FOREWORD

This book originated from two comparative studies commissioned by British local authority associations in association with my employer, the Institute of Local Government Studies (INLOGOV) of the University of Birmingham. The object of both studies was to help to identify what might be learnt from systems abroad that could usefully contribute to British policy-thinking. The first, commissioned by the English metropolitan county councils in 1983, was a study of metropolitan governments abroad. The second, defined by the four main English and Welsh local authority associations in association with INLOGOV in 1985, had the wider objective of describing and comparing aspects of local and regional systems abroad and their relationships with state governments. It added the United States to the national systems covered on the understanding that in this case the description would be based on published literature and the advice of American experts on local government. Subsequently I agreed with the present publishers to develop the work into the form of this book and to add Japan to the countries covered, drawing on the help of several Japanese scholars who adopted INLOGOV as their base for study visits to Europe.

The book was originally planned to appear several years earlier than has been possible as a result of other major commitments to which I felt obliged to give priority. The delay has not been without its advantages. The advent of recent decades has brought unexpected changes. In Western Europe the end of the 1970s heralded a period in which major decentralisation of power was initiated in major countries, excepting the United Kingdom which, if anything, tended to move in the opposite direction. It was followed by the empowerment of democratic regional governments in important countries in Western Europe. The subject merits a book in itself, but I have described here briefly their nature and their place in the new European structures.

The early 1990s have brought more momentous changes — most conspicuously the establishment of new liberal democracies in Eastern Europe, leading to social and economic results that have carried deep consequences for countries throughout the world. Delaying the book has thus made it possible to take into account some immediate direct and indirect consequences, as well as the benefits of an expanding new literature on local and regional government issues.

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This book is designed to meet several purposes. One central aim was to facilitate comparison. Learning is essentially by comparison at all levels, from that of individuals to that of nations and families of nations. If it is to be of positive value it must be well-informed learning.

While the book facilitates the systematic study of differences between nations, it is also a reference book to enable those seeking background information on major aspects of local and regional government in other countries to find key facts through the index or by turning to the relevant chapter and section.

A leading aim is to assist policy-making, especially in opening up vistas of what local and regional governments can achieve and how they might be better organised, thereby providing a stimulus to worthwhile innovations that may make significant contributions to efficiency and to the local and national quality of life. Although the direct copying of institutions and practices used abroad is not to be recommended without as thorough as possible a study of their possible impacts in a new environment, comparison often leads to a reconception of national and local problems and new ideas on how they might be overcome. History shows that it has been widely undertaken, sometimes, however, for the worse where it has not been preceded by sufficient care about the likely consequences in a particular situation.

Another main aim of the book is to contribute generally to international understanding about local and regional institutions and related matters. The need for mutual understanding on local government affairs became clear to me in attending a number of international conferences on local government issues in the 1970s, when attempts at intelligent discussion were frustrated by mutual ignorance between representatives of different countries about each others’ institutions and problems. Since then international contacts have rapidly increased, and with them the size of the problem of meaningful communication, not only at governmental levels but also in the activities of trade and commerce, voluntary agencies, other interest groups and individuals moving from one system and culture to another.

There are major obstacles to mutual understanding in this field. One is national stereotypes. Too often the selection of news seems designed to reinforce them. We need to break them down through a deeper understanding of the varied character of particular countries, their qualities and variety of peoples, their institutions, culture and problems, and in many other ways. A not inconsiderable problem lies in the understanding of foreign words and their translation. Dictionaries commonly give inadequate definitions in this field. Foreign terms often lack exact equivalents. The same word can have many and often conflicting meanings, so that its use
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confuses more than helps if an understanding is lacking of the national context in which it is used. Apparent similarities between words in different languages are often 'false friends' that mislead rather than help. Translations even of common terms such as 'district', 'region', 'mayor' and 'chief executive' can create utter confusion. Both the nature of local institutions and the context of their usage need some background understanding.

The book gives key facts on aspects of local and regional government in countries in Western Europe, North America, Australasia and Japan, in accordance with a standard pattern. Interrelated topics are surveyed in Part I, followed in Part II by a deeper examination of nine selected countries according to the same pattern. The aspects are the historical backgrounds of local and regional government; the status, values and concepts supporting local and regional government; the national structure of local and regional authorities; their joint organisations and the relations between them; central-local-regional relations; local and regional government competences and services; local and regional finance, including expenditure, local taxes, grants and borrowing; electoral systems and party structures of local and regional government and conditions of service for elected members; the internal organisation of authorities; the means for direct participation in local government by members of the general public; and how the problems of metropolitan governance have been approached.

I have generally held back from theorising, although the book contains descriptions of concepts and principles supported by theory in the third section of each chapter. That is not to say that, like most books on government and national characteristics, it may not carry implicit theory which readers may like to ferret out for themselves.

Its approach is essentially inter-disciplinary, as seems appropriate in an area in which economic, social, political, legal and administrative considerations intermingle. I have gone into more detail where this seems of particular value to policy-making, as for example in the field of taxation, and have in some cases moved towards conclusions on practice, as in structural innovation in the reorganisation of boundaries, principles of local taxation and the governance of metropolitan areas.

It can be disastrous in practice for politicians and administrators to fail to understand the contributions that all relevant disciplines can bring to policy decisions aimed at the well-being of communities. This justifies the use of highly varied sources. Much of the groundwork for the book came from copies of official papers that administrators passed on to me. Newspaper reports are vital for keeping in touch with new happenings. Flashes of insight can come from anywhere and quite unexpectedly. On the other
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hand they cannot substitute for deep knowledge of particular fields. For this one seeks the best sources practically available, both from experts within their own countries and from those who have studied situations from the outside. The work of the greatest of all writers on local government, Alexis de Tocqueville, is the outstanding example of how the study of countries other than one’s own can be of relevance to the wider understanding of government and society.

Part I gives a broad survey of the subjects stated above and related matters, taking in Council of Europe countries as a whole and also Australia and New Zealand. Thus, for example, §1.1 contains a short history of the origins and development of local government in these countries within a worldwide perspective. Later sections include among other things classifications of local government taxes and electoral systems and some comparative evaluation. My analysis in the first section to some extent determines the sequence of the chapters in Part II.

The book has geographical limitations. There are other democracies in the world that might well have been covered by its title. It was not practicable to include them, but I trust that its contents will be of equal interest to readers in these and in developing and industrialising countries, and that other authors will work to provide a basis for a wider view.

Alan Norton
Birmingham, 1993

Note on Style Conventions

I have made departures from some common style conventions in ways that seemed to be justified by the nature of the book. In particular, certain parts of the book are so thick with terms belonging to foreign languages, including many that have no satisfactory translations, that it seemed best to adopt the increasing practice of not italicising them — at least subsequent to their first introduction. In some cases, for example départements, régions and maires, it seemed better not to translate them in order to avoid confusion of meanings.

The references section seeks to aid literature searches as well as to fulfil the usual reference function. For this reason, entrances under main heads, such as Council of Europe, are given in alphabetical rather than date order, and the publications concerned are named in the main text. The usual lettering of references, however, is used for an author’s publications which appeared in the same year.

Book references in the main text given after the last sentence in a paragraph indicate general sources of information on the subject of that paragraph as a whole.