

# Local Government Reforms in Great Britain, Sweden, Germany and France: Between Multi-Function and Single-Purpose Organisations

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*This four-country comparison has four sections. First, some remarks on appropriate definitions and concepts are made (inter alia by introducing and emphasising the distinction between 'traditional' and New Public Management-inspired administrative reforms). Then, country by country accounts of the pertinent reforms are submitted 'in a nutshell'. Third, with the 'convergence or divergence?' question in mind, the conclusion is put forward that significant differences persist (and even increase), particularly between Sweden and Germany, on the one hand, and England and France on the other. In the final section, an attempt is made to assess the 'performance' of the different local government systems in looking at their capacity to 'co-ordinate' policies and activities. It is argued that Sweden's and Germany's traditional type of democratically accountable, multi-functional and territorially viable local government does relatively well in achieving policy co-ordination, democratic participation and political accountability. Great Britain and France, however, could do better.*

The purpose of this paper<sup>1</sup> is to put the reform waves which Great Britain's/England's<sup>2</sup> local government has seen since the late 1970s into a comparative international perspective. The article considers Great Britain/England, Sweden, Germany and France. The consideration underlying this selection is that in many comparative accounts these four countries are seen as representing, at least in their historical evolution, distinctly different local government systems, so that the analysis of their more recent developments should provide relevant insights.

The article is in four sections: first, some points on definitions and concepts are made. Then, country by country nutshell/summary accounts of the pertinent reforms are given. Third, the question is taken up as to whether the reforms of local government show convergence or divergence between the countries under consideration. Finally, an attempt is made to comparatively assess the performances of the different local government systems in their present stages and states.

#### INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

##### *Reforms or Modernisation?*

We shall mainly use the term 'reform' rather than 'modernisation', as the term 'reform' seems better suited to signify the institutional changes that local government has undergone, while 'modernisation' seems more loaded with normative, if not teleological implications.

##### *(Local) Government or Governance?*

The paper will, first of all, address the changes which have taken place in the formal structures, that is in 'local government' in the accepted narrow meaning. Accordingly, only parsimonious use will be made of the term 'governance', which has gained an all but inflationary currency in recent social science debate (see, e.g., Rhodes, 1997), where it denotes, in analytical terms, the manifold networks of non-public (societal etc.) organisations and actors operating outside and beyond the formal local government structures and, in normative-prescriptive terms, the modalities and their capacity to coordinate and 'steer' these multi-faceted networks.

##### *Reforms of Political and Administrative Institutions*

Our paper will treat the reforms of the *political* institutions of local government (relating, for instance, to the political accountability of decision-making in local government) as well as the *administrative* structures, because only if these two sides of the local government 'coin' are seen together can an adequate picture of the ongoing changes be expected.

##### *'Traditional' and NPM-Guided Reforms*

In the analysis which follows a distinction is made between 'traditional reforms' and reforms which are conceptually rooted in and driven by New Public Management (NPM) ideas. Such a distinction is useful because it allows us to obtain a more differentiated picture of the varied approaches and components of past and ongoing reforms which otherwise risk becoming blurred with all the institutional changes that now occur being lumped together under the NPM label.

*Traditional reforms* were conceptually generated typically in the 1960s and 1970s in ‘Western’ countries. They were essentially meant to strengthen the political and administrative institutions of the advanced (‘neo-Keynesian’) welfare state which, bearing ‘social democratic’ handwriting, aimed at improving political and administrative problem-solving capacity and to redress ‘market failures’. The crucial frame of reference for the institutional reforms of this period was the expansive and active welfare state and its public sector.

In their *political* orientation the reforms were directed at enlarging the rights and opportunities of the (local) citizens to influence, and ‘participate’ in local decision-making. In their *administrative* aspects different dimensions can be discerned:

- In the intergovernmental (vertical) aspect a further distinction can be made between *decentralisation*, that is, the devolution of upper-level functions to *elected and politically accountable* local government units, and *deconcentration*, that is the transfer of administrative functions from one administrative unit to a lower administrative level.
- Another important strategy of administrative reforms of local government pertains to *territorial reforms* which are typically meant to put local government functions on a territorially more viable basis.
- Reforms that aimed at improving the functioning of (still largely ‘Weberian’) administrative structures (and personnel) by the introduction of planning, information and evaluation capacities, including an early thrust of management concepts and instruments (‘management by objectives’).

Whereas the planning debate by which this set of ‘traditional’ reform concepts was originally fuelled has largely faded away, they were further pursued or were taken up anew in subsequent reform contexts.

*New Public Management (NPM)*-inspired reforms are rooted in bundles of various, in part contradictory, concepts (see Aucoin, 1990) which have essentially in common that their crucial frame of reference is the private sector and its organisational and operational, basically market-oriented, principles. They are meant to be transferred to and applied by the public sector in order to overcome (‘welfare’) state failures’ and ‘public administration failures’:

- A NPM variant which is embedded in the neo-liberal policy discourse aims at cutting back the public sector, deemed as excessively expanded during the previous era of the ‘social democratic’ welfare state, and at moving towards a ‘lean state’, if not a ‘minimal state’ by way of privatisation, outsourcing and (competitive) marketisation.

- Another NPM variant, essentially drawing on private sector managerialism, envisages overcoming the rigidities of the ('Weberian') model of legal rule-bound and hierarchically controlled public administration by introducing managerialist principles, particularly by guiding and monitoring administrative activities through the setting (and checking) of performance goals and 'outputs' (performance management by 'indicators', by results) and by enhancing the innovativeness and flexibility of administrative operations by way of internally devolving responsibilities ('let managers manage') for handling the financial and human resources.

In still another (more political) NPM version it is stipulated that, on the one hand, politicians refrain from day-to-day involvement in the administrative operations ('steering not rowing') and that, on the other hand, the administrators be guided ('steered') through 'outputs' (performance indicators) set and controlled by the politicians.

#### *Analytical and Exploratory Frame*

In analysing and 'explaining' the institutional changes in what follows, the underlying 'analytical and explanatory' frame will draw on the 'institutionalist debate' (see Peters, 1995). In drawing on three variants of 'institutionalism' (historical, sociological and actor-oriented), institutional choices and changes in institutional reforms are assumed to be essentially shaped by:

- the socio-economic, particularly budgetary context prompting institutional change;
- the country's institutional and cultural tradition ('path-dependencies') – as highlighted by 'historical institutionalism';
- its 'starting condition' (institutional context etc. in the given reform situation) which defines the degree of 'reform needs';
- the relevant constellation of actors, their beliefs and interests, as well as their 'will and skill' – as stressed by 'actor-oriented institutionalism';
- the (national as well as international) discourse and 'dominant' ideas in which institutional reforms are embedded – as highlighted by 'sociological institutionalism'.

#### 'BROAD BRUSH' COUNTRY STUDIES

In the following sections, (summary) country studies will be given, of the four selected countries (Great Britain, Sweden, Germany and France). Needless to say, within the limited space available, only sketches in a 'broad

brush' fashion can be presented, possibly marred by oversimplifications. At the beginning of each country account a note on the 'starting condition' will be spelt out in order to bring to mind some of the basic historical (if not 'path-dependent') institutional givens of the context (in the late 1970s) from which the institutional reforms, under consideration in this paper, have taken off.

### *Great Britain/England*

Historically, England's local government, following the historic Municipal Corporation Act of 1835, was still, through most of the nineteenth century, characterised by 'a plethora of single purpose agencies managed by boards that were appointed or elected in various ways' (Skelcher, 2003: 10). It was through the secular reforms of 1888 and 1894 (the former abolishing the medieval regime of the Justices of the Peace in the counties, the latter creating the districts as a new bottom layer of local government) that the territorial basis of England's modern two-tier local government structure was put in place that persisted until the 1970s. The local councils exercised their political and administrative functions through 'government by committees' over a broad range of responsibilities which were financed almost entirely through a locally levied property tax ('the rates'). Thus, well into the early twentieth century, England experienced the 'golden ages of local self-government' (Norton, 1994: 352) and presented a type of politically strong and multi-functional local government unparalleled (and much admired) elsewhere in contemporary Europe.

Since the 1920s the Victorian model of local self-government has undergone continuous change as central government, with the emergence of the welfare state, proceeded to 'nationalise' and expand its infrastructure and social policy concerns, which had until then been largely left to the local authorities, turning the latter increasingly into instruments of national welfare state policies.

In the course of the 1940s, particularly after 1945 under the incoming Labour government, English local government experienced a sequence of dramatic shifts in the range and composition of its responsibilities. A broad array of time-honoured tasks was taken away from the local authorities (gas and electricity were transferred to nationalised bodies in the 1940s, health care was taken over by the National Health Service after 1945 as the social assistance scheme was transferred to a state agency). Hence, the historical multi-function model of local government was significantly curbed. At the same time, the mandate of local government to deliver other social services (including social housing) and education was significantly expanded (see Leach and Percy-Smith, 2002: 55 ff.), thus further accentuating the social service delivery function which has been pivotal in English local government ever since.

The delivery of the social services came to be carried out primarily by local government personnel proper. Along with the build-up of the statute-required departments in the local authorities and with the expansion of professional personnel (social workers etc.) the local administration in this field developed into what was (critically) called 'municipal empires' (Norton, 1994: 377).

In a major territorial reform, in 1972, the counties were redrawn (resulting in an average size of 730,000 inhabitants) and the number of districts was drastically cut (arriving at an average size of some 130,000 inhabitants); this made England the extreme case among the territorial reforms that were carried out by 'North European' governments during this period (see Norton, 1994: 93 ff for comparative figures).

### *Reform Waves Since the Late 1970s*

Since the 1980s, the English local government system has been changed by two waves of reforms. The first of these was unleashed after 1979 when the Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher took office. Two main conceptual and ideological thrusts pursued by central government can be discerned.

First, driven, no doubt, by the party political wish to weaken Labour, still well entrenched in local government, the Conservative government aimed at curtailing the powers of the local authorities and at strengthening its top-down grip over them. Thus, a series of measures, not least the initial attempt to 'cap' the traditional 'rate' (property tax) and the later attempt to replace it with the 'poll tax' (a largely flat rate per capita tax), was targeted at doing away with the local discretion on local spending which was at the heart of the traditional local government model. Furthermore, the functional scope of local government has been cut back, as an increasing number of its functions have been transferred from elected local councils to special-purpose agencies and organisations (labelled quasi-non-governmental organisations – quangos, see Skelcher *et al.*, 2000) – whose boards are appointed by central government and which are also financially largely dependent on it, thus turning them practically into (single purpose) local agents of central government bypassing and all but marginalising elected local government and its previous multi-function scope of responsibilities. Overall there are some 5,000 local quangos in the UK comprising over 60,000 appointed board members and at least an equivalent number of partnership boards and members. This compares with almost 500 unitary, district and county councils and their 22,000 elected members (Skelcher, 2003: 11). The 'quangoisation' of single purpose bodies, operating outside politically accountable local government and largely depending on central government, has since become a prevailing feature of local level activities. It is

particularly these elements of the Thatcherite 'revolution' that have transformed England from a (historically) 'unitary highly decentralised' into a 'unitary, highly centralised' country (Jones 1991: 208), thereby falling 'out of step with the rest of Europe' (Stoker 1998).

Second, in pursuit of its 'lean state' policy and its resolve to trim the scope of local government (given the background of the existing quasi-monopoly of the local authorities in the delivery of public services) the Conservative government, after 1980, passed legislation to oblige the local authorities to expose service delivery to 'market-testing' through competition (Compulsory Competitive Tendering, CCT). While the Conservatives government refrained from expressly extending CCT to social services (see Munday, 2000: 270), significant sections of it have in practice also fallen under it. (For instance, by early 2001, out of 255,000 persons who lived in publicly supported residential and nursing places only 17 per cent were placed in local authority-run homes, see Hill, 2002: 186.)

After taking office in 1997, the New Labour government under Tony Blair pursued two different tracks.

First, in subscribing to NPM thinking the government imposed on the local authorities a rigorous centrally determined and controlled system of performance management. While revoking the predecessor government's legislation on CTT (and thus distancing itself from the latter's fixation on privatisation at almost any price), the Blair government, after conducting an extensive pilot programme, installed a 'Best Value' (BV) regime which came into operation for all English local authorities in April 2000. It required councils to make arrangements – in the form of an annual Best Value Performance Plan and regular service-specific and cross-cutting reviews – to secure continuous improvement in the way they undertake all their service responsibilities. All functions of an authority are subject to inspection at least once every five years by an existing special inspectorate or by the Audit Commission's Best Value Inspectorate. The Secretary of State has wide-ranging powers to intervene where a local authority is judged by inspectors not to be delivering a BV service. It was critically observed that, 'while it would be rid of the deeply unpopular CCT regime, Best Value would prove every bit as centrally prescriptive and potentially even more interventionist' (Wilson and Game, 2002: 337). Obviously reacting to the 'extremely widespread antipathy to the inspections' (ibid.: 340) among local authorities, and also to the impracticability and high 'transaction costs' of locally implementing the BV regime, the Blair government has in the meantime turned to, and given priority to, 'Comprehensive Performance Assessments' (CPAs) which are designed as a more coherent and integrated system of performance measurement in which all local councils are assigned, on the basis of Audit Commission-

directed inspection and assessment, to one of five performance categories (excellent, good, fair, weak, poor – see Wilson and Game, 2002: 347). While the higher performers are rewarded with ‘additional freedoms’ and funding, the poor performers may be penalised, including transfer of functions to other providers or even placing the council into the hands of government-appointed administrators.

By and large, BV and also CPA can be seen as just another move of central government to impose on the local authorities a degree of centralist guidance and control which continues to ‘fall out of step with the rest of Europe’ (to apply and extend Gerry Stoker’s dictum and verdict on the Thatcherite era also to the Blairite period, see Stoker, 1998). Yet it should be recognised that the centralist top-down rigour exercised by central government has obviously elicited some ‘bottom-up’ initiatives, activities and learning processes, not least through the Local Government Association (LGA) and the ‘Improvement and Development Agency’, established by LGA in 1998 (see Cochrane, 2004).

Second, quite distinct from its Conservative predecessor, the New Labour government has also embarked on an, at face value, ambitious *political* programme meant to revitalise local government – for one, by revamping its traditional ‘government by committee’ system and providing for more effective variants of politically accountable political leadership. Among the three options that have been laid down in the local government legislation of 2000 the directly elected mayor constitutes the furthest deviation from the traditional model (see, e.g. Wilson and Game, 2002: 350 ff.); it may be indicative that so far there are hardly a dozen local authorities where it has been put in place (see Cochrane, 2004). Another more general conceptual move is directed at instilling some ‘new localism’ into local government and politics (see Stoker, 2004).

In sum, the main directions which English local government reforms have taken in the past 25 years can be summarised like this:

- The (re-)centralisation which was triggered by the Tory government has hardly abated under the New Labour government, but has, rather, been intensified by the introduction of the central government’s performance indicator-based top-down ‘performance management’.
- The multi-function scope for action of traditional elected and politically accountable local government has been significantly reduced, while the scope of non-elected (in part centrally appointed) single purpose actors as well as (‘marketised’) private *single purpose* service providers has strongly expanded. ‘The consequence is a transition from a unitary to a multiple system for governing local communities – from local government to local governance’ (Skelcher, 2003: 9).



- The picture is somewhat ambivalent, inasmuch as initiatives have been undertaken by the New Labour government to revitalise the *political* model of local government by providing new institutional arrangements for effective local political leadership and to instil some ‘new localism’.

### *Sweden*

Sweden is by tradition a unitary but conspicuously decentralised country in which the central government exercises only ministerial (policy-making) functions and comparatively few administrative functions are performed by self-standing (semi-autonomous) (central) state agencies. Most public tasks are fulfilled by the two-tier elected local government structure in which the counties are responsible for the public health services, while the municipalities fulfil a broad scope of responsibilities, including education, social services and public utilities. The autonomy of the municipalities (as well as of the counties) rests, not least, on their traditional power to levy their own taxes, since 1991 in the form of the local tax on earned income and pension income (see Norton, 1994: 303ff.). The lion’s share of the local government expenditures are covered by such local taxes (55 per cent in the municipalities and 81 per cent in the counties – in 1993, for details see Häggroth *et al.*, 1993: 74). Reflecting the multi-function profile of Swedish local government, almost 60 per cent of the total number of the country’s public sector workforce is municipal and another 25 per cent county personnel, while merely 17 per cent are employed by the state (central government and the central state agencies – 1994 figures from OECD, quoted in Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000: 44). In 1974 central government carried out a territorial reform which, as result of massive amalgamation, arrived at an average size of 30,000 inhabitants (see Norton, 1994: 40 ff.). In international comparisons Sweden has been ranked in the group with the politically and functionally strongest local government forms in Europe (see Hesse and Sharpe, 1991) and, one should add, financially most independent.

### *Two Reform Tracks Since the 1990s*

For one, Sweden has pursued ‘traditional’ reform strategies on a number of scores.

Following the ‘free commune experiments’ of the 1980s, Sweden’s already remarkably decentralised intergovernmental setting has been further decentralised by transferring additional functions from the state level to the municipalities, particularly in the fields of social services and education (see Premfors, 1998). Hence, the traditional multi-function model of local government has been further accentuated.

By the same token, through the Local Government Act of 1991, the power of the municipal councils to regulate the institutional structure and

organisation of the local authorities on their own has been significantly extended (see Häggroth *et al.*, 1993), thus widening the discretion and opportunity of the local councils to embark upon 'bottom-up' reform activities.

In order to offset the losses of participatory citizen rights that have entailed from the large-scale local government amalgamation of 1976, legal provisions were introduced in the late 1980s to establish (advisory) 'district committees' within the municipalities. After a short flurry of such additional participatory bodies most of them have, however, now been dissolved (except in the country's three largest cities Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö).

In making use of the enlarged discretion given to them by the 1990 legislation, many municipalities have been experimenting with redesigning the traditional 'government by commission' system (see Montin, 2004). Linking up with earlier steps embarked on since the 1970s, the municipalities, including the smaller ones, have increasingly turned to 'professionalise' and at the same time to '(party-) politicise' the political leadership in local government, within the general frame of the traditional committee ('board') system, to turn the chairpersons of the committees ('boards') into part-time (half-paid) or full-time (fully paid) positions ('local commissioners') and to have the committee chairs, particularly the chairperson of the crucial 'executive committee' who is mostly the dominant local political leader, elected by the ruling local majority party (see Häggroth *et al.*, 1993: 40 ff.). This development has been interpreted as a 'kind of parliamentarism' (see Bäck, 2004) or 'limited majority rule' – within the framework of the proportional election system (Strömberg and Westerstahl, 1984: 39).

### *NPM-Related Reforms*

Furthermore, the prevalent organisational form of the delivery of social services through municipal personnel proper has been challenged, since the early 1990s, through a number of developments (see Bäck, 2003; Montin, 2004).

First, the New Public Management debate, emerging from the Anglo-Saxon world since the 1980s and becoming dominant in the international debate, also made its entry into the discourse of Swedish reform. It was particularly the 'quasi-monopoly' which in Sweden the municipal sector (as comparable to Great Britain) exercised in social service delivery that was increasingly criticised and evoked NPM-derived calls for competition, outsourcing and privatisation of these services.

Second, the conservative ('bourgeois') national government which took office in 1991, temporarily unseating the Social Democrats (until 1994),

programmatically proclaimed the 'system change' of abandoning of the 'Social Democratic welfare state'. This political and ideological stance of central-level politics gave additional momentum to conservative majorities in the local councils in a number of municipalities, with the capital city of Stockholm becoming a kind of flagship in pushing for NPM-inspired reforms.

Third, through the (aforementioned) Local Government Act of 1991 the municipal councils were given a wide autonomy to decide on the organisational structure of their respective local authorities, including the question how to organise the delivery of social services. The new legislation explicitly allowed the municipal councils to transfer and to contract out local government functions to 'a (local government-owned) corporation, a trading partnership, an incorporated association, a non-profit association, a foundation, or a private person' (ch. 3, s. 16 of the 1991 Local Government Act, see also Montin and Amna, 2000: 9).

Last, but not least, the budgetary crisis which peaked in the early 1990s served as further impulse for turning to NPM concepts.

Two main NPM-inspired patterns of organisational change have been pursued by Swedish municipalities since the 1990s. First, some municipalities have embarked upon 'outsourcing' the provision of services by concluding contracts with private (commercial) as well as non-profit (voluntary) organisations. This has been the case particularly in the care for the elderly.

Second, with the proclaimed intention to give their citizens the 'freedom of choice' to 'buy' services (such as care for the elderly) 'on the market', some municipalities have introduced municipality-funded 'vouchers' (equivalent to the expenditure which the municipality would have if it delivered the service directly). The Swedish national government promoted this development in the early 1990s by obliging the municipalities to offer parents 'education vouchers' in case they preferred to send their children to a non-municipal/public, so called 'independent', school.

Mention should also be made of the delivery and supply of public utilities (energy, water, sewage, waste treatment etc.) which is a traditional field for Swedish municipalities. With the advent of powerful international providers (particularly in the energy sector) and under the impact of the market liberalisation policies pursued by the European Commission, Swedish municipalities have begun to sell their assets or parts of them to private investors and providers. The recent budgetary problems have proved a further stimulus for municipalities to 'cash in' their assets. Thus, Sweden's municipalities have begun to give up or withdraw from a number of traditional activities.

In sum, the main trends can be summarised as follows:

- Along its 'traditional' reform track Sweden has become further decentralised while still strengthening the multi-function profile of local government, particularly of the municipalities.
- To some extent, the political profile of local government has also been increased.
- NPM-derived concepts, such as outsourcing and 'vouchers', have made some inroads into the hitherto existing quasi-monopoly of the municipalities in the delivery of the social services. But so far the 'outsourcing' has been quantitatively limited.
- Guided by managerialist concepts, the idea of result-orientation has been more widely adopted by municipal administrations. First of all, in the public health service provided by the counties the 'purchaser/provider split' concept has found application.
- The public utilities sector, which in past was largely handled by the municipalities, came under privatisation pressure due to the arrival of international providers and international competition.

### *Germany*

Germany's federal constitution defines two levels of government: the Federation and the *Länder*. Local government, whose two-tier structure is made up of the counties (*Kreise*) and the municipalities (*Gemeinden*) is, constitutionally speaking, part of each individual *Länd*, each of which consequently exercises important legislative and political powers over its local government level, such as the enactment of municipal charters, the decision on territorial reforms, etc. At the same time, however, the municipalities and counties possess a significant political and functional status in the intergovernmental setting on sundry scores. First, based on a 'general competence clause' which dates back to the Prussian Municipal Charter of 1808 and has been laid down in the Federal Constitution of 1949, the municipalities (and to a somewhat lesser degree the counties) have – in the formulation of the Constitution – 'the right to deal with all matters of relevance for the local community in their own responsibility (within the frame of the law)' which circumscribes (and constitutionally guarantees) a wide scope for local self-government. Second, in line with a German–Austrian constitutional and municipal tradition which again dates back to the early nineteenth century, the municipalities can be put in charge, by legislation, of public tasks 'delegated' to them by the state (see Marcou and Verebelyi, 1993: 371; Wollmann, 2000a: 118). This 'dual function' model of combining self-government and 'delegated' tasks adds up to an unusually broad catalogue, by international comparison, of administrative functions and responsibilities. Third, under the Constitution of 1949, the federal government is not allowed to establish regional or local field offices of its own to

carry out its policies or legislation. Hence, about 70 to 80 per cent of all the (federal and *Länder*) legislation (as well as legal provisions of the European Union) is carried out by the local authorities. The distribution of functions in the intergovernmental setting can also be seen in the respective numbers of personnel. Only 6.5 per cent of the total number of public sector personnel are employed at the federal level, while some 50 per cent fall to the *Länder* (mostly teachers and the police force) and some 40 per cent are local government personnel (2002 figures). In interpreting these statistical data one should be aware that, unlike the UK and Sweden where social services, at least until recently, were delivered almost entirely by public/municipal personnel, in Germany most social services have been rendered by non-public non-for-profit organisations (*Wohlfahrtsverbände*) under the traditional 'principle of subsidiarity' (see Bönker and Wollmann, 2000).

During the 1960s and 1970s territorial reforms of the county and municipal levels were carried out (and pushed through) by the *Länder* in order to strengthen the territorial basis for politically accountable multi-function local government; the territorial reforms resulted in an average municipal size of some 8,000 inhabitants – with great variance in the rate of amalgamation between an average size of 40,000 (in Nordrhein-Westfalen) and of 3,000 in some other *Länder* (see Wollmann, 2004a).

In sum, Germany's local government has been placed, in comparative analyses (see Hesse and Sharpe, 1991; Wollmann, 2000a: 121 for further references), in the group of the politically and functionally strongest local government systems in Europe – along with Sweden. This needs to be qualified, however, by adding that, unlike Sweden, the allocation of revenues to German local government is markedly more centralised, in that, while on average 30 per cent of the revenues of municipalities come from their own taxes, most of these 'local taxes' are generated through a revenue sharing system which is determined by federal legislation.

#### *Reform Waves Since the 1990s – Traditional*

In Germany local government reforms have also been pursued on two tracks, the first being the traditional approach.

At the outset mention should be made of the secular event and process of German unification in the wake of which the entire institutional (and legal) setting of post-communist East Germany was transformed and restructured (see Wollmann, 2003a). While the central government structure of the defunct German Democratic Republic was entirely dismantled, the five East German *Länder* governments which had been abolished by the communist regime in 1952 were rebuilt from scratch, and the existing local authorities at the county and the municipality levels were fundamentally remoulded largely in line with the organisational patterns of the German local government

tradition and some West German 'blueprints'. It was only in the later 1990s that, following the pace set in West German municipalities and counties (see below), the NPM-inspired administrative reforms were taken up (see Kuhlmann, 2004).

In the course of this transformation, the newly established East German *Länder* embarked upon territorial reforms at the local government level in order to create a territorially viable basis for the traditional multi-function model of local government. In the first round of such territorial reforms only the counties were addressed and changed, while the host of small and very small municipalities (half with less than 500 residents!) were left territorially unimpaired in order not to quench the just-revived local democratic arenas; instead a new level of 'inter-municipal' formations (*Ämter, Verwaltungsgemeinschaften*) was introduced to give administrative support to the member municipalities. More recently, some of the East German *Länder* have started a new round of territorial reforms with the intention of doing away with the inter-municipal bodies and creating 'unitary municipalities' (*Einheitsgemeinden*), with a size of at least 5,000 inhabitants, territorially and demographically large enough to serve as a viable basis for politically accountable and multifunctional local government.

In the intergovernmental dimension, still another recent reform strategy aims at further decentralisation by transferring ('delegating') further state functions to the local authorities and thus at widening still more the multi-function model of local government. The most conspicuous example can be currently found in the South German *Land* of Baden-Württemberg where most of the remaining (relatively few) local field offices of the *Land* government have been abolished and their functions transferred to the local authorities (see Banner, 2004) – thereby ushering in a truly comprehensive model of politically accountable multi-function local government.

Regarding the political institutions of local government, two innovations particularly need to be highlighted. First, during the early 1990s, each of the *Länder*, in a striking sequence of congruent legislative moves, embarked upon introducing binding local referendums in order to extend the democratic rights of the local citizens and to rectify and complement the existing dominance of the rules of representative democracy. Although binding local referendums have so far been initiated and conducted but scarcely (see Wollmann, 2002a), they are likely to strengthen the political potential and profile of the local political arena.

Furthermore, and politically even more conspicuous, all *Länder*, in an equally surprising sequence of amendments during the early 1990s of their respective municipal charters, have enacted legislation which provides for direct election of the (executive) mayors – in the middle-sized and larger cities full-time salaried positions and in the small municipalities on a part-

time non-salaried formula. By the same token, in most *Länder* the head of county (*Landrat*) is also directly elected. While the directly elected ‘strong’ mayor who combines political leadership (by chairing the local council) with administrative leadership (by exercising the chief executive function in administration) has been in place in two South German *Länder* (Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria) since the Second World War, distinctly different local government systems existed in the other *Länder*, including the local government charter enacted in Nordrhein-Westfalen which, under the influence of the British Occupation Force, had been tailored on the English ‘government by committee’ model (see Wollmann, 2004b: 152 ff.). As a result of the wave of *Länder* legislation in the early 1990s, this previous variance of local government forms has disappeared and has given way to the dominance of the directly elected (chief executive) mayor largely following the South German ‘strong mayor model’.

Two reasons loomed large in this development. For one, the direct election of the mayor, along with the procedure of recalling him/her by local referendum, was meant to further extend the rights of citizens in local decision-making. It also aimed at strengthening the political and administrative leadership in local policy making and administration as, particularly in the case of the ‘strong’ mayor, he/she is not only chairperson of the elected council, but also holds the chief executive function in directing local administration.

### *NPM-Derived Reforms*

While NPM-derived administrative reforms, originating at first primarily in the UK and New Zealand, became rampant in the international discourse during the 1980s, Germany remained conspicuously aloof well into the early 1990s. The main reason for this initial non-receptiveness and detachment was probably that pivotal concepts of NPM, such as the outsourcing and ‘marketisation’ of social service delivery seemed to have already been since long realised in Germany’s municipal practice (see Wollmann, 2000b with references). When, in the early 1990s, NPM made finally its entry into the German reform discourse (it got ‘translated’ into the so-called ‘New Steering Model’, see Banner, 1991), it was, first of all, its managerialist components and thrust that were adopted, inasmuch as they were critically and promisingly directed against the accepted ‘Max Weberian’ model of legal rule-bound hierarchical public/municipal administration by instilling managerialist flexibility and efficiency into it. In fact, in an increasing number of municipalities and counties managerialist procedures and instruments, such as cost-benefit accounting, and the definition and application of performance indicators and monitoring, have in the meantime been put in place (see Bogumil and Kuhlmann, 2004; Banner, 2004).



Up to the late 1980s, the traditional model of social service provision seemed to be immune from NPM concepts because of the extended role which the 'outsourcing' of social service provision to non-public not-for-profit organisations had traditionally played in the past. During the 1990s, the idea of enhanced competition in service provision increasingly gained ground, not least because the rendering of social services by non-public not-for-profit organisations had, over the years, shown oligopolistic features, and 'marketisation' was seen as a necessary strategy to elicit more competition and plurality in the delivery of services by other (including private-commercial) providers (see Bönker and Wollmann, 2000).

Finally, the public utilities sector (energy, water, sewage, waste treatment, etc.) which constituted a time-honoured field of municipal engagement (through municipality-owned corporations etc.) came under 'marketisation' pressure, particularly in view of the market liberalisation policy which the European Union has pursued with growing resolve to do away with 'sheltered local markets' and to create the 'single European market'. In fact, under the combined effect of the European Commission's market liberalisation policy and their budgetary plight, an increasing number of local authorities have chosen to privatise and 'cash in' on their local assets, thus giving up a crucial segment of the traditional local government profile (see Wollmann, 2002b).

In sum, the trends observable in Germany show a complex and somewhat contradictory picture:

- The traditional multi-functionality of local government has been confirmed and even further accentuated, as (particularly in the East German *Länder*) a new round of territorial reforms has got under way (meant to strengthen the territorial viability of the multi-function model of local government) and (so far in one *Land* only) the step was taken to abolish all remaining sectoral ('single purpose') local field offices of *Land* administration and to transfer their functions to the elected multi-function local authorities.
- While, hence, the traditional multi-functionality of local government is being strengthened, an important (and time-honoured) segment appears to be breaking away, as, under the pressure of European market liberalisation, the municipalities seem about to withdraw from the provision of public utilities.
- The traditional profile of politically strong local government has been reinforced by the introduction of direct democratic citizen rights (binding local referendums, direct election of the mayor) and of the direct election of the (executive) mayor in his/her position as the directly accountable political as well as administrative leader in local decision-making and administration.



- Managerialist result- and efficiency-related concepts have made a noticeable impact on Germany's traditional local administration. Yet, against the background of Germany's rule of law (*Rechtsstaat*) tradition and the persisting salience of law application in local government operations, the accepted feature of 'Weberian' administration continues to be writ large. A development appears to be under way towards what perceptive observers have called a 'neo-Weberian' type of public administration (see Bouckaert, 2004).

### *France*

Until the late 1970s France was a unitary highly centralised state in which the major public tasks were performed by the (central) state acting through the central ministries. At the regional level the (100) *départements* were characterised by a peculiar division of functions. On the one hand, they were the institutional level of state administration which was headed by the prefect (*préfet*) who was appointed by central government and acted as the regional backbone of central government. On the other hand, the *départements* were the territorial base of the upper level in France's two-tier local self-government structure (*collectivités locales*) which is made up of the *départements* (in local self-government function and dimension) and the municipalities (*communes*). The two levels of local government, consisting of the (100) *départements* (averaging some 500,000 inhabitants) and of the some 37,000 municipalities (*communes*, averaging some 1,700 inhabitants), were traditionally assigned only limited responsibilities and were, in exercising them, subject to a comprehensive (*a priori*) oversight (*tutelle*) by the *préfet*. On the top of this, the departmental prefects carried out the administrative functions that arose from the (scarce) local self-government responsibilities of the *départements* and of the *communes* (see Norton, 1994: 121 ff.; Wollmann, 2000b: 40 ff, 2000c: 40 ff) – with the exception of the larger cities which began to build up administrative structures and personnel of their own during the 1950s and 1960s (see Borraz, 1998: 141 ff.). However, while the *communes* were functionally weak, they had a politically strong standing in the intergovernmental setting thanks to the French peculiarity of the *cumul de mandats* according to which many mayors hold and 'accumulate' seats in upper-level elected bodies, not least the national parliament (*Assemblée Nationale*). In constituting an all but 'path-dependent' feature of France's political system, the *cumul de mandats* gives the local mayors a strong influence in national politics (see Mabileau, 1994: 131; Thoenig, 2004). When, in 1971, the national government took the initiative to bring about a territorial reform of the country's myriad of small municipalities, it foundered in the face of the opposition of the mayors (see Marcou, 2000: 4). This left the historical boundaries of the 37,000

municipalities (with an average size of 1,700 inhabitants) unchanged. Against the background of their administrative and budgetary incapacity, the multitude of small municipalities resorted to the creation of inter-communal single-purpose formations) (*syndicats à vocation unique – SIVU*, introduced by legislation as early as 1890) and of inter-communal multi-purpose bodies (*syndicats à vocation multiple – SIVOM*, provided for by legislation of 1959) in order to jointly carry out specific tasks of the individual communes (see Dantonel-Cor, 2003: 77 ff.). These forms of inter-communal co-operation have become another ('path-dependent') characteristic of France's institutional architecture in the sub-national space between the *départements* and the *communes* (see Marcou, 2000).

### *Reforms Since the Early 1980s*

In 1982 France embarked upon an attempt at a far-reaching decentralisation as well as deconcentration of the political and administrative system.

The hitherto dominant position of the *préfet* in the sub-national arena was reduced to a largely co-ordinating function. His/her comprehensive control (*tutelle*) over the local authorities was replaced with an *a posteriori* legality review with the final decision being left to the administrative courts.

The decentralisation move also entailed a political and functional strengthening of the (22) regions.

The main beneficiaries of the devolution of state functions were the (100) *départements* (in their status as *collectivités locales*, that is as upper-tier local self-government units), since important responsibilities hitherto performed by the (departmental) prefectural state administration, not least in the social policy and social service field, were transferred to them – along with the related prefectural personnel. The decision-making now lay with the *départements'* elected councils (*conseils généraux*) and the council-elected chairpersons (*présidents*) who, exercising the chief executive function over the newly established departmental administration, have risen to play a key role in the regional space (see Thoenig, 2004).

By contrast, the transfer of responsibilities to the municipalities was distinctly more limited, but included the transfer of powers in the field of *urbanisme* (such as urban planning and the issuance of building permits, see Jacquot and Priet, 2004: 40 ff.). Revealingly, the decentralisation of responsibilities to the communes was not accompanied by an ensuing transfer of state personnel.

In responding to the persistent extreme territorial fragmentation of the myriad of communes on the one hand, the numerical growth of *syndicats* both of the single-purpose and of the multi-purpose types (SIVU and SIVOM) continued with a focus on inter-communal co-operation in the delivery of public services and utilities (water supply, waste treatment etc.). As of 2000,

some 14,900 SIVU and some 2,160 SIVOM existed (see Moreau, 2003: 116). On the other hand, in 1966 legislation on the *communeautés urbaines* was introduced as a new form and frame for more integrated inter-communal co-operation, at first applied to the big city agglomerations of Bordeaux, Lille, Lyon and Strasbourg (see Dantonel-Cor, 2003: 82). After some further (not very effective) steps had been made in the early 1990s towards experimenting with other forms of *communautés*, a consequential change was introduced in France's sub-national institutional architecture when, under the centre-left government, the *Loi Chevènement* was passed in which three types of *communautés* (*urbaines*, *d'agglomération* and *communes*) were legally laid down as the key institutional frames and arenas for future inter-communal co-operation (see Rangeon, 2000: 9 ff.). In what some observers deem an all but revolutionary turn in France's inter-communal world the three types of *communautés* are seen as bearing the potential of finally achieving, as it were, 'through the backdoor', a territorial reform of the multitude of small communes by increasingly taking over their functions and by thus virtually squeezing and phasing them out. Particularly the number of *communautés d'agglomération* which are directed at inducing communes in urbanised areas to engage in integrated co-operation has been soaring since their introduction by the *Loi Chevènement* in 1999, jumping from 50 in 2000 to 143 in 2003 (see Dantonel-Cor, 2003: 97). Yet, just like the earlier generation of *syndicates*, the *communautés* are decision-making bodies which are not directly elected by the citizens, but indirectly by the councils of the member communes, thus operating as new layer of *functional* local government that lacks direct democratic legitimacy and control.

Whereas the original legislation of 1982 on decentralisation laid down the principle that clearly defined and separate powers and responsibilities (*'bloc de compétences'*) be assigned to each of the (local) government levels, subsequently in reality the division of responsibilities between the state, the *départements* and the *communes* (as well as the web of 'inter-communal' bodies) has remained blurred with widespread practices of joint activities (*cogestion*) and mixed financing (*cofinancement*, *financement croisé*).

In the face of the existing (and still growing) web of local government units and actors in the inter-communal setting and interface and in view of blurred and overlapping responsibilities of the sub-national levels (regions, *départements*, inter-communal bodies and *communes*) a peculiar type and style of intergovernmental policy-making and policy implementation has evolved in which central government tries to achieve certain policy goals (for instance the social and infrastructural improvement of troubled neighbourhoods, *quartiers sensibles*) by 'targeting' policy measures on such local areas (*action politique territorialisée*). In order to better co-ordinate the multitude of actors involved (*communes*, *départements*, sectoral state agencies, private

and voluntary actors), 'contracts' have been concluded, mainly between the state and the municipalities concerned, in which the course of action and the actors involved are laid down. Hence, the (single) project orientation of programmes, their 'local targeting' (*territorialisation*) (see Duran and Thoenig, 1996) and 'contracting' (*contractualisation*) have become a characteristic feature of France's central government/local government relations (see Gaudin, 1996).

### *NPM-related reforms*

While the local government-related administrative reforms centred around 'traditional' measures such as decentralisation and around institutions and instruments of policy implementation in the sub-regional and inter-communal space, NPM-related reforms have attained but a low profile at the local level.

The moderate expansion of municipal responsibilities resulting from the decentralisation of 1982 and entailing the build-up of municipal administration coincided with the municipal elections of 1983. In these elections the political right won majorities in a significant number of municipalities and brought into office a cohort of mayors that subscribed to the NPM-derived idea of running their municipalities as 'enterprises' (*ville entrepreneuriale, ville stratège*). In the pursuit of such concepts, forms of performance management (*contrôle de gestion*) were introduced. In the meantime, in part following the municipal elections of 1995 when some of the 'entrepreneurial' mayors were voted out of office, this movement seems to have lost momentum (see Maury, 1997). A similar development can be noted with the local authorities (*collectivités locales*) at the *département* level.

Concerning the provision of public utilities (water, sewage, waste treatment etc.) it should be recalled that in a tradition which dates back to the late nineteenth century, the French municipalities, probably because of their small size, have often 'outsourced' them to private, but also public companies (see Lorrain, 1995). The sectors of energy and water have seen the emergence and dominance of powerful public as well as private companies. In 1906 the production, the transport and distribution of gas and electricity was nationalised and turned over to two huge state-owned companies (*Électricité de France, EDF* and *Gaz de France, GDF*). In the water (and sewage) sector two private companies (*Lyonnaise des Eaux* and *Générale des Eaux*) have become market-dominating providers. Besides putting the (small) municipalities domestically in a difficult position when it comes to renegotiating and renewing the pertinent concessions (see Lachaume, 1997: 68), these big companies have in the meantime become powerful international players.

The local government-related institutional reforms can be summarised as follows:

- In the inter-governmental dimension the historic decentralisation drive of 1982 was directed primarily at the (100) *départements* that became a politically and (multi-) functionally important local government level.
- By contrast, in the continuing absence of a territorial reform of the municipal level, the majority of the (small) municipalities remained functionally weak, but the (council-elected) mayors, thanks to the traditional *cumul de mandats*, continued to exercise significant political influence (reaching into national politics).
- The local-level implementation of policies and services lies, to a large extent, with the web of inter-communal formations which operate on a single purpose or few purpose formula.
- The (local and sub-regional) field offices of the hardly reduced set of sectoral state ('single purpose') administration (*services extérieurs*) still loom large.
- In order to cope with operational (not least policy co-ordination) problems in the sub-regional and inter-communal world of (largely single purpose) actors, the conclusion of 'contracts' between the actors (*'contractualisation'*) has become a key instrument.

#### CONVERGENCE OR DIVERGENCE?

Turning now to the much debated question as to whether the public sector reforms have shown convergence or divergence (see Wollmann, 2003c: 247ff. with references), at first sight, on the basis of the preceding discussion of the development on the local government systems in the four countries under consideration, a case for the 'convergence thesis' may be made on several scores.

- In the intergovernmental dimension a general trend can be observed towards *decentralisation* by transferring responsibilities to local government structures (with England making for a stunning exception where, it is true, some decentralisation has taken place by the creation of regional parliaments in Scotland and Wales, but the democratically elected and politically accountable local authorities have been significantly curbed in their functions and further subdued to central government instruction and control).
- Furthermore, reform efforts have been congruently directed at strengthening the political institutions of local government by enhancing politically accountable political leadership and by strengthening the democratic and participatory rights of the local citizens.
- Concerning NPM-guided reforms, the introduction of managerialist principles in the conduct of public administration (for instance through

‘performance management’) as well as marketisation and outsourcing has advanced.

- In the cases of Sweden and Germany, where the local authorities were by tradition strongly engaged in the provision of public utilities, these municipal activities have been eroded by (European) market liberalisation and (global) competition (see Wollmann, 2002b).

So, at first sight, the trends towards ‘convergence’, driven by the much-referred-to forces of ‘globalisation, internationalisation and Europeanisation’ appear to be well on the march.

Yet, at a closer look, a persisting divergence of the country profiles stands out and may even have become more pronounced. On the basis of the four countries under consideration three divergent developmental patterns can be seen:

- *England* has gone far in reducing the political and functional profile and scope of the elected local authorities, in subjecting them to central government control, and in giving a prime role, in bottom-level policy implementation and service delivery, to non-elected (mostly single-purpose) bodies (‘quangos’) and non-public single purpose institutions, both outside the reach of politically accountable local government. In other words, the model of multi-functional local government as a politically accountable *public* body has waned, the (counter) model of single-function actors working largely under the rules of market competition outside the reach of elected politically accountable local government has increased.
- *France*, in significantly decentralising its previously centralist state, has come to rely, for sub-national policy-implementation, on a multitude of (single-functional or multi-functional) ‘inter-communal’ formations of the traditional *syndicats* type and, more recently, on the *communautés* as a more integrated institutional form of inter-communal co-operation – with the myriad of historically small-size municipalities playing a functionally marginal role.
- By contrast, *Sweden* and *Germany* are countries in which, for sub-national policy-implementation, the traditional multi-function model of local government is still in place and has been even extended. While NPM-guided strategies of introducing managerialist and marketisation principles have, no doubt, changed the previous administrative profile, important aspects have been retained and, in ‘amalgamating’ traditional and NPM elements, exemplify, particularly in the case of Germany, the emergence of a ‘neo-Weberian’ model of public/municipal administration.

Thus conspicuous differences in the countries' trajectories of institutional change and reform stand out, suggesting that, notwithstanding the powerful (global etc.) forces which congruently lean on the individual national local government systems, the trajectories continue to exhibit country-specific (or 'country-family'-specific) particularities which seem strongly rooted in the individual countries' institutional, political and cultural pasts and contexts.

In summarising these aspects and features and in drawing on an ideal-type distinction submitted by Johan Olsen between a 'sovereign state' and a 'supermarket state' (Olsen, 1988), one might in an admittedly gross and (ideal-type) exaggerated manner see the persistence of the 'sovereign state' in the profile of countries with a *Rechtsstaat* tradition plus politically and multi-functionally strong local governments, such as Sweden and Germany, while traces of the 'supermarket state' can be detected in the Anglo-Saxon countries with a 'marketisation' and single-purpose strategy and perspective in public sector reforms.

*Do the Different Institutional Patterns 'Make a Difference'?*

Finally the attempt will be made to assess the 'performance' of the different local government systems whereby the capacity to 'co-ordinate' policies and activities on the local level are looked at as a kind of 'measuring rod' (for more details and references on the issue of *policy co-ordination* in different – inter-organisational – settings see Wollmann 2003b).

Our summary and assessment at this point is that *Sweden's* and *Germany's* traditional type of democratically accountable, multi-functional and territorially viable local government does relatively well in achieving the triad of policy co-ordination, democratic participation and political accountability. Faced with the crucial task of 'co-ordinating' different policies and tasks which are often supported by varied political, administrative, economic etc., actors and stakeholders with conflicting interests, the political process conducted in the territorially defined political arena is called upon and appears capable to attain conflict resolution (in the last resort by majority vote) that satisfies relevant interests and, at the same time, meets some 'common good'. While, no doubt, Germany's federal 'multi-layer' setting has also generated a system of (vertical and horizontal) 'interlocking' of policies (*Politikverflechtung*) and of ensuing actor networks, the persisting multi-functionality of politically strong and territorially viable local authorities still provides a political as well as institutional frame and arena for effective policy co-ordination 'from below' and 'bottom-up'. While traditional local government, acting through 'Weberian' structures and personnel, often showed shortcomings in (economic) 'efficiency', the recent adoption of NPM-inspired (managerialist etc.) reforms (towards some 'neo-Weberian' profile) seems to have improved efficiency (see Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004).



In *England's* local-level world, with its enfeebled structures and reduced competences of elected local government, and with its concomitant expansion of non-elected (single purpose) bodies and (single purpose) service providers, the efficiency gains with regard to the single purpose objectives and criteria are certainly significant. Yet, the single purpose actors are naturally disposed to 'externalise' their costs to the detriment of the general public, while the ability of the 'hidden hand' of market mechanisms to offset these drawbacks seems limited. On top of this, the loss in political accountability of such 'outsourced' activities is significant. Strategies meant to 'join up' such fragmented single-purpose activities and actors are prone to usher in the build up of monitoring institutions and inspectorates which, besides high 'transaction costs', breed the emergence of new hierarchical controls. Accompanied and echoed by calls for 'joined-up government' (see Pollitt, 2003) collaborative mechanisms are being resorted to in order to restore and achieve co-ordination both horizontally and vertically in the networks largely made up of single purpose actors, public, semi-public (of the quango type) as well as private. 'Strategic partnerships' have become an almost magic formula as a strategy to cope with the highly fragmented and hollowed-out local government system – in a web of actors which leaves the question of democratic control and legitimacy unanswered (Skelcher, 2003: 9–11).

In *France*, in the traditional absence of multi-functional, territorially viable communes and in the absence of a clear-cut delineation of responsibilities in the intergovernmental setting, the emergence and mushrooming of inter-communal bodies (*intercommunalité*) has served to solve some of the functional problems, but lacking direct democratic legitimacy and political accountability. Under the *Loi Chevènement* of 1999, which was designed to install some institutional clarity and 'simplification' in the maze of inter-communal bodies, a tentative step towards some territorially defined 'pluri-functionality' appears to have been embarked upon. However, like the earlier *syndicats*, the *communautés* whose decision-making bodies, appointed by the member *communes*, are deficient in direct democratic legitimacy and political accountability. They still contribute to the complex system of inter-organisational and inter-level negotiations and agreements ('*contractualisation*') which is part and parcel of the French intergovernmental system – with corresponding 'transaction costs'.

#### NOTES

1. The article is based on preliminary findings of a comparative four-country study that the author is currently conducting with a grant from *Wüstenrot Foundation* at *Institut fuer Stadtforschung und Strukturpolitik*, IFS, Berlin. It is a revised version of a paper originally presented to the 'Hurst Seminar on Reform and Democracy in Local Government' held at the



Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva, Israel, on 23–24 May 2004. I wish to thank Andrew Coulson for very valuable comments. The responsibility for the remaining shortcomings of the article remain, needless to say, mine.

2. The non-British reader who may not be quite familiar with the country's 'regionalism', should recall that, particularly with regard to local government, significant differences existing between England, Scotland and Wales. These distinct institutional differences in local government provisions have been confirmed and reinforced since 1998 when, through the Acts of devolution, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly were created and endowed with legislative powers of their own which relate, not least, to the institutional arrangement of local government. Bearing this in mind, we shall, in the following, mostly refer to and speak of *English* local government.

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