LOCAL AUTHORITY EDUCATION IN A DEMOCRATIC SCOTLAND

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SYNOPSIS

The establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 will pose questions about its relationship to local authorities, and about the local authorities' roles in education. The Parliament could become a force for further centralisation in Scottish education policy, or, as the Scottish Constitutional Convention proposed, it could initiate a radical programme of decentralisation. Both of these scenarios hold significant implications for education and local government.

Local government has recently been reformed in ways which make education much more central to the business of local councils. This gives the new councils an opportunity to shape the emerging debate, and establish for themselves a position as partners of the Parliament in the government of Scotland.

1. INTRODUCTION

The third major structural reorganisation of Scottish local government this century was fully implemented in 1996. It altered the organisational and political context for the local government roles in education. As in the previous structural reforms of 1929 and 1975, the 1996 changes were as much about the necessary links between local and national government as they were about local government in itself.

In the autumn of 1997 we were invited to consider the proposition that 'the possibility of a Scottish Parliament offers us the opportunity to invent the future of the nation's education' (Eastwood, 1997). This of course requires a wide-ranging debate covering: all the 'sectors' of education from pre-school to higher education; the requirements for creating some kind of 'learning society' in Scotland; the roles of local government and the new Parliament; the roles of the various education 'quangos', the voluntary sector and the private sector; the complex relationship between education and our evolving democracy (Paterson, 1998); and the institutional framework which seems best-suited to supporting the developments or 're-invention' which the nation favours.

This paper will explore some aspects of the developing relationship between the local authority role in education and local *government*, the capacity of the new local authorities to provide 'strong' local *government,* the impact of the Scottish Office on local authority education, and, finally, the importance of the new Parliament and how it might change these relationships.

2. THE CHANGING EDUCATION AUTHORITY–LOCAL GOVERNMENT RELATIONSHIP

The relationship between education and local government has changed from a situation where they were separate from each other, to the current one where education is central to the concerns of every local authority. As local government has been changed in response to pressures for greater efficiency and concerns about the democratic governance of Scotland, education has come to be seen as the core local government service.

Throughout this century it has been accepted that oversight and management of the school system should be a local matter. However it has not always been a local government matter. Between the end of the Great War and 1929 local responsibility for education rested with *ad hoc* bodies which were separately elected on a strange

form of proportional representation in which electors had a vote for each school board seat, and were free to distribute the votes as they saw fit (Galbraith, 1995: 26; Knox 1953: 183). These bodies were based on the counties. Initially there were 38, with the amalgamation of Edinburgh and Leith reducing the number to 37.

This system was later deemed to have been a failure because of its financial complexity[1], its lack of popularity with the voters, and its fragmenting effect on local public services. The Scottish Education Department considered the system to have been a failure and the Wheatley enquiry into local government in the 1960s re-iterated the reasons for failure in rejecting calls by the EIS, the Association of Directors, and the SSTA for a return to the *ad hoc* system (Wheatley, 1969:87; see also Hunter, 1974:46–7).

In 1929 a restructuring reform was made for Scottish local government. A complex system of 430 councils of 5 types was put in place (Wheatley, 1969:26). Although the system seems complex and fragmented from the standpoint of the 1990s, it was then seen as a fairly bold rationalisation of the system of over 1300 local bodies which it replaced (SLGIU, 1995:24). It was also bold, or perhaps a sign of confidence, that local government's remit was extended to cover education; local election on the basis of universal suffrage was a recent innovation. The 1929 system remained in place until it was reformed in 1975. The institutional system was sufficiently flexible to adapt to the changing demands of society, and education continued to develop under specific legislation within the framework of the 35 local authorities which were designated as education authorities (Macbeth, 1984). However, by the late 1960s, it seemed clear to the Wheatley Commission that this local government system was no longer adequate.

The next great restructuring occurred in 1975. It continued the trend started in 1929 by further reducing the number of councils from 430 to 65. In so doing it reduced the number of elected institutions, the number of elected politicians, and the number of opportunities available to citizens to stand for election[2]. The system was a heavily modified version of the proposals put forward by the Wheatley enquiry. It provided for a system of 3 Islands Councils, with 9 Regional Councils and 53 District Councils covering the mainland and the inner islands. The Island and Regional Councils were the 12 designated education authorities.

In this reform education was regarded as a 'strategic' service best provided to a fairly large population. It was already clear that education was 'by far the largest single item of expenditure that falls on local government (Wheatley, 1969: 86)', although of course only the minority of councils which were designated education authorities controlled these budgets. Wheatley commented that 'Manifestly education authorities ought to be large', but also observed that 'there are authorities which have produced good results in spite of the handicaps imposed by their small size' (1969: 92–3). The Commission thought that the minimum size was between 150,000 and 250,000, with the ideal being somewhere between 250,000 and 'upwards of half a million' (ibid, p. 94). In the event the size of the education authorities varied greatly from around 20,000 in the smaller islands to about 2.3m in Strathclyde Region, with both the smallest and the largest differing significantly from the Wheatley ideal. The largest, Strathclyde Region, was not favoured by the Scottish Office (McPherson and Raab, 1988: 488). The proposal to set up a Strathclyde-type education authority for a population of more than 2 million led the Wheatley Commission to comment:

> Such a large area would offer no educational advantages: it would be administratively unwieldy: and it would raise the question whether, with one education authority covering almost half the population of Scotland, it was really worthwhile to have local education authorities at all. (1969: 94)

Within the political debates of the time, the creation of the large Regions and Strathclyde in particular, did, to some extent, head off demands for a Scottish Parliament or Assembly. It would have been very difficult, if not impossible, for a national government to co-exist with such large, elected sub-national institutions. The Labour MP and ardent supporter of devolution John P Mackintosh commented that, 'The Wheatley two-tier pattern was devised as an alternative to an Assembly, not as a supplement to it' (Drucker, 1982: 43).

The two-tier system never achieved the somewhat utopian vision of rational local and regional government which Wheatley envisaged. Throughout the two decades of this system, there was friction and frequent conflict between the 'strategic' Regions and the 'local' Districts, as Robert Peggie (1976), Lothian's first Chief Executive had predicted. This became particularly clear in the main cities and was no less of a problem when the same political party controlled both levels of government. Whatever advances were made in education policy, policy implementation, educational practices, and management by the 12 education authorities, from the perspectives of education and local *government*, the Wheatley system found itself under increasing criticism from the mid-1980s. By 1984 Macbeth was able to observe that 'It is difficult for the citizen not to regard our education authorities as somewhat remote and faceless' (1984: 174).

Once the Conservative Government had abolished the Greater London Council and the English Metropolitan Counties in 1986, the Scottish Regions suddenly looked very large, in European as well as UK comparisons. When the Inner London Education Authority was abolished under legislation of 1988, the Strathclyde Regional Council acquired the dubious honour of being Europe's largest education authority. The large Regions became easy targets for those on the political right who saw local government as 'part of the problem'. Prime Minister Major attacked Strathclyde as 'a monstrosity' (Alexander and Orr, 1994), and the Conservatives entered the 1992 general Election pledged to reform local government in Scotland by creating one tier of all-purpose councils.

The three opposition parties were, in different ways, committed to establishing a Parliament for Scotland and thought that single-tier local government would be the best system in this context. By the early 1990s all four parties wanted to see single-tier local government (McVicar, Jordan and Boyne, 1994), the difference being that the Conservatives intended to act while the others thought the reform task should be left to the new Parliament.

The Conservatives' proposals, and the legislation of 1994 were controversial largely because the reform was perceived to have been politicised by a party which had only minority support in Scotland. Why the Conservatives acted so resolutely remains unclear. They may have thought that they could seize, define and lead an emerging consensus for single-tier government and so improve their own political standing. They may have thought that the reform of local government would satisfy the demand for change and undermine the campaign for Home Rule. They may simply have thought that their manifesto mattered more than Scottish sentiment. However, whatever the motivation, the arrogance and intransigence shown by the Conservatives in reforming local government according to their minority view may nevertheless have led to some unintended benefits for local government, for local authority education, and for the governance of Scotland.

It was surely naive of the opposition parties to think that it would be easy for a new Parliament to reform the powerful bureaucracies of the large Regional Councils. The Conservatives solved this problem. And in so doing they added technical arguments to the already powerful campaign for Home Rule: the local government reform needed to be accompanied by a new Parliament or Scotland would simply be 'under-governed', with too few elected institutions and politicians relative to

population and compared with most of Europe. As a by-product of the restructuring which took full effect in 1996, the Conservatives completed the historical task of finally and fully making education a local government service. After 1996 every local council was a designated education authority, and education was the largest service and concern of each council (Fairley, 1995a). This made education central to local government in a new way, and at the same time brought education into councils which were stronger because they were responsible for all services and had the sole electoral mandate for their area (Lang, 1994).

The 1996 restructuring continued the long-term trend of reducing the number of elected institutions, reducing the number of elected councillors, reducing the number of opportunities to stand for election, and making the business much less attractive to potential politicians by greatly increasing the workload to unreasonable levels[3]. Thirty-two all purpose or 'unitary' councils replaced the former 65. However the reduction in the number of councils was also an increase in the number of education authorities from 12 to 32. The number of education authorities seemed like a return to the pre-Wheatley system, but the context of unitary local government was in fact a fundamental transformation which had the potential to bring substantial benefits for education and local government.

Table 1: The Numbers of Local Authorities and Education Authorities, 1929-96

	No. of Councils	**No. of designated Education Authorities**
1929	430	35
1975	65	12
1996	32	32

Sources: Macbeth 1984:174; SLGIU 1995:24

3. A LOSS OF 'STRATEGIC CAPACITY' OR 'STRONG' LOCAL AUTHORITIES?

One argument advanced by the Conservatives in support of the 1996 restructuring was that it would create strong local authorities which were closer to their communities and freed from friction with the other tier (Lang, 1994). However the dominant paradigm shared by academics, senior professionals, and many local politicians is quite different. It is that the Conservatives' reform of 1995/96 led to a loss of 'strategic capacity' in local government (See Alexander, 1995 and 1998; Black, 1995a and 1995b; McFadden, 1996; Midwinter, 1995; and, Midwinter and McGarvey, 1994). This paradigm enjoys such widespread support that it is difficult to question. However, perhaps now that the Conservatives no longer seem to pose a threat to Scotland's aspirations we may explore the paradigm and revisit the last Conservative Government's claim.

The paradigm is supported for a number of reasons. Black (1995b) points to the removal of functions—such as water and sewerage, further education colleges and bursaries, the careers service, the Children's Reporter and trunk roads—from local authorities to incorporated bodies or quangos, and to the compromising of the unitary principle by the requirement for joint arrangements for some services. Others point to the generally smaller size of the new councils, the loss of the Regional 'overview', the apparent fiscal crisis, and the loss of scale and scope economies. Some, despite the advances in technology and major changes in service design over three decades, wish to hold fast to Wheatley's 1969 definitions of optimum service sizes.

A number of points opposing the dominant theory may be advanced. First, while local government lost some functions it gained others, and these were of some strategic importance. The new Councils were given a duty to bring forward decentralisation plans, in part to help with democratic renewal (Scottish Office, 1997: 8). The 1994 Act gave them a new power to conduct economic development which was not cash-limited (Fairley, 1996). As a consequence of the 1995 Children (Scotland) Act they were required to begin to think corporately about and to plan their services for children. Each of these is significant in itself and has some relevance for education.

Second, the restructuring was not uniform across Scotland and it required a number of different types of change (Fairley, 1995b) to be effected. The five largest Regions—Strathclyde, Lothian, Central, Tayside and Grampian- were abolished and replaced by smaller councils. Some wholly new governmental institutions, for example Aberdeenshire Council, were created. Some new councils were based on former District boundaries, for example Dundee and Edinburgh Councils. And in four—Highland, Fife, Dumfries and Galloway, and Scottish Borders Councils—the former Districts and Regions were combined to form new councils in the areas covered by the old Regions. It would seem quite plausible to argue that, at least in the last group of four, the restructuring significantly enhanced 'strategic capacity', albeit for a slightly reduced range of functions.

Third, the combining of all services in a unitary local government enables it to overcome some of the barriers which existed in the two-tier system. Now it is only vision, competence, and the level of funding which restrict local government's ability to improve internal co-ordination, to act corporately rather than departmentally, to improve member-officer relations, to improve access for citizens, and to effect stronger partnerships with outside bodies. The many innovations underway across Scotland are surely testimony to a heightened strategic capacity for *government*. Perhaps it is now safe to give some credit to the Conservatives!

Fourth, the dominant paradigm tends to focus solely on service delivery. It is not concerned with the broader question of what makes good government, with the quality of local governance, or with the need to improve democracy. The development needs of local government are not reflected in the narrowness of the essentially managerialist dominant paradigm.

Fifth, the dominant theory of what constituted effective 'strategic planning' changed particularly during the 1980s. At the time of the Wheatley enquiry rational models of centralised planning were favoured. Translated into local government this called for large units able to plan and deliver services to large populations. The critiques of the welfare state and its systems of strategic planning which emerged with particular force in the 1980s called for new approaches to service planning which were based on business practices. The reforms of the 'new managerialism'—compulsory competitive tendering and devolved school management, for example— urged local authorities to plan at the level of decentralised business units and cost centres which were small and local enough to be responsive to 'customers'. Responsiveness to customers, organisational flexibility, and cost competitiveness became the hallmarks of the new approach to being strategic in public services.

Sixth, it is important to question both what is meant by 'strategic capacity' and the validity of cross-system comparisons. 'Strategy' is an old, developing and somewhat contested concept which has its origins in the planning of military activities and large companies. Mintzberg (1994: 32) identifies a number of different types of strategy, and rather more ways of approaching the creation of strategies. Once the choices and manifestos of local politicians are added to the picture, as they must be for local government, then the complexities grow. In any case, is it valid to compare 'strategic

capacity' across organisations which are fundamentally different? Highland Council is simply a different type of council compared with a predecessor like the Ross and Cromarty District, just as Aberdeenshire is quite unlike the former Gordon District or Grampian Region.

And finally, the paradigm rests on the untested assumption that the large Regional Councils were actually strategic. No doubt at times they were. Strathclyde's strategies for tackling poverty and deprivation (Young, 1983) were attempts at radical, concerted, corporate action, which included redistribution of resources through the schools system. However, for every example of effective strategies, counter-examples could be cited of fragmentation through departmental or professional rivalries and of 'comprehensive plans' gathering dust on shelves.

It is also something of a paradox for the dominant paradigm, that the period 1975–95 when Scotland had 'strategic' Regional authorities saw perhaps the most rapid centralisation of control over local government by the Scottish Office. The Wheatley Commission was critical of the high degree of control which the Scottish Office exercised over local government (Alexander, 1995), and over local authority education (Wheatley, 1969: 89–90). It is widely accepted that the centralisation of education proceeded apace during the 1980s and 1990s. Gordon Kirk (1995) observed that,

> we have moved from a time when ministers prided themselves in knowing nothing about the curriculum to a context in which ministers provide a detailed framework covering practically every area of the school's work.

It would be easy to attribute this trend to the centralising strategies of the Thatcher administrations. However this would be difficult to square with the claims made in Scotland that the Regional Councils were largely successful in resisting Thatcherism, not least in education, (Pignatelli, 1994).

If discussions of 'strategic capacity' are necessarily complex, perhaps it is an appropriate time to return to and reformulate the claim of the Conservatives that they were creating stronger local authorities. What does it mean to be a 'strong' local authority in the new context of the Scottish Parliament? Perhaps a 'strong' local authority would show the following attributes:

- an adequate financial base, established on the basis of agreed needs

- a higher degree of financial autonomy than any council currently enjoys

- clarity of political leadership

- good member-officer relationships

- the managerial and professional expertise needed to support local political processes and deliver services effectively

- a sufficient capacity for policy development (perhaps in partnership with neighbouring councils, as in the evolving Highland Convention) to be able to engage as equals with the Scottish Parliament and its committees

- a strong and coherent set of responsibilities to deliver, or secure the delivery of services, including the many support services which schools require (Benn and Chitty, 1996: 334)

- a strong role in the services which matter most to individuals and their communities, in particular the personal social services: education, housing, health and welfare

- a strengthened role in education, encompassing current responsibilities and

an ability to influence the other sectors of further and higher education, and vocational training

- a strong commitment to corporate government

- a strong and active commitment to improving elective and participative local democracy

- a commitment to decentralise decision-making to communities and local institutions such as schools

- the organisational and policy capacity to form effective partnerships with other bodies

- an active interest in the governance of Scotland

- an ability (perhaps in partnership) to engage with the policies of the European Union

If it is now possible to admit that the Conservative claim was an honest one, then honesty also compels us to admit that the new councils do not display all the attributes of strength. On some attributes -local democracy and decentralisation, for example- there are many innovations underway, but the picture across Scotland is very uneven.

In those areas which they can tackle autonomously, the new Councils have, thanks to the Conservatives, some time to effect changes and make improvements *before the Parliament is operational,* and so influence the attitudes of the Parliament. On other attributes the ability to improve does not reside with local authorities alone. The elements of continuity in central government policy, particularly in relation to public spending totals, diminish the strength of local councils. And progress on some issues will depend upon changes in the Scottish Office.

4. THE FUTURE ROLES OF THE SCOTTISH OFFICE

It is no longer adequate to consider local government (Kjellberg, 1995) or education (OECD, 1995) within the old framework of 'central-local relations'. Decisions which affect education in Scotland are now made by parents, by local politicians, by civil servants in Edinburgh, and in some cases by pupils. Some decisions are made by the school, some by the local authority and/or its education department, and some by the Scottish Office. The priorities of the UK government remain important influences and many EU policies and programmes affect education.

Nevertheless the Scottish Office is of paramount importance for the future of local authority education. There are three main reasons for this: the extraordinary control which the Scottish Office has acquired over local government and its educational roles, a level of control which may be rivalled in Europe only in the Republic of Ireland; the assumption underpinning contemporary debates that the Scottish Office will continue in much its present form but under the scrutiny provided by an elected Parliament; and the opportunity presented by the Parliament to consider a radical restructuring of the Scottish Office in ways which will help in the process of democratising society.

The Scottish Office exercises control and constrains local authorities in four principal ways. First it controls local government income and expenditure. The expenditure side is controlled by the setting of 'reasonable' spending limits, and the availability of 'capping' powers if these look like being exceeded, or indeed if a council appears to be planning to exceed them. Local government capital expenditure, for example to build new schools or carry out major refurbishment, is particularly tightly controlled. The income side of local government is heavily dependent on the Scottish Office. The Council Tax leaves councils raising only an average 14% of their

income locally. Since legislation of 1958 (McPherson and Raab, 1988:179–181), education has been funded through the general block grant to local authorities and not through specific funding, with the exception of specific grants to promote some kind of change, for example TRIST, the scheme to promote teacher training relevant to the TVEI programme. There is no doubt that the move to block grant funding was an advance for local government and democratic decision-making, providing as it did 'a certain freedom… to local planners' (Scotland, 1969:187). However not everyone agreed, and, in the late 1990s, there are calls for a return to specific grant funding for education (Eastwood, 1997).

Second, it exercises control over local government and its conduct and has done so since the late nineteenth century. There is some irony in the acquisition by the Scottish Office of very detailed controls. It was local authorities which led the campaign, through the Convention of Royal Burghs, to have a Scottish Office set up (Paterson, 1994:62). And 'it could be argued that the supervision of local government is one of the *raisons d'être* of the Office' (Pottinger, 1979:162). The Wheatley enquiry commented adversely on these often very detailed controls and called for their relaxation and replacement by a more equal partnership between the two layers of government (Alexander, 1995). This did not happen during the Wheatley period and the Conservatives saw their 1994 legislation as paving the way to the realisation of the enquiry's aspirations (Lang, 1994). The general controls over local authorities are now mainly exercised through the Development Department.

Third almost all Scottish Office Departments deal with local government (Pottinger, 1979:162) and traditionally they have done this separately, without reference to each other. The internal fragmentation and departmentalism (Sinclair, 1996) of the Scottish Office is externalised to local government and creates enormous barriers to councils which wish to act in a corporate manner. The Scottish Office has taken some action on this problem, merging education with industry, and creating the largest department, the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (SOEID), and reducing the overall number of departments from six to five (Mills, 1995).

Fourth, the Education and Industry Department exercises specific controls over local authority education, and now oversees further education following its removal from local government. By the mid-1960s education was very much a 'national service, locally administered' (Hunter, 1974:42). The level of central control left considerable local autonomy while being sufficient to facilitate rapid change driven from the centre (Scotland, 1977:99). Again Wheatley commented adversely on the detailed controls which were exercised in the 1960s. We have already noted the increasing centralisation which occurred during the life of the Wheatley system, and which took control into key areas such as the curriculum. The 'new managerialism' provided another centralising force in the early 1990s, and now the Department and the independent Accounts Commission both hold local authority education to account through centrally-designed performance management systems and published 'league tables' (Fairley and Paterson, 1995).

The modernisation of Scottish democracy requires there to be strengths at both the local level and the national Parliament (Sinclair, 1997), and a fairly equal partnership between them, particularly if this is to be characterised by 'constructive tension rather than conflict (McIntosh, 1995)'. At present there is simply too much central control of local government and of local authority education. Teune observes that, 'If local governments are to be democratic, then they must have autonomy. If they have more autonomy, they will exercise it and become relatively more important in everyday affairs' (1995:14).

In order for local autonomy to grow, the Scottish Office grip must be relaxed and more responsibilities devolved to the lower tier of government. And an enormous 'culture change' must occur if the Scottish Office is to come to see local authorities

as equal partners rather than subordinates which merely implement national policies. These changes cannot begin until such times as an elected Scottish government may decide upon them. However, there is an opportunity for local councils to lead the campaign and shape the debate, just as they once did to secure the establishment of the Scottish Office.

5. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PARLIAMENT FOR LOCAL AUTHORITY EDUCATION

The Scottish Constitutional Convention was responsible for the so-called 'Convention Scheme' which the Labour Government has largely committed itself to implement as the basis for the new Parliament (SCC, 1995). The SCC was very much in favour of the process of devolution of responsibility running from Westminster to Edinburgh, and from the Edinburgh Parliament to local authorities. It favoured some degree of 'entrenchment' of the local government role, and raised the possibility of some councils, for example, the islands, having additional powers to respond to local needs.

The SCC clearly favours strong democratic local authorities. Since its election in May 1997 the Labour Government has taken some promising steps, signing the European Charter of Local Self Government, and establishing independent expert groups to examine relations between the Scottish Parliament and local authorities, and the system of local government finance. These provide further mechanisms for the new local authorities to influence and shape the debate on Scotland's future government. Highland Council (1997) has recently made a number of proposals for strengthening local democratic government, and has called on central government 'to guard against loss of powers and responsibilities from local government to the new Scottish Parliament, and to embrace the principle of subsidiarity'.

There has also been some discussion of a second form of decentralisation, namely removing Scottish Office Departments and units from Edinburgh to locations which are more appropriate. This could see the dispersal of those parts of the Office which are concerned with forestry, agriculture, fisheries, and tourism to locations in rural or Highland Scotland.

These two types of decentralisation will require that major changes are made to the Scottish Office. However, much of the debate about the Parliament so far has assumed that the 129 elected Members will provide 'democratic oversight' of a Scottish Office which will carry on much as before. This would not help to promote a vigorous democracy at national and local level. However it is probably the case that such is the complexity of the modern Scottish Office that simply providing effective democratic oversight could keep 129 men and women quite busy. If the tasks of re-designing the Scottish Office and implementing a far-reaching decentralisation programme are added, then these new posts could be very challenging indeed! Once again local authorities have some time to reflect on these issues of decentralisation, to prepare advice for the Parliament as to what is feasible and desirable, and to demonstrate that they are competent to have new powers and responsibilities devolved to them.

The SCC also favoured employing the principle of 'subsidiarity', almost as a design feature in how the Parliament might operate. This is a much more radical concept than decentralisation. Charles Handy (1992:83) explains the difference:

> Delegation suggests that you are taking part of your responsibility and giving it to someone else. Subsidiarity says that the responsibility is theirs in the first place and shouldn't be delegated upwards unless they are incapable.

Handy went on to quote from the papal encyclical which is credited with having first formulated the concept:

> It is an injustice, a grave evil and a disturbance of right order for a larger and

> higher organisation to abrogate to itself functions which can be performed efficiently by smaller and lower bodies.

In a polity as centralised as modern Scotland, the principle of subsidiarity may seem so radical as to have little chance of implementation. However, Highland Council's call on the Government to respect the principle when it sets up the new Parliament would have the great advantage of providing a presumption against the removal of any powers or responsibilities from local authorities.

Perhaps the major innovation which the Parliament will provide is a set of forums in which political discussion will take place as a matter of routine. These forums will be the Parliament itself and its powerful committees, one of which is expected to focus on education. In a country which has often eschewed political debate in favour of a manufactured, technocratic and sometimes suffocating 'consensus' the creation of these forums could also prove to be something of a 'culture shock'.

Local authorities need to prepare for life in this new environment. They must acquire the high levels of 'policy capacity' which will be needed to engage with the Parliament's political forums. This means freeing up councillors' time to enable more policy and political discussion to take place. It means more discussion of politics in the council chamber and the committee meetings. And it requires senior officials and professionals fully to accept the legitimacy of local politics (Fairley, 1995:11–13) in the work of democratic local councils. In many of Scotland's councils these developments will require major change to take place. However in some of the new councils interesting innovations to stimulate a more vigorous local democracy are underway.

As far as local authority education is concerned the main political focus is likely to be the Parliament's education committee. This will provide a powerful forum in which all aspects of Scottish education will be subject to political debate and discussion. This will provide, for the first time, the possibility of some democratic planning of the whole system including the local authority roles, the roles of the private and voluntary sectors, the colleges and universities, the European Social Fund's continuing impact, and the education and training activities of the Local Enterprise Companies. All of these will fall within the Parliament's remit as 'fully devolved' matters.

In a situation where the Parliament wished to have a direct role in education, then clearly local authorities are not the only potential 'target'. The Parliament could, if it wished, take some responsibilities away from any of the sub-national players. However it is quite possible that the task of analysing, planning and providing democratic oversight of *the system as a whole* will prove sufficiently exciting and challenging.

Once again local authorities are in a position to influence, and to do so by planning and taking some action in advance. At the very least the new Councils must be in a position to engage effectively with a powerful Parliamentary Committee, ideally they will equip themselves with a sufficient 'policy capacity' to be able to engage with the Parliament. However local authorities, in a possible future role as 'Community Planners', also have the opportunity to make comment on non-local authority aspects of education and training as they affect the local area, to the Parliamentary Committee. The Labour Government has a manifesto commitment to give local authorities a new power of 'community planning' (Scottish Office, 1997, para. 36). The Committees of the new parliament may become important forums for local councils to express themselves in this new role.

CONCLUSIONS

The current degree of central control by the Scottish Office over local government

and its roles in education is unhealthy. More importantly it is incompatible with the project to democratise Scotland. This requires healthy, democratic institutions of *government* at national and local level. At national level major change will be required of the Scottish Office to relax the inappropriate controls and to decentralise the civil service itself. At local level major changes are now required of councils, to demonstrate their competence and to become more vigorous institutions of local democracy. The last Conservative government should now be given a little credit. The 1996 restructuring made all 32 Councils education authorities and, for the first time, made education central to local government. It created unitary Councils which have the potential to be strong, with a little help from the Parliament. And the fact that local government reform came first gives the Councils some time to prepare themselves for life in, and to help shape, the new, democratic Scotland.

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1. The ad hoc bodies were indirectly funded and raised their finance by requisition on the rating authority.

2. Tom Johnston, who became a Member of Parliament for the Independent Labour Party and later Secretary of State for Scotland, first entered politics by standing for election to the Kirkintilloch School Board (Galbraith, 1995:21).

3. Research carried out in 1996 by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Local Government Information Unit showed that on average councillors devoted 46 hours per week to council business, and that senior councillors, for example education convenors, put in 62 hours each week. See Scottish Local Government, No 88, December 1996, Glasgow, SLGIU.