

COMMANDER W. O. REES-MILLINGTON, R.N. (RETD.)

I came to the Island 57 years ago. Being half Welsh and a quarter Scots I have no great affinity with the English and identify myself with the Island. I would apply for 'naturalisation papers' if ever we decided to rule ourselves.

The publication of the Maud report followed by the previous Government's white paper gave the Island hopeful prospects of a Metropolitan District status with practically full powers to control all Island local Government activities. This was then followed by the latest white paper from the present Government reducing us to the status of a District Council, with about 8 per cent of our present powers, and working to the County of Hampshire.

If this came about we should be in the position of a non-county borough equivalent to the present set up in Newport and Ryde. We made presentations to the Minister concerned suggesting a County Council with full powers with two District Councils (40,000 each) working to us. As the minister was unlikely to accede to this idea we had an alternative, one District Council to take the place of the present County Council, but with extended powers to cover all services essential to the Island Community and which could not be dealt with efficiently by Hampshire without complete delegation.

We are in process with these negotiations now and have every reason to expect success in great part.

When County Councils were brought into being a little over 80 years ago, the Island was brigaded with Hampshire, an arrangement which lasted a year; it became manifest that the union was unworkable for many very obvious reasons, one of the principal being communication difficulties, and another the impossibility of a mainland authority being able to comprehend our special problems. There is no reason to suppose that such a union would work any better now or last any longer.

There have been innumerable expressions of opinion, both inside local government and amongst the public at large to the effect that seven local authorities to run an Island of 100,000 people is a complete nonsense when compared to the single councils of Portsmouth and Southampton with double our population. And they appear to run their ideas efficiently and economically. The only voices raised AGAINST the proposition have come from members of the District Councils who make the claim that they are the only representatives of the ratepayers. In fact every ward in every District Council is represented on the County Council which, in truth, is the only body on the Island which can claim to represent the overall wishes of the public.

Over the years we have never been able to get a breakdown of the abstracts of accounts of District Councils in spite of many requests. The only conclusion to draw is that they were very apprehensive that a disclosure of their detailed figures would enable us to prove beyond all doubt that a one tier authority would lessen the increasing burden on the ratepayers very considerably. A 30 per cent saving may even be an underestimate after general streamlining of staff and services.

Having served on a Borough Council for 13 years it is quite plain to me that the real reason for opposition was loss of position for the members and some of the staff, no regard being paid to the effect on the public economy. Enmity and jealousy of the County Council and a policy of non-co-operation wherever possible has plagued us for years past, and our efforts for the betterment of the Island, by the displays of disunity amongst District Councils have been greatly hampered when dealing with Government Departments.

The danger is that whenever bureaucracy sees disunity it is apt to leap in with its own decisions with no further regard to the local susceptibilities. This was typified by the action of the Minister of Health over 20 years ago in the matter of the Water Board, when he became tired of continual local bickerings and imposed his own decision to the disadvantage of some, who had they agreed with the rest and put up their own suggestion in time, would have got better terms.

By union with Hampshire (or for that matter any other mainland authority) we should become virtually disenfranchised in that out of electoral body of some 80 members we could not hope to have more than six, and we should have the greatest difficulty in finding such persons who were not only capable as representatives but who could spare the time involved in travelling and, on many occasions stay overnight away from home. The essence of good local government, constantly available for consultation and on occasions ad hoc meetings.

This proximity is particularly necessary for committee chairmen and, of course, now exists in the Island.

We must press for the full county status, with two District Councils (East and West Wight) or, failing this, one District Council with extended powers. The latter is the very least we should accept.

Researched by
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