

William Robson, the Herbert Commission and 'Greater London'

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Bernard Crick tells the story of George Bernard Shaw's first trip in an aeroplane.¹ Always concerned to keep his modernist credentials up-to-date, Shaw asked to be 'taken up' by the author of *Aircraft in War and Peace* (1916), a book about the practicalities of manufacture, maintenance and training which also discussed the wider political significance of flight as well as conveying the intense exhilarations of the rush of air in the face, the panoramas below, the aeronaut's extraordinary sensations of buoyancy, the uplift in mind and body.² The young aviator had left school at fifteen and within three years become assistant manager of Hendon Aerodrome - now he was a lieutenant in the Royal Flying Corps flying the night skies over London on Zeppelin patrol. His name was William Robson.

On landing safely, Shaw asked what Robson intended to do when demobbed, On learning he had no settled plan, Shaw said 'LSE is the place', took out his famous reporter's notebook from his cavernous pockets and, resting it on the fuselage, wrote a note of introduction to 'my friend Webb'. Robson would recall this to say, 'however well we plan, there is a lot of accident in career and history'.

Robson lacked entry qualifications but at the Webbs' request the School waived its normal matriculation requirements. He graduated with a first in the BSc Econ in 1922, turned to law and was called to the Bar. Sir William Beveridge invited him to become an LSE lecturer in 1926 and he published his academic magnum opus *Justice and Administrative Law* just two years later. He taught and researched at the LSE until his death in 1980, writing widely on politics, administration and public enterprise, and editing for more than four decades the *Political Quarterly*, which he had founded in 1931 with financial support from G.B.S. as 'a bridge between the world of thought and action, between the writer, the thinker and the teacher on the one hand, and the statesman, the politician and the official on the other'.³ The Greater London Group is another of his legacies and, if you like, another such bridge.

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Early in his career the Webbs encouraged their protégé to explore an unfashionable and academically neglected topic that was close to their hearts: municipalism. The first fruit was the popular Labour handbook co-authored with Clement Attlee, *The Town Councillor* of 1925. Robson soon became a leading authority on the technicalities of rates, structures, functions, audit, *ultra vires*, and the facts and tendencies of local government. His expertise was not, as he put it, 'colourless': he was ardent for modernisation. He laid out a comprehensive critique and reform agenda in *The*

¹ Crick, B. (2004). 'Robson, William Alexander (1985-1980)'. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

² Robson, W (1916) *Aircraft in War and Peace*. London, Macmillan

³ Robson W (1979) 'The Founding of *The Political Quarterly*' *Political Quarterly* 41 1 1-17

Development of Local Government (1931), a book which would run through several editions and reprints over the next quarter of a century. With many a vigorous sideways swipe at the fetters of nostalgic localism and dead-handed centralism, he argued for local government to be modernised in structure and function and

not merely preserved and strengthened but expanded in a progressive direction and brought into harmony with the developing economic, social, political and scientific tendencies of the day.⁴

Robson would soon apply that argument to London. His first contribution was a *Political Quarterly* commentary 'Thoughts on the LCC Election' written after the Labour Party's momentous victory in March 1934. Subtitled 'the Chaos of London', the piece was less about the shift of party-political control in County Hall than the geographical and functional limitations on the administrative county and the undermining presence of the City of London. It contains a characteristic example of his style, combining factual detail with verbal flights and similes that were hard to forget:

This, then, is the spectacle which confronts us in the London scene. There is London County Council, which is supposed to be the principal governing body of the capital city. Its area was designed more than three-quarters of a century ago, and is about fifty years out of date. It is able to claim jurisdiction over less than half of the inhabitants of the metropolis, and its area extends over a fifteenth or twentieth part of the effective territory of the region. The Square Mile of the City, the heart of the empire, with its vast wealth and long traditions, its Lord Mayor, its ancient privileges, its magnificent Guildhall, its jealously guarded right to an independent police force, and its own peculiar 'Mayor's and City of London Court' - all this is entirely divorced from the county of London, a heart cut off from the functional needs of the living body of the metropolis, like the heart cut off from a dissected animal beating in a scientist's laboratory.⁵

'The Chaos of London' ends with a call for a Greater London council with regional scope and functions, and a suggestion that if such a government existed it might embue Londoners - even Londoners - with shared civic consciousness.

Five years later these arguments emerge fully-fledged in *The Government and Misgovernment of London* (1939). Robson timed the publication of the 484-page book to coincide with the LCC 50th Jubilee celebrations - and deter celebrants 'from indulging in any excessive satisfaction at the present state of affairs'.⁶ The book begins with a history of previous missed opportunities for reform, the second part describes present institutional confusions, especially in London's vast tracts of new suburban expansion. Part Three - The Future - elaborates the blueprint for a directly elected Greater London Council covering the new continuously built-up metropolis of eight millions. In 1936 Robson had made a study visit to Moscow with Sir Ernest Simon of Manchester, dedicatee of *Government and Misgovernment*. He had noted the relevance to London of Mossoviet's two-tier structure of city and district governments).⁷ He had also closely

⁴ Robson W (1931). *The Development of Local Government*. London, George Allen & Unwin p12

⁵ p.174 in Robson W (1934) "Thoughts on the LCC Elections: the chaos of London government." *Political Quarterly* 5(2): 167-178

⁶ Robson W (1939) *The Government and Misgovernment of London* London, G. Allen & Unwin

⁷ pp 3-7 in Simon E Sir, W Robson et al (1937) *Moscow in the Making* London, Longmans Green

followed the 1938 reorganisation of New York City and Boroughs, a concrete demonstration of the potential for reform 'in the only other metropolis which can be compared in size, wealth and importance to London'.⁸

Throughout the 1940s Robson kept up his tenacious advocacy for metropolitan government, often under the pseudonym 'Regionaliter'. The war favoured the planning movement; a framework for comprehensive control of land use and industrial location had been put in place even before the Attlee government nationalised development rights and launched the new towns programme. London acquired visionary advisory plans which were to lay the basis for its post-war development. But what did not change, in any way, was the structure of local government. In 1948 *Government and Misgovernment* went into a second edition with its arguments for metropolitan reform transposed to a context of reconstruction. In 1954 Robson tackled the same theme from a different angle in another major volume, *Great Cities of the World*, the first comprehensive attempt at a comparative account of the government, politics and planning of nineteen metropolitan areas around the world. He built an international team of authors, set them a template, and wrote a long introductory essay which ends with a vision of the constitutional framework for great cities: not direct rule by the central state, nor ad hoc single-function bodies, or joint arrangements, but a modernised municipalism:

'It involves the administrative integration of the whole metropolitan area for the large-scale services which require unified planning, co-ordination or administration. It also involves smaller, more compact units of local government to perform the functions which can best be administered by smaller municipal organs. The reform of metropolitan government thus demands both more centralization and more decentralization; in other words, both larger and smaller areas and authorities'.⁹

The editor's own chapter on London repeats a now-familiar critique. The City Corporation appears as 'an obstinate relic of mediaeval structure sticking out like a rock in the sea'.¹⁰ And so it still sticks. . . but everything around was about to change.

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In 1957 the Macmillan government announced its intention to review the structure of London government and appointed a Royal Commission under the chairmanship of the solicitor Sir Edwin Herbert. Unlike previous commissions, none of its members could be said to represent existing interests in the capital - they included the Birmingham industrialist Paul Cadbury, Sir Charles Morris, Vice-Chancellor of Leeds University and Professor W J M Mackenzie of Manchester. The geographical coverage was quite precisely defined to coincide with the continuous built-up area inside the newly-designed Metropolitan Green Belt. The commissioners' task was to rearrange the existing map and functions - they were not ask to consider whether other competences such as police and water should be brought under local government control. As Royal Commissions go,

⁸ 1939 p 465

⁹ p99 in Robson W ed. (1954) *Great Cities of the World: their government, politics and planning* London, Allen & Unwin.

¹⁰ *ibid* p261

Herbert and his team were exemplary: well focussed on their remit, conscientious in visiting every corner of their vast enquiry area, thorough in investigation, and careful in sifting their recommendations, which unlike many local government enquiries before or since were unanimous.¹¹

As part of the commission's preparatory stages Sir Edwin Herbert wrote personally in March 1958 to the chief administrator of every university in the UK inviting evidence from academics, and particularly evidence from research groups rather than individuals. The University of London's invitation was soon in William Robson's hands, backed by personal words of encouragement from William Mackenzie. It prompted the event we celebrate this afternoon: the formation fifty years ago of an interdisciplinary research group at the London School of Economics, chaired by Robson, to do research and submit evidence on matters within the Herbert Commission's field of enquiry. The work had been invited rather than commissioned (that would come later, in the Royal Commission on the Structure of Local Government in England of 1966), but William Robson secured Nuffield Foundation money to hire the young Jim Sharpe as research assistant. Among the Group's fourteen members were lawyers (Olive Stone and John Griffith) economists (Alan Day), geographers (Michael Wise, Robert Estall, John Martin), specialists in social policy and administration (David Donnison and Jane Henderson) as well as colleagues from public administration and political science (Peter Self, Richard Pear, Keith Panter-Brick). After twelve intensive months of research and drafting the Greater London Group made a 200 page submission in July 1959.¹²

It was the weightiest and most comprehensive evidence received by the Herbert Commission, with substantial analysis of the London economy, demography, land use and transport as well detailed thematic papers on each of the main local government functions - all familiar territory for Robson. However, he was no longer offering his own analysis of government and misgovernment but chairing a group of equally opinionative colleagues; and as Ken Young has observed persuasion was not his forte¹³. The Group splintered. John Griffith saw no call for structural upheaval and could not share Robson's passionate conviction that the functions of a great city needed to be provided by general-purpose directly-elected municipality. He submitted individual evidence to that effect. The Group's other members could accept, with some reservations, the case for a single upper-tier authority for the continuously built-up area, with its eight million population, and were willing to sign up to the Robson's own long-held though controversial conjecture that the absorption of metropolitan Kent, Surrey, Middlesex, Hertfordshire, Essex and the County Boroughs into a Greater London Council would 'both express and develop the latent consciousness among Londoners, which lies beneath the surface, of belonging to great metropolitan community'.¹⁴

¹¹ Rhodes, G., Ed. (1970). *The Government of London: the struggle for reform*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson; Self P (1962). "'The Herbert Report and the Values of Local Government' " *Political Studies* X(2): 150-3

¹² 'Evidence Submitted by the London School of Economics and Political Science .. Greater London Group' pp 440-639 in Royal Commission on Local Government in Greater London (1962) *Written Evidence from Local Authorities, Miscellaneous Bodies and Private Individuals*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office. Vol 5

¹³ Young, K. (1999). "'Re-reading Robson'." *The London Journal* 24(1): 58-67

¹⁴ Rhodes (1970) 54-55

But they could not reach agreement on the lower tier. Robson's views were clear. Since *Government and Misgovernment* he had envisaged the reformed system as a scaled-up version of the relationship between the LCC and the Metropolitan Boroughs. The new boroughs should be small enough to correspond in some degree to the structure of urban sub-centres and their communal loyalties and memories, and large enough for all but the minimum amount of London-wide responsibility to pass upward to the GLC. Half the Group went with him, settling on a recommendation of twenty units with a size range of 250 to 500 thousand, comparable to county boroughs elsewhere in England: Scheme A. Peter Self, David Donnison and four other colleagues preferred to take county councils as the template, dividing London into seven sectors radiating from the centre, each with its share of inner city and outer suburbs, and populations in the range of 1 to 1.5 million: Scheme B. There was also a variant of Scheme B which left the greater part of the LCC intact.

The Herbert Commission spent two full days taking oral evidence from the Greater London Group. They did not disguise their differences. Robson said of Scheme B that to obliterate 100 local authorities and replace them by 7 counties 'does not look right and I think that not only does it not look right but I personally would say that I do not think it is right'. Peter Self spoke of the Scheme A model as 'anomalous and retrograde - perhaps even a little absurd'. When the Chairman thanked them all at the end of Day 63, Robson stole the last word, returning thanks to the Royal Commission

for the very patient hearing that you have given to us and the great courtesy you have shown to our eccentricities and peculiar ideas.¹⁵

At this point we have to imagine, with the help of George Jones's evocative pen portrait, a certain puckering of William Robson's face, 'as if he were drawing jocular sustenance from the air with his mouth and nostrils'.¹⁶

The Commissioners really did seem to appreciate the Greater London Group's openness. These lively intellect wranglings over the model for change made a contrast with generally descriptive or defensive tone of most other evidence received by the Commission. The Group's lower-tier disagreements also put into relief their comprehensive and unanimous advocacy of a single Greater London Council - with all that implied in terms of LCC abolition. The strength of LSE endorsement brought a late counter-submission from UCL's Centre for Urban Studies.¹⁷ This group had an even wider disciplinary range, being chaired by the public health specialist Professor J M Mackintosh, and including the statisticians Roy Allen and Claus Moser, the planner Sir William Holford, anthropologist C. Daryll Forde, geographer Dudley Stamp, historians S. T. Bindoff and Asa Briggs, and the sociologists David and Ruth Glass - they did most of the drafting. Their evidence set out to correct the 'misconception' that existing arrangements were somehow flawed and that London was lacking in democratic vitality.

¹⁵ Royal Commission on Local Government in Greater London (1960) *Minutes of Evidence, Day 63* Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

¹⁶ G.W Jones 'Preface' to C.E Hill ed (1986) *A Bibliography of the Writings of W A Robson* (Greater London Paper No 17) London, Greater London Group

¹⁷ 'Evidence Submitted by the Centre for Urban Studies at University College London' pp 640-699 in Royal Commission on Local Government in Greater London (1962) *Written Evidence from Local Authorities, Miscellaneous Bodies and Private Individuals*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office. Vol 5

They attacked advocates of administrative solutions, with their question-begging faith in the magic word 'coordination'. They pointed out that the LCC had a socio-economic basis and corresponded to an area of 'distinct social identity'. They saw no need for a metropolitan authority, arguing that the outer boundaries of London were indeterminate and that physical built-upness was an inappropriate basis for metropolitan definition. They suggested that the management of this wider metropolitan region could best be provided through a special agency of central government. Their oral evidence was somewhat confused, apart from an emphatic rejection of the Greater London Group's recommendation: as Sir William Holford put it, 'I think we all feel such a regional elected authority would be a monstrosity'.¹⁸

The report of the Herbert Commission - submitted in October 1960 - was unanimous and closely followed the argument of the Greater London Group. They discussed and rejected London-wide government by Whitehall ministries, ad hoc bodies, appointed agencies or joint committees of local authorities. Instead, there should be a comprehensive reorganization into two tiers, with 52 London Boroughs and a Greater London Council for 'those functions which can only be or can better be performed over a wider area'.¹⁹ In 1961 the Government's White Paper signalled its acceptance of the Herbert Commission's recommendations, including the key premise that Greater London within its green belt had become a recognisable civic entity, the home of modern 'Londoners'.²⁰ The 1963 London Government Act pattern of 32 London Boroughs was closer to the LSE Scheme A than the 52 recommended by Herbert, though to William Robson's dismay the Corporation of the City of London escaped unscathed - yet again.

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Let me end with two last thoughts about William Robson, the Herbert Commission and 'Greater London'.

The creation of the GLC in 1963 set the pattern for the wave of structural reforms undertaken by the Wilson and Heath governments - a 'triumph of public administration', in Leach's words, which conspicuously failed to stand the test of time.²¹ Contemporary American observers Frank Smallwood (1965) and Stephen Elkin (1974) were struck by the lack of interest in political dynamics and the degree of respect being accorded to technocratic elites in London's management.²² Ken Young comments unfavourably on the role of academics in this process particularly the public administration represented by Robson and his group. Young contrasts their advocacy of large-scale integrated metro-bureaucracy with American political scientists' awareness of territorial diversity and conflict - and their discovery of neo-liberal mechanisms for metropolitan governance.

¹⁸ *Minutes of Evidence* Day 70 p2916

¹⁹ Herbert, E., Sir (chairman) (1960). Report of the Royal Commission on Local Government in Greater London 1957-1960, Her Majesty's Stationery Office. Cmnd 1164.

²⁰ MHLG (1961) *London Government: Government Proposals for Reorganisation*. Ministry of Housing and Local Government, HMSO Cmnd 1562; Robson W (1961). "The Reform of London Government." *Public Administration* 39(1): 59-67

²¹ Leach (1983 1)

²² Smallwood, F (1965) *Greater London: the politics of metropolitan reform*. Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill; Elkin S (1974) *Politics and Lands Use Planning: the London Experience* London: CUP

This line of argument gathered strength from abolition of the GLC in 1986, though from the longer perspective of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 we may feel Robson and Herbert got the essentials right after all.

A final word on the Greater London Group. The studies undertaken for Herbert were amplified and published as Greater London Papers. Robson kept the team together, adding new members from many disciplines within the LSE: the group became the springboard for many academic careers. London's reorganisation was chronicled in Gerald Rhodes's *The Government of London: the struggle for reform* (1970) and *The New Government of London; the first five years* (1972). Other studies followed in the 1970s and Robson continued to preside over the Monday afternoon meetings of the group until his death in 1980.

At this point the group might also have faded were it not for the stimulus of *Streamlining the Cities* in 1983. Robson's successor George Jones rebuilt a fresh interdisciplinary team of young academics who submitted evidence on GLC abolition and were joined by Tony Travers to chronicle the dismantling of County Hall's empire and illuminate the complexities of government and misgovernment during the years of interregnum. Through formal and informal channels the Group had a significant influence on the 1999 outcome. The dialogue between thought and action, research and policy continues here and now - as the playwright said to the aviator, 'LSE is the place'.

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