

Mindless mismanagement of our urban affairs is to blame for the social disintegration of our cities, argues J. D. McConaghy in this abridged version of a paper he delivered on 22 May to a Fabian Society seminar on housing problems, published here by kind permission of the Society.

As conditions in the inner areas of our cities get worse, symptoms of deprivation, such as crime and vandalism, assume exaggerated importance and remedies also shift from normal municipal programmes to the imposition of law and order. Like pollution, the social disintegration of the inner city just happened without the public at large perceiving what was going on. Consequently the real problems have never been understood, the machinery of recovery never forged and the necessary funds never allocated. Like pollution, our solutions may be too little and much too late.

The Shelter Neighbourhood Action Project is a small action-study located in an area of Liverpool with a higher incidence of social malaise than any other part of the Merseyside conurbation. Two years ago we began to investigate how residents could take advantage of the 1969 Housing Act which encouraged them to bring forward their own proposals for the improvement of their homes and the whole environment. We saw this as a launching pad for an exercise in comprehensive recovery but, as we began to achieve the narrow physical objectives, it became all too clear that the resident, the volunteer and the public official can achieve little in halting the underlying social collapse of such areas. Indeed even physical rehabilitation itself could turn out to be a much more vicious form of 'nigger removal' than traditional urban renewal in metropolitan areas where the different classes compete for housing stock.

In our final year we are relating our experience to other experiments in Europe and the US, but already it seems clear that new political, financial and management initiative is required if the breakdown of civilised relationships and the possibility of social conflict in inner urban areas is to be avoided.

It is no accident that in Liverpool the keenest agency sponsoring new initiative is the constabulary, or at least its senior officers and chief constable. As one sergeant said at a conference: 'Society pushes its problems into the dustbin and requires the policeman to sit on the lid.' But it is quite unfair to delegate the 'hot seat' to chief constables, just as it is unfair to expect individual officers to remain unbrutalised where there is no matching dedication from other public agencies.

We must not be deceived or side-tracked: effective development of the community is the efficient management of the public sector. Community development is synonymous with city management. Where there are major community problems there you will find also problems of city management and of local and central government machinery. That is why the worst ghettos in the United States, and even in this country, are those where local government machinery is

minimal and where there is a history of neglect.

Our enlightened welfare state is reasonably sensitised to individual problems of deprivation and we have urged our legislators to do something about it. But there is no general public awareness that each type of deprivation assumes an entirely new dimension and character when compounded in specific urban territories. In such areas the poverty problem is the housing problem, the education problem, the colour problem, the crime problem, the health problem and, in short, the urban problem.

The public is confused when the remedial effects of intervention in any single problem tend to be negated by the interactional demands of such areas. In fact, the public resents this seeming rejection of assistance and the only all-prevailing concept of multiple deprivation is still that of a sin committed by people who have proved themselves unable to consume the specialised goods and services offered to them by professional caretakers.

So our first job is to understand the inner city as a very unique and special problem of its own and to see its deterioration as a fundamental trend and process with quite global implications. Even the vast agrarian populations of Asia will be an urban society within a few generations and the rotten core of the whole thing will be these specific areas, special territories, where all the worst urban problems coincide. No political party and no politician in Europe or the US can say that they have an urban policy—and that is to say, a social policy—while vast areas of our cities continue to grow worse.

## A Culture Condemned

The inner city is the final condemnation of our whole economy and whole culture. The American dream ends in Watts County, German affluence in the Lehel of Munich and British justice in the Shankhill and the Falls.

To date no political party has really tried to get to grips with this unique problem and such areas are effectively disenfranchised. Since we are referring to cities, and therefore local government, electoral mathematics dictate that both Socialists and Conservatives will have regard to the majority of ratepayers. This simple matter has always exacerbated the downward spiral of inner areas and it has inhibited the initiative and level of attack required to face their intractable problems at source.

Certainly, as far as those people right at the bottom of the barrel are concerned, it really doesn't matter if they have a Socialist or a Conservative council. It doesn't matter if they have a Labour or Tory prime minister: they will still be at the bottom of the barrel. As someone

said: 'It doesn't matter who you vote for, the Government always gets in!'

*Ad hoc* representation serves as a convenient smokescreen. The advocates for the poor very usefully make as much noise as they can about bad conditions, but nothing could be much further from reality than the notion that all such areas need are legions of hot-rod sociologists, architects or spell-binding activists to voice their hitherto unspoken requirements. Radical social activists eventually demand a quite unacceptable redistribution of power and resources and, while highlighting problems, such pressure lies permanently outside the political process or its insensate machinery. Administrative social activists, like those employed by local authorities, favour a gradualist approach and aim for a smooth-running game which inevitably favours the more powerful. The activity can be compared with basket-weaving, as a type of social therapy, and tends to be ignored by minority groups and the really underprivileged.

The reform of local government will produce larger and more powerful local authorities, but the central problems of minority areas may be as far away as ever from the priorities of the top politicians who will run the new authorities. Neighbourhood councils may provide useful forums but middle-class neighbourhood councils will get most of the cake as usual. Participation in the public planning of such areas must be seen as PR rhetoric when planning is understood as programmes of meaningful events, all of which must be paid for, shaped and ordered by bureaucracies not themselves dedicated to problem-solving in minority areas. Participation yes, but participate in what? Self-help yes, but help myself to what?

To be positive, we must find a coherent way to involve top politicians in areas which themselves provide little electoral advantage. Only then will the resources and detailed management solutions follow.

The local government machine just evolved and its task was primarily administrative. Traditional functional departments multiplied together with the difficulties of lateral communications between them. As far as the vast majority of the electorate in the wider city area are concerned, things tick over reasonably well and problems of coordination are simply not a burning issue to the average suburban commuter.

The situation is radically different in the inner city, where to solve one problem is but to succumb to another. Tasks are emphatically developmental rather than administrative and the case for project-orientated management structure is overwhelming if chaos, waste and frustration are to be avoided.

As it is, one department will operate inefficiently for the want of involvement

of another at the right time and, in the end, may solve one problem at the expense of creating several others. It is no accident that many local housing managers, teachers and other public servants become brutalised if the alternative is to go insane.

Our management structure in cities is generally based on the myth that there is some elite business core which dominates their growth and decision-making institutions. In the last century this was certainly the case but now industrial or financial authority in the city is the local branch manager operating as a corporate bureaucrat in increasingly complex industrial complexes. No longer can the city 'follow along behind,' merely administrating what is going on. The city is now in the real-estate business, in the employment business and, most of all, the city is in the community business—or the city is not in business at all!

It is no longer possible to hold up the simple image of the town baron for the poor to emulate and send in the welfare agencies and charities for those that haven't got the moral fibre to aspire. These



days the baby born in an urban slum is simply not a potential president or prime minister. The implied social mobility of the Victorian city is now as anachronistic as that city's management and charitable traditions. Distasteful or not, positive social planning is now the final and most important function of city management.

Supplementary financial resource is needed to inspire real initiative and to ensure both management dedication and flexibility. For obvious reasons this must lie outside the fiscal competence of local government and the burden on the ratepayer must be relieved. Already successive governments have dissipated many millions of pounds in the Urban Aid Programme, as *The Times* pointed out, through the lack of 'any coherent strategy' and the lack of any 'combined approach to the multiple problems of particular localities' (and see Robert Holman's article on p. 227 of this issue).

The previous Labour Government initiated the Community Development Projects, but because the Home Office did not accept an *a priori* case for resource-

handling agencies, even as a basis of research, their directors will be in a difficult position as they attempt a level of coordination found impossible by departmental chief officers. Moreover, the Urban Programme does not deal with physical redevelopment, and Community Development Projects are seen primarily as polishing up delivery systems in social services. In Liverpool there is a CDP which is outside the large Educational Priority Area, where most of the residents are local authority tenants, and where the population is predominantly white!

The taxpayer has lavished money on new town development corporations which, if they were to bear the social costs they incur in the problem areas of deprivation, could show a short fall of debt charges even after fifteen years. It is time that the problem areas themselves got a bit of these large budgets. It is time we went in there and spent it where the problems actually occur.

Jack Dyckman once said that the dilemma for social planning was clearly not 'bureaucracy or grass roots' but 'what bureaucracy?' Both militancy and complacency can obscure the need for custom-built agencies providing multi-lateral programmes necessary in areas of multiple deprivation. The rationalisation of social policies must be coherently conceived both at the local level and at Whitehall, and this should be the first priority of the central policy review unit at the Cabinet Office.

Political, management and financial resource must combine to provide a new vital initiative. Ten comprehensive pilot studies are required comprising areas of 50,000 people each; ten districts where corporate planning may be linked to the traditional physical planning of areas and resources. Ten major pilot studies, a White Paper in this Government's term of office and the prospect of legislation in the next.

Ultimately we may have inner area local government agencies with access to the Treasury. Historically these areas functioned as 'educators' through which the under-privileged, minority and ethnic groups passed outwards and upwards to enjoy the economic opportunities of the wider community. This process stopped and the 'twilight trap' was formed, where the urban poor became concentrated together, unable to escape. The dreadful decline of these areas must be halted, their misery alleviated and their historic role as educators reasserted.

So let us be clear and let us not deceive ourselves: the decline of the inner city is the failure of both government and city management. We now look for Fenians and Orangemen under the bed in Belfast. True, this has become to some degree an ethnic struggle; but the real trouble is really no more than fifty years of mismanagement in the public sector. Community Relations Commissions and cheques for anti-vandal campaigns are all red herrings. The social disintegration implicit in Watts, Liverpool, N. Kensington, Belfast and all the inner areas of Western Europe amounts to no more than the mindless mismanagement of our urban affairs.