Metroide — 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 constitution 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 executioners — the British and Catalan Conservatives — was threefold. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Catalan regional government leader President Puig alleged met authorities were functionally redundant and obstacles to sound government.

Sr Puig 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 ILEA as a special case, leaving it exposed to further reorganisations.

In Barcelona the Catalan Conservatives are about to implement a gerrymander which will lead to the under-representation 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 over-spending, budget maximising authority, accusing it of tampering into national policy making. The CMB, although not accused of wastefulness, was criticised by Puig'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 unerringly 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 death-sentence: 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 from bringing Madrid into Catalonia's affairs, thus sealing the fate of the CMB.

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

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 whereas the CMB was indirectly elected and made up of mayors from the municipalities.

Catalan Conservatives are unable to centralise any of the functions administered by the CMB. A proviso in the Spanish constitution prevents regional governments taking powers from local governments. They can reorganise local governments but not 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. Continued on page 18
Management

It has been agreed that a clear transition period is in place for the implementation of the new system. The implementation of the system requires a concerted and coordinated effort from all relevant parties.

The transition period is designed to ensure that all aspects of the new system are fully operational. It involves the following key elements:

1. A comprehensive review of current processes and systems.
2. Identification of areas requiring improvement.
4. Training of staff on new systems and processes.
5. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the transition period.

The transition period will be managed by a dedicated team, consisting of representatives from all relevant departments. The team will be responsible for ensuring that all aspects of the transition period are carried out effectively.

The transition period is expected to last for 12 months. During this period, regular updates will be provided to all stakeholders. Any issues or concerns will be addressed promptly.

Chief Executive

By [Name]

Bonaparte

The Bonaparte Group is committed to maintaining high standards of operational excellence. In line with this commitment, the implementation of new systems is a priority. The transition period is an opportunity to improve processes and systems, ensuring that the organization remains competitive and efficient.

Over the course of the transition period, the following key areas will be addressed:

1. Streamlining of processes to reduce waste and improve efficiency.
2. Enhancement of customer service through the implementation of new systems.
3. Development of a robust training program for staff.
4. Introduction of new technology to support business operations.
5. Ongoing evaluation of the transition period to ensure continuous improvement.

The transition period is a critical stage in the development of our organization. We are committed to ensuring that all aspects of the transition period are carried out effectively, and that the organization emerges stronger and more efficient as a result.