

## England

# New Labour, New Democracy?

Roelant Noppe  
Arthur Ringeling

### Introduction

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THERE IS A LARGE, ACCESSIBLE VOLUME OF LITERATURE on the problems of English local government. Pratchett (2000:3) groups these problems into three categories: electoral apathy, functional impotence and arcane decision-making structures. Hard words, these, but possibly all the more reason for renewal. On the one hand, the existence of a large volume of literature means that it may prove hard to add something new to it. On the other hand, it provides us with a number of advantages. It is relatively easy, for instance, to gain insight into the structure of English local government and into the developments that have taken place over the last hundred years, as well as more recent developments and plans. Also, the problems with respect to local government have been analysed and reported extensively.

In this section, we will briefly introduce the cities under study here: Birmingham and Leicester. In section 2, we will sketch the general context of local government in England, its structure, the tasks of local government and some general developments. In section 3, we will discuss the developments in the relationship between the local government and citizens in Birmingham and Leicester. A brief analysis will follow in section 4.

## The cities

Birmingham, located in the West Midlands, is England's second largest city, with a population of over one million. This is 20% of the population of the West Midlands. Birmingham is also the fifth most deprived municipality in England and Wales. With an unemployment rate of 8.9%, it accounts for 35% of the regional unemployment. Also, Birmingham has a large black and ethnic community, estimated at 25% of the total population and 33% of all 16-year-olds. With its two-billion-pound budget and 31,000 full-time and 22,000 part-time staff, the city council provides a full range and large quantity of local services. The city is divided into eleven parliamentary constituencies, each of which are subdivided into three or four wards. The 39 wards are represented by 3 councillors each. As a result, the city council consists of 117 members. That the city of Birmingham recognises its problems with local democracy is perfectly clear: it set up a commission for local democracy in 1999 (Birmingham Democracy Commission, 2000: 5-9).

Leicester, with almost 300,000 inhabitants, is markedly smaller than Birmingham, and the tenth largest city in the country. Leicester, too, has a large minorities community and unemployment levels vary from relatively low (2.6 - 5.9%) in 11 wards, to average (5.9 - 9.2%) in 14 wards, to high in 3 other wards (up to 19.3%).<sup>1</sup> The 28 wards each select 2 of the 56 city councillors. In both cities, the Labour Party holds the majority in the council.

## Local government in England

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Local government in England is a complex matter. Different areas have different numbers of tiers; central-local relations are hard to describe and can vary over time. Besides the usual administrative structure, government through, for instance, quangos plays an important role at the local level. Yet local government is also an interesting subject. Since the 1970s, there have been tendencies towards centralisation, and from 1987 onwards there seems to have been a shift in the direction of 'newer models of individual choice', derived from a slowly emerging 'philosophy of consumer choice and individualism' (John, 1991:64). In addition, at the end of the 1990s, the New Labour government presented a wide-ranging programme for local democratic renewal. Another interesting point is the average size of English local government. According to Pratchett and Wilson (1996:13),

the average population size was 122,740 in 1994, if only the principal authorities are counted and parish, town and community councils left out. So Pratchett and Wilson remark, even before the recent reorganisations, 'the average size of English and Welsh authorities was ten times or more the size of authorities in the rest of Europe' (see also Appendix C).

In the remainder of this section, we will briefly discuss the system of local government, the tasks of local government, its political and administrative structure and government-citizen relationships. Recent developments will be discussed where appropriate. We will conclude with a short summary of the new Labour programme for change.

## State tradition and the system of sub-national government 2.1

When studying (local) government in England, one should realise that England is a part of the United Kingdom and not a synonym to it. The structure of local government in Scotland is rather different from that in England, and it should be kept in mind that this chapter is concerned with England only.

England's sub-national government consists of a complicated system of 1, 2 and sometimes 3 tiers of local government (OECD, 1997; Norton, 1997; [www.local.gov.uk](http://www.local.gov.uk)).

Single-tier local government can be found in the six main conurbations (each divided into metropolitan districts that provide most services) and some other newly created unitary councils, which have the same functions as the metropolitan districts. Both of the cities under study are of the single-tier type. The other English municipalities, in the shire-areas, are part of a two-tier or three-tier structure, usually consisting of a county, district and parish. To cite the local government web-site already mentioned above: 'Each County has an elected County Council providing the strategic and more costly services like social services and education', and this County is 'divided into several districts, each with its own elected district council providing the more local services. Some district councils are called borough or city councils. These are ceremonial titles. Many district councils are divided up into parish or town councils, with their own elected councils'.

According to Norton (1997:366), the local authorities are equal as regards legal status. This means, for instance, that there is hardly any supervision by the counties of the district level. The question of how many local governments there are in England, therefore, requires a complex answer. For 1997, the OECD counted 33 London Boroughs, 36 metropolitan district councils, 14 new single-tier authorities, 35 county councils, 274 district councils and 8,200 parish councils.

## Local government tasks

## 2.2

Unlike local governments in many other countries, the English local authorities are not protected by a constitution. 'Parliament has the authority to alter local authority structure and operations. Local authorities must be able to adduce specific statutory authority for their actions and have only a limited power of general competence. They can be challenged for acting *ultra vires*' (OECD, 1997:392). Then what tasks do local authorities have? According to the OECD, the main areas of expenditure are 'education, personal social services, police, fire, road maintenance, recreation and cultural facilities, libraries and environmental services (refuse collection, street cleaning, etc.)'. In the two-tier structure the tasks are divided as follows (OECD, 1997:393):

### County councils

Education and libraries  
Fire and civil defence

Highways and traffic  
Personal social services  
Strategic planning

Consumer protection  
Waste disposal and recycling

### District councils

Housing  
Planning control and implementation  
Recreation  
Collection of local taxes  
Car parking - where delegated by county council  
Refuse collection  
Environmental health

The parishes have more limited tasks. According to the local government website, 'Parishes deal with local services and problems - such as footpaths, parks, litter and dogs fouling footpaths - at a very practical, detailed level. They also comment on planning applications to the planning authorities (usually the districts or metropolitan districts) but do not take part in the decision making itself' ([www.local.gov.uk](http://www.local.gov.uk), 2000).

Noteworthy is the fact, as we learned from one of our respondents, that central government can take away a local government task from one local authority and pass it on to another authority (for instance, a quango) or start providing the service itself, whereas other local authorities do remain responsible for the task concerned.

## Political structure

## 2.3

The councils are elected by the people; in the larger cities (the metropolitan districts) one third of the councillors is elected by means of yearly elections. The smaller authorities may choose to apply this system as well, but have the option to hold elections for the whole council once every four years (Staatscommissie Dualisme en lokale democratie, 2000: 148). The principal local authority areas are divided into electoral areas or wards (Norton, 1997:384). The wards elect one or more candidates for the county council election; three in the metropolitan areas, because of the yearly renewal of one third of the council. The mayor has a strictly ceremonial function and is elected by, but not necessarily chosen from the councillors.

### The current political structure

According to the Dutch Staatscommissie Dualisme en lokale democratie (2000:148) committees play a very important role in decision-making. A tangle of committees makes local government not very transparent. A financial committee chaired by the leader of the majority party functions as an executive board. This structure is often criticised for being bureaucratic, intransparent en time-consuming, and is regarded as obsolete, because decision-making tends to take place behind closed doors at party meetings. In reaction to such criticism, a new structure has been proposed. Also, the wish exists to offer councillors more opportunities to control the executive and contribute to the formulation of policy. The hope is as well that a directly elected mayor will increase electoral turnout and political involvement.

### Three new models

The Labour Government has proposed three new models, which now form part of the new Local Government Act (DETR, 1998, Staatscommissie Dualisme en lokale democratie, 2000). The councils may choose one of these models or hold a referendum on the matter, the latter which is even mandatory if model 1 is chosen. The three models are:

1. A directly elected mayor heading a cabinet (composed by either the council or the mayor).
2. A leader with a cabinet. The council elects the leader, the other members can be chosen by the council or the leader. The leader and other members are chosen from the members of the council.
3. A directly elected mayor with a council manager. The elected mayor confines himself to the main political lines, while the council manager (appointed by the council) is responsible for the policy implementation.

If the council decides against an elected mayor, a minimum of 5% of the electorate can call for a referendum on this issue.

### London

In London, a new Greater London Authority has been set up, and London now has a directly elected mayor with a fairly large number of responsibilities.

### Administrative structure

2.4

Gray & Jenkins (2000:27) point out that there are many organisational forms of local administration. They mention:

- local branches of central government departments
- public corporations ('an endangered species')
- special purpose ad-hoc bodies (including quangos)
- local lay appointed bodies
- local authorities directly and indirectly elected.

It must therefore be kept in mind that the council and its administration, which are the focus of this section, do not have a monopoly on local public administration. Especially quangos play an important role. As Greer and Hogget remark with respect to quangos in England and Wales: 'The central contextual factor is that there are well over 4800 local quangos with a total budget of over £37 billion, that is almost two-thirds of the equivalent allocation of central government money to local government' (Greer & Hogget, 1996:150). This section, however, focuses on the administration of local government as executed by the council and its administrative apparatus.

### The council and local administration

According to Kingdom (1993:16-18) many authorities instigated some variant of the 'Bains model' after the local governmental reorganisations in 1974. In the Bains model, the administrative apparatus is split up into departments along functional lines; the council mirrors this structure by means of specialised committees. The more important positions (senior staff, chief officers etc.) tend to be occupied by professionals. Generalists are found at the lower levels (Kingdom, 1993:19). Some authorities, however, have returned to the older managerial structures. With respect to developments in the administrative structure, Kingdom writes: 'Recent decades have seen a widespread movement to achieve better co-ordination in policy making through a reduction in the number of departments. At the same time there have been moves to improve leadership through the establishment of senior committees of councillors, resembling boards of directors or cabinets, and the appointment of chief administrators as managers to replace the traditional, legalistic town clerks. This has been termed the corporate movement' (Kingdom, 1993:16). In addition there has been some discussion about a move towards elected chief executives.

All in all, the system of local government as sketched above seems to be a complex one. With this in mind, we will now turn to developments in the relationships between local governments and citizens.

### Recent developments

### 2.5

Apart from the centralisations and the introduction of new public management, the single most important recent development is probably the Labour programme for

the renewal of local government. *The White Paper<sup>2</sup> Modern local government: In touch with the people* is a comprehensive programme for change, it will be discussed briefly below. Although the programme does not always differ in all respects from existing policies, the proposals are of a quite radical nature.

In 1997, after a long period of Conservative government, Labour came to power. According to Pollitt (2000a:3), some of the Labour government's statements acknowledge a de facto shift in the role of government, a change induced by economic, technological and political processes of globalisation. The conclusion most frequently drawn seems to be that the national government must operate 'in partnership' with 'almost everyone one can think of'. The reforms comprise both the reform of representative institutions and developments in direct democracy. "Taken as a whole, the New Labour reforms constitute the most extensive set of changes to elected democratic institutions witnessed in the UK since the Second World War" (Pollitt, 2000b:7).

The Labour Party has not only proposed changes with respect to the national level, but the local level as well. The Blair government presented a White Paper in 1998 with proposals for the radical reform of local government. Based on this paper, two new Local Government Acts have been passed. According to the White Paper concerned, only some local governments in England match up to the ideals it sketches of a modern council. For instance, huge variations in service quality are mentioned.

In the White Paper, a major problem in the 'old culture' is conceived. Council members and officers too often take a paternalistic view and there exists an inward-looking culture when it comes to essential local partners. Also, the low local electoral turnout is remarked upon and the fact that, as a body, councillors do not reflect the make-up of their community. Reasons for these problems can be found in the old framework, which dates mainly from the 19th century, amongst others the committee structure. According to the White Paper, the committee structure causes councillors to spend too much time, and leads to a situation of distorted priorities and decisions taken behind closed doors. The paper also points out some outdated features of the local electoral system and criticises the system of accountability for levels of council tax. It recommends that "councils everywhere should embrace the new culture of openness and ready accountability (...) and local people taking a lively interest in their council and its affairs".



In the White Paper it is indicated that a lot of councils have already started reform, within the existing framework. Other councils are encouraged to do the same too, for instance, by taking steps to "strengthen relationships with key public, private and voluntary sector organisations in their area". A new framework is introduced. This framework should lead to (a) A Bigger Say and (b) A Better Deal for local people.

### **A Bigger Say**

A Bigger Say is to be realised by means of four strategies. The first of these is a new political structure, one which guarantees openness and accountability of the councils, suited to their role of leaders of communities, and secures the efficient delivery of quality local services. Also, diversity is allowed, which means that there is no one right political structure. Many councils have already started to reduce the number of committees, the number of councillors in meetings and the number of meetings held. In addition, several forms of decentralisation have opened up the decision-taking process. Furthermore, a separation of executive and backbench roles has been proposed for reasons of efficiency, transparency and accountability. Although councils can take some of these steps within the existing legal framework, in the White Paper new legislation is proposed to make the three models mentioned above available. Other proposals concerning the political structure include area committees, neighbourhood forums, support for councillors, and more representative councillors.

The second strategy is that of improving local democracy. The "Government will establish a framework which will reinforce and encourage local efforts to improve the quality of local democracy in their area". This framework consists of arrangements for participation and consultation and changes in the electoral procedure.

The third strategy aims to improve local financial accountability, in such a manner that the financial system reflects both the importance of local accountability and the strong interests of central government. The universal rate capping system therefore has to be ended, which gives councils more freedom to determine their own tax-rates, although some reserve power to restrain councils that raise excessive taxes has to be maintained. Through this, local citizens will have more impact on local spending and tax decision.

Finally, as a fourth way to provide the people with a bigger say, a new ethical framework is proposed. This includes a code of conduct for council employees, for which a model code will be developed, as well as a new registration of councillor's interests and a whistleblowing procedure.

### A Better Deal

The Blair Government also wants a Better Deal for people when it comes to the provision of services, better in terms of both quality and costs. A first strategy is that of increasing performance by means of the principle of 'best value': "the best value process will help councils decide on priorities in consultation with their communities and other partners, build on consensus on what needs to be achieved, and measure how their programmes and services are contributing to the shared objective". A legislative framework that requires local authorities to undertake a number of key steps will be proposed. Government will introduce a new system of performance indicators, standards and targets.

A second strategy is the promotion of the well-being of communities. Promotion has to be made, first of all, through the 'community leadership' role of the councils we discussed above. Second, new legislation must be introduced to "place on councils a duty to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of their areas and to strengthen councils' powers to enter into partnerships". A coherent and comprehensive strategy should result from the community planning process; it has to be developed in co-operation with "local people, local business and with public and voluntary sector bodies".

A third way to give people a better deal is to be found in capital finance. The framework for capital finance must become both simpler and more readily understandable. For instance, by means of a single capital pot, local autonomy and accountability can be improved.

The fourth way concerns the field of tax structure. A reformed business rate system is suggested which will strengthen the relationship between councils and their local businesses by 'allowing some measure of local discretion over the business rate'.

Many of the proposals mentioned have by now become law. The Local Government Act 1999 introduced legislation concerning, for instance, best value and taxes. The Local Government Act 2000, which includes the new models for local government, has passed through parliament. It is now up to the Minister of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to decide when exactly this act comes into effect.

## Local government - citizens relations

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A first, general remark on the relationship between local governments and citizens concerns the role of local governments. When discussing the internal structure of local government, Kingdom starts by stating that '[l]ocal authorities are organisations that administer and deliver services to clients and, if we ignore the democratic structures, we find that they exhibit many features that are shared with other organisations' (Kingdom, 1993:16). From the case studies discussed below, we can learn that, by now, citizens are, at least to some extent, regarded as more than just consumers of services.

In the remainder of this section, we will focus on the problems the two cities under study encounter in their relationships with citizens, and the actions undertaken to solve these problems. It should be clear, though, that it is unlikely that the selected cities are representative of England as a whole. Also, because the number of interviews conducted was limited to three in Birmingham and two in Leicester, we may still not know everything about these two cities.

### Birmingham

3.1

The citizens of Birmingham take part in the governance of Birmingham, first, as voters; elections take place every three out of four years. Second, citizens can participate in ward committees, neighbourhood forums, ward advisory boards, and the like. These latter forms of participation are less formal, however. In the end, most decisions are made by the ward committee, and only the council members have the right to vote. Third, citizens can participate through the network of voluntary organisations and interest groups, which can try to exert influence. Fourth, citizens can be consulted as consumers in, for example, the best value programme. The existence of these more or less formal options does not mean that citizens

always make use of them. In a survey on what kind of influence citizens want, it became clear that with respect to this matter, there are three groups distinguishable. One group of citizens knows about the ward committee and does or does not attend meetings, another group wants a say in the provision of services, and the third group simply does not care.<sup>3</sup>

### Problems with local democracy

In the interviews, it became clear that both politicians and civil servants recognise a range of problems with respect to local democracy. These difficulties are not fundamentally different from those Pratchett (2000) sketches. First and foremost, there exists a 'democratic gap' between citizens and politicians. Local electoral turnout is low in Birmingham; the turnout percentage of 42% in some wards is considered high and the average lies around 25%. Connected to this there is the problem of what Pratchett calls 'functional impotence'. Because local government lost many functions under the Thatcher government, people may well have become less interested in a local government tier that is perceived as relatively powerless. The Birmingham Democracy Commission comes to the same conclusion in their research on the subject (2000:28). Another cause for the democratic gap may be found in the changing composition of the city. Councillors elected by wards no longer represent clearly defined communities, as a result of which they lose some of their legitimacy as decision makers.

That this democratic gap is perceived is clear. The Birmingham Democracy Commission, too, remarks 'A message which has been repeatedly emphasised to us is that the City Council is perceived to be either unwilling to listen to, or incapable of hearing, the voice of ordinary people. It may be an unfair perception but it is one which is strongly held and is regularly cited as a major reason for the lack of interest in voting and in becoming involved in local democracy' (Birmingham Democracy Commission, 2000:11). Other problems mentioned by our respondents include complex and slow decision-making in the old committee system and a relatively strong dependency on the national government.

Looking at the problems mentioned, one could argue that they are mainly problems for Birmingham's politicians, who seem to feel a loss of legitimacy. That the matter is perceived as important, becomes apparent when one considers the amount of attention paid to possible solutions.

## Democratic renewal in Birmingham

Democratic renewal in Birmingham seems to follow two main tracks. The first of these concerns devolution of power down to the 39 ward committees; the second concentrates on introducing a new decision-making structure for the council. This is not to say that no other initiatives are being taken. Also, it must be kept in mind that the process of renewal is a continuing one, and that the recently established Birmingham Democracy Commission has published only one document so far. This document is to be followed by a Green Paper on the changes in the use of ward committees, the political structure and a whole range of other matters. We will return to this later.

For years, Birmingham has been experimenting with so-called ward committees.<sup>4</sup> Formally, the sole members of these committees are the elected councillors from the 39 wards; each committee consists of three members. These members are the only ones with formal voting power, as the council may only delegate decision-making power to councillors. In practice, however, every citizen who is interested can attend meetings and make his or her view known to the committee. In the wards, there also are tenants associations and neighbourhood forums, which can advise the committee. A special group is that of the ward advisory boards, which consist of ward committee members, the neighbourhood forums and other interest groups, although it is the ward committee members who decide on its ultimate composition. Another initiative that uses the ward structure are the recently introduced ward co-ordinators, who are to bring local service providers together.

The two motives behind the use of ward committees are, first, to respond to a demand for more local involvement from the council and, second, to try and hold the community together, the different parts of the community being so disparate. Several problems are connected with the ward committee structure. Historically, the ward committees had only limited decision-making power. This has slightly improved and at present the committees have their own, albeit limited, budgets. One of the reasons for the ward committees' restricted power might be that the history of the ward committee structure has notably been one of experiments and pilots. The discussion used to concentrate on devolution of all kinds of services to some wards; the current discussion revolves around a more comprehensive devolution of responsibilities to all wards, although it remains limited to few services deemed appropriate for this. Another reason might be a certain reluctance of the majority party of the council to give up power: ward committees can be of a mixed composition and may even be controlled by the opposition.

A second problem is the rather low attendance at ward committee meetings. As one respondent said, a turnout of 20 people is reasonably high; this, while most wards comprise between 20,000 and 30,000 inhabitants. On the other hand, when more controversial issues are discussed, attendance can be much higher. Another respondent also mentioned that people are unwilling to participate on a continuous basis, but rather show up when something is the matter. According to this respondent, people do show up at meetings, but to set up a permanent dialogue proves to be difficult. Third, as one other respondent remarked, changing the political decision-making structure ought to go together with a change in the structure of the administration.

Other problems perceived by the Birmingham Democracy Commission (Birmingham Democracy Commission, 2000:19-23) include the uneven spread and influence of local bodies. For instance, there are many differences between the neighbourhood forums in different wards. As the commission states, one community forum encompasses three wards, while some neighbourhood forums represent some 2,000 people. Also it is hard to determine the exact boundaries, since many communities do not coincide with wards or neighbourhoods but overlap. The commission recommends moving towards a simpler, more comprehensive structure, officer support for ward committees and the setting up of (elected) parish councils.

Another type of reform concerns the council structure. In anticipation of the new legislation by the national government,<sup>5</sup> in January 2000, Birmingham introduced the cabinet-leader model as far as possible within the existing legislative framework. Under the threat of being forced to do this when the new legislation becomes effective, Birmingham has decided to hold a referendum on the matter of an elected mayor.

As early as May 1999, the committee structure was reorganised and four group committees created. Fourteen committees were clustered around these groups, along with 17 new policy panels and 39 ward sub-committees. In January 2000, an informal 'Leader and Cabinet' were chosen. Each of the cabinet members heads an advisory team that is responsible for a particular field of council activities. Formally, however, this cabinet has no decision-making power. Parallel to this, 12 scrutiny committees have been set up, chaired by a member of the majority party.

Some committees have continued as before. The acceptance of the policy framework fell to the full council (Birmingham Democracy Commission 2000: 31).

The introduction of this model has not been without criticism. As councillor Roy (Leader of the Conservative Group) remarks in his minority report in the Birmingham Democracy Commission report: 'We profoundly disagree with the current Cabinet system where no agenda is issued, meetings are held in private, Opposition Parties are excluded, the press are excluded, the public are excluded and no Minutes are issued - only a very basic briefing note. Furthermore the Scrutiny Panel function is entirely Chaired by the ruling Party and we have made strong representation that for this to be a true Scrutiny, the Opposition should be offered Chairmanships of an appropriate number of these. However, this request has been refused' (Birmingham Democracy Commission, 2000:57). In somewhat milder words, the secretary of the Liberal Democratic Group, too, criticises the new model in his minority report, with many arguments being essentially the same as those mentioned above by Roy.

The two types of reform discussed are not the only ones. There has been a discussion on referenda, opinion polls have been used and the 'Best Value' program also includes the consultation of citizens. In addition, the Birmingham Democracy Commission is discussing the introduction of proportional representation, reforms such as postal or electronic voting to increase electoral turnout and a move towards some form of regional government. A full discussion of all the commission's proposals will not be presented here, because they are recommendations only and not actual practice. It should, however, be clear that the process of democratic renewal in Birmingham has not ended yet.

## Conclusion

All in all, we can conclude that Birmingham, due to both local pressures and national developments, is moving towards a new organisation of the local polity. Regarding the reforms discussed, we can clearly distinguish between institutional reform and participative strategies. Both types of reform are present in Birmingham. Up till now, however, the number of citizens involved in the process seems to be rather limited notwithstanding the city being clearly ahead in adapting to the needs presented by the new legislation. Finally, the introduction of a local democracy commission shows that there are many plans for future renewal and an ongoing discussion.

## Leicester

## 3.2

The role of citizens in the governance of Leicester is rather similar to that in Birmingham, although there are some differences discernible. Most importantly, the ward structure is much weaker in Leicester, while there seems to be more informal consultation taking place. We will return to this later. From the interviews, we learned that Leicester is more 'centralised' than Birmingham, with less devolution of power, which may have its impact on the role that politicians and citizens can play.

### Problems with local democracy

The perceived problems with local democracy parallel the problems in Birmingham. Low electoral turnout - in some wards around 20% and 34% on average<sup>6</sup> - is seen as an indicator of a democratic deficit. Local government is often perceived as irrelevant to the problems of citizens. In Leicester, too, the loss of functions is regarded as one of the causes of this. Another factor may be the dominance of Labour of the council for over 20 years; one respondent noted that the Labour Party is identified with local government, and gets blamed for everything that goes wrong. According to one of the respondents, the situation has also led to a somewhat paternalistic culture. He told us that some parts of the city are alienated from the council, sometimes in an openly hostile way. One factor adding to the feelings of animosity is the idea that the council favours the inner city over the outer areas. No matter what reasons, however, Labour has been losing votes over the past few years and seems rather close to losing the majority.

The dependency on the national government is also a factor of importance in Leicester. For instance, when Leicester became an all-purpose local authority (without a county level between the central and local level), major responsibilities were transferred (back<sup>7</sup>) to the city, while the budgets for these tasks were reduced. Inally, in Leicester, too, the decision-making process by means of the old-style committee system is perceived as a problem.

### Democratic renewal in Leicester

The solutions being sought in Leicester follow two main tracks, as was the case in Birmingham. On the one hand, a number of consultation procedures are used,



although these are not accompanied by significant devolution of power. Decision-taking remains to a large extent a central matter, amongst others because of the perceived need to balance the interests of parts of the city with those of the city as a whole. This is clearly expressed by the fact that, in Leicester, the ward structure is much weaker than it is in Birmingham; the wards have no real responsibilities and no budget. On the other hand, Leicester is also experimenting with a new decision-making structure for the council. Although this was only recently implemented, Leicester, like Birmingham, seems to be ahead of the forthcoming legislation. Below, the two major tracks are described in more detail.

In Leicester, consultation takes shape in many different forms. One set of experiments aims at involving individual citizens, the other has more to do with community leadership, co-operation with interest groups, and such. Consultation also takes place within the 'Best Value' context.

In the first set of experiments, several attempts have been made to consult individual citizens on important issues by means of citizens' panels, surveys and focus groups. The respondents mentioned two projects in particular. A citizens' panel has been set up by means of which a (relatively small<sup>8</sup>) number of individual citizens has been given the opportunity to discuss the council's budget. The randomly selected members can discuss the budget with each other and voice their opinions. They receive training in the technicalities of, for instance, reading budgets first. Although only a small number of people are involved, the hope is that they will remain active. Because of the positive experiences with the project, there are plans to drastically increase the number of participants to 1,000: this will allow for a selection of people from a wide range of city areas. A second major programme is aimed specifically at young people. By means of school elections, a number of young people have been chosen for the 'Young People's Council'. This council is to hold meetings in the council hall; participants receive training in meeting skills. Also, a small budget has been made available for the Young People's Council to really achieve something.

Although our respondents were fairly enthusiastic about both these projects and about consultation in general, they also made some critical remarks, pointing at the potential danger of participants being disappointed later when evaluating 'what has really happened'.

Consultation of groups is also of importance in Leicester. As one respondent mentioned, there are influential opinion groups. Apart from a citizens' panel with local business people, other somewhat more structural forms of group consultation exist, such as tenants associations. Although there is some discussion about giving these organisations a bigger say, as yet there is no devolution of 'strategic social powers'. Group consultation is not without problems. As one respondent said, with a strong network of local opinions groups, the question is how to hear the voices that don't shout the loudest. It is not always clear to what extent organisations represent the community. One other respondent was planning to look at the groups with 'best practice' in each city area, and perhaps provide them with budgets.

The second track again consists of changing the council structure. Leicester very recently adopted a new 'constitution' for the council, aimed at implementing in as far as possible the cabinet-scrutiny model; the introduction of an elected mayor was rejected.<sup>9</sup> Up till now, only one meeting has taken place under the new structure. During this meeting, some gaps in the constitution immediately had to be filled, because a few urgent decisions had to be made which hadn't gone through the new structure yet.

The reforms discussed are not the only types of reform taking place in Leicester. There also seems to be a lot of attention for ICT developments and how these could be used to make service provision more efficient and local through locally accessible databases and the like. One of the more futuristic ideas is to install local web-cams for communication with centrally located civil servants. Also, like in Birmingham, there seems to be a discussion going on about making voting easier by postal voting and using different locations for voting stations. However, there appear to be legal limitations to the implementation of these ideas.

## Conclusion

Leicester seems, by and large, to share a lot of problems with Birmingham. Renewal takes shape in two major ways. In advance of the forthcoming legislation, a new council structure has been introduced in the form of a cabinet-scrutiny model, and a wide variety of consultation procedures are being set up to increase the involvement of both individual citizens and organised groups in the policy-making process, even though eventual decision-taking appears to remain

an essentially central task. As it was the case in Birmingham, both institutional reform and participative strategies seem to be present.

## Conclusion

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Within the limits of this study, we can only point out the most important similarities and differences between Birmingham and Leicester. Basically, both cities wrestle with the same problems with local democracy. Although Leicester is smaller than Birmingham, the perceived democratic gap is equally wide. Electoral turnout is low in both cities. The cities share a concern over the loss of functions and the ongoing influence of the national government on local democracy. In this, one could recognise one aspect of the Anglo-Saxon state tradition as described by Loughlin & Peters (1997:46), the absence of a legal basis for the state. Local government lacks constitutional protection and national government can easily influence its functioning.

The strategies to tackle these problems are the same when it comes to the reorganisation of the council structure. Both cities have introduced a cabinet-scrutiny model, in anticipation of the coming into effect of the Local Government Act 2000. Both cities seem to be against the introduction of an elected mayor. The way we understand it, these forms of experimentation chosen are rather common throughout England.<sup>10</sup>

The use of new participatory arrangements, however, differs between the two cities. Leicester seems to be slightly more conservative. Participation is mostly limited to a diverse, interesting set of consultation procedures, while decision power remains vested in the Council. On the other hand, Leicester has somewhat more advanced ideas with respect to the use of ICT in service delivery. In Birmingham, the ward structure appears to be more important to channel participation than in Leicester. Through the ward committees, citizens and interest organisations can influence local affairs; neighbourhood forums also play a role. In Birmingham some responsibilities and budgets are decentralised to the wards. In addition, the administrative organisation seems to be less centralised than it is in Leicester.

Overall, we can conclude that both cities are experimenting with institutional renewal and certain participative strategies. However, the type of participative

strategies differs. Both cities seem to be careful and a little hesitant to devolve real power and budgets, as they are strongly aware of the necessity of balance between the city as a whole with the interests of its constituting parts, be it constituencies, wards, areas or neighbourhoods.

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- 1 On the web-site of the Leicester municipal office, this is split up further into three categories. The figures come from the Office of National Statistics.
  - 2 The status of a 'White Paper' is fairly formal. When ideas are presented in this form, it means that the government is actually planning to turn the ideas into an Act. For the paper discussed here, this has already taken place.
  - 3 Unfortunately, we do not know the percentages of people in these three groups.
  - 4 Also, there is now one elected urban parish council, with a very limited power of taxation.
  - 5 The Local Government Act 2000, following most of the proposals as set out in the white paper discussed above, has passed through parliament. When exactly the Act will become effective is up to the Minister of the DETR.
  - 6 In the 1999 city council elections.
  - 7 Leicester had lost these functions when it lost its borough status in 1974.
  - 8 About 30 to 40.
  - 9 Though the people may still call for a referendum under the new legislation.
  - 10 We would like to thank Lawrence Pratchett for informing us about this.