obliged governments to pay more attention to the economic implications of local spending. Since the first world war, public expenditure has risen from one sixth of gross domestic product to over a half, but the most dramatic growth in spending has been in local government. No government can afford to ignore a sector which now accounts for one third of all public expenditure and employs 10 per cent of the working population.

Central government concern with the efficiency of local administration inevitably led to calls for a "rationalisation" of both its physical and management structures. It was felt that the pre-1972 local government structure—a legacy from the Victorian era—had failed to adapt to either demographic change or to the requirements of increasing administrative complexity. Most authorities were seen as too small to make effective planning units, or to bring economies of scale in services.

So local government was not to escape the influence of late-1960s managerialism. The Redcliffe-Maud royal commission was set up by the Wilson administration in 1966 to examine the structure of authorities, just as the Mallaby, Maud and Bains committees were set up to examine their internal organisation. The culmination of all this was Peter Walker's Local Government Act of 1972 which brought in the present system.

A "rational" administrative structure has, at the county tier at least, created the right conditions for a "rational" political system—ie, one based on party politics. Many Independent candidates decided not to stand for election in 1973 (or to stand as Conservatives), and more are doing so this year. Partly, this is because the new counties are seen as being too large and impersonal, and therefore inconsistent with the Independents' localist ideology. But it is also a response to the difficulties of organisation. Wards in new counties are too large to be properly canvassed without a party apparatus. Independents were often faced with competition from former aldermen (whose office was abolished by the new act). But the most important factor was Conservative Party pressure.

Fears of Labour successes in 1973, and of Independents not having the resources to check Labour advances, led many local Conservative associations to fight for control of authorities in areas where they had previously left the anti-socialist opposition to Independents, or had at least coexisted with them. This was not local party initiative but Conservative Central Office policy.

The Conservatives had good grounds to fear Labour making inroads into the new counties—and this was borne out by the results. The incorporation of county boroughs (which were for the most part Labour Party strongholds) into many of the new counties, meant that their Labour representation would be "transferred" into the counties. It also meant that local Labour parties got the incentive and confidence to use this electoral base to campaign in parts of shire counties hitherto neglected. Reorganisation abolished the over-representation of rural areas within counties, which had operated to Labour's disadvantage. It gave an industrial Labour vote about the same value as a rural or suburban Conservative vote. Labour gains were expected in 1973 for political reasons, anyway. A Conservative government was in mid-term.

Conservatives have taken part in local elections since the 19th century. They have often fought under "non-political" banners (such as the Bristol Citizens' Party, or the London Municipal Society). They have recently tended to claim that they have entered local politics reluctantly in the face of Labour advances. But their contribution to the rise of national party politics took the form of two major offensives. The first was in 1945-50, after the landslide Labour victories of 1945 at parliamentary and municipal levels. The second was 1973.

The 1973 offensive did not necessarily involve opposing Independents. In most cases, the Conservative group simply put pressure on them to change their colours and adopt a Conservative label. This was sometimes achieved by offering the carrot of a committee chairmanship; more often by threatening opposition at the next election.

But the Conservatives had other motives for their campaign besides the threat of Labour advances. A number of Conservative councillors, deprived of their seats by reorganisation, coveted those held by Independents. But, more important the party both nationally and locally recognised the importance of the new authorities, just as the Labour Party did. Their scale, responsibilities, and the resources they controlled, made them a prize worth winning. (The west midlands metropolitan county council is the planning authority for a population the size of New Zealand.) This argument led Morrison to wrest control of the old LCC, the jumbo authority of its day, from the not-very-crypto-Conservative London Municipal Society.

Moreover, it was quite simply their bill. The Local Government Act had been attacked from all sides. Conservative participation was a way of showing commitment to the new set-up. Peter Walker had gone for a two-tier "county" structure which most Conservative councillors were happy with, in place of the Labour/Redcliffe-Maud proposals based on urban areas. The Tories wanted to make it work.

But whatever the immediate causes, the roots of a full explanation lie deep. The interventionist role of the state has to be politically legitimised. Jürgen Habermas, the Frankfurt School sociologist, is among those who point out that the state has politicised aspects of public life which were previously based on cultural norms and were regarded as "non-political"—for example, health services, education, and even town and country planning. This does not mean that issues necessarily become polemical. But traditional boundaries between political and "socio-cultural" systems are breached.

As Habermas says: "Administrative planning produces a universal pressure for legitimation in a sphere that was once distinguished precisely by its power of self-legitimation"; "Policy is based on the premise that traditional patterns could as well be otherwise." This legitimation is achieved through a system of "formal democracy" which is compatible with the prevailing culture (but avoids meaningful participation). For the local government boom to be legitimised, it has to be seen to be controlled by political representatives responsible to the electorate, like the parties at Westminster. The electorate has to be mobilised, the issues articulated, and a clear choice of policy programmes presented.

The major parties are taking next week's elections very seriously. The Conservative pressure on Independents has intensified, and will no doubt be reflected in further Independent losses to Conservative advantage. The Labour Party has begun to form county Labour parties in order to fight local elections more effectively. The battle for control of county governments has, in most places, become as much a two-party affair as a parliamentary election in most English and Welsh constituencies. By Friday of next week the "nationalisation" of county politics could be almost complete.

R. A. W. Rhodes, "The changing political-management system of local government" (unpublished paper, 1975)

Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (Heinemann, 1976)

Charles Reich, "The new property" (*Yale Law Journal*, vol 73, No. 5, 1964)

John Bennington, *Local Government Becomes Big Business* (Community Development Project, Information and Intelligence Unit, 1976)

Keyworth House labour exchange

Society at work

From pillar to post

Ian Macpherson
photos: Homer Sykes

As far as the law is concerned, the Department of Health and Social Security accepts responsibility for resettling rootless people. Society, it is felt, is more manageable when its members are married, have jobs and bear 2.4 children—the national average. The DHSS is worried that bums, itinerants, gypsies and so on are not merging properly into society. So it operates a resettlement scheme. A group of us at the Claimants' Union set up a working party to look into homelessness, with particular reference to what the social security system does to fulfil its legal obligations.

I volunteered to become a test case. When I had previously applied for supplementary benefit myself, the process took five minutes. I wore a suit and was an ex-teacher. For the test case I adopted the persona of a 20 year old Irishman who had come over from Dublin and had his belongings stolen. To all intents and purposes he is now homeless and rootless in London. With a minimal amount of encouragement and help, however, he would be willing to settle down. His school results aren't very good, but he has been employed for most of his working life in Dublin. He was laid off two weeks before, and came to London on the advice of a friend. He knows no one, and is afraid to go to the police because of the war in the north and the possibility that they might detain him.

Our contact with the Irish embassy gave little reason to believe that they could help very much. The DHSS does accept responsibility for "social security," Irish immigrants included. I witnessed the same treatment as I got being given to several people from the north of England.

My test case involved two trips to Marshalsea Road emergency social security office in Southwark; one to Keyworth House, also in Southwark; an hour at Camberwell reception centre (the Spike); a night at Dean Street reception centre; and a night of board and lodging at the expense of the taxpayer. The whole resettlement process is very unsettling. I am now back in the comfort of suburbia and can describe my experience as follows:

MARSHALSEA ROAD EMERGENCY SOCIAL SECURITY OFFICE: *Monday, 5pm*

This office is neatly tucked away from the public gaze. I found it after walking past it twice. Jumping over the pool of water at the door inside the main interviewing room, I was faced with a long narrow room with two rows of seats running lengthways. Parallel with these rows, and only a few feet away, are the interviewing cubicles. The social security employees are segregated from the claimants by glass and by bars which rise to the ceiling to protect both sides from attack. The reception cubicle was manned (personned?) by a woman who looked and acted like a cross schoolmistress from *Bunty*.

The man in front of me had no identity document. His head twitched and he all his money in the three weeks since then. couldn't talk properly. Had he no identity documents anywhere? Not even a driving licence? He could hardly manipulate himself, let alone a car. This, I realised, was an example of the social security sense of humour. She let him sign and he took his giro and left. I moved forward.

"I wonder can you help me? I was told I could get some money here."

"Emergency service 6.30. It's marked up outside."

"Thank you," I said and left.

MARSHALSEA ROAD—*6.30pm*

The main office was shut, but the small side-office was open. I went in and sat down. There were two cubicles, one of which was personned, and seven people sat in front of me. Of the seven (all males) two were sent into the main office for further interrogation. The rest were offered accommodation at a reception centre. Because of the layout of the office, the waiting claimants were cast in the role of spectator whether they liked it or not.

The interrogator seemed trained to relish killing claimants' hopes. A recent arrival from Newcastle-upon-Tyne was one victim.

Marshalsea Road emergency office

We listened in on his private conversation. He had been laid off, and had spent He didn't sign on, as he'd never had trouble getting a job before and thought he wouldn't have any this time. He had never claimed before. He showed the appropriate documents. "Don't you know it's illegal to stay unemployed for more than seven days without signing on?" snapped the social security man, "and you expect me to give you money? You should go to jail. Do you know that?" The Newcastle man left soon afterwards, presumably to hide out. He was as rich when he left as he had been on entering.

The interrogator continued with the task of helping us. It took him about 20 minutes to dissect the seven life stories that were related to him. None of the stories seemed to merit special attention. Soon it was my turn.

I sat, striking a pose of humility, my eyes downcast like a shy nun. "Hello," I said, "I was told you could help me here." I told him my story briefly, and he listened until I paused.

"All you Irish are the same," he said. "I've never met a bloody Irishman yet who didn't lose his belongings as soon as he got off the boat. Tell me, where did you sell them?" (social security humour: example two). "I suppose it looks that way," I said, "you see, I wanted to look for a job and . . ." "And you wanted me to give you money. I know. You can stay in the reception centre tonight, and come back after you've signed on. That's all I can do." He gave me a card with bus directions to Dean Street on it.

Any money? No. Any shoes grant? No. I left without getting the bus pass he should have given me.

My shoes-grant request was prearranged. The DHSS are notoriously tight when it comes to giving clothes, bedding, special heating and special diet grants. And yet claimants are entitled to these. I deliberately wore a jersey with a carefully arranged hole and shoes that were not calculated to impress a prospective employer. The DHSS refused, on three separate occasions even to consider giving me an exceptional needs payment. My trousers showed two inches of ankle, and even a cursory glance would show that I wasn't a flashy dresser. Yet I was clean, and there was no reason to suppose that I would abuse a pair of shoes if they entrusted me with them.

Undaunted, I set out towards the Spike.

CAMBERWELL RECEPTION CENTRE

I spent only an hour here because they decided that I was too young to stay the night. I only knew it was nearer than Dean Street. As I had no money, it was easier to get there. I arrived at about eight. I found the building quite easily, although it was neatly tucked away from the public gaze. I was met by a man in a white coat who asked me how much money I had. "Just a few coppers." "Ah, that's okay, kid. Just sign here, and go through for your shower." I signed and went.

In the following hour, I was inspected for lice, had a shower, and ate. The food consisted of a stew and some bread. The stew was lukewarm and seemed to be made from packet soup and baked beans. Apart from this, I have no complaints. My reluctance to mark it down as a three-star hotel is due to the reluctance to let me test the sleeping facilities. What is a 20 year old too young to see? I was given bus directions and a bus pass and left, not stopping until I reached . . .

DEAN STREET RECEPTION CENTRE

The entrance to Dean Street centre is also neatly tucked away from the public gaze, on Carlisle Street. Why the secrecy? Dean Street offers supper, bed and breakfast, and the services of a welfare officer or resettlement officer. For those with money, it costs £1.68 a night, or £11.76 a week ("Cheap at half the price," as someone remarked). But penniless people can stay there for nothing. They do a task in the morning, but otherwise luxuriate on the taxpayer's money.

As soon as I got in the door, I was checked for lice. This entails showing your shirt. I had no lice, so I don't know what happens in the delousing process. "I had a shower in Camberwell," I told the delouser to which he replied, "That's okay, you can have another here" (social security humour: example three). When I was doubly clean, I was interrogated lightly, and asked to sign a form. I was then taken to the blanket room, invited to "choose any three" of several hundred blankets that looked identical, and directed to the dormitory.

I slept in relative comfort, in spite of having to get used to the fact that blankets tickle the bare body.

Tuesday

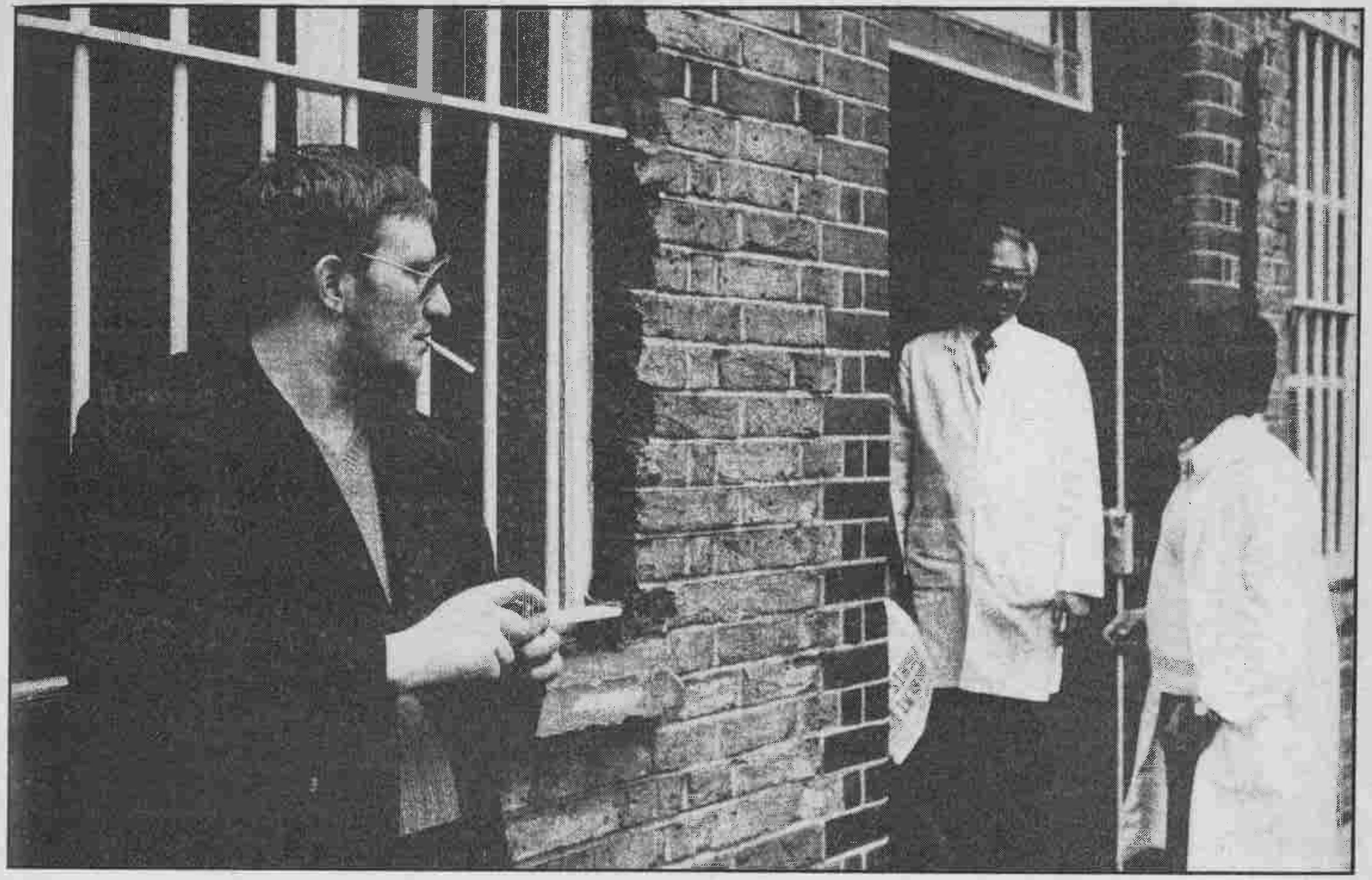
I was up at 7.15 and left Dean Street at 11.45, a period of 4½ hours. Fifteen minutes were spent on my task, ten on breakfast, 15 with the welfare officer, and the rest waiting. Breakfast was okay. The task consisted of cleaning out the shower room, and it wasn't overseen by anyone in particular. At 8.30 I went into the waiting room and sat down. I waited. And waited. And waited. The welfare officers came in at nine o'clock, and each had several cases to deal with. They all finished by ten, apart from one matronly lady who looked like a block of granite with clothes on.

She dealt with each case meticulously. Her work persona was that of the sergeant-major with the heart of gold. She marched each victim into her office as if she intended to solve Britain's problems in the morning, and the world's before teatime. She would march into the waiting room, read out a name and look around. "You there! Feet off the chairs."

I felt that she was probably a nice lady in real life and that in any other situation we would have gone out together and got pissed like two old pals, but she didn't seem to have much to offer in the way of advice. True, the Chelsea Hotel needed some more trainee managers; but apart from that, jobs were thin on the ground.

She told me to go to Keyworth House labour exchange, and that a No. 1 bus would take me there. "How much money have you got?" she asked. "About 10p." "That should be enough. Get a national insurance number before you go." "Thank you for your help," I said.

Had this lady helped me? Not as far as I could see. Had the three-hour wait been worthwhile? I'm afraid not.



Dean Street reception centre

KEYWORTH HOUSE LABOUR EXCHANGE

My 10p wasn't enough for the bus journey, so I had to walk part of the way. I arrived at Keyworth House. Having signed the preliminary forms, I waited my turn for an interview. The room was notable for cigarette butts, hastily scrawled notices, and customers playing, as usual, the Waiting Game. My interviewer was cheerful and friendly. He filled out a B1 form, wished me luck, and sent me on my way with advice on how to cope with the DHSS: "Don't let them give you Sally Army vouchers," he warned "Ask for the money."

MARSHALSEA ROAD REVISITED

At 3.20 I was back in the small reception room, having my basic details written out. This took a minute, after which I was sent into the main room. It was a sight for eyesores. It was packed with people, making every conceivable noise. The still sad music of humanity? Wordsworth obviously didn't claim at Marshalsea Road.

The loudspeaker was busy. "Fred Smith, cubicle No. 4," followed by a pause, and "*Fred Smith cubicle No. 4*!!!"

"Joseph Kidd, cubicle No. 10." I went to the cubicle and told my story. I had found a sympathetic ear. He even asked me if I wanted to find my own lodgings or not. I did. "Is there any chance," I asked, "of money for a pair of shoes? I don't think I'd get a job with these ones." "I'm afraid not," he said, "we can't just give them out like that."

After the interview, I thought I was finished with the preliminaries. But I was called back, a few minutes later, to be questioned by the manager in a much more thorough fashion. Any chance of a shoe grant? Emphatically, No!

The interviews stopped shortly afterwards. The room began to empty as people collected their giros from the schoolma'am lady. She had left her microphone on. Each conversation was broadcast to the room. A black kid was sent to the back of the class for failing to confine his signature within the two lines allotted. An old man was told to practise his writing.

I went to the counter, where I was given a giro and an envelope. The money was, I was told, to last me a week. The cheque was for £6.65. The envelope, marked "to be presented unopened," was addressed to the Salvation Army. Opening it, I found that I had seven nights lodging, with supper and breakfast thrown in. I was alone in London, but I had money and a place to stay. The DHSS had resettled me.

In the following 24 hours I met enough winos to drink London dry in an evening. I was refused admission to a public library. Moral: public means public, except when it means private. I was also refused admission to a church in the morning. Two priests, standing outside a chapel at Westminster cathedral, told me to come back at 10 for communion. The church was open. I can only assume that God has a lie-in on Tuesday mornings.

SALVATION ARMY HOSTEL

This is in Great Peter Street, a little back street in Westminster. It is filled every evening with misfits, alcoholics and DHSS Resettlement Plan victims. I was in bed at 9.30, and up at 6.30 after listening to a dawn chorus of coughs from my roommates, about 60 of them. I breakfasted lightly—I had no choice really— and left at 7am. I have nothing to say against the Salvation Army just in case there is a God. But I hope in high summer the DHSS have the decency to resettle people in cleaner surroundings, say St James's Park.

I was now going to have to get a job. I was probably too late for the Chelsea Hotel, so with my shoe flapping rhythmically . . . and my holey jersey . . . and my Jacques Tati trousers . . . and my slightly tarnished youthful eagerness, I wound my wary way West-End-wards.

The photographs show Keyworth House, the Marshalsea Road office, a man outside Camberwell Spike, and Dean Street reception centre. (They were taken after the text was written. The people shown are not those specifically described here.)

A play, "One for the Road," based on this and other material, has been produced by Soap Box Theatre, and opens tomorrow at Stage 1, 15 Deanery Road, Stratford, London E15. *It is due to move to the Half-Moon Theatre, London* E1, *on 10 May.*