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TRANSPORT IN THE CONURBATIONS

Resource Paper Number 1

Background to the Current Arrangements

I R Sanderson

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Ian Sanderson

Institute for Transport Studies
University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT

CONTENTS

1. Introduction

The present structure of local government has been in existence for ten years; that which it replaced in 1974 had survived for about 80 years. However, the reorganisation which was implemented in 1974 represented the culmination of many years of criticism of, and debate about, the old structure which became particularly strong after the Second World War. Since the present system can be considered to be relatively 'young' on the timescale of institutional change, it is worth referring to the arguments which were rehearsed during the reorganisation debate, particularly in the late 1960s, in order to indicate the 'rationale' for the current structure and therefore provide the context for our examination of transport functions in the Metropolitan Counties. The aim of this paper then, is to provide a brief survey of the arguments which have informed the process of local government reform particularly as it relates to the handling of transportation in the conurbations.

We begin the paper with a brief outline of the evolution of local government in England up to the late 1960s, the problems it faced and the attempts made at reform. We then consider the findings and arguments of the Royal Commission on Local Government in England which sat between 1966 and 1969. Finally, we look more generally at the process of reorganisation up to 1974 focussing on the considerations which were brought to bear on the framing of the proposals upon which the present system is based.

2. The Evolution of Local Government in England up to the Late 1960s

The local government system in England (and, indeed, in Wales and Scotland) has undergone, since its piecemeal growth between medieval and Victorian times, only two major structural reorganisations (Alexander 1982, p. 1). The first took place between 1888 and 1894 rationalising a set of arrangements which was widely recognised as chaotic. Some attempts to introduce a coherent system had been made during the nineteenth century in response to rapid economic and social change, especially in the towns. Thus the Municipal Corporations Acts of 1835 and 1882 required the election of councils in the corporate boroughs and this improved the administration of services (including highways) in these areas (Byrne 1981, p. 27-8). However, many ad hoc bodies existed for the provision of services, having elected boards, their own officials and their own rates, for example the highways boards set up under the Highways Acts of 1835 and 1862. Moreover, in some areas Justices of the Peace, appointed by the Crown and exercising authority on a County-wide scale, were responsible for highways and bridges (ibid).

The reforming pressures of the mid nineteenth century eventually resulted in the passage of the Local Government Acts of 1888 and 1894 which established a democratic system of local government throughout the country and, in formal and institutional terms, created a uniform structure which survived until 1974. Unitary

county borough councils were established in the old boroughs of more than 50,000 population and these were responsible for the full range of local government services, being the highway authority for their area. County Councils werr based largely on the existing counties and were highway authorities. However, the urban and rural district councils, created by the 1894 Act as a second tier in the county areas, were delegated authorities for county roads in their areas and could apply to the County Councils for the delegation of such functions. Also, those districts with a population of more than 20,000 exercised powers of traffic regulation (cf. Redcliffe-Maud 1969 p. 323).

The reforms of the late nineteenth century were essentially a response to the processes of urbanisation, perhaps the most significant feature being the separation of the larger urban areas as unitary authorities from the new counties. However, during the twentieth century the dominant socio-spatial process became that of suburbanisation and it soon became clear that the local government structure was ill-suited to adapt to this process (Alexander 1982, p. 2). As urban areas expanded county boroughs came into increasing conflict with the counties over three concerns of local institutions - territory, tax base and status. Alexander (op cit) summarises the basis for this conflict as follows:

> "It arose, quite simply, from the inherent conflicts in a structure that implied a belief in the autonomy of urban centres but that did not provide an effective mechanism whereby that structure could respond to demographic change."

Such conflicts were compounded, especially during the period after the Second World War, by developments which tended to erode the powers, responsibilities and status of local government (cf. Byrne 1981, p. 32-7). For example, the post-war policy of nationalisation took away responsibilities for gas and electricity supply. Legislation in 1930 and 1947 took away responsibilities for licensing road passenger transport services and for many canals and harbours. Responsibility for the building and maintenance of trunk roads was taken over by central government under the Trunk Roads Acts of 1936 and 1946. In general terms there was a tendency for functions to be transferred 'upwards' to higher-tier authorities and bodies indicating a concern with achieving larger scales of organisation. Moreover, central government control over local authorities was extended as the latters' reliance on grants from central government increased, as powers of intervention and control were developed, and as local authorities increasingly became instruments in Keynesian strategies of economic management (Byrne op cit).

Certain attempts at reform were made before the late 1960s primarily aimed at the problem of conflict between the counties and county boroughs. A Royal Commission on Local Government sat between 1923 and 1929 and its recommendations resulted in the raising of the minimum population level for county boroughs (to

stem their proliferation) and a reduction in the number of district authorities. After the Second World War the government appointed a Local Government Boundary Commission to review the effectiveness of local government units and their report in 1947 presented some severe criticisms of the existing structure, recommending a new two-tier system for the conurbations, most-purpose authorities for medium-sized towns, and a uniform system of district councils. The report was, however, rejected and the Commission dissolved (Byrne op cit, p. 44-6). Under the Local Government Act 1958 a further Local Government Commission was set up for England (and one for Wales) to review areas and, in certain special areas, to review functions. The Commission made various proposals for revision including a two-tier system for the Tyneside and South-East Lancashire conurbations, and a joint board of neighbouring county councils for Merseyside (ibid).

However, in spite of these criticisms and reviews the structure of local government remained fundamentally unaltered. It was the Labour Government which came to office in 1964 committed to major reforms which eventually decided that reorganisation was necessary and which therefore appointed the Royal Commission on Local Government in England in 1966, to be chaired by Lord Redcliffe-Maud.

3. The Redcliffe-Maud Commission 1966-69

The Redcliffe-Maud Commission was given the following terms of reference:

> "... to consider the structure of Local Government in England, outside Greater London, in relation to its existing functions; and to make recommendations for authorities and boundaries, and for functions and their division, having regard to the size and character of areas in which these can be most effectively exercised and the need to sustain a viable system of local democracy ..."
>
> (Radcliffe-Maud 1969, p. xii)

The Commission took evidence from a variety of government departments, and other bodies and organisations connected with, or having an interest in, local government, and also commissioned several research studies. Its report, published in June 1969, identified four desirable qualities of a local government system: the ability to perform efficiently a wide range of important tasks concerned with the well-being of people in different localities; the ability to attract and hold the interest of its citizens; the ability to develop enough inherent strength to deal with national authorities in a valid partnership; and the ability to adapt itself to the process of change in people's patterns of activities (ibid. para 1.).

These qualities were seen as missing from English local government which was diagnosed as suffering from four basic 'structural defects'. It was argued that these defects "... seriously reduce, and will increasingly reduce, the chances of

ensuring that local government works efficiently and economically, is understood by the citizens who elect it, and holds their interest." (ibid. para 6). The four basic faults were:

> i.   Local government areas did not fit the pattern of life and work in modern England and the discrepancy would increase with social, economic and technological change;

> ii.   The fragmentation of England into 79 county boroughs and 45 counties, exercising independent jurisdictions and dividing town from country, was making proper planning of development and transportation impossible and causing hostility between county boroughs and counties.

> iii.   The division of responsibility between counties, and their districts, together with the position of county boroughs as 'islands' in the counties, meant that services which should have been in the hands of one authority were fragmented among several, making it more difficult to meet needs comprehensively.

> iv.   Many local authorities were too small in size and revenue, and consequently lacked highly qualified personnel and technical equipment, to be able to discharge their responsibilities efficiently.
>
> (ibid. paras. 6, 85-94)

These structural faults were also seen as partly responsible for other serious failings in local government's relationships with the general public, who saw local government as too complex and irrelevant to their daily lives, and with national government, who doubted the ability of local governors to run local affairs and consequently restricted their activities (ibid. paras. 7, 95-108).

On the basis of this analysis the Commission identified one 'fundamental question' to which it should seek to provide answers:

> "What size of authority, or range of size, in terms of population and of area, is needed for the democratic and efficient provision of particular services and for local self-government as a whole?"
>
> (ibid. para 8)

It argued that answers to this question must be found by seeking to apply to each part of the country certain general principles relating primrily to the interdependence of town and country, the grouping of appropriate functions, the minimum and maximum size of population, and the continuity of the existing structure. The first of these essentially asserts that local government areas should match the pattern of living and give an authority sufficient space to assess and tackle its problems in order that effective use of resources can be promoted, particularly in

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respect of planning and transportation (ibid. para 243). Secondly, as regards the grouping of functions, it was argued that all services concerned with the physical environment (planning, transportation and major development) must be in the hands of one authority and also that all personal services (education, social services and housing) must be grouped in one authority. Moreover, where possible all these services should be in the hands of a unitary authority so that through allocation of priorities and co-ordinated use of resources, such an authority could relate its programmes for all services to objectives for its area considered as a_ whole. However, such unitary authorities were seen as inappropriate in large conurbation areas (ibid. paras. 244-55).

In relation to the issue of size it was argued that authorities should be large enough to command the resources needed for efficient provision of services. A minimum population size of 250,000 was identified as necessary for the employment of "... the range and calibre of staff and the technical and financial resources, necessary for effective provision of (services) ..." (ibid. para 257). On the other hand, a maximum population size of one million was designated to avoid disadvantages deriving from managerial and administrative inefficiencies and lack of democratic control by elected representatives. Consequently, where 'coherent' areas on the pattern of living criterion contain substantially more than a million people, the two-tier solution should be applied (ibid. paras 256-78). Finally, it was regarded as desirable that wherever possible the new units of local government should be formed out of existing areas in order to respect the common interests, traditions and loyalties inherent in the existing structure (ibid. paras 9, 279-81).

It can be seen, therefore, that there were essentially two primary issues underlying the Commission's deliberations: the pattern of living and size. As regards the latter, inadequate size of authorities was identified as 'the most frequently voiced criticism' of the existing structure and, as we have seen, the issue became established in the 'fundamental question' facing the Commission. On the other hand, the failure of the old local government areas to "... fit the pattern of life and work in modern England ..." was seen as "... the most fatal defect ..." in the system (ibid. paras 6, 85). Behind the 'pattern of living' criterion lies the concept of the 'city region' which was supported by the Commission as a suitable basis for unified planning of land use and transportation developments. The 'city region' can be seen as a relatively self-contained, functional area in the sense that most movements of people, goods and information take place within it rather than across its boundaries (ibid. para 114). Within such 'city regions' the interdependence, both functionally and spatially, between socio-economic activities, and therefore between the problems to which local government must address itself, means that units of local government should relect such interdependence if they are to achieve "... unified _information, plan-making, investment priorities and execution" (ibid. para 115).

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The application of the above principles and criteria resulted in proposals for 58 new unitary authorities covering most of the country, responsible for all local government services. In the three main conurbations of Merseyside, SELNEC and West Midlands, however, the size of the authorities required for effective treatment of planning and transportation problems meant that a single authority would be too unwieldy, too difficult to control democratically and too remote for the 'personal services'. Consequently, in these conurbations the two-tier solution was applied with the component metropolitan districts responsible for the personal services, while a conurbation-wide upper tier was seen as essential to the development of effective policies in respect of the 'environmental' group of services:

> "The magnitude and complexity of the issues there require units for planning, transportation and major development whose territory and population together are too big for a unitary authority. Authorities for less extensive areas than the three proposed would be unable to work out effective policies for dealing with their massive housing and transportation problems. Nor could they plan and undertake redevelopment, with its widespread consequences, on the scale required where so much of the urban fabric is obsolete. For each metropolitan area, there must be a metropolitan authority responsible for the planning, transportation and major development group of functions throughout the whole area."
>
> (ibid. para 291)

A single unitary authority was, however, seen as appropriate for the Tyneside conurbation and it was argued that the West Yorkshire conurbation could be satisfactorily divided among five unitary authorities (ibid. paras 295-6). In South Yorkshire two unitary authorities were proposed, one comprising Sheffield, Rotherham and Barnsley, the other centred on Doncaster, seen as a separate centre in its own right.

The Commission argued that the designated metropolitan authorities must control all aspects of transportation: "unified policy and execution are essential; and they must be in the hands of the authority responsible for planning" (ibid. para 328). Responsibility for all roads and passenger transport services should be concentrated in the metropolitan authority in order to be "... most economical in staff and most efficient in operation." (ibid).

Finally, the Royal Commission recommended two partial or non-operational tiers of local government. Firstly, at a very local level, 'local councils' should be elected with the duty of representing local opinion and perhaps with some powers to provide some local services (ibid. Chap 9). Secondly, at the regional level, eight 'provincial councils' should be established to represent the main local authorities in each region and to be responsible for drawing up the provincial strategy and planning

framework within which the main authorities would operate (ibid. Chap 10).

It should be noted that one Commission member, Derek Senior, disagreed with the majority findings to the extent that he published a 'Memorandum of Dissent' (Senior 1969) outlining alternative proposals for reform. His criticism was basically that the Commission's proposals were too conservative and did not adequately reflect the pattern of social and economic activity. His own proposals were based centrally on the 'city region' concept and a concern to internalise externalities. He suggested 35 regions, subdivided into 148 districts, the former permitting fully integrated strategic planning of transportation and land use development and the latter being appropriate for the personal services.

4. The Process of Local Government Reorganisation 1966-74

The proposals of the Royal Commission provided the basis for the reorganisation of local government but substantial modifications were made to them as the legislation was framed during the period 1969-72 and the system which was eventually implemented differed in some significant respects from the original recommendations. In this section we shall look briefly at these changes and also at legislation which was passed during the late 1960s, as the Royal Commission sat, which was directed at the organisation of transport functions in local authorities.

This latter legislation, in the form of the Transport Act 1968, was based on two White Papers published during 1966 and 1967 both of which were concerned with the need for integrated transport planning on a conurbation-wide scale. In turn, these White Papers drew on two earlier studies. Firstly, the 'Traffic in Towns' report (Buchanan 1963) stressed the need for integrated land use and transportation planning throughout urban regions defined in terms of urban areas plus their journey to work hinterlands. Two years later the Report of the Planning Advisory Group (1965) similarly emphasised the theme of co-ordinated planning of land use and all aspects of transportation.

The 1966 White Paper 'Transport Policy' (Ministry of Transport 1966) endorsed the findings of the above two reports, and put forward two major proposals. Firstly, it proposed the establishment of 'conurbation transport authorities' to integrate public pasenger transport services and provide the machinery for co-ordinating road and rail transport. Secondly, it emphasised the need for single authorities in the conurbations with responsibilities covering land-use, highways, traffic and public transport. The 1967 White Paper 'Public Transport and Traffic' (Ministry of Transport 1967) reiterated the view that the planning an operation of public transport must be carried out over the whole of urban areas plus their hinterlands, indicated that such areas were larger than existing authorities, and argued that reorganisation was required urgently and in advance of the reorganisation of the wider local government system. It

therefore proposed the establishment of 'Passenger Transport Authorities' (PTAs) as joint boards of constituent authorities in the conurbations of Merseyside, SELNEC, West Midlands and Tyneside, the latter probably promoted by the considerations of the Local Government Commission during the 1960s.

The proposed PTAs were established by the Transport Act 1968, without prejudice to the work of the Royal Commission but inevitably had an influence on its thinking about local government structures for the conurbations (Wood 1976, p. 48-9). Indeed, the 1967 White Paper can be seen as giving a push to the Royal Commission when it states:

> "Indeed, it is clear that one of the major factors making for the reorganisation of local government is the need to create local authority units big enough to tackle the sort of problems, like transport, which they ought to tackle if local government is to survive as an effective force."
> (Ministry of Transport 1967, para 14)

The 1968 Act had a further important influence on the process of local government reorganisation. In order to minimise the prejudice to the Royal Commission's work the boundaries of the PTAs were drawn tightly round the conurbations and this was helped by authorities on the edges of the conurbations seeking to be excluded from the PTAs on the grounds that inclusion might subsequently be used as grounds for incorporation in any new conurbation-wide local authorities. However, when legislation was being framed in 1970-72 for local government reorganisation, the argument was turned round by authorities to justify their exclusin from the new metropolitan counties on the grounds that they were not part of the PTA which covered the effective transportation area (Wood op cit, p. 49).

The Redcliffe-Maud Commission's proposals for the wider reorganisation of local government were adopted, with a few modifications, by the Labour Government's White Paper of 1970 (Ministry of Local Government and Regional Planning 1970). Two additional Metropolitan authorities were proposed for West Yorkshire and South Hampshire; it was proposed that education be the responsibility of the metropolitan authorities; and proposals in respect of 'provincial councils' were excluded pending the report of the Crowther Commission on the Constitution (Wood op cit, p. 92). The Conservatives, although committed to some kind of reform, did not support the idea of unitary authorities, prefering a two-tier system everywhere, and wished to protect the shire counties by restricting the boundaries of the new metropolitan authorities in the conurbations (ibid. p. 98-9). Following the General Election of 1970, the Conservative Government published a White Paper early in 1971 (Department of the Environment 1971) embodying these themes.

The Conservatives' White Paper, then, rejected the unitary model on the grounds of both democracy and efficiency, arguing that some services required large administrative areas while others

did not. Therefore, the two-tier approach was applied everywhere. Three more metropolitan Counties (Tyne and Wear, West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire) were added to the Royal Commission's three. However, in spite of a commitment to the idea of large units covering urban areas and their hinterlands for land use planning and transportation, the boundaries of the metropolitan counties were drawn tightly round the conurbations to protect the adjacent shire counties (Wood 1976, p. 104-7). Only in West and South Yorkshire did the counties include substantial rural areas reflecting the rather different geography of these areas. The proposal that the metropolitan districts be made the education authorities caused some controversy; the Royal Commission's proposals along these lines had been criticised on the grounds that the districts were too small and weak and critics of the White paper now pointed to the increase in the number of districts with a population below 250,000 (ibid).

Various changes were made to the White Papers' proposals on their passage into legislation. As regards the metropolitan counties the main changes involved reductions in the size of all six counties with territory being conceded to the neighbouring shire counties; the proposals therefore moved further away from the ideal of larger urban regions, encompassing towns and their hinterland, for integrated land use and transportation planning. This trimming of the metropolitan counties was essentially motivated by the desire firstly to keep apart residents perceived as having different life styles, values and needs, and secondly to contain 'urban sprawl' and help retain open space (Honey, 1981, p. 258). The process can be illustrated with reference to the county of West Midlands which suffered drastic trimming between the Royal Commission proposals and the Local Government Act, which served to replace the problem of conflicts between county boroughs and counties with potential conflicts between metropolitan county and shire county neighbours (ibid p. 260). Figure 1 shows the changes in the boundaries which served to jeopardise the new county's ability to achieve the objectives of integrated conurbation-wide planning which had ostensibly been so important in the arguments for reform.

Two other modifications to the reform proposals prior to legislation can be noted. Firstly, two new metropolitan districts were created with the division of Bury-Rochdale in Greater Manchester and St. Helens-Knowlsey in Merseyside and this further increased the number of such districts with a population of less than 250,000; this was now the case in 15 out of the 36 metropolitan districts compared with 4 out of 20 in the Royal Commission's proposals (Wood op cit, p. 107, 133-54). Secondly, concessions were made to the district councils in the form of powers to claim the right to maintain unclassified roads in urban areas. Wood (op cit, p. 135-6) argues that these changes had little to do with the concepts of efficiency and democracy but were related more to 'political' objectives. For example, the continued division of responsibilities for highways and traffic contradicted the Governments stated aim, based on considerations of effectiveness, of clearly separating functions between the two

tiers (ibid). Further, as indicated above, the reductions in the size of the metropolitan counties made with regard to political considerations, contradicted the accepted concept of the 'city region' as the basis for effective integrated planning of land use and transportation.

5. Conclusion

The Local Government Act 1972 therefore implemented a new system of local government after many years of debate and argument. A process which began with detailed consideration of principles relating to the objectives of effective and convenient local government, of efficiency and democracy, ended with major concern for 'political' considerations and expediency. Boundaries which frequently placed emphasis on tradition at the expense of functional requirement; important functions with responsibility statutorily shared between counties and districts; the importance of 'agency' agreements in the provision of services; the large number of authorities with populations of less than 250,000; all these features point up potential problems in the system when assessed from the point of view of effectiveness and democratic accountability. As Wood (op cit, p. 190) concludes:

> "The existence of 'acceptable' objectives like democracy and efficiency was little more than a convenience. Government interest in these concepts was limited to support for the standard diagnosis of the ills of local government as undemocratic and inefficient. Reform was based on a mixture of theoretical, institutional and political objectives. The need for governmental leadership and parliamentary decision ensured that any concern for theory was frequently subordinated to tactical considerations."

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Figure 1. Alternative Proposals for the West Midlands.
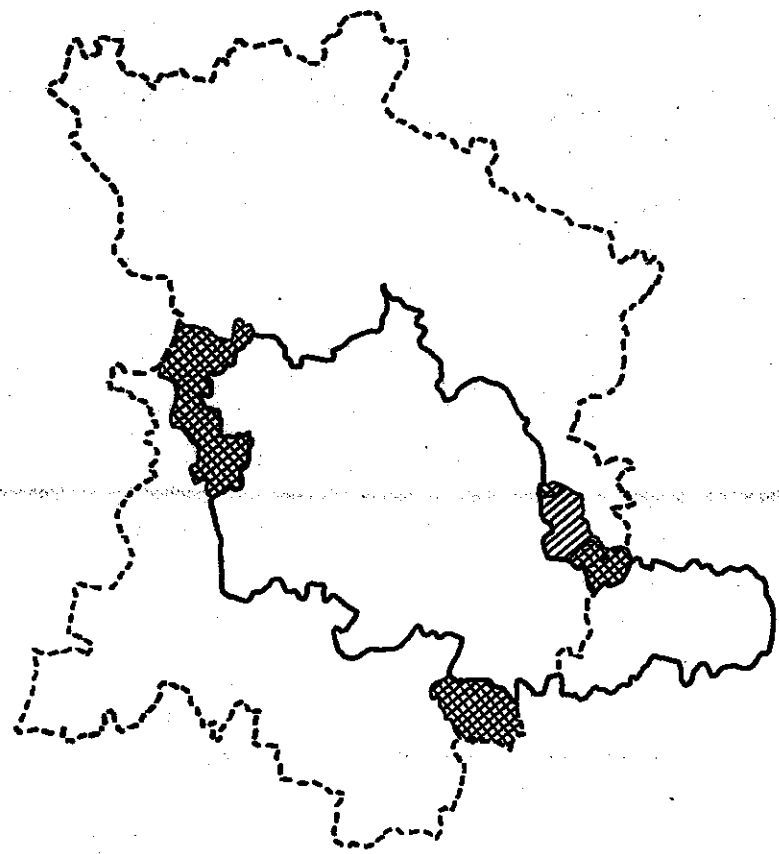
KEY :

——— Local Government Act
----- Redcliffe -Maud , Labour
▓▓▓ Included in Conservative White Paper
▨▨▨ Included in Local Government Bill

Source : Honey (1981)