure of counties and county boroughs will remain unaltered, at any rate for the foreseeable future.

### *County districts*

Reorganisation may be more feasible in the case of non-county boroughs and urban and rural districts. This has been a topic of discussion among members of local authorities for many years, and the present Government in Northern Ireland have indicated that they intend to review local government areas.

A primary aim of such a review should surely be to eliminate very small units. Larger units are needed, in the first place, to enable the local authority to pay adequate salaries to officials of ability, energy and imagination. Local government can play a significant part in stimulating economic development, notably by providing houses, roads, water and other facilities; and if it is to flourish it must maintain a high standard of all services for local residents. Initiative in these matters must often come from the officers, who alone have the necessary skill and experience. Officers should also be of such a calibre as to enable them to negotiate with senior civil servants on a basis of intellectual equality. Secondly, a wider field may possibly produce more elected members of ability. Concentration on "parish pump" politics not only discourages outstanding people from giving their services, but deadens local interest in local affairs. Finally, it is urgently necessary to stop the tendency to transfer local services to counties and to the central government.

In creating larger units there seem to be two possible alternatives. One is to abolish very small urban districts and merge them in rural districts. This is open to several objections. It would mean the disappearance of about half the town councils, since 15 of the 34 boroughs and urban districts have populations below 5,000. Then, too, the urban area is the natural focus of interest for a much wider district. We have seen that the tendency is for the country dweller to drift towards the town. The local town is the place to which country people look for the bigger shops, for many services, and for much of their recreation, and it is generally the centre for a local newspaper which is the chief means of public communication throughout the district.

These considerations point to the second alternative: to create new units, each of which would comprise a sizeable town and a surrounding rural area, on the model of the old poor law unions. We need not necessarily keep to the boundaries of existing rural districts, some of which are tiny, while others are very large. Tandragee R.D. has 17,000 acres and 3,000 population, whereas Omagh R.D. has 253,000 acres and 30,000 population. Districts should be able to discharge with equal economy and efficiency the same functions, and ideally they should be equal in size, population and resources. This is not really possible; nor, indeed, is it always desirable, for other factors such as physical features and communications must be taken into account. But the inequalities that



do exist could at least be reduced. With reorganisation on these lines, it might also be feasible to create more towns as centres of local government. These new-style district councils would be able to draw councillors from a wider field, they would have greater financial resources, and they could become a lively focus of interest for the whole area.

Local government could also be simplified and strengthened in other ways. The functions of counties and districts should be clearly distinguished. So, too, should their membership. The two types of authority should be separately elected and be singly responsible to their own electorates. Both county and district councils could strike their own rate, but it would be economical for districts to collect all rates. The district rate and the rate for county services should, however, be clearly set out on the face of the demand note.

In finance, it is important to increase the independent revenue of local authorities. The White Paper on Local Government Finance (England and Wales) (Cmnd. 209 of 1957) said: "The Government believe that the best contribution they can make towards improving the quality of local government services is to improve the quality of local government; and they are convinced that greater independence and freedom from detailed central control is essential to this". Industrial derating has been ended in England, and it stands at only 50 per cent in Scotland. If the primary aim of politicians was to strengthen local government, they would abolish all derating and, if necessary, make Exchequer grants to agriculture and industry. That, unfortunately, seems out of the question in Northern Ireland. But specific grants could in part be replaced by general grants, which give local authorities more latitude. And it should not be impossible to abolish, or at least greatly to reduce the scope of, rating exemptions.

Financial relations between the central Government and local authorities should also be simplified. Services for which a Minister is responsible to Parliament (e.g., civil defence) should surely be wholly financed by parliamentary grant; and serious consideration should be given to replacing the education levy by a modified system of Government grants.

All these proposals are designed to produce a simpler, stronger and more intelligible system of local administration. It must be admitted that in the past the climate of opinion in Northern Ireland has not been conducive to local democracy. But with a clear lead from the central Government, and with good will from all sections of the community, it should not be beyond the realms of possibility to allow local councils more room to develop initiative and responsibility and to make local government more of a common ground for resolving common problems.

My suggestions are not revolutionary: they spring in large part from the actual trend of events in Northern Ireland since 1921, and I have confined them to what seem to be the limits of the practicable. Nor are they very novel. Similar problems and proposals have arisen in Britain, and it may be of interest if in conclusion I briefly mention current developments there.

## COMPARISON WITH GREAT BRITAIN

In England the Local Government Commission which was set up by the Local Government Act, 1958 is still reviewing the areas of counties and county boroughs, though the Minister of Housing and Local Government indicated on 22nd September, 1965 that the terms of reference of the Commission were too narrow and that the Government are to set up a powerful and impartial committee to make a further study of the problem. We shall probably hear much more in the future about the need for local government on a regional basis.

In the English counties the county councils have begun to review the areas of county districts (as required by the Act of 1958), and it is certain that many small units will eventually disappear. The first of these reviews, by Shropshire County Council was confirmed by the Minister in September, 1965. The number of authorities in the county will be reduced from 25 to 14, and four ancient boroughs—Bishops Castle, Bridgnorth, Ludlow and Oswestry—are to be swallowed up by adjacent rural districts. They will not disappear without trace though. Under the Act of 1958 a borough which is included in a rural district becomes a rural borough. It will keep its mayor, councillors, town clerk and traditional dignitaries but have functions little wider than those of a parish council. It is of interest to note that while Oswestry has a population of 12,000, the majority of boroughs and urban districts in Northern Ireland are much smaller than this. But the possible extinction of many more urban authorities in England is causing disquiet, and the Association of Municipal Corporations has come out in favour of amalgamating small non-county boroughs with other types of district council.

Amalgamations of this sort were first officially proposed by the Scottish Office in "The Modernisation of Local Government in Scotland" (Cmd. 2067 of 1963). This suggested, in brief, that the 33 Scottish counties could be regrouped so that their councils would exercise certain major functions throughout a wider area, and that within the enlarged counties new areas could be drawn by combining existing burghs with neighbouring landward areas. These would have a population of at least 40,000, and their councils would be responsible for all services except those that remained with the counties. These promising ideas have unfortunately aroused much opposition in Scotland, and it seems that the present Government is going to abandon them.

*Statistical sources (Northern Ireland)*

Returns of Local Taxation.  
 Local Authority Rate Statistics.  
 Annual Reports of the Registrar General.  
 Ulster Year Books.