



# The Library Committee in the United Kingdom

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IT IS DOUBTFUL that there is any area of public library administration in which British and American traditions and practices differ as widely as that of library government. On the main objectives of the modern public library and the organizational methods appropriate for their attainment there is little, if any, real divergence of opinion in the Anglo-American public library world, and indeed there is a remarkable measure of professional agreement on such matters as the need for reorganization of units of service on more rational lines, for supra-local sources of financial support, and for more effective application of minimum standards of service. The most recently issued statements on these and other matters by the national professional associations on both sides of the Atlantic show this: the American Library Association's *Public Library Service* (1956)<sup>1</sup> and the Library Association's *Memorandum of Evidence to be laid before the Committee appointed by the Minister of Education . . .* (1958).<sup>2</sup> In other words, the Anglo-American public library world shows increasing signs of becoming one world, and this is perhaps not surprising in view of ever-increasing professional contact and the cross-fertilizing effect of transatlantic professional opinion over the past quarter of a century, of which the pioneering work of men like Carleton B. Joeckel<sup>3</sup> and Lionel R. McColvin<sup>4</sup> provides a striking example.

In at least one respect, however, this considerable measure of agreement is surprising. In the area of government of the public library, the British and American systems (if either can be so described) are poles apart. The library "committee" in the United Kingdom does correspond functionally to the library "board" in the United States; however, little but confusion would result in the mind of the American

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observer of the British scene if he were to conclude from this similarity in function that they are very much the same thing. They are not, and in order to understand why this is so, something must first be said about the committee system in British local government and the place of the public library committee within that system.

Although the local authorities throughout the United Kingdom now display a fair measure of uniformity as far as their functions are concerned, there are still important differences in legal origins and constitution between the authorities in England and Wales on the one hand and in Scotland on the other, with those of Northern Ireland also displaying local characteristics, resulting largely from their statutory powers' being derived from the Parliament of Northern Ireland rather than from the United Kingdom Parliament at Westminster. The differences between the local authorities in England and Wales and in Scotland are explained by the fact that "in these countries local government had different origins and has developed independently and along different lines."<sup>5</sup> Local government, in the sense of local self-government, has had a long and vigorous history in the United Kingdom, particularly in England, and some evidence of this can be seen in the early creation and subsequent longevity of institutions of local government in the English colonies in North America in the seventeenth century. Yet, as Warren explains in his excellent introduction to English local government, *The English Local Government System*, "Except in a sense so narrow as to be negligible, Local Authorities are not legislative bodies. They are executive bodies exercising powers, or discharging duties, given to them by Parliament, as the sovereign legislative assembly; and the rule is virtually absolute that they may exercise no powers at all except such as Parliament has given."<sup>6</sup> British local authorities are then, in the lawyers' phrase, "creatures of statute" and insofar as their present-day constitution and status are concerned they have been created by Parliament (by the Parliament of Northern Ireland in the cases of the local authorities in that part of the United Kingdom), and have had placed upon their shoulders by Parliament certain powers by which they may meet their responsibilities in the provision of local services. Some of these services they must provide; others are optional. The public library service, as in almost every other part of the world, outside the Scandinavian countries, is among the latter. It is not the least of the achievements of British local government over the past hundred years that, despite this optional nature of the service, less than one per cent of the popu-

lation of the United Kingdom is living in local government areas not provided with a tax-supported public library.

The Local Government (England and Wales) Act, 1933, "provides that a local authority may appoint a committee for any general or special purpose as in its opinion would be better regulated and managed by means of a committee"<sup>7</sup> and, as far as public libraries and most other optional services are concerned, this is still the main governing statute. In the case of committees which the local authority is compelled to set up, usually in connection with the regulation and management of a service which the authorities must provide, such as education and certain welfare services, special provision is made in statutes dealing with those particular services. Thus a distinction has been established between "permissive" and "statutory" (compulsory) committees in British local government,<sup>8</sup> but this is of little significance in considering actual committee operations. Whether the service concerned is one that the authority *may* provide or one that it *must* provide, it is generally valid to say that "the Local Authorities have been thus free to manage their own households."<sup>9</sup> In the case of the local government of the public library service, some form of local committee has been set up by every authority concerned. There is, indeed, the rather peculiar circumstance that in Scotland, under an Act dating back to 1887 which is still in force, the burghs (cities and towns) must appoint a library committee, if they provide a public library service, and in Northern Ireland also, under an Act of 1924, county councils adopting the Public Libraries Acts, "are obliged to appoint a county library committee for the purpose of carrying the Acts into execution."<sup>10</sup> It has been said that committees "are in fact an important part of what is referred to with reasonable pride as 'the British way of life'" and that "in a moment of exasperation during the war, Mr. Churchill exclaimed: 'We are overrun by them, like the Australians were by the rabbits.'<sup>11</sup> Certainly British local government, like British central government from the Cabinet level downwards, is very much government by committee.

So far nothing has been said to indicate the considerable differences that exist between the library committee in the United Kingdom and the typical library board in the United States. It is when we look a little more closely at the conditions of appointment and nature of the membership of the typical library committee in the United Kingdom that these differences begin to reveal themselves. In the first place, it must be borne in mind that the body responsible for the operation of

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the public library service in the area of any local authority is the "authority" itself—that is to say, the council of the county, county borough (larger cities and towns), non-county or municipal borough (generally medium-sized towns), metropolitan borough (the London boroughs), or urban district (generally the smaller towns)—which has decided at some time in the past that it will provide such a service and support it out of its own tax income. (It might be noted, for the sake of clarity, that the rural areas are, with few exceptions, served entirely by the county library services. The exceptions are represented by the twenty-odd parish public libraries in England and Wales, surviving as independent library authorities from earlier days when the parish could still adopt the Public Libraries Acts. The rural parish, the smallest local government unit in England and Wales, is not to be confused with the ecclesiastical parish.)

This does not mean that the county library service is wholly rural; it is, indeed, largely urban in some parts of the country, as the Act (1919), which deprived parishes in England and Wales of the right to become library authorities in the future, took similar action with regard to the non-county boroughs and urban districts. In other words, since 1919 only the "larger" authorities, the counties and county boroughs in England and Wales, have been allowed to initiate a public library service; many of the "smaller" authorities, non-county boroughs, urban districts and parishes, provide an independent service, however, but only because they were doing so prior to the passing of the Act. In addition, a number of the "smaller" authorities have relinquished their library powers to the counties since 1919, and the result of all this has been that, although there is almost universal agreement on the need for the creation of larger units of service, the situation in this respect is far less serious in England and Wales, with approximately 480 independent library authorities, than in the United States, where the present total is apparently approaching the 8,000 mark.

In the case of all these services (and the same is true in Scotland and Northern Ireland) the "authority," deriving its powers and responsibilities from Parliamentary statute, is the local council, nowadays elected almost everywhere on political lines, with the two major parties dominating the local scene in very much the same way as at Westminster. Furthermore, it is to the local council that the power to appoint a committee "for any general or special purpose"<sup>12</sup> is granted by statute, and it is from the membership of the local council

that the majority of members of those committees, including the library committee, will come. This is, indeed, ensured in England and Wales by the provision made in the Local Government (England and Wales) Act, 1933, under which it is laid down that a "committee may include persons who are not members of the local authority (council), provided that at least two-thirds of the members are members of the local authority."<sup>13</sup> Most library committees do not include any "persons who are not members of the local authority," and if and when they do, as the Act of 1933 makes clear, they will never exceed in number one-third of the whole membership. In other words, the typical city or town library committee in England and Wales is very much an integral part of municipal government, with its membership consisting wholly or mainly of men and women elected to the council of the authority by the local electorate, inevitably reflecting the political complexion of the council. This is a very different governing body from the typical American library board, deliberately separated from the municipal or county government and, to use Garceau's words, "relatively aloof from active and effective power groups in the community."<sup>14</sup>

One of the more interesting contributions to the 1949 Conference at the University of Chicago Graduate Library School on the Public Library Inquiry was made by Goldhor in his discussion of the Garceau volume. In this he reminded us that in the United States "The board form of government is also expected to insulate the library from the rest of local government, and traditionally the public library has been a semi-independent institution."<sup>15</sup> He, like Garceau, was generally unhappy about the library board situation as he saw it in this country and suggested, among other things, that "if our public libraries have been protected from municipal corruption they have also been insulated from municipal progress."<sup>16</sup> Any comparison here may well prove, as in other instances, to be odious; in any case there are one or two other legal aspects of the British situation that call for clarification at this point.

Statutory provision for county libraries came comparatively late in the United Kingdom: to Scotland in 1918, to England and Wales in 1919, and to Northern Ireland in 1924. A little provision had been made earlier in some rural parts of the country, usually based upon the quite inadequate unit of the rural parish, but nowhere was there anything approaching an adequate service. By 1918/1919, pressure on the part of the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust and the Library Asso-

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ciation (with the former body playing the major role), eventually succeeded in persuading the government that the county councils, initiated as local government authorities in England and Wales in 1888, must be given powers to provide a library service if anything approaching national coverage were ever to be achieved. This provision was made in the Education (Scotland) Act, 1918, the Public Libraries (England and Wales) Act, 1919, and, somewhat later, in the Public Libraries (Northern Ireland) Act, 1924. In the case of each of these Acts, however, a somewhat surprising provision was made in respect of the appointment of the county library committee.

The Scottish Act, 1918, placed the new county library service squarely under the control of the county council, in its capacity as an *education* authority, with the library clearly regarded as part of the public education service, and the appropriate governing committee of the library the education committee (which could, if it wished, appoint a county library subcommittee). One result of this rather surprising enactment has been that in Scotland the county library service has been operated, for better or worse, as part of the public education service of the county council; the burgh services are governed, under the burgh council, by a library committee, which, as has already been noted, must be appointed by the council.<sup>17</sup> In the following year, the Act for England and Wales, although authorizing the county councils to adopt the Libraries Acts and thus allowing them to become library authorities, imposed upon them the obligation of referring "all matters relating to the exercise of their powers and duties under the Libraries Acts . . . to the county education committee."<sup>18</sup> In this instance also, further provision was made that the county education committee could appoint a library subcommittee. In Northern Ireland in 1924, on the other hand, no mention was made of the county education committee as an appropriate body to which library government might be delegated. There the county councils were indeed "obliged to appoint a county library committee. . . ."<sup>19</sup>

These surprising and unprecedented provisions for county library government in both Scotland and England and Wales to be one of the functions, under the council, of a committee primarily concerned with the education service, inevitably created a controversial situation, in which spokesmen on both sides have expressed themselves vigorously and almost ceaselessly. An impartial observer might find it difficult to align himself on one side or the other, if only for the reason that neither has been able to produce any valid body of evidence to

show that things would have been better had the form of government been different! Too much of the discussion has been at the purely emotional level, dictated unduly by the personal experiences of a number of county librarians in their own situations. Briefly, it can be said that in both Scotland and England one can find library services, ranging from the excellent to the appalling, in both the municipalities, with their "independent" library committees, and the counties, with their "subordinate" library subcommittees. It must be admitted that the inevitable subordination of the county librarian to the chief education officer of the county must be taken into account. The American observer of the situation may be reminded of the battles long ago fought in this country over school district control of public libraries and, if he takes the view that the general rejection of school district control was a step in the right direction, he will be gratified to learn that, in the case of England and Wales at least, the present official view, as expressed in the "Roberts Report" (1959) is as follows:

In a broad sense libraries are, of course, part of the educational system of the country and there are very close connections between the work of the public libraries and the formal education service. None the less, we think that the further development of the public library service may, in many areas, be more effectively carried out with a library committee staking its claim for financial resources as an independent service and with a chief librarian having direct access to such a committee, than if the service remains as a small part of a far greater education service. Such an arrangement is not possible at present in the counties; and we were impressed by the evidence submitted to us as to the harmful effects on the status of the public library service generally and on the work of some counties resulting from the present position.<sup>20</sup>

This probably represents the present majority view among the members of the Library Association who are directly concerned, but there is a minority view in favor of the "present position" and some who would go further and support the "subordination" of the whole public library service to the education service. The American observer, who might find it difficult to appreciate the motivation of this minority point of view, should perhaps be reminded that the 180 local education authorities in Great Britain are very different governmental units from the vast majority of the "happy confusion of 35,300 independent school systems"<sup>21</sup> to be found in the United States. The effectiveness of the Ministry of Education (England and Wales) and the Scottish Educa-

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tion Department in helping to maintain minimum national standards of public education might also be borne in mind. If all this and considerable central government grants in aid of education represent some kind of bandwagon, then a number of British librarians are of the opinion that the time has come for the public libraries of the country to jump on it.

Although the typical library committee will be made up of members of the elected council of the authority, provision is made in all cases for the appointment of co-opted members, i.e., non-members of the council; only in the case of the Scottish burghs, however, is this compulsory (one half of the membership of the burgh library committee of "not less than ten nor more than twenty members"<sup>22</sup> must be non-members of the council. A somewhat similar legal provision is made in West Germany). Elsewhere co-option to the library committee is entirely at the discretion of the local authority and in most instances it has not found favor. Even where it has, the co-opted members will never be in the majority. The Local Government Act, 1933, granted to local authorities in England and Wales a general enabling power to co-opt non-members to their committees, but at the same time insisted that a least two-thirds of the members must be members of the council. Co-option is, however, compulsory in the case of the county education committee and, for this reason, non-members of the council may be found serving on the library subcommittee of the county education committee in both England and Wales and Scotland. Again only in the case of the county library subcommittees in Scotland is co-option obligatory.

It is suggested that the continued appointment of non-members of the council to library committees in Britain may be of special interest to the American student of the position. In some respects the co-opted member is not dissimilar from many of the members of the library board in the United States; in most cases he is aloof from local politics, and frequently he has been appointed by reason of either his special interest in the work of the library or his expert knowledge and experience or possibly as a representative of a significant group within the community. There can be no doubt that there have been many instances of individual public libraries deriving considerable benefit from the presence on their committees of able and conscientious co-opted members; Savage indeed claimed many advantages for the practice in his *The Librarian and His Committee*,<sup>23</sup> which, incidentally, still represents the one serious attempt by a British librarian to study

librarian-committee relations. But Savage's study was published twenty years ago, and much of it was based upon his own experience in Edinburgh, a Scottish city in which co-option to the library committee is compulsory to the extent of half the total membership. Today it generally finds less favor and, outside Scotland, its use is declining. Within the profession it is increasingly regarded as a relic of the early days of the public library movement, when the librarian was in most cases unqualified, underpaid, and almost certainly lacking in both administrative and bibliographical ability. Among the elected members of the committee there appears to be an increasing resentment towards the appointment of those who have not entered "through the gateway of popular election."<sup>24</sup> In Warren's words:

The new enabling powers of the Act of 1933 have not been extensively used; and there seems little doubt that the practice of co-option does not find favour with the Local Authorities. The intention was obviously to enable persons who have special knowledge or experience, and who may have neither the time nor the inclination for the full responsibilities of a Councillor, to give their services in a limited field. The feeling of the average Councillor is that members of the Council are not expected to have special capacities; that it would be best if Committees did not pretend to be any more than they were, namely, bodies of lay-men exercising the functions expected of lay-men, and which it is of special value for lay-men to perform; and that in these days special knowledge and experience are best looked for in the proper quarter, i.e. among the officers. ["Officers" here means the professional staff who administer the service under the committee and council.]<sup>25</sup>

This increasing emphasis upon the full and proper use of the professional expert has been characteristic of almost all recent studies of British local government. Harold Laski pointed out in his *A Grammar of Politics*, first published in 1925, that "anyone who has seen an English municipal body at work will have realised that the whole difference between efficient and inefficient administration lies in the *creative* [italics added] use of officials by elected persons."<sup>26</sup> Few public librarians on either side of the Atlantic would hesitate to echo such sentiments, and clearly any possible comparison of the relative effectiveness of the American library board and the British library committee will largely turn upon this aspect of their roles. At the same time let us remind ourselves that the day is still some way off when one will be able to assert with a clear conscience that all, or even a

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considerable majority, of the public librarians of the two countries are themselves adequately prepared for such creative use. The position is perhaps a happier one in the United Kingdom, simply because there are many fewer small public libraries with inadequate staffs, but even there too many librarians are "woefully lacking in administrative training and capacity,"<sup>27</sup> if one may apply in his own words Garceau's criticism of many of the public librarians of the United States.

One quite striking result of some of these differences between the British library committee and the American library board is to be seen in the area of what has been described as the "sponsoring function" of the governing body. Both Garceau and Leigh<sup>28</sup> stressed the potentialities of the library board in this respect, and few board members would deny that this is not one of their more important responsibilities. Nor can there be any doubt of the outstanding contributions that have been made to American public librarianship as a result of such sponsorship of the movement in many communities by the board and other lay bodies. Here, it is suggested, the somewhat isolated and aloof nature of the board may have been advantageous. Operating from its "semi-independent" point of vantage, it has frequently been in a position to appeal directly to the community over the head of a reactionary or parsimonious council. In the United Kingdom, however, where the library committee is a part of the city or county government, with its membership largely or wholly made up of members of the council, action of this kind is unusual, if not impossible. The propaganda directed at the public library trustees of the United States by the professional associations and individual librarians appears somewhat bizarre to the British observer, whether he is from the professional ranks or a committee member. The Library Association makes no provision for any section similar to the American Library Trustee Association and has indeed now removed its "institutional" members from full membership (their new and reduced status is that of "affiliated" member).<sup>29</sup> This is not to say that the British committee member would not have benefited from one or two small doses of professional education, over and above his slight exposure to it, resulting from attendance at professional conferences. It is simply that the hard-headed local politician, who is the typical member of the British library committee, does not fit into this kind of picture. At the National Assembly of Library Trustees in Cleveland in 1961 it was announced that "Thirty-seven states reported an increase in trustee attendance at institutes and workshops. . . .";<sup>30</sup> it would probably be no exaggeration

to say that this sort of attendance would be incomprehensible to the typical library committee member in the United Kingdom. The real significance of this may well prove to be the major clue to an understanding of the basic differences between the governing bodies of the public libraries of the two countries.

Both the American and British public library movements have achieved a great deal over the past hundred years to which a finger of pride can be pointed; they have also both failed badly in a number of respects. In both countries we can find examples of the best and almost the worst public libraries in the world. Some, though by no means all, of the differences between public library government in the United States and the United Kingdom have been raised in this chapter. Even if, however, there had been space to consider them all, it is just possible that the conclusion would still have been that Alexander Pope knew the answer more than two hundred years ago, when he wrote in his *Essay on Man*:

“For forms of government let fools contest;  
Whate'er is best administered is best.”

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