

The Greater London Authority, 2000 to 2008

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Restoration

The election of Tony Blair's Labour government in 1997 signalled the restoration of elected metropolitan government in London. The struggle to find an appropriate system of governance for the capital has gone on for a very long time¹. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats had been committed to a new institution in place of the Greater London Council since the latter was abolished in 1986. Labour set about a series of constitutional reforms, including devolution to Scotland, Wales and London. A green paper was published and, in 1998, a referendum was held on the proposal to introduce a 'Greater London Authority' (GLA) for the capital. Blair had personally pushed the idea of a mayor, bringing an American political institution into the British governmental arrangements².

Voters in all London boroughs voted in favour of the new GLA, which would consist of an executive mayor who would be overseen by a 25-member assembly. The former would be elected by a 'supplementary vote' arrangement and the latter by the 'alternative vote' system – a form of proportional representation. The new authority would be responsible for transport, economic development, spatial planning and, to a lesser degree, police and the fire brigade. It would have the power to set a council tax precept³. Although the GLA was less powerful than the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, it had a wider range of responsibilities than the GLC.

The Mayor would run a small administration that would, in turn, be responsible for four key 'functional bodies': Transport for London (TfL), the London Development Agency (LDA), the Metropolitan Police Authority (MPA) and the London Fire & Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA). Each of these institutions would have a board, all or some of whose members would be appointed by the Mayor. Policy would be determined by the Mayor in a series of strategies, the most important of which was a 'spatial plan' within which the boroughs would have to fit their own planning policies. The Mayor would also set the budgets of all four functional bodies.

Creating a new city-wide authority was welcomed by the boroughs and the City of London. There was a widely-perceived vacuum in the capital's government⁴. Some of the GLA's powers, eg transport, economic development, planning and the police had been transferred from Whitehall, while others such as the fire and emergency services had been run by a borough joint committee only during the period after 1986⁵. The boroughs lost virtually none of their own responsibilities though, as with earlier systems of London government, there was some concern about the way the new mayor would use planning powers.

The 2000 GLA election

For the political parties, the GLA posed a challenge. Directly-elected executive mayors were an innovation in Britain. New procedures were needed to select a candidate. The Conservatives, who had changed their post-1983 policy of opposition to London-wide government, chose Jeffrey Archer as candidate. For Labour, ex-GLC leader Ken Livingstone emerged as the leading contender. However, Blair and his Chancellor Gordon Brown, who were determined to avoid signalling a return to the devising politics of the 1980s, created an electoral college to select their party's candidate. Former Cabinet Minister Frank Dobson won. Livingstone (who was a Labour MP at the time) decided to fight the election as an Independent. Meanwhile, Jeffrey Archer had to be dropped after allegations of perjury in relation to an earlier court case emerged. Steven Norris was chosen to represent the Tories. The Liberal Democrats, with no fuss, selected Susan Kramer as their candidate⁶.

The 2000 elections for the Mayor and Assembly were the first of their kind in England. Campaigning took place in a series of 'hustings' meetings and in televised debates between the candidates. The personality-based contest between Ken Livingstone and Steve Norris provided an easy-to-understand political competition of precisely the kind Tony Blair had envisaged. But despite the visibility and accessibility of the contest, turnout at the election was just under 35 per cent⁷, rather lower than had generally been achieved in GLC elections.

Livingstone won easily. He beat Norris by 58 per cent to 42 per cent when both 'first and second preference votes were counted. Despite his 'loony left' image at County Hall, his charisma and anti-authority image appealed to Londoners. He returned to lead London after an interval of 14 years. Mrs Thatcher's government, having abolished him along with the GLC, had created the democratic space for his restoration as London's leader. But now he was much more powerful, as a 'strong mayor' within London's new upper tier of government. It was, as Thatcher had observed on another occasion, a 'funny old world'.

Creating the GLA

The government had arranged for London's new government to be provided with a temporary headquarters in Romney House, a nondescript building in Marsham Street, Westminster. A 'transition team' had been put in place (by Whitehall) to allow the new mayor and assembly to start their work. Two months were allowed, from May to July 2000, for the first Mayor of London to put his administration in place. The GLC, first elected in 1964, had run in parallel with its predecessors for a year before assuming control. Ken Livingstone had to work at a far quicker pace, appointing his 'Mayor's Office, board members and senior officials. The Assembly, similarly, had to appoint its own staff and also to decide how it would hold the Mayor to account.

Livingstone brought in a ready-made team of key advisors to form the core of his Mayor's Office. A group of advisors that had worked with him during his years as an MP, including Simon Fletcher (Chief of Staff), Redmond O'Neill (Transport), John Ross

(the Economy) and Mark Watts (the Environment) were immediately embedded at the heart of the new system. These individuals remained in post for the full eight years of Livingstone's period of office. In the short term, the bureaucracy of Romney House continued to be run by 'Head of Transition Team' Robert Chilton. Within weeks, a permanent Chief Executive (Anthony Mayer) was appointed⁸.

Livingstone appointed an American, Bob Kiley, to the new position of 'Transport Commissioner', while an ex-GLC colleague, Michael Ward, was made chief executive of the LDA. Board appointments reflected a different Livingstone approach to the one adopted almost 20 years earlier in his 'Red Ken' period. A number of the new mayor's old friends from the GLC were chosen, for example, Dave Wetzel, who had chaired the transport committee at County Hall re-appeared as vice chair of TfL. However, there were also new appointees from business who would have been seen as 'the enemy' back in the high days of the Livingstone GLC. This issue is considered in more detail in the next section. Mrs Thatcher, in addition to creating a democratic vacuum within which it had proved possible to create a new role for Livingstone, had also clearly had an effect on his approach to the economy.

The Greater London Authority Act, 1999 had allowed the Mayor to appoint two political advisors plus a 10-strong 'policy unit'. All other GLA staff were to be appointed by the Assembly. The government had hoped that consensus would be created by balancing the Mayor's executive powers with the Assembly's appointment of the bureaucracy. It operated differently in reality. Livingstone did a deal with the Assembly to create a much larger Mayor's Office than the '2+10' he could directly appoint⁹. By 2008, the Mayor's Office had over 100 people in it, a significant number of whom were, by any standards, politically loyal to the Mayor – rather than being merely civil servants temporarily within the core of the administration.

The GLA Act was optimistic in its hope that the Mayor and Assembly could proceed by consensual working. Moreover, senior figures within the Authority found themselves working both for the Mayor, as executive, and the Assembly, which was supposed to hold the Mayor to account. Thus, the Chief Executive, Director of Finance and other key administrators found themselves – uneasily – on both the 'executive' and 'scrutiny' sides of the Authority. There were other problems with the Act, such as the appointment of Assembly members to the boards of the police and fire authorities. This latter arrangement meant the Assembly was intended to scrutinise the activities of MPA and LFEPA when their boards included several members of the Assembly itself.

Ken Livingstone's First Term

During the 'interregnum' from 1986 to 1990, Ken Livingstone had become the Labour MP for Brent East. In Parliament, he had opposed the creation of a directly-elected executive mayor. But he had stood for, and won, the first term of office of the new Mayor of London. The reason Tony Blair and Gordon Brown had been so opposed to his candidature was the perception that the ex-GLC leader was a political throwback to the early and mid-1980s when Labour's local government leaders were often seen as

extremist and ultra-left wing. Livingstone embodied the doomed Labour Party of the Thatcher years and, even in the House of Commons, had proved an isolated figure.

After the 2000 mayoral election, a 'New Ken' emerged from the remains of the old one. From the start of his regime he embraced business leaders, rather as Blair had done in the run-up to the 1997 general election. Having spent years arguing for the abolition of the City of London Corporation, he now championed it. Although Livingstone had always been less ideological than his opponents suggested he now took steps to hint at a new, consensual, style of government. His Conservative and Liberal Democrat opponents in the mayoral race, Steve Norris and Susan Kramer, were appointed to the board of TfL. The appointment of Bob Kiley, who had run the New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority, as Transport Commissioner signalled a professional approach to public services. An 'advisory cabinet' embracing a wide range of interests was also created.

The 'Kenocracy' was not entirely different from the collective leadership during Livingstone's County Hall days. A number of his colleagues from that period returned to power, notably Michael Ward as Chief Executive of the LDA and several of the appointees to the boards of the functional bodies. There was, as at the GLC, a heavy emphasis on 'equalities' and on promoting minorities – issues that had become more mainstream in the intervening years and thus appeared less politically contentious. But the overall approach of the early Livingstone years – one that would continue till his defeat in 2008 – was to promote London's economic and population growth while simultaneously addressing poverty and 'social exclusion' in the capital. In many ways, the 'New Ken' strategy was very Blairite. As often in the past, Livingstone had the capacity to surprise political friends and enemies alike.

The main policies pursued during the 2000-04 period emphasised Livingstone's continuing fascination with transport. In his 2000 manifesto, he had promised to introduce a 'congestion charge' to tackle the problems of the capital's roads. He was also committed to oppose the government's Public-Private Partnership (PPP) to re-invest in the London Underground. Both of these policies were pursued with vigour. Despite significant opposition, a congestion charge started operation in central London in February 2003. The Mayor and his Transport Commissioner took the government to court in an attempt to stop the PPP, arguing that the rebuilding of the Tube should be controlled by TfL and funded by the issuance of bonds¹⁰.

Even the Mayor's enemies conceded the congestion charge had been well implemented and that it operated as intended¹¹. Traffic and congestion levels fell within the small central zone. Compared with central Whitehall's serial incapacity to make large computer-based policies work, the congestion charge was a miracle of effective government. Opposition to the PPP failed and the Underground was handed over to TfL in 2003, but with its investment programme signed off into 30-year contracts.

Livingstone's administration prepared a *London Plan*. The GLA Act required the Mayor to produce a spatial development plan and the *London Plan* became a distillation of the administration's strategy for the capital, embracing the objectives of both his separately

evolved transport and economic development strategies¹². Although different in scope, the *London Plan* was the linear descendent of the Greater London Development Plan which, on and off, had occupied the GLC for the whole of its existence.

The *Plan* outlined a strategy that would see London's population and economy grow as quickly as possible. The Mayor was a 100 per cent convert to the idea that London was a 'global city', competing with centres such as New York, Tokyo and Paris for dominance in financial & business services, cultural industries and tourism. Ever since his days leading the GLC, Livingstone had understood the power of marketing and promotion. Documents like the *London Plan* and the budgets of agencies such as Visit London were approached accordingly. Following similar practices at County Hall in the 1980s – initiated by Conservative leader Sir Horace Cutler in the late 1970s – Livingstone's City Hall began to emblazon the term 'Mayor of London' on Tube maps, public service adverts and other publicly-viewed manifestations of city government. *The Londoner*, a free newspaper that had been published by the GLC¹³, was resuscitated. Once again in Livingstone's London Policy and propaganda became a seamless single entity.

The Mayor used his 'strong mayor' legitimacy to set up a number of commissions and institutions to consider policy areas or issues. There were such initiatives in housing, culture, public health and design. As the government intended, the scale of the Mayor's mandate gave him the capacity to intervene in more-or-less any sphere of public affairs he chose. Livingstone, who had initially opposed the concept of executive mayors, came to relish this extraordinary capacity to act.

The London Assembly were less sure-footed than the Mayor¹⁴. They proved unable to veto his budget. Scrutiny of his policy was less appealing to many members than the traditional local government committee role. Livingstone's mastery of the business of government, coupled with the tightly-run administration at City Hall and the functional bodies, made it hard for the Assembly to unravel the detail of what was being done by the Mayor and his services. By the end of the first four-year GLA term, there were calls for the Assembly's powers to be strengthened and/or for the existing powers to be used more effectively.

Ken Livingstone's Second Term

Following a narrower election victory in 2004, again against Conservative Steven Norris, the Livingstone team set about entrenching its particular form of power. A small number of new policies were delivered in the years from 2004 to 2008. Strong support was given to developers who came forward with proposals for tall buildings and/or major housing developments. Targets for 'affordable' homes were rigorously pursued. The congestion charge was extended into a new zone, just west of the original one. The 2012 Olympic Games was won for London. The Oyster card, a new pre-pay transport ticket was introduced. Some within-London commuter rail lines were transferred to TfL from the national rail system. Greater prominence was given to the environment and 'sustainability'. After a series of terrorist attacks on London in the summer of 2005, the Livingstone regime increased its efforts to combat Islamophobia.

The Mayor also took a number of positions that had little to do with mainstream politics. In July 2004, a Muslim cleric, Yusuf al-Qaradawi shared a platform with Livingstone at City Hall. Whatever the purpose of the meeting, it produced a lasting, angry, response from a number of individuals and organisations representing women, the gay community and Jews. In February 2005, Livingstone became entangled in an exchange with an *Evening Standard* reporter at the end of a party at City Hall. The reporter, who was Jewish, took exception (as did his newspaper) at being likened to a “concentration camp guard”. In December 2005, the iconic Routemaster bus was finally taken out of service, despite Livingstone having previously stating he would keep it. During March 2006, the US Ambassador was called a “chiselling little crook” in respect of his Embassy’s refusal to pay the congestion charge. Livingstone became a high-profile supporter of Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez and signed an oil-for-advice deal with Caracas. George W Bush, the Saudi royal family and the editor of the *Evening Standard* were the subject of regular and aggressive attacks by the City Hall machine¹⁵.

There were other, similar, eccentric events during the second Livingstone term. None of them were particularly important in their own right. Yet each was seen as tactically vital by the regime at City Hall. With the benefit of hindsight, this approach provided evidence of an administration that had become tangled unnecessarily in tiny wars over matters of virtually no relevance to voters. Visits to Latin America outnumbered those to several outer boroughs. The war with the *Evening Standard*, which was a Livingstone classic, initiated a series of events – in particular a series of exposé articles by Andrew Gilligan concerning the London Development Agency – that eventually caused electoral damage. The meeting with al-Qaradawi and related initiatives created new and articulate enemies on the Left of politics. The tone of the City Hall administration became miserable and embattled¹⁶.

But London continued to boom economically. The city’s population rose to 7.5 million, the highest it had been since the 1960s. Big business appeared to like the Mayor’s encouragement for development and growth. Among the dwindling band of Labour activists Livingstone remained a hero, having survived almost 30 years as a high-profile anti-authority figure within the Labour Party. Moreover, his understanding of the business of government made it possible for him to lobby successfully for additional funding and responsibilities for the GLA. New legislation in 2007 increased the Mayor’s powers over housing, planning, skills, waste management and in the appointment of individuals to the functional bodies.

Further reforms to London government

The Greater London Authority Act, 2007¹⁷ extended devolution beyond the powers given to the Mayor in 2000. First, the GLA was given responsibility for the allocation of resources for social and ‘affordable’ housing, previously in the hands of the Housing Corporation. The Mayor was also given increased potential powers to intervene in boroughs’ housing plans if these do not conform with his housing strategy. Second, the Mayor’s planning responsibilities were extended so as to give City Hall development

control powers over larger developments. In future, the Mayor would be able to give planning permission for major schemes even if the local borough rejected them. Third, the Mayor was made chair of a new London Waste and Recycling Board, though the government resisted Livingstone's demands to take full control of waste disposal in the capital. Fourth, the Mayor was given new powers to direct the policy of the fire authority. Fifth, strategic direction over funding for skills and training was transferred to the GLA, with the Mayor to chair a new London Skills and Employment Board. Finally, the Mayor was also given the right to make additional appointments to the boards of functional bodies and, if he chose to do so, chair the police authority.

Assembly powers were also strengthened. In future, there would be a greater capacity to hold confirmatory hearings for senior mayoral appointments, though there was no veto power. The Assembly was also given the chance to propose amendments to the Mayor's strategies and to receive an explanation as to why their proposals had been accepted or rejected. The Assembly was given the power to set its own budget and a duty to publish an annual report. On the other hand, the responsibility to appoint the GLA's staff, apart from the Mayor's '2+10' appointments, was transferred to the Chief Executive.

The scale of the 2007 reforms was modest, but it suggested the government was sufficiently happy with its experiment in devolution to London to give the GLA more powers. There is little doubt that most senior figures within the Blair-Brown government believed that, despite their reservations in 1999 and 2000, Ken Livingstone had proved a successful mayor, despite his occasional eccentric political diversions.

The 2008 GLA Election

By 2008, Ken Livingstone had been mayor of London for eight years and the capital's leader, on and off, for 13. Herbert Morrison had managed just six (1934-40)¹⁸, though Sir Isaac Hayward had led the London County Council in a highly centralised way for 17 years (1947-65)¹⁹. As Livingstone faced his third mayoral contest, it was almost 27 years since he had become leader of the GLC.

The Conservatives, having lost in 2000 and 2004, sought a new candidate. They selected Boris Johnson, MP for Henley and a well-known journalist. The Liberal Democrats chose Brian Paddick, who had been a senior officer in the Metropolitan Police. As in the earlier contests, there were several other candidates, including the British National Party, Christian Choice, UKIP and Respect.

The campaign was long and high-profile, capturing the attention of the national and international media – perhaps providing them with a refreshing sub-plot to the endless, parallel, US presidential election. Livingstone relied heavily on his record at City Hall, essentially taking a 'you know what I stand for; you can take it or leave it' stance. His team mobilised their coalition of favoured interest groups and pushed a number of messages, notably attempting to portray Johnson as a racist and a reactionary. Much time was spent attacking opinion pollsters YouGov whose polls suggested Johnson was in the lead. In the event YouGov got the final result spot-on.

Johnson's campaign was more traditional, concentrating on the threat of crime and the perception that Livingstone had ignored outer London. The Conservatives hired Australian political strategist Lynton Crosby to run the campaign and, importantly, to hold in check Johnson's capacity for verbal blunders. Although some Tory grandees were unconvinced by Johnson, a larger cadre of Labour commentators despised Livingstone and used their media presence to attack him.

The Guardian threw its weight behind Livingstone and the *Evening Standard* behind Johnson. The *Sun* came out for Boris, the *Mirror* broadly supported Ken. The 2008 mayoral election was a battle to the death, squeezing the Liberal Democrats badly. In the end and with second preference votes taken into account, Johnson beat Livingstone by 53 per cent to 47 per cent²⁰. This was a comfortable margin in a two-horse race. While Livingstone could reasonably point to the Labour Party's unpopularity in the parallel local elections, the result also suggests that however good a tactician the ex-Mayor had been, and however unique his brand, his time was over. Unlike Chicago and the Daleys, London had not embraced an incumbent populist for term after term until death.

The 'squeeze' on smaller parties visible in the mayoral election could also be seen in the Assembly contest. Both the Conservatives and Labour gained seats, while the Liberal Democrats and UKIP fell back badly. The BNP won its first-ever seat on the Assembly. The Tories' total of 11 seats was sufficient to ensure Mayor Johnson would be unlikely to face a challenge to his annual budget.

The first Conservative mayor – Boris Johnson

Boris Johnson's arrival at City Hall was a reminder that London's politics are plural. Just as Desmond Plummer and Horace Cutler had won the GLC in 1967, 1970 and 1977, so the Tories vanquished Labour in 2008. Labour remained strong in parts of the capital and will undoubtedly re-capture City Hall at some point in the years ahead. But for the time being the Conservatives are strong at both the borough and London-wide levels. The Liberal Democrats, though powerful in boroughs such as Richmond, Sutton, Kingston, Islington and Haringey, have bumped against a 'glass ceiling' of support. They fell back badly in the 2008 mayoral and Assembly elections.

In his first months in power, the new mayor faced significant challenges. First, he had to appoint a new administration within a very short time period. Second, it was necessary to decide how to reform the large City Hall bureaucracy – some officials wished to leave, others would be asked to go. Third, the new administration then needed to be attached to the remaining, smaller, machine. Only when these stages were complete would it be possible to issue policy directions and change the direction of the GLA. If such policy were to have a visible impact, it would need to derive from a central 'narrative' of what the Johnson administration was seeking to achieve.

The new core team, unlike Livingstone's, was drawn together from a number of different sources. It was by no means ready made. A series of Deputy Mayors (DM) were appointed, closely following the New York model. Ray Lewis was appointed DM for

Young People, Ian Clements DM for Government Relations, Kit Malthouse DM for Policing and Tim Parker as 'First Deputy Mayor'. Assembly member Richard Barnes was made the statutory Deputy Mayor, as envisaged in the original GLA Act. Munira Mirza was made Director of Culture and Kulveer Ranger Director of Transport. Sir Simon Milton was appointed advisor on planning and housing. Neale Coleman, one of Livingstone's core team, was retained to advise Johnson about the Olympic Games²¹.

The backgrounds of these individuals included the private sector (Parker), the voluntary sector (Lewis), ex-leaders of borough councils (Clement, Milton), an Assembly member (Malthouse), a public servant (Ranger) and a think-tanker (Mirza). The creation of the new regime was stage-managed by Nicholas Boles, former director of think-tank Policy Exchange and Conservative Parliamentary candidate. It was intended to appear diverse, and it did.

It will be possible fully to assess the new Conservative administration at City Hall until it has been in office for a year or more. Early initiatives, such as a 'summit' on knife crime, introducing more police onto the buses and an alcohol ban on public transport were the kind of tactical activity that could be undertaken quickly, using existing officials at bodies such as TfL and the Metropolitan Police. Both the transport and police commissioners remained in post during the early weeks of the Johnson regime, providing the possibility of 'quick win' policy changes. In the longer term, officials such as these will remain in office only if the Mayor feels confident in them.

The Johnson administration has signaled a shift of power from the GLA to the boroughs. This is not the first time that Conservative control of metropolitan government has led to a move of this kind. Lord Salisbury recognised and responded to the desire for local autonomy within the capital's many sub-divisions. The Conservatives who ran County Hall in the 1970s also transferred power to the boroughs. Boris Johnson has, by his words and by promoting senior figures from the boroughs, suggested that he, too, believes in a looser version of London government.

Once the Mayor has assembled his full team, aligned the City Hall machine and determined his approach to government, it will be possible to judge the regime's success or failure. There is little doubt the change of political control in London in 2008 heralded the possibility of a new approach to government at City Hall. Much remains to be proved.

Conclusions

The Greater London Authority Act, 1999 established Britain's first-ever directly elected executive mayor. It was a new kind of political arrangement for London, bringing an American system of city government to the capital. Although the concentration of power in the Mayor's Office was probably not so different from the centralised operation of the London County Council in its latter years²², the concept of the executive mayor certainly was. The GLA has operated in a very different way to the GLC.

Nothing, aside from the City of London Corporation, is forever in London's government. The boroughs, which are long established by the standards of British governmental institutions, have survived for just over 43 years. In that time, there have been three different upper-tier arrangements. Although Ken Livingstone from time to time called for a cull of boroughs – he would have preferred five 'wedge' authorities – virtually no one else has lobbied with conviction to reform this tier.

It is almost 50 years since the Herbert Commission's report proposed a new Greater London Council²³, following many years of encouragement to do so by academics such as William Robson of the London School of Economics²⁴. Interestingly, the concept of 'Greater London' has survived and, apart from occasional debates about the possibility of Slough or Dartford becoming part of London, there has been no significant effort to change the outer boundary. The question of governance machinery for the capital's region, the Greater South East, remains unresolved.

After eight years, and two mayors, it is now possible to make a number of observations about the operation of the GLA and how it might be improved in future.

American city government comes to London

The ministers and civil servants who evolved the legislative framework for the GLA had virtually no detailed experience of how an 'American' system of government operated. They had, like most other Britons, been brought up in the UK system with its classic 'Parliamentary' features. Thus, for example, idea of formally separating 'executive' and 'legislative' functions, with a constitution or other written document to establish how the system should operate, is not one that has ever been applied in Britain, a country with an evolved, informal constitutional settlement. Regularly changing laws, influenced by custom and practice, guide the operation of both national and local government. In the United States, by contrast, mechanisms have been created that are designed to ensure effective 'checks' and 'balances' on the executive – at the national, State and city levels of government²⁵.

In London, an executive mayor was adopted, though without an effective 'legislative' city council to provide oversight. The GLA Act had given the Assembly an annual opportunity to reject the Mayor's budget, albeit by imposing an alternative one by a two-thirds majority. But this 'nuclear' option was to prove difficult to use in practice. Given London's political make-up, the proportional representation electoral system made it very difficult for any one party to win more than 40 to 45 per cent of the popular vote and, therefore, more than 10 or 11 seats. The Conservatives and Labour have won between seven and 11 seats each. Smaller parties tended to win two or three members. With such fragmentation, it has proved impossible for the Assembly to hold together a two-thirds majority against the Mayor's budget.

There is no requirement for the Assembly to vote on other mayoral policies. It can scrutinize the Mayor's strategies, but it cannot amend or reject them. There is no power of 'recall' over the Mayor: the Assembly cannot demand that the Mayor, in defined circumstances, should face a fresh election. Moreover, the appointment of Assembly

members to the boards of some of the functional bodies creates a conflict of interest and, in terms of the ‘American’ government model, confuses ‘executive’ and ‘legislative’ functions.

Short-term improvements

It would be possible to make immediate changes within the existing GLA legislation to improve the accountability of the Mayor, but without threatening the benefits of the post-2000 London arrangements. Accusations of cronyism – made during the Livingstone’s second term – or the undue use of mayoral power could be avoided if there were more effective mechanisms to ensure oversight of the Mayor’s budget and expenditure. All future mayors would benefit from a new mechanism to provide independent oversight of the GLA’s budget. There would also be advantages from publishing indicators showing the performance of the GLA and its functional bodies. There are currently few measures to test the success, failure or progress of mayoral policies. Because the GLA is unique, it is also impossible to make the kind of benchmarking comparisons faced by other authorities.

In the aftermath of the 2008 election, the Mayor and the boroughs have agreed to create a document that spelled out the formal institutional structure, institutions, powers and duties of the London government system. In New York, there is a *City Charter* for this purpose. While there cannot be a direct read-across from American to British political systems, a charter of this kind would provide a more robust framework for the relationship between the Mayor, Assembly and the boroughs (including the City of London).

There would be merit in sorting out the arrangements to be adopted in the appointment of the Mayor’s Office. Because the Mayor of London functions in the context of the British system of government, personal appointments made by the Mayor can appear ‘political’ or sleazy. In reality, the American government model (upon which the London one is based) is intended to provide elected officials with the power to appoint the individuals who form their administrations. But because such ‘personal’ mayoral appointments to executive positions are alien to British political institutions, they can be seen as somehow improper. Yet the mayoral system of government is supposed to work in this way²⁶.

Possible longer-term reform

The creation of the Greater London Authority, including a directly-elected executive mayor, was intended by Tony Blair to be a radical ‘presidential’ import into the British political system. In the longer term, there would be arguments for legislative change to strengthen the institutions created in 2000 to make it operate more effectively in the way American political institutions are intended to.

When it is next decided to review the GLA legislation, the government will almost certainly be encouraged to consider a number of improvements. For example, the Assembly could be given an enhanced ‘legislative’ role and there could be an end to

Assembly members sitting on the boards of functional bodies the Assembly itself is required to scrutinize. The government could reconsider the issue of whether the Mayor needs to be responsible for all staff appointments to deliver his policy programme. The question of term limits could be re-examined, given the extent of the personal power in the hands of the Mayor.

Another issue, raised by the first changeover of mayor in 2008, was the question of how to facilitate senior Mayor's Office appointments in the period immediately after a new mayor takes office. Attempting to create a new Mayor's Office within a very short period is difficult within the normal British civil service or local government traditions where there are requirements about openness and due process in making appointments.

Any future reform of London government could reasonably consider the question of whether more 'Whitehall' provision could be transferred to the GLA. The funding and oversight of the NHS, commuter railways within London, full responsibility for the police and an effective system of local taxation would all be candidates for reform. Wales (with a population of 3 million) and Scotland (5 million) each enjoy far greater autonomy than London (7.5 million). Now the Mayor and Assembly are properly embedded and functional, a full devolution of central government power is surely a possibility.

The first eight years of the GLA – success or failure?

The Greater London Authority is the capital's third system of city-wide government within a quarter of a century. The GLC had survived just 21 years when it was abolished. The 'interregnum' lasted 14 years. The GLA has existed for just over eight years so far. At present, there is no lobby to scrap the Mayor and Assembly, though the quest for to strengthen and improve the London government system continues. All three major parties support the concept of metropolitan government. Indeed, there is evidence that the Labour Party has considered exporting the 'GLA model' to other city regions in England. The Conservatives have talked of extending the use of elected executive mayors to other cities.

The fact that Labour and the Conservatives have now won the 'Mayor of London' crown is probably important in the longer term. It is likely that governments of both parties would wish to maintain and possibly enhance the post-2000 arrangements. The capital remains a key political battleground for all the parties. If only one party had won the mayoralty, or had permanently dominated the Assembly, there would have been a risk that the other would have lost interest. As it is, winning the four-yearly contest to be Mayor of the capital will be one of the biggest prizes in British politics.

A two-term Labour mayor made efforts to centralise power at City Hall. The fast growth of the city demanded action at a metropolitan scale. His Conservative successor has tilted it back towards the boroughs. As Ken Young wrote in 2006 "Strong executive models of metropolitan government tend to produce deep conflicts that, in time, erode their support and lead to their dissolution. And the threshold is reached at a lower threshold of conflict than many imagine...seeking a progressive concentration of

Mayoral authority...is a route back to past conflicts”²⁷. If Young was correct, and history is on his side, Boris Johnson’s decision to operate a ‘weaker’ model of City Hall power and to give the boroughs more autonomy may help to extend the existence of the GLA.

The Greater London Authority, consisting of the Mayor and Assembly has, by the standards of many British government reforms, been a success. In fact, it has been a success by any standards. London has regained its self-government and, to a significant extent, civic self-esteem. There is more accountability for transport, the police and planning than when such services were embedded within Whitehall. One mayor governed effectively. Another has now taken office and has started to get to grips with power. The city’s politics remain plural and contested. Boris Johnson is the end of the beginning for the post-2000 arrangements. The process of London government reform will almost certainly never end²⁸, but for the time being, it has reached a period of calm and stability.

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- ¹ Keene, D “Roots and Branches of Power” in *The London Journal* Volume 26, Number 1, 2001 explores some of the earliest roots of modern London government
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