

## Urban Governance: Britain and Beyond since 1750

**Review Number:** 179

**Publish date:** Thursday, 1 March, 2001

**Editor:** Robert Morris

Rick Trainor

**ISBN:** 9780754600157

**Date of Publication:** 2000

**Pages:** 282pp.

**Publisher:** Ashgate

**Place of Publication:** London

**Reviewer:** Barry Doyle

Governance has replaced government as the object of fascination for political scientists. As the structures of the state are steadily dismantled so it has become necessary to look elsewhere for the seats of power and the means by which it is exercised. But political scientists can be a somewhat present-minded bunch, and though this volume won't stop them reinventing the wheel, it may help to enrich the study of current trends in contemporary governance and remind historians that the road to 1945 and beyond was certainly not straight or narrow - or even, necessarily, the only route available.

The volume under review contains most of the papers presented to the 1998 Urban History Group Conference in Leeds on the theme of 'Urban Governance'. Often collections of conference papers can be both variable in quality and only tangentially related to each other. This is not the case on either count with the collection here, where very intelligent editing and ordering and the inclusion of a number of thematic papers has helped to provide considerable coherence. Three introductory chapters by the key players in British urban governance - Bob Morris, Rick Trainor and John Garrard - along with the leading political scientist in the field, Mike Goldsmith, set the scene, whilst that by Robert Millward forms a bridge between the general survey and the specific empirical studies which dominate the rest of the volume. There are in total twelve 'case studies', touching on governors - both elected and unelected and the relationship between the two - the importance of policing streets, health, and pollution; the place of employers and professionals and their associations in the government of towns; the business, politics and ritual of burial; and the overall management of space at a variety of levels and in a variety of places.

In Bob Morris's highly effective introductory chapter many of the key themes of both the debate in general and this collection in particular, are identified and explored. In reviewing and addressing the social science, urban theory and governance literature - as well as the contributions from urban history - in a sophisticated and intelligible way for the historian, he emphasises the porous boundaries of governance over time but also the significant differences between the nineteenth century (the main focus of the chapter) and the contemporary world. Garrard and Goldsmith's collaborative piece compliments and consolidates Morris by focusing specifically on the contemporary theory and literature of governance and its recent history. It emphasises the differences brought to urban governance in Britain by Margaret Thatcher and contrasts them with the nineteenth and early twentieth century and with the situation in America. This is a stimulating piece, engagingly written which guides one well through the predominantly political science literature.

Much the same can be said of Rick Trainor's excellent reassessment of the urban elite in the period since 1850. Trainor, in a well sustained argument, takes issue with the pessimistic analysis of urban elite governance which has dominated the literature. Drawing on the growing body of research on local urban elites in the period after 1880, he makes a good case for the persistent dominance of local elites in urban governance - at least until 1945 - and on the validity of the public person in post-war local politics. Their ability to shape urban society and deliver services, often despite the attempts of central government and international capitalism, he sees as a considerable success, and certainly no longer worthy of the epithet decline.

Millward draws on evidence from a range of 36 differing urban environments from small southern towns like Shaftesbury through a core of expanding middle sized places such as Luton, and Norwich to the classic industrial towns and cities of the midlands and north - Preston, Stoke, Leeds - to show why and how the urban infrastructure - especially the sanitary infrastructure - was provided and make assessments about the financing and effectiveness of these services. As with most papers in the collection, the variety of options open to local governors is emphasised, with state and private options, or a mixture of the two, appearing across the spectrum of towns. In highlighting the late development of the sanitary infrastructure - around the 1890s - he suggests that its impact on mortality was of less significance than the overall improvements in standards of living, and especially housing, which delivered greatly improved life-chances to all except the under ones.

Whilst Millward utilises new sources to revisit an old debate, Irene Maver's piece on Glasgow's municipal managers is one of the most original contributions in the collection. Despite the importance of municipal officials in late-nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain, little has been written on them and whilst Glasgow may have been unique in the scale of its municipal workforce, the findings here are important and applicable across the range of British towns and cities. Maver shows how the officials were linked into the city's existing political elite, with the Town Clerk and the Gas and Tramways managers controlling vast budgets and thousands of workers largely independent of any direct political control. However, changes in the political and economic structure of the city in the mid-twenties drove a wedge between the municipal and political classes, leaving them open to accusations of extravagance and mis-management, although the structures they had created continued to dominate the municipal life of the city even after Labour took control. By exposing the networks of power and knowledge by which the city was and is governed, Maver provides a major contribution to an understanding of governance in both the early and late twentieth century.

In the first of three articles which address non-British subjects, Michèle Dagenais looks at the maturing of urban governance in Montreal and Toronto from the mid-nineteenth into the twentieth century. The piece highlights the slow development of municipal services in these cities, especially in comparison to British examples, but does suggest a growing concern for the welfare of citizens over those of property by the start of the new century, a trend which by the 1930s saw both cities devoting considerable resources to the education, welfare and leisure of their populations. The tardy development of these structures is attributed to the power of capital and the absence of a tradition of civic responsibility which had to be slowly learned in the new cities of Canada.

The next three chapters have much in common, providing closely researched case studies of the conflicting boundaries of local governance in England. Ann Day's chapter on improvement commissioners in Portsea and Chris Williams' contribution on policing and the reform of government in early nineteenth century Sheffield explore the changing structures of local governance in a period of considerable flux when demands for new forms of government clashed with existing systems (and governors) and brought locality and central state into dialogue. In both cases the creation of new legislative structures - police forces and boards of health - challenged the complacency of existing bodies and led to demands for and ultimately facilitated the setting up of, new systems of governance. In the course of these debates issues such as the most appropriate structures and people to deliver services, local chauvinism, the ultimate power of the central state and of course, the feelings of the ratepayer all emerged as significant. In both cases, it is apparent that improvement commissions, set up for very different purposes, could not meet the challenges of the mid-nineteenth century

urban environment, and despite the desire for small government and low rates, the threat of both the disordered environment and the power of outside bodies, prompted many in the local elite to choose borough government as the best way forward.

Tim Willis, also using Sheffield as his focus, addresses one aspect of this growth of borough power - health services in the first 'socialist city'. Once again, the emphasis is on the choices available in the delivery of services and the conflicts and compromises which the effective governance of the city required. In constructing his thesis, Willis lays stress on the relatively weak associational nature of middle class life and the strong cultural bonds and organisations developed by the city's working class. These became relevant after 1918 when the financing of the local voluntary hospitals was all but taken over by the 'Penny in the Pound' workers' contribution scheme operating through the Joint Hospitals Council, an early example of a city-wide hospital scheme which united voluntary and municipal hospitals. However, despite this entrée to the management of the hospitals, the labour movement remained committed to 'a complete public medical service administered by local authorities', and for nearly thirty years hospital services in the city operated on 'a mix of pragmatism and ideology on both sides of the hospital divide'. [p.134] In other areas of health, however, from 1926 Sheffield's Labour majority attempted to develop a municipal socialist policy which combined health and housing and brought the municipal government into conflict with medical officials and the central state. Thus, Willis argues, a view of 'governance' as a consensual, partnership, solution to problems - as seen arguably in the Joint Hospital Council - deflects attention from the more deep-seated ideological differences which arose in relation to other aspects of the council's health agenda.

The next two chapters, by Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud and Jean Adams, provide studies of the contrasting attempts in England and France to control industrial pollution in the course of the nineteenth century. In the French case, legislation to control pollution was introduced by the central government at an early date (1810) and remained largely the responsibility of prefects, working in alliance with local mayors and medical officers. In terms of governance, the case revealed the fragmented nature of French local governance, with central authority weak on the ground, whilst local political power, in the shape of the mayor, was initially unable to exert significant influence to ensure improvements - giving the industrialists a free hand to flout the law. In the case of Stockport, though the effect was the same, the cause was the opposite - here pollution control was in the hands of the local notables who happened also to be drawn significantly from the ranks of the industrialists, and it was their reluctance to promote pollution control which ultimately encouraged central government intervention. Drawing on political science models of decision-making and 'un-politics', Adams concludes - in ways which might also have been appropriate in the French case - that the scope for action of the local political elite was increasingly subscribed by both local pressure and central control.

The next two chapters take the concept of urban governance a long way from the mix of municipal, voluntary and private service provision which concerns many of the contributors, to focus on associational control over groups within the urban sphere - workers and the medical profession. Though an excellent piece in itself, Donna Loftus's assessment of industrial conciliation in mid-nineteenth century Nottingham is only very tangentially related to the subject of urban governance. Her justification, that the system of public boards of conciliation was a useful paradigm for problem solving, is effective, but overall this is about industrial relations. Its novelty lies in its appropriation of some of the language and methods of cultural history which give a new relevance to a somewhat traditional subject, whilst the conclusions highlight, once again, the contingent nature of local political power. Similarly, Campbell Lloyd's analysis of the nature of medical government in Glasgow and Edinburgh fits uneasily in the book. Concerned with internal battles within the medical profession, between the professions in Scotland and England, between universities and the profession and both of these institutions and the local authority, the chapter tries to achieve too much. However, one does get the impression that the medical profession and the universities were both very prominent players in these two Scottish cities, with strong links to the local elites, forming important partnerships with the local authorities, and that, as ever, it required parliamentary legislation to clarify the boundaries and the responsibilities of all the players.

Julie Rugg's contribution on ownership of place of burial reveals how this issue was an exemplar of the open

nature of early nineteenth century urban governance in which a range, and even a combination of public, private and voluntary options could be tried. Challenging the view that public burial grounds were largely the product of the Burial Acts of 1850 or even inspired by Edwin Chadwick, she highlights the development of the joint stock cemetery companies in the 1820s, showing how the successful companies were those rooted in their own communities. Focusing on both the slow state response to the 'burial crisis' of the second quarter of the nineteenth century and on the history of the private companies she shows how local, secular control of burial became the solution to the problem with the burial acts reflecting a compromise worked out over twenty-five years of debate and experiment which suggested the 'communitarian' response was the one most likely to deliver burial for all.

Death and burial also features prominently in the penultimate, and probably best, essay in the collection, Simon Gunn's exploration of 'Ritual and civic culture in the English industrial city, c. 1835-1914' which argues that 'urban governance has important symbolic dimensions'. [p.237] In particular, he unpacks the meaning in the civic ritual of the new middle class corporations of provincial England, emphasising the infusion of radicalism into civic pride, even when dressing up in robes or meeting the monarch. 'Urban community' was evoked through the creation of a new civic space of municipal buildings, squares and statues and the development of a 'processional culture' which brought together the various voluntary, friendly and trade societies, as well as civic dignitaries, religious leaders, businessmen and even county elites, helping to order, publicly, the hierarchy of the city, not least by their exclusion of women and inclusion of working men. However, Gunn suggests, as these rituals became more inclusive and as alternative forms of commercial and mass display emerged, so civic pageantry gave way to the 'centipedic funeral' of urban notables as *the* ritual of civic and bourgeois authority, creating a broad unity within the middle class which over-rode sectarian and political divisions. Overall, Gunn emphasises the importance of the visual spectacle in revealing and supporting the power of the new civic order and giving a broad legitimacy and permanence to the coalition of men who made up the urban leadership of mid to late nineteenth century England. But this was a flawed project as, by promoting public display as the route to recognition, the 'excluded', when they did appear on the streets in the Edwardian period, dealt a significant blow to the order established by the processional cultures.

In the final essay, Narayani Gupta investigates the changing management of space in the Indian city of Shahjahanabad/Delhi, exploring the impact of differing forms of governance on the city's streets and open spaces. In particular, she illustrates how the pre-colonial city had been economical of space, open, communitarian, secure and tolerant of a variety of uses, how the colonial city was monumental and impersonal and how the planned Greater Delhi of the independent India has been both wasteful of space and increasingly intolerant of the pedestrian's desire to colonise the street and pavement for social intercourse. Yet the very brief nature of this essay, its long time scale and its contemporary focus make it an unsatisfactory read. The ideas are too condensed to do justice to some of the important points which do emerge - not least the shift in governance from concern for the community to concern for the individual.

Overall the collection has an air of coherence rendered by the introductory chapters and the discipline of the authors who, in most cases, are addressing broad themes of governance. It displays a variety of methodological approaches, with contributors drawing on political science, social theory, economic history, traditional urban history and the new cultural history. In the latter case, the essays by Loftus and Gunn show how this approach can add real value to our understanding of the governance of urban space, especially when supported by deep research, solid empirical examples and a clear understanding of the dynamics of the places being studied. Key themes do emerge from most of the chapters, especially how a state response - whether local or national - was never inevitable and often not even the most likely outcome; the tension between local and national governance; and the fluid relationship between differing modes of service delivery. Most chapters show that governance was much broader than simply the power of the local authority, but spread across elected (and unelected) bodies, private companies, voluntary organisations, professional and educational institutions and business and religious leaders. Membership of these seats of power was not discreet, but often highly promiscuous, with the same figures appearing across the spectrum of governance providers in the Victorian town. It is this emphasis on a broad, interconnected civic elite with

their fingers in many pies that ultimately gives the book its structure and separates governance in nineteenth century Britain from its reborn form at the end of the twentieth century.

But the book does also have some notable weaknesses, many of which reflect the problems associated with 'putting hard covers on a conference'. Most obviously this is not really a book about governance beyond Britain as only three chapters deal with non-British subjects. Whilst it would have been a little unfair to leave these chapters out, they do not add a great deal to the overall themes or coherence of the book, providing an occasional opportunity to remind us that Britain was not the only country in the world, but neither representative or numerous enough to really challenge the Anglocentric focus. Similarly the time-scale is not as broad ranging as it suggests. Few of the contributors venture back before the 1830s and most stop around the First World War, with only Maver and Willis dealing in any detail with the inter-war period. The emphasis is very much on the establishment of municipal authority in the period between roughly 1830 and 1890. In terms of the broad theme of governance this has some validity - this was the period of multiple service providers and experimentation - but it leaves the impression of a golden age of urban governance which gradually gave way first to the omnipotent borough and then the steadily encroaching central state before the contemporary return to a form of 'bastard' urban governance. The third main problem is a concentration on the provincial at the expense of the metropolitan. Even if this is a book about Britain, is it really representative of the experience of urban governance when there is only one reference to the London County Council and a couple of asides about the absence of an effective administration before 1888? Rather, when London does appear it is as a synonym for central government, or as a place to which local urban power migrates, politically, institutionally or personally. Surely the peculiar problems associated with governing capital cities in Britain, or elsewhere in the world, was an issue which had to be addressed in some way.

These weaknesses derive both from the constraints of a conference - even a coherent conference - which limits the editors to the papers available (or commissioning new pieces which may disturb the balance and squeeze out original contributors). But it also clearly illustrates the state of British urban history at the moment, with its focus on the heroism of the provincial middle class of the mid to late nineteenth century at the expense of more critical study of other countries, the situation after 1914 or the history of the rather unheroic metropolitan middle classes who appear to have been surrendered to the cultural historians.

This is a good book, a worthy contribution to a worthy new series from Ashgate (Historical Urban Studies) which may at last plug the gap left by the loss of Leicester University Press in the early 1990s. It is expensive at 50 pence short of fifty pounds, but would undoubtedly command a prominent place on any reading list addressing the Victorian City or the nature of urban power in the nineteenth century.

#### **Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:**<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/179#comment-0>

#### **Links**

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/1156> [2] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/>