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## Whatever happened to local government? A review symposium

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This collection of contributions uses the 21st anniversary of the publication of Allan Cochrane's *Whatever Happened to Local Government?* (1993) to reflect on the state of contemporary English local government, and in the process assess the book's intellectual legacy.

**Keywords:** English local government; governance; politics; welfare state

### Introduction

Academic books do not appear out of nowhere. Rather, their constitutive elements are presented at conferences and published in journals over the preceding years. Allan Cochrane's *Whatever Happened to Local Government?* (1993) is no exception. Written, quite literally, over the course of 1991–92, it consisted of an argument that had been fashioned and honed in a number of publications from the mid to late 1980s. For example, almost 10 years before *Whatever Happened to Local Government?*, Cochrane (1985, p. 47) was writing about the apparent 'attack' on it by Mrs Margaret Thatcher's central government, arguing for greater clarity over what it was and what it was not. He bemoaned the unquestioning and 'vacuous commitment to decentralisation and local democracy' that was being espoused by the left-leaning local authorities, such as in London and Sheffield. In subsequent papers he explored the responses of a particular strand of 'socialist economic strategies' as part of a wider turn towards 'municipal socialism' (Cochrane, 1986, 1988; Clarke & Cochrane, 1989). This analysis he situated in a wider appreciation and understanding of the ways in which local government, as part of the wider local state, was being restructured from without and from within. In *Whatever Happened to Local Government?* the argument was made that

the fragmentation of local government has led to a proliferation of different agencies which need to be considered as part of the local state, both in the fields of welfare and economic development. In a sense, therefore, the only answer to the question posed in the title is that local government can now only be understood as one element alongside others within the welfare state. (Cochrane, 1993, p. 5–6).

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Junking more insular accounts of local government – where the emphasis was on local government qua local government – his intellectual project was to step back and take a wider focus. This involved him in engaging with the state theoretical work of Jessop (1990) on regulation theory, the then still emerging US theories on coalitions and regimes (Logan & Molotch, 1987; Stone, 1989), and the policy networks approaches (Rhodes, 1988). While one reviewer at the time regarded these engagements as ‘rather pithy’ (Tomlinson, 1994, p. 299), the potential theoretical possibilities were only just becoming clear. Over the course of the 1990s the conversations between different ways of theorizing ‘local’ politics would become louder and louder. As someone who did his PhD during this period, they were exciting times! Those involved in the conversations included human geographers, political scientists, planners and sociologists (John, 1994; Jonas & Wilson, 1999; Lauria, 1997), and they were ones in which Cochrane himself would play an important role (Cochrane, 1999; Cochrane, Peck, & Tickell, 1996).

These attempts to bring into conversation a range of theoretical perspective on ‘local’ politics also sought to trouble the very internal coherency of the notion. Nowhere was this clearer than in the various interventions around the notion of ‘localities’ (Cooke, 1989). Cochrane’s study of English local government questioned the very pre-given ontological security and status of ‘the local’:

Most of the pundits would probably agree that spatial divisions cannot in themselves answer the demands of ‘localness’ – of local political identity – but they nevertheless easily slip into the shorthand of ‘local people’ (whatever that many mean) and the convenient identification of ‘local’ with community. (Cochrane, 1985, p. 56)

Analysis of local politics in Britain will increasingly need to be understood in terms which [...] consider the precise balance of potential interests at [the] local level, as well as the ways in which they are linked into wider policy network and hierarchies of political, economic and social power. (Cochrane, 1993, p. 5–6)

This questioning made more than a nod to the relational thinking that would characterize his later work (Allen & Cochrane, 2007, 2014; Allen, Massey, & Cochrane, 1998), and that lies behind this diagnosis of the current version of ‘new localism’:

Localities are neither coherent nor autonomous. They are heterogeneous, contested, and produced through distanced relations. Local actors often have complex institutional geographies, embedded as they are in partnerships, associations, groups, and contracts stretching down into neighbourhoods and out into other localities, regions, and countries. Such complexity poses challenges for tracing democratic accountability and ensuring democratic participation. To be effective, localism in defence of locally dependent groups must operate in multiple spaces of engagement. To be responsible, localism must know and regulate its effects on distant places and people. (Clarke & Cochrane, 2013, p. 20)

### **What continues to happen to local government?**

Local government still exists in England. I do not think this would surprise the Cochrane who wrote *Whatever Happened to Local Government?* In its conclusion he argued that the changes outlined in the book ‘herald neither the necessary “end” of local government nor the inevitable rise of the “enabling” authority’ (Cochrane, 1993; p. 124). He went on to claim that local government would not necessarily remain the dominant political actor at the local level. There would be some geographical variation.

My own work in the mid to late 1990s confirmed this (Ward, 2000). For sure, however, English local government has demonstrated an ability to survive, even to grow its capacity in some areas while managing its decline in others. The last five years of the UK coalition government's austerity programme have taken their toll, of course (Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012). Budgets have been cut centrally and local governments have been left to manage the local consequences. In many ways this has reinforced geographical uneven development (Centre for Cities, 2014). At the same time, the rhetoric around the notion of 'new localism', despite its internal inconsistencies, has involved the movement downwards of some autonomy and some responsibilities. Rather presciently 25 years ago Cochrane (1989) wrote:

'Financial devolution at a time of fiscal stress means the devolution of responsibility without an equivalent devolution of power: decentralised decisions take place within centrally determined (and narrow) budgetary constraints' (p. 42).

For the likes of Manchester, my own city, there may be scope to challenge the central 'rules of the game', the 'centrally determined (and narrow) budgetary constraints' of which Cochrane writes. Not on its own, of course. Rather, working with the other nine local authorities – Bolton, Bury, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford and Wigan – through the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), which currently exists in parallel with the Association of Greater Manchester (AGMA). Through a long process of cajoling and lobbying it has managed to wrestle away from the coalition responsibility over £1 billion of the estimated total of £22 billion spent across Greater Manchester by all public bodies (Dudman, 2014, n.p.). Talk of 'Devo Manc' (Respublica, 2014) looks set to define the local and regional political condition for the foreseeable future. Other local governments may not be so well placed, economically or politically. Neither may they be so institutionally sorted. The GMCA may be an organization of local authorities, but it is embedded within a series of networks and relationships that stretch beyond Greater Manchester and which involve a range of other stakeholders of differing geographical reach. Of particular importance amongst these are the different representatives of business. It would appear to remain as true today as it did then that '[t]he position of elected local governments within the changing local political regimes is not a straightforward one' (Cochrane, 1993, p. 124).

### The contributions

In assembling the contributors to this collection of papers I have taken seriously Cochrane's (1993) plea from all those years ago:

'[t]he study of local government should not be left to single-discipline experts, because if it is its study will remain fragmented and (at best) we will only be able to understand parts of the story' (p. 6).

So, here are featured four contributions and a response by Cochrane himself. These consist of those from a human geographer, a political scientist, a social scientist and an urban planner. I will sidestep any attempt to categorize Cochrane's own disciplinary 'home'! Using *Whatever Happened to Local Government?* as a starting point, the purpose of this collection of papers is twofold. First, to revisit some of the central arguments made in the book, in light of the empirical and theoretical developments over the

last 21 years. What does this more recent history reveal about the starting point for *Whatever Happened to Local Government?* and the book's capacity to see into the future of the welfare state? The second purpose is to reconsider the book in light of the last five years of the coalition's austerity and localism programmes. While the outcomes of the systematic restructuring of the UK state are still revealing themselves (Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012; Meegan, Kennett, Jones, & Croft, 2014), that it is proving a challenge to local government seems beyond doubt.

Newman's is the first contribution in this collection. She reflects on her own experiences of working on local government issues during the 1980s and 1990s. Her take on the current role of local (and indeed central) government is a sombre one. She posits that what we may be witnessing is a politics of governmental abandonment, of places and of people, and those institutions that would seek to represent them, including local government. John, in turn, begins by focusing on the question posed by Cochrane (1993): 'Whatever happened to local government?' In response to this provocative question he has his own line in natty subheadings, including 'The true story of English local government'. Emphasizing continuity rather than change, resilience rather than restructuring, he argues that local government continues to play a central role within the wider welfare state arrangements. Theodore's contribution revisits the UK's political economy when *Whatever Happened to Local Government?* was being written and highlights the theoretical reference points of the book. Applauding its locating of an analysis of local government in the context of the wider state theoretical literature, he argues that the last 21 years have seen neo-liberalism emerge as the dominant logic behind the restructuring of the UK's welfare state. The further downloading of responsibilities under the coalition's austerity programme simply reinforces the ways in which local government is on the frontline of transformation. MacLeavy picks up the concern with the current juncture. She turns her attention to Bristol and examines how its local government has been restructured as a result of the changes emanating from one of the many 'multiple centres' identified by Rhodes (1988, p. 3). She contends that the capacity of local government to do what it is increasingly being asked to is geographically variable. On the one hand, asked to do more with less by various bits of central government while, on the other hand, working with communities and neighbourhoods to manage and meet their expectations and needs.

The final word, or, to be more precise, words, go, of course, to Allan Cochrane. He reminds us why he wrote the book. The late 1980s and early 1990s – when the central arguments in *Whatever Happened to Local Government?* were being formulated – was a time when intellectually and politically something appeared to be happening to local government. It was not just Cochrane making that argument, however, as he acknowledges. And something has continued to happen to local government since this period. Cochrane makes this point with reference to successive central governments that have, in their own ways, asked different things of local government. This includes restructuring itself from within and restructuring its relations from without, with the other agencies that go to make up the local state. Something continues to happen to local government, then, as part of a restless institutional landscape in which spatial fixes of one sort or another are always being sought out. At the same time, our intellectual approaches have evolved over the years. The study of local government is an interdisciplinary endeavour, of course, and the degree of evolution differs from one discipline to another. Perhaps this is clearest, as Cochrane highlights, in his and others' attempts to theorize space relationally. It is human geographers who have been at the fore of this work. This has involved questioning the what and the where that goes into the making

up of the local. The beginnings of this argument were there in *Whatever Happened to Local Government?* and have emerged more fully in some of the other works in which Cochrane has subsequently been involved (Allen & Cochrane, 2007, 2014; Allen et al., 1998; Cochrane, 2004, 2011).

## Author 1

### Beyond fairy tales? Local government and the politics of critique

Rereading *Whatever Happened to Local Government?* after its first appearance, I was reminded about how different it was from other books on local government at the time. I was working at the Institute of Local Government Studies (INLOGOV) at the time of its publication, and was surrounded by rather tedious accounts of changes in the structures and functions of local government, and normative prescriptions about its role in producing a better, more democratic and decentralized world. Cochrane no doubt shared some of those aspirations, but rather than being ‘about’ local government, his book offered a brilliant reading of post-war politics and tensions in the British state as they were refracted through local government.

I want to pick up two strands of analysis and critique that I think continue to speak to the present. The first is inspired by the fairy tale with which the book begins, in which something called ‘local democracy’ was systematically curtailed by the wicked witch or evil Snow Queen (Margaret Thatcher). This story, Cochrane wrote, offers different possible endings, depending on your political stance: in the first, local government becomes frozen in fear as the Snow Queen triumphs; while in the second, councillors and professionals manage to turn the changes imposed from above to their own advantage in order to herald an era of greater openness and customer care.

This made me think about the fables or fairy tales in current circulation. One might be titled ‘The Revolt of the Oppressed’. This builds on memories of the Thatcher era in which local government offered a source of oppositional politics, with particular authorities not only serving as significant islands of dissent but also heralding alternative political futures. Those on the political left today may look forward to the resurgence of radical opposition, with the assaults on local government by the current administration producing a return to a more assertive and abrasive local government. There are certainly some signs of new forms of political leadership by English cities, leading in part to a new and radical devolution of powers to Greater Manchester. But the power base of local government is now very different from that of 20 years ago. Local government has been progressively weakened by ongoing cycles of budgetary cuts and (local) state retrenchment, reducing its powers to pursue oppositional politics.

A second fable or fairy tale looks back not to Thatcher but to the Tony Blair years, in which local government actors were (selectively and conditionally) invited to the ball. In those years innovation and policy ideas generated within local government formed the inspiration for and basis of many of the ‘modernizing’ policies of central government. Local government also peopled – and often led – the proliferating policy networks of the time. Today local government retains a significant role in innovation, albeit defensive (how to survive) rather than expansive. And, despite the loss of crucial staff and infrastructure, it can still serve as a reservoir of ideas and talent that might help shape life after the coalition era of austerity governing: see, for example, the Local Government Association (LGA) on *Rewiring Public Services* (LGA, 2013), or Ines Newman’s recent ‘Reclaiming local democracy’ (2014). However, central–local relations have deteriorated

sufficiently, and the capacities of local government so severely squeezed, such that there will probably be no ‘happy ever after’.

A third fable offers a transformation myth in which ‘ordinary people’ take over, unseat the evil barons and take charge of their own lives (as in the revolt of the characters in the land of ‘Far, Far Away’ in the film *Shrek 2*). Images of transformation pervade local authority initiatives to promote democratic innovation and active citizenship, and in professional discourses of coproduction. However, we can also see this in earlier attempts by government to promote a ‘big society’ in place of a big state; and in the current localism policies of central government (with Eric Pickles as the evil fairy godmother?).

Now the value of fairy tales and fables is that they summon a world of mutability, suggesting that the present arrangements are not all there is, that other worlds are possible. But as Cochrane argued, such fables distort as much as they clarify. Most look back to a rosy past of innocent victims and gallant heroes. In some, local government itself appears as heroic (though its heroism takes very different forms). In others, it appears as the innocent victim of structural and cultural change. Recent images are of local government being defeated by a thousand small strokes, both victim (of an evil government) but also as perpetrator (deciding where and how to intensify the pain of austerity). The political position of the narrator matters: what stories are told, what endings they envisage, how victims and heroes are brought into view.

Political imaginations – the stuff of myth and fairy tale – are crucial resources for reviving and restoring a politics of hope. However, they are of little value unless they are rooted in a more nuanced analysis and a more grounded politics. This takes me to the second thing I want to pick up from Cochrane’s book: the politics of critique. In the 1980s–90s there was a huge industry of local government theory and analysis, much of which Cochrane engages with in this book. Since those heady political days, attention to local government as an object of theoretical interest has declined, along with the declining power base of local government itself. But critique has also become more difficult. In the present context of cuts, perhaps little more can be accomplished than an analysis of harm caused and damage wrought on the institutions of the local state, on the people it serves, on its staff and on the wider political culture. And politically the focus is, of course, on defence. However, in my own research many of the women I interviewed spoke of their discomfort in defending institutions that they knew to be deeply flawed, and which they had spent much of their working and political lives seeking to transform (Newman, 2012). There is no going back to a mythical golden era; rather there is a need to work with – and against – the contradictory politics of local government.

This takes me back again to Cochrane’s book. This offers a brilliant piece of political economy, rooted in the dominant debates of the era. But it made me wonder what kinds of theory we need for the present and future. Cochrane argues (1993, p. 76) that we need to distinguish between hopes, ambitions and visions on the one hand and analyses of change on the other. And in the present we need to understand something of the limits of political economy – not least since radical theory seems to be coming from outside the traditions of critique that Cochrane’s book speaks to. Cochrane, over the years, has himself moved into new ways of theorizing the temporalities and spatialities of politics and policy, drawing from new theory in geography, sociology and cultural studies.

Cochrane’s book was of its place, as well as its day, significantly rooted in the British experience. Here we (on the left) have become preoccupied by the difficult politics of central–local relations, with a focus on the limited freedoms and powers of local government, But I want to argue that at stake is not just a politics of central–local

power; it is also about the spatial flows and relationships in which both are implicated. My particular interest has been in the appropriation and re-signification of innovations generated within local authorities. The political projects of successive governments have drawn on, reworked and changed the meanings of such innovations – from best value to local partnerships to fostering active citizenship; from the co-production of services or public involvement in decision-making to models of environmental sustainability or alternative models of ownership and control. But many of these have been taken up by government and re-inscribed as instrumental programmes of reform that are evaluated against criteria that are far from the intentions of innovators. In the process of rolling out or ‘mainstreaming’ such policies, local authorities are rendered as the targets rather than the agents of policy reform. But at the same time they themselves are deeply implicated in the generation of neoliberal rationalities of governing (Newman, 2013).

I do not want to argue that debates about central–local powers are not significant. Rather I want to point to how the kind of theory Cochrane has offered since the book was published offers a rather different spatial imagery that links and connects local and central government in new topologies of power. In the present we are perhaps witnessing less a politics of central control but rather a politics of governmental abandonment – citizens left adrift by welfare and service cuts, as well as the abandonment of institutions in which older traces of public rationalities and values were inscribed, including local government.

This makes the politics of critique more, rather than less, important. Cochrane’s book offers models of how to link careful, theoretically informed analysis to a deep political – and personal – engagement with the changing political landscape. He continues to offer resources to think with, and inspiration for action, and I am pleased to have had the privilege of working with, and alongside, him for the last decade.

## Author 2

### Declinism and the study of English local government

Allan Cochrane’s *Whatever Happened to Local Government?* (1993) represents a particular kind of academic endeavour, quite common in many fields of study: declinism. In this approach, a formerly vibrant entity becomes victim to forces beyond its control and attenuates in importance as a result. For example, Colin Campbell and Graham Wilson’s *The End of Whitehall* (1995) is very much in this vein, whereby a previously influential and dominant institution, the British civil service, was considered to have been ravaged by successive reforms and the forces of neo-liberalism. The content of such books are always much more subtle than their titles imply as dramatic changes in the status of political institutions rarely occur in such a binary fashion given path dependence and institutional resilience – and Cochrane himself shows how centralization was not necessarily dominant. However, these authors need to be aware of the dangers of a declinist thesis: a sweeping generalization has been made; short-term changes are given prominence; and it is very hard to support or reject the claim that decline has taken place. Cochrane’s rather wistful and elegiac book is no exception, subtle as it is. He is one in a long line of writers on English local government (see the list in John, 2014) who have observed a crisis in the institution, which go back to Robson’s (1933) railing against the legislation of the 1930s. John (2014) notes that the frequent appearance of the soothsayers of doom is evidence more of the resilience of this institution rather than an indication of its immanent destruction.

In this contribution there is a chance to restate these arguments about resilience and continuity. However, it is also important to reflect on why students of local government have been so pessimistic, more so than the travails of the institution itself would imply. Whereas local government responds to its diminutive status in political life pragmatically, crafting out a shadowy existence based on managing public services efficiently and finding new functions in a low-key exercises in local autonomy, students of local politics in Britain display a more bipolar sensibility, showing enthusiasm and engagement with new forms of decentralization only to return back to self-abnegation when these flurries of activity do not transform local government.

### **The true story of English local government**

The simple story is that it is not possible to sustain the argument that local government entered a period of decline or even experienced massive changes in the 1980s. Of course, this decade was a period of central reform of local government, controls over its discretion and removal of some functions, which local government in the main faithfully implemented as it always does; but the multifunctional service-providing enterprise largely carried on as before run by the corps of professional bureaucrats and overseen by locally elected politicians. As Cochrane discusses, local government still took up the same share of public spending at the beginning and end of the 1980s (Travers, 1989). The legislative enactments that were frequently seen as evidence of centralization were often minor amendments and consolidations of existing laws (John, 1994, p. 416, n. 28). More radical reforms, such as the poll tax, were temporary and the local property tax duly reappeared three years later (Butler, Adonis, & Travers, 1994).

Local authorities actually worked well with the new centrally funded organizations that were implanted into the localities forming partnerships which they largely lead by virtue of their size, capacity and permanence (Imrie & Thomas, 1999). Many quangos had short lives, linked to particular funding streams, ministerial initiatives and government terms of office, so had to move quickly to get programmes implemented before being abolished or restructured. They needed local authorities. Studies of local governance found that local government was not marginalized: it was at the centre of these new networks and dominated the terrain of local governance (Stoker 2004), such as public-private partnerships (Harding, 1997) or local policy networks (Cole & John, 2001). Even when funding has been controlled by many other organizations, the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust study *Whose Town Is It Anyway? The State of Local Democracy in Two Northern Towns* found resilience in local institutions and high levels of attachment to local democracy (Wilks-Heeg & Clayton, 2006).

Local government retained its role as a service principal amid restructured services that it delegated or contracted out provision to others. Most of all, local government found new things to do, and the funding to implement them, such as over local economic development, carrying out activities for the European Commission and inventing a variety of new functions, such as over crime and the environment (Atkinson & Wilks-Heeg, 2000). What happened in the UK, with the rise of partnerships, decentralization and Europeanization, was not that different to developments in other parts of Europe (John, 2001).

In the 1990s and 2000s, local government showed it had survived the Thatcherite period and it went on to acquire new functions and activities, such as to run and make sense of New Labour's sometimes ill-thought-out policy initiatives. It resisted the imposition of directly elected mayors and was happy to sabotage regional government reforms. Even in the period of austerity in the 2010s, local government continues as

before as the dominant local actor and plays its classic role of administering new central government policies, such as City Deals. Resilience, pragmatism and an instinct for survival are the core characteristics of English local government (John, 2014). This generates considerable continuity in the face of reforms and policy changes emanating from other levels of government.

### **Studying local government: from hope to despair and back**

Studies of local government follow waves of interest that inevitably ebb. At times scholars focus on new policy changes or ideas, which appear to show a reinvigorated local government; but then they become disappointed with what happens on the ground. In the early 1970s there was considerable interest on studies of urban politics and community power from the United States (see the volume edited by Young, 1975), which produced equivalent studies in the UK (e.g. Newton, 1976); but scholars could not find the vibrant signs of life that the American cousins had identified in US cities. Instead local bureaucrats and service managers dominated local decisions rather than communities and a wide range of interest groups. In the 1980s there was another lease of life in the subject and new generations of scholars became attracted to local government, which partly reflected the rise of the new left and the emergence of what was thought to be local socialism (Gyford, 1985). But after a time such local initiatives appeared to have been undermined by a focused central government and also by pragmatic acceptance of neo-liberal ideas within local government itself, such as over partnerships, privatization and new public management. Cochrane wrote his book in this period of disillusion. The reality was that the strong left policies were confined to a few councils, and that local innovation and even radical policy initiatives continued if with less fanfare than before.

Since that time there has been something of a revival in interest in community politics and neighbourhood decentralization, though less on local government the institution itself (Durose, Greasley, & Richardson, 2009). The flurry of interest in locally elected mayors by academics and policy-makers led to the initiatives of the Labour government, and created a debate about local political leadership (Copus, 2004); but both the initiative and with it any academic interest foundered on the conservatism and pragmatism of local government itself that rejected elected mayors. Even with the reformed cabinets, local authorities largely ran their affairs in the same way as before (Gains, John, & Stoker, 2005).

The question that emerges is: what is the current state of academic studies? There are signs that the academic interest is finally getting separated from the fortunes of the institution itself. There is a new interest in urban politics (Troustine, 2009), which comes from an interest in local accountability and takes advantages of studying local government, which is its closest to citizens and the large number of units that allow for comparison and statistical analysis (John, 2009). Such a research agenda is concerned with the big themes of decline and revival, but also in understanding how the institutions in local politics intersect with citizen preferences and demands, which should be at the core of the political science of local politics.

### **Author 3**

#### **Uneven development and the remaking of the local welfare state**

‘Public expenditure is at the heart of Britain’s present economic difficulties,’ or so proclaimed the Thatcher government’s first policy White Paper on public spending

(HMSO, 1979, p. 1). The implications could hardly have been clearer: the locus of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's attempts at 'rolling back the frontiers of the state' (Lawson, 1980, p. np) would centre on reining in local government and cutting back Britain's expansive welfare state. The broadsides against local government would continue throughout Thatcher's time in office, even as processes of state rescaling were placing increasing demands on localities for 'resolving' (as if they ever could) the crisis tendencies of uneven development (Fuller & Geddes, 2008; Jones & Ward, 2002; Raco & Imrie, 2003).

From the breakdown of the Keynesian consensus in the late 1980s to the period of neoliberal policy experimentation that followed in the 1990s, to the repositioning of the urban scale as a key node in a globalizing economy in the 2000s, the local state has simultaneously been the site and target of sweeping programmes of institutional restructuring aimed at catalysing supposedly latent potentialities for economic growth. In *Whatever Happened to Local Government?* Allan Cochrane (1993) analyses the evolving, and sometimes contradictory, role of the local welfare state in Britain, with a focus on various institutional changes that were initiated in the 1980s and early 1990s. The result is a lucid and measured account of a transformational era of state restructuring in Britain, one that analyses a pivotal period of institutional reform.

Looking back on the trajectory of welfare state restructuring since the end of the Second World War, it is clear that the 1980s' period was indeed a key inflection point, a period in which the tenets of Keynesian policy-making became widely discredited, giving way to the ascendant orthodoxy of neoliberal statecraft, particularly at the scale of the local state (Theodore & Peck, 2012). Cochrane's analysis – written as Britain was on the cusp of systemic changes in modes of urban governance – was timely and astute, and, in many respects, it foreshadowed the even deeper forms of restructuring that were to occur in the early 21st century. Cochrane identifies key pressure points in the emergent policy portfolio of neoliberalization, such as the marketizing reforms of the third Thatcher government, which pursued, among other initiatives, the extension of compulsory competitive tendering and a series of changes to education, health and housing laws that chipped away at Britain's prevailing welfare state ethos. Yet, despite the radical and countercultural condemnation of welfarist principles by Conservative leaders at the time, in retrospect the initiatives undertaken by the Thatcher and John Major governments might better be characterized as political ground clearing in terms of social-assistance policy: a time of strident anti-welfarist discourse, though rather tepid forms of policy experimentation. Nonetheless, these governments set the stage for the more sweeping neoconservative remaking of social-assistance programmes that was to follow under New Labour.

In contrast to the Thatcher government's efforts to exert control through policy and administrative centralization, New Labour favoured administrative decentralization and the devolution of certain responsibilities to the local scale. This localization was crucial to New Labour's remaking of social assistance in that it facilitated the cultivation of a pluralistic delivery system within its flagship New Deal programmes, which in turn enabled inter-locality 'regime competition' between different governance models and delivery strategies (Peck & Theodore, 2001). Most controversially, this included the privatization of New Deal delivery in certain parts of the country, a decision that was legitimated on the grounds that system-wide innovation would be spurred by the presence of private-sector competition within a heterogeneous delivery system. But under New Labour, to the extent that there was going to be local innovation, it would centre on implementation and service delivery, not on policy formulation. New Deal policies

were conceived of and designed centrally. Importantly, as Cochrane (1993) notes with regard to welfare state restructuring more generally, devolution and fragmentation, paradoxically perhaps, can be used as a means of control from the centre. Despite New Labour's efforts to expound a quite different narrative regarding the creation of 'learning systems' within the British welfare state, the scope of experimentation with truly alternative forms of welfare policy-making was in fact quite narrow.

The reforms of Britain's welfare state that have been implemented since the 1980s have been closely aligned with a now-dominant, transnational discourse on poverty, one that is ideologically rooted in neoliberalism. These reforms have necessitated the remaking of the local state in the pursuit of economic growth, even though this has meant forsaking core welfarist principles. Cochrane (1993, p. 97) notes 'An emphasis on competitiveness also implies the need for significant changes in those aspects of local government most closely associated with the welfare state'. In the process, 'Some traditional welfare concerns (for example urban deprivation) may simply be reinterpreted as problems of economic growth' (p. 97). This discursive redefinition of economic problems has led policy-makers to emphasize, for example, imperatives associated with fostering a welcoming 'business climate' and trumpeting supposed supply-side deficiencies of employability, while simultaneously underplaying demand-side causes of poverty, inadequate opportunity and long-term unemployment.

Unemployment and poverty in Britain follow distinct and enduring geographical patterns (Dorling et al., 2007; Theodore, 2007; Webster, 2005). Former coal-mining regions, towns where steel mills have been shuttered, de-industrialized cities of the North, and inner-city neighbourhoods suffering from disinvestment – the locations where economic hardship has been, and continues to be, concentrated are well known. The persistent regional disparities in job availability across Britain are testament to ongoing structural deficiencies in certain local labour markets. What is less well understood, on the other hand, is how processes of uneven economic development interact with the locally variable institutional capacities of the welfare state. In other words, does the uneven institutional development of the welfare state exacerbate problems associated with the spatially uneven development of the British economy? Welfare-to-work programmes, for example, perform differently depending on the health of local economies, and with quite different labour market effects (Cochrane & Etherington, 2007; Peck & Theodore, 2001; Sunley, Martin, & Nativel, 2006). In high-unemployment areas, welfare-to-work programmes are associated with labour market 'churning', few sustainable transitions into long-term employment and only marginal earnings gains for programme participants. Furthermore, it is precisely in these areas where the institutional capacities of the local welfare state are likely to be stretched to the limit, straining under the burdens of high regional unemployment, deepening poverty and inadequate employer demand. In this context, over-burdened and under-resourced service delivery systems are unable to surmount the challenges of a faltering local economy, and in the process regional employment disparities will likely worsen.

In the two decades since the publication of *Whatever Happened to Local Government?* the scope of local welfare state restructuring has continued to broaden. Experiments with various governance arrangements and delivery systems have been initiated, most under the straitened conditions that have accompanied the rise of neoliberal urbanism. Meanwhile, patterns of uneven geographical development across Britain endure, and are compounded by, the challenges facing an increasingly localized welfare state whose institutional capacities likewise are highly uneven. What has happened, in short, has been a further devolution of responsibilities for economic revitalization and for managing the fallout from economic

decline, this despite mounting evidence that the search for sustainable development strategies must transcend the narrow parameters of the neoliberal orthodoxy and its policy portfolio that relies so heavily on austerity measures, privatization and the incessant rolling back of the frontiers of the welfare state.

#### Author 4

#### **New localism and the politics of austerity: reflections on the current state of English local government**

In *Whatever Happened to Local Government?* (1993), Allan Cochrane outlines the changes and developments in English local government that occurred through the 1980s and early 1990s. He argues that during this period the role of local government in terms of urban policy and the provision of local welfare services changed. There was a new emphasis on competitiveness, which gave scope for real geographical differentiation as locally based promotional and economic development activities resulted in uneven levels of development. Added to this, the formation of partnerships between local government, non-elected institutions and the private sector resulted in uneven institutional capacities and place-based variation in the abilities of local councils to meet citizen needs. These changes were significant insofar as they signalled a process of state transformation in which the structures and patterns of intervention associated with Keynesian welfarism were ‘rolled back’ and a market-based and post-welfare ethos was ‘rolled forward’. Conceptualized by Bob Jessop (Jessop, 2002) as a Schumpeterian competition state, this strategic reorientation is broadly understood as a form of political response to the challenges and opportunities posed by the breakdown of Atlantic Fordism.

Building on Cochrane’s (1993) understanding of local government as an integral part of the welfare state, this contribution reflects on more recent developments in English local government in the ‘age of austerity’. Focusing on the period since the formation of the UK coalition government in 2010, it outlines how post-recessionary state restructuring has proceeded along two axes: the first of these has involved welfare spending cuts and the introduction of new approaches to public spending; the second a renewed emphasis on localism and the reconfiguration of democratic relations. Exploring the current state of local government in Bristol, a regional city in the south-west of England, it asks what budgetary and political reform in this case study location might tell us about the role and future direction of English local government.

#### **Restructuring as a response to recession**

In the aftermath of 2008–09 recession and ‘double dip’ of 2012, the introduction of a series of rounds of public sector cuts has placed local governments in England at the forefront of delivering (or resisting) the UK austerity programme. This downwards pressure on public spending has coincided with an increased demand for welfare assistance as a result of rises in the cost of living (which have not been matched by wage increases), increased debts and a reduction in the availability of jobs. To reconcile these competing demands for funds, several local councils have moved away from traditional approaches to public spending that have seen them respond to past spending cuts by deciding how best to distribute departmental budgets in order to deliver pared down services across the board. Starting in the 2014–15 financial year, Bristol City Council was one of several local governments to adopt a ‘zero-based budget’ approach. Rather

than attempt to allocate the money available across all areas of expenditure, this approach sees the council first decide which services to provide, and then approve budgets accordingly.

The consequence of a zero-based budget response is radical structural change, involving the axing or merging of some council departments, substantial job losses, and either an end to many of the public services that citizens have previously taken for granted or the transferral of these to other providers. One example is of this can be found in the realm of education, where many schools have been granted academy status freeing them from local authority control. The transferral of responsibility for education from the council to individual schools not only reduces the workload of the council's education department but also reduces the level of democratic oversight and accountability.

Building on the 2003 Local Government Act, greater civic involvement in the planning, design and delivery of public services is promoted as an effective means of reducing public spending in the context of austerity. There is a new or renewed emphasis on community and the empowerment of local people, which is being enacted through increased community ownership of assets such as land and buildings, and in some cities such as Bristol the decentralization of functions from Whitehall to joint local authority–business bodies that have recently been established.

In 2011, the West of England Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) was set up to replace the South West Regional Development Agency. It is one of 39 joint local authority–business bodies in England now charged with promoting local economic development. The West of England LEP is awarded central government funds via a process of competitive bidding and was included in the first wave of City Deals in 2012. These followed the 2011 Localism Act, which introduced the Core Cities Amendment. The amendment allows local areas to bid for new powers to promote economic growth and set their own distinct policies. For instance, Bristol City Region's City Deal includes a Growth Incentive Proposition (in which the West of England Authorities will be allowed to keep 100% of the growth in business rates generated over a 25-year period), as well as a Transport Devolution Agreement, People and Skills Programme, City Growth Hub and a newly created Public Property Board).

### **Reconfiguration of local democratic relations**

The effects of such restructuring are complex and uneven, and have generated a significant amount of critical scrutiny. Though the importance of planning services around the needs and ambitions of local communities is noted, commentators have argued that such post-recessionary restructuring represents the complete rejection of regionalist perspectives on economic development and policy. Some go even further and argue that the apparent 'localism' is an illusion since the LEPs do not have the necessary power or resources to carry out the tasks set for them (Bentley, Bailey, & Shutt, 2010). In this sense, their establishment serves only to legitimate the further reduction of local government control through the inclusion of management committees comprised of third-sector representatives and private organizations in local economic development.

While the functional 'hollowing out' of local government risks reducing democratic control over some aspects of policy provision, though, other changes to representative democracy have the potential to improve local democratic relations. In Bristol, for instance, the election of a mayor (who is accountable to the electorate rather than local councillors) has signalled the end to the political instability that has hampered policy development as a result of hitherto frequent changes in the leadership of Bristol City

Council. Following a referendum in 2012, George Ferguson – an architect and cultural entrepreneur well known locally for his regeneration projects in the south of the city – was elected mayor. In term for a fixed four-year post, Ferguson has assumed a greater public profile than former council leaders and sought to forge cross-party alliances in order to broker innovative, creative responses to the recession.

Advocates of the mayoral model suggest that the election of a mayor strengthens urban leadership and in so doing increases the power of local governments and the voting public in civic affairs. Critics, however, argue that city mayors are being introduced across England not to serve the interests of citizens but to meet the needs of global capital. The more executive style of leadership leads to a concentration of power in the office of the mayor, which may not be more sensibly democratic, because it allows mayors to – amongst other things – make developer-friendly deals behind closed doors (Hambleton & Sweeting, 2014).

The move away from a model of local government where elected councillors have checks and balances on their leader to an arrangement where elected mayors are personally accountable for local government initiatives is relatively recent. Indeed, the mayor of Bristol has been in post for just two years, making it difficult to extrapolate the consequences of this new political system. Whilst there are indications that the mayoral model has increased the ability of Bristol City Council effectively to respond to economic change, its success depends upon the post holder's ability to utilize the resources of the city. Indeed, there is a risk that this system places a structurally embedded premium on the individual personality of the mayor as an 'executive leader' capable of mobilizing the council and other organizations to work towards an agreed set of goals.

## Conclusions

In the age of austerity, the role of elected local governments is changing through a combination of budgetary and political reform. Public sector cuts have induced a review of spending priorities, whilst a series of moves towards autonomous local governance have created a rationale for the introduction of directed elected city mayors. These changes underline the extent to which local political structures and practices now serve to constrain or empower individual councils to meet the needs of citizens whilst also creating the conditions necessary for economic (re)development. As Cochrane (1993, p. 25) notes, 'How a local economy develops will be influenced by local social relations and local political relations (as well as by their interaction with national and international levels).'

Given the potential for geographical differentiation to result in and from uneven institutional capacities, English local government will likely be subject to different kinds of political contestation in the years to come, some of which will shape it in decisive ways. In particular, and as this contribution indicates, the current state of local government in England raises important new questions about the risks and benefits of new localism and the politics of austerity in framing the future course of local government in England, both of which warrant further empirical investigation.

## Author 5

### So, how come local government is still around after all these years?

It is a tremendous privilege to be given the opportunity to reflect back on something that I wrote so long ago ... and it is even more of a privilege to have been able to force

people to read (or maybe reread) something written so long ago, to engage with its argument and reflect on its continuing relevance (or irrelevance).

In responding to what others have written, let me start by reflecting back on why I wrote the book when I did, what I was trying to say and how. As Kevin Ward suggests it was a product of its time, although I hope it also has some resonance with contemporary debates. It was – to misuse Charles Dickens – the worst of times but also the best of times. It was the time of Thatcherism, of the new Right ascendant. It was the moment of what Stuart Hall (Hall, 1985) described as ‘authoritarian populism’, when market individualism was held to be the answer to almost any problem and the state was at hand to reinforce that vision, with force if necessary, for example in the heavy policing response to the miners’ strike of the early 1980s and to the dispute around the move of News International and its printing plant from Fleet Street to Wapping in the mid-1980s. Even if the process has accelerated since then, it was now that the Keynesian welfare state began to be dismantled through the privatization of some services and the contracting out of others to private sector providers, a programme of council house sales, the creation of an internal market in the National Health Service (NHS), the introduction of enterprise zones and urban development corporations, reduced spending on social assistance, and increasingly tight controls on local authority spending. A national curriculum was introduced to shape what was taught in state schools, and in 1989, Section 28 of the Local Government Act explicitly forbade any activity in state schools that presented the ‘acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’.

But it was also a time of intense political debate and active resistance. The 1970s and early 1980s saw the rise of the women’s movement, the movement for gay liberation, anti-racist struggles, a wide range of community-based activism, peace campaigning and the emergence of environmental political movements, to the extent that Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright (Rowbotham, Segal, & Wainwright, 1979/2013) called for a politics that sought to move ‘beyond the fragments’, drawing on the experience of feminism to suggest ways in which a wide range of activist movements might be brought together to generate a positive political programme. It is impossible to summarize comprehensively the various strands of oppositional and sometimes inspirational politics as they developed in the 1980s and into the 1990s, often coming together in unexpected ways. But it may be helpful to identify some. So, for example, the Greenham Common Peace Camp developed a powerful feminist message about how politics might be conducted differently, as well as providing a powerful focus for opposition to the proliferation of nuclear weapons; support groups for the miners’ strike were not only organized in places far beyond mining communities but also drew in political constituencies, including those active in the gay liberation movement, not traditionally associated with mainstream trade union activity (as reflected in the film *Pride*); the politics of the urban riots or urban uprisings that took place across the 1980s, mainly in Britain’s inner cities, informed a whole series of anti-racist campaigns and challenges to the ways in which those areas and their populations were policed. This too provided a context for local government at the time in which I was writing.

And in those contexts of Thatcherism and its discontents, there were three clusters of issues with which I sought to engage.

First, I was conscious that – at least in the politically radical circles in which I moved – for a long time, local government had seemed to be a political backwater and when I explained my interest in it to people, their eyes would simply glaze over. Of course, that still happens but that is now because they know they are at risk of hearing

me say something about relational geographies, regions as assemblages or even drifting off into talk about topologies.

Then it was because local government just seemed boring – bureaucratic, hierarchical administration. Although my first book (Johnson & Cochrane, 1982) was already trying to open up slightly different ways of thinking about what local government might do (see also Cochrane, 1983), its hardly inspirational title – *Economic Policy-Making by Local Authorities in Britain and West Germany* – did little to dispel such assumptions. Instead, the politics that mattered were defined in terms of the workplace (often through the lens of rank-and-file trade unionism), the women’s movement, peace campaigns, youth culture and anti-racist struggles. Locally the emphasis was on community politics, and if local government did make an appearance it was as a site for those working ‘in and against the state’, or as an enemy standing in the way of progressive social movements.

And, of course, there was enough truth in this to make it persuasive. But it was also clear to me that something interesting had been happening over the previous decade or so; that traditional approaches to local government studies (although they had generated some valuable insights) had not fully engaged with the changes that had taken place; and that the ‘local’ was more than just a level of government. I was not alone in this discovery – Simon Duncan and Mark Goodwin (Duncan & Goodwin, 1988) had explored the local state in the context of uneven development; Cynthia Cockburn (1977) had located its role in ‘collective reproduction’; Patrick Dunleavy (1980) had set out a manifesto that reframed it as urban politics; and Peter Saunders (1980) had offered us a sociological interpretation. And there had been some powerful interventions from within political science, too – from John Dearlove (1979), Rod Rhodes (1988) and Gerry Stoker (1988), as well as John Stewart (1983, 2000), who somehow managed to keep up a thoughtful engagement with the politics of local government in practice across the years.

Second, for a time in the 1980s it looked as if local government might provide the basis for a different sort of politics, picking up on some of the political energy associated with the social movements that were making claims which stretched beyond the constraints of the institutional politics of local government. Not only did some people – as councillors or as professionals – move into the local government machine in ways that questioned existing bureaucratic and professional structures (as women’s committees, race equality committees, enterprise boards and employment departments were set up and industrial strategies, anti-racist campaigns, people’s plans and cultural initiatives were launched) but, as Janet Newman (2012) has noted, new sets of political concerns were also raised from within. Again, I was not the only one to notice this, and it was, in any case, hard to ignore the claims that were being made by those involved. Martin Boddy and Colin Fudge (Boddy & Fudge, 1984) put together an edited collection that focused on local socialism, and for a time there were discussions about the emergence of a new urban left or a new municipal socialism (e.g. Blunkett & Green, 1983; Gyford, 1985), not just at the Greater London Council (GLC) (despite its iconic status), but also Sheffield, Lambeth, some of the metropolitan counties, maybe even Manchester and Stirling – with a particular variant in Liverpool. It seemed important to learn lessons from the past – from the little Moscovs (Macintyre, 1980) and Poplarism (Branson, 1979), but also to reflect on contemporary possibilities, moving beyond the limitations in which local government was understood to have a secondary role in delivering what was left of the welfare state. Now it felt exciting, and possibly with a resonance that went beyond the ‘local’ (Benington, Alcock, Cochrane, & Lee, 1984; Cochrane, 1986, 1988).

Third, there was no doubt that in a real sense local government – or, perhaps more accurately, those aspects of the welfare state for which it was responsible – had come under attack across the 1980s, as attempts were made to cut budgets, programmes of privatization and compulsory competitive tendering were launched, council house sales were encouraged, and more and more schools were withdrawn from local authority control (Cochrane, 1985, 1988). The metropolitan counties and the GLC were abolished and in the place of municipal socialism we were offered a vision of the ‘enabling’ authority and urban development corporations.

At the end of the decade the poll tax – or community charge – was introduced, in part as an attempt to resolve the recurrent difficulties of managing a system of local property taxation but, equally significantly, in part to signal a shift to a new model in which citizens were redefined as purchasers of services provided by local government and its contracted agencies (Cochrane, 1992). Individual residents were expected to pay a flat rate to cover the costs of these services, a rate that would, of course, vary between councils and was, therefore, expected, in principle at least, to increase the pressure on councils to reduce their spending. However, the immediate political response to the new system was rather more negative: not only did many people simply refuse to pay the new tax, which was widely perceived to be unfair, but also the popular movement against the tax led to major demonstrations and even what was described as a ‘riot’ in London in 1990.

Paradoxically, then, what had previously been seen as the most obscure and least interesting aspect of local government, namely local government finance, became the trigger for significant political mobilization. As a result, local government played its own part in the departure of Prime Minister Thatcher and her replacement by John Major, who swiftly restored an unsatisfactory system of property taxation which is unable either to generate the funds required to run local services or to deal with the inequalities of wealth reflected in property values. Local government, in other words (as Nik Theodore notes), was a key site across which the process of neo-liberalization was realized in practice, not through the imposition of some preordained template but through more complex processes of negotiation, accommodation and sometimes resistance.

So ... in amongst all this I thought I had something to say, maybe several things.

Perhaps none of the arguments I sought to develop was new in itself, but it seemed to me that bringing the arguments together did offer a new perspective on the role of the local government and the local state in British politics after the Keynesian welfare state. It seemed important to make it clear that local government was always more than a level of the British state, trapped in a hierarchical relationship within a unitary state, delivering services as set out in statute or expressed in the priorities of the departments of central government. It was necessary to move beyond the relatively static (and dualistic) framing expressed in the notion of ‘central–local relations’, and instead to reflect on the extent to which the different players were co-dependent, and on the complex ways in which their roles were shaped and defined through policy networks and the daily practices of professional life of within the state (what Joe Painter has more recently described as the ‘prosaic’ state; Painter, 2006).

In this context, it was equally important to recognize that the local state was always much more than local government. Comprehensively listing all the organizations and agencies that might be involved is probably an impossible task, but they range from police authorities and local police divisions to the various outposts of the NHS; from educational institutions including universities and – increasingly – schools to housing associations and registered social landlords; from the ever-changing array of partnership

organizations to community foundations and neighbourhood agencies. The challenge was (and is) to work through the implications of all this complexity rather than just to note them and move on or to imagine that identifying some notional and underspecified shift from ‘government’ to ‘governance’ is sufficient. It was (and is) necessary to trace through the connections and consider the ways in which (however uneasily) they come together to define the local state, its scale and scope (for my own early attempts to do this, see Charlesworth, Clarke, & Cochrane, 1995, 1996).

And this also meant (as Kevin Ward notes in his introduction) it was necessary to move beyond conceptions that implied that local government could somehow be captured as an expression of specifically ‘local’ social relations. In some respects this meant setting myself against those who at the same time were setting out more precisely to specify the nature of ‘localities’ (Cochrane, 1987; Cooke, 1989). Local government was not simply local both because of the position of many of the professional and party political actors in policy and other networks, not only because of the way in which they connected into a range of central government departments, but also because of the ways in which their professional behaviours were learned and practised with reference to their peers beyond the local, and because the most local of local social relations also involved networks of connection and disconnection with elsewhere (Clarke & Cochrane, 2013). I suppose these days (Cochrane & Ward, 2012) I would want to talk in terms of policy mobilities and relational geographies to capture this. In writing and thinking about local government it is all too easy to slip into language that privileges some essential local, whose definition is necessarily elusive.

But that does not mean that the material spaces of the state are irrelevant – that the specification of government as ‘local’ does not matter. In practice I have tended to look for different ways of capturing the importance of place and locality within the state – for example, in work on urban politics or the assembling of regional political spaces – because of my reluctance to work through the implicit and explicit hierarchies and dualisms of central–local or national–local scalar imaginaries. What matters is the way in which the ‘local’ is constructed politically, in different ways and with different territorial definitions, at different times (so, for example, this is particularly apparent in the local politics of global mega-events; Cochrane et al., 1996; Allen & Cochrane, 2014). Although I do not think this was something I fully understood when I wrote the book, rather than positioning the local within a straightforward scalar hierarchy, stretching from local through regional and national all the way up to global, what matters is to understand the way in which the ‘local’ itself is defined through its connections to elsewhere – through the ways in which extended sets of social relations settle in place over time and for a time.

If trying to understand how the ‘local’ of local government might be constituted was one of my concerns, another directly related to the implicit and sometimes explicit positioning of (British) local government within the post-1945 welfare state. The division of labour between the different elements of the state seemed to imply that issues of economy, fiscal management, taxation and benefit payments, as well as foreign affairs and security would remain national responsibilities, while the delivery of more personalized aspects of welfare would be the responsibility of local government (personal social services, schools, social housing, waste management). Of course these divisions of responsibility were never clear cut, but they were broadly taken for granted. That made local government a key site through which it has been possible to explore some of the fundamental aspects of social and political restructuring and change (identified by Theodore) over the last quarter of a century or so. It has been and remains at the centre

of a project whose purpose is to encourage a process of marketization in which the state's role in the provision of a wide range of welfare services has been questioned and, while finance often continues to pass through local authority accounts, in practice it flows out to privatized, semi-privatized and private monopoly-based agencies. Local government continues to be at the heart of attempts to reimagine the state after welfare, whether that is done through rhetorics of localism, partnerships or city regions.

The balance has shifted away from collective provision towards a stress on the responsabilization of communities and individuals with a rhetorical emphasis on reinforcing the resilience of existing social networks. A language of community, neighbourhood, individual responsibility, localism and 'local' people has been counterposed to the apparent weaknesses of electoral politics, alongside a belief in the inherent superiority of private or quasi private agencies in delivering services. This has been accompanied by a new managerialist re-imagination of local government, particularly urban government, as a potential driver of economic success, and specifically success in competition with other places (Cochrane, 1999, 2004). If the local government of the 1960s was effectively an adjunct of the Keynesian welfare state, the urban government of the 21st century makes it possible to explore the emergence of a very different political and social policy landscape.

There is a real danger of implying that the history of local government since the early 1980s is one that can be neatly summarized as if it had some clear ending, particularly one that implies the 'end' of local government. *Whatever Happened to Local Government?* is certainly not a story of its end. Local government remains a remarkable site for contestations and debate (today maybe around localism, but still around some of the same things as always – the delivery of care services, the fight for decent housing and so on). I do not think I ever deliberately committed the sin of 'declinism' identified by Peter John, since it was always quite clear to me (and is, I hope, also clear in the book) that there was no golden age against which to measure decline (hence my obsession with the fairy tales that Janet Newman discusses), even if the title of the book may have implied something different. In the conclusion I sought to identify new possibilities and I was always eager to explore the contested nature of the local state in practice (as Theodore recognizes in his piece), rather than to write an elegy about its passing.

Of course, since writing the book, I have frequently been tempted to write the obituary of English local government (recognizing even in doing so that the experience elsewhere in the UK might be different), if only so that I did not have to keep writing about it – Thatcher may not have finished it off, but at various moments I thought Blair's modernization project and Gordon Brown's version of local area agreements might have done the job. So being reminded of its resilience by Peter is salutary. However, I have to admit to being less persuaded by some aspects of the case he makes. While there is certainly evidence of a continuing process of political mobilization around local government, I think it is dangerous to dismiss some of the changes that have taken place as little more than moving the deckchairs around. It seems that it does matter that we have seen the arrival of large corporations to deliver services that were previously the direct responsibility of local government; it does matter that most schools are no longer under the direct control of local education authorities; it does matter that more people now live in private rented housing than in council (or even social) housing; it does matter that the politics of economic development and competitiveness have become a key driver of local government reform (as expressed in City Deals, for example) rather than the delivery of welfare services. In that context, it seems that Janet Newman and Julie MacLeavy are also right to remind us of the need to acknowledge how (much) local government has

changed. Indeed, it is the change and how it has come about that are interesting, particularly in today's context of localism and austerity.

In my own academic practice, in any case, I kept being called back to engage with local government, even if I sometimes sought to give it a different label (Clarke & Cochrane, 2013; Cochrane, 1999, 2004, 2011). There remains a vibrant if ambiguous politics around local government, as MacLeavy suggests in her review of contemporary political engagement. In a recent book Ines Newman (2014) sets out a positive agenda for British local government that goes beyond 'resilience' and is instead focused on a politics organized around inherent or universal need, social justice and rights, and she calls for an extended approach to democracy – not the participative chimera of market-driven localism, but a genuine form of participative democracy that is framed around the possibilities of electoral politics. She sharply criticizes what she sees as the 'democratic elitism' of those who disparage the contribution of local councillors.

It is not necessary to agree with all the claims Ines Newman makes. But it is important to continue to focus on what is (still) possible, or becoming possible, as much as what is being undermined. The existence of local government assumes the possibility of local variation and continues to provide a basis on which to argue for alternatives. It stubbornly remains a focus around which community action can be organized and on occasion councils are even be able to generate a collective voice, making claims and mobilizing resource.

But the debate around local government is not just important in its own right. It is also emblematic of the need to imagine and explore an active politics of space, with different territories and different scales being called upon at different times (e.g., Allen & Cochrane, 2014). Thinking about local government in these ways highlights the importance of moving beyond formal institutional or territorial definitions, however important they may be at particular moments. Instead of focusing on the resilience of some particular institutional form, however remarkable, it is necessary to engage creatively with the more complex and uncertain processes by which political spaces and political opportunities are made and remade in practice, locally and beyond the local. We should not be surprised that something labelled local government survives across time – what matters is how the form taken by the social and political relations which define the local state change (or remain the same) over time. The experience of local government is clearly important in that context, but urban (and 'local') politics is always straining at the limits implied by the boundaries and institutional framings of local government.

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