

A Mayor and Assembly for London: 10 years on

Report of Conference at LSE 2nd July 2010

Opening remarks of Chairman, Emeritus Professor George Jones, Chairman of the Greater London Group [GLG]

This conference follows one of May 2007 held at City Hall, which had looked at the performance and demise of the Greater London Council [GLC]. Notable speakers at that event were the then Mayor, Ken Livingstone, and Lord (Desmond) Plummer, a former Conservative Leader of the GLC, who had since died. That earlier event was timed to mark the 40-year anniversary of the date when Plummer had become leader.

Earlier this year L.J. [Jim] Sharpe died. He had been a research officer with the GLG in the early 1960s and had helped prepare evidence leading to the establishment of the GLC. He went on to write two pioneering GLG papers about the 1961 London County Council (LCC) Elections called *A Metropolis Votes* (1962) and about *Research in Local Government* (1965). He remained a frequent visitor to the Group and writer about London government. I would like to dedicate this conference to Jim's memory. The Group also lost a few days ago William Plowden who sat with me at GLG Monday afternoon meetings under the chairmanship of William Robson when I first joined the Group in 1966.

Today's conference is timely since the vesting day of the Greater London Authority [GLA], when it came into being, is ten years ago tomorrow. The objective of the conference is to assess the performance of the Mayor and Assembly that make up the GLA, looking at why and how it came into being, its achievements and disappointments.

From the 19th Century to today there was a clear party divide over how London should be governed. Liberal and Labour parties tended to support an overall pan-London government, like the LCC (1889-1965) and the GLC (1965-86), while Conservatives supported the creation of local units, or boosting their powers, as counterweights to any city-wide government, like the metropolitan boroughs (1899-1965) and the London boroughs 1965-to date, or even abolishing the top tier 1986-2000.

Yet today Boris Johnson, the Conservative mayor of a Labour creation, seeks more powers for the top tier, although he promises to devolve more in turn to the boroughs and respect their roles. Most of these boroughs have become Labour-controlled since the elections of 2010. The former Labour Government gave him more powers, and the new Coalition government may give him more too. One wonders if old party approaches have lapsed. Are we about to see the end of the 140-year Conservative hostility to a top-tier of London government? Will they curtail its powers, as they have traditionally, or enhance them? In the past party-political pressures shaped the pattern of London government. How will those pressures play out in the years to come? That is a question this conference will have to ponder or at least have at the back of its mind.

Speakers:

1. Mike Tuffrey, a London Assembly Member from 2002, and Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group 2006-2010; he had been a Lambeth borough councillor (1990 to 2002) and a member of the GLC and the Inner London Education Authority [ILEA] 1985-86.

Mike Tuffrey noted the large number of representatives on the GLC/ILEA, all of whom were elected from small constituencies, and the large size of the whole organisation. He felt that towards its end the GLC spent much time in activities that could not have a direct result or outcome, for example producing an industrial strategy that no one read or criticising the police from outside. He described the events leading to the end of the GLC, the interim period without a single authority for all London, and the coming of the GLA. The Conservative central government had not liked the GLC, seeing it as an alternative powerbase. The Labour central government established the GLA with a strong mayor and weak Assembly.

He contrasted the huge size of the GLC, which pushed it to intervene in local matters, with the small size of the GLA which encouraged it to play a metropolitan role, and tackle the big issues. He called for a review of the powers of the Assembly to build up its powers over the Mayor's budget, policies and appointments. While not wanting to diminish the mayor's powers - London needed such a big beast - he called for a stronger Assembly to provide plural centres of power at City Hall. He contrasted the austere atmosphere of the GLA with the GLC's use of local taxes to finance "parties [ie celebrations] on the rates". However he noted that an aloof strategy role alone was not enough. There needed to be real engagement with the public and those in a position to implement policy changes. The change of government provided an opportunity looking forward to expand the GLA's strategic role on housing, skills and health. On police, proposed changes risk diminishing democratic involvement. Overall the visible leadership brought by the mayoral model did have benefits, although GLC leaders, in their time, had not been invisible.

2. Anne Sofer, a GLC member (1977-86) and of the Inner London Education Authority (1972-1987), and Director of Education, Tower Hamlets (1989-1997).

Anne Sofer concentrated on the ILEA which continued as the local education authority after the GLC was abolished and lasted until it was itself abolished in 1990. It was the heir to the London School Board of 1870 and the London County Council which were responsible for education in London up to 1965. The same boundaries had been used for education for 120 years. The ILEA was abolished as a later follow-on of abolition of the GLC. It was regarded by the Thatcher Government as an arrogant and lumbering bureaucracy; there was bad personal chemistry between it and a central government intent on "demunicipalisation", and abolition was seen as a way to reduce public expenditure. The transfer of its functions to the boroughs helped to enhance the boroughs and enabled them to gain further powers, later under Labour central governments.

Abolition allowed the creation of borough departments of children's services, which would not have happened if the ILEA had still existed. Under the ILEA schools had become used to running themselves, so Local Management of Schools [LMS] was

less of a break than in some other parts of the country. One loss was that of the pan-London research and statistics service. There was evidence of good results in London's schools. There were huge similarities in results between authorities with similar socio-economic characteristics. Poor results were correlated with poor people.

But London has not been deprived of resources. The Labour Government has allocated considerable resources to London schools. Further and adult education, however, have been the victims of constant structural change. The GLA did not want them, although there was a need for a single metropolitan body to set strategy for them.

3. Nick Raynsford, is MP since 1977 for Greenwich, and was the Minister responsible for reorganising London's government in the Blair Government. He had been a councillor for Hammersmith and Fulham in 1971-1975.

Nick Raynsford described the story of the making of Labour's scheme to bring back a city-wide government for London, but not to turn the clock back to a body like the GLC with its interminable conflicts with the boroughs, as over housing. The Government wanted a small streamlined strategic authority. Tony Blair pressed for a directly-elected mayor against considerable opposition from many in the Labour party. Frank Dobson who in opposition in 1997 was shadow local government minister and head of Labour's London reorganization team was hostile to a mayor. In government he was replaced by John Prescott as Secretary of State.

Prescott's attitude was that if Tony wanted it then that was that. No detailed work had been done on how London was to be governed, as with devolution to Scotland and Wales; there was no blueprint in May 1997 other than manifesto promises to have a London authority, more streamlined than the GLC, with a directly-elected mayor and assembly with a strategic remit, and the creation to be endorsed through a referendum. A high-calibre civil-service team, including Robin Young and Genie Turton worked from May to July 1997 on producing a green paper. The main elements were a small assembly to engage in scrutiny of a directly-elected mayor. The GLA was to be a strategic pan-London body not duplicating the boroughs nor likely to be in conflict with them. The Conservatives opposed. Then came the responses to the green paper, and consultations with organisations and stakeholders, and research was conducted into how other countries operated directly-elected mayors. One lesson from New York was not to have small constituencies for Assembly members to avoid the mayor being able to buy off a member with a small pot of money for a local project.

Then came the white paper containing the unique voting system of the 'supplementary vote' to cut out all except the top two candidates for a final vote. The mayor was given significant powers and scope for influence to make him/her a powerful figure, and there was provision to avoid deadlocks over the budget, as in the USA. To defeat a mayor's budget required a two thirds majority and a new budget, which meant there would always be a budget. Transport was in Prescott's empire so the mayor obtained powers over transport, despite opposition from Transport civil servants, but later in 2003-4 when Transport was a separate department, it was not prepared to hand over transport powers to regional assemblies outside London.

The referendum of May 1998, although with a low turnout, gave the proposal a

majority in every borough, even in Bromley. Then followed legislation with an Act said to be the biggest since the Government of India Act of 1936, because there was so much to repeal and amend, even back to 1829. Ken Livingstone called it 'bonkers' at the time but changed his views later. The handover was fast, including a new building for the new authority, City Hall, similar to the new buildings for the new devolved governments in Edinburgh and Cardiff. The transition team was led by Bob Chilton, who devised a system of checks and balances between the Mayor and the Assembly to encourage cooperation. The new mayor had legitimacy: it would not be easily abolished - there is no appetite to abolish it. However, Raynsford feared recent proposals to give more powers to the GLA, in planning, housing, economic development, urban development and policing could produce conflict with the boroughs.

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4. Ken Livingstone, Leader of the GLC 1981-1986, and Mayor of London 2000-2008. He has been an MP and a borough councillor.

Ken Livingstone said the Act was not designed to curtail him if he became Mayor: it was the way Tony Blair wanted London to be governed, by a US presidential system he operated himself at the national level and wanted for other cities. Ken did not like it until 18 months into his term of office. He had tried to work with a cabinet and found it was not what he wanted. He began to operate as the Government had intended. The Act allowed the Mayor to have only a small team of advisers, but he negotiated with the Assembly, formally responsible for staff appointments, an agreement for him to have more of his own staff. His big policy concern was a fear that business would leave London, especially because of traffic congestion, and so he drove through the congestion charge which has become a template for other cities. He built a consensus coalition using the budget and finances by forging an alliance with business, the trades unions and the greens, with the policy of sustainable growth, supporting buses, and involving the workforce. Boris has adopted the basic approach of Ken. The system survived. The Tube public-private partnership scheme arose because the Treasury felt the existing system had failed over the Jubilee line and did not want a repetition. The scheme seemed to provide a modernised Tube at no cost to the taxpayer or fare-payer. Ken brought in Bob Kiley, as the best person for the top transport role, but Gordon Brown was hostile and would never meet him.

5. Baroness (Jo) Valentine, Chief Executive of London First from 2003.

Jo Valentine explained that London First was created to fill a vacuum and be a pro-business lobby to make London the best place in the world in which to do business. She reckoned the new system had been a success, acting as the political champion of London, removing blocks and helping make London an economic success. Without it London would not have gained the Olympic Games. It had helped keep London moving with its decisions on transport, it had increased the skills of Londoners, and produced plans and strategies. It was a business-like government.

6. Tony Travers, Director of the Greater London Group, LSE.

Tony Travers assessed it had been a success. What worked were the mayor's leadership, winning the Olympics, convincing the government to provide large sums of money for transport and housing, the successful introduction of the congestion

charge and bike-hire scheme, more police accountability, and strategic planning. The economy and the population grew. There is no serious pressure to abolish it. What worked less well was the Assembly. It was not a legislative body like in the USA and in the rest of Europe, it was weak in holding the mayor to account, and is so small as to be too informal.

The financial basis is flawed. Police accountability is muddled, because the Mayor, the Metropolitan Police Authority, the Assembly and the Home Office, all have roles which make the system complicated. Although there is no serious pressure to abolish the GLA, there is a sense of a changing system. Reforms happened in 2007 and more will come – devolving powers to City Hall and from City Hall to the boroughs. Recent proposals to increase the powers of the boroughs risked a damaging response by the boroughs.

The growing job losses in the Midlands and the North may intensify an anti-London attitude. London will be less hard hit because it is, overall, less dependent on the public sector than the rest of the country. It would be important nationally not to damage London because it is the hub that drives the rest of the country.

7. Stephen Hammond, Conservative MP for Wimbledon since 2005, now Stephen Hammond, Conservative MP for Wimbledon since 2005, now Parliamentary Private Secretary to Rt Hon Eric Pickles MP, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. He had been a councillor in Wimbledon.

Stephen Hammond listed the Coalition's agreed measures for devolving power to local government and to communities, including 16 areas for devolution, and the general power of competence. New primary legislation was required. There is much to negotiate between the Government, the GLA and the boroughs, including London Councils. Rail franchising remained a problem. He hoped for jointly agreed proposals soon. He noted that devolution from the boroughs to communities below remained a problem, and on the agenda had to be a consideration of how boroughs deliver services with perhaps too many service organisations and some which were too small for tackling the problems of cost efficient and effective delivery of services. He raised the question of the need to devolve to neighbourhoods.

8. Professor George Jones in his concluding remarks wondered whether the lesson he drew from the seminar was that the two fatal defects that had made the GLC system flawed were not also damaging the GLA. Both the GLC and the GLA were supposed to be metropolitan 'regional' authorities, yet their geographical boundaries encompassing the same area, were too restricted for the performance of strategic functions in land-use planning, economic development, transport, and major infrastructure. They required a much wider area for the master planning of London and its true hinterland, possibly the area within the M25, or better the South East.

The second weakness was that real London had no local-governmental authority, a concern of both William Robson and Jim Sharpe. The densely-populated core city was divided into a patchwork of boroughs that lacked a common identity. The GLC and GLA arrangements had no institution to represent its collective interests as a local-government unit for London. Even Ken Livingstone's plan for five boroughs,

wedge-shaped triangles covering both outer and inner London whose points converged in central London, fragmented the heart of London.

The need was for a unitary London city government, ringed around by a number of unitary authorities, all under a genuinely regional strategic authority, in which central government should play a significant role. Professor Jones suggested as an opening position that the London city government should cover an area roughly that of the old LCC (and ILEA), which would contain the area most people living in it would consider to be London, while those outside London would regard it as London too. London would then have a strong city government that would make it similar to England's provincial cities, like Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds and Sheffield. Why should London be treated as a second-class English city?