

## ESSAY REVIEW

### LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

THE NUMBER of publications banned in South Africa is legion. Running a close second — or so it often seems to this reviewer — is the growing number of titles about that country and its neighbours which, under pretext of scholarship are, in fact, compounded of superficial analysis and blinkered partisanship.<sup>1</sup> The volume reviewed here<sup>2</sup> is not likely to be banned (although it deserves to be for the appalling number of printing errors), but I have no hesitation in consigning it, firmly, to the second category. A mere catalogue of the book's defects would make for poor reading, admittedly, and would expose the reviewer to the charge of compounding the felony, so to speak; but local government has a prouder history and a deeper significance than will ever be apparent if one's reading is restricted to this volume.<sup>3</sup>

There is a more personal interest that has helped me to struggle through these bland, boring and ill-conceived chapters, and still feel disposed to write about them afterwards. In 1970 the editors invited me to contribute a chapter on local government in Rhodesia. Local government in a number of forms certainly existed in Rhodesia, but virtually nothing beyond formal description of certain municipalities had been published, and a search of the National Archives in Salisbury revealed hardly anything of contemporary relevance. To produce one relatively short chapter, therefore, would have required a major project, which the publishers' deadline precluded. I remained very interested, nevertheless, in the volume that would emerge, particularly as the state of knowledge and research about local government elsewhere in Southern Africa seemed similar to that described with regard to Rhodesia.

I had thought, naively, that the editors shared these concerns; it is now obvious that they had a different agenda in mind. Nevertheless the title invites one to take the book at its face value, and ask how successful it is as an attempt to survey the general characteristics of local government in ten different countries. It is immediately apparent that the very scheme of the book has a fundamental flaw. The editors have insisted on including something on each country (although Angola and Mozambique are lumped together as 'Portuguese Africa'), and something on all past and present institutions of local government and administration worthy of the name within them. This intention is then qualified by their policy of dividing South Africa and Rhodesia into 'White' and 'Black' areas, and giving a rough equality of

<sup>1</sup> To take two recent examples, A. Humbaraci and N. Muchnik, *Portugal's African Wars* (London, Macmillan, 1974) and P. Joyce, *Anatomy of a Rebel: Smith of Rhodesia* (Salisbury, Graham Publishing, 1974).

<sup>2</sup> W. B. Vosloo, D. A. Kotze and W. J. O. Jeppe (eds), *Local Government in Southern Africa* (Pretoria, Academia, 1974), 291pp, Rh\$10.35.

<sup>3</sup> As evidence one could select A. Maas (ed.), *Area and Power* (Glencoe, The Free Press, 1959); R. Wraith, *Local Administration in West Africa* (London, G. Allen and Unwin, 2nd edit., 1972); and L. J. Sharpe, 'Theories and values of local government', *Political Studies* (1970), 18, 153-74. *The New Local Authorities: Management and Structure. Report of a Study Group . . .* (London, H.M.S.O., 1972), illustrates contemporary ideas about local government organisation.

space to each category. Presumably the object was to achieve some kind of balance with the unspoken premise of a 'balanced view'. The results, however, disclose just the opposite. Vosloo on South West Africa cannot find anything about local government specifically, until the fourteenth of the nineteen pages making up his chapter, and even then his attention is devoted almost entirely to urban institutions in a predominantly rural country. Kotze on contemporary Lesotho has no more to offer: 'Responsible elected local government' in the shape of district councils established in 1959, was abolished in 1968, and 'urban areas are so diminutive that they are unable to support local authorities financially': the rather lame conclusion follows that 'no devolution of powers is envisaged by the government' (pp.120, 125). A lengthier and more critical examination of Swaziland by I. E. Butler reaches an equally damaging conclusion: 'In particular rural local government quite apart from the political difficulties described (changes would be strongly opposed by the Swazi National Council and chiefs) cannot progress. Independent Swaziland is still finding its feet and it is not clear to what extent changes proposed will be acceptable' (pp. 180-1).

Even more disastrous is the chapter on the then Portuguese territories, where the institutions of colonial rule, described very inadequately by J. L. Torres, hardly fit the editors' definition of 'a local political process analytically separate from the nation-wide political process'. And no matter that there is no attempt to bring material up to date, i.e. beyond 1960, or to acquaint the reader with the work of municipal councils in the larger towns of Angola and Mocambique as reported in local newspapers. No matter that only the most general description, and one that can be found from reading the appropriate legislation, has been provided. Something has been said about two of the largest countries in Southern Africa and that is what matters to the editors.

Yet the truth about local government is that it flourishes in some countries, and in parts of one country, and is dormant or defunct in others; even a general survey of its characteristics ought to give expression to these differences in some logical manner.

Part of the trouble is that none of the editors, nor of the other contributors, appear to have been members or officials of any representative local government body, and so have never been responsible (at whatever level of authority) to some group of people for carrying out local services. Some experiences of this sort would have generated a feel for the 'stuff' of local government politics and processes that is totally absent from the volume. We never learn how a local authority works, what sort of people are members, what the local inhabitants (of any race or nationality) think about their own administration, or even what the central governments themselves think about it. All these aspects, mark you, are descriptive, and do not involve 'theories' — something that the editors eschew. In short, who (again, of any race or nationality) after reading the book would be interested in participating in local government, let alone be led to believe that any of the variety of systems presented here offers anything of value for political, social or economic development?

Not that I am castigating the editors because of some failure to recognise the prescriptive side to public administration. Indeed these three Afrikaner academics cannot be faulted on that score, their dislike of 'theory' notwithstanding. The medicine is clearly labelled, and the signature is not hard to decipher. South Africa is divided into 'White' and 'Black' areas, a natural phenomenon that finds expression in the Republic's political institutions. The 'Black' areas are the Bantu Homelands within which the development of local administrative bodies foreshadows complete separation from the rest of the country as sovereign, independent states. The Transkei is far advanced

along the path already, Bophutatswana less so but with the same goal in mind. Both will take their place as 'Black-ruled' areas, alongside Lesotho, Botswana and other former colonial territories. Or so the argument runs, the argument for separate development that is. To supply some intellectual credibility for this policy is the task of the Stellenbosch alumni, and hence the real purpose of this book. Of course the editors know very well that the development of genuine local bodies — representative, financially viable and with wills of their own<sup>4</sup> — is not a high priority for the rulers of Swaziland, Rhodesia or Zambia. The highly centralised nature of decision-making in these regimes is too well known. Nor can the editors be unaware that the institutions in the region showing the closest resemblance to such a model are the White-run municipalities of Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town and Salisbury, which have administrative capability, financial strength and political influence quite beyond the imaginings of any of those 'native' authorities to which this book devotes so much of its attention.

Despite its title and list of contents, this is not a book that has very much to do with local government. What concerns the editors is South African politics and in particular the Nationalist Government's apartheid policy. In Vosloo's own words:

Generally speaking it seems that the development of local self-government of Natives residing in white urban areas is designed to proceed within the framework of the South African government's policy in terms of which political rights and power must be exercised by the Native groups within their respective homelands and not within the area of the white group (p.117).

Exactly. Or one can make a check on the type of sources relied on by the nine contributors, and discover that expressions of public opinion and group interests — as recorded in Parliament, press or the proceedings of the local authorities themselves — have been almost totally ignored. The one reference to South African Parliamentary proceedings cited in the text concerns 'Bantu Areas' and was made 24 years ago. Administration is a matter of implementing the law: institutions have validity only in so far as they continue to give effect to the law. For the Afrikaner theoretician, as for his Marxist counterpart, ideology is everything, the individual nothing.

Local government cannot guarantee individual liberty. Nor can it claim much success in the fields of economic and social development, as recent experience in Botswana demonstrates.<sup>5</sup> And its costs are high: a supply of finance, and manpower, and technical and administrative expertise that few developing countries can afford, a degree of autonomy and diversity that only the more representative of governments can allow. Rather, the ruling party is likely to favour local-level institutions for what these may contribute to national strength and the reinforcement of their own position. For, if there is one common goal that binds these nine disparate regimes of Southern Africa together, it is survival — whether for the protection of a privileged elite, consolidating a tenuous legitimacy, or simply, *pace* President Banda, keeping afloat. Given these centralising tendencies, it is too much to expect local government to do anything except hold its own in the (mainly) urban

<sup>4</sup> See A. H. Marshall, *Local Government in the Modern World* (London, Athlone Press, 1965), 5.

<sup>5</sup> W. Tordoff, 'Local administration in Botswana', *Journal of Administration Overseas* (1973), 12, 1972-83; (1974), 13, 293-304.

environment. By so doing, it will continue to demonstrate that important societal values are enshrined within its mundane processes: participation, reconciliation of interests, community self-reliance, the sharing of power not its monopoly.<sup>6</sup> It may be worth remembering that back in 1963, the Municipal Council of Bulawayo took the initiative in recommending elected African representation to its membership, and the creation of one community out of a racially-divided population.<sup>7</sup> Nothing was forthcoming because the Government could not tolerate local alternatives to national policy. Yet administration without the possibility of choice is an invitation to incompetence, repression and, ultimately, self-destruction.

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<sup>6</sup> See Sharpe, 'Theories and values of local government'.

<sup>7</sup> G. C. Passmore, *Local Government Legislation in Southern Rhodesia* (Salisbury, Univ. Coll. of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, 1966), 8-9.