The Politics of Local Government

Gerry Stoker

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The Politics of Local Government

Second Edition

Gerry Stoker

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MACMILLAN

For Deborah, Bethany, Robert and Benjamin

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showing interest in something they felt was too time-consuming and fundamentally boring.

Finally in a book of this kind, surveying a wide field of study, omissions and inaccuracies are inevitable. I accept full responsibility for any errors and the views expressed in the book.

<div align="right">GERRY STOKER</div>

Guide to Reading the Book

Local government has during the 1980s found itself buffeted and challenged by a range of forces including public expenditure constraints, economic restructuring, increased politicisation and changed public perceptions. Local government has become a focus for some wider conflicts between Left and Right as well as an arena for political competition between business, trade union, environmental, community action, women's and ethnic minority groups. From being a quiet backwater of routine administration and parochial politics, local government has been pushed into the limelight. In the light of these developments the aim of this book is to examine the changed world of local government politics.

This book has been designed to be read as a whole or by dipping into particular chapters or sections. Its underlying concern with the politics of local government is pursued in a variety of ways.

Chapters 1–3 of the book consider the institutions of local government as part of the political system of modern Britain. The discussion challenges the narrow focus that often accompanies the study of local government by placing local politics in a broader context and by directing attention not only at elected local government but also at the increasing role undertaken by a range of non-elected local governmental and quasi-governmental agencies.

Chapter 1 argues that to understand local government we must place it in the context of particular historical circumstances and consider its relationship with a range of social and economic interests. Chapter 2 examines elected local authorities as political institutions and considers their organisation, the nature of councillors and the operation of party systems and electoral accountability. It includes a new section dealing with the nature of local parties. Chapter 3 examines the world of non-elected local govern-

ment. It is concerned with the growing importance of a variety of non-elected agencies operating at a local level. These agencies have been created by central government, local authorities and partnerships of public and private sector sponsors. The chapter considers which interests control and benefit from the actions of different types of non-elected organisation.

Chapters 4–6 examine the everyday politics of local government. Its focus is on policy processes within local authorities and decision-making influences from the wider political environment. Chapter 4 examines the internal politics of local authorities, starting from a concern with the relationship between officers and councillors and moving on to examine party group and departmental influences on policy-making and implementation. Chapter 5 considers the world of local interest group politics and the nature of the relationship that different interests establish with local authorities. A picture of considerable diversity within the world of local government is assembled, but a trend towards a greater 'openness' in local politics is identified. Chapter 6 examines the non-local governmental influences on local authorities. A complex set of inter-organisational relations are identified and the increasingly strained nature of central–local relations during the Thatcher years is examined.

Chapters 7–9 focus on a number of contentious and critical issues which have confronted local authorities in the 1980s. The concern is with some of the major political conflicts affecting local government. Chapter 7 examines the struggle over local spending between 1979 and 1987. Chapter 8 provides an account of the introduction of the poll tax, and the problems it has caused. Chapter 9 looks at the issue of privatisation, dealing with the range of measures undertaken during the Thatcher years.

Chapters 10–11 examine competing visions of what the role of local government is, and should be, in our society. Chapter 10 identifies various theories of local government and politics and critically assesses the interpretations that they provide. Chapter 11 considers the future of local government in the light of the post-Thatcher debate.

This book is about local government in Britain and does not deal with the position in Northern Ireland. The main reason for not considering Northern Ireland is that the system of local government in the province is substantially different from that operating

in the 'mainstream' British context. For an excellent discussion of local government in Northern Ireland see the special issue of *Local Government Studies*, vol. 12, no. 5 (1986) edited by Michael Connolly.

1 Local Government in Context

The origins of modern local government

The rise of local government is closely tied to the process of industrialisation which gathered momentum in Britain from the middle of the eighteenth century. The movement of population from rural to urban areas was accompanied by severe problems of overcrowding, law and order, and ill-health. The immediate response to this was the creation of a series of *ad hoc*, single-purpose bodies which included poor law boards, turnpike trusts and boards of improvement commissioners. The powers of the improvement commissioners varied but often included responsibility for paving, cleansing, the lighting of streets and the provision of watchmen. These *ad hoc* responses were viewed by many as inadequate in administrative terms. Moreover, the *ad hoc* bodies operated alongside a system of local government institutions effectively controlled by Tory squires and traditional landowning interests. The propsperous entrepreneurs that increasingly dominated the expanding towns and cities resented their lack of control over the full range of civic affairs. In response to these pressures the 1835 act created elected municipal councils and gave to them a range of powers and property.

The creation of these municipal boroughs or corporations in many towns and cities is widely viewed as the beginning of our modern system of local government. The municipal boroughs shared key characteristics of modern local authorities in that they were responsible for a range of functions and directly elected. The functions of these municipal boroughs were, of course, very different to those of modern local authorities and the franchise was limited to male rate-payers of more than three years' residence. Crucially, however, the principle of local self-government had been established.

The middle years of the nineteenth century witnessed a continued concern with the consequences of industrialisation and urbanisation. Various legislative measures gave additional or new responsibility for public health, highways, housing, poor relief and education to the institutions of local government. The municipal boroughs took some of the powers, as did the long-established and unelected county and parish agencies in rural areas. There was also a substantial proliferation of *ad hoc* bodies. The result was a very complex local government system with a range of agencies, all, perhaps, able to raise a rate and with overlapping boundaries.

The extension of the franchise to agricultural workers was followed in 1888 by the creation of all-purpose and directly elected county councils. For towns and cities with populations greater than 50 000 the 1888 Act also established elected county borough councils, independent of the county councils and based on the existing municipal boroughs. London was given its own directly elected county council. In 1894 and 1899 further reforms established a range of directly elected multi-purpose authorities below the county councils. In urban areas the prime responsibility for local government remained with the all-purpose county boroughs. These various reforms established the basic structure of local authorities that lasted until well past the Second World War.

The structure of local government may have been relatively stable in the early decades of the twentieth century but there was considerable change and development in the functions undertaken by local authorities. The concern with public health, highways and lighting, and law and order remained. Some responsibilities were transferred from existing *ad hoc* bodies. For example, in 1902 school boards were abolished and in their place local authorities took on the provision of education and set up separate committees to oversee the service. As new responsibilities were taken on by the state, so many of these were placed in the hands of local authorities. These included town planning responsibilities, the building of low-cost housing and the provision of a range of welfare services. In addition local authorities took on the development of public utilities such as gas, electricity, water and, in the case of Hull, a telephone system. Local authorities also had some responsibility for poor relief and were instrumental in the management and provision of hospital and other health services. Between

1900 and 1938 total local authority expenditure increased nearly four-fold in real terms (Dunleavy, 1984, Table 3.2).

The inheritance of the modern system of local government has a richness and diversity which we cannot hope to capture here (see Keith-Lucas and Richards, 1978; Alexander, 1985; Widdicombe, 1986d, pp. 81–105). The linchpins of the modern system remain directly elected, multi-purpose local authorities. Their organisation and responsibilities differ substantially from the institutions of the pre-Second World War period but they are still major spenders of public money and providers of public services. However, rather like the original elected local authorities, today's local councils operate alongside a range of non-elected, single-purpose agencies, such as health authorities. In this book most of our discussion is directed towards the politics of local authorities but we also focus attention on the increasingly substantial role taken by non-elected agencies of local government.

Local government is an important part of the system of government in Britain. In 1988–9 local authorities spent approximately £46 billion and employed nearly three million people. This accounted for about a quarter of all public expenditure and a tenth of the gross domestic product. The cliché about local government 'looking after us from the cradle to the grave' is almost inadequate to capture the range of modern local government activity. Manchester City Council's *A-Z Guide* contains information about its services under more than 700 separate headings, starting with advice about abandoned motor vehicles and ending with a reference to zebra crossings. Local authorities have a role in education, housing, welfare, land-use planning, leisure, transport, public health, refuse disposal, street lighting, traffic management, the arts, consumer protection, police and fire services, tourism, emergency action and disaster relief, economic development and many other areas. They, along with other governmental organisations operating at a local level, are key agents of the welfare state.

The scale and scope of modern local government means that it is essential to place its study in the context of the society in which it operates. Dearlove (1979, p.412) comments that the 'necessity for this cannot be doubted when we are faced with something of such massive significance as local government. . . . We have to see how it fits into the historical trend of our times; and have to assess its significance for different groups and interests in society'. These

twin tasks provide the focus for the discussion in this chapter. First a brief account of the post-war development of local government is outlined in the context of changes in the social and economic environment. The aim is not to provide a detailed history but rather to relate the shifting pattern of local government activity to dominant trends and developments within society. The second half of the chapter attempts to establish the importance of local government activity by examining the way it is experienced by different groups and interests. We draw attention to the way the public as consumers establish a diverse and complex set of relations with local government. We also examine the position of local government employees and the way that local authorities affect and influence private industrial and commercial interests within their areas.

The post-war development of local government

The post-Second World War history of local government has been described in terms of decline (Robson, 1966; Loughlin *et al.*, 1985; Bryne, 1986, pp. 17–23). Considerable play is made of the loss of local control over several important functions and the increasing domination by the centre of finance and expenditure. The brief historical review, provided below, challenges this interpretation as too one-sided. Local government has lost some functions but it has also gained further responsibilities, and the attempts of central government to control local spending have not been wholly successful. This argument is pursued in an analysis which divides the post-war history of local government into three periods: 1945–55 1955–75 and 1975 to the mid-1980s. The aim is to capture important shifts in the economic and political climate and corresponding changes in the organisation and operation of local government.

Launching the Welfare State: 1945–55

The welfare legislation of the 1940s, along with the commitments of the post-war Labour Government in the areas of housing and employment, built on the reforming legislation of the previous century to produce the Welfare State in a recognisably modern form (Taylor-Gooby, 1984; Thane, 1982). The task of developing

services was largely taken by elected local authorities. Newton and Karran (1985, pp. 60–1) note a dozen important pieces of legislation 'which had the effect of increasing local spending by virtue of creating new local responsibilities'. This period, however, also saw the creation of one of the major quasi-governmental agencies, the National Health Service, and the removal of some public utilities from local government, in particular gas and electricity services were nationalised. Nevertheless elected local government was to be a prime vehicle in the drive to create the Welfare State.

Despite its new responsibilities the institutional apparatus of local government remained largely unchanged. Major towns and cities were the responsibility of all-purpose authorities. There were 81 county boroughs in England and Wales and equivalent authorities with all local government powers in the four major cities of Scotland: Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee and Aberdeen. Outside these major centres 61 county authorities shared local government powers with 1356 county districts, composed of non-county boroughs, urban districts and rural districts in England and Wales. In Scotland, county authorities shared responsibility with 26 large boroughs and 171 small boroughs, as well as a range of small district authorities. Local government in London was shared between 28 metropolitan boroughs and the London County Council.

The system was widely regarded as inadequate and obsolete. A few academics and some official reports called for radical reform to create a local government system capable of dealing with new demands and changing population patterns (Robson, 1948; Barlow, 1940). Indeed, Aneurin Bevan, the minister in the post-war Labour Government responsible for local authorities, drew up plans to replace the existing structure by about 240 'new all-purpose authorities' (Foot, 1975, pp. 263–4). This scheme came to nothing and no new proposals emerged from the Conservative administration which followed. There was some 'institutional tinkering' based on the work of the Boundary Commission of 1945–8. Various *ad hoc* arrangements to jointly administer some services were made between authorities. But there was no real desire on the part of either the local authorities or the concerned central departments to engage in fundamental reform. The 'principle of adjustment rather than restructuring' dominated. Thus 'there was an accurate perception of the problems of the local

government system together with an unshakable reluctance to adopt radical solutions to them' (Alexander, 1982a, p. 13).

The ideological environment was dictated by the building of the 'welfare consensus'. As Taylor-Gooby (1984, p. 18) notes the 'consensus did not descend ready-made from heaven. It had to be constructed and maintained, and neither process was without conflict'. The attitude of many Conservative politicians to welfare reforms was ambivalent and not all acquiesced to Keynesian management of the economy. However, according to Taylor-Gooby (1984, p. 19) 'the departure of Churchill in 1955 and the accession of Macmillan in 1957, marked the acceptance by the mainstream of the Party that there was no road back'.

The local ideological climate was in most areas apolitical in character (Bulpitt, 1983). Party colonisation of local politics was incomplete, with only about half of all councils under political control. When parties did control local authorities, this 'control could be purely nominal with little or no impact over and beyond the election' (Rhodes, 1985, p. 43). Only in some major towns and cities did party politics exercise considerable influence over policy-making.

The years 1945–55, then, saw the launching of the Welfare State to which the growth of local government was tied. Underlying these developments was the substantial economic growth during the period. The domestic product grew by about 20 per cent in real terms and there were other signs of growing affluence with rising numbers of homeowners, car users and so on. Macmillan's famous statement, made in 1957, 'most of our people have never had it so good', was more than politician's rhetoric.

Expansion and modernisation: 1955–75

Economic growth continued, slowly but steadily, in the remainder of the 1950s. The 1960s showed growth again. It was only by the mid-1970s that severe economic problems became manifest. Between 1955 and 1975 Gross Domestic Product increased by approximately two-thirds in real terms. This period also saw a sustained expansion in local government.

Newton and Karran (1985, pp. 59–64) show how the scope of local activities broadened in response to pressures for a range of new public services. They identify nearly 50 pieces of legislation,

enacted during the period, which had the effect of giving local authorities new responsibilities. In the field of planning and environmental control alone local authorities acquired new powers for pollution control, the reclamation and conservation of land, the preservation of wild creatures and flowers, the provision of camping and picnic sites, the removal of dangerous industrial tips, the control of dangerous litter and poisonous waste, and the regulation of listed buildings.

There was also a substantial improvement in service quality. The period 1955–75 saw bigger, airier and lighter schools, better trained teachers, and more carefully planned books and syllabuses. Larger, more elaborate leisure centres were provided, as well as better staffed and stocked libraries. Better roads, pedestrian lights and public buildings were developed. This list indicates only the tip of the iceberg in the improvements introduced during this period.

The expanding role of local government is reflected in increased public expenditure. Table 1.1 shows local authority current expenditure in 1975 was nearly three times larger in real terms than that in 1955. The level of capital spending also more than doubled during the same period. Spending increased on other welfare state activities with, for example, health service expenditure undergoing an expansion equivalent to that of local authorities. The expansion

TABLE 1.1   Local authority expenditure, 1955–75 (constant 1975 prices)

Year	Current expenditure (£ million)	Capital expenditure (£ million)
1955	4676	2027
1960	5903	1821
1965	7852	3331
1970	11 699	3858
1975	13 598	4569

Notes:
1. All figures are for Great Britain.
2. Current (or revenue) spending covers the day-to-day running of local authorities including salaries and wages and the purchase of materials. Capital spending pays for investments in long-term physical assets such as buildings, land and machinery.

Source: Calculated from figures provided in Foster *et al.* (1980) Appendix 1.4 A1 pp. 102–31.

of local spending went along with a general rise in public expendi-
ture. In 1955 local authority expenditure constituted 28 per cent of
public expenditure and by 1975 this proportion had increased to
only just over 30 per cent. Local authorities were, however,
consuming an increased proportion of the nation's resources.
Local expenditure constituted 9.1 per cent of the Gross Domestic
Product in 1955 and this had risen to 14.9 per cent in 1975. It
reached its peak in 1976 when local authorities spent £15.40 for
every £100 available to the nation.

Increased public expenditure was reflected in a growing number
of local authority employees. Table 1.2 shows that between 1952
and 1972 there was a fifty per cent increase in the number of
full-time employees and an over two hundred per cent increase in
the number of part-time local authority workers.

The expansion of local government, particularly from the
mid-1960s, drew on grants provided by central government. As
Table 1.3 shows the share of current spending financed by central
government increased substantially between 1966/7 and 1975/6.
The proportion from miscellaneous sources, primarily fees and
charges for local authority services, remained constant. The con-
tribution from rates – a local tax levied on industrial, commercial
and domestic property – declined. The growing reliance of local
authorities on central government support became an element in a
wider debate about local government reform.

Modernisation joins expansion as a dominant theme in the
development of local government during this period. Reorganisa-
tion in London, 1963–5, led the way with an enlarged Greater
London Council and 32 boroughs (plus the Inner London Educa-
tion Authority and the and the City of London Corporation)
replacing a total of 87 authorities. The reform of London's local
government helped to break down resistance to radical restructur-
ing. There followed a series of reports and investigations examin-
ing the organisation and management of local authorities (Maud,
1967; Mallaby, 1967; Redcliffe-Maud, 1969; Wheatley, 1969;
Bains, 1972; Paterson, 1973). The debate was conducted in terms
of structure, efficiency, planning and the rational allocation of
functions. However, what emerged was heavily influenced by
party political considerations and other vested interests (Wood,
1976; Alexander 1982a; Page and Midwinter, 1979).

In the reform of 1972–4 the multi-tiered nature of the previous

TABLE 1.2   Local authority employment, 1952–72 (thousands)

	Male		Female		Male & Female	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
1952	798	44	395	211	1193	255
1972	1089	125	667	703	1756	828
Percentage increase 1952–72	36.5	184.1	68.9	233.2	47.2	224.7

Notes: These figures relate to UK local authority employment.
Source: Calculated from figures provided in Newton and Karran (1984), Table 2.1, p. 28.

TABLE 1.3   Local authority income sources, 1953–76 (current expenditure)

Percentage of income made by:	Rates	Central government grants	Miscellaneous
England & Wales 1953/4	33.4	35.4	31.4
England 1958/9	32.7	36.1	31.2
1966/7	34.2	36.5	29.3
1975/6	23.9	46.8	29.3

Source: Adapted from Travers (1986) Table App. 7, p. 211.

system remained and was to some extent reinforced. In England and Wales local government powers were shared between 53 counties (6 metropolitan and 47 non-metropolitan) and 369 districts (36 metropolitan and 333 non-metropolitan). In Scotland most of local government became the responsibility of 9 regions and 53 districts. In short all-purpose authorities no longer operated.

The details of these systems are considered further in Chapter 2. For the present it can be noted that reorganisation resulted in a considerable reduction in the overall number of authorities, from around 1500 to about 500. Modernised local government covered larger areas and local authorities were, in general, bigger and had new and streamlined management structures. By 1975 these

organisations were responsible for a substantial range of services and resources. Local government, in the words of one commentator, 'had become big business' (Benington, 1975).

Other changes, however, led to loss of functions from local authorities with responsibility for water and sewerage being taken out of local authority control in England and Wales and most of the remaining local health functions being handed over to health authorities.

The ideological climate of the period was heavily infused with a commitment to efficiency, planning and technological progress. It was not only local government that had to be modernised; it was the rest of Britain. The administration of central government was reformed; so too was that of the health and other public services. The spirit of restructuring was also applied in the management of the economy, with experiments in planning, intervention and organisational reform.

These years of expansion gave considerable scope for professional influence and growth. Planners, teachers and social workers seemed to grow in confidence and stature. Directors of Education, headteachers and other educational professionals carried forward school reorganisations, new systems of teaching and launched a range of experimental initiatives. Planners and engineers facilitated and encouraged the large-scale redevelopment of their towns and cities. The development of new housing estates, roads, shopping centres and other facilities was promoted and guided by local authority professionals. Professionals in many cases dominated local authority policy and decision-making.

Behind the scenes, however, there were growing signs of discord. Social reformers pointed to gaps and limitations in the range and impact of welfare services, despite all the increased expenditure (Taylor-Gooby, 1984). Political and community activists began to call for the greater involvement of ordinary citizens in the decisions that affected their lives, such as house demolition or road building (Hain, 1975; O'Malley, 1977). The early 1970s was also a period of intense activity by the women's movement, often centred on welfare issues (Wilson, 1977). The Heath Government flirted with but soon abandoned the ideas of the 'new right', which criticised state intervention and argued for a greater reliance on the market (Young, 1974). Finally, the early 1970s saw large-scale industrial action over wages as a response to the Heath Govern-

ment's industrial relations legislation and incomes policy. Local
authority and welfare state workers were for the first time promi-
nent in taking strike action.

Local politics was less calm than in the immediate post-war
period. There was the conflict and turmoil stimulated by re-
organisation. Party politics was increasingly dominant in local
elections and reorganisation is widely held to have confirmed this
process.

There was also evidence of a growing politicisation of decision-
making in London (Kramer and Young, 1978) and outside (New-
ton, 1976). Local politics was beginning to come to life.

The period 1955–75 has been described as local government's
'years of greatest affluence' (Newton and Karran, 1985, p. 52). As
we have seen it was a time when local government expanded and
its structure and management were modernised. Between 1973
and 1975, however, the world capitalist economy experienced a
slump unparalleled since before the war. This recession had major
consequences for local government after 1975.

From constraint to instability: 1975 to the mid-1980s

The contemporary history of local government is closely tied in
with the economic panic caused by the 1973–5 slump. World trade
declined by 14 per cent and in Britain the effect was heightened by
the underlying weakness of the economy. Unemployment began
to rise, inflation was in double figures and the strain on resources
to fund state programmes was considerable. Public expenditure
cuts were by no means the inevitable solution but they were the
response that emerged.

Labour's Anthony Crosland told local authorities that 'the party
was over'. Matters were brought to a head in 1976 when the
country borrowed from the International Monetary Fund. A
condition of the loan was a halt to the growth of public spending.

Labour's programme of 'cuts' was targeted mainly at the capital
spending of local authorities. As authorities had already begun to
cut capital projects because of the dire effects of steeply increasing
interest rates on their finances, the extra central government
pressure led to a rapid fall in capital spending (see Table 1.4).
Cash limits on current spending were also introduced. The cuts
were painful and reversed a long-established trend of growth but

TABLE 1.4 Local authority expenditure, 1976–87 (constant 1984/5 prices)

Year	Current expenditure (£ million)	Capital expenditure (£million)
1976/7	25596	7898
1977/8	25360	6191
1978/9	26291	5981
1979/80	27058	6588
1980/1	26951	5764
1981/2	26978	4843
1982/3	27598	5479
1983/4	29476	5508
1984/5	29877	5349
1985/6	29339	4598
1986/7 (estimate)	30236	3952

Notes:
1. Current expenditure figures are for Great Britain. The figures are for total current expenditure. Calculations of constant price figures, with 1984/5 as base year, were made using the repricing index provided in *Association of County Councils* (1986), Table J, p. 310.
2. Capital spending figures are for gross expenditure by English local authorities and cover spending funded by loans plus that funded by the sale of assets.
3. The sharp jump in current expenditure in 1983/4 reflects the transfer of responsibility for housing benefit expenditure from central government to local authorities, and the slight drop in 1985/6 probably reflects various creative accounting measures taken by local authorities rather than any effective reduction in spending.
Sources: Current expenditure figures taken from HM Treasury (1982 and 1987) and capital expenditure figures provided by the Association of Metropolitan Authorities.

they were achieved by a mix of discussion, compromise and conflict within the established machinery of government.

A rather different picture emerges post-1979. The Thatcher Government argued vigorously for cuts in public expenditure, a reflection of their rejection of Keynesian economic management and their commitment to monetarism. Local government was selected as a particular target. 'Within weeks of taking office local government was strongly criticised by ministers who claimed that it was wasteful, profligate, irresponsible, unaccountable, luxurious and out of control' (Newton and Karran, 1985, p. 116). The Thatcher Governments pursued a strategy of confrontation had constantly changed the machinery of government in

their attempts to control the expenditure and finances of local authorities.

A key weapon for the Conservatives was to reduce the contribution of central government grants towards local authority expenditure. Table 1.5 shows the declining proportion of local authority income for current expenditure obtained through central grants, and the increased proportions made up by rates and miscellaneous sources including changes for services. On the capital side an increasing proportion of local spending was financed by asset sales, particularly from 1979 onwards.

**TABLE 1.5   Local authority income sources, 1976–85 (current expenditure)**

Percentage of income made up by:	Rates	Central government grants	Miscellaneous
1975/6	23.9	46.8	29.3
1978/9	23.2	44.0	32.8
1984/5	27.0	39.2	33.8

Note: These figures relate to England only.
Source: Travers (1986) Table App. 7, p. 211.

Paradoxically, despite the aggressive nature of the Conservative's attack on local government, progress in reducing expenditure up to the mid-1980s was modest.

Local capital spending remained at historically low levels but current expenditure continued to increase in real terms (see Table and Figure 1.1). Total current expenditure was about 12 per cent higher in 1986/7 than in 1979/80. However this figure is misleading because it is affected by the shift in responsibility for housing benefit from central government to local authorities in the early 1980s. If allowance is made for this transfer it still emerges that current spending grew by at least, 5–6 per cent in real terms between 1979/80 and 1986/7. The dramatic growth in local authority employment up to the mid-1970s was checked. The number of full-time employees in English local government fell by about five per cent between 1979 and 1982 but has since remained relatively stable. Part-time employment also fell during the early 1980s but by 1985 was back at about the same level as 1979 (see
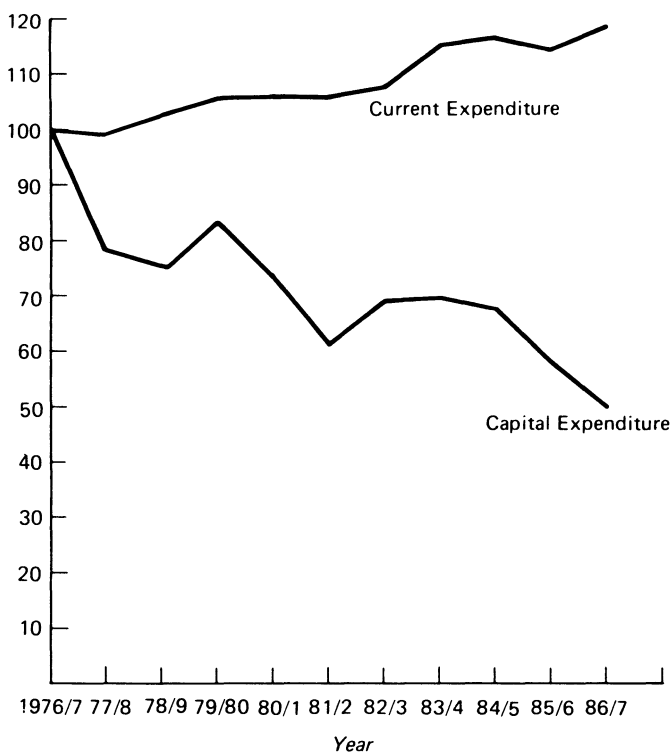
**FIGURE 1.1   Trends in local authority expenditure, 1976–87
(index 1976/7 = 100)**

Table 1.6). This limited progress reflects the fact, as we shall see in Chapter 7 and 8, that central government's onslaught was met with resistance by many local authorities.

The battle over local spending took place against the backcloth of continuing changes in Britain's economy. In particular the growth and expansion experienced by much of the South East contrasted sharply with the further decline and de-industrialisation which hit much of the rest of England, Scotland and Wales. Local authorities in Britain's M4 Growth Corridor – in a line stretching from Heathrow Airport through Reading to Swindon and Bristol – saw the rise of new 'hi-tech' and electronics industries (Boddy *et al.*, 1986). In contrast authorities in areas such as the West

TABLE 1.6   **Local authority employment, 1975–85 (thousands)**

Year	Full-time	Part-time
1975	1608	862
1976	1625	851
1977	1606	853
1978	1600	869
1979	1626	886
1980	1609	865
1981	1578	843
1982	1552	840
1983	1558	852
1984	1551	858
1985	1545	873

Notes:
1. Separate figures for male and female employment have not been available since 1974.
2. These figures are for England only.
Source: Department of the Environment (1981; 1983; 1986).

Midlands watched as the manufacturing base of their towns and cities collapsed (Spencer *et al.*, 1986). The different problems posed in areas of growth and decline led to diverse responses by local authorities as they attempted to grapple with rapid economic change (Brindley *et al.*, 1989).

Other material changes have provided local authorities with new challenges. They include changes in social structure, in the role of women or the significance of ethnic minorities, and the rise in the number of elderly people. Gyford in his evidence to the Widdicombe Committee (1986e, p. 110) argues more generally that there has been 'a move away from a society with a large degree of consensus on interests and values, towards a more diverse and fragmented society within which there are asserted a plurality of sectional interests and values'. The emergence of sectionalism has led to a growth of groups conscious of their own particular identities and rights as gay people, tenants, parents, patients, claimants and disabled people.

The ideological climate showed marked changes, such as the emergence of a more assertive and active public. People became less willing to accept authoritarian styles of leadership. There was a loss of confidence in the professional experts amongst the public

and indeed amongst some of the experts themselves. 'Increasingly the professional claims of planners, architects, road engineers, social workers and teachers began to be called into question by a sceptical public informed by a combination of more widespread educational opportunity, investigate journalism in the media and – sometimes the most crucial – their own lay experience of professional solutions' (Widdicombe 1986e, p. 108).

Some writers (Golding and Middleton, 1983) suggest that there was a collapse of public support for the welfare state. But Taylor-Gooby (1985) convincingly argues, by way of survey evidence, that general public support for the 'welfare consensus' had by no means disappeared. Indeed, the sustained commitment of public opinion to maintaining and improving many aspects of welfare service delivery helped to explain the degree of support and success achieved by local authorities in resisting expenditure cuts.

It is clear, however, that there was an important shift in the ideology of the central state élite, the politicians and officials responsible for managing central government decision-making. We have already noted their concern with public expenditure reductions. Another dimension to the changed ideological pattern was privatisation, the shifting of state assets and responsibilities to the private sector (see Chapter 9 for a full discussion). A greater concern with and a more authoritarian and less liberal approach towards a range of law and order, moral and civil liberties issues was also an element of 'Thatcherism' (Hall, 1979). Finally, a desire to push women back into traditional family roles would also seem to have been part of the shift in the assumptions of central state élite (Rose and Rose, 1982).

The reaction of the local political community to these developments was varied. Some local authorities were enthusiastic supporters of privatisation and the welfare backlash. Others developed defensive and pragmatic strategies, seeking to protect existing services. Some sought to challenge directly both central government's financial controls and its policies by developing alternative forms of local government provision and operation.

In general, it is plain that the local political scene became more highly charged. The concern of party groups to organise and implement manifesto policies grew. This was accompanied by an increasing gap between the ideological positions and policy preferences of Conservative and Labour party groups, divergences