The Execution of the GLC: A Policy Folly?

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A policy folly is a policy pursued contrary to the self-interest of the policymakers. It must meet three criteria. First, it must be perceived as counterproductive by at least some of its makers at its inception, not merely with the benefit of hindsight. Second, feasible alternative policies must be available. Third, the policy should be that of a group. The abolition of the GLC meets all three criteria. First, abolition was regarded as unnecessary, time consuming and counterproductive by both Michael Heseltine and Tom King, Patrick Jenkin's predecessors, as the Department of the Environment, and by William Whitelaw, chair of the cabinet committee MSC 79 which offered abolition as a 'stop to Mrs Thatcher in compensation for failure to do something about the rates' (Forrester et al., pp 64-6). Second, feasible alternative policies were available. Ratecapping, expenditure limits and a propaganda offensive to defeat the Livingstone administration in the GLC elections due for 1985 were feasible options, capable of achieving the government's objectives: preposterous, of course, that it had set them. Third, abolition has been stoutly defended by the cabinet, which has included Peter Walker and Keith Joseph as the architects of the creation of elected metropolitan government in England, and most notably, by Kenneth Baker, promoted to provide succour to a beleaguered secretary. The latter four individuals have all been to some Damascus and repudiated their previous convictions on elected metropolitan government. Finally, abolition is a policy folly because its mode of implementation has considerably reduced Conservative electoral support in London, and because the reorganization will not achieve the declared objective of 'streamlining the metropolis'.

Andrew Forresters and his colleagues, and Francis Wheen have written recent journalistic narratives on the 'battle for London' which support my policy folly interpretation. Both books provide good evidence for the view that 'administrative rationalisation' has not mobilised the government. As all of the statutory metropolitan wide functions and services administered by the GLC before 1983 are to continue after 1 April 1986, then the only candidate for functional redundancy are the elected councillors and the central GLC administration. It is becoming evident that any 'vasties' which will accrue from the reorganisation will come from rate precept and mumpreneurship, and from what Blue Ken Baker euphemistically calls 'police savings', that is, the termination of activities which Conservatives do not like: women's committees, ethnic minority programmes, state charity, police monitoring and the like.

As readers of the Sunday Times will be aware, even if one agreed that the GLC is functionally redundant, in terms of its original objectives, the Marchell Report of 1978, commissioned by Harrie Celler, unambiguously concluded that a strengthening of the metropolitan area of London government was the administratively rational response to the failure of the GLC to match its high promise. Even for Conservatives, administrative rationality does not suggest GLC abolition as a policy priority.

The worst tactic for those opposed to abolition is to build their case primarily upon the GLC's record. Wheen's breathless piece of approp, composed in haste with the aid of the GLC's research library and Pluto Press, often makes this case. He manages to convey the impression that the GLC has a policy history in housing planning and transport of which it can be proud, passing strange for a radical socialist. Wheen even has a nice twist to say about Thamesmead, 'one of the GLC's major achievements in housing' (p. 74). Quite so, in the appropriate response for those who know something about London housing or have been to Thamesmead. Forresters et al., relying heavily on the work of Ken Young, provide a correspondingly better account of the conflicts over

London since the beginning of democratic government, and tell the tale of how successive Labour-led GLC administrations went down to defeat at the hands of the suburban boronies in housing, planning and transport, defeats which left the GLC vulnerable to organizational death.

Both books, despite the prime facie evidence of a policy folly embarked upon with a stubborn lack of attention to detail or cost/benefit analysis, are quite happy to understand abolition as the product of adversary politics: Conservative cities versus Labour cities in the increasingly polarized party system. Yet neither book explores the consistency of abolition and reorganization with New Right ideology. Arguably, abolition is consistent with the traditionalist conservation espoused by Roger Scruton and the aptly titled Satskia Review circle, for whom any elected local governments are anathema. Abolition can be seen as compatible with Monetarist and 'crowding out' objections to local public expenditure, an attempt to put an end to Keynesianism in one council. Abolition might also be favoured by those New Rightists sophisticated enough to grapple with Tobeart and Public Choice models of optimum local government. However, the reorganization maintains GLC functions in public administration, pleasing neither the Scrutonites nor the hyper-politicians. Moreover, the creation and expansion of OAGs (quasi-governmental agencies), and QELGOS, quasi-elected local government organizations, such as joint boards by a government which began life sworn to Quangocide is an ideological cock-up. Both books do nonetheless indicate that to the extent that abolition and reorganization are the outcome of adversarial politics, they have been dogged throughout by quite exceptional tactical incompetence. Forrester et al. give an excellent account of Jenkins's botched attempts both to cancel the GLC elections due for 1985, and his gerrymandering proposals—which might have caused even Unter Unionists to blush—shown out by the House of Lords. Even the gerrymandering was incompetent in the view of certain Conservatives because Labour's strength on the joint boards might have been disproportionate. The production by Rodney Gentry of a pamphlet entitled How We will get out of this mess without appearing disloyal encapsulates the judgment that for Conservatives abolition is worse than a crime; it is a blunder. The electoral damage in the 1986 borough elections and the predictable implementation difficulties will haunt the Thatcher government for the rest of its term of office.

Although both books exemplify the journalist's eye for the juicy quotable they missed what to my mind was the most priceless analysis of Streamlining the Cities, that of Roger Scruton. 'I doubt whether the Conservatives have thought of a more popular policy since the Factory Acts' wrote the emissary grise of the New Right in The Times, showing why he is employed as a philosopher rather than as a political scientist or historian. For arrogance and inaccuracy Scruton's errors are only matched by Ferdinand Mount's, the author of the Conservative Manifesto of 1953 who managed to write that abolition would 'return' to the boroughs functions which they had never had.

The skill and panache of the Livingston administration's conversion of public perceptions of both Livingstone and the GLC is acknowledged in both books. Naylor on Northern Ireland and misconceived by-elections apart, Livingstone's post-1982 leadership is a refutation of the defeatist argument that it is impossible to use the media and advertising in controlling the Conservative and central government, and arguing for socialism. Brian Wheel, although he argues for socialism, is not as professions as the administration he rightly favours. Some of his use of data merits inclusion in the next edition of The Use and Abuse of Statistics. For instance the May 1983 fare reductions and the Travelcard (admirable policies) are cited as leading to '3,000 fewer casualties on the road' (p. 44). Yes, but in comparison to what time period, and according to whom? The absence of references is not just an academic complaint. When due to alter people's judgements and only confirms the converted—the City Limits target audience— which makes it poor propaganda. Readers of the London Journal would be better advised to spend their spare change on Norman Fren, Steven Leach and Caryl Smell's Abolition or Reform? The GLC and the Metropolitan County Councils (George Allen & Unwin, 1983) to their access and generally judicious account of the GLC's record, with the added bonus of a useful bibliography.
perform its goals as a strategic metropolitan authority, the GLC was handicapped from its inception. Yet the authors neglect the inter-departmental conflicts in central government which also account for the demise of the GLC. The Treasury has wanted control over local government expenditure since 1929, and the weight of its pressure fortified by Leon Brittan led DoE officials to recommend abolition in the House of Commons as an organizational sacrifice. A means of avoiding the menacing step of rate capping. As it happened, both abolition and rate capping eventually found their way onto the agenda in another near-victory for the Treasury.

As a participant in the Greater London Group’s The Future of London Government project (R. Clegg et al. 1983, London School of Economics) I was especially interested in what both books had to say in the field of political and organizational analysis. Whet’s four pages on the future are very disappointing. After correctly dismissing the respective merits of a Grand Committee of London MPs, the London Boroughs association, the GLC Conservatives’ ideas for a circumscribed GLC and the LSD Alliance’s regionalism, Whet chooses to toss the current party site. There is little one can do but accept that the GLC’s present structure works pretty well... The immediate task is to save the GLC (p. 125). Forrester et al. give much more time to the possibilities of worlds without the GLC. Ken Young’s proposals for five large unitary superboroughs, which would be well resourced and carve up rich and poor, inner and outer London between them (a piece model is the age description) are analyzed and dismissed. They should indeed be dismissed, but mainly for a reason the authors neglect. There is no point in having local government if all units are to be roughly homogeneous in social composition, resources, and electoral outcomes. Policy diversity and experimentation is a prime value in a local government system, and Young’s plans would destroy such prospects for London. The ‘Son of Frankenstein’ model, as Mrs Thatcher dubbed the GLC Tories’ proposals, has already been rejected. Regionalist ‘two tier’ models of the Copenhagen, Strathclyde and the Marshall Report variety are also briefly adumbrated and analysed (pp. 170-181).

However, the most interesting proposal that could emerge from the government’s policy folly is the resurrection and reincarnation of the LCC as a unitary authority, with some appropriate boundary amendments. The death of the City of London, Westminster and certain other inner London boroughs is a consummation devoutly to be wished. A new LCC would have a resource base sufficient to tackle the problems of the inner metropolis and would not be too dependent upon the co-operation of the outer London boroughs. The only activity for which there is an unchallengeable case for a regional level integrated authority is transport. Transport policymaking should therefore be in the hands of a regional DELGO (directly elected single function local government organization) or in the hands of a directly accountable Ministry of Transport. Less vital metropolitan-wide policy areas can be governed through voluntary co-operation. A revived and refeshed LCC phoenix rising from the ashes of the GLC, through a Labour Government committed to local income tax and the liberation of local government, coupled with a firm commitment to neighbourhood deconcentration, is London’s best hope. With luck pseudo-nostalgia for the GLC will not obstruct such a possibility. Such a prescription for the future is unquestionably partisan. Yet Outer London Tories, freest of GLC interference would be free to pursue their vision of the good life in Bromley, Croydon and Kingston. Moreover, a revamped LCC is prescribed by Professor George Jones of the LSE (Forrester et al., p.69), but maybe that suggests that the biographer of Herbert Morrison is in the wrong party.