



GOVERNMENT BEYOND THE CENTRE

SERIES EDITOR: GERRY STOKER

**LOCAL
GOVERNMENT
IN SCOTLAND
REFORM OR DECLINE?**

Arthur Midwinter



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The world of sub-central government and administration – including local authorities, quasi-governmental bodies and the agencies of public-private partnerships – has seen massive changes in recent years and is at the heart of the current restructuring of government in the United Kingdom and other Western democracies.

The intention of the *Government Beyond the Centre* series is to bring the study of this often-neglected world into the mainstream of social science research, applying the spotlight of critical analysis to what has traditionally been the preserve of institutional public administration approaches.

Its focus is on the agenda of change currently being faced by sub-central government, the economic, political and ideological forces that underlie it, and the structures of power and influence that are emerging. Its objective is to provide up-to-date and informative accounts of the new forms of government, management and administration that are emerging.

The series will be of interest to students and practitioners of politics, public and social administration, and all those interested in the reshaping of the governmental institutions which have a daily and major impact on our lives.



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Local Government in Scotland

Reform or Decline?

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*For my wife Jean
a truly generous spirit*

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Foreword

*Councillor Eric Milligan, Convener,
Lothian Regional Council*

In 210 BC, the Roman historian Petronius observed of his experience of the Roman Army:

we trained hard . . . but every time we were beginning to form up into teams we would be reorganised. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganising; and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralisation.

The recent history of local government has been exactly analogous to this. At the time of the reorganisation of local government in 1975, there existed a broad consensus that change was required. A widespread and genuine enthusiasm for the proposed restructuring into regions and districts was apparent, and the new system was imbued with the confidence that many of the emerging problems of urban and rural development could be addressed successfully by means of the powers and responsibilities of the new local councils.

Unfortunately, these hopes and aspirations have been substantially dulled by extensive and continual intervention by central government. The obsessive determination to control and constrain the public sector which grew in the early 1980s has been justified on the basis of the control of public spending, and the perceived need to make our public organisations more accountable. The style and approach which has been adopted by central government in its declared intention of achieving these ends, however, has had the direct effect of reducing the effectiveness of the public sector bodies subjected to this treatment, and undermining belief and confidence in the public sector as a whole, and local government in particular. I fear that it may be some considerable time before that confidence is restored.

The successful operation of the current system of local government, therefore, has been achieved despite the attentions of central government, and is largely attributable to the inherent qualities of