

# Metrocide — how London and Barcelona suffered a similar fate

**The similarities between the abolitions in London and Barcelona are as instructive as the contrasts they exhibit, reports Lecturer in Public Administration at the London School of Economics Brendan O'Leary and Senior Accountant with Hammersmith and Fulham LBC Lorelei Watson**

Abolishing metropolitan authorities is becoming infectious.

When the GLC was abolished on All Fools Day 1986 London became the only major EEC conurbation without a metropolitan authority. Now it is to be joined by Barcelona (met population 3,100,000), capital of Catalonia and Spain's primary industrial and commercial centre.

The Corporacio Metropolitana de Barcelona has been legally abolished and is awaiting implementation of its death sentence. The similarities between the abolition of the London and Barcelona authorities are as instructive as the contrasts they exhibit.

The administrative and managerial rationale provided by the executors — the British and Catalan Conservatives — was threadbare. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Catalan regional government leader President Pujol alleged met authorities were functionally redundant and obstacles to sound government.

Sr Pujol cited Mrs Thatcher's attack on the GLC as proof there was no strategic role for met authorities. Yet in both cities the elected authority is being replaced by quasi governmental agencies covering the entire met area, which undermines the administrative rationale for abolition.

Ken Livingstone and Pasquall Margall, respective leaders of the London and Barcelona socialists, both complained it was metropolitan democracy which their opponents considered redundant, rather than met functions.

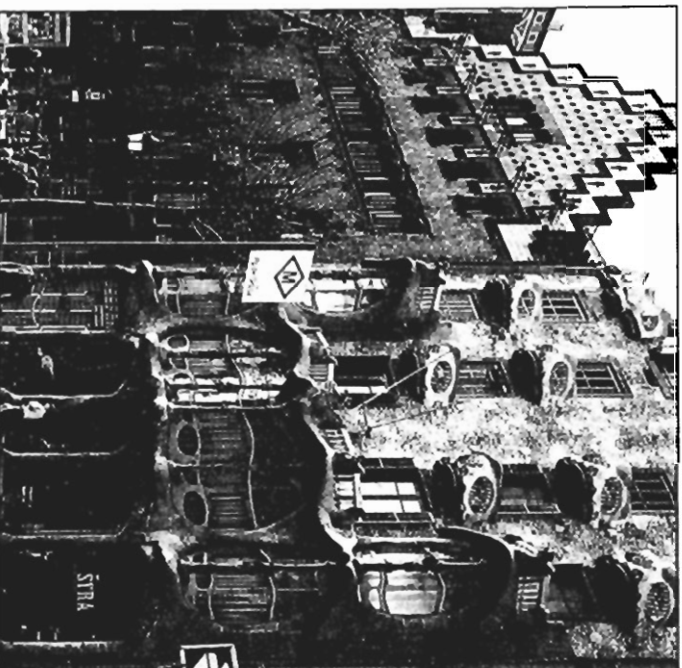
In both cities the met authority was vulnerable for several reasons: lack of salience among the electorate, little support from the local authorities in the built up areas, and hostility expressed by some inhabitants outside the metropolis — the rural areas of Catalonia and the suburbs of south east England.

In the two cities party political motivations underlay both the call for abolition and the subsequent restructuring of local government.

In London the Conservatives tried to abolish an election before they abolished the authority. They also isolated ILDEA as a special case, leaving it exposed to further reorganisations.

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In Barcelona the Conservatives are about to implement a gerrymander which will lead to the under representation of urban citizens in Catalan local authorities



of urban citizens in Catalan local authorities (a plan bearing a passing resemblance to the Conservatives' gerrymandering of British met government boundaries in 1972-74.

The met authorities were regarded with hostility by right wing ideologues in both countries.

British Conservatives regarded the GLC as an overspending, budget maximising authority, accusing it of trespassing into national policy making. The CMB, although not accused of wastefulness, was criticised by Pujol's party as being an undesirable, countervailing power to the regional government. It threatened the national unity of Catalonia.

## HOSTILE

Not surprisingly Barcelona socialists regarded this view as dangerously reminiscent of Francoist doctrine — which had been unremittingly hostile to all modes of political decentralisation.

Finally, in both cities the party political machinations and ideologically motivated assaults proved too powerful for the met authorities to successfully resist.

The GLC and the CMB both shared an ironic deathbed fate — they were never so popular as when they were about to be abolished. Citizens only began to learn about the functions they performed when their execution reached the political agenda.

While creating considerable embarrassment for their respective governments, opponents of abolition made tactical errors in both cities.

The Livingstone administration's decision to force GLC by elections, and the confusion created by their defence of 'local

socialism' (as opposed to the GLC) were gifts to central government.

But the Barcelona socialists' tactical error was more culpable. They at least had the opportunity to appeal to the Supreme Court for a ruling on the constitutionality of abolition. But they avoided possible criticism by bringing Madrid into Catalonia's affairs, thus sealing the fate of the CMB.

However, there are important contrasts between the London and Barcelona metrocides.

There was a major difference in scale between the two authorities. The GLC dwarfed the CMB which had only 450 staff — most of them professionals and graduates. There was no case for streamlining the city of Barcelona! In fact the CMB was similar to the small scale strategic planning unit desired as an alternative to the GLC by some London Conservatives.

The GLC was directly elected and made up of mayors from the municipalities.

Catalan Conservatives are unable to centralise any of the functions administered by the CMB. A provision in the Spanish constitution prevents regional governments taking powers from local governments. They can reorganise local governments but cannot usurp their functions — a powerful constitutional protection which defenders of local government in Britain would do well to contemplate.

They are politically, functionally and territorially insecure. Their political weaknesses stem from either direct election (in the case of the GLC) or indirect election (the CMB). When the met authority is directly elected it is vulnerable to being sandwiched between local governments

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and the higher tier of government. Despite its weakness it is regarded as highly dangerous by other tiers. By contrast, when indirectly elected it finds great difficulty in transcending parochial interests, and is invariably weaker than the nominating bodies.

Met authorities are functionally insecure because no one is certain which functions are appropriate for this tier, and the arguments for the monopoly and sharing of functions are equally compelling.

In London and Barcelona transport, waste and planning were regarded as met functions, but appropriate allocation of other functions was much debated — notably economic development, housing, education and culture. The argument for integration of functions — giving the met authority capacity to implement as well as plan — is finely balanced against the argument for sharing functions — it preserves local autonomy.

Finally, there is territorial uncertainty. Where do London or Barcelona begin or end? Should administrative units be constructed on the basis of historic communities, or on functional criteria such as the built up area or commuter zone.

## BOUNDARIES

The debates over the definition of London are mirrored in Barcelona. General Franco deliberately confined the city boundaries to a small area as punishment for its role in the civil war and to prevent its administrators becoming too ambitious, but since democratisation the definition of Barcelona has reached the political agenda again.

Despite the metrocides, arguments for metropolitan government remain convincing, ensuring its place on the political agenda.

The administrative case for met authorities is based first on the recognition of significant managerial interdependencies in the metropolises — especially in land use, planning, industrial location and public transport; second, on the value of coordination as opposed to counter-productive competition; and third, on the usefulness of a critical mass of professional experts in policy analysis who can provide a strategic planning capability.

The political arguments rest on two considerations. Justice requires financial equalisation in the metropolises and democracy requires citizens to be able to control those met level issues which are not appropriately left to the market.

These debating points are likely to ensure met resurrections are as regular as metrocides.

Brendan O'Leary has studied GLC abolition in more detail in *Why was the GLC abolished? International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 194-217, and *British Farce, French Drama and Tales of Two Cities: Explaining the Reorganisation of Paris and London Governments, 1957-86, Public Administration*, 65, 4: 367-389.

## management

The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives has circulated a consultation document to all its branches inviting comment on a committee's conclusion on what the society should be about.

More importantly, members are asked to respond on what they would like to be. It is an important question because the good such societies could do is significant. If they cannot be justified, the waste of time and effort is equally significant.

Chief executing is not a profession. Its skills relate to getting the best out of others and that is about giving excellent leadership. These are not the skills of a single profession.

Chief officer societies exist mainly to support their members. To appeal, however, they must go beyond that and ask — support to do what?

Organisations such as SOLACE often compare themselves with CIPFA and societies such as those for civil engineers. These comparisons will have a predictably depressing result — they are the wrong comparitors. Such organisations recruit the entire profession, they are long established, well financed and well organised to influence government and other bodies.

More reasonable comparitors are organisations like the Society of County Treasurers, the Society of Chief Personnel Officers and so on.

One innovation proposed for the 1990s is to suggest a mission statement for the society based on the US equivalent of SOLACE.

A mission statement cannot be plucked out of the air by a committee or an individual. A mission is derived from a vision of a desired future and a set of values from which choices are made.

When there is understanding about vision and values a mission statement provides a convenient shorthand. It reminds all those in an organisation of the complexity of understanding to which they subscribe. Albeit that any vision is evolving and values developing. If a mission statement is not based on understood vision and values it may appear trite or dry, and it will certainly belong to someone else.

A reason people may go straight to missionary statements is the vulnerability of trading in areas of values. To try to express in the simplest terms a set of beliefs will leave an individual open to rebuttal or ridicule.

But what could be a better basis for an exchange between men and women who want to be a part of a society of equals. What better basis to determine the nature of a society than to risk describing a vision of its future success.

**By Brian McAndrew,  
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A set of values for a society of chief executives might include:

- a commitment to courageous leadership based on the understanding of the needs of customers and the choices of elected members
- a personal commitment to local democracy
- a belief in the genius of human beings and their near limitless potential
- an acceptance of a responsibility for the development of others
- a responsibility to maintain and develop their own skills and knowledge
- a commitment to leading the creation of learning, developing, achieving and energetic communities
- a belief that work should be joyful and fulfilling
- an undertaking to create organisations that send people home in better condition than they arrive
- a responsibility for the efficient, effective and economical use of resources
- a duty to promote a good image of the council to its customers, employees and the media
- a belief in maintaining excellent communication
- a fearless commitment to the highest standards of integrity and probity
- a belief that authorities should have a chief executive officer as the unambiguous head of the paid service
- a belief that chief executives should be selected on the basis of their managerial achievement and future potential without any irrelevant reference to age, sex, race or party political affiliation.

A discussion on a set of values might surface the subterranean feelings about whether traditionally selected chief executives can work with a new breed of chief executive, whose selection includes party political affiliation.

The authors have put time and effort into providing a foundation document.

The members of the society can respond and build a model of a society for themselves in the 1990s.

It might even provide a model for others, which is what leadership is all about.

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