

## The Greater London Council, 1965-1986

*Jerry White*

It's easy to look back on the 21-year history of the Greater London Council as an institution whose early promise was snuffed out by a tragic combination of malevolent external enemies and fatal flaws from within. There was tragedy here, because in the round the GLC was a failure. And, indeed, it did seem that certain design flaws had set it on the wrong path from the very beginning. Yet right across those 21 years almost anything seemed possible at the time. The outcome of certain disputes and conjunctures seemed sometimes to hang by a thread – as fine and uncertain as a judge's deliberations, say, or depending solely on personal relationships and fickle human frailty. This was, then, a story that *could* have had a happy ending. But it would, I think, have been a happy ending against the odds.

Those odds were stacked against success mainly at two levels. One was structural, founded in the relationships between powerful institutions – the London Boroughs in the localities, Whitehall at the centre, and the GLC uncomfortably in the middle. And the other, even more important, was political. The GLC was unfortunate in existing at a time when London politics were peculiarly frantic and where the political reference points that had held good in the capital – and to a certain extent the nation – were dissolving before politicians' very eyes.

The structural problems had, of course, been foreseen from the beginning. The Herbert Commission had striven to avoid overlapping and duplication between the boroughs and the GLC, with the boroughs discharging all functions best delivered locally, although it must be said that some of its proposals met this injunction better than others. The new arrangements in the London Government Act 1963 muddied the waters further by disregarding some of Herbert's proposals for functional discrimination. I won't review all the functions here. But suffice to say that planning functions were reasonably clearly delineated between boroughs and GLC; education was a muddle, with a solution for the inner boroughs based on the continuation of the London County Council Education Authority under another name; traffic and roads were distributed uneasily between the GLC, the Minister of Transport (responsible for trunk roads) and the boroughs (general road maintenance), while boroughs and the GLC shared parking responsibilities. Public transport had been specifically excluded from

Herbert's consideration. But that was rectified from 1970 when the GLC became Transport Planning Authority for London with the task of integrating and improving public transport in the capital.

The most difficult area of all, though, was housing. The London housing problem was of huge dimensions and it was inconceivable that the GLC could have been given no part to play. But the Local Government Act's arrangements were a recipe for conflict. The GLC could buy land and build wherever it wanted. The enormous housing stock it inherited from the LCC (230,000 dwellings, including the suburban estates) would eventually be transferred to the boroughs but on a timetable that took years to negotiate. When, in 1969 and 1974, councils were given power to encourage the improvement of areas of old housing rather than demolition, the GLC was given them, too. So the Act in effect put two housing authorities in every borough in London - one the borough council and the other the GLC.

The London Government Act made one other change of lasting significance to the recommendations of the Herbert Commission. This was to draw in the boundaries of Greater London, taking out some well-off suburban areas which had vociferously lobbied the government against inclusion. These changes, made at the behest of Conservative authorities, in fact did the Tories' prospects in Greater London no favours. But incidentally, they helped put the GLC on a political knife-edge by balancing out suburb and inner city in what was virtually a microcosm of England. The new council would be much more susceptible to swings in the national political mood than the peculiar micro-climate of the old LCC had been.

This effect was felt from the beginning. Elections took place for shadow authorities in April 1964, to take over the new councils from 1 April 1965. To general surprise, Labour won overwhelming control of the GLC (64 councillors to 36) and 19 of the 32 boroughs, including unlikely targets like Bexley and Hillingdon. The reason was clear enough. The elections had come at the fag end of an unpopular and scandal-plagued government. The Greater London elections were the first opportunity for a nation that wanted a change to make its opinion felt.

An even more dramatic fluctuation the other way took place three and four years later. The deep unpopularity of the second Wilson government in mid-term, hit by an incompetently-handled devaluation, was combined with a new element in London politics: race relations.

The result was a landslide for the Conservatives in April 1967. They took control of the GLC with 82 seats out of 100. A year later, 28 of the 32 London Borough Councils went Conservative too. A pattern of Londoners voting in local elections largely in accordance with national preference produced a GLC that fluctuated in a gloomy double fugue, with political rule at County Hall often (for 11 years in 21) out of kilter with the party in charge across the river at Westminster; and generally in conflict with half the London Borough Councils.

Maybe all this would not have mattered so badly had not the London Government Act shared so much power at local level between the boroughs and the GLC. Maybe, most of all, it would have mattered less had the times been more propitious. But the late-1960s and 1970s were years when there was fundamental disagreement over every element of change in London. There was no common ground - indeed furious dispute - over roads versus communities, or redevelopment versus conservation, or the future of redundant industrial land. Getting things done in such a tempestuous climate proved noisy, bloody and endlessly protracted. The Greater London Development Plan took seven years to be approved by the Secretary of State after Sir Frank Layfield's rewriting. There were bitter and exhausting debates over London's ringways and the future of Covent Garden. There was failure to negotiate and agree a scheme capable of practical realisation in Docklands. And there was mordant trench warfare over housing in London, the biggest metropolitan political question of all.

From the beginning the GLC sought hegemony over London housing. It was allowed by government to delay handover of former LCC stock as a bargaining tool to get borough councils to do what it wanted, and to meet its own needs as a housing developer. But the first Labour GLC's big idea that 'London was one city' went down badly in a capital where local interests and popular loyalties were always stronger than any metropolitan worldview. For just as the old Metropolitan Borough Councils had successfully staked their claim against an overweening LCC, the London Borough Councils fiercely resented interference by the GLC as central authority in local affairs.

It was not just parochial pride, though, that made boroughs bridle at the GLC trespassing on their interests. This was political. The Conservative boroughs of outer London suspected the GLC of reducing inner London's problems by exporting Labour-voting council tenants to the suburbs. Bromley and Redbridge were not alone in virtually refusing to cooperate with the

GLC's efforts to rehouse Londoners in their areas; others were niggardly in their offers of help. When Conservatives captured the GLC and almost all the boroughs, housing policy switched drastically to council house sales and stock transfer to the boroughs, although both were at first curtailed by a Labour government until 1970 and reversed with Labour back at County Hall from 1973. In 1974 the GLC attempted to put together a housing strategy for London which tried hard not to alienate the outer boroughs. But their cautious agreement to negotiate was all set at nought by swingeing government cutbacks on housing capital from 1975.

That failure to construct a London-wide strategy for housing, coming on top of 10 years of housing strife and planning defeats, provoked *The Observer* to comment in May 1975 that 'regional housing strategy is the [GLC's] one claim to salvation. If it fails in that, what is it there for?' And that was a question many others were asking from the mid-1970s on. The boroughs had bedded down reasonably well - their travails were yet to come. But the GLC had not staked a satisfactory claim in London governance. There had been such wild swings in political control and policy direction. Policy had been blocked from above by government and below by the boroughs. The council had lost functions like vehicle licensing to the Department of Transport in 1969, sewerage responsibilities to the water authorities in 1973, the London Ambulance Service to the NHS in 1974. True, it had gained the coordination of public transport in 1970, but here it was thwarted by chronic under-investment and poor management within London Transport. So was the GLC necessary at all?

Some thought not. In 1974, Geoffrey Finsberg, a former Hampstead Borough Councillor, Conservative leader of Camden Borough Council from 1968-70, and then MP for Hampstead, produced *A Policy for London* which advocated stripping out the GLC's role and reviewing its purpose. This sparked off an even more radical movement for abolition within a section of the Conservative Party in London. In the new abolitionists' scheme 'a Minister for London would become the metropolitan authority', and self-government would be confined to the parts of London acting alone. At the GLC elections of 1977 'The Abolish the GLC Campaign' fought 31 out of 92 seats. They had little success. But London Conservatives, who won their third term at these elections, could hardly fail to take note.

In their 1977 GLC manifesto, Horace Cutler, the Conservative leader, had undertaken to commission an 'independent inquiry into London government'. Cutler was an anti-

abolitionist but also believed the GLC had taken on too much, especially with housing. He arranged for a fresh look at the council by commissioning Sir Frank Marshall, formerly the Conservative leader of Leeds Corporation, to review the GLC's role in London government.

The Marshall Report of July 1978 concluded that a metropolitan authority continued to be necessary because 'The total interest of London as a whole transcends that of its constituent parts, their local needs and individual aspirations.' Marshall called for devolution from Whitehall to give the GLC a clearer and bigger strategic role. Government should pass to the GLC responsibility for trunk roads; for 'the complete public transport network in London, setting fares policies, approving investment plans and co-ordinating services', including contracting with British Rail; and, in 'the long run', the health service in London and the Metropolitan Police should also go to the GLC. Marshall also recommended that the GLC should let some services go to the boroughs, especially housing management and development. But he was notably less keen on devolution from County Hall to town hall than from Whitehall to the GLC. And, while suppressing for a few years the abolitionist war cry by reaffirming the need for metropolitan government, his recommendations for more power to be given it fell on stony ground. For in May 1979 a Conservative government was elected that proved more hostile to local government than any since the Attlee years of 30 years before.

One reason for its hostility was the increasing identification of local government with an adventurous and costly left-wing socialism. This was especially so in London.

We could debate for a long time the forces that scrambled beyond recognition Labour politics in London from the 1960s on. Race and the consequences of gentrification were the key elements, it seems to me, but no doubt there were others. The Conservative landslides of 1967 and 1968 unquestionably had a pernicious racial component. The effect on Labour of electoral defeat was to dislodge many of the older party activists from their powerbase in the town halls. With the party flung into opposition it became easier for middle-class newcomers to make a mark. Well-educated, articulate, trained to argue, their self-confidence often honed by working in the media or in professions (like law or architecture) which brought special and useful knowledge to party discussions, the gentrifiers formed alliances dedicated to moving the party in new directions. For if the 'old guard' - a favourite phrase of the time - had been so good why had they lost power in 1967-68? When they had held power, why had

they done so little, most of all to improve housing conditions? And how could 'socialist' councils tolerate black people living in worse conditions than whites? These were the years when politics began wrestling with new ideas and the new challenges emerging from a multi-cultural society.

The old guard didn't give up easily. The 1970s were characterised in Labour Parties throughout London by factionalism, shifting alliances and internecine strife. There was a bitterness that had not been seen since the anti-communist struggles of the 1920s. Any number of elements were cast into this burning fiery furnace. Race grew in importance as minority groups gained in confidence, discovered the need for self-defence, and found their way to a stake in civil society through party politics. It was less a question of choosing a party - that usually was Labour - than of choosing elements or groups to ally with inside it. It was often, though, the manual trade unions who held the key to advancement within the local and London parties. Hardly a Labour council in London felt able to confront and resist its blue-collar workforce in the dreadful strikes in the 'Winter of Discontent' of 1978-79 because to do so would have meant losing power to the faction which would back the union.

Then gender and the politics of sexuality found a louder voice from the mid-1970s and after. So did countless single-issue 'pressure groups' who attached themselves to party or faction in a kaleidoscope of fragile and promiscuous unions: conservationists, environmentalists, squatters, anti-nuclear campaigners, roads protestors, lobbyists for single mothers or playgroups, protestors against abortion or kerb-crawling. All, at some time or another, actively engaged within local Labour Parties or knocked importunately without. This excitement wove Shakespearian plots that were hard to follow. It all had little to do with the real lives of most London citizens - indeed, in the case of public sector strikes, was directed against their interests. And the 'traditional Labour voter', the skilled worker in regular employment who had originally been the party's backbone but was now leaving inner London in droves for the suburbs and the New Towns, gave up trying to make sense of it.

It was out of this feverish milieu that Ken Livingstone emerged to seize the London limelight on 7 May 1981. That night Labour won control of the GLC after four years' rule under Cutler. The question was, which Labour? Going into the elections the GLC opposition was led by Andrew McIntosh, a moderate who had relied on right-wing support to take the leadership just a year before. He had beaten Livingstone by one vote with two abstentions.

Yet it was Livingstone on whom Cutler concentrated his fire during the campaign and Livingstone to whom the television cameras turned on election night. And Livingstone who was to prove the most significant Labour Party figure of the post-Morrison years in London.

It was Ken Livingstone who became the voice of the Labour left in London. Within 24 hours of the GLC victory he had engineered a party coup to oust McIntosh and to install himself as leader and his close allies as committee chairs. The left's victory at the heart of London government led to a redoubling of conflict, dissension and schism across the Labour parties of the capital. Things were hardly helped by Livingstone's *London Labour Briefing*, where personal attacks, laced with vitriol, anathematised Labour politicians of the right and centre. For the rest of the GLC's short life, there would be splits everywhere, and unprecedented electoral defeats in London's Labour heartlands.

At County Hall the GLC under Livingstone seemed fatally caught up in the quagmire of political rhetoric that had clogged Labour's arteries since at least the mid-1970s in most of inner London. The euphoria of the 1981 GLC election victory when, in a high turnout, voters came out in droves against a temporarily unpopular Conservative government, seemed to endow Livingstone with a crusader's cloak equipping him to do battle with the dragon across the Thames. The whole agenda of the Livingstone GLC, in close alliance with so-called 'Loony Left' boroughs like Lambeth and Hackney, seemed set to provoke, challenge, defeat the Thatcher government. Any means would justify that end: ignoring the majority of Londoners in spending endless time and bottomless resources in pursuit of ideological purity on gender, sexuality and race; spending Londoners' taxes on recruiting comrades to an ever-enlarging payroll; funding grants for some 'community organisations' dedicated to little more than their own survival and the government's downfall; waging a publicity war against government on policies, like 'troops out of Ireland'; confusing the boundary between GLC and the Labour Party when agitating at huge expense against rate-capping and other government initiatives; snubbing the Royal Family, always a mistake with cockney London. In all this Livingstone demonised those colleagues who departed from him along the way. It was all pretty dreadful stuff, even if it had considerable allure for many at the time.

There were, though, some achievements. The Council's anti-racism agitation, carried by ILEA into every classroom in inner London, forced Londoners to think seriously about the implications of living in a multi-cultural society. It probably changed behaviour for the better.

The GLC's much-lambasted arts policy redirected subsidy for 'culture' away from the opera house and art gallery into more demotic and inclusive spheres. The GLC tried to find a role in stemming the flood of jobs out of London. Its Greater London Enterprise Board exploited GLC land and capital to some positive ends. Most of all, the GLC tried valiantly to do something about London's transport and traffic problems.

The Labour Party manifesto for the 1981 GLC election, constructed under McIntosh's leadership, proposed a 25% cut in London Transport fares followed by a freeze. The cost of this 'Fares Fair' policy would be borne by ratepayers, estimated in the manifesto at a supplementary rate of 5p in the pound. But by the time Labour came to implement this pledge the government's punitive grant regime clawed back one pound subsidy for every pound a council spent beyond the government target. The actual cuts in fares made by the GLC averaged 32%, but the cost to ratepayers was nearly 12p in the pound. This 'more than doubled Londoners' weekly outgoings to the GLC.'

It was both the cost - and more, the popularity - of the fares cuts that enraged London Conservatives, especially in the run-up to the Borough Council elections of May 1982. And it was the enterprising leadership of Tory Bromley - old opponents of the Labour GLC in its early days of housing imperialism - who dreamt up the wheeze of challenging in the courts the GLC's decision to subsidise bus and tube fares from the rates at such a high level. They rationalised their challenge by arguing that Bromley would not benefit, because it didn't have a tube, but would pay steeply through the GLC precept. The High Court at first instance rejected Bromley's claim: the GLC could subsidise London Transport and it was a matter of discretion how much that subsidy need cost. But Bromley appealed and the Appeal Court unanimously decided against the GLC on the basis that London Transport had a statutory duty to balance its books - fares covering costs - without the benefit of GLC subsidy. That was a decision upheld in the House of Lords. The government was hardly likely to alter London Transport's obligations, so Fares Fair was at an end.

Livingstone's GLC, with the support of most Londoners, had fought to get a sensible funding regime for public transport in London and so ameliorate one of London's enduring disabilities. That it might well have worked was shown by an estimated 10% increase in public transport use during the three months' operation of Fares Fair, and a 6% fall in cars entering London in the rush hour. It seemed preposterous that such a sensible strategy for



Londoners should have been defeated in the courts: justice was with the Council but the law was against it. The GLC didn't give up entirely. A low-fare travelcard initiative ('Just the Ticket') followed in May 1983, again leading to very positive signs of increased public transport use and fewer cars. And a 'lorry ban' was implemented in central London from December 1984. By then, though, the government had taken responsibility for public transport in London away from the GLC and put it to a new London Regional Transport Board, appointed by Ministers. Fares rose once more from January 1985. Even so, in the memories of a generation of Londoners from 1981 on, it was better to have tried and lost than never to have tried at all.

Across the river in the Palace of Westminster, to have tried at all was treason most rare. Fares Fair, the travelcard and Ken Livingstone's charismatic leadership had made the Labour GLC both more recognisable and more popular, despite its risible extravagances of leftist gesture politics, than ever before in its brief history. It was, perhaps, typical of Margaret Thatcher that she chose to abolish the GLC at the moment it seemed most secure in the support of Londoners and when the abolition movement had been dormant for five years or so. The decision to do so was, it seems, very much hers. Although apparently mooted in secret for some time it came as a thunderbolt to London Tories. Alan Greengross, their leader on the GLC, learned of it just three days before the commitment to abolish was made public in the Conservative general election manifesto of May 1983. When Margaret Thatcher won that second term she could claim a popular mandate for both scrapping the GLC and scuppering Ken Livingstone.

A DoE white paper in October 1983 justified abolition of the GLC as a cost-effective attack on 'the "national overhead"'. When public transport was taken from the GLC it would have little to do. 'This generates a natural search for a "strategic" role which may have little basis in real needs' and might also 'conflict with national policies which are the responsibility of central government.' Abolition was needed in the interests of 'Streamlining the Cities'.

These were weasel words and Londoners knew it. They saw the only organisation prepared to do something to ease their transport problems being abolished because the government didn't like it spending money to do so and because it hated Livingstone and all his works. Opinion polls showed increasing, and soon overwhelming, support for retention of the GLC. Abolition was opposed by a significant band of Tory rebels in parliament, led by Ted Heath, and in

County Hall by Alan Greengross. The *Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Financial Times*, the London Chamber of Commerce, the Royal Town Planning Institute, the London School of Economics and almost everyone other than Conservative Central Office, all raised their voices against abolition. Thousands of representations in response to the 1983 white paper flooded in but the government refused to publish any, or even to say how many were in favour of its proposals. All to no avail. The GLC elections of 1985 were cancelled to ensure that the wishes of Londoners could not find expression at the ballot box. And with a monster firework party from the South Bank, London said goodbye to the GLC on 31 March 1986.

The GLC's demise was much lamented. But not, I think, for the Council's achievements, which had been both very limited and very costly. It was, indeed, remembered most fondly of all for its heroic failure over 'Fares Fair', where it had marshalled the large majority of Londoners against what seemed to be a well-off suburban minority, and against antediluvian judges who seemed to be in the pocket of an overweening government. And then, of course, there was the manner of its passing, which no reasonable person could stomach.

When it came to construct a new London government in 2000, however, one theme was quite frequently heard. Many were clear that a London-wide government was most certainly needed. But what they didn't want was another GLC. And it's not hard to see why.