

## New Labour and Local Government Reform

The Despatches programme of 21<sup>st</sup> January and subsequent debate poses a simple question, “Is it Ken Livingstone or the role of the London Mayor that is at fault?”

The programme gave plenty of ammunition to those, who might think that Livingstone is the problem. It raises issues about cronyism at City Hall, about dubious grant decisions, about the Greater London Authority members’ ability to scrutinise Mayor Livingstone’s actions and about Ken Livingstone’s personality. Livingstone’s reply in the February 4<sup>th</sup> New Statesman is, however, robust and convincing.

Moreover, Livingstone was positive in his defence of the Mayoral role in a recent Today interview. He declared that he had originally opposed the role as proposed by Tony Blair and doubted that it was appropriate for London, or indeed anywhere else in Britain. But he claims to have been converted and to doubt that he, or anyone else, could have introduced anything as radical as the Congestion Charge under the traditional committee structure of British local government.

Leaving to one side whether the Congestion Charge is or is not a sufficient justification for the role as defined, it is surely time to analyse the success or failure of the Mayoral role and the demands it places on individuals. Has Tony Blair’s radical, even revolutionary, change to the British local government system been a vindication of his confident assertion “that we are at our best when we are at our boldest” or has it demonstrated instead the dangers of unconsidered innovation?

The Greater London Act of 1999 established the role and function of the Mayor and the Greater London Authority (GLA) following the overwhelming Referendum result of 1998. In the Referendum, the London public had decided by a 78:22 majority that it wanted to reverse Mrs. Thatcher’s abolition of the Greater London Council. Even Conservative-dominated Bromley voted 57:43 in favour of the reform and in every other Borough the result was more emphatic.

The Act establishing the GLA also became a model for other local government reforms passed by the New Labour Government, especially the Local Government Act of 2000, which was the legislative basis for establishing the Executive Mayors and Cabinets that are now part of English local government. Ken Livingstone was elected Mayor of London in 2000 and two years later in May, 2002, Doncaster, Hartlepool, Watford, Lewisham, Newham, North Tyneside and Middlesbrough elected Executive Mayors. They were followed by elections for Mayors in Stoke, Mansfield, Hackney and Bedford in October, 2002, and in Torbay in May, 2005.

But the turnout for the London Referendum was a meagre 34%, whilst for the Mayor and GLA it was an even more anaemic 31%. The equivalent referenda in the Boroughs and cities had a wide range of turnouts. In areas where the Mayoral system was rejected the range was between 9% and 64%. At the Mayoral elections turnouts ranged

from 15% to 36%, with 18% at Mansfield and 26% in Hackney, though Mansfield's turnout rose to 34% in May, 2007.

What had happened to inspire this sudden change in England's traditional local governance arrangements? And indeed was it such a change? Certainly two of the objectives were clear. It was claimed that electoral turnout needed to be improved and "democratic accountability" needed to be strengthened. The inspiration came from two major sources: one political and the other academia and the media world.

English local government had traditionally and universally been considered boring, worthy and probably more efficient and less corrupt than most of its equivalents in the developed world. It was probably most graphically displayed in the opening scenes of the iconic *Room at the Top* (pub. 1957), which sent a clear message of just how boring and square a job in local government really was. Indeed, it continued to be galling, as a councillor, to read newspaper articles starting with phrases like, "I shall start with the two most boring words in the English language – local government" (Guardian, some time in the 90s).

This began to change when in the 60s Governments of both persuasions used local authorities to achieve national housing targets. In the 70s a new, self-confident graduate generation of mainly London councillors challenged the government's "right" to lay down not just the framework but many more of the rules of local government. By the 80s, for the first time in post-war history, local government was far from boring.

On the left there was Lambeth and Liverpool, but also Islington and Ken Livingstone's Greater London Council (GLC), challenging the Thatcher government politically and ideologically. On the right Bradford, Westminster and Wandsworth were privatising services and along with Croydon urging the abolition of the GLC, the ILEA and the metropolitan counties.

The Labour Councils, including those caricaturised as the "loony left" Councils, of the 80s were not only battle-grounds for such groups as Militant and their fellow travellers but also a nursery for many aspiring young politicians, who were to get into Parliament on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1997. At least half a dozen MPs post-1997 had been Leaders of London Labour Groups and many more came from similar positions across the country.

Most of them had had a difficult time controlling, or not, their Labour councillor colleagues and were all too ready to go along with a Government scarred by the experience of the 80s and eager to ensure that its own reputation would not be destroyed by irresponsible or naïve local representatives.

The academic world was providing an answer, which fitted very neatly with both their personal experiences and the inclinations of Tony Blair. A key player in this was Professor Gerry Stoker. Stoker was the founding Chair of the [New Local Government Network](#) (NLGN), a contributor to influential Labour think tanks like Demos and an author of many books and articles on local governance.

Another was Paul Corrigan, husband of Hilary Armstrong, Blair's first Minister of State at the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions with responsibility for Local Government. Along with Simon Jenkins, the journalist, they popularised a view that local government was insufficiently accountable and/or interesting and as a consequence it was a prey both to the extremist left and the nimby right.

In an interesting, if later, work (*New Localism, Participation and Networked Community Governance*, Univ. of Manchester) Stoker etched a sociological history of local government, in which he argued that local government had transmuted from the "traditional public administration" model, the Room at the Top model, through the "New Public Management" model, his description of the minimalist Nicholas Ridley model, to today's "Networked Local Governance".

In the first of these models the agreed objectives of local government were simple, even if large and technically complex. The objectives were about providing housing, drainage, roads and schools. The leadership of such authorities could be left to large, mass political parties, whose basic stance was generally understood.

In the second model, where ideally local authorities would meet once a year and award service contracts to service providers, the goal was again simple – the most efficient delivery of services at the lowest cost. Unsurprisingly under Mrs. Thatcher's administration, Conservative-controlled Councils such as Bradford and Wandsworth were in the vanguard. In this model governance was hardly an issue. Ridley thought that ideally a Council Election would take place annually, or four-yearly depending upon location; the Council would meet and allocate service delivery contracts and then the Leader and Cabinet could simply get on with the job of governing.

The Ridley model had one big advantage over the experience that most Labour councillors (and future MPs) had in the 80s. Because the goals were simple, the model facilitated the rise of powerful and focused Leaders. They may not have had quite the aura of a Livingstone but Dame Shirley Porter of Westminster, Eric Pickles of Bradford and Sir Paul Beresford of Wandsworth had a clear sense of direction and strong united groups behind them.

There was, however, a major disadvantage. What were the other 60 or so councillors on the authority supposed to do? Michael Heseltine came up with his own version of this in the early 90s when, as well as advocating elected executive mayors, he suggested that councillors should concentrate on their casework and become community representatives.

Peculiarly enough this was essentially the same conclusion that New Labour came to under Tony Blair. The process started with the optional introduction of Executive Mayors and Cabinets in 2000 and 2002. In the GLA Act the Blair Government did not quite have the courage to install a Mayor, unconstrained by other members of the

authority, but it did the next best thing. A Greater London Authority was created with 25 members performing an overview and scrutiny function.

But from its creation it had less chance of scrutinising the Mayor than any other elected body in the UK, whether Parliament or the humblest local council. Fourteen members were elected to represent mega-constituencies with populations of about 450,000. The other 11 were elected by a form of proportional representation by all Londoners. This structure was designed to ensure that it was impossible for any one party to “win control” and operate as a real check on the Mayor. New Labour reformers had argued, and were to continue to do so, that one fault with local government was that few knew who their councillors were. Ironically, they created the 25 most unknown councillors in history!

That was not, however, the only or even the major weakness with the institution. The ultimate sanction in the British Parliamentary (and Council) system is the potential loss of confidence in the Leader. Less seriously, Parliament and Councils can refuse to vote for policies or pass budgets. The first of these options is not open to GLA members – they can merely scrutinise and comment. The second is almost denied them. Rejection of the Mayor’s budget is only possible with a two thirds majority, which given the 25 members of the GLA means that 17 of the 25 members have to oppose.

Quinton Hogg once described British democracy as an ‘elective dictatorship’. Ironically, New Labour with its emphasis on new localism and democratic participation has managed to create an elected Mayor with all but dictatorial powers. Blair, of course, expected to have a “business-man” Mayor. The last thing he expected was a Mayoral candidate, who knew London, had experience of running it and with the charisma to win.

The other Mayors have similar, if slightly less powerful positions. Once given their four year mandate they are secure in their position. In NLGN’s own words, “A mayor is equally responsible to the whole city, borough or council, unlike a council leader who has been directly elected from only one ward amongst many and whose power is derived primarily from an ability to retain the support of other councillors (or, more likely, the dominant political party).”

Accountability “to the whole city, borough or council” may have theoretical advantages but the writer fails to understand that having “ability to retain the support of other councillors (or, more likely, the dominant political party)” is not just a valuable political asset, but a much more immediate and far more effective system of accountability than a once in four years election. It is a crucial “check and balance” in the system.

Recent Government White Papers suggest that the lesson has still not been learnt. For example, it is now suggested that where directly elected Mayors are not introduced then Leaders should be elected by their fellow councillors for four-year terms. There seems to be no recognition of the reality of political life at Council level, which is simply that, if the Leader loses the confidence of the councillors, even if only of “the dominant

political party” s/he will last no time at all and if s/he does not lose that confidence then they have no need to be protected by national legislation.

Unfortunately, there appears to be little evidence that other claims for the new governance system have been justified. For example, much of the anguish about the state of local government relates to electoral turnout. But using London Boroughs as an example the evidence from 2006 is not encouraging to the reformers. In Hackney, despite going to the same polling booths on the same day more people actually voted for their councillors than for the Mayor. The Borough-wide turnout was 34.41% and the Mayoral vote just 32.24%. In Newham the turn-out was 34.41%, but in non-Mayoral votes on the same day Bexley managed 42.35%, Greenwich 35.81% and Richmond 51%.

Wandsworth is an interesting example, which suggests a different explanation for differential turnouts. In Wandsworth turnout rose from 34% at its inception in 1964 to 49% in 1978 and then in the following four elections in 1982, 1986, 1990 and 1994 to 54%, 51%, 57% and 51%. However, the 1998, 2002 and 2006 elections have seen turnouts falling again to 40%, 30% and 34%. This exactly mirrors the very tight nature of the political contest in the 80s and the very much less closely fought battles since gentrification took strong hold. In other words, and unsurprisingly, people seem to have a greater tendency to vote when it looks likely to make a difference.

A similar explanation might apply in Hackney. Although the disparity in figures is not very great, surely it is conceivable that the 2.17%, who voted for their councillor in Hackney wards but not for their Mayor, either did not know who the Mayor was or thought it a non-contest with Mayor Pipe certain to be returned to office.

So in practice neither turnout nor accountability has been improved by the introduction of the “Executive” Mayor. Indeed lack of Mayoral accountability is a major platform of the “Bring back democracy” campaign in Lewisham and the move to abolish the Mayor in Doncaster. Indeed on 27<sup>th</sup> February 2007 Doncaster Council responded to an 11,000 signature petition by voting for an abolition referendum, which is due to take place on 1<sup>st</sup> May this year.

Interestingly googling “remove mayors” brings up 705,000 results, including Doncaster and Lewisham but also many, many examples of electors trying to remove executive mayors in many of the United States and other places round the globe.

The last remaining argument for the Mayoralty, used by Ken Livingstone and his supporters, is the claim that only the new Mayoral power enabled him to introduce the Congestion Charge. The philosophical basis of that argument, “the end justifies the means”, is so shallow as to be unworthy of Livingstone. But it also demeans his previous achievements. As Leader of the Greater London Council, with traditional local government powers, he was capable of introducing the equally radical and challenging Fares Fair policy, which had a similar and possibly greater impact than the Congestion Charge.

None of this is an argument to deny a vote to Ken on 1<sup>st</sup> May. If you believe, as I do, that Ken's record has been overwhelmingly positive for London (despite his crazy dalliance with high rise developments!) then voting for him must be the correct move for a Londoner. The Conservative Party's irresponsibility in putting forward Johnson as an alternative effectively robs the electorate of any real choice.

However, personal power on the scale of the London Mayor's would be enough to turn the character of a saint. It is, therefore, incumbent upon politicians, of all persuasions, to resist the introduction of any more Executive Mayors, to reform the Greater London Authority's constitution, to restrain the Mayor's role and to give real power and influence to its members. Politics is and should be a pluralist process, and emphatically not an elective dictatorship.

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