

A Mayor and Assembly for London: 10 years on

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A brief history...

It is 10 years since the Greater London Authority was created as a metropolitan or regional tier of government for London. There have been five different arrangements of 'upper tier' government in the capital since the Metropolitan Board of Works (MBW) was created in 1855 to build infrastructure. The MBW was succeeded by the London County Council (LCC), a powerful authority for the inner part of the contemporary city. Within this area 28 metropolitan boroughs and the City of London delivered 'local' services.

Two factors were particularly important in influencing the progress of London's government. First, the physical expansion of the city created demands for provision across a wider area than the City of London's original and long-evolved 'square mile'. The Metropolitan Police Service was created by the government in 1829 to meet the law and order requirements of a fast-growing city. The squalor and chaos of the London of the 1850s prompted Parliament to legislate for London's first-ever metropolitan government, an indirectly-elected entity. Further physical expansion between the end of the 19th century and 1939 generated a debate about the need for a 'Greater London' government¹.

The second important factor in determining the kinds of institutions that emerged was the local power and parochialism of both the City of London and the parish-based or ad hoc bodies that developed to deliver services in the absence of a city-wide government. At all stages of the capital's development, the 'local' tier has resisted efforts to amalgamate existing parishes or boroughs and has often opposed the powers of any metropolitan institution created².

After many years of lobbying and a Royal Commission, the LCC was succeeded in 1965 by the Greater London Council (GLC), which embraced a large proportion of the continuous urban area covered by London. The GLC was intended to be a more 'strategic' authority than the LCC, providing a planning framework within which 32 boroughs and the City would set their own plans as well as direct provision of certain services.

The GLC was abolished in 1986 to be replaced by a system with no overarching powers but simply a set of relationships between boroughs and agencies.

The much leaner Greater London Authority with its associated Assembly was created in 2000, covering the same physical area as the GLC but with far fewer powers especially in terms of taxation. It has already seen its powers increased by legislation passed in 2007. The new government elected in 2010 is committed to further change,

¹ William Robson, *The Government and Misgovernment of London*, Allen & Unwin, 2nd Edition, 1948

² John Davis, *Reforming London: The London Government Problem 1855-1900*, OUP, 1988

extending the powers of the mayor and, to some extent, the boroughs. The result of the 200 year-long struggle briefly described here has been an uneasy two-tier system of government, with the possibility of reform never far away.

The GLC, the ILEA: accidentally evolving conditions for reform

The GLC, which was London's metropolitan government from 1965 to 1986, was created with the explicit purpose of extending administrative 'London' well beyond the old County of London, embracing the whole of Middlesex and parts of Hertfordshire, Essex, Kent and Surrey. It was given control over strategic planning, London Transport, the London Fire Brigade and was a substantial social housing landlord. The London County Council's education responsibilities (inherited from the London School Board in 1904) were passed to the GLC, which created a 'special committee' – the Inner London Education Authority – to deliver them³.

In retrospect, the GLC's existence was reminiscent of Talleyrand's description of Russia: "too strong, yet too weak". The 'strategic' Greater London Development Plan took years to develop and was not effective in determining the city's evolution. Large modernist housing estates proved an awkward 'strategic' power and much of the housing was transferred to the boroughs during the late 1970s. London Transport was transferred to the GLC in 1970 and away again in 1984⁴. Importantly, throughout the GLC's life period, London's population and economic dominance declined in part because the economic region spread further and further out into the greater South East.

One strength was the ILEA, with its membership drawn from the GLC and the boroughs, which was by far the largest education authority in the country. It was forward-looking and well-funded. Politicians on the Left saw it as a beacon of progressive, comprehensive, education, while those on the Right believed it to be 'trendy' and inefficient⁵.

Politically, the GLC swung backwards and forwards between Labour and the Conservatives. Finally, in 1981 Labour won the GLC back from the Tories under the leadership of a moderate, Andrew McIntosh. Within 24 hours of the election, McIntosh had been replaced by Ken Livingstone, a leading figure within the 'new Left'. Policies pursued by the Livingstone-led GLC provoked Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher, after a ferocious political struggle, to abolish the Council⁶. The GLC's life ended in 1986, though the ILEA continued (as a directly-elected authority) until 1990 when its responsibilities were transferred to the boroughs.

The vacuum left by the removal of the GLC was filled by central government departments, joint committees of the boroughs, boroughs individually and a quango, the London Residuary Body. Services did not collapse. However, Opposition

³ Gerald Rhodes, *The Government of London: The Struggle for Reform*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970

⁴ Tony Travers, *The Politics of London Governing an Ungovernable City*, Palgrave, 2004

⁵ Tim Brighouse and Leisha Fullick, 'Introduction' in *Education in a Global City: Essays from London*, Bedford Way Papers, 2007

⁶ Andrew Hosken, *Ken: The Ups and Downs of Ken Livingstone*, Arcadia Books, 2008

politicians were committed to reinstating city-wide government in London. In 1992, a number of the capital's leading businesses created London First, a good government and lobbying organisation which sought, in part, to occupy the space left by the GLC. This was followed in 1994 by the creation of the Government Office for London, a co-ordinating department for central government. The Association of London Government brought together two predecessor organisations to provide a city-wide voice for all boroughs⁷.

The stage was set for the post-1997 Labour government to reform London government once again.

Creating the GLA: Legislating for the Mayor of London

The Labour Party and the Liberals/Liberal Democrats had been committed to re-creating metropolitan government in London ever since the Conservatives abolished the GLC. When Tony Blair succeeded John Smith as Labour leader in 1994, he decided that the new London government should be led by a directly-elected executive mayor of the kind found in American cities. In Opposition, Labour proposed a Greater London Authority, consisting of an elected mayor and assembly.

Once in office, a green paper was published. On the basis of its proposals, a referendum was held in 1998, which produced a majority for reform in every borough. A white paper was then developed, leading to the massive Greater London Authority Act, 1999. The Government Office for London and the Minister for London, Nick Raynsford carried forward the Parliamentary stages of the complex legislative framework for the new system of government. Both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats supported the principle of a new system of London-wide government.

The Mayor of London was given executive powers over planning, transport, economic development and, to a lesser extent, fire & emergencies and the police. Because the mayor had a constituency consisting of the whole of Greater London, the electoral legitimacy of the new office was bound to be powerful, even though their taxation powers were extremely limited. The 25-member London Assembly, elected by a form of proportional representation, was created to oversee the mayor by scrutiny sessions and the publication of reports. The Assembly's most significant power was the opportunity, once a year, to overturn the mayor's budget. However, in order to over-rule the mayor, the law required the Assembly to pass an alternative budget by a two-thirds majority. This condition has proved too high a hurdle for the Assembly to achieve⁸.

Making it work: setting up the Mayor's Office and Assembly operations

The first GLA elections took place in May 2000, with a two-month period before 'vesting day' on 3 July. The new mayor, Ken Livingstone, had to appoint a 'mayor's office' and chief officers to bodies such as Transport for London and the London Development Agency. Although there had been a 'transition team' of civil servants,

⁷ Ben Pimlott and Nirmala Rao, *Governing London*, OUP, 2002

⁸ Tony Travers, *The Politics of London: Governing an Ungovernable City*, Palgrave, 2004

the machinery for the new government had to be put together at immense speed once the election had taken place.

The mayor and assembly moved into a new City Hall, in Southwark, in 2002. While the GLC had operated with over 10,000 staff in a massive Ralph Knott edifice at Waterloo, the GLA was housed in a minimalist glass building designed by Norman Foster. The idea was that the new authority would be genuinely 'strategic', employing only a couple of hundred of people. Arms-length 'functional bodies' such as Transport for London would run day-to-day provision. Although staff numbers are greater than envisaged originally, they are tiny as compared with the GLC and ILEA.

Mayor Ken Livingstone pursued a number of high-profile policies. He published a draft *London Plan*, including planning requirements such as a demand for higher development densities and the delivery of larger amounts of social/affordable housing. The congestion charge, a form of road pricing, was introduced in central London in 2003 and much later extended westwards. Linked to this strategy the government provided the mayor with large additional grants that allowed modernisation and extension of the bus network. Extensions to the Docklands Light Railway and the commuter railway were also funded.

But there was a major disagreement between central government and the mayor over the funding of upgrades to the Underground. The Chancellor, Gordon Brown, insisted that Tube improvements must be funded by way of a 'public private partnership' which involved private companies bidding for 30-year contracts to rebuild the system. Ken Livingstone and his Conservative successor Boris Johnson opposed this form of long-term and inflexible contract⁹. One of the two companies, Metronet, went bankrupt in 2007, while the other, Tube Lines, was taken into public ownership in June 2010.

What has the GLA achieved and has it been a success?

There have now been two holders of the office of Mayor of London, one Labour (including a period as an 'independent') and one Conservative. A significant part of this role has been negotiating with central government for capital funding to improve London's infrastructure. Transport, in particular, has been extended and improved. Accountability for the Tube, buses, DLR, major roads, economic development and elements of the protective services has been sharpened. London is seen to have a 'champion' who can, for example, lobby for the Olympic Games and other major events. Innovations such as congestion charging and a bike hire scheme can be introduced. It is most unlikely such changes would have taken place without a powerful mayor able to command the political legitimacy and resources to push them through. There are no serious calls for the abolition of the GLA. The Mayor of London is now one of the most important public office-holders in Britain.

⁹ Christian Wolmar, *Down the Tube*, Aurum Press, 2002

The new government's plans for London government

The new government which took office in May 2010 has been encouraged by Mayor Boris Johnson to devolve a number of powers to City Hall, including the London region of the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) and also to transfer the functions of the London Development Agency (LDA) into the GLA. A new London housing and regeneration body would instead undertake an in-house function within the GLA. In addition, the Olympic Park Legacy Company would become a Mayoral Development Corporation, reporting directly to the Mayor. The Mayor has also proposed that responsibility for the Royal Parks Agency and the Port of London Authority should be devolved from Whitehall to the Mayor. Other proposals include giving the mayoralty greater powers over traffic control and the awarding of rail franchises on routes into London.

The Mayor has also proposed that the duties of the Metropolitan Police Authority should be divided between the Mayor and the Assembly, with the former taking on the executive functions and the latter assuming scrutiny functions. Other proposals from the Mayor include granting the London Skills and Employment Board, which the Mayor chairs, the power to approve the allocation of the adult skills budget in London, and suggesting that City Hall should have a greater say in health provision in the capital.

The Mayor has also set out his plans for greater powers for the London Assembly, proposing that consideration should be given to granting the Assembly an enhanced role on strategy development and, as the powers of the Mayor increase, that the scrutiny function of the Assembly be strengthened. The Mayor has further said he would like additional powers devolved to the boroughs.

These proposals are broadly consistent with stated government policy. Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities & Local Government has stated: "The new Government is committed to genuine decentralisation of power. In London, this means transferring power and responsibility down from Whitehall and its quangos progressively downwards to City Hall, to London boroughs and to local neighbourhoods". The Government Office for London will be abolished and a Localism Bill will, according to Mr. Pickles, examine "the scope for devolving power from City Hall to London boroughs and local communities, in line with the principle of giving power to the boroughs and beyond"¹⁰.

Where the approach is out of line with more general government policy there is an extraordinary difference in the treatment of London as compared to other regions. Since the election, the regional layer of planning has been removed in all other regions – as have regional housing targets. The continuation and expansion of London's role reflects both the past success of London's governance and the greater diversity of activities and consequent need for stronger integration. It may also suggest that the current government has learned some lessons from history.

¹⁰ See GLA Press Notice of 15 June 2010:
http://www.london.gov.uk/media/press_releases_mayoral/mayors-vision-better-focused-gla-more-say-and-more-power-key-london-iss

Conclusions

Thus, the current Mayor of London has made a bid for additional powers for City Hall. It seems very likely there will be a further round of devolution from central government to the GLA and possibly to the boroughs, although it is not yet clear how many of the requested powers will be transferred. Over time, however, it appears that both a Labour government and a Conservative-Liberal Democrat one will have proved willing to move London's government towards a more devolved model than elsewhere in England. The process of devolution to London, started in 2000 (or, arguably, in 1986), still has some way to run.