50
YEARS

OF THE
LONDON BOROUGHS

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This lecture has been typeset using the Clarendon font. Clarendon, was created in 1845 by the typographer Robert Beasley who went on to become the Sheriff of the City of London in 1863 and the Lord Mayor of London in 1869.

This lecture relies heavily on the work of other people.The bibliography at the end of the paper lists many of the excellent books I have relied upon to bring together the development and history of the London boroughs. I would particularly like to acknowledge the help over many years of my colleague Professor George Jones. The story of London's government is strangely gripping. It has attracted researchers and commentators over many years. I have also been enormously assisted by a number of officials at London Councils, including John O'Brien, Dick Sorabji, James Odling-Smee, Souraya Ali, Dan Drillsma-Milgrom, Sarah Fudge, Ian Mitchell, Barbara Salmon and Emma Stewart.

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In the context of this lecture and a book to be produced later in the year, all 32 boroughs have generously provided historical information which has contributed to the lecture. The City of London, an institution with rather more than 50 years of history, has kindly provided the opportunity for the lecture to be delivered.

Tony Travers
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1965 was a remarkable year for London. In late January Sir Winston Churchill's funeral took place at St Paul's Cathedral. Early in March, Herbert Morrison, legendary leader of the London County Council, who had been a member of Churchill's War Cabinet, died. In June, the 700th Anniversary of Parliament was celebrated at Westminster. Early in October, the Post Office Tower, symbolising contemporary scientific and technological progress, was officially opened. A month later, the Race Relations Act took effect, signalling the start of a profound change in society and its attitudes.

In 1965, a reform was made to London's government which has affected the city ever since. After many years of debate and a Royal Commission, 'London' – that is the area of the London County Council – was expanded to embrace the whole of Middlesex and parts of Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent and Surrey. On April 1st, today's 32 boroughs and the Greater London Council (GLC) took charge of the capital's local government. The LCC, the metropolitan boroughs and a substantial number of districts were abolished or merged to create new authorities.

In a country which frequently reorganises its governmental machinery, 50 years is a long time. The GLC survived just 21 years. The Inner London Education Authority, created in 1965 as a remnant of the London School Board and the LCC, was abolished in 1990. Whitehall departments have come and gone. For a while there was a Government Office for London. The NHS has been much reorganised, sometimes including a London region. But the boroughs have survived and prospered.

Of course the City of London, as a heroic exception to all rules, has existed continuously since before 1066. Its history is unique, though since 1965 it has played an important role as an authority with the attributes of a borough, but also with its own, special, features.

The boroughs' 50 years have included a number of distinct periods. In the early years, massive housing and road schemes were undertaken when London's population was falling. In the 1980s, relations between many London authorities and the government were (to put it gently) strained by radicalism and differing ideologies. But from the early 1990s onwards, London has grown fast and working relations with central government were restored. In 2000, a mayor and assembly were created to form a new city-wide government. Latterly, the boroughs are partners with the mayor in managing rapid population growth and the need for more and better infrastructure.

London today is still recognisable as the city of 1965. But it is also remarkably different. The city's historic strength has proved to be a capacity to accommodate the new without destroying the old. Its particular form of government is unique.

This uniqueness owes much to the long and complex evolution of what might be termed a 'bottom-heavy two-tier system' of city government. London today has a mayor with substantial power over transport, policing, fire and emergencies, planning and housing. But the boroughs collectively spend twice as much as the mayor, with responsibility for education, social care, public health, highways, environmental services and some housing. In assessing this system it is necessary to understand its origins, operation and outcomes.

The origins of London's contemporary system of borough government lie two thousand years ago. The Romans' decision to create a settlement on a site close to today's Tower Bridge (though they paused for reinforcements in contemporary Southwark) determined for all time the location of a city which grew from Londinium into London. What have the Romans ever done for us? Well, they located their main British town at a point where it was relatively easy to cross a wide river which also provided good access to the sea. In doing so, they not only built an urban settlement but also made it possible to develop ship-borne trade.

The Romans left in 410AD. By 450 or 460, English history descends into un-chronicled years when the city was abandoned and its great Roman buildings fell into disrepair. The Anglo-Saxon settlement of London, or Lundenwic, as they called it, began during the 7th century, not on the site of the Romans' Londinium, but somewhat to the west, near contemporary Aldwych. Later, King Alfred took London back within the Roman walls to make it easier to protect from Viking invaders. From this point onwards, meetings of the city's 'folkmoot' took place, allowing all the people of the city a voice, though formal power rested with the Court of Hustings, which developed a 'Court of Aldermen' to perform administrative functions. The Court of Aldermen came, over time, to rely on a Court of Common Council as a way of broadening decision-making.

King Alfred re-established London and attempted, though with little success, to impose a grid street-plan on London. The establishment of the city's own government during the Anglo-Saxon settlement of England put in place the first building-block of today's system of government. King Canute (1016-35) built the first royal palace, and seat of national government, near to a church (a minster) to the west of the

City of London. The palace burned down during the reign of Edward the Confessor (1042-66), the first of three great fires that destroyed the royal palace (others occurred in 1512 and 1698), and he rebuilt it (in 1062), close to the church he built, now Westminster Abbey. Westminster/Whitehall has been the centre of national government since the 11th century, and has remained separate from the government of London in the City. From here on, the City is the centre of mercantile London, while Westminster is the home of the national government.

The City of London Corporation dates its earliest origins from around this point. Because the City's evolution comes to determine so much else about London government, these early stages can be seen as hugely important in setting the scene for developments during Norman, Plantagenet, Tudor and Victorian history. William the Conqueror decided to leave the City alone, granting it a Charter to guarantee its freedoms. The Tower of London, in neighbouring Tower Hamlets, was built to keep watch over the powerful self-governing and tax-paying merchants of the City.

Between the 11th and 15th centuries, the historian Caroline Barron records that the City of London developed many of the livery companies and guilds which became the backbone of its system of government. The office of Mayor was initiated in 1189. Dick Whittington, symbol of London ambition and resilience, became Lord Mayor in 1397. By the 16th century, Elizabeth I was so concerned with the sprawl of the city that her government attempted to prohibit further construction in its hinterland by an early form of 'green belt'. At this time 'Bills of Mortality' were introduced to monitor deaths around London on a weekly basis as an early involvement by local government, through parishes, in public health. The parishes covered by these Bills of Mortality became the basis of the area of the 1855

Metropolitan Board of Works and subsequently of the London County Council and today's inner London.

By the time of Elizabeth's death in 1603, London had spread beyond the City and neighbouring Westminster in all directions. Her government's restrictions on development had little effect and the sprawl continued. Areas beyond the City were not governed by the Corporation, although from 1550 till 1899 part of today's Southwark, the ward of Bridge Without, was run from Guildhall. Westminster had its own governance, administered by officers of the Abbey. Everywhere else, there was a limited kind of parish-based government, including Poor Law provision funded by an early form of rates.

New players, in the shape of aristocratic estates, now emerged into the story. A number of families owned land between the City and Westminster and began to develop housing in places such as today's Covent Garden, Mayfair and Belgravia. These developments did not require planning permission. Simon Jenkins has written that, particularly during the 18th century, farm land was rapidly covered with elegant squares and thoroughfares.

From this point onwards, the great city sprawls out across fields in what would today be Marylebone, Soho, Fitzrovia, north Lambeth and to Marble Arch and beyond. By 1820, London covered something close to today's TfL Zone 1 and was a city of 1½ million people. But London's government did not expand to match this outward development. The City of London governed itself according to its historic traditions. Outside this ancient jurisdiction, there were shires and parish-based government. By the start of the 19th century, there was self-evidently a problem with the way London governed itself. The Municipal Corporations Commissioners who reported in 1837

suggested there should be a single metropolitan municipality which would, inevitably, have consumed the City. This proposal was given short shrift by the Corporation, which wished to protect its ancient self-government and privileges. As a result, the growing urban area continued to be governed by county and parish-based local authorities. Increasingly, ad hoc boards and private companies came to have a role in delivering water, lighting, paving and other services.

John Davis has written the definitive account of this period in a book with the revealing title 'Reforming London The London Government Problem 1855-1900'. The complexities of the parishes, vestries and of Parliamentary efforts to reform London's government are a remarkable tale of very local vested interests fighting to preserve the autonomy of their tiny areas.

By the middle of the 19th century, London was by far the biggest city the world had ever known. In New York, the city commissioners had already (in 1811) laid out that city's epic street grid. In the 1850s Baron Haussmann created Paris's grands boulevards and the urban form we still admire. The Metropolitan Police had been created in 1829, covering an area which extended well beyond the LCC boundaries. But there was no city-wide planning and no capacity in London even to provide sewers or water supplies.

The failures of government became so bad that, because of the filthy condition of the Thames, Parliament found itself unable to meet in rooms near the river. This 'great stink' and successive cholera epidemics convinced the government to create a type of city-wide government for London: the Metropolitan Board of Works (MBW). The Board and its chief engineer Sir Joseph Bazalgette managed to deliver one of the world's most advanced sewage systems, a number of road

improvements, the Embankment (which faced much opposition) and even a fire brigade.

But the Metropolitan Board of Works was a distinctive kind of institution. So as not to threaten London's parish vestries and the City, it was set up as a cumbersome joint committee of these local bodies, though some of the vestries were grouped together into 'district boards' for the purposes of representation on the MBW. The new institution's name was revealing: it was not 'London government'. But when scandal engulfed the Board in the 1880s it was decided, as part of a wider local government reform, to replace it with a 'London County Council'. The LCC was directly-elected and the capital's first city-wide government.

Once again, there was no reform of the system of parish vestries and district boards, which by this time had been joined by Poor Law boards of guardians, which delivered services for paupers through the workhouses. The vestries and district boards were running 'district council' services such as street cleaning, refuse collection, lighting and highways. But between 1888 when the LCC was created and 1899, a process of reform took place which led to the creation of 28 metropolitan boroughs within the LCC area. The larger vestries and district boards were aggrandised with the new status of 'metropolitan borough', while smaller ones were combined to form the new councils. The City survived unscathed as a self-governing unit.

The LCC adopted the MBW's boundaries which were based on Elizabethan 'Bills of Mortality' parishes. By 1888, the city had already grown beyond the MBW/LCC boundaries. East Ham and West Ham, were substantially built up. There were large settlements in places such as around the north west fringe of the LCC in Willesden. From this point on, particularly

between 1918 and 1939, the city grew at an astounding rate. Agricultural land was bought up, the Underground was extended and, with no real planning system, London sprawled outwards to become 'Greater London'. By the start of the Second World War, the built-up area covered almost 650 square miles: a 'province of houses' extending over a huge part of southern England.

The counties of Kent, Surrey, Hertfordshire and Essex became increasingly urbanised at their London edge. Middlesex was entirely built-up. Within these counties, 'district' local government was largely provided by municipal boroughs and urban districts. East Ham, West Ham and Croydon were, in each case, all-purpose county boroughs with all the powers of county and district councils. In some of the larger municipal boroughs there were pressures for greater autonomy, particularly in education. Many districts lobbied the government for 'excepted district' status, to allow them self-government over education. A number of the councils in the counties just outside London (such as Acton and Ilford) were bigger than metropolitan boroughs within the LCC area.

From the 1920s onwards, there were arguments for a new 'Greater London' council, notably put forward by Professor William Robson of the LSE. Such proposals carried with them the inevitable implication that the councils within this wider area would have to be reformed. But virtually all of the then-existing authorities were resistant to change. The LCC, by now heavily dominated by a powerful Labour Party majority group, was implacably opposed. Yet the pressure to create a tidier and more logical government system continued.

It took over 30 years to get to the position where a government felt reform was sufficiently important to take direct action. On 29 July 1957, six months after the Suez Crisis had ended, Harold Macmillan's Conservative government announced that a Royal Commission would be set up to consider the question of the possible reform of 'Greater London'. Chaired by Sir Edwin Herbert, it considered a far wider area than built-up London. There were 117 municipalities within a review area covering 840 square miles – a third larger than today's Greater London.

Herbert reported in 1960, proposing the creation of a 'Council for Greater London' and 51 Greater London Borough councils, with populations of between 100,000 and 250,000. The borough was to be "the primary unit of local government in Greater London". Many of the functions of the then-existing counties "could be better performed by the Greater London Boroughs". The scale of operations of the boroughs "must be big enough to attract first rate people…both as councillors and officials" and the resources of the borough "must be sufficient to support the full range of Borough services". It followed that many existing councils would have to be reorganised.

The City of London, of course, was different. The Herbert Commission dryly noted "logic has its limits and the position of the City lies outside them". The Commission went on: "The City is, in some respects, a modern local authority with the powers of a metropolitan borough. It has also powers, ancient and modern, of its own…. Its wealth, its antiquity, the enormous part it has played in the history of the nation, its dignity, its traditions and its historical ceremonial make the City of London an institution of national importance". Herbert, and indeed the government, proposed to retain the City and give it all the powers of one of the new boroughs, plus a number which were unique to it.

The Commission opined "it may be that the Greater London Boroughs will find it desirable to have some form of joint committee….covering the whole of the new area". Thus it was that the London Boroughs Association, and, after a number of reforms and name-changes, London Councils came into existence.

Some of Herbert's proposed boroughs: Newham, Merton and Harrow, exist today. Most did not get past this, Royal Commission, stage, although many formed the building-blocks for subsequent mergers before the London Government Act, 1963 was finally enacted. Herbert's borough of 'Finsbury, Holborn and Shoreditch' ended up in Islington, Camden and Hackney respectively, though Shoreditch briefly visited Tower Hamlets in the government's white paper proposals. 'Banstead and Epsom and Ewell' and 'Esher and Walton and Weybridge' did not make it as boroughs because the government chose to take three of them out of Greater London.

Some of the 51 proposed authorities included former district councils in what is today 'outer London' whose status would be much enhanced when they were liberated from their county council. Places such as Ilford had previously attempted to win county borough status and escape the clutches of Essex. A number, including Harrow, Twickenham and Wembley (in Middlesex), were 'excepted districts' within counties, providing education on behalf of the county. Many of the authorities in outer London were happy to become boroughs within the new Council for Greater London's area, because the new metropolitan authority was less powerful than the former counties. Uxbridge, Tottenham, Erith and Crayford were among those who supported the Royal Commission's proposals. Croydon and East Ham (both county boroughs) opposed reform, as did Middlesex County Council.

Within the LCC area (now inner London), Conservative boroughs including Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster were enthusiastic for the proposed reforms. Most Labour boroughs opposed them, except Fulham and Hackney which supported change. Unsurprisingly, the LCC opposed its own demise and many Labour boroughs within London supported them. Labour accused the Conservatives (and not without reason) of wanting to expand 'London' and thus, by bringing in a number of affluent suburbs, make it more likely the Conservatives would win control of the new Council for Greater London than the LCC. But Conservative-controlled Surrey County Council also opposed reform and suggested instead the creation of a joint planning board of local authorities in the wider London area.

The government published a white paper in November 1961 which included a preference to call the new metropolitan authority the 'Greater London Council'. Henry Brooke, the Minister of Housing and Local Government, also proposed there should be fewer, larger, boroughs and also that education would be run by the boroughs alone, except within the LCC area where a single authority would take control. Herbert had suggested making education a joint responsibility of the GLC and the boroughs. At this point, 34 boroughs were proposed – fewer in number and thus bigger than Herbert's proposals.

As the debate about the white paper continued ministers, under pressure from outer districts, gradually ruled out a number of them from being inside the new 'Greater London' area. Banstead, Caterham, Warlingham and Walton and Weybridge were excluded, as were Cheshunt, Esher, Staines and Sunbury-on-Thames. Parts of Hornchurch and Surbiton were also taken out. Epsom and Ewell survived as part of London until the legislation reached its report stage in the House of Lords.

Commenting on the struggle between shire districts and the government over their place in London, The Economist commented: "Dr Hill [now the minister] must not let himself be browbeaten by suburban witenagemots….The Surrey Tories may dance in the streets because they still have sack and soke in Banstead….[But]…London's readjustment will not be advanced if Dr Hill's first action has to be to placate those of his political friends who make the loudest noise". In fairness to Dr Hill, the more of the outer parts of the metropolitan area were excluded from London, the less likely the smaller Greater London was to vote Conservative.

In examining the government's proposals for new boroughs, academics described the government's proposed 'Borough 27' (today's Hounslow) as "a funnel-shaped authority over ten miles long from the Hammersmith/Chiswick boundary to the Thames at Staines with the A30 as its spine. But it was less easy to see what had led to the grouping in Borough 28 [Hillingdon]; it was almost as long from north to south as Borough 27 but the main lines of communication ran across it… "

The white paper proposed a series of conferences, to be chaired by town clerks from outside London, which would consider the final composition of the proposed boroughs. It is worth briefly considering the kind of issues these conferences proposed and, thus, how different things might have ended up. The following is an edited section of Gerald Rhodes's book on the struggle for reform:

"The government had proposed to split Wandsworth…The main reasons were that it was very large…and an awkward shape. Moreover, its neighbour, Battersea, was small. It seemed an obviously sensible proposal, therefore, to add part of

Wandsworth to Battersea. This the government had suggested, but unfortunately the result was to leave the remainder of Wandsworth as a separate borough 'without municipal buildings or any other of the basic equipment of public administration'.

....[T]he town clerks suggested a different borough grouping, but in doing so they rejected the views of both boroughs. Wandsworth did not want to be divided and Battersea simply wanted to take as much of Wandsworth as would bring it up to the required population size....To solve the problem, they suggested adding most of the eastern part of Wandsworth (ie Clapham and Streatham) to Lambeth, leaving the rest of Wandsworth to be joined to Battersea...

However, the consequence of this suggestion was that there had to be a wholesale recasting of practically all the other boroughs in the area. In the government proposals, for example, Lambeth was to have been joined with Southwark. Now a new home had to be found for the latter...."

Thus, in a different version of history, 'Lambeth and Southwark' would have been one of the new boroughs, Camberwell (including Bermondsey and Deptford) would have been another and the new London Borough of Lewisham would have been Deptfordless and have no river-front. It is remarkable how one period's modest administrative tidying-up become the basis of another's day-to-day government.

Matters proved rather easier north of the river, though there were some creative suggestions for changes to the white paper's proposals. The Metropolitan Borough of Chelsea came out with an ingenious proposal to combine Chelsea, South Kensington, Fulham and Knightsbridge into one borough.

This was rejected because it meant splitting even existing authorities. The proposal to merge Wembley and Willesden was fiercely opposed by both councils. But Wembley was considered too small to go it alone and would have had to be joined, if not to Willesden, to Harrow. Neighbouring authorities opposed being joined to either Wembley or Willesden. In the end, the town clerks left the Wembley-Willesden borough (Brent) in place.

After extensive consultation about the white paper, the government set about passing the legislation necessary to achieve reform. The London Government Bill was introduced in November 1962. It was pushed through by Conservative MPs and opposed by Labour. There were lengthy debates about the powers to be given to the GLC and the boroughs. There were also many proposed amendments about the precise configuration of the new boroughs. Any decision about the components of one borough had knock-on consequences for its neighbours. To make things even more difficult, the outer boundary of London was still not finally fixed.

In the end, there were to be 32 boroughs, not 34. The City of London lived on once again. The question of choosing names proved a challenge. Many wanted to keep two or more of the previous district names while the minister, by now Sir Keith Joseph, was resistant to the use of the word 'and' in new names. In the end he allowed only one of the new authorities, Kensington and Chelsea, to keep its two names. In 1979 Hammersmith and Fulham (originally 'Hammersmith') and in 1980 Barking and Dagenham (originally just 'Barking') and were allowed to re-attach their other former half's name.

Even before the legislation was passed, the town clerks of the authorities that, together, were to form the new councils began

to communicate and then meet each other. Joint committees were set up during 1962 to put in place the arrangements necessary to bring together the administrations of the predecessor councils. In April 1964, 'shadow' councils were elected and a year later, on 1 April 1965, the new boroughs started their work.

Some decisions were taken at this time whose consequences can still be seen in the city's streets. Original choices of logos and the design of street signs can still be seen in some boroughs 50 years later. A prime example of such design is the City of Westminster's street name signs.

They were designed, using a unique typeface, by Misha Black who was a Russian-born architect and an academic at the Royal College of Art. Black was also designer of the 1967 Victoria Line trains, the famous orange-yellow-brown-black 'moquette' seating fabric for the Tube and buses, decorative panels at Baker Street station and a number of iconic British Railways locomotives. Westminster's street signs have become as recognisable as red buses, black taxis and the Underground roundel as signifiers of London, suggesting they are a true design classic.

The boroughs had to rationalise their buildings and decide where to put their headquarters. Some of the new councils added an annex to an existing town hall or civic centre, as at Ealing, Enfield, Greenwich, Hammersmith, Haringey, Havering, Kingston and Lewisham. Where such a bolt-on proved difficult, the decision was taken to create a modern complex, as in Bexley, Bromley, Hillingdon, Hounslow and Sutton. Croydon and Westminster bought conveniently-located speculative office blocks. According to Michael Hebbert, two-thirds of the boroughs located the seat of local government in their dominant town centre.

At least two of the new municipal buildings created by the new London boroughs became the object of controversy. In Hillingdon a grand gesture was made. The council decided to construct a major new civic centre in Uxbridge and, as it turned out, the controversy surrounding the new building proved emblematic of a struggle between different interests in the borough. At its simplest, Labour wanted to urbanise the borough while the Conservatives preferred to preserve Hillingdon's suburban tranquillity.

The cost and splendour of the brick-clad chateau-style civic centre built in Uxbridge became national news. The council's Labour leader was seen as a municipal expansionist who wanted to change the image and outlook of the borough. As a civic-office development, the scale of the project is unparalleled in post-1965 borough history.

Constructed between 1973 and 1977, the civic centre is seen by architectural critics Edward Jones and Christopher Woodward as rather too 'domestic' for an office building: "That the imagery of vernacular housing should be applied to a large bureaucratic institution…. is a sad comment on the times and evidence of an architectural loss of nerve. The adoption of 'friendly' forms is intended to make unwieldy local government less inaccessible. Architecturally the opposite proves to be the case, for in a secular age civic centres are one of the last institutions that can legitimately be distinguished from housing or commercial building. But the building is very popular and a relief from the banal office blocks normally associated with local authorities".

Hillingdon civic centre is one of the most important municipal buildings constructed in London since 1965. Only Kensington and Chelsea's (also brick-clad) headquarters is recognised as

both 'of its time' and similarly architecturally-striking. Both buildings cost significantly more than originally planned. The Royal Borough commissioned Sir Basil Spence to design a new town hall in Hornton Street. Work began in 1972 and the result can be seen today.

As is sometimes the case, the controversy that surrounded the construction of such buildings is now forgotten and the quality of the building is admired. Certainly, the Hillingdon and Kensington and Chelsea civic buildings have prospered in a way that much social housing built across London a few years previously has not.

In the early years of the new councils, there was much enthusiasm within the inner boroughs to clear slums and to build new modernist housing estates. Many of the new councils appointed borough architects to oversee the design of major developments. A number of these architects had trained at the Architectural Association, which was notable for training radical and innovative adherents to the theories of the Bauhaus and Le Corbusier. Many had worked with Sir Leslie Martin at the LCC Architects' Department.

Lambeth appointed Tom Hollamby and Camden Sydney Cook. These architects believed in the capacity of well-designed buildings to change the lives of Londoners who had hitherto often lived in slum conditions. In Lambeth, George Finch designed Lambeth Towers, Cotton Gardens and Brixton Rec. Lambeth Towers came complete with community facilities such as a doctor's surgery, nursery and older peoples' centre. This development is still in use and, broadly, functions as planned. Camden, under the control of Sydney Cook, became a byword for low-rise, high-quality, modern architecture. Developments such as Branch Hill in Hampstead and, most famously,

Alexandra Road are even today seen as among municipal architecture's greatest triumphs.

Other council housing developments have proved less successful. Indeed, many have been constructed and knocked down during the life of the London boroughs. For example, the Ferrier Estate in Kidbrooke (Greenwich) and Holly Street (Hackney) have been entirely redeveloped since their construction in the early years of the new boroughs. Much has been written about the baleful consequences of council housing estates built during the 1960s and early 1970s. Poor-quality construction, Brutalist architecture, ill-thought-through layouts, cost-cutting and changes in residents' life-styles are among the explanations put forward as to how idealistic public housing turned, in many cases, into a nightmare of fetid lifts, boarded-up flats, poverty and social disorder.

There were many other difficult estates, some of which are still being re-developed today. Broadwater Farm in Haringey featured in horrific riots in the 1980s. Over the years, councils and central government have acted again and again to mitigate the original problems set in train by what turned out, in many cases, to be an alien form of housing. The Lisson Green estate in Westminster has required major re-modelling to remove walkways and to close-off short-cuts through the estate which allowed non-residents to commit crimes.

A leading indicator of the need for change was provided by Ronan Point (Newham). This system-built 22-storey tower partly collapsed on 16 May 1968, soon after its construction. A gas explosion demolished a load-bearing wall which caused a corner of the block to collapse from top to bottom. Four people were killed and 17 injured. Public confidence in residential towers was lost, signalling an end to this particular phase in the provision of social housing.

Boroughs inherited a number of modernist estates from their predecessors. Not all were a failure. For example the Cremorne Estate at World's End in Chelsea had been started by the former Chelsea metropolitan borough and was handed on to Kensington and Chelsea. Although built at high densities, it has been relatively successful for over half a century. Similarly, Westminster inherited the Churchill Gardens estate in Pimlico and it, too, has offered high-density modernist homes right through to today.

Other boroughs had different kinds of council housing within their area. Barking and Dagenham was the inheritor of the Becontree Estate, built by the London County Council between 1921 and 1935. Lewisham inherited the Bellingham Estate. In each case, the housing had a 'garden city' feel to it and was carefully planned to include parades of shops and other facilities.

Were the boroughs to blame for the failures of the 1960s and 1970s? With the benefit of hindsight it is easy to see why concrete slab blocks, elevated walkways and isolated towers would be problematic. Idealistic architects cannot have predicted the kinds of social change which occurred from the late-1960s onwards. At the time, councillors were attempting to clear what they saw as time-expired older housing and to provide council tenants with decent, spacious, homes with inside facilities and central heating.

But what went wrong, at least in some places, was the use of Brutalist, inhuman, architecture, a willingness to cut back on agreed building programmes, shoddy construction techniques and poor maintenance. Moreover, social housing has become an ideological battle-ground from the mid-1960s onwards. It still is. This issue is not one of the London boroughs' making,

but it has affected the way social housing has developed. Today, many councils either operate largely through housing associations or 'arms-length' management organisations. These latter institutions have been pivotal in bringing improvements to social housing. The experience of the 1960s and 1970s, compounded by the ideological strife of the 1980s has, it would appear, left most of local government wary of a return to these earlier types of large, single-tenure, developments.

Outer boroughs saw things differently. Councils such as Hillingdon, Redbridge and Bromley had no need for slum clearance. But more importantly, they did not wish to have the GLC building estates, or indeed nominating many tenants, into their areas. From the beginning of the post-1965 system there was tension between many outer boroughs and the GLC. When the Council was Labour-controlled, in particular, Conservative boroughs found themselves resisting efforts to transfer people from inner to outer London. Some leading GLC members saw the resistance of the outer boroughs as demanding greater efforts to drive through new housing developments. During this period the original seeds of GLC abolition were sown.

Other activities of the GLC and their friends in Whitehall provoked borough opposition. The early years of the boroughs saw a number of them struggling to stop massive road schemes. The GLC had plans for a 'motorway box': concentric rings of major roads, linked by other motorway-scale roads running outwards from the city centre. If it had been completed, the motorway box would have resembled a giant spider's web of highways. One of the linking roads was the Westway, which Kensington and Chelsea and other boroughs attempted to stop. Westway cut a number of neighbourhoods in two and condemned the northern parts of Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea to years of chaotic disruption.

Redbridge found itself fighting roads for years. It is worth considering the problems faced by the borough as an example of a wider issue for many other authorities. The council opposed the piecemeal announcement of road schemes, the government's refusal to publish the costs of schemes and the lack of compensation for the many householders affected by, particularly, the M11. The council believed rightly, as it proved, that the Ministry of Transport and the GLC were taking apparently unconnected steps which would inevitably leave Redbridge criss-crossed by motorway-scale roads. Such tactics were often used in the 1960s to minimise opposition to major highways.

Chunks of the motorway box can still be found in contemporary London. A section of of Ringway 1 can be seen as the West Cross Route between North Kensington and Shepherds Bush. This part of the system, along with the Westway, was opened by transport minister Michael Heseltine in 1970. There were huge protests against Westway, including people putting up banners saying: "Get us out of this Hell - Rehouse Us Now" outside their windows. The East Cross Route, with a new 'eastern bore' for the Blackwall Tunnel, was completed.

Much of the North Circular has been rebuilt, piecemeal, to motorway standard. It follows Ringway 2's route in east London between the M11 and the A13. At its eastern end, Ringway 2 was planned to have crossed the Thames at Gallions Reach in a new tunnel between Beckton and Thamesmead. The search for an east London river crossing continues even today. A part of Ringway 3 was built as the M25 from Swanley to Potters Bar, while Ringway 4 provided most of the rest of the rest of the M25.

Not all boroughs have opposed all roads. The Hayes by-pass was long the subject of a lobby by Hillingdon council and local

MPs, while Croydon has for many years attempted to have the A23 improved. Indeed, roads south of the river, apart from the M25, have not been constructed with the enthusiasm that the government and, for a while, the GLC managed in north London. In some ways, this disparity is a blessing but in a number of locations it has left residents and businesses facing poor road and environmental conditions.

Housing and roads took up a considerable amount of the early energy of the new boroughs. Paradoxically, this modernisation of the city took place at a time when its population and industrial base was in sharp decline. Between 1965 and 1980, the Greater London population fell from about 7.8 million to 6.8 million: a rate of reduction almost as great as the current rate of increase. Old housing, some of it slums, was being replaced by new and, it was thought at the time, better homes. Roads were being constructed on a 'predict-and-provide' basis.

Between 1960 and 1980, London Docks declined from carrying their highest-ever tonnages to having virtually no business. Industry was shrinking, a problem made worse by the need to seek a government permit to develop any new factory in London. The Location of Offices Bureau, set up in 1963, required official permission for the development of new offices in central London. As a result of such policies and also the development of new towns, London found itself facing rapid decline. Peak-hour tube and rail travel to central London began to fall, which allowed the government to cut back on reinvestment in the Underground and other elements of the transport system. This period of inadequate investment has been a problem for the capital ever since.

The economic decline of London and other cities had consequences for industrial relations and, inevitably, for

politics. In 1968 the Conservatives swept to power in every borough except Barking, Newham, Southwark and Tower Hamlets. There was a huge cull of traditional Labour councillors. Then, three years later, there was a massive shift back to Labour, bringing many new and younger councillors into the boroughs. In a number of authorities, the 'New Left' began to build-up a power base. The political and industrial struggles of the 1970s provided fertile grounds for radicalism. But the election of Mrs Thatcher in 1979 initiated an all-out war between some on the Left and the new, radical, Conservative prime minister.

London boroughs including Camden, Hackney, Lewisham, Islington, Brent, Haringey, Southwark, Greenwich and Lambeth found themselves subject to spending targets, grant penalties and then rate-capping. Direct-labour building departments had, under new legislation, to be exposed to private-sector competition. Many of the boroughs adopted radical policies including decentralised sub-committees and the defence of services from cuts. As London Labour Briefing, the publication of the New Left at the time, put it in 1982 "One of our hopes for decentralisation of council services should be that it will help develop a political awareness among more people that the struggles of council workers and 'the community' over cuts in jobs and services are a common anti-capitalist struggle against economic oppression".

In response to rate-capping, efforts were made by several Labour boroughs to work together to refuse to set a rate, a tactic which, it was believed, would force the government to back-track on cuts which were being imposed by Mrs Thatcher and her Environment Secretary Michael Heseltine. The cuts at the time were, it should be added, derisory as compared with the 30 per cent real-terms reductions faced by many London

councils in the period 2010 to 2015. Other urban councils in Sheffield, Manchester and Liverpool were engaged in similar tactics. The GLC, from 1981 under a left-wing leadership, was signed up to the same policy.

Eventually, opposition to rate-capping collapsed. One by one, boroughs found ways of justifying setting a rate or of allowing opposition councillors to set one. Most councillors did not wish to risk surcharge and bankruptcy at the hands of the District Auditor, which is what happened to a number of Lambeth and Liverpool councillors.

The 1980s saw the emergence of new and radical Conservatives in London. Wandsworth, under a series of leaders, developed a 'small State' and highly-efficient version of local government. This model has subsequently been much imitated. Although not particularly ideological in its inspiration, the Conservatives' opponents have long seen this low-cost version of local government as 'Thatcherite'.

In Westminster a new leadership was intent on imposing business principles on the council. 'One stop shops', which many councils now operate, were introduced. But the quest for efficiency led to the sale of three cemeteries in such a way that maintenance contracts failed and the cemeteries had to be bought back at a far higher price. This error was compounded by the 'Homes for Votes' scandal, which saw the council moving homeless tenants into asbestos-filled homes as part of what the District Auditor described as 'gerrymandering'. This policy led to the surcharging of councillors.

Policies pursued by radical New Left councils included a number of causes such as race-equality, women's and gay rights which have subsequently become mainstream across all

parties in local and national government. Equal opportunities were born at this time. But in the 1980s, they stimulated the national media into a frenzied attack against the so-called 'Loony Left'. Progressive councillors were running ahead of public opinion but may, today, reasonably claim to have been proved right in terms of content, if not in the way message was delivered.

However, many of the same authorities and councillors confused a more liberal attitude to people and rights with an over-relaxed attitude to good management and an unwillingness to tackle failure, which undermined the quality of services, leading to the breakdown in some boroughs' housing, refuse collection and benefits services. Social care and education were badly affected. In Lambeth and Hackney there were serious public service failures and it took new and determined leaderships many years to restore good government.

Other boroughs were untouched by most of this radicalism and ideology. Residents of Croydon, Enfield, Barnet, Harrow, Richmond, Kingston, Hounslow, Merton, Sutton, Hillingdon, Havering, Bexley, Bromley, Barking and Dagenham, Redbridge, Waltham Forest, Newham, Kensington and Chelsea, Ealing and Hammersmith and Fulham would have lived through most of the 1980s without being aware (apart from what they read in newspapers) that London was in the grip of new and radical ideologies while also locked in a war with central government. It is a measure of the compartmentalised nature of London's borough government that the politics of any one council is unlikely to tell one much even about its immediate neighbours' political life.

This era was the time of 'creative accountancy'. A number of London boroughs and the GLC were adept at financial

manoeuvres which, though lawful, came close to the line. Spending was moved from one year to another so as to minimise grant penalties. Special funds were created. Spending was shifted from revenue to capital accounts. Councils sold off assets and then leased them back. An Audit Commission report on eight London boroughs concluded they had entered into so-called 'deferred purchase arrangements' to a value of £550 million.

A number of London authorities became heavily involved in the swaps market, which allowed councils to retain flexibility in the management of their borrowings. Swaps allowed councils to generate extra income by speculating on interest rate movements. Hammersmith and Fulham became heavily involved in swaps during the mid-1980s. By 1988-89, at the height of its activity, the borough was responsible for 0.5 per cent of the entire world swaps market.

The district auditor appealed to the Divisional Court seeking a ruling that Hammersmith's Capital Market Fund (ie its swaps activity) was contrary to law. The borough and others similarly involved suspended their activities in the swaps market and made provision for outstanding payments. The banks then issued proceedings to ensure they received payments due. As a result of the auditor's application, the banks decided not to proceed with writs against Hammersmith and a number of other councils. The councils were, as a result, protected against potentially massive payments.

The ideological turmoil of the late 1970s and 1980s created conditions where the Greater London Council, established alongside the boroughs in 1965, was abolished. Bromley councillors, in particular, led the charge to get rid of the GLC. Within three years of the Thatcher government's

original announcement that the GLC was to be scrapped, it was gone. The boroughs and the City inherited many of the GLC's responsibilities. A new joint committee of boroughs (the London Fire and Civil Defence Authority) took over the fire brigade, while another one administered the GLC's large programme of grants to voluntary bodies. A third one, the London Research Centre, assumed responsibility for statistics about greater London.

It was a measure of the underlying purpose of abolition that the London Planning Advisory Committee (LPAC), set up to provide advice to ministers about London-wide planning, was chaired initially by a Richmond councillor but given offices in Havering. Planning was not intended to be a powerful, centrally-driven, activity in the post-GLC world, though as it happened LPAC went on to provide the intellectual basis for planning and development not only between 1986 and 2000 but also within the GLA. There were many other committees for all or part of London. The City of London, fulfilling an 'honest broker' role in these highly-political times, agreed to run Hampstead Heath and a number of other former GLC responsibilities.

The London Boroughs Association, which had been set up in 1965 and until the mid-1980s represented all the boroughs, split in two as a result of the political turmoil of the period. Conservative boroughs, which had generally supported abolition, remained in the LBA, as did SDP-Liberal Alliance authorities and the City. Labour boroughs joined the new Association of London Authorities. In 1995, with ideological hostilities largely abandoned, the two organisations joined to create the Association of London Government, which in 2006 changed its name to London Councils.

In April 1990 the Inner London Education Authority was abolished and, in November, Margaret Thatcher left Downing Street. For the first time ever, the inner London boroughs ran their own schools. John Major's government started a process of reconciliation with local government. In London, Labour councils pulled back from their confrontational stance and assumed a more pragmatic approach. Senior Labour politicians decided enough was enough. From now on, cleaning streets and repairing council housing was seen as a better route to popularity than an all-out ideologically-based war with central government.

The decline in London's population and economy, which had occurred continuously since 1939, suddenly started to reverse in the late 1980s. At the time of the GLC's abolition, London's population was just under 6.7 million, almost two million below its pre-war figure. By the early 1990s, the number of London residents was rising again.

The *Central London Rail Study* (CLRS), published in 1989, signalled an understanding inside government that the long-term decline of London's transport had become a problem. The Tube and buses were, by this time, bulging with new passenger growth. Apart from the original part of the Docklands Light Railway and an extension of the Underground to Heathrow, there had been little new public investment in the capital's transport system since the Victoria Line had fully opened in 1968. The CLRS, like the renewed population increase, suggested a corner had been turned.

In the years since the early 1990s, London boroughs have had to cope with a renewed need to build infrastructure and, in parallel, to cope with problems left by the housing and road developments of the 1960s and 1970s. Several boroughs took

a number of years to re-take control of their administration. Lambeth, under aggressively-moderate leadership, appointed a new chief executive with the explicit purpose of bringing about radical improvements to housing, street services and council-tax collection. Southwark similarly moved on from a period of complex collective leadership to the re-building of good government. Hackney required a Labour-Conservative administration to begin the process of service improvement. It, too, appointed a chief executive who had to work with senior councillors to face down the challenge of chaotic management.

From this point on, the London boroughs which had been affected by the struggles of the 1970s and 1980s moved to become among the best-run of all local government in England. Audit Commission performance rankings started to show councils such as Lambeth, Southwark and Hackney among the fastest-improving anywhere. In east London, the London Docklands Development Corporation, imposed by Mrs Thatcher's government in 1981 against the will of the local boroughs, began to work more consensually with Greenwich, Newham, Tower Hamlets, Lewisham and Southwark. Canary Wharf emerged as a symbol of the new London, with its developers lobbying hard and successfully for the extension of the Jubilee Line from central London to Stratford, opening up the river for development from Waterloo to North Greenwich. Enlightened planners in Southwark were subsequantly able to develop Bermondsey and Surrey Quays.

The next step in the evolution of London's government was Tony Blair's New Labour landslide in 1997. Labour was committed to the re-creation of city-wide government in London, though Blair personally had come to the view that a directly-elected mayor should be introduced as the executive leadership of the new Greater London Authority. A referendum

held in May 1998 produced a vote in favour of reform in every borough. The vacuum created by the abolition of the GLC left space for a Mayor and Assembly which, without doubt, is more powerful, efficient and effective than its predecessor.

One of the Mayor's most important roles was the requirement to create a London Plan. The first and second mayors of London each used the plan to set out a path for London's rapid growth, including the need for additional housing, transport infrastructure and over policies about tall buildings. Inevitably, there have from time to time been differences between the Mayor's view of what was required for London as a whole and the desire of individual boroughs to determine their own destinies.

As in the 1960s, some of the boroughs today favour a low-rise future with modest population growth. Other boroughs use the financial and regeneration benefits of major developments to pay for services and facilities that would otherwise be impossible to fund. Haringey, Waltham Forest and Enfield are developing housing and employment along the Lee Valley in ways that will transform the fortunes of this formerly-industrial corridor of the city. Boroughs such as Barnet, Ealing, Lewisham and Hounslow, which might have been seen as predominantly 'suburban' in the late 1960s, are now encouraging new residential developments which have a distinctly metropolitan scale and look. Inner London is moving outwards.

Indeed, the need to develop big and densely-packed sites is an issue on which individual boroughs and the Mayor will sometimes work together, though on others they will find themselves in opposition. New financial incentives encourage development but can complicate how resources are attributed.

The need to 'tax' new development has called forth a major skill for the modern London borough.

However, the five Olympic boroughs (Newham, Waltham Forest, Hackney, Tower Hamlets and Greenwich) worked closely with successive mayors on the preparation of the 2012 Olympic Games. The Olympics provided over £10 billion's worth of regeneration and transport investment in east London, which has opened up places such as Leyton, Plaistow, Stratford, Homerton and Hackney Wick to the kind of improvement which had occurred in Islington and Camden during the 1970s and 1980s. The London Overground has connected Newham through Tube-style services around north London to Hackney, Islington, Camden, Brent, Ealing, Kensington and Chelsea, Hammersmith and Fulham.

More widely, the Overground has altered the geography and economy of London in ways that would have been unthinkable 50 years ago. Southwark, Lambeth and Wandsworth are linked in inner south London. Many other boroughs, including Croydon, Waltham Forest, Haringey, Harrow, Lewisham, Hounslow and Richmond are on spurs off the central section of the Overground. Residents of outer London can now travel to each other more easily without visiting the city centre.

Writing a decade after the boroughs started work, Simon Jenkins concluded *"…of all the institutions set up in the capital in 1964 the most successful have been…the new London boroughs. While GLC and Whitehall bureaucrats bickered and battled their way from one strategic stalemate to another, the boroughs were quietly making the best of their new powers…. the rapidity with which they established an identity of their own was remarkable…Local government in London is borough government"*.

In 1991, half way from 1964-65 to today, Michael Hebbert concluded: "The borough effect is a straightforward expression of political geography. The units created by the reconstruction of 1965 had a new territoriality, distinct from their predecessors and competitive with their neighbours. Each arbitrary tract of built-up London defined in the reorganisation process became for borough leaders and their officers a 'field of vision, expectation and action' Original marriages of administrative convenience became…real entities worth campaigning for, with boundaries that showed on council wall-maps like an island shoreline".

The boroughs really are 32 different places. The political and economic history of any one authority will not help much with an understanding of its neighbour, still less a borough 12 to 15 miles away. Conservatives in one borough are different from those in another. The same is true for Labour and Liberal Democrat groups. Some boroughs, notably Tower Hamlets, Newham and Hillingdon, have seen economic change at spectacular scale over the last 50 years. Others, including Havering, Sutton and Bromley have developed, but more gently.

London in 2015 is far more affluent and in many ways more settled than in 1965. Although the make-up of its population has changed enormously, London has gone from struggling with the 'orderly management of decline' to a need to accommodate population growth of over 100,000 per year. Throughout the whole of this period, the 32 boroughs and the City of London have swept the streets, emptied the bins, planned development and housed the homeless. There have been good times and bad, but after 50 years, it is possible to look back and analyse what has been learned.

First, it is a miracle the boroughs have survived 50 years. Given the propensity of British governments to meddle and reorganise, the boroughs' relatively long life is a cause for surprise and delight. The GLC survived only 21 years and the ILEA just 25. Many councils outside London have been reorganised in the period since 1965. The implication of this relative longevity is perhaps that the boroughs were broadly the correct size to be both 'local' and yet powerful.

Second, an ideological war-of-all-against-all is not good for the people and government of a city. The years from about 1975 till 1990 were bad for London, even if the reactions to them have been moderation and pragmatism since the end of the struggles of the 1980s. The differences between Mrs Thatcher's government and the New Left in London can be explained by changes to the city's industrial base and its population. But the results, at least in some boroughs, were not good for tenants, council staff or for the reputation of London government. Mercifully, today is very different.

Third, London government is good at recovering from serious problems: in 50 years there has been not-so-orderly decline followed by a remarkable resurgence. The first half of the boroughs' life was characterised by a shrinkage in the city's population and its economic power. Most of the boroughs managed to continue to deliver good services in this period and helped create the circumstances where people eventually wanted to return. Even the boroughs which suffered a period of weak government have shown how local politics can re-establish good government and then flourish. Over many centuries, London has shown itself capable of recovering from periods of decline to re-assert its economic strength.

Fourth, history suggests large developments and re-developments are probably better left to private developers, albeit within firmly-imposed rules and plans determined by the boroughs and the GLA. In the years immediately after 1965, the boroughs and the GLC undertook a number of large, comprehensive, redevelopment schemes. Many of these projects did not turn out well. Indeed, it has taken years of regeneration and reinvestment to replace a number of failed 1960s and 1970s developments. This is not to say that London boroughs and the GLA should not plan for the redevelopment and improvement of tracts of the city. Rather, it appears that major development companies are more likely to have the skills and persistence to drive complex and often controversial schemes to successful completion.

Fifth, and not discussed hitherto, London's government needs greater fiscal autonomy. It is now widely accepted that England has one of the most centralised systems of taxation and public finance in the developed world. If the London boroughs and GLA are to prosper to their full potential, they need to have greater powers to determine both spending and taxation. The London Finance Commission outlined proposals for such a reform in 2013. These proposals have had the support of the boroughs and the Mayor.

Sixth, the 'bottom-heavy two tier system' is probably a good one to run a large city. For 50 years, the London boroughs have delivered municipal services. In doing so, they have represented the most local level of government within a city of many millions of people. The Herbert Commission and the government judged the size of the boroughs correctly. Any smaller and they would have been under-powered: any larger and they might have been remote. Collectively, the boroughs spend twice as much as the GLA. For most people, 'the council'

is the agency they expect to act when there is a need to change something locally. This assessment is not to say there is not a need for over-all metropolitan government. London needs a city-wide, democratically-elected, transport, police, fire and planning authority.

Moreover, the two-tier system is now the established norm for London. Apart from the period from 1986 to 2000, there has been a two-tier arrangement continuously since 1855. The geographical scale of London is such that a single government would inevitably be seen as too big and too distant. The much-defended 'borough' level, on the other hand, is too small to deliver many of the infrastructure-based services a great city requires. The London model would work well in many emerging global mega-cities.

The City of London can be seen as the origin of both borough and city-wide government. For many years it was, effectively, both. Today, along with the Monarchy, it represents part of the long-evolved, unique, institutional machinery of Britain. The City and the boroughs have developed together over 50 years into an essential part London's patchwork of local government.

Does this system need further reform? Some voices in recent years have suggested there are too many boroughs, or that the Mayor should be given greater powers over the boroughs, or that the boroughs should be fragmented into urban parishes. The issue of whether or not there are too many or too few boroughs needs to be seen against the backdrop of both the costs and benefits of potential reforms. Structural reorganisations of local government can rarely be proved to save money. The boroughs are already large institutions by the standards of municipalities in other countries. Is there any overwhelming case for fewer boroughs? The answer is 'no'. But that is not to

say that as spending constraints continue there will not be a need for more joint working and combined administration.

On the other hand, the balance of power between the boroughs and the Mayor may need to be changed. As London grows to become a city of nine and then ten million people, it will from time to time be necessary for the GLA to drive through developments that boroughs do not want. The needs of London as a whole will have to be imposed on a particular area. But in doing so, the Mayor will need to take great care: if the boroughs are unnecessarily aggravated they will begin to agitate for reform - the lesson of the GLC's relationship with the boroughs.

For the time being relationships between the boroughs, the City, and the Mayor are broadly harmonious. The partnership of the Mayor and the boroughs will be important in meeting both the pressure on budgets and the infrastructure needs of London in the coming years. Devolution of powers and possibly greater fiscal autonomy will require an agreement about a public service settlement which convinces central government. Greater Manchester has latterly prospered by successful joint working. London can do as well or better, proving in a way that would have been thought impossible in the 19th century that metropolitan and local interests can be successfully aligned.

As London grows, its government can capture the benefits of development for the improvement of the lives of its people. For 50 years, the London boroughs have affected the lives of all the people of London. They continue to do so today. As we look ahead it is likely the boroughs will continue to provide the fragmented, flexible, competitive, collaborative system of government they have since 1965. 50 years is a long time, though in London's case it isn't really so long.

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