

Local Government areas — Newcastle Morning Herald 4. 6. 1964 too many and too weak?

SHOULD THE number of municipal and shire councils be reduced through amalgamations?

This question was asked but not answered in a seminar at Armidale, conducted by the University of New England.

Professor Butland, head of the University Geography Department, said the fragmented structure of municipalities and shires made for weakness in the face of State authority and was in-

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adequate to deal with long-term planning problems and the provision of better and more varied services.

Professor Butland quoted Northern Ireland. It was smaller in area, he said, but not dissimilar in distribution of population and balance of rural and urban interests to New South Wales. The government of Northern Ireland proposed to reduce 68 local to 12 or 18 area councils.

Should New South Wales, he asked, go for some amalgamation of areas, land regional structures, within which country towns and rural areas would be represented.

The present system produced intense competition for every aspect of State expenditure. The expense for some services of regional significance, such as main link roads, fell upon shires whose population did not have any great interest in or benefit from them.

Mr. Justice Hardie asked whether, if local municipalities and shires once had power to make general laws in the form of regulations and ordinances, this power has been lost? If so, should this power be restored to achieve effective local government and contribute to the wider problem of adequate law enforcement in modern society?

How, he asked, did a local authority exercise its power "to control and regulate" and with it the power "to prevent and prohibit" now that it no longer had an express charter to enact ordinances and so prescribe general rules having the force and effect of law?

He also commented on the powers of local government in the Local Government Act, such as the setting up of urban areas and urban committees, county councils and joint action between adjacent authorities. He asked how useful these had proved and why they appeared to have worked successfully in one area and not in others.

Mr. Justice Hardie also referred to the disposal of Crown lands no longer required by the Department of Lands, the provision of housing, and the problem of derelict cars. Now, he asked, were local authorities meeting the problems? How far did the Local Government Act need review or reform.

An agricultural economist asked how and to what point new techniques of economic analysis could assist at Federal, State and local levels of government. Mr. Musgrave instanced water policy and signs of more sophisticated determination of water resource development by the Commonwealth Government as a field in which cost-benefit analysis could contribute. In many decisions on the allocation of public investment both State and local government might raise their own questions of cost and benefit.

Mr. Day, of the Department of Decentralisation and Development, said he believed regionalism might be a major means of development outside the metropolitan area.

Alternative

The growth of a few select regional centres to provide larger towns of not fewer than, say, 100,000 people, might be the only alternative to no significant regional development at all, particularly as it is possible that by the year 2000 three-quarters of the work force would be in tertiary industry.

Some State Government departments might be persuaded to adapt their own regional arrangements to a few very large regions. The major reason would be their usefulness as a basis for statistical and other information required to curtail and define development. The growth of major regional centres might also depend in part on the re-location of some administrative offices of Commonwealth and State.

Mr. Perrott, a Melbourne architect, asked what more effective development by design might do. Given clear

statements of policy from State governments, "new towns," including Canberra, pointed the way, but in existing towns they could not expect more than slow improvement.

Did private developers prefer to operate within a programme for change and could they be attracted to towns with a long-term plan, consistently pursued? Too often local councils were overcome by events and took emergency decisions without regard for the future. On the other hand, the business centres of some towns were overrunning as a result of well considered programmes. Adequate parking and a diversion of through traffic had aided business and the quality of the environment in many small towns.

Imbalance

Research studies by Mr. Ian McPhail, of the New England University, into the territorial financial bases of the shires of New South Wales, using indices such as unimproved capital value and rates levied per acre, revealed that shires varied markedly in their economic foundations. A broad picture of imbalance between shires to the east and to the west of the State appeared also. In respect of Federal and State grants for roads many shires fell below a level at which economies of scale produced maximum efficiency, a concept confirmed by comparing loan indebtedness of shires and their proportion of sealed roads.

While in sympathy with the Elie-Mitchell report on local government finance and the activities of the Local Boundaries Commission, Mr. McPhail criticised the terms of reference. A review of the territorial base of local government, laid down in the last century, was not called for, nor was the Boundaries Commission asked to do more than advise upon cases of boundary adjustment.

Mr. McPhail advocated a permanent commission to study and review local government, to include the proposed Local Grants Commission and the Boundaries Commission.

The Under-Secretary of the Department for Local Government (Mr. C. J. Barnett) asked how well local government functioned in New South Wales. Within the present system, he said, it had a fair record of success, though it was only 60 years old. The greatest difficulties of councils arose from their regulatory powers over town development, in subdivisions, buildings, town planning and the like. If they faced the question of how well the system was changing to meet needs, the picture was less satisfactory. Mr. Barnett noted the resist-

ance to change within local government and State departments.

The first half of the seminar concluded with these questions.—

● How can resistance to change be overcome and what are the priorities?

● Should local government be given more powers to make it more interesting and responsible?

● Was it necessary to re-construct areas to strengthen the territorial financial base for local authorities?

● Did they put regional changes before reconstruction of local government?

Mr. George Clarke asked: "Why have country towns in Australia?" They were partly functional as regional service, tourist and retirement or social educational and administrative centres, or mining towns. But did they provide a choice of different styles of living away from the metropolis and give justice and equal services to primary producers who must live in the country? Many or most of the small rural service centres would continue to wither and die. In the absence of national and State guidelines on decentralisation, what could local councils in country areas do in the meantime? Mr. Clarke suggested that they should take a long, hard look at their future.

Conflicts

Planning was not a coloured map. It was a process of discussion about the future and setting agreement between interested groups within each town or shire. If conflicts in a town and its council ran too deeply, it might not be possible to plan in this sense at all.

Dr. Bunker, of the Department of Town and Country Planning of the University of Sydney suggested that survey work could assist appreciation of the future. Provided the cost of surveys was related to the size of the town and its future growth, studies in population, economic base, land use, land values and site opportunities would help in making programmes and plans.

Another New England geographer, Dr. Woolmington, argued that decentralisation was not against the continuing and possibly desirable "drift to the cities," assuming that it was based on the

further development of selected towns, such as those that appeared to be holding their populations. Resource studies, such as water availability, might assist in the selection of sites for urban development.

Discussion turned on a number of other criteria in this selection.

● A team consisting of the President and Clerk of Murrumbidgee Shire Council, a planner and a civil engineer presented a case study of the new rural service centre of Coleambally for the Conservation and Irrigation Commission below the Bowerine Dam. The financial, political, social and physical problems involved and the extent to which constant regional and local initiative and drive were necessary to overcome them was judged to be very typical of "new town" development anywhere.

Analysis

There must be points of conflict between private developers and local councils. Mr. T. Whipple, of Sydney University, described how each approached any new development project. Soundly based private developers used sophisticated techniques of capital budgeting and benefit-cost analysis.

Local government should be the watchdog of long-term community interests within which private development operated. Local government performance would be related to the quality of local political leadership and to the training and status of its officers. It must adopt more modern management techniques, such as capital budgeting, to meet private developers and work with them, also to provide the guidelines to community development.

Mr. Gordon Craig said he was convinced that local government could attack these long-term problems. Within an area sufficiently large, and where growth factors were already in evidence, the Shire of Sharncliffe had approached development vigorously. It sought to be in advance of private enterprise, ready to put proposals to, and to provide facilities for, individual developers. This required a courageous council and participation by local people, but also an effective management system to control performance and identify opportunities. He advised imagination, with good management, in the development of country towns.

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