

The interregnum, the boroughs and the GLA, 1986-2000

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Towards the end of its life, the Greater London Council had come to be seen by some as ‘either too weak to be effective or too powerful to be acceptable.’¹ The one serious attempt to resolve this impasse – the Marshall Inquiry – led nowhere. However, the abolition of the GLC in 1986 left decision-making and governance highly fragmented. A network of joint bodies struggled to build a basis for the planning of the metropolis, while the case for a London-wide government gained new momentum. Although abolition was a massive administrative exercise, the predicted chaos did not materialise and London continued to function.² The private sector advocated ‘partnership’ as a panacea for London’s ills, but by the mid-1990s, however, the limits of partnership served only to highlight the gaps in the overall management of the metropolis. Over-dependent on elaborate structures of cooperative joint action, the absence of any overall responsibility for formulating and giving effect to a vision for London was open to criticism. Indeed, commentators and academics alike had condemned London’s dismemberment as an act of political vandalism. But the analysis of the problem of London government soon became more sophisticated. Opinion moved towards creating a ‘voice for London’ that might—or might not—take the form of an elected mayor with executive powers.³

The interregnum

The post-GLC period also witnessed the emergence of other local government. Some London-wide functions passed directly to the boroughs in their own right. The principal example was education. Prior to GLC abolition, ILEA had existed as a Council subcommittee, the members consisting of the GLC councillors from inner London constituencies together with representatives from the inner London boroughs. Amendments to the Education Reform Bill of 1987 brought about the abolition of ILEA and the transfer of education services in their entirety to the boroughs in 1990.

Beyond education, there were a number of GLC functions for which immediate London-wide arrangements had to be made, several requiring joint action by the boroughs. The London Boroughs Grants Scheme was one of a number of funding sources established to replace the GLC’s voluntary groups funding, with all London boroughs, together with the City of London, as its constituent members. The lead borough, Richmond-upon-Thames, supported

¹ K. Young, ‘Metropolis, R.I.P?’ *Political Quarterly*, 57/1, 1986.

² M. Hebbert, *London: More by Fortune than Design*, New York, John Wiley, 1998.

³ T. Travers, *The Politics of London: Governing an Ungovernable City*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2004.

a Grants Unit, which became responsible not only for administering schemes and advising the committee but also for monitoring social needs in Greater London. Research and intelligence was also easily handled, with the remaining parts of the GLC research and intelligence function reconstituted under section 88 of the 1985 act as the London Research Centre. Accountable to a joint committee of boroughs, Islington took the 'lead borough' role. With a budget in excess of £150 million, the London Fire and Civil Defence Authority (LFCDA) was one of the major authorities that undertook a number of important functions on behalf of the London boroughs and the City Corporation.

Far more important and controversial was the arrangement made for London regional planning. Following the abolition of the GLC, primary responsibility for strategic planning was transferred to central government, but the London Planning Advisory Committee (LPAC) was established to advise the minister and the boroughs, in this case with Havering as lead borough. Advised by a panel of chief officers comprising chief executives, borough planners, engineers, surveyors, and finance officers, LPAC was funded by London local authorities contributing on a per capita basis. LPAC's principal task and statutory *raison d'être* was to make representations to the Secretary of State on behalf of the London boroughs over the periodic strategic guidance, which provided a framework of general policy within which boroughs prepared their own Unitary Development Plans.⁴

Another major role of LPAC was to advise, on behalf of London boroughs, on major development proposals before local planning committees and to define criteria for distinguishing major from minor developments. LPAC became an important player within the London and South East Regional Planning Conference (SERPLAN) a body which, established some years before, continued its monitoring and advisory role on major transport and planning issues affecting the region and coordinated joint policies on waste disposal, regional shopping centres, maintenance of open land in the green belt, and the allocation of building land for housing.

One of the largest functions of the GLC—waste disposal—was also transferred to the newly established Waste Disposal Authority (WDA), which comprised four statutory joint authorities covering Western Riverside, East London, West London, and North London. Twelve London boroughs linked together into three voluntary groups covering Central, South London, and South East London worked alongside the joint authorities to form the WDA.

At the national level, the Conservative government established a Cabinet subcommittee to link up separate Whitehall departments; and when, in the following year, John Gummer was appointed Secretary of State for Environment he was also given a new and significant designation as Minister for London. In 1994, the Government Office for London (GOL) was set up as one of ten regional offices in England. The machinery was now in place to enable Whitehall to function effectively as a strategic authority for the

⁴ M. Hebbert and T. Travers, *The London Government Handbook*. London: Cassell, 1988.

metropolitan area. Accountable to Gummer's Cabinet subcommittee, GOL was an inter-departmental entity bringing together the regional offices of the Departments of Environment, Transport, Trade and Industry, and Education and Employment. GOL was in no sense a monolith, as its component parts continued to report to their own sponsoring departments.⁵

By the mid-1990s, the London boroughs, working with GOL, had considerably increased the part they played, individually and collectively, in London's government. This was itself partly a reflection of the emerging leadership role of private sector-led bodies. A new organisation, London First, brought together London borough leaders, the voluntary sector, and leading private-sector interests, and took the lead role in shaping the debate on the future of London government.⁶ Chaired by Lord Sheppard, London First enjoyed the support of more than 300 businesses, and latterly, the London boroughs.

The London Pride Partnership was launched by London First and its private sector partners included the CBI, London region, the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the TECs. London government was represented by the Association of London Government (ALG), by LPAC, and by the Cities of London and Westminster. In his role as Minister for London, John Gummer set up a Joint London Advisory Panel in 1996 composed of the twelve ministerial representatives on the Cabinet subcommittee and eleven private sector representatives of the London Pride partnership. These initiatives aimed to promote the locational advantages of London as a world city and business centre and to demonstrate that the abolition of the GLC and the lack of a firm planning and investment framework created the space for business and the City to promote their priorities.⁷ But the Partnership did not escape divisions. The business partners were keen to concentrate on London's central area, while the borough members insisted on taking a broader view and including the suburbs.

Rethinking London Governance

As the general election approached, the time seemed ripe for fresh thinking about London. A number of prominent Labour politicians had picked up Michael Heseltine's proposal for a directly elected mayor and advocated such a solution for London. In April 1996, Labour published *A Voice for London* (Labour Party 1996). For the first time, the proposal was put forward for a Greater London Authority (GLA)—not Council—which would take an area-wide view but which would not be directly responsible for the provision of services. Instead, the GLA would promote economic, transport, planning, environmental, and policing strategies as well as inward investment. Those services for which it would be responsible, such as fire and police, would be

⁵ T. Travers and Jones, G., *The New Government of London*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1997.

⁶ P. Newman and A. Thornley, (1997). 'Fragmentation and Centralisation in the Governance of London: Influencing the Urban Policy and Planning Agenda'. *Urban Studies*, 34/7:, 1997, pp. 967–88.

⁷ P. Newman, 'London Pride'. *Local Economy*, 10, 1995, p. 118.

run at arms length through appointed boards. That the authority might be complemented by an elected mayor was put forward only tentatively.

According to Labour's leader, London needed 'a galvanising powerful vision of its future' and 'for a vision, there does need to be a voice'. The manifesto settled London's future. A GLA would comprise an elected assembly together with a separately elected mayor and would have wide-ranging powers of appointment and direction over the major metropolitan services, including police and transport.⁸ The high-profile business group London First came out in support of an executive mayor or 'governor' for London, although it preferred one untrammelled by an elected assembly. Speaking to the London First conference following his election triumph, Blair acknowledged the business community's role in shaping the agenda and proclaimed the mayor's office to be

an immensely powerful position with the mandate of five million voters. It needs to be, because the challenges London faces are immense . . . What we need is government, business and the new Mayor to work together for the good of all London. That should be our aim so that we can make this city and our country ready to face the next century even stronger than it leaves this one. (*Evening Standard*, 9 September 1999)

London under the Greater London Authority

Thus, the creation of the Greater London Authority (GLA) in 2000 marked the opening of a new era in the governance of metropolitan London.⁹ The institution of a directly elected executive Mayor and representative Assembly was entirely novel. Drawing inspiration from the experiences of other great cities, the GLA Act replaced the plethora of other bodies and joint arrangements that had characterised the interregnum period. Yet despite the aim of streamlining London's government to ensure that key services were provided in a clearly accountable fashion, the reality is that in almost every respect responsibility is diffused between a host of bodies, statutory and non-statutory.¹⁰

Take the example of promoting London as a world city. Much of the case for creating a Mayor as a single focus for promotion – the 'voice for London' argument – rested on the assumption that the Mayor alone would act as the beacon for attracting inward investment and enhancing London's competitiveness in the world markets. In reality, the Mayor and the London Development Authority (LDA) do not have sole responsibility for promoting London. That role is shared with other bodies, many of which are overseen by different Whitehall departments. They include the London Tourist Board with

⁸ DETR (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions) (1998a). *A Mayor and Assembly for London*. Cm. 3897. London: TSO.

⁹ B. Pimlott and N. Rao, *Governing London*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

¹⁰ B. Pimlott and N. Rao, 'Metropolitan Miasma: Blurred Accountabilities in the Governance of London', *London Journal*, 29 (2), 2005, pp. 33-44.

its *Visit London* campaign to attract tourists and business visitors, which comes under the purview of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), as does London International Sport, which aims to bring international events to London. The successful bid for the 2012 Olympic games draws these bodies together with a new delivery agency, and embroils both mayor and ministers in detailed – and sometimes fraught – negotiations over Olympic planning.

The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) has an important stake, expressed through two partnerships with predominantly private sector bodies, Trade Partners UK with the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) for export promotion and the London First Centre, which seeks inward investment. At the local level there are sub regional partnerships – five in London covering north, south, east, west and central London, which the LDA brings together through Team London. Inescapably, GOL attempts to take an overview of all these activities.

A second, and very different, example was the plethora of bodies concerned with the management of London's waste. The UK government has implemented European Commission Directives on landfill, recycling rates and producer responsibility, set regional targets for recycling, and established Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) to develop new markets for recycled products. London Remade plays a similar role to WRAP at the London level, while the London Community Recycling Network supports communities' engagement in waste and recycling, the LDA seeks to promote the 'green economy' and the Environment Agency monitors and regulates the whole. Lines of authority and accountability are complex. For their part, the London Boroughs have statutory obligations to collect, manage and dispose of waste, for which purpose a number of joint inter-borough arrangements have been developed. The Mayor has little direct power with respect to waste management at the borough level, while the boroughs themselves have different waste management processes, and relate to the central and regional funding streams in ways that express their own local priorities and preferences.

As in waste, so too in energy policy are the arrangements complex. The general thrust of policy is to move towards a low carbon economy. In the case of the Mayor Livingstone's Energy Strategy, there are almost no formal powers at his disposal by which to bring about any changes. The main instrument proposed in the strategy was a London energy partnership which – if it is to succeed – will have to rely on extensive goodwill and collaboration amongst a wide and disparate range of stakeholders.

Such blurred networks in these three areas of promotion, waste management and energy are replicated in the principal areas of London's service provision: planning, roads and public transport. Here, arguably, considerations of accountability and transparency loom still larger. The Mayor is responsible for the overall planning framework through the London Plan, while the boroughs operate development control. The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act replaces the former Unitary Development Plans (UDP), prepared by the boroughs, with Local Development Schemes (LDS). Approved by the Secretary of State, these are required to conform to the London Plan and will

be subject to public inquiry. It will be some years before these borough schemes are brought into conformity with the London Plan. In the meantime, should conflict between the London Plan and a LDS arise in any appeal it would be for a planning inspector to decide which should have precedence.

The GLA Act accorded only a general and strategic role to the Mayor. In relation to planning applications mayoral powers are essentially negative and while he or she has power to direct refusal of a planning application of strategic importance, there is no power to direct approval if the borough is minded to refuse. There is some expectation that boroughs may be deterred from refusing applications by the prospect of the Mayor supporting the applicant at a public inquiry, with their being liable for costs if they lose. The Mayor's determinations of planning matters are also subject to the overriding powers of the Secretary of State to call in planning applications of national importance.

A major planning issue of concern to Mayor Livingstone related to the provision of affordable housing, crucial to the recruitment and retention of key workers in London's economy and public services. However, the diffusion of responsibility under the Act is such that the Mayor can only lead by persuasion, at least until he gained enhanced powers in 2006. Despite GOL taking a lead in this respect, accountability for London's housing development remains blurred. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Thames Gateway initiative, which covers a vast area to the east of the capital, extending deep into Kent and Essex. The Thames Gateway is identified in the government's Sustainable Communities Plan for major expansion, aiming to provide 200,000 more homes in this area than previously planned with an allocation of £446m over three years for infrastructure in the Thames Gateway. This ambitious initiative has spawned further institutional complexity. The Thames Gateway Strategic Partnership (TGSP) was to provide the overarching strategic framework for the whole of the Thames Gateway. A London Gateway Partnership Board was established to agree sub-regional strategy and priorities, in the context of the TGSP framework, the London Plan, Regional Housing Strategy, and the LDA's economic development strategy. At the executive level, an East London Urban Development Corporation (UDC) was accorded responsibility for the delivery of the programmes.

Under the GLA Act, Transport for London absorbed London Transport and the functions of the Traffic Director for London, together with some of the functions of the highways agencies and the Government Office for London. TfL was given overall responsibility for roads, buses, trains, and the underground, managing the traffic light system and regulating taxis and mini-cabs. The Mayor appoints the members of the TfL board and has the right to chair their meetings. The Mayor's overriding responsibility is to draw these several modes of transport together through the preparation of an integrated transport strategy for London.

The task of setting a strategy for roads and traffic lies with the Mayor as part of the duty to set an overall transport strategy. However it is not clear to what level of detail such a strategy could and should go and how far the powers of the Mayor and TfL extend to ensure its delivery. Yet, while TfL has extensive

powers to force the boroughs to implement its transport strategy, these may be too draconian to make them useable in practice. Notwithstanding the Mayor's formal powers, there is no discernible overall strategy for managing traffic and the road network in London and no single point of responsibility within this complex of TfL, boroughs, the Highways Agency, public utilities and enforcement agencies.

Any such strategy would be tested by the lack of a coherent road hierarchy at borough level. The present strategic network is clearly defined. The Highways Agency is responsible for motorways within London: the M1, M3, M4, M11, M40 and the M25 which, although only partly within the GLA area, caters for orbital travel from one part of London to another. The Mayor has responsibility for the Transport for London Roads Network (TLRN), the strategic network of 550 km (broadly the same as the red route network) which represents just five per cent of the total network, but carries a third of the traffic. The remaining 13,000 km of roads are the responsibility of the boroughs, and the way that the boroughs manage them has a major impact on the performance of the strategic network and of the transport system as a whole. Each borough's unitary development plan (now replaced by Local Development Strategy) defines priorities for roads, but problems arise where roads cross borough boundaries. Moreover, when boroughs choose to block through routes or change traffic light timing, this may have a significant impact on congestion on the strategic network that an individual borough has no reason to take into account.

Congestion is also exacerbated by roadworks, whether instigated in order to repair roads, introduce new traffic management measures, repair or renew outworn public utility pipes and cables, or make connections to premises. The boroughs maintain their own information systems for those roadworks that arise from their own activities, but they neither hold data from the utilities nor do they promote co-ordination at the boundaries between boroughs. The London media are quick to highlight the inconvenience caused by roadworks, whether the lack of co-ordination between undertakers leading to the same stretch of road dug up many times, a lack of urgency in completing the work, or poor re-instatement requiring further work to make it good.

Finally, making the best use of road space depends on effective *enforcement* of traffic, loading and parking regulations in order to prevent infringements. The police traffic wardens enforce parking control on red routes and borough parking attendants on other routes. Bus lanes are enforced partly by cameras operated by the boroughs, partly by TfL through bus-mounted cameras, and partly by the police. The police are wholly responsible for dealing with offences at traffic lights and yellow box junctions although it is now proposed to vest these powers in their wardens. Generally, though, the enforcement of traffic regulations is not a high priority for the police and the Mayor has had to provide funding for the Metropolitan Police from TfL's budget to pay for bus lane enforcement. The boroughs employ parking attendants to enforce parking regulations, and they tend concentrate on metered and residents' parking bays, both to satisfy residents and maximize the revenue from parking penalties. Preventative enforcement on major roads and bus routes, on the other hand, is expensive and, if successful, produces little penalty revenue. Borough

enforcement, then contributes relatively little to improving overall traffic flows.

Given the long lead times for rail and underground improvements, buses offer the quickest way of improving public transport in London. TfL designates the London Bus Priority Network (LBPN) and sets the programme for improving services through the London Bus Initiative (LBI).¹ However many of the key components of the LBPN are borough roads and the boroughs are responsible for implementing bus priority measures on them, co-ordinated on a sub-regional basis. Implementing priority measures such as bus lanes is proving to be a slow process, partly because of resource constraints and partly because of the need to consult and take account of local concerns.

Over 400,000 people travel to central London by rail in the morning peak, of whom nearly half transfer to the underground to complete their journey. There are conflicts between national priorities for use of the rail system in around London – inter-city and longer distance commuter services and freight – and London priorities – turn-up-and-go shorter distance and orbital services. The future of the relationship between TfL and the SRA is uncertain, prompting the Mayor to make his own bid to acquire the power to take forward and fund such developments as Crossrail, Thameslink 2000 and the East London Line extension. At present, such major projects are not the responsibility of any single organisation. The promoter may be TfL or the SRA (or both acting jointly in the case of Crossrail), but they are not empowered to make them happen. The Government has to approve them but does not take responsibility for driving them through. Priorities for rail projects are determined on a national basis and assessed on the basis of standard transport cost-benefit appraisal that does not take account of multiplier or regeneration benefits. Projects are often delayed because of obstacles in the public inquiry or legal process, arising from the national legislation for project authorisation, EU legislation and the Human Rights Act rather than the structure of London government.

If the effectiveness of the new government of London is to be judged solely as a strategic authority providing public services, then it is apparent that the confusion, conflict and overlap that arise from multiple players impede transparency and accountability. More fundamental is the underlying confusion stemming from the lack of clarity in the relationships between the Mayor and the Assembly. If the objective of the GLA Act was to create an authority for London with clearly focused and visible leadership, then the public must know who to call to account – and how – when things go wrong. This, however, is far from the case. The institution of Mayor and Assembly and the dynamics of the relationship between them, at least during Mayor Livingstone's two terms, has been one of constant flux.

That situation continues as we move into a new era under Boris Johnson. Others at this seminar will be speculating about the likely future direction of his mayoralty. What is clear, however, is that he is likely to pursue a very different approach to the problem of governing London than his predecessor. Already, the City Charter agreement has been made between the Mayor and London Councils. Together, they promise joint action in place of conflict, and

a self-limitation of mayoral power in favour of consensus and local rights. How this will work, and how Mayor Johnson will steer a new course among this plethora of bodies, remains to be seen.
