

MANAGING THE CITY

The Aims and Impacts of Urban Policy

Edited by
Brian Robson

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Introduction

Scholars and story-tellers have vied with each other over the centuries to reach the heart of 'The Matter of Britain'. Despite their endeavours, the truth about the elusive Arthur — *regis quondam regisque futuri* — escapes us. It is in its elliptical nature that the charm of the Arthurian story lies. Who would remember an obscure warrior chief from the Dark Ages were it not for the accretion of legend and the busy literary and academic industry which has grown from those tales? Clear away these luxuriant growths and we are left with very little that we can cling to. Indeed, for most of us the legend has itself become fact and the erudite books about the real site and nature of Arthur and his court — if ever he or it existed — pale into insignificance beside the mesmerising effect of the Round Table, the band of knights, the Holy Grail, and the sword Excalibur. Similarly, much of the vast amount of knowledge and research into our modern world assumes the simplicity of heroic myths. Much of that simplicity surfaces in school text books or on popular television programmes or in the distillations of teachers and lecturers. From there it becomes entrenched as popular wisdom and, as in the Arthurian legends, fact and fiction become inextricably entangled. Not least is this so in the making of urban policy.

The city — itself once thought suitable only for the myth-makers of Utopian landscapes, as Lewis Mumford suggested — has now (whether large or small, modern or ancient, developed or developing) become in the twentieth century the quarry of a wide range of practitioners in both old and new academic disciplines; it has been dissected and described through the eyes and pens of journalists, dramatists, photographers, artists, novelists, poets and, the great gurus of our age, the TV pundits. On the academic front, urban history, urban sociology, urban geography, urban studies confront us at every turn. And, of course, since the late 1960s, British policy-makers have increasingly turned their attention to the city with policies such as the Urban Programme or Urban Development Grants, or with agencies such as Urban Development Corporations, and the welter of other policies and bodies set up to tackle 'the problem of the city'. It is not an overstatement to talk of an urban oracular proliferation.

Awareness of the problems of British cities has waxed and waned among public and politicians: apathy has been interspersed with periods of panicky and fatalistic concern prompted by the intermittent upwelling of the latest riot or the newest report. The message that I hope this book purveys is that the future of cities is not necessarily as bleak as the common fatalism might suggest — that there *is* a future as well as a past to large cities. Some part, at least, of the urban problem stems from the unfavourable myths and stereotypes of the city which we carry with us as the baggage of our cultural history. The problems faced by our large old cities in coming to terms with the radically new world to which they must accommodate are indeed awesome, but there are many steps that public policy could take to make the transition less cathartic and less problematical. We need both to be more aware of the issues and hence of the unintended effects that policy decisions can have and also to develop urban policy frameworks which are more consistent and longer-term.

The contributions to the book stem from the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science which was held at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow in 1985. There could be no more appropriate location to consider the issues of urban decline and urban change. Glasgow is at once the worst and the best of cities. It has for long been everyone's idea of the most deprived and most run-down of the large cities of Britain; the Gorbals and 'Wine Alley' were for long archetypes, potent images of the squalor and decay which in varying degrees have become synonymous with the received wisdom about what has become of the large industrial city. The collapse of the economy, not only of the city's economy but also of the encompassing regional economy of Strathclyde, appears to have undermined any defence of the economic rationale of the city itself. If ever a policy of 'triage' was to be put into effect, Glasgow must certainly have been the prime candidate for being first in the queue at the executioner's stall. Yet today, even though the economic indicators of the city's future are little less grim, it is Glasgow's resilience in accommodating to change which is the most striking impression that its growing stream of visitors take away with them. The refurbishment of tenements; the growth of private housing in a city which had long had the most monolithic stock of council housing in its centre; the investment in new factory units in the Eastern Area; the development of the Exhib-

ition Centre; and the unquenchable ebullience of its people: all of these have now become potent symbols of the possibilities of turning around the fortunes of cities — given resources, political will and a competence to deliver urban-oriented policy. As President of Section E at the Strathclyde meeting, I invited a number of papers on the theme of urban policy from a mixture of academics and practitioners. The following chapters are revised versions of some of these papers.

The themes which they address are ones of pressing moment to anyone concerned with the future of our cities. Some of the work on which the chapters draw derives from a major research initiative funded by the Economic and Social Research Council through its Environment and Planning Committee which I chaired for the first four years of its life. The scene is set with a broad review of the legacy of attitudes which we bring to bear on the city (Chapter 1). This suggests that, as much as anything intrinsically 'wrong' with the city, it has been public policy which has unwittingly contributed to many of the urban problems that we now face and therein lie some of the policy directions which could help to turn around the fortunes of large cities. The themes of this chapter are echoed in what follows. Paul Cheshire (Chapter 2) sets a comparative picture by placing the British urban problem in the context of other European countries, drawing on his major research programme in the EEC and suggesting not only the depth of the social and economic problems in British cities but also that such problems are not absent from the cities of mainland Europe despite its later industrial start. He sees the future role of cities as administrative centres not unlike that of major cities before industrialism. Two examples from specific British cities then follow. At one end of the spectrum, Bill Lever looks at the Glasgow case against the emerging pattern of post-industrialism (Chapter 3). He suggests the mixed success of some of the many initiatives which have been developed to tackle the economic problems of the city; with many of the problems merely having been displaced to the fringe of council estates and yet with some specific schemes which have been successfully targeted on the needy. At the other extreme, Martin Boddy looks at the supposed success story of Bristol, which is popularly seen as having made a successful accommodation to the social and economic changes of the past decade, and of the M4 Corridor of which Bristol is the western extreme (Chapter 4). His work argues convincingly that public

investment has played no small part in sustaining the local economy of the area. If Bristol's supposed success is popularly — if incorrectly — associated with high technology, the chapter by John Goddard and Andy Gillespie takes up the broader regional implications of technical change (Chapter 5). They contrast the potential benefits of increasing equity which might be associated with the 'information economy' with the more likely effects that incremental change to the hierarchical development of information networks will *reinforce* the benefits of existing concentrations and will work to the detriment of northern areas.

Even if the economic rationale of the large old cities continues to look precarious, the housing and infrastructure patterns can provide rather more hopeful indicators. It is to improvements to the physical environment that local-authority approaches have traditionally turned and the following four chapters consider housing improvement, the land issue and the role of planners. Duncan MacLennan shows, in Glasgow since the middle 1970s, the way in which a well-resourced public-sector programme of rehabilitation of housing and the environment has provided the base of a new confidence on which private-sector investment has expanded within the inner city (Chapter 6). Alice Coleman takes up some of the issues of how the design of housing developments might be improved so as to avoid the vandalism and anti-social behaviour that has characterised many high-rise developments (Chapter 7). Her suggestions clearly need to be read not as alternatives but as complements to the better management of estates and the involvement of tenants. Bryan MacGregor, David Adams and A. E. Baum explore the vexed question of vacant land in cities (Chapter 8). Urban land values have proved remarkably resistant to adjusting downwards in response to lack of demand or excess supply. They argue that the commonly-used comparative methods of valuation are inappropriate to a market in which there are few sales and a declining economy and that the blockage thus created presents obstacles to the process of development in inner areas. Derek Lyddon considers the roles of planners in their new guise as both marketers of municipalities and as economic development agents (Chapter 9). He sees the traditional physical development plans and the newly-emerging economic planning process as being essentially complementary. Again, Scotland serves as a striking exemplar, with a hierarchy of national guidelines, structure and local plans, and with a central role being played by its Development Agency.

Finally, to look at the other side of the coin, David Grafton and N. Bolton look at 'counter-urbanisation' from the rural perspective of North Devon (Chapter 10). It has been in the small and free-standing towns and the rural areas that population growth has occurred in the last decade — not least in the South West and East Anglia. The Devon case offers both support for the idea of a 'clean break' in demographic trends during the 1970s and shows the part that local planning policies have played in attracting and accommodating to the broader processes of social economic and demographic change out of which counter-urbanisation has stemmed.

Profound social and economic changes have accompanied technical developments and the internationalisation of trade and production. Such change has been played out on a world stage, but the pangs of the transition have been most severe in the older industrial nations like Britain where change has been associated with decline rather than growth and, within them, it has been focused in the old large industrial cities. Through all of these chapters, an important undercurrent is the lessons which we might draw for the making of future policy. As a postscript to the chapters, I have therefore drawn together some of the policy suggestions made by the contributors and considered the broader issue of what kinds of policy would provide a consistent and long-term policy framework that could assist cities in the process of adjustment to such change.

I am grateful to all of the authors who first contributed to the meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science and then responded uncomplainingly to suggestions about the revision of their papers for publication. I am grateful too to Michael Bradford for his advice as Editor of the Series and to Peter Sowden of Croom Helm for his patience and help in ensuring the rapid publication of these essays. Glen Ransom has been a source of continuous inspiration and help.

The Enduring City: a Perspective on Decline

Brian Robson

Political events in 1985 in Handsworth and elsewhere have overtaken the mood of the urban debate. It is now difficult to avoid writing to a theme of 'the pen or the petrol bomb?' Can and will policy begin to listen and respond to the findings of research or does the attention of debate only focus momentarily and fleetingly on the problems of cities if prompted by riot, arson and the threat of widespread social disorder? As part of a presidential address to the Geography Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (Robson, 1985) I outlined a possible worst-case scenario for British towns and cities: one in which those urban areas, overwhelmingly in the North, which are most affected by loss of industry and population and burdened with more than their fair share of the weaker members of society and the physical detritus of dereliction, would be left to decay. Within them, a few professionals, heavily guarded, would be well paid to man minimum-standard hospitals, schools and refined versions of the truck-shop. Other cities and towns, predominantly those in the favoured high-tech corridor, would live in a reverse situation in which the so-called underclass would be penned into ghettos and allowed out to perform menial tasks. This appalling vision of the future is neither improbable nor impossible: as the Lozells Road burned on the night of 10 September it seemed only one more grim indicator on our present path to such a purgatory.

Do we need to be so morbid about our cities? Apocalyptic analysis and the search for 'solutions' are meat and drink to academics: many of us, myself included, have danced for years on the head of the urban pin, dissecting, describing, warning, pontificating, arguing; but rarely praising. Politicians too enjoy