Self Government in the British Isles
The experience of the Shetland Islands and the aspirations of the Shetland movement.

By John Goodlad

This paper describes the degree of self government which has been achieved by the Shetland Islands over the last two decades together with an analysis of the current aspirations for increased autonomy. In the first section the background to and development of local government in Shetland is outlined in some detail. It is argued that the present structure of Shetland local government is somewhat distinctive as the result of specific responses by the Shetland community to certain major political and economic issues during the last twenty years. In the second section the more recent demands for further autonomy are considered. Particular attention is focused on the origins and policy development of the Shetland Movement which advocates a considerably enhanced degree of autonomy for Shetland. It is argued that the emergence of the Shetland Movement, with its specific constitutional objective of self government for Shetland, is a political development of some considerable significance since it represents a real desire to change the future political structure of government in Shetland.

This paper is presented within the context of the British political system which remains one of the most centralised democracies in Western Europe. As a result, while the development of local government in Shetland may be seen as significant within the British context, the attainment of any degree of self government for Shetland can be viewed as very limited indeed if comparisons are made with certain other European countries.

Local government in Shetland
The aspirations for increased autonomy for Shetland are often justified by the argument that the problems of Shetland are particular to the islands and quite different from the rest of Britain. The fact that Shetland is a fairly remote island group with a relatively inhospitable climate and an economy which is heavily dependent upon the fishing industry are all obvious factors which identify the islands as being different from the rest of Britain. Although lacking any distinctive national cultural characteristics such as language, Shetland has an identifiable regional cultural identity which is manifested in many ways including a vigorous Shetland dialect, a distinctive musical tradition and a unique style of knitwear. While not claiming any national identity, most of the 23,000 islanders believe themselves to be Shetlanders as opposed to Scots; the historical links with Scandinavia being emphasised as a balance to the more modern connections to Scotland. A more recent example of this has been the development of a Shetland flag which acknowledges the islands' links with both Scandinavia and Scotland in its design and colours.

Despite these regional differences the structure of local government in Shetland has been that of a typical Scottish rural county for most of this century. In other words, the role of the Zetland County Council was limited to the administrative functions undertaken by all Scottish County Councils in such matters as roads, education and housing. The relevance of this type of local government to the problems of Shetland was first questioned following a visit to the Faroe Islands by a delegation from the Zetland County Council in 1962. The buoyant Faroese economy and rising population was contrasted with a stagnant economy and depopulation
in Shetland. It was concluded that the main reason for the Faroese success was their ability to control their own affairs through the Faroese Parliament which has both legislative and fiscal powers. The comparison with Faroe had been made and the debate regarding autonomy for Shetland, as opposed to the traditional local government structure, had begun.

By this time, however, it was clear that there was a growing trend towards centralisation within the United Kingdom. The Zetland County Council mounted a vigorous but unsuccessful campaign against the proposals to merge the administrative functions of the local police force (1962) and the Water Board (1966) with those of Orkney and the North of Scotland. This centralising trend culminated in 1968 when the »Royal Commission on Local Government in Scotland« recommended that the various county councils in the remote parts of Scotland (including Shetland) be merged to form a large Highlands and Islands Region. As these proposals would have effectively removed what little local government Shetland enjoyed, they were strongly opposed by the Zetland County Council. The case against the merger, as presented by the Zetland County Council and others (e.g. the Orkney County Council), eventually convinced the Government and, in 1971, separate Island Councils were proposed for Shetland, Orkney and the Western Isles. These proposals became law in 1973 when the Local Government (Scotland) Act was passed. Local elections took place in 1974 and by 1975 the Shetland Islands Council was in existence as a local authority with much the same administrative functions as the Regional Councils in Scotland, which all, of course, serve much larger populations (1). The creation of a separate Shetland Islands Council can be regarded as something of a watershed when the tide of centralisation was at least temporarily stemmed.

At the same time as the debate over Local Government re-organisation in Scotland was taking place, the discovery of North Sea oil identified Shetland as an area for potential onshore development, including an oil terminal. This led to widespread concern that oil related development would have a catastrophic social, economic and environmental impact on Shetland. This concern prompted the Zetland County Council to sponsor a Private Bill in Parliament which granted the local government considerable powers to control oil developments within the islands and to generate significant oil-related income. This bill eventually became law when the Zetland County Council Act of 1974 was passed (2).

So, by 1975, the newly elected Shetland Islands Council (S.I.C.) was not only undertaking much the same functions as the larger Scottish Regional Councils but also enjoyed the additional powers to control oil related developments. In this way Shetland local government was beginning to be regarded as rather different from the general Scottish pattern. This position was consolidated throughout the remainder of the 1970's as the Shetland community at large, and the S.I.C. in particular, responded to certain major issues in a quite distinctive manner.

Following the accession of the United Kingdom to the European Community in 1973, a referendum on continued membership was held in 1975. In contrast to the rest of Britain, there was a substantial majority against continued membership in both Shetland and the Western Isles (3). Concern for the future of the Shetland fishing industry within an E.E.C. Common Fisheries Policy was the main reason for the Shetland vote (4). The same concern for the future of the Faroese fishing industry prompted a similar attitude in the Faroes in that the Faroese Parliament decided to remain out with the E.E.C., despite the decision of Denmark to become a full member. Notwithstanding the Shetland referendum result, the S.I.C. had no