London's Evolution from Parochialism to Global Metropolis

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London, like most major British cities, experienced rapid population growth at the same time – the second quarter of the nineteenth century – as Britain was modernising its constitution. As a result, those problems associated with urban growth were being addressed at the same moment as the relationship between government, parliament, the localities and the citizen was being reassessed. In London the 'urban problem' was as severe as anywhere, while the administrative problems associated with the government of the modern world's first metropolis were arguably more intractable than elsewhere. In other British towns and cities the template provided by the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act proved generally adaptable, but London's particular problems – the autonomy of the City Corporation and the difficulty of accommodating local variation within any single municipal model – required constitutional innovation. This was pursued in traumatic circumstances in the 1840s: concern about public health regulation in the wake of the 1832 cholera epidemic was so intense as to dissuade policy makers from entrusting health functions to a fragmented network of local bodies – there were said to have been eighty-four separate paving boards in London in the 1850s[1] - with the result that an *ad hoc* government agency was appointed to overhaul London's sanitation. At the same time, suspicion of the kind of centralising model introduced for the Poor Law reform of 1834 bred a similar determination to protect localism against central intrusion. In the view of the most articulate localist, the Radical Joshua Toulmin Smith, the 'enemies of human freedom' invariably resorted to central poor law boards, boards of health and the like, but 'no central bureaucracy can ever, by any possible human machinery, know, as the inhabitants must always do, the circumstances and conditions of a district, and so how its affairs may be best managed.'[2] He also believed, as did many early Victorian theorists on local government, that public involvement in local administration was a good in itself: 'not allowed to learn self-government', he wrote in 1853, 'men naturally take to beating their wives.'[3] In these years the phrase 'local self-government' was used more often than 'local government': John Stuart Mill's journey away from strict utilitarianism would lead him to conclude that the best system of local administration was one in which, though expertise should be centralised, administration should be decentralised as far as was feasible.

These tensions made the issue of London's administration something of a 'West Lothian question' – a conundrum to which any likely solution would be sub-optimal. The solution eventually chosen was Sir Benjamin Hall's Metropolis Local Management Act of 1855, which sought to reconcile the demands of metropolitan administration with a respect for localism by means of a two-tier government system. What was sub-optimal about it

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[1] H.Jephson, *The Sanitary Evolution of London* (London, 1907, 12.

[2] J.Toulmin Smith, *The Metropolis and its Municipal Administration* (London, 1852), 11.

[3] Smith, letter of 7 December 1853 in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, collection of cuttings relating to Toulmin Smith, 2288 d.405.

would become clear over during the years of its operation. First, a pronounced localist bias within the legislation[4] ensured that the London-wide body, the Metropolitan Board of Works, was indirectly elected from the second tier, which impaired its accountability and thereby increased resistance to the substantial taxing powers that the Board possessed. The Corporation's in-house polemicist, the City Chamberlain Benjamin Scott, saw the MBW as 'a compromise between a desire to appear to favour Representative Government, and a determination to deny its practical operation.'[5] The parochialist Toulmin Smith had predicted that *any* metropolitan body would be nothing more than 'oligarchism…a mere clique – father of costly jobbery and functionalism.'[6] The MBW was a soft target: in attempting to avoid creating a body too distant from parish concerns, Hall had created a structure which diminished accountability, as the scandals which overtook the Board in the 1880s would show.[7] Secondly, and perhaps as a reflection of the offhand treatment of the metropolitan layer of government, little thought was given to the identity of administrative London. The Registrar General's definition of the Metropolis was adopted, without regard to the actual built-up area, with the result that municipal London included much wilderness in the south and south-east, but excluded, in the north, many areas that were already built upon in 1855. Thirdly, and again out of deference to localism, the second tier preserved every existing parochial body, regardless of administrative fitness, grouping the smaller ones into 'District Boards', after the manner of the Poor Law Unions of 1834, but retaining the direct election of each parish vestry, however tiny.

The difficulties produced were evident a generation later, if not sooner. The Metropolitan Board lived most of its short life under a cloud. It had been created, before all else, to produce a main drainage system for London, rather as the GLC would later be created above all else to produce an urban motorway network. The drainage system, the associated Thames Embankment and the other infrastructural works were intrinsically expensive, but they were the MBW's *raison d'être*: challenges to the Board's legitimacy provoked by its heavy expenditure were challenges to the system as a whole. Secondly, although the failure of its writ to run beyond the Registrar General's London was probably the least of its worries, the fact that the Board had no authority in Hornsey or Wimbledon was a failing becoming increasingly evident as the London fringe expanded in the 1870s and 1880s. Finally, the fragmented nature of the second tier, exacerbated by the associated inequality of wealth between authorities, meant that London's local bodies varied greatly in strength and prestige. Larger, populous parishes like Islington and St Pancras were well resourced urban authorities. They lacked first-tier powers, of course, but they were otherwise comparable to many of the stronger municipalities given county borough status in 1888. Overall, though, the second tier was only as strong as its weakest members. As so often in Victorian local government, the take-up of permissive legislation provided the most telling evidence. Twenty years after Hall's Act, only eight

[4] J.Davis, *Reforming London. The London Government Problem, 1855-1900* (Oxford, 1988), ch.2.
[5] B.Scott, *A Statistical Vindication of the City of London* (London, 1867), 131.
[6] Smith, *Metropolis and its Municipal Administration*, 25.
[7] Davis, *Reforming London*, ch.4.

of thirty-nine second-tier authorities had adopted the Baths and Washhouses Act,[8] while even by 1890 Sidney Webb could still argue that the duties neglected by the vestries were more significant than those they actually performed.[9]

These systemic problems provide one substantial explanation for London's missing the 'municipal revolution' of the later nineteenth century, when most major UK cities became providers of the principal public utilities and other services. As a result, in the 1880s, ratepayer discontent with the cost of the system was augmented by ratepayer unrest at the cost of public services still in private hands and by municipal reformers' demands for a more energetic and more democratic municipal administration. In the 1880s London came closer, arguably, to a consensus on the municipal agenda than at any time before or since. The goodwill vested in the early London County Council from 1889 was evidence of this. More strikingly, the depth of concern about London's social problems following the publication of the first edition of Charles Booth's poverty investigation in 1889 made it possible the Council to be run for its first eighteen years by the Liberal-Radical Progressive Party, advocating a combination of social radicalism and municipal provision of public services, in defiance of the capital's Conservative leaning in parliamentary elections.[10] The Progressive LCC is still regarded as path-breaking in its development of social politics, particularly the spectacular early housing schemes, but success in public service provision was essentially confined to the acquisition of the tramways. Gas and water remained beyond its reach, in part because the county area formed only a relatively small proportion of the service area. Given the intensity of public hostility to the water companies in the late 1890s, the 'quango' solution adopted with the creation of the Metropolitan Water Board in 1904 has to be seen as a significant setback to the Council, as does the similar expedient – the Port of London Authority – adopted to take the docks into public control in 1908.

A year earlier the Progressives had been ousted from power in a rancorous election which demonstrated that the municipal consensus of the late 1880s was dead. A quarter of a century of Tory control followed, putting an end to the more ambitious aspirations of Progressive municipalism. In the Progressives' last few years these had included what were by now overdue proposals for the expansion of the administrative county.[11] These were a direct reflection of the communitarian ideals of the local 'New Liberalism' that the Progressives embodied, seeing the LCC not only as a service provider but also as a mouthpiece for a metropolitan community capable of speaking with one voice. They had been promoted, somewhat quixotically, despite the likely hostility of the outer suburbs to high-spending Progressive radicalism. In narrow political terms, the (Conservative) Municipal Reformers who took control of the Council in 1907 stood to benefit from any expansion of the county boundary to embrace the suburbs, but they were also politically

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[8] J.T.Dexter, *The Government of London* (London, 1875), 41.

[9] S.Webb, *The London Programme* (London, 1890), 18.

[10] J.Davis, 'The Progressive Council, 1889-1907', in A.Saint, ed., *Politics and The People of London. The London County Council, 1889-1965* (London, Hambledon, 1989).

[11] See, e.g., *Municipal Journal*, 16 October 1903, and the interview with Fitzroy Hemphill in *Morning Post*, 19 November 1907.

sympathetic to those outer London areas most resistant to LCC expansion. Only once during the quarter-century of Tory control at County Hall did the Council leadership make any concerted effort to advocate expansion – in 1920, when the Council lobbied the Lloyd George Coalition government for revision of the county boundary. This initiative by the LCC Tories was opposed by the metropolitan Tory umbrella group, the London Municipal Society, by the extra-metropolitan local authorities and by the contiguous county councils.[12] The establishment of the Royal Commission on London Government (the Ullswater Commission) in 1923 may well have been intended to bury the enlargement issue; it was certainly no surprise when the Commission scotched the proposals.[13] If there ever was a realistic prospect of expanding the county boundary in the first half of the century, it was before 1914, the period when Liverpool absorbed Bootle and Greater Birmingham was created. The harsher economic climate of the post-war years stiffened the resistance of the suburbs to what they saw as central city designs on their growing rateable value. After a flurry of expansion proposals had been blocked up and down the country, a moratorium was imposed by Whitehall in 1925.

As inter-war suburban growth proceeded apace, the 'County of London' therefore became more markedly distinct from built-up London. Another quango, the London Passenger Transport Board, created in 1933, relieved the LCC of its trams and underlined its inadequacy as a metropolitan body. Among the principal objects of London's variegated transport providers was to carry commuters to suburban homes beyond the county boundary. The pre-war LCC had probably been most visible to Londoners as a tramways authority; now it lost that role and was made to renounce any other transport ambitions. The inevitable political consequence of suburbanisation followed in 1934, when the victory of Herbert Morrison's London Labour Party demonstrated that the LCC was now effectively an inner-city authority. For the thirty or so years until its abolition, the Council became as much of a one-party state as any east end borough, being privately described by Clement Attlee as 'the nearest approach to a totalitarian state in Western Europe.'[14] Its policy agenda shifted steadily to emphasise Labour concerns, principally housing and healthcare.

This is where the Greater London group's founder, W.A.Robson, comes in. There is presumably no reason to doubt that this Fabian protégé of the Webbs was happier to see the LCC in Labour than in Tory hands, but his 1939 polemic on London municipal history, *The Government and Misgovernment of London*, is better read as a Webbian – in some ways a Progressive – call for an energetic pan-London authority, combining efficiency with accountability, than as a piece of Morrisonian triumphalism. At a time when democratic institutions were threatened cross the world, Robson called for

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[12] J.Davis, 'The Government of London', in D.Tanner, C.Williams, W.P.Griffith & A.Edwards, ed., *Debating Nationhood and Governance in Britain, 1885-1939. Perspectives from the Four Nations* (Manchester, 2006), 220-3.
[13] Report (Cmd.1830) in PP 1923, xii.
[14] Freda Corbet, revised by Mark Pottle, 'Sir Isaac James Hayward, 1884-1976', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), online edition, www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/31213.

recognition of the democratic qualities of municipal government and for a 'strong [and] effective regional patriotism' instead of the detachment bred by the existing system.[15] Specifically, Robson surfed the wave of 1930s regionalism, asserting 'as an in disputable proposition that if we desire to cultivate and encourage a sense of community among the citizens of the London region, it is necessary for the area to acquire a regional form of government.'[16] Tellingly, the book received only tepid recognition in the Labour press,[17] while Robson took the opportunity provided by a post-war reissue in 1948 to pour contempt on Labour's limited and pragmatic proposals for London reform in the 1943 pamphlet *The Future of Local Government*.[18] Ten years later, the conviction remains clear that the fusion of administrative efficiency and democratic accountability that the Victorians had pursued by such elaborate means could only be achieved through expansion of the administrative county and the creation of a strategic metropolitan authority, mandated to 'think big' for London. Robson's Greater London Group would provide make the strongest non-Tory case for dispensing with the LCC and enlarging the administrative county – even at the risk of destroying Labour's inner-city stronghold. In 1939 Robson had argued that 'only through a Greater London Council can a Greater London spirit arise which will attempt to envisage the problems and the welfare of the metropolis as a whole rather than the problems and the welfare of its particular parts.'[19] A quarter of a century later, following the Herbert Commission's deliberations, a Greater London Council is what Londoners got.

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[15] W.A.Robson, *The Government and Misgovernment of London* (London, 2nd edition, 1948), 349.

[16] Robson, *Government and Misgovernment of London*, 324.

[17] See the review by D.H.D[aines], *London News: Monthly Publication of the London Labour Party*, April 1939.

[18] Robson, *Government and Misgovernment of London* (1948 edition), 497-8.

[19] Robson, *Government and Misgovernment of London*, 324-5.