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BRITISH LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN THE NEW LABOUR ERA

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ABSTRACT
After the election victory of the new Labour Party led by Tony Blair in 1997, the process of establishing a new system based on the devolution of authority started in the United Kingdom. Along with this process, a sui generis system, which can be called the regionalised state model, has developed in the United Kingdom. This system envisages regional governments as a new level between the central state and local governments. However, local governments constitute the most fundamental level of local democracy and decentralisation. This study focused on how a transformation was initiated with the New Labour governments as well as an overall assessment of the British local government system. In this respect, the historical background of local governments in Britain was touched on to place the argument in a historical context. Then, the structure was elaborated on without falling into the "trap" of structure/agency problem since this kind of presumptions usually limits the comprehensiveness and peculiarity of the research in question. Finally, the New Labour Party's local election 2006 manifesto was evaluated.

Keywords: local government, Britain, New Labour, local democracy, governance

INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom developed a unique system of government having more or less similar underpinnings with Spain and Italy. This system can be conceptualised as a regionalised state mode (Konuralp, 2019). This model organises the state together with the devolution of authority to the regional administrations. In other words, there emerges a new layer between local governments and regional administrations. This new model draws on decentralisation. However, another vital aspect of decentralisation is associated with the level of local governments.

This study tries to re-discover the local government system of Britain with the point views of a foreigner. Hence, the central assertion here is the objectivity of this paper. Moreover, all of the ideas and outlooks are developed during the research stage, and in this sense, there are no biases and presumptions to direct this study. The inquiry starts with an attempt to understand what its object is. The historical background of local governments in Britain is touched on to place the argument in a historical context. Then, the structure is elaborated on without falling into the "trap" of structure/agency problem since this kind of presumptions usually limits the comprehensiveness and peculiarity of the research in question. The New Labour Party's local election 2006 manifesto is evaluated in the last part while referring to the arguments raised in the preceding part concerning third-way politics.

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OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY

In the mid-eighteenth century, the industrial revolution in the United Kingdom (UK) gave pace to meet the needs of people at the local level, and this attempt initiated the rise of local governments (Stoker, 1991, p. 1). Also, as Wilson and Game (1998, p. 42) state, "It is an irony in the history of British local government that the term 'local government' itself was coined only in the nineteenth century –at the very time when it was becoming larger and less local ever before." The county councils and boroughs were formed through the "Local Government Act 1888" (History, 2006). The system established by this act existed till 1965 reform, namely, London Government Act. Local Government Act of 1972 introduced new changes such as creating a uniform two-tier system everywhere, abolishing county boroughs and reducing the number of counties. In the 1990s, John Major's Conservative government introduced new reforms to the local government system. While forming a unitary model in various parts of the United Kingdom, at the same time, some other parts remained in the confines of the two-tier system, which was similar to the situation that existed between 1890 and 1972. The Conservative period in the 1990s ended with New Labour's coming to power. The change process gains momentum in Tony Blair's New Labour era. The unitarist form of local government structures was put into practice in this era. The argument about the New Labour's local government policy was that "unitary local government was inserted as a precondition for the introduction of any elected Regional Assemblies under the Blair-Labour government's former plans to introduce such bodies prior to the rejection by referendum in North East in November 2004" (Recent History, 2006). However, the local government system in the UK continues to be complicated.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

As Keating (1991, pp. 26-27) puts forward, "Local government structures reflect national traditions as well as social and political interests." These structures of modern times in the UK carry the intentions of the central bureaucratic and political elite to a large extent. Keating (1991, p. 27) explains the subordination of localities as such:

> By the 1920s, the principle was established that the wishes of the inhabitants should be a subordinate consideration. Convenience, partisan advantage and technical efficiency have been the motives for change which has been imposed from the top rather than emerging from the localities. The structure has been dominated by large units with uniform powers for each category of local government and little fragmentation of major cities. Local interests have been important only at the margin, influencing boundaries to ensure local partisan advantage or the defence of social interests.

Leaving aside the discussion of the extent to which the British case is centralist, focusing on current structures will provide a ground to analyse the new phases of these structures in light of the change process. Hence, the centralism indigenous to the British case becomes evident in a historical context. At this point, it would be appropriate to clarify British local governments' external and internal structures.

External Structures

In the UK, as mentioned above, there is no uniform structure of local government. In this sense, every part of the country has its own local government structure. Since "… local government in Northern Ireland will remain something of a pale imitation of that elsewhere in the UK" (Wilson and Game, 1998, p. 67), this paper is concerned only with the mainland.

The yellow areas have two-tier authorities: Ceremonial and administrative county in England, as shown in Figure 1. Hence, in England, there are:

- 39 Traditional Counties of immemorial antiquity. These no longer have any legal standing but still represent what many people continue to think of as "counties", such as "Middlesex", "Sussex" and "Yorkshire".
- 33 Non-metropolitan Counties - areas covered by county councils, 6 of which (Isle of Wight, Cornwall, County Durham, Northumberland, Shropshire and Wiltshire) have become unitary authorities absorbing the functions of former districts now abolished.
    - Rutland and Herefordshire councils are not county councils (they are unitary district councils) despite sticking the word "County" into their corporate names. It is not clear that this distinction has any practical consequence other than determining the years in which they hold their all-out elections (2013 + 4n for counties, 2015 + 4n for districts).
    - In most cases, the area a new unitary authority created from 1995 onwards has been defined as a separate "county". (The districts in Berkshire and Cleveland seem to have missed out on this.) Except for the 6 mentioned above, the statutory instruments creating them have exempted them from the provision of the 1972 Act that "every county shall have a (county) council".
- 48 Ceremonial Counties (areas for which a Lord Lieutenant acts as the Queen's deputy). Every County Council area has a Ceremonial County of the same name, but the Ceremonial County is in many cases larger as it takes in areas served by Unitary Authorities. The other 15 Ceremonial Counties do not have a County Council of the same name. Insofar as there is an official definition of "Geographical" county I believe this is it. Everywhere in England falls within one (and only one) Ceremonial County. The term "Lieutenancy" is also sometimes used for these areas. (The City of London is a separate Ceremonial County from Greater London - it is too small to show on the adjoining map).

In Scotland, 31 lieutenancies were established in 1975 and revised in 1996, bearing some resemblance to the counties existing pre-1973. There are also 4 cities which have been "Counties of Cities" for centuries, where the Lord Provost is the Lord Lieutenant ex officio. In Wales, for Ceremonial purposes there are eight "preserved counties" which have the same names as the 1974-1996 Administrative Counties, but have had their boundaries shifted to align more closely to the unitary councils. In Northern Ireland, the traditional six counties and two cities remain as they were before 1973. Lord Lieutenants and High Sherriffs are appointed for each county. (Edkins, 2011)

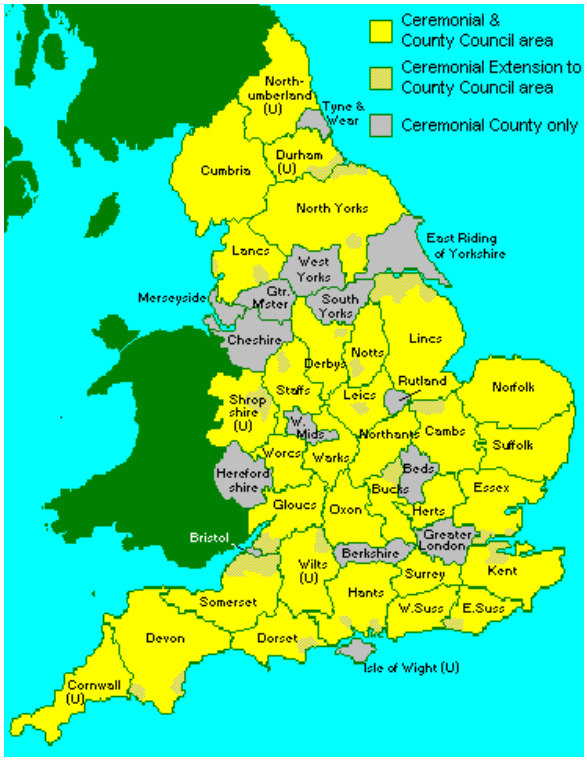

Figure 1. Counties in England (Edkins, 2011).

Internal Structures

The components of the internal structure of British Local Governments are local authorities, councils, councillors, elected members, committees, departments, officers (Wilson and Game, 1998, p. 70).

> Local authorities (…) are semi-independent, politically decentralised, multi-functional bodies, created by and exercising responsibilities conferred by Parliament. The term is often used –and has already been used by us- interchangeably with councils. Strictly speaking, though, the council is the legal embodiment of the local authority: the body of elected councillors who collectively determine and are ultimately responsible for the policy and actions of the authority. In recognition of this legal responsibility, councillors are often referred to as the elected members of the authority, which distinguishes them from its paid employees, the officers and other staff.
>
> (…) British local authorities are mostly very large organisations and, with the spread of unitary authorities, getting larger still: 467 from 1998 for the whole of the UK, or one council for every 125.000 of us. Several have more than 100 councillors and tens of thousands of full time and part-time employees. In most authorities it would be impossible for councillors to take all necessary policy decisions in full council meetings, or for officers to ménage or deliver the multitude of the local government services, without some kind of internal structural divisions. The way in which local authorities in this country have traditionally organised themselves is through committees and councillors and professionally-based departments. (Wilson and Game, 1998, pp. 70-71)

In these structural components, committees and departments need to be analysed in detail. For this reason, the table below gives us characteristic features of them.

Table 1. Internal Management Structures (Wilson and Game, 1998, p. 77).

Committees	Local authorities are governed by councillors or elected members, who meet regularly and publicly to take authoritative decisions for their local area. Most councils delegate much of their work to committees and sub-committees of councillors that concentrate on a particular area of the council's work and are responsible for determining the council's policy in that area. Each committee will have a chair, who chairs its meetings, speaks and acts on its behalf, and liaises with relevant officers. Council meetings are presided over by the mayor or chair of the council, elected annually by and from all members of the council. The leader of the council, its key political figure, is generally the elected leader of the majority or largest party group on the council. Most authorities have a coordinating policy (and resources) committee of mainly senior councillors, usually chaired by the leader.
Departments	Local authorities are organised into departments. These departments are staffed by appointed officers and other employees -administrative, professional, technical and clerical staff, manual workers- who legally are the paid servants of the elected council. These officers and staff implement council policy as determined by its councillors and run the authority on a day-to-day basis. Departments can be divided into service departments, providing a service directly to the public, and central or coordinating departments, providing a service for the authority as a whole. Each department has a chief officer, usually a professional specialist in the department's work and is responsible for it to a committee and its chair. Most authorities have a chief executive, the head of the council's paid service, responsible for coordinating the operation and policy of the council, usually through a Chief Officers' Management Team.

A council makes a policy through the interaction of elected councillors and their appointed officers both formally and informally. Also, they have substantial discretion over their internal organisation. For this reason, we cannot see the same internal structures in the British local governments.

Elaboration on the structural relationship between councils and their committees would provide us with an outlook concerning the complexity of the system's functioning. This is generally the main criticism directed to the council system (Wilson and Game, 1998, p. 74). Because the huge number of committees and their sub-committees either make the decision-making process difficult or delay the implementation of the decisions. Figure 2 shows how complicated a county council is in, for example, Leicestershire.

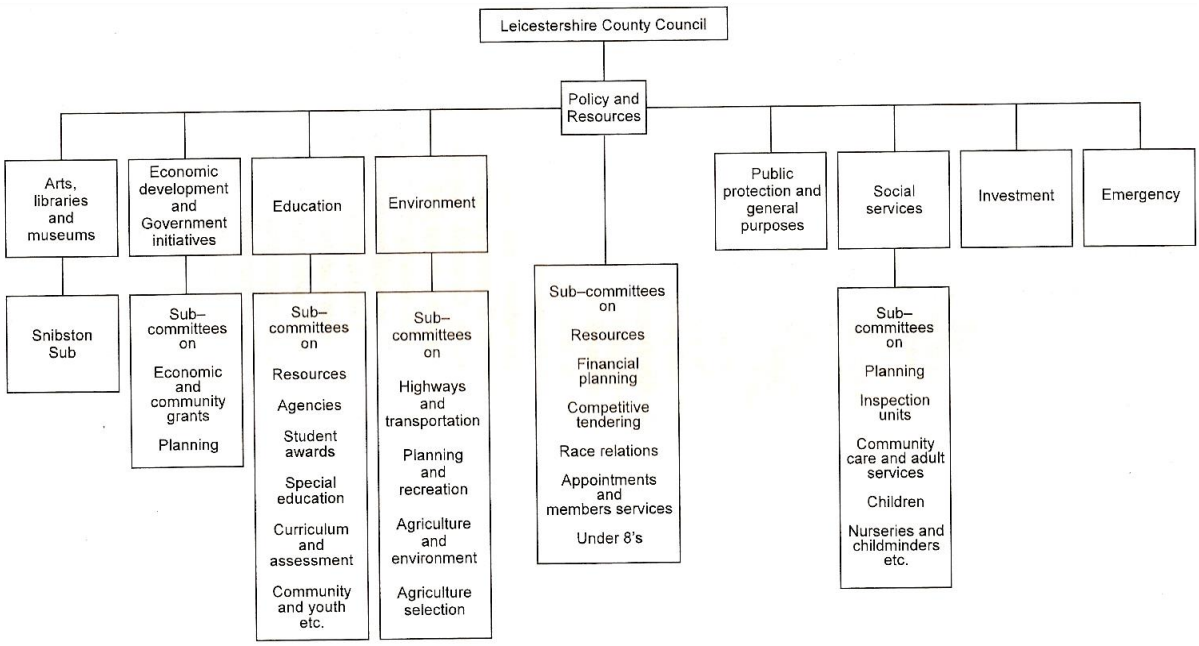

Figure 2. The organisation of the Leicestershire County Council.

THE ERA OF NEW LABOUR: THE FOCAL POINT

With Tony Blair's coming to power, Britain faced an era of change through the catchword of regeneration: the third way. As Giddens (2000a, p. 29) puts it, third-way politics "offers the means of reconstructing and renewing public institutions." More responsive and more open political institutions are at the heart of the reform agenda. For Giddens (1998, p. 1), this can be realised through "democratising democracy". In Blair's rhetoric, the ideological standpoints behind this new left-of-centre politics were democratic socialism and liberalism. However, the former president of the Social Democratic Party in Germany, Oscar Lafontaine argues, Tony Blair was far from presenting a political concept, and he was only successful at offering a "marketing" concept (2000, p. 116).

Moreover, says Lafontaine (2000, p. 118), whatever Blair did was labelled as "new" and "modern", although he was only hoodwinking. Also, for Nirmala Rao (2000, p. 191), the third way could be questioned in terms of lacking substance "as an amorphous political project." While the people demanded a freer and more democratic atmosphere, the New Labour appealed to the masses as representing these new ideals. Nevertheless, as some thinkers argue, the New Labour is reducing the individual to a market object. In this sense, Lafontaine (2000, p. 152) describes the third way as "out-of-the-way."

On the other hand, Blair (1998, p. 16) explains the new process as such: "New democratic experiments from elected mayors to citizens' juries were hailed as important pointers to the future. Making government more responsive would enable local government to be open and vibrant, for diverse democratic debate is a laboratory for ideas about how we should meet social needs."

Nirmala Rao (2000, p.120) argues that the regeneration process of New Labour reflected concepts of partnership, local involvement and decentralisation. For the time in which Labour came to power, there was a global demand for accountability, transparency and responsiveness. Thus, the change process in Britain under the Labour government reflected these new demands.

In this sense, local democracy in Britain recognised effective participation resting on well-informed citizens, and New Labour was trying to promote communication and openness and enhance accountability through broader participation (Rao, 2000, p. 124). Within this context, it is clear that the term "governance" becomes a respected contour of the "new" political agenda.

For Gerry Stoker (2000, p. 3), this term implies "a concern with governing, achieving collective action in the realm of public affairs, in conditions where it is not possible to rest on recourse to the authority of the state". This definition gives us the idea that, firstly, governance is highly related to governing, but not using the state authority; and secondly, it is a way of collective action. Before focusing on its reflection on actual life, it would be appropriate to continue with Stoker's (2000, p. 3) vision:

> Governance involves working across boundaries within the public sector or between the public sector and private or voluntary sectors. It focuses attention on a set of actors that are drawn from but also beyond the formal institutions of government. A key concern is processes of networking and partnership. Governance recognises the capacity to get things done which does not rest on the power of government to command or use its authority. Governing becomes an interactive process because no single actor has the knowledge and resource capacity to tackle problems unilaterally.

The passage above involves most of the terms that are key to governance. These are "public-private-voluntary sectors, networking, partnership, interaction". These terms have much to do with the trend that the discipline of public administration faces from the 1970s. Public-private partnerships could be seen as a new phase of changing strategies of development. Despite the striking slogan of the new-right that non-intervening, minimal, "night watchman" state, the line of demarcation between market and state has been disappearing through partnerships at whether local or national level. Recalling the very known motto of "steering, not rowing", one may say that local governments are both steering and rowing in this new age of local governance.

"Bringing Britain together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal", the report of the Social Exclusion Unit established by New Labour, was critical of both central and local government for its past failures in relation to urban policy (Rao, 2000, p. 126). Calling on public, private and voluntary bodies to work together was seen as a solution. Hence, maybe the most crucial concept of this regeneration led by New Labour was "partnerships", implying this coming togetherness. Within this context of partnership, local authorities were to discharge their new duty: to promote economic, social and environmental well-being in their areas.

"Best value" and partnership are two concepts combined. New Labour attempted to introduce a new context in which partnerships produce the best value. There was a rewards-incentives system, and the best-performing authorities were rewarded. Beacon councils are examples of this new context. As their performance increase, so the discretionary power of these councils. In Beacon status, for "the very best performing councils either for an individual service or for the council as a whole. Beacon Councils will have to have modern management structures, effective community involvement and a successful Best Value programme. Councils with Beacon Status have additional powers and freedoms" (DETR, 1998).

The assertion of governance is to bring together various actors to form a social coalition in reaching relevant solutions to socio-economic problems and provide a sustainable ground for development. It is not an uncomplicated and smooth process; on the contrary, forming a fertile base for cooperation requires effort and skills of coordination. Otherwise, there emerges chaos which may result in the intensification of problems. Similarly, Peter John and Alistair Cole (2000, p. 86) underline the exigency of "political leadership". They acknowledge that "whereas local government leadership was always difficult, local governance leadership requires almost

super-human skills" (John and Cole, 2000, p. 86). In this sense, another fundamental concept raised by New Labour is community leadership. The "community leadership" concept, which developed during Labour's years of opposition, came into its own after May 1997 and informed the entire gamut of New Labour's programme for local government: "Community leadership is at the heart of the role of modern local government. Councils are the organisations best placed to take a comprehensive overview of the needs and priorities of their local areas and communities and lead the work to meet those needs and priorities in the round" (DETR, 1998, p. 79). As Rao (2000, p. 131) puts it,

> Clearly, New Labour has given local government central place in its agenda to modernise British institutions, but the key question is whether or not the package is likely to work. It is not hard to see that Best Value offers greater flexibility and brings in wider considerations of service and the beacon council scheme makes sense as a model for diffusing and encouraging innovation. It is also hard to disagree with the proposition that the new ethical framework has a wider compass and greater sensitivity than the old blunt instrument of surcharge. What is less clear is whether the underlying problems of public disaffection and distrust, sporadic electoral participation and general indifference to local democracy can be reversed. To make that judgment, it is necessary to look more closely at what is proposed by the new legislation - first, for directly enhancing participation and, second, for attracting greater interest through new models of political leadership.

In July 1998, The New Labour government published the "White Paper Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People" The aim was the renewal of local democracy with a slogan of "a better deal; a bigger say for local people". This modernisation program implies the relationship between the council and its community with two primary grounds: first, listening to and involving people; second, readdressing the problem of non-voting. On the first ground, there were some ways of realising this: (1) consensus conferencing (small number of local people); (2) local referendums; (3) citizens' jury (selection of a representative group of residents); (4) deliberative opinion polls; (5) standing citizens' panels and research panels. For increasing voting turnout, the New Labour government aimed at simplifying the electoral system. Also, local authorities were permitted to experiment in electoral practice such as (1) electronic voting, (2) mobile polling stations, (3) voting in different hours, (4) voting on different days, (5) voting over a number of days holding elections entirely by postal vote. To sum up, New Labour triggered the change process and combined the new reform agenda with its experiences in local governments.

NEW LABOUR PARTY AND 2006 LOCAL ELECTIONS

New Labour Party's 2006 local election motto was "Securing Britian's Future" (Labour Party, 2006, p. 1). Thus, the primary source used in this discussion is the official manifesto of the Labour Party. In the local government agenda of the party, there are five main topics that the party was making promises to the citizens of the UK. In this part of the paper, these topics will be elaborated on: (1) Investing in each and every child; (2) Securing Local Communities; (3) Stronger cities and Towns; (4) Labour's councils cost less and deliver more; (5) Working for cleaner, greener, safer communities.

In the "Investing in each and every child" section of the manifesto, the Labour Party (2006, p. 6) says:

> Every young person deserves the best possible start in life with every opportunity to achieve their full potential. That is why education is Labour's top priority. As a result of Labour's record investment and programme of reform in our schools, standards are up. The next stage of our economic development depends on the highest standards of education, which is why Labour is now intensifying the pace of school reform.

The Labour Party aims to increase the local authorities' power to raise the standards of schools. In this respect, the party believed that the powers of local governments are "strategic" (Labour Party, 2006, p.7). However, being strategic was not defined, or the tasks of local authorities were not determined clearly. What makes the powers of local authorities strategic and different from the previous situation remained untouched.

At that point, the "Sure Start Program" is a clear indicator of how the New Labour attached importance to education via local governments. Since their target was to enhance these centres through conveying it to every community, these centres provide the best start in life for every child and help families.

Another important point is the "Securing Local Communities" that Labour Party gave a great deal of effort. Labour (2006, p. 8) says that "With Labour, every community will have a local neighbourhood policing team, which is accountable to the community it serves." In this way, the community elects the ones who will govern and is involved in controlling the services. The involvement of the community in the processes reveals how the term of governance is reflected in actual life practice.

Labour Party (2006, p. 10) promised "Stronger Cities and Towns" by trying to increase the efficiency of cities in terms of their economic opportunities. On the other hand, any program neglecting the social aspects has no chance to be successful in the total sense. In addition, while adhering to democratic socialist ideals to a certain extent, New Labour seems to be sunk into mistaken considerations of market discourse, such as attempting to account for most of the issues with market rationale. The cultural, social, economic and also political development of a city or a community is a composite whole. There is no point in separating these dimensions because development is integral with its all components.

New Labour's (2006, p. 12) frequently used catchword "labour's councils cost less and deliver more" indicates its approach towards public service provisions. It claimed that "Labour councils have led the way by delivering both the lowest increases and the lowest average council tax" (Labour Party, 2006, p. 12). For instance, Table 2 shows the relative cheapness of Labour councils. Here is again a confrontation with Labour's market-oriented evaluation of every issue. Rather than presenting how many people benefited from services provided by these councils, Labour seems to be content with its councils' economic advantage compared to liberal democrats and conservatives.

Table 2. Average Council Tax in 2006 (Labour Party, 2006, p. 12).

Average council tax in 2006/07		
Labour	Liberal Democrats	Conservatives
£957	£1053	£1147

The last section of the Labour (2006, p. 14) manifesto is about environmental concerns under the topic of "working cleaner, greener, safer communities." To realise this, it dumps the responsibility on local governments. It says: "Labour has given local authorities new powers to tackle graffiti, abandoned cars, fly-tipping, noise pollution and other environmental concerns. These new powers will help local authorities deliver real improvements to the environmental quality of our neighbourhoods."

Giddens (2000b, p. 74) argues that a risk plait is composed of positive and negative sides: opportunity, security, responsibility, and innovation. Even environmental issues are approached in terms of this plait which smells market rationality to a large extent. It is evident that the

central notion is winners and losers in the market and survival of the fittest. However, for example, in environmental issues, who will be the loser, nature or humanity?

CONCLUSION

There are clear indicators of how the term "governance" is reflected in the local government practice in the British case. However, one should not disregard that during the transition from the "old" style of local government to "local governance", it is normal to see some deviations and consistencies. A clear example of this could be seen in Urban Development Corporations (UDCs). Over the UDCs, the councillors have no power and appointees of central government run these corporations. This results in social exclusion, especially of ethnic minorities (Brownvill, Razzaque, Stirling, Thomas; 2000, p. 239). Local democracy is eroded while opening the way to the influence of local business people; the elected bodies are drowned out of the picture (Brownvill, Razzaque, Stirling, Thomas; 2000, p. 238). In order to broaden the borders of local democracy, exclusionary forms of governing need to be transformed. Otherwise, neither local governance nor accountability would be realised.

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