

SETTING UP SIX TOWNS

AN URBAN STRATEGY GAP

by

DES McCONAGHY

Almost ten years ago the then Prime Minister, [Sir] Harold Wilson, announced 'we are about to embark on a new Urban Programme'. His speech in Birmingham on 5 May 1968 heralded a decade of special measures and projects, experimental or academic in style and always administered by governments in a totally haphazard way. The three *Inner Area Studies*, reviewed in this issue of the *Town Planning Review*,* were no exception. The way they were launched goes a long way to show why governments continually fail to adopt policies for the needs of deprived areas, whether or not they are inner city areas. My own thesis has been that the worst urban areas are only the most visible and distressing manifestation of fundamental weaknesses in national, regional and local economies and in the institutions charged with managing them.¹ It is a politically convenient fantasy to pretend that inefficient bureaucracy, fragmented action and piecemeal measures are confined to those areas where they are most apparent.

For all people to depend on government for anything is a highly dangerous activity. One distinguishing feature of 'problem families', 'problem areas' or, if it comes to that, 'problem cities' is the *extent* to which they are *compelled* to depend on government programmes that are inherently incoherent and un-coordinated. To a large extent government is the nature of their problem. Every new ministerial initiative over the past ten years purported to coordinate the efforts of central government and failed to do so. Each professed to involve fully the main policies of central and local governments; each was without success.

In 1977 the Secretary of State for the Environment, Peter Shore, revived the familiar rhetoric of a 'total approach', reinforced by the publication of a White Paper² promising to 'recast the Urban Programme'³ and to involve and relate the main programmes of central government 'so far as practicable'⁴. The difficulties in launching the *Six Town Studies* (the three *Inner Area Studies* were only part of Peter Walker's 1972 initiative) demonstrate how most obstacles impeding a coherent and effective Urban Programme still have to be faced. These obstacles are not just those of overcoming a lack of involvement and coordination; they also lack a recognition of the central problem to be tackled. The central problem was then, and is now, one of diminishing opportunities, and therefore the central purpose behind all concerted funding has to be the renewal of the economic base so as to improve real incomes. Only in that way can people afford to buy (or get) the sort of services they have been led to consider as a reasonable standard. At the risk of over-simplification, the one thing

* See p. 195. The Final Reports of the three *Inner Area Studies* are: *Change or Decay: Final Report of the Liverpool Inner Area Study* by Hugh Wilson and Lewis Womersley, Roger Tym and Associates and Jamieson McKay and Partners for the Department of the Environment, London, HMSO, 1977; *Inner London: Policies for Dispersal and Balance: Final Report of the Lambeth Inner Area Study* by Graeme Shankland, Peter Willmott and David Jordan (Shankland Cox Partnership and the Institute for Community Studies for the Department of the Environment), London, HMSO, 1977; *Unequal City: Final Report of the Birmingham Inner Area Study* by Llewlyn-Davies, Weeks, Forestier-Walker and Bor for the Department of the Environment, London, HMSO, 1977.

certain about poor people, or poor areas, is that they do not have much money.

Another dominant theme is that the prospect of whole minority groups or whole areas permanently on the 'welfare route' can scare governments silly; and not always for compassionate reasons. Thus, for most of the last decade, the responsibility of the Home Secretary for law and order, race relations and immigration has given the Home Office the dominant interest over half-baked forays into areas of low political currency. Indeed, had it not been for Enoch Powell's mischievous vision (20 April 1968) of 'the river Tiber foaming with much blood' there might not have been an Urban Programme at all. It is already a lesson of history that fear remains the most potent trigger for institutional change. But anxieties about permanent and large scale unemployment, ever present fears of escalating crime rates and breakdown of social order are not enough to give Home Secretaries much leverage with other spending departments.

In 1971 it seemed to many that the new Department of the Environment (DOE) was the best candidate to take the lead. Peter Walker as Environment Secretary and the late Tony Crosland, as Shadow Minister, both wanted to take over the Urban Programme, directly bringing into play the very wide range of powers ostensibly enjoyed by the DOE. This seemed a sensible approach since the DOE had assumed responsibility for local government and local government finance, for housing, transportation and land use planning. The impending reorganisation of local government, to come into effect in 1974, gave the DOE a further advantage in using its wide powers to take the lead in urban policy.* These factors coincided with the views of Peter Walker who set up a major review of urban policy.⁵ The review introduced the idea of practical expenditure-linked planning for the first time. Unfortunately, this became confined to transport, and, by default in all other areas of urban policy, the review led to the *Six Town Studies*.

In 1971 the stage was set for lifting urban deprivation action out of Home Office experiments and into main policy areas such as local government finance and concern for the economic base of the inner city. Of the three *Inner Area Studies* reports only the Liverpool volume suggests some of the events leading up to their work.⁶ This account is more detailed and places the *Studies* in a different perspective, and notes the crucial policy areas from which private consultants were excluded. I will begin with the Urban Policy Review carried out by the DOE, since it was the most important matter influencing events.

The conduct of that Review not only excluded the possibility of new programme grants for problem areas, but closed the doors on a vital new dialogue on finance between central and local government. Only in this context can the launching of the *Studies* and their subsequent lack of direction be fully understood. The Liverpool report also mentions my own work, but does not mention how my proposals to both Peter Walker and Tony Crosland differed from the approach taken by the DOE. I will say something about this. Finally, since it appears that these *Studies* are about to give way to further studies, I briefly refer to the difficulties experienced trying to re-establish some rationale for DOE intervention when, inevitably, the initiative passed back to the Home Office. Now, with the publication of Peter Shore's White Paper *Policy for the Inner Cities*,⁷ the initiative has returned to the DOE, but in

* In tackling the central problem of diminishing opportunities there are always arguments about whether it is more effective to concentrate on personal transfers or positive discrimination for areas. Both are important and both involve important anomalies in the delivery of local services. It is important to remember that in 1971 both policy approaches were under serious consideration. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Anthony [now Lord] Barber, was intending to introduce personal transfer reforms on a substantial scale through either tax credits or negative income tax. The cost would have been enormous and it would have taken many years work. More immediately a transfer of resources in terms of cash benefits would have had critical Exchequer limitations, and in itself could not provide people with *improved* access to better opportunities. The DOE's parallel interest in an Urban Programme directed at particular areas has to be seen as a counterpart to the Chancellor's general proposals.

implementing their policies Mr. Shore and the DOE will still have to overcome the serious obstacles revealed by past experience.

The Urban Policy Review

Edward Heath, the incoming Prime Minister in 1970, had placed official machinery in the Cabinet Office to coordinate overall departmental strategies. This embryonic capacity was intended to grow in influence as a key feature of the massive reorganisation of central government in 1971.⁸ The inability of the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS) to develop a strategic or co-ordinating capacity, the naiveties of the techniques then fashionable, and indeed the subsequent failure of central reorganisation is a neglected study in itself. At any rate, Prime Minister Edward Heath was dedicated to going about government in a 'business-like way' and graduates from the Harvard School of Business Studies seemed to be everywhere. The new functional re-grouping of ministries into 'super-departments' suggested that each had to devise clear policy objectives. An attempt was to be made at the DOE in 1971.

The DOE ministers and senior officials who met for a conference to set the ball rolling concluded that the various existing policies did not add up to a clear urban policy and that the traditional fragmentary way of dealing with problems was far from satisfactory. The 'Cardington Conference' decided to look for some form of urban 'auditing', a 'total approach' or 'guidelines' for the new urban districts, including a strategy for getting to grips with the worst problem areas. The first task for the DOE was to place these ambitions within a major review of existing policies and their resource implications. Because the DOE had been set up to bring together related functions and, among other things, to facilitate such analysis, this was an *internal* departmental review and it seems to be an unfortunate characteristic of internal reviews that they are more successful at inviting a defence of existing practice than developing new ideas and procedures. More profoundly for urban policy, none of the programmes inherited from the Ministry of Housing and Local Government had clear relevance to improving the economic environment. With succinct clarity, although regrettably after she had retired from the Ministry, Dame Evelyn [now Baroness] Sharp observed that 'economic policy is crucial to its [DOE's] priorities; and itself constitutes *the* priority . . . since prosperity matters more to people than anything else and anyway is the condition of improving the environment.'⁹ The DOE in 1971 did not see itself as a central policy department in the sense implied in Lady Sharp's comment, nor does it still.

The rather inconsequential outcome of the Urban Policy Review must be set against the growing concern of Ministers that un-related environmental measures were indeed counter-productive. For example, eminently sensible and reasonably successful measures, such as the previous Government's 1969 Housing Act, could also lead to unexpected and embarrassing consequences.¹⁰ The fundamental question was how to measure all separate policies against an overall framework relevant to financial controls. This proved too difficult and, in any event, was unlikely to recommend itself to civil servants traditionally cautious of such 'massive plans'; but for Ministers the urgency of the Review was enhanced by the timetable for local government reorganisation. Their concern to manage clearer policy was exacerbated by the desperate financial circumstances of many urban areas whose growing need for expensive services was made more critical by inflationary trends.

In terms of Ministerial input Peter Walker originally wanted to develop the concept of 'urban audits' to measure the impact of expenditure on urban problems. The point here was (and is) accountability. Every Environment Secretary's special problem is to depend largely on autonomous local authorities to execute government policies (which in total amount to about a third of total public expenditure). This dilemma was one of the main issues to be faced in proposals for a new Urban Programme. The provisional 'solution' for both political parties has been to centralise; taking more powers away from local government, while noisily

'defending' local democracy. Precisely the same dilemma had a direct bearing on the ability of Ministers to make sure newly defined 'supplementary' resources went to minority areas within local government areas—and were put to good effect! The main policy question was this: what type of financial dialogue could be developed in the arrangements between local government and central government departments without usurping local responsibilities?

Peter Walker's original idea of 'urban audits' was perhaps too crude and could have resulted in mere political gesturing for extra resources by local councils. My opinion was, and is, that the development of similar ideas of joint resource- or expenditure-linked planning with local government was the necessary financial principle linking environmental control with economic policy. Certainly this was the principle set out in the SNAP (Shelter Neighbourhood Action Project) proposals for supplementary expenditure in a recast Urban Programme.¹¹ The principle did flourish, albeit briefly, in the field of transport, but Peter Walker's ideas did not develop generally in this way. However, there is no doubt that he and his Ministers did expect some financial innovations before local government reorganisation which were not reflected in the conduct of the Review. Nothing much was to happen.

The inability of this enormous departmental Review to reach clear statements on urban policy was due to three reasons. First, prior concern for the economic environment was troublesome because it carried matters beyond the DOE's jurisdiction—and still does. Secondly, official attitudes about local government finance were inflexible—and still are. Thirdly, there was some expectation that the new town and country planning system could directly involve strategic funding and financial controls, whereas it could not—and still cannot. I believe these problems remain to jeopardise all Ministerial initiatives in urban areas.

The first difficulty, that of prior concern for the economic environment, was crucial. In reorganising a company, for instance, some thought might be given to the economic base of its component parts and how the new company would be financed. But throughout the long saga of Royal Commissions and White Papers prior to local government reorganisation (and during reorganisation itself) no appraisal was made of the economic environment or relevant financial controls. Tony Crosland's Layfield Inquiry into the financing of local government (also inconsequential and inconclusive) followed years later.¹² So the only relevant DOE policy instrument in this area of concern was to be the Rate Support Grant (RSG), a fairly passive response to local demands and in many ways a subsidy for addictive services. While the DOE acts as a secretariat, as it were, for a number of spending departments, central government merely restricts its influence to making money available.

The £6000 million a year RSG settlement accounts for over fifty per cent of local government expenditure, but any direct relationship between this vast redistribution of resources and coherent measures designed to renew the economic base of cities was, and is, rather fortuitous. This passive response tends to limit the DOE's own concern for the economic environment as such. Other large spending departments more directly concerned with employment, incomes and industry have their own peculiar principles for the random distribution of largesse, and go their separate ways. Naturally, the DOE's Urban Policy Review did not venture into the jurisdiction of other departments and so matters of employment and income were not seen as a central feature of urban policy or expenditure planning.

The second difficulty was the rigid dedication of officials to the sacrosanct philosophy of local autonomy said to be enshrined in the block grant (RSG). This stood as a solid obstacle to consideration of expenditure-linked planning or new supplementary programme grants. The argument was, and is, that while any particular grant settlement in aid of current expenditure implies overall growth rates, and central policy about growth (or otherwise) in certain fields, the settlement is not designed to encourage individual authorities to undertake specific improvements in problem areas—or at all. Faced with the slightest departure from

the gloss of local autonomy, the likelihood of an angry reaction from the local authority associations was, and is, a powerful official argument for the status quo.

In the RSG system one national formula is meant to cater for the needs of diverse areas but, of course, never does. In reality, the whole principle of local autonomy is over-simplified and has masked an inexorable drift of power to Whitehall. Indeed, total reliance on a refined calculus in which every source of varying need can be reflected in central grant is quite clearly incompatible with either efficiency or local independence. But such attitudes exclude a down-graded local government, responsible for a third of public expenditure, from a sensible dialogue with the Treasury about joint resource planning of overall expenditure. They also exclude expenditure-linked planning for exceptional problems, or tasks, or any more sensitive response to urban problems.

The third and final matter blocking progress towards urban audits or the total approach was the reaction of the planners. They had squandered the more prosperous 1960s in an academic debate about land-use planning, aspiring to make it some comprehensive system of governmental decision-making. This development had shown almost no regard for actual political and financial controls or the prevailing realities of management in central or local governments. The trend was consolidated in interpretations of the 1968 and 1971 Town and Country Planning Acts. By such standards there was really no need for the Urban Policy Review at all. Nominally, the new Structure Plans would provide the main lever for overall urban strategy and a framework ensuring that the total approach was worked out in local action.

Clearly, the difficulty was to get any other part of the governmental system to take much notice. The DOE held that Regional Plans, or Strategies, would relate the management of the economy to every other level of town and country planning. This was such an over-simplification as to be totally misleading but, again, such attitudes blocked consideration of realistic shorter-term planning linked to expenditure proposals. Had town planners not been so arrogant, the new Development Plan System could have formed a useful background for much more effective expenditure-linked action.

These three difficulties crippled the development of a productive internal review prior to the 'pilot studies'. Only in the field of transport, which remained somewhat apart from the review procedure, was some progress made towards a new financial dialogue with local government. Here it was considered possible to envisage some type of expenditure-based plan, although it was accepted that its preparation would not be easy, despite a great deal of existing groundwork on developing techniques and changing attitudes. In the field of housing, a few officials believed that there was a clear need for such a form of planning if new measures were to lead to coherent policy. In terms of the more general urban fabric, there was also an early measure of support for expenditure-based planning, although it was admitted that progress would be more difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, a minority of senior officials believed such an approach to be both valid and even essential. Appropriate arrangements in the financial field, it was held, could do much to give reality to a more planned total approach.

This early advice could not be taken due to the strongly held attitudes described. In early 1972, Ministers were advised that it would take at least several years to begin to look at such developments in terms of general urban policy. I believe this advice was wrong; even if it had been correct, consistent progress in staff work might have prepared some financial framework for the Ministerial urban initiatives of today. As it was the Urban Policy Review became a shambles and noise of it leaked through Whitehall and beyond. Meetings between Junior Ministers and outside experts, well known private consultants, academics and the like were arranged; nobody knew what to do, but something had to happen. Peter Walker had come to the conclusion that outside contractors were essential. He had only two years left before the reorganisation of local government.

The Launch

The *Inner Area Studies* reports suggest their work followed a reply to a question in the House of Commons on 26 July 1972.¹³ In fact, the Ministerial initiative had been taken in the Budget Debate four months earlier. Under the rubric of 'a total approach to the urban problem' Peter Walker used the debate to introduce ideas for expenditure-linked planning in transport.¹⁴ The variety of local grants were to be merged, he said, and the new counties would have to provide comprehensive plans to justify their expenditure. (These were to become 'Transport Policies and Programmes', originally the rationale for 'Transport Supplementary Grant'). In other areas of urban policy, efforts to coordinate fragmented decision-making would be looked at in six pilot studies involving local government and the DOE. He went on to say that the working group in each of the six towns would be headed by a DOE Minister. He wrote to SNAP 'we must try to make a start somewhere.'

Was Ministerial chairmanship a device for involving policy directing levels in Whitehall, or even in the DOE? If so, it did not work. Whatever the answer to that question, Peter Walker gives the following account. 'I decided that this was not an enquiry that should be in the hands of officials, because I felt that it was important that from the beginning politicians, and politicians with power, should be immersed in the study'.¹⁵ Whether or not this was entirely a Ministerial initiative, it certainly ran ahead of the ability of the civil service to deliver. On the other hand, Whitehall had no intention of 'handing over' to outside consultants; the announcement was considered 'premature'; the problem would be 'thinking of things to do'.

Later, however, three management consultants were hired for *Urban Guideline Studies* at Oldham, Sunderland and Rotherham.¹⁶ Three town planning consultants were additionally employed to study environmental problems of the inner urban areas of Birmingham, Liverpool and Lambeth.¹⁷ One small division within one directorate of the DOE was to act as a secretariat for the studies; no serious internal arrangements were made to involve other DOE directorates dealing with housing or finance—let alone other central government departments.

The Guideline Studies, under the chairmanship of the Junior Ministers, looked as if they could be put between covers in six months. Because the *Inner Area Studies* were to involve 'action projects' (again), they would necessarily take much longer. Progress would depend on the enthusiasm of local government! All my own energies had been directed to avoiding just such an approach. In this respect, my own proposals may have been unrealistic for Ministers lacking political support or whose position at the head of vast new central departments could limit knowledge of all the machinery ostensibly under their control—or what they could get out of it! But the issue was clear enough: we needed to define operational techniques for new funding principles for urban recovery.

In all this, other central spending departments were crucially involved. So was the caution of the civil servants justified? By Whitehall standards the answer will be, yes! Policy directors wield immense power in public affairs under their control, but this same power is self-cancelling when dealing with other autonomous departments and their own colleagues' in-built resistance to change. Given the 'spiritual distance' of the DOE from all matters of economic policy and rigid attitudes in key policy areas, the pilot studies were certain to be considered 'premature'. The millions spent would be justified by the simple formula 'we spend some money and we may learn something'. All academics will applaud such a formula as they scramble for money from the latest DOE research brief.¹⁸

It is beyond dispute that the real opportunities for adapting DOE and other main programmes had been missed, or avoided, before the consulting firms got their briefs in 1972. I had agreed to help, so I could say nothing. As late as 20 March 1973, when under pressure in the House, Ministers referred to the Studies as a source of new ideas for local government

finance.¹⁹ Apparently they were unaware that the work of the DOE (and the consultants' work with local authorities) was not organised on any such basis. Indeed, in 1973 the Environment Ministers were told that they could not include innovations in local government finance bills.²⁰ As a national programme on a pilot basis it was all over. Mr Heath gave overall responsibility for urban problems and 'community relations' to the Home Office.

The Fight for Policy Content and Action

The inner city could not be considered on its own and coherent action had to be perceived in terms of finance or not at all. In 1971/72 we were on the brink of expenditure-linked planning but constantly up against Whitehall's failure to respond. The *Liverpool Inner Area Study* report mentions SNAP as a direct influence promoting the 1972 initiative.²¹ Without venturing into detailed proposals, SNAP's ideas were essentially different from those of the DOE. As early as 1970, I had concluded that local authorities should bid for supplementary resources on the basis of joint programmes and comprehensive plans.²² Initially this approach would encourage local authorities to think deeply about concerted action linking up normal municipal and development functions to short term programmes beyond their usual concern in areas such as employment. Bidding for finance was also the only motivation for local organisational changes, 'area management' and the like.

These proposals raised unpopular questions about how central government would handle bids for inner city supplementary finance. A new Supplementary Programme Grant was needed, where the urgent questions would be: orders of magnitude; principles for the operation and control of grants; and inter-departmental machinery for the assessment of bids. Specific answers could only emerge from a wide review of central strategic controls, which the DOE was not disposed to promote. Any strategy also demanded a sensible way of clearly relating the many 'priority' activities in the most difficult areas to priority action elsewhere. We had to find a funding definition for all highly selective activities, a financial framework for the otherwise senseless proliferation of un-coordinated, ad hoc special measures and agencies deployed across urban regions.

My proposals amounted to central government inter-departmental machinery to assess bids alongside local government in a supplementary regional fund that paralleled the Public Expenditure Survey Committee (PESC) system. Again the basic idea was relatively simple. Local government would initially put forward spending programmes, with implications for all relevant central departments, for the discussion of priorities, the commitment of capital investment and allocation of supplementary funding. The proposition posed clear questions: all authorities or only some; all Exchequer money or only some; all programmes or only some; and, if 'only some', then which, and how much? Finally, how did existing operations match this idea; how could they be adapted to it? The DOE continually ignored proposals framed in this way.

All action depends on spending. The questions posed in the paragraph above were not only a matter for urgent review, but a matter for continuous review as an essential financial dialogue between local government and central government departments. The SNAP Report tried to convey the flavour of this: 'a highly innovative Urban Programme could result, complementary to the normal functions of local government but not usurping its statutory powers—testing alternative courses of *action* for their generative effects within an overall strategic programme'.²³ Such proposals saw the gradual development of expenditure-linked planning as 'the cutting edge of change' sensibly relating attempts to improve the economic base of the worst urban areas to other main programmes of urban and regional regeneration.

My emphasis on a national programme on a *pilot* basis was perhaps a weakness, because it

is always more easy to set up new local 'experiments' or 'studies' than to contemplate doing something about anomalies in central policy. But the SNAP campaign for pilot areas placed all such work in the context of strategic reviews of funding in Whitehall. 'Action programmes' with local government were intended as an 'earth contact', stimulating, testing and informing the build up of positive policy at the centre. The attractive political capital of local pilot schemes was no disqualifying defect so long as progress was also being made in Whitehall. Indeed, it was clear that local pilot schemes could not work in any other way. The management dedication of local councils and the interest of local people could only be enlisted if government was seriously investigating new policies in financial terms. This it refused to do and all such advice was ignored by Whitehall. In spite of the fact that the DOE's own Urban Policy Review had exhausted its remedies, officials were only interested in proposals their specific division, directorate or department could handle; for them it was not possible to perceive problems or actions that did not fit the existing bureaucratic structure.

The DOE certainly did not subscribe to any regional dimension for special purpose funding, nor could it envisage any a priori involvement with other central departments. But the proper management of the proposed Supplementary Programme Grant necessarily implied that the then departments of Trade and Industry and of Employment would be involved in considering problems of the economic bases of areas. However, it was felt this would 'waste time'; the DOE wanted to concentrate on the physical environment, and this limitation ruled out any plan for sensibly inter-related action in urban regions. The Department rejected the notion that the definition of special purpose finance could sensibly inter-relate action across urban regions because, *nominally*, this remained a matter for regional and structure planning; and any special funding cut across the RSG philosophy.

Enlisting the help of the then Shadow Minister, Tony Crosland, did not take matters much further. He did not know of an adequate town planning machinery at any level that would be considered relevant to Treasury control. He was also, I think, aware of the difficulties of saying so. At SNAP, and at Labour Party Conferences, he generally favoured dealing with urban problems by varying the Needs Element in RSG, but would always add that he kept an open mind on the subject. Much later, as Secretary of State for the Environment, and thus in charge of the *Studies*, he regrettably came to no conclusion.

My own conclusion in 1972 was that real progress towards more coherent urban funding would depend on Treasury or Cabinet Office initiatives. Whitehall departments consistently registered a *strategy gap* on all matters relating environmental policy to the management of the economy. Traditional organisational roles precluded even a clear perception of this problem or the ability of any part of government to do much about it. In this respect at least, the civil service of Sir William Armstrong was unable to be innovative; even a Permanent Secretary at the head of a large department could feel profoundly powerless. Essentially, the DOE carried on the traditions of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government: guarding the physical environment as such. Pondering such matters on the day he retired, a very senior civil servant rather sadly remarked to me 'we [the DOE] are really a department for a bit of housing and for hearing planning appeals'. That may be an exaggeration, even for the post-1976 truncated DOE with the severance of the Department of Transport, but the spirit of this summary view rang true when it came to marshalling any real concern for the economic environment.

Before joining the DOE on the *Six Town Studies* I had published proposals to reinforce the machinery already established in the Cabinet Office for pioneering strategic funding reviews, and thereby the means of inter-relating the efforts of central departments.²⁴ This approach had stood little chance with the DOE or other departments primarily obsessed with their own autonomy. Set attitudes were not going to shift, and it was unable to coordinate a strategic funding of urban and regional regeneration in ways accountable to local government, the Treasury and Parliament. Just as accountability for strategic action will

remain a dominant theme of political life over the next decade, so inevitably debate on what is popularly called the 'urban problem' must point to such profound issues. The debate points directly to the 'strategy gap' that increasingly distances innovative politicians from the civil service. From the Haldane Report of 1918, through Plowden and Fulton, the same sort of 'strategy gap' appears, in almost similar terms, up to its most recent expression in the Reorganisation White Paper.²⁵ CPRS and the No. 10 Policy Unit are respectively the most recent departmental and political 'solutions' of a very provisional nature. But there are no strategic functions without strategic funding. The problem of the cities reflects such unresolved dilemmas at the centre of the governmental machine.

Sequel

An extensive review of the SNAP proposals in *The Times* suggested that we had directed our attention along the right lines, but asked 'could a central task force [under the Cabinet Office] be effective in securing the practical co-operation of large departments of state?' In the reviewer's opinion 'this co-operation will never be achieved without political will at the top'.²⁶ With Mr. Geoffrey Rippon's arrival as Secretary of State for the Environment in late 1972 these all seemed esoteric matters; he did not want to change much. Because the *Studies* were not directed around funding principles, the dedicated interest of local government was lost. The six projects concentrated on too widely varying aspects of the 'urban problem', partly because of differences in approach by private consultants, partly because the concerns of local authority members and officers differed and partly because of differences in the situations of the six areas chosen. All the projects were kept away from central policy issues and were largely forgotten as an item of DOE business before the Home Secretary, Robert [now Lord] Carr, made his 'take-over' bid in 1973.

The Home Secretary's new initiative could have been beneficial because he was capitalising on an inter-departmental review of the Home Office's Urban Programme. The Treasury had insisted on the review as a condition of increasing the Home Office Programme. The original intention was to seek clearer funding principles by closely involving all departments including CPRS. However, real progress would have had to involve the full participation of the Department of the Environment, which remained determined to exclude matters of financial controls and local government finance from the review's consideration. As a Cabinet-authorized review there was nominal participation, but generally the DOE anticipated that the Home Office and CPRS would soon become overwhelmed by their topic.

The outcome was for a new programme grant based on comprehensive local proposals. These 'Comprehensive Community Programmes', announced by Mr Roy Jenkins (the incoming Labour Home Secretary) in July 1974,²⁷ had to be just more limited 'experiments' due to the DOE's lack of interest, or help, on principles for operation and control. The real opportunity missed by the DOE was in its failure to provide a financial framework and to have allowed the Comprehensive Community Programmes to develop as a financial basis for all such supplementary funding. Again, this would have been contrary to expressed DOE principles of local autonomy in finance and its unwillingness to be involved with other spending departments in a strategic programme.

With Mr. Shore's Manchester speech on 17 September 1976 the pendulum of popular rhetoric swung back to the problems of the 'inner city'. The *Inner Area Studies* reports were rescued from obscurity, given the 'kiss of life' and put between glossy covers as supporting evidence for yet another Ministerial initiative. Of course, the Studies have added to knowledge, but their real test can only be their influence on government. Neither the Studies themselves nor the subsequent White Paper *Policy for the Inner Cities* begin to address themselves to difficulties that have always stood in the way of a strategic response. So

persistent are these obstacles that all the Ministerial urban initiatives over the past decade may just add up to a growing poverty-industrial-complex of academic debate. This diverts attention from government itself and from fears that the 'welfare route' taken by many cities is part of that governmental system. In this sense, the apparently endless history of experimental action might all be classified as cosmetics or law-and-order programmes.

Serious questions arise. There is the theory that the governmental apparatus which served the growth of urban society well enough, can cope with the negative results of growth and now with the prospect of permanent large scale unemployment in specific areas. For many, any other theory is 'thinking the unthinkable' because alternatives to traditional ideas of growth remain beyond any political and institutional spectrum. Nevertheless, such profound anxieties will haunt us through the next economic miracle, and various cosmetics will continue to be applied in an effort to keep the 'under-classes' patient.

In the meantime it could not be a bad thing if some central urban strategy emerged to improve governmental accountability in relatively traditional ways. In 1970 the Government attempted to bridge the central 'strategy gap' in Whitehall, but failed.²⁸ Apparently we learned nothing. In 1972 we were on the brink of expenditure-linked planning where local government and the Treasury might have made some progress. Even that was discouraged. The whole idea of a coherent Urban Programme with a dominant interest in the economic base and the improvement of incomes has seemed over-radical and beyond the limits of autonomous central departments. Endless study of urban decline and experimental action cannot evade the issue that government itself is the main problem.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 A brief account of the SNAP proposals is given in McConaghy, Des, 'SNAP: An Urban Programme' in Cox, Margaret and Brand, Janet (Eds.), *The Urban Planning Crisis: Social Problems and Planning*, London, Royal Town Planning Institute, 1975, pp. 33-42. See also: *SNAP 69-72: Another Chance for Cities*, London, Shelter, 1972

2 Secretary of State for the Environment, *Policy for the Inner Cities*, Cmnd. 6845, London, HMSO, 1977

3 *Ibid.*, paras. 41, 62-65

4 *Ibid.*, para. 45

5 *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)*, Fifth Series—Volume 833, House of Commons Official Report, Session 1971-72, 23 March 1972, col. 1968

6 Wilson, Hugh and Womersley, Lewis, Roger Tym and Associates and Jamieson McKay and Partners for the Department of the Environment, *Change or Decay: Final Report of the Liverpool Inner Area Study*, London, HMSO, 1977, pp. 1-7

7 *Policy for the Inner Cities*, op. cit.

8 The Prime Minister and Minister for the Civil Service, *The Reorganisation of Central Government*, Cmnd. 4506, London, HMSO, 1970

9 Sharp, Evelyn, 'Super Ministry: The First Steps', *Built Environment*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (April 1972), pp. 22-26

10 For instance, see *Home Improvement: People or Profit?*, London, Shelter, 1972

11 *SNAP 69-72: Another Chance for Cities*, op. cit., section 9

12 *Local Government Finance* (The Layfield Report), Cmnd. 6453, London, HMSO, May 1976

13 Wilson, Hugh and Womersley, Lewis et al., *Change or Decay*, op. cit., p. 6; Llewelyn-Davies, Weeks, Forestier-Walker and Bor for the Department of the Environment, *Unequal City: Final Report of the Birmingham Inner Area Study*, London HMSO, 1977, Appendix 1, p. 222; Peter Walker's announcement of the commissioning of the studies is recorded in *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)*, Fifth Series—Volume 841, House of Commons Official Report, Session 1971-72, 26 July 1972, cols. 319-320

14 *Parliamentary Debates*, 23 March 1972, op. cit., cols. 319-20

15 Walker, Peter, *The Ascent of Britain*, London, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1977, p. 129

16 Their reports were later published under the general heading of 'Making Towns Better': *The Oldham Study: Environmental Planning and Management*, London, HMSO, 1973; *The Rotherham Study: Vol. 1: Improving the Physical Environment, Vol. 2: Technical Appendices*, London, HMSO, 1973; *The Sunderland Study: Vol. 1: Tackling Urban Problems: A Basic Handbook, Vol. 2: Tackling Urban Problems: A Working Guide*, London, HMSO, 1973

17 The three principal town planning consultants were: Llewelyn-Davies, Weeks, Forestier-Walker and Bor for the Birmingham Study; the Shankland Cox Partnership for the Lambeth Study; and Wilson and Womersley for the Liverpool Study

18 Department of the Environment, 'Brief for External Research on Inner City Areas', London, DOE, June 1977

19 *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)*, Fifth Series—Volume 853, House of Commons Official Report, Session 1972–1973, 20 March 1973, col. 277 (Mr Graham Page, Minister for Local Government and Development) and col. 310 (Mr Eldon Griffiths, Parliamentary Under-Secretary)

20 The only innovation in the 1973 Local Government Bill on finance was a clause for making regulations about altering the RSG formula.

21 Wilson, Hugh and Womersley, Lewis, *Change or Decay*, op. cit., p. 5

22 McConaghy, Des, 'SNAP: An Urban Programme', op. cit.; and *Another Chance for Cities*, op. cit.

23 *Another Chance for Cities*, op. cit., section 6

24 *Ibid.*, section 9

25 *The Reorganisation of Central Government*, op. cit.

26 Smith, Geoffrey, 'Who Can Drive the Machinery of Help?', *The Times*, 1 February 1973

27 *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)*, Fifth Series—Volume 877, House of Commons Official Report, Session 1974, 18 July 1974, cols. 649–51. The Home Secretary also included (cols. 651–52) an outline of his approach in the Official Report. The Comprehensive Community Programmes were also briefly mentioned in adjournment debates (*Parliamentary Debates*—878) on urban deprivation (cols. 237–53) and city planning (cols. 324–35) early on the morning of 29 July 1974

28 *The Reorganisation of Central Government*, op. cit.