Part 2

The evolution of London Local Government

For more than two centuries the practicalities of making effective governance arrangements for London have challenged Government and Parliament because of both the scale of the metropolis and the distinctive character, history and interests of the communities that make up the capital city.

From its origins in the middle ages, the City of London enjoyed effective local government arrangements based on the Lord Mayor and Corporation of London and the famous livery companies and guilds of London’s merchants. The essential problem was that these capable governance arrangements were limited to the boundaries of the City of London – the historic square mile. Outside the City, local government was based on the Justices of the Peace and local vestries, analogous to parish or church boundaries. While some of these vestries in what had become central London carried out extensive local authority functions, the framework was not capable of governing a large city facing huge transport, housing and social challenges.

The City accounted for less than a sixth of the total population of London in 1801 and less than a twentieth in 1851. The Corporation of London was adamant that it neither wanted to widen its boundaries to include the growing communities created by London’s expansion nor allow itself to be subsumed into a London-wide local authority created by an Act of Parliament. This, in many respects, is the heart of London’s governance challenge. The metropolis is too big to be managed by one authority, and local communities are adamant that they want their own local government arrangements for their part of London. At the same time those individual communities cannot adequately deal with their own affairs without a great deal of London-wide – if not national – assistance.

In the 19th century, Parliament passed several major pieces of legislation in attempts to improve London’s governance. Each was contentious and considered by powerful interests groups in the capital to be flawed.

The 1835 Municipal Corporations Act excluded the City of London partly because it was perceived as well governed but mainly because it supported the new Whig administration. The Corporation of the City of London, however, was increasingly regarded as archaic and ineffective. William Carpenter published a damming polemic *The Corporation of London As It Is and As It Should Be* in 1847, and Charles Dickens referred derisively to the Corporation in the famous opening passage of *Bleak House* as the “leaden–headed old corporation”.

*The evolution of London Local Government*
Sidney and Beatrice Webb regarded the City Corporation as inferior to the municipal corporations that governed British provincial cities in the early 19th century. Whether or not these indictments were fair is less clear. The Corporation carried out major infrastructure programmes, including building new markets at Billingsgate and Smithfield, and between 1833 and 1848 more than 4,000 homes were connected to 23 miles of new main sewers built by the Commission on Sewers.

In the 1850s, in fact, the City was the only part of London with a complete sewerage system. These public works were reflected in a fall in the mortality rate, and when the Metropolitan Board of Works was created in 1855, the City retained its own autonomous Commission of Sewers.

**Metropolitan Management Act of 1855**

The Metropolitan Management Act of 1855 ended the involvement of the Church of England in London's local government. Until then the parish had been the organ of local government, a situation that had created problems in London for some time. Parishes levied property taxes, called rates, and in some expanding parishes, such as St Pancras, the vestries, as they were called, levied rates to pay for the erection of new Anglican Churches. This was naturally unpopular with Non-conformists and Roman Catholics.

When legislation democratised vestries in 1831, a majority agreed to change, including five prosperous parishes, amongst them St Marylebone and St Pancras. London was a hotchpotch of archaic administrative arrangement of varying levels of democracy and efficiency, while life in London was regulated by more than 250 local Acts of Parliament and more than 10,000 commissioners were entrusted with various tasks in the metropolis. London enjoyed the benefit of government by ‘quango’ long before the reign of Mrs. Thatcher, who was elected on a mandate of tackling a similar problem in the second half of the 20th century.

The Metropolitan Management Act created a unitary authority for Greater London called the Metropolitan Board of Works. This followed the discrediting of the Metropolitan Commission on Sewers, which had been made responsible for 100 square miles of sewers in London in 1848. The Commission was appointed by Government and had the power to tax local authorities, a situation that exposed it to political assault.

This new authority, the Metropolitan Board of Works, had responsibility for metropolitan problems, including the urgent issue of the condition of, and the mess in, the River Thames. Although directly-elected, it was appointed by indirect election from the parish vestries. Each parish, liberty or Inn of Court retained its identity in a bid to prevent the emergence of an unaccountable centralised monster, reflecting the general revulsion against Sir Edwin Chadwick’s nominated commission.
The Metropolitan Board had greater powers and a much larger budget than the vestries and district boards. It achieved a great deal; construction of the Thames Embankment and a drainage system in new streets such as Shaftesbury Avenue, Northumberland Avenue and Charing Cross Road. It lacked proper democratic accountability, though, and indirect election resulted in a slow turnover of board members. The members of the outgoing board in the 1880s were a generation older than the members initially elected to the London County Council.

The Metropolitan Board developed a culture of mutual admiration among members that diluted political differences. This culture encouraged cooperation among members and enhanced efficiency, but made the board indifferent to justified criticism. The result was maladministration and serious corruption, a situation that became so bad that a Royal Commission was set up to investigate it. The Commission found that improper speculation had taken place in land bought to make street improvements. The Board was unable to tackle its internal problems and it took external intervention from the press and Parliament to end the corruption by outright abolition.

London County Council 1888
The Metropolitan Board of Works was abolished in 1888 as a part of the setting up of county councils in England and Wales. The London County Council inherited the powers of the Board together with powers transferred from the former county justices of the peace as the result of a measure passed by Lord Salisbury’s Conservative and Unionist Coalition Government.

It was essentially a conservative measure. Lord Salisbury, Prime Minister, opposed centralisation of the sort practised in France, preferring “the inconveniences of being governed by squabbling juntas of shopkeepers and tenant farmers” to the dangers to liberty of a strong central administration. The challenge to Conservatives like Lord Salisbury, when they recognised in the 1860s that “pure squire Conservatism was played out”, was what to put in place of the system based on the Justices of the Peace that would not result in the numerical majority in an area being able to tax the rich minority heavily through local authority rates.

Salisbury resolved this by removing authority over the Poor Law – a rudimentary form of social security – and control over the police from the powers of the new county councils.

At the insistence of George Goshen, the Liberal Unionist Chancellor of the Exchequer, London was included in this local government reform, resulting in the creation of the London County Council. The Corporation of the City of London was left untouched.

While some towns were given ‘county borough’ status, no attempt was made to redraw urban boundaries to reflect rapid urbanisation. The
measure neatly reflected the national political position. The Whig and Liberal Unionists had joined with Lord Salisbury’s Conservatives to form a Government in 1886, having abandoned Gladstone’s Liberal party over the Irish Home Rule Bill. They wanted a local government reform measure as part of the coalition agreement, while the Conservatives recognised the need for change but preferred a more limited measure than Gladstone’s Liberals would have passed. It also meant that the bill would get through the House of Lords, where a more radical measure may have foundered.

In London, the new county authority covered the boundaries of the old Metropolitan Board and therefore fell well short of the built up area around London. This meant that from its start in 1889 the LCC was not in a position to play the part of a strategic authority for London’s hinterland.

London, radical from the start
In the county council elections of 1889, the Justices of the Peace won more than half the seats contested. As local Aldermen were also co-opted and made up one third of the members, Salisbury realised that county councils were not going to be revolutionary bodies. English County Councils became bastions of Conservatism, and to some degree they are still perceived as being so.

In London, the position was different. The Liberals, standing as Progressives, defeated the Conservatives who styled themselves as Moderates, and the London County Council became an irritant to Lord Salisbury. After the elections he told his daughter Gwendoline: “I rather look to the new London County Council to play the drunken helot for our benefit. Such a body at the outset must make some portentous blunders.”

It was, however, Lord Salisbury who ended up making a blazing indiscretion when he launched the Moderates’ election campaign for the LCC in November in 1894. He said provocatively: “It is the place where collectivist and socialist experiments are tried, it is the place where a new revolutionary spirits finds its instruments and collects its arms.” Beatrice Webb complained that it was “the most aristocratic local body in the world”, chaired as it was by the Earl of Rosebery, with council members including the Duke of Norfolk, the Earl of Dudley, Earl Cadogan, Lord Mountmorres and the Earl of Onslow. Despite this aristocratic presence at its start, the LCC was a local authority distinguished by its political radicalism and a taste for innovation.

London and the rediscovery of poverty
The LCC reflected the zeitgeist of the period in which it was created. This was the time when the issue of urban poverty challenged the world’s greatest empire and most advanced industrial economy.
In the 1880s there had been large-scale immigration into London from the surrounding rural communities in response to the protracted agricultural slump of the 1880s. Many immigrants also came from the Tsarist Russian Empire, where people were fleeing from anti-Semitic pogroms, straining both the capital’s housing stock and its small-scale industrial businesses.

In 1889 Charles Booth catalogued overcrowding, sweated labour, unemployment and poverty in his seminal book *The Life and Labour of People in London*. Its publication coincided with the arrival of the LCC, and poverty issues were close to the top of the agenda for many of the candidates who sought election to the council. Poverty was essentially a political issue, and it helped to politicise the new county council. One of London’s lasting legacies of this period, and of the LCC itself, is a range of youth and social care services that are distinguished by their variety, quality and innovation. A good example was the founding of the London Boys’ Clubs (now the London Federation of Youth). Many London boroughs still benefit from this legacy, which is the backbone of the tradition of voluntary public service in the capital.

The Liberal Party’s national leadership took the LCC seriously. After the disastrous split over Irish Home Rule in 1886, it recognised the LCC as an opportunity for a revival in London after the party’s poor showing in the city in the 1886 General Election.

Lord Rosebery, the former Liberal Foreign Secretary, was elected to the council and became the first Chairman elected by the Liberal-Radical Progressive group that controlled the early LCC. Among the LCC’s prominent members were John Williams Benn and Sidney Webb, the founder of the Fabian Society.

From the start the LCC was highly politicised; it was rarely out of controversy. There were two political caucuses – the Progressives and the Moderates. The Progressives were in control of the authority and had a programme that increasingly emphasised control of public services, including competitive services. They implemented this programme with both a wages and a direct labour building programme. The Moderates claimed that in practice the LCC’s spending programmes were directed by London’s trade unions. In response, they themselves focused on public expenditure control, or what they termed ‘retrenchment’, to attract votes from highly taxed ratepayers living in the West End of London. Their dislike of the Progressive Party’s programme led the Moderates to advocate the dismemberment of the London County Council by wholesale devolution of its powers in 1898.

As a local authority the LCC was hobbled from the start. It lacked many powers that a normal county or county borough would exercise. These included areas such as the police, water and gas supply, the markets and
docks. It controlled only a fraction of the built up metropolitan area and had no control over London’s natural water basin. As a result it did not get control over water when that resource was finally brought under public control in London in 1904. That power was instead given to the Metropolitan Water Board.

The LCC did, however, have certain highly concentrated powers which it used with powerful executive effect. It could influence London wages by its fair wages policy and direct labour organisation, and it made a marginal improvement in London’s housing conditions through slum clearance and house building. In 1904 it became a Local Education Authority under London’s version of the Balfour–Morrant Act, which gave local authorities the power to establish secondary schools in addition to the elementary or primary schools they were obliged to provide under the 1870 Forster Education Act that had established compulsory, free, state-maintained education in England.

In the first 30 years of the 20th century, the age of great municipal projects, irrevocably linked to Joseph Chamberlain’s gas and water socialism in Birmingham, gave way to a period when the ambition of a large urban authority was to be the regional strategic centre from which the local economy in its city and hinterland could be managed. Few English local authorities came close to achieving this effective strategic economic and social leadership and the LCC perhaps failed to do so more than most other city authorities.

**Gas and Water Municipal Socialism**

Although municipal enterprise thrived in Britain it was not in the core of the centre – local debate in Victorian England or later. The effective compartmentalisation of the national and local tax systems, plus confining localities to the highly inelastic property tax, had crucial, but unintended consequences for this sort of development.

More important, leaders of the socialist movement themselves took little interest in municipal enterprise.

The Webbs’ monumental inquiry into local government was not about how to make local government larger and more effective according to socialist principles, but how to make it work better in order to serve national objectives.


By the 1930s the LCC had effectively become an inner-city authority, a feature exemplified by the entrenched Labour majority after 1934. It was, indeed, from London’s 1930s politics that one of the most charismatic
local authority leaders that Britain has ever produced emerged. Herbert Morrison dominated London government for a generation and went on to play a massive role in both the Churchill wartime coalition and the Attlee Labour Government in the 1940s. He coined one of the most vivid pieces of local authority rhetoric when he promised to “build the Tories out of London”. Morrison’s power derived from his mastery over the London Labour Party, but even his skills and force of personality could not disguise the fundamental limitations of the authority he controlled. His core powers were housing and education, both of which would eventually be devolved to the boroughs.

The genesis of the Greater London Council
The first proposal for the creation of a Greater London council with powers over London’s sprawling residential suburbs was made by HG Wells and taken up by the London Liberal Party in 1906. This was followed at the end of the First World War, between 1919 and 1923, by a brief bi-partisan campaign for a single Greater London authority. The Conservatives on the LCC may have campaigned for it, but other Conservatives in the shire counties that bordered London – such as Middlesex – opposed it. It was in response to those concerns that the Leader of the Conservative Group on the LCC, George Hume, reassured suburban authorities by denying that the LCC was “a wolf on the prowl”. A Royal Commission, the Ullswater Report, looked into the question and split three ways, with the majority recommending no change, a decision that heralded the end of Conservative support for a Greater London authority in the 1920s.

And yet the metropolitan planning challenges thrown up by London’s outward growth remained. The open spaces around London offered immense opportunities to build new housing, but at a cost. Attractive, suburban middle-class commuter communities were accompanied by urban congestion, ribbon development and the building-over of once beautiful fields. If anything, the London Passenger Transport Board encouraged suburbanisation by linking speculative residential developments to London by extending the passenger transport network. The need for a planning strategy was recognised by the Unhealthy Areas Committee and the Ullswater Report in the 1920s, and in 1927 the Greater London Regional Planning Committee was established.

Support for the case for a Greater London authority came with the publication of William Robson’s *The Government and Misgovernment of London* in 1939. Robson’s proposal for a single metropolitan authority for the whole of London initially won few supporters. The Conservatives in local government did not like it and there was fierce criticism from both Labour intellectuals and the Labour-controlled LCC.

R.C.K. Ensor was attracted by the idea of some kind of London-wide
body. He proposed a federal structure in which the principal powers would be held locally, but within a London-wide metropolitan body that would have limited strategic powers that in practice could hardly be described as those of a conventional local authority. Ensor's point was that a London-wide body would have constituencies so vast, and a ratio of representatives to inhabitants so low, that any meaningful democratic control and accountability would be lost.

The Conservative attraction to a Greater London Council
Aside from the issues surrounding strategic planning, there was no overt support for a Greater London authority, but in the highest reaches of the Conservative Party things were being discreetly stirred in the late 1930s.

The outer London suburbs in places such as Middlesex were essentially refuges for the gardening middle-classes, while the inner Metropolitan London Boroughs and the LCC had built affordable homes for the working classes in their own areas. The result was social and political polarisation. Labour controlled the city and the Conservatives controlled the surrounding sub-urban and county authorities.

Labour won the LCC decisively in 1934 and consolidated its grip further in 1937. A private Conservative Party inquiry that reported to the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, concluded that in “a larger London boundary which would include areas to which many middle-class residents of London have now removed, our prospects would be much more favourable”. The committee recognised the opposition that many Conservatives would have to such a course but urged the Government to consider extending London’s boundaries. The war, though, intervened before the Chamberlain Government could legislate.

The entrenched character of Labour’s control of the LCC was further illustrated by the 1949 election. Despite the unpopularity of the Attlee Government and big Conservative gains in other parts of Britain in local government elections, Labour was unshiftable on the LCC.

The Conservative Party looked at London government again in the post-war years and published the so-called Powell Plan. This proposal was drawn together by J. Enoch Powell, the Director of the London Municipal Society, and published in 1954. Under the Powell Plan the LCC would be replaced. The metropolitan boroughs would be reorganised and amalgamated into seven new London boroughs. A joint planning body would be created for roads, drainage, planning and emergency services across the entire metropolitan region. The scheme’s principal purpose was to abolish the LCC, and only the opposition of rich Conservative boroughs prevented it from being incorporated into Conservative Party policy in time for the 1955 General Election. The Conservative Party approach to local government reform in the late 1950s was to make
changes incrementally, and only where there was broad consensus for the proposed change.

**London’s strategic planning challenges**  
This cautious, consensual approach could not deal with the strategic planning challenges of London and the south east of England in the middle of the 20th century. The *Barlow Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population*, which reported in 1940, dominated post-war planning policy. The central proposition was that industry and workers should be moved out of London to make the metropolis less congested.

In the 1940s and early 1950s there were three master plans for London’s development based on these principles. The most influential was Abercrombie’s plan for Greater London. This covered 2,600 square miles, from Luton in Bedfordshire in the North to the Surrey/Sussex border in the South. Population growth was to be restricted within the region and new industrial development was to be barred in London and the Home Counties. A million people were to be decentralised from inner London to a ring of new towns that would provide self-contained nodes of industrial growth. The Attlee Labour Government accepted these proposals and implemented them, along with Sir John Reith’s complementary report proposing the development of new towns. The Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 provided the statutory powers that gave effect to the Abercrombie Plan. In Greater London, the LCC, five county councils and three county boroughs had the task of producing development plans for ministerial approval.

The whole approach, though, was confounded by market forces and demography. The planners, led by Abercrombie, were aiming to redistribute a static or falling population; the Abercrombie plan assumed that London’s population would fall from 10.3 million in 1938 to 10 million in 1961. As late as 1949 a Royal Commission was forecasting a sharp drop in births extending into the 1960s.

In the event, the famous post-war baby boom subverted this central planning assumption. The Greater London region’s population grew to 10.6 million in 1961 and increased to 12 million over the next 40 years.

In the 1920s the big planning challenge in London and the south east of England was to accommodate new industrial growth. In the 1950s the challenge was growth in office space. An increase in floor space of 12 per cent would have replaced the offices lost as a result of aerial bombardment during the war. In fact, London office space grew by 82 per cent between 1945 and 1966. There was a huge change in land use, particularly in west London, where factories were being turned into offices and warehouses. Despite this, as late as the 1970s planning policy focussed on land use rather than on changes in employment, where
manufacturing was giving way to distribution and services.

Outside London, meanwhile, the demand for labour was increasing, together with the demand for homes and business space. Abercrombie’s notion of decentralisation was being achieved not by policy, but by market forces that prevailed despite, rather than because of, policy. In 1960 the Ministry of Housing and Local Government concluded that: “The economic background of the Barlow report is a thing of the past, and planning based on it is equally outdated ... the Abercrombie Plan and the Development Plans have their social and economic roots in the Barlow report and a revised Regional Plan is urgently required to bring them into line with current realities.”

These ‘current realities’ resulted in the setting up of another Royal Commission under Sir Edwin Herbert. The Herbert report proposed the creation of a Greater London council, but with boundaries that did not contain the whole of the built up area around London. Those boundaries did not, for instance, include the full area covered by the Abercrombie Plan. The key issue was the relationship between the inner urban mass and the larger region in which London was located, but this issue was avoided rather than addressed by the proposed boundaries for the Greater London Council. Harold Macmillan’s Conservative Government accepted the need for a London-wide authority and legislated to create the Greater London Council in 1963. The expectation was that this would make it more possible for the Conservatives to achieve periods of control in the capital.

The creation of the Greater London Council – a planner’s dream?
Two years later, in 1965, the Greater London Council replaced the London County Council. The Inner London Education Authority was created to take on the education responsibilities of the old LCC in the central London boroughs. A Conservative Government was finally able to achieve Neville Chamberlain’s inter-war objective of a Greater London authority over which the Conservatives would at least be capable of winning control.

The creation of the GLC generated great expectations in the planning world, which anticipated that the Abercrombie plan for the London road network, first set out in 1944, would finally be implemented.

The London Government Act required the GLC to produce a written statement, accompanied by two maps, setting out the proposed urban structure and the road proposals necessary to support the plan. These turned out to be Abercrombie’s A, B and C roads, reappearing as ringways 1, 2 and 3; the outer ring road was eventually built by the Department of Transport as the M25.
These plans and maps were published with much fanfare and bi-partisan enthusiasm. From the perspective of Dame Evelyn Sharp, the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, all the necessary planning and local authority machinery was now in place for the Abercrombie Plan to be executed after a 21-year delay.

**The GLC, the motorway box and *Homes Before Roads***

It all went wrong, though. The road plan was swiftly demonised as a ‘motorway box’; of more than 23,000 objections lodged against the Greater London Development Plan, 18,000 of them related to the road plan. Although the road plan continued to have bi-partisan support after Labour lost power to the Conservatives in the London elections in 1968, a year later the Labour Party bowed to rising popular protest against the road plan and allied itself to the *Homes Before Roads* movement. The Conservative Party on the GLC then joined Labour in stepping away from a policy that was not just unpopular but expensive and involved pulling down 35,000 homes.

This was the start of a gulf that existed from the early 1970s between Whitehall ministries that wanted action on the GLC road plan and a local authority that was wise enough to step aside from such a politically charged issue.

> **The Metropolitan Councils and the Greater London Council have been shown to be a wasteful and unnecessary tier of government. We shall abolish them and return their functions to the boroughs and districts.**

*The Conservative Manifesto 1983*

**Why was the GLC abolished?**

The central policy feature of the GLC was the road plan that became a fiasco. Ken Young has provocatively suggested: “It is tempting to argue that the GLC was created in order to build Abercrombie’s motorway system, and abolished because it proved unable to do so.” While he goes on to say that it “would be wiser to resist that temptation,” he makes the point that the motorway box saga demonstrated to civil servants that the problems of managing London were not simply administrative, but political.

The GLC, even under Conservative control, was stimulating opposition from the outer London boroughs, and even as early as 1972 this was manifesting itself as demands for it to be abolished. By the mid-1970s there was, in addition, a number of Conservative local authority politicians both nationally and in London who were becoming hostile to any form of London-wide authority. The Labour Party, however, remained absolutely convinced that there was a need for a London-wide strategic authority.
The reorganisation of London boroughs that accompanied the abolition of the LCC and the creation of the GLC resulted in fewer boroughs, but boroughs with more powers. These powers included the transfer to the boroughs from the LCC of responsibility for children’s services.

In response to the Milner Holland report on London housing in 1964 (the inquiry set up in response to the television documentary *Cathy Come Home* and the notorious activities of wicked Notting Hill landlord Peter Rachman) the GLC was given extensive housing powers. These powers, including the power to acquire suburban land for municipal housing, were bitterly resented by the boroughs in general and by the outer boroughs in particular.

When Labour was in control in the mid 1960s, the administration at County Hall was mainly concerned with building in the centre of London. This fitted in with Minister of Housing Bob Mellish’s interest in developing former railway goods yards for housing and coincided with the demand for housing from their central London constituents.

Between 1967 and 1970, when the Conservatives were in control of the GLC, Labour ministers controlled Whitehall and the GLC’s housing policy was in the hands of Horace Cutler, there was little trouble between the outer boroughs and the GLC. The real trouble started when there was a Conservative Government, headed by Edward Heath, in which the Environment Minister was Peter Walker, a man who was committed to making things happen in Greater London. Horace Cutler, the Conservative Housing Chairman, was removed from his place in County Hall, almost certainly under ministerial pressure, and the GLC began a policy of aggressive land acquisition in the outer London boroughs.

The reaction of the outer London boroughs was ferocious, and in 1972 their leaders began to campaign to get the Conservative party to commit itself to abolishing the GLC.

In 1974, Geoffrey Finsberg MP, a man with a long record of opposition to powerful London government, became the Conservative party spokesman on London. In 1978 Nicholas Freeman became leader of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council, and as an inner London Conservative leader he too began to campaign for the abolition of the GLC.

**Ken Livingstone makes a difference**
When the Conservatives returned to power nationally under Mrs Thatcher in 1979, they already controlled the GLC under Horace Cutler, which meant there was no immediate pressure to abolish it. This changed, though, when Labour took control of the GLC in May 1981 after winning the election under the leadership of Andrew McIntosh.
As soon as the new authority was elected, leader McIntosh was deposed in a caucus putsch and replaced by Ken Livingstone, who had just been elected for the first time.

The Conservative boroughs quickly began to oppose the policy of the new Labour-led GLC through the London Boroughs’ Association. Ken Livingstone proposed to increase rates in order to subsidise lower tube fares and encourage greater use of public transport. The Conservative boroughs successively challenged GLC’s *Fares Fair* policy, obtaining judicial review on the grounds that despite the fact that there was no underground system in some of the outer London boroughs they would be expected to help pay for the subsidy. On the London Boroughs’ Association the Conservative boroughs secured a majority vote calling for the GLC to be abolished.

The GLC then embarked on a programme of confrontation with the Conservative Government in Whitehall. This was exemplified by the banner put up every week on County Hall, almost opposite the Houses of Parliament across the river, which recorded the rising level of unemployment in the early 1980s. Mrs Thatcher resolved to put the abolition of the GLC and the metropolitan county councils into the 1983 Conservative Manifesto. Although the Cabinet Committee on Local Government Finance had considered and rejected both the abolition of the GLC and that of the metropolitan counties, the Prime Minister, encouraged by the organisation of Conservative London MPs and the principal Conservative London borough leaders, pressed ahead and had it put in the manifesto.

The change of control at County Hall in May 1981 fundamentally changed the character of London politics, which became very bitter. Local government in London had always been more overtly partisan than in other parts of the country but now things became much worse.

In many great provincial cities, the ceremonial office of Lord Mayor alternates between political parties and is based on an elected member’s length of service. Not in London. Traditionally, mayors in London boroughs are usually representative of the majority party that controls a borough.

The emergence of Ken Livingstone as the Leader of the GLC, his confrontations with Conservative ministers and the protracted fight over the abolition of the GLC led to a period of exceptional political acrimony in the metropolis. Amid the controversy there were, though, moments of great comedy, not least the political satire *The Ratepayers’ Iolanthe*, directed by Ned Sherrin in 1984.
Government proposals for the Abduction of London and the Foundering of Local Democracy.
If the GLC goes, Whitehall moves in.
If you wanted to make London more efficient, would you give the job to Whitehall? Say No No To No Say.

Theatre programme for *The Ratepayers’ Iolanthe* – Directed by Ned Sherrin at the Phoenix Theatre 1984 commissioned by the Chair of the GLC.’s Arts and Recreation Committee, Peter Pitt

**London boroughs**
The history of the London Borough Councils is the story of a steady accumulation of powers and responsibilities. The London boroughs were created by Act of Parliament in 1899 which saw 28 new Metropolitan Boroughs in the central London area covered by the LCC, itself created in 1888. Lord Salisbury’s Conservative-Unionist Government passed the measure, which reflected pressure from the Conservative Moderate opposition on the LCC for powers to be devolved away from the LCC. It was also a response to “the civic pride and community-consciousness of municipal activists who were actually responsible for the greater part of local government affairs in the metropolis”. Local communities in different parts of London wanted to have their own meeting places and express their own local civic pride.

In the 1963 London Government Act, the 28 London Metropolitan Boroughs were reduced to 12. These, together with 20 other boroughs carved out of the surrounding urban sprawl, made up the 32 boroughs within the area presided over by the Greater London Council in 1965.

Over the past 40 years the London boroughs have progressively accumulated more functions. In 1966 Richard Crossman, the Minister for Housing and Local Government, took responsibility for children’s services away from the old LCC and gave it to the London boroughs. In 1970, as Secretary of State for Social Services, Richard Crossman accepted the recommendations of Lord Seebohm’s report that proposed the establishment of integrated social services departments based on the generic social work model. He placed these departments in county councils outside London and in the London boroughs in London, a decision that was confirmed by his Conservative successor as Social Services Secretary, Sir Keith Joseph. In 1990 the National Health Service and Community Care Act transferred the responsibility for financing community care for disabled and older people to social services departments in the London boroughs.

The abolition of the Greater London Council in 1986 resulted in all responsibility for housing being devolved to the boroughs and, eventually, in the central London boroughs taking on responsibility for...
education. When the GLC was created the outer London boroughs were already education authorities and their residents would not have tolerated their local schools being transferred to a London-wide body. As a result the education responsibilities of the LCC were transferred to the Inner London Education Authority, and when the GLC was abolished the ILEA continued to operate as a separate authority, except that it was directly elected.

The ILEA was the largest education authority in Britain, with 300,000 pupils, 21,000 teachers and an annual budget of £800 million. It continued to have responsibility for education in the 12 inner London boroughs and the City of London until it was also abolished in 1990 and its responsibilities devolved to the London boroughs. Other than modifications to the powers of local education authorities that have reduced the role of all local education authorities over the past 20 years, the London boroughs have seen no major diminution in their role and function, but rather an accumulation of responsibility in the context of London local government since 1965.

**London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) 1981-1998**

As Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Heseltine chose to regenerate London’s docklands by setting up a quango and bypassing the local authorities affected. The London Docklands Development Corporation covered 8.5 square miles in the east London boroughs of Newham, Tower Hamlets and Southwark. The area had suffered substantial bomb damage in the Second World War and declined as international trade and dock work changed. Changes in technology meant that large cargo ships needed modern container ports with deep water docking facilities. In addition, it had for many years been central Government policy to offer manufacturing businesses incentives to move to new towns and other sites out of London where costs were lower.

As a result of this combination of factors, the East India Dock closed in 1967 and trade in the other docks fell. Between 1961 and 1971, more than 80,000 jobs went from the London docklands area. High rates of unemployment were accompanied by a falling population and an increase in the amount of derelict land in the area.

This process of dereliction and decline resulted in this area of east London being identified as “the largest redevelopment opportunity in Europe”. The Docklands Corporation was set up under the Local Government, Planning and Land Act 1980; its purpose was to take over the role of local government and take responsibility for development in the docklands area. It was funded by central Government grant and from the proceeds raised by selling land for development.

The corporation built new roads and office buildings on the Isle of Dogs,
and under its aegis many architecturally interesting buildings, including some of the tallest buildings in the UK such as the famous Canary Wharf building, were constructed. It was able to allow these structures to be built because the corporation was the planning authority and exercised the development controls that would normally have been in the hands of a London borough. A total of 145 kilometres of newly improved roads, the Docklands Light Railway and London city airport were also constructed.

The decision to create the corporation was always contentious in the local communities affected by its work. It was a powerful and undemocratic body with little or no need to reach agreement or enter into partnership arrangements with the London boroughs involved. Part of its purpose was to be able to get things done and to bypass the normal planning arrangements, and this inevitably created both controversy and bad feeling. Community campaigners charged the corporation with emphasising the needs of big and international business at the expense of local people and small-scale industrial development. In 1994 it began a staged withdrawal, starting in Bermondsey, and it finally withdrew from the Royal Docks and was wound up in 1998. Canary Wharf will probably turn out to be the most enduring legacy of the long and busy career of Michael Heseltine in national government.

The interregnum and the reign of the London boroughs
When the GLC was abolished in 1986, London was governed by its boroughs, a complex network of inter-borough committees and a series of Government appointed ‘quangos’ (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations).

Tony Travers has commented that the “most obvious immediate consequence of the abolition of the Greater London Council on 1 April 1986 was the lack of visible impact”. Ben Pimlott and Nirmala Rao commented that, following the abolition of the GLC, “the government of London functioned far more effectively than many had predicted”.

In economic terms, between 1986 and 2001 London was a success story. The economy boomed overall, largely as a result of the success of London’s liberal financial markets and the deregulation of the financial services sector, while the population that had fallen between the 1960s and the early 1980s started to rise – from 6.75 million in 1985 to 7.25 million in 2000.

This long period of economic success took place in the context of a sharply pronounced economic cycle. These economic fluctuations were at various stages uncomfortable and accelerated, and may have aggravated long-term structural changes in the London economy. In the early and mid-1980s London lost much of its manufacturing base. In the early
1990s the London economy was particularly affected by the long recession because it affected services as well as manufacturing, in contrast to the previous deep and protracted fall in economic activity that had been confined principally to manufacturing output. Unemployment at this time touched 20 per cent in parts of east and south London.

Tony Travers concluded that the experience of an interregnum in London-wide government showed two things. Firstly that even when there was no London-wide government, Whitehall had to find ways of securing effective service provision for the whole Greater London area, and secondly that local, democratic London-wide government is not a pre-condition for London's economic success. This second lesson is not new. London was a success before 1855 and during the 1920s and 1930s, when much of London was outside the area covered by the LCC.

Despite these factors there was, however, immense political pressure from almost every quarter outside the Conservative party for the re-creation of some form of democratically elected, London-wide body.

**The Mayor and the Greater London Authority**

In its 1994 manifesto *Working Together for London*, the Labour Party argued that London was the only capital city in Western Europe without a city-wide government and an overall strategy. It declared that “London needs a voice” and that it needed “a body that speaks for all of London to carry weight in Whitehall”, adding that “only a directly-elected body can have this legitimacy”. An important part of Tony Blair’s *New Labour* manifesto in May 1997 was a commitment to an elected London government. In 1997 the new Government published a White Paper entitled *A Mayor and Assembly for London*. This argued that an elected mayor with executive powers would provide the democratic leadership needed to promote London as a world-class city and bridge the gap between community-led and national government. The new arrangements centred on a new elected body – the Greater London Assembly – and a mayor. Together they constitute the Greater London Authority (GLA). Following a referendum that approved the proposals in the white paper in 1998, the new London-wide governance arrangements came into effect in 2001. The government has now initiated a review of the GLA’s powers following its first few years of operation.

A directly-elected mayor with executive powers was a radical innovation for the UK. The idea had been explored at various times over the previous 30 years, most notably by the former Conservative Secretary of State for the Environment Michael Heseltine.

The GLA was intended to be a strategic authority. While the old GLC had been created at a time when strategic planning was fashionable, little had
been done to achieve a clear sense of what a strategic authority should do in the context of London or what powers it should have. Nick Raynsford, the Local Government Minister with responsibility for London, contrasted the former GLC with the authority that the Government was proposing, arguing that it would not be another GLC but a new form of city-wide government that would be streamlined and strategic. While at first sight the Greater London Authority Act 1999 appears to streamline London’s government, some observers, such as Ben Pimlott and Nirmala Rao, have suggested on closer inspection that “the new system retains some of the diffused responsibilities and blurred accountabilities that characterised the post-GLC interregnum”.

Examples of the diffusion of responsibility they identified include the promotion of London, which is shared by the mayor and a number of Government departments. These include the London Tourist Board, now called Visit London; London Sport International, which tries to attract international sporting occasions to London under the aegis of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport; the Department of Trade and Industry, which works with Trade Partners UK; the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry; and London First Centre, which promotes inward investment.

Another example is waste management. There is a plethora of bodies concerned with waste: The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) develops new markets for re-cycled products; London Remade does similar work; the London Development Agency – an agency of the mayor – seeks to promote a green economy; there is the Mayor’s Municipal Waste Strategy that seeks more sustainable waste management in the metropolis – and all this is overseen by Government’s Environment Agency. Meanwhile the London boroughs have responsibility for collecting and disposing of household and business waste.

The boroughs use different waste management processes and relate to central Government and regional funding grants in ways that reflect their local needs and priorities. Waste management, moreover, illustrates that in the actual day-to-day delivery of service in all the big areas of local government (schools, social services and community care, libraries, parks, and street sweeping) it is the 33 London boroughs and the Corporation of the City of London that have the critical core function.

The mayor has an energy strategy. Its principal purpose is to move London towards a low carbon economy by promoting the development of renewable energy technologies such as wind-power and photovoltaic power, and by increasing the use of combined heat and power systems and community heating systems. In practice the mayor has no formal power to put this energy strategy into place since the energy market in the UK is completely de-regulated. The main instrument available to
encourage greater use of renewable energy is the ‘renewable obligation’, a fiscal tool designed to encourage investment in renewable technologies with the objective that 10 per cent of UK electricity should come from renewable sources by 2010. These blurred and defused responsibilities are further replicated in the areas of planning, roads and public transport.

The fundamental difficulty of London government is that the metropolis is too big to be governed by one authority. Yet the issues that confront London are so great that 33 separate boroughs cannot resolve them and it is equally unlikely that a streamlined arrangement of five, or even six or seven, ‘super boroughs’ would be able to do so either. The issues are, moreover, so great that they probably could not be resolved even by a London-wide body with effective powers, simply because they are too contentious and require too much money. It is inevitable that central Government departments will have to get involved – and such Whitehall involvement will often require the sanction of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the arbitration of the Prime Minister.