

Greater London: 50 years of reform and government

In 1957, Harold Macmillan's government set up the *Royal Commission on Local Government in Greater London*, better known as the Herbert Commission. A year later, a group of academics at the London School of Economics, chaired by Professor William Robson, set about preparing evidence for the Royal Commission. Robson's work, developed by the 'Greater London Group', became the basis for the Royal Commission's eventual proposal that a new 'Greater London' council should be created.

Greater London approximated to the built-up sprawl that had grown around the historic core of the London County Council (LCC). A small amount of countryside lay within Greater London, while some urbanised areas of Surrey, Berkshire and the then county of Middlesex were left outside. Although 'London' is today described as a region of England, it is more accurately seen as a metropolis at the centre of the Greater South East super-region.

Robson's body of work was immensely important in influencing the Herbert Commission. George Jones and Michael Hebbert describe how Robson had researched the issue of London government for many years and how he had become convinced that a single local authority for the metropolis was essential. Herbert, in accepting this idea, created the version of 'Greater London' that was used not only for the Greater London Council (GLC) but which is today the area covered by the Greater London Authority.

There is no doubt that Robson was hugely influential in propagating the intellectual case for an authority for the whole of the capital. His writings regularly display impatience with the fragmented and often chaotic governance arrangements for, in particular, planning and transport. The group of colleagues he brought together at LSE undertook detailed research and gave both written and oral evidence to Herbert.

John Davis outlines the complex and parochial set of institutions that had evolved in London as the city had grown from its medieval core. There had been earlier 'metropolitan' institutions, notably the Metropolitan Board of Works and the London County Council. But they covered the built-up area that existed in the mid-19th century. If fragmentation and complexity was often the norm within the LCC's boundaries, government became even more tangled within the rest of the capital's apparently endless built-up area.

Although the government (and, indeed, Parliament) amended Herbert's detailed proposals for a Greater London Council with a second tier of 51 boroughs (plus the City of London), the overall concept of a metropolitan authority for about 700 square miles around Charing Cross was delivered. From 1965 till 1986, the GLC took responsibility for a number of city-wide services. Jerry White's paper outlines the extraordinary, if short, life of the council, which was abolished amid acrimony in 1986.

There was then an 'interregnum' when central government departments and joint committees of boroughs took responsibility for ex-GLC functions. During this period, the capital's economy and population began to grow, following many years of relative and/or absolute decline. Nirmala Rao describes this reversion to fragmentation and Whitehall intervention in her paper. Then, in 2000, a new central government introduced the current metropolitan government arrangements, including the GLA, the boroughs and the City. This, most recent stage of the 'Greater London' story is described by Tony Travers.

Few major cities have simple systems of government. But London's has been reformed with regularity and zeal, suggesting a restlessness that, in turn, implies the post-2000 arrangements are unlikely to be the last word on the subject. However, the last 50 years has seen the establishment and development of Greater London, with a population of almost eight million people. Despite all the churn and reform, Robson's hope for an authority for virtually the whole of the urban area around central London has proved surprisingly durable.