INTRODUCTION

The core of local and regional government as it is understood in economically advanced liberal democracies lies in the concept of self-government and administration, as exercised by the inhabitants of territorial areas through the election of councillors, and sometimes also through the direct election of local government executives. High value is placed on individual rights and liberties and the protection of those privileges within the law. Value may also be placed on the general participation of citizens in government in a more direct way than by periodical voting. This has seemed to some the core of a democracy, enabling citizens to develop political skills and a sense of civic responsibility and so fulfil their potential as human beings. Otherwise the national systems described in the following pages differ widely in their scale, political organisation, origins and traditions. Historically the countries in which they developed include the principal nurseries of local democratic institutions throughout the world.

Writers on international comparative government commonly use countries or states as their units for comparison. Authors often identify characteristics held in common by a group of countries, seeking to make a kind of Linnaean classification into families of national systems. This procedure has the danger of setting pre-conceptions of what may be found in a particular country because it belongs, for example, to a Latin or an anglophone culture, although members of each language group always differ from each other in important respects. What is interesting within a 'family' of countries is perhaps more how its members differ from each other than what they have in common. 'Frameworks of reference', such as that tentatively sketched in the first section of Chapter 1, can therefore be misleading in the attempt to acquire an understanding of particular systems.

'Cross-classifying' nations by selected variables can nevertheless be a help towards making the field manageable and drawing out tentative hypotheses. It invariably, however, requires gross over-simplification when dealing with social phenomena and human institutions. There is a need for continuing exploration of present conditions and their relationship to the past in order to challenge received ideas and assumptions. As Heraclitus said, one cannot step into the same river twice. But we must describe and seek to understand the flows and levels of a great river if we are to cross or to bridge it. It is never the same as yesterday. Innovative measures always
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have a large element of the experimental. Whatever decision-makers can find by means of comparisons, analogies and the experience of others, the more they may understand what may succeed or go wrong.

I follow the route of cross-classification in the first section of this book, and my analysis to some extent determines the sequence of the following chapters. Thus Part II starts with France, followed by Italy as an example of a country deeply influenced by the Napoleonic model and sharing the corpus of Roman law. There follow countries which were deeply affected by French concepts and events but where strong indigenous traditions conditioned the evolution of their systems: Germany, Sweden and Denmark. The division is clear between these five countries and Britain, which tended to see French radicalism as a threat to its own traditions. It still does so to judge from the reaction of the British media and some historians to the bicentenary of the French Revolution. Although Britain was midwife at the birth of national self-government in many countries throughout the world, and passed on to them many of its local government and other institutional forms as well as its basic legal system, it has gone its own way in recent times, distancing itself from most of its former dependencies yet hardly coming closer to continental European culture and institutions. The principal institutions of the United States were established before the French Revolution and rapidly developed their own characteristics. In the twentieth century the USA has been a strong influence in the North Pacific. Canada and Japan have mixed characteristics.

Part I consists of a survey of a wide range of national systems. Due to problems of space and time the text can only touch briefly on developments in some countries that deserve fuller treatment, including those in the southern hemisphere. Much less can it do justice to the new multi-party democracies of Eastern Europe whose institutions and ideologies are being transformed in the early 1990s in a search for the essence of economically successful liberal democracy.

In recent years Western Europe’s continental states have been particularly concerned to spell out principles of local government, and have also been active in democratising the process of regional government within the unitary state. The Council of Europe, through its Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities in Europe (CLRAE), has taken the lead in these matters and has achieved the high level of consensus expressed through the European Charter of Local Self-Government (see §1.2).