

# The Execution of the GLC: A Policy Folly?\*

D. B. O'LEARY

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 complex, time consuming and counterproductive by both Michael Heseltine and Tom King, Patrick Jenkin's predecessors at the Department of the Environment, and by William Whitelaw, chair of the cabinet committee MISC 79 which offered abolition as a 'sop' 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 – presupposing, of course, that it had well defined objectives. 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 Jenkin. 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 Forrester and his colleagues, and Francis Wheen have written racy journalistic narratives on the 'battle for London' which support my 'policy folly' interpretation. Both books provide good evidence for the view that 'administrative rationality' has not motivated 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 candidates for functional redundancy are the elected councillors and the central GLC administration. It is becoming evident that any 'savings' which will accrue from the reorganization will come from rate, precept and manpower capping, and from what 'Blue' Ken (Baker) euphemistically calls 'policy 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 LONDON JOURNAL will be aware, even if one agreed that the GLC is functionally redundant in terms of its original objectives, the *Marshall Report* of 1978, commissioned by Horace Cutler, unambiguously concluded that a strengthening of the metropolitan tier 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 agitprop, composed in haste with the aid of the GLC's research library and Pluto Press, often makes this *faux pas*. 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 word to say about Thamesmead, 'one of the GLC's major achievements in housing' (p. 75). Quite so, is the appropriate response for those who know something about London housing or have been to Thamesmead. Forrester *et al.*, relying heavily on the work of Ken Young, provide a correspondingly better account of the conflicts over

\*A. FORRESTER, S. LANSLEY and R. PAULLEY, *Beyond our Ken: A guide to the battle for London*, Fourth Estate, 1985, 208 pages, illustrations, index £4.95. FRANCIS WHEEN, *The Battle for London*, Pluto Press, 1985, 128 pages, illustrations, index, £1.95.

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

Both books, despite the *prima 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 elites versus Labour elites 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 conservatism espoused by Roger Scruton and the aptly titled *Salisbury 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 Tiebout and Public Choice models of optimum local government. However, the reorganization maintains GLC functions in public administration, pleasing neither the Scrutonites nor the hyper-privatisers. Moreover, the creation and expansion of QGAs (quasi-governmental agencies), and QUELGOS (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 Jenkin's botched attempt both to cancel the GLC elections due for 1985, and his gerrymandering proposals – which might have caused even Ulster Unionists to blush – thrown 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 Gent of a pamphlet entitled *How do we get out of this mess without appearing disloyal?* encapsulates nicely the judgement 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 quotation they missed what to my mind was the most priceless analysis of *Sreamlining the Cities*, that of Roger Scruton. 'I doubt whether the Conservatives have thought of a more popular policy since the Factory Acts' wrote the *eminence 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 1983 who managed to write that abolition would 'return to the boroughs functions which they had never had.'

The skill and panache of the Livingstone administration's conversion of public perceptions of both Livingstone and the GLC is acknowledged in both books. Naïvety on Northern Ireland and miscalculated 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 confronting the Conservatives and central government, and arguing for socialism. Francis Wheen, although he argues for socialism, is not as professional 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. Wheen does little to alter people's judgements and only confirms the con-verted – 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 Flynn, Steve Leach and Carol Vielba's *Abolition or Reform? The GLC and the Metropolitan County Councils* (George Allen & Unwin, 1985) if they want an accessible and generally judicious account of the GLC's record, with the added bonus of a useful bibliography.

Flynn *et al.*, Forrester *et al.* and Wheen are aware of the significance of inter-organizational politics in making the GLC vulnerable: Sandwiched between central government and the boroughs, without the political, professional, administrative, financial and jurisdictional independence to

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 to Heseltine as an organizational sacrifice, a means of avoiding the more drastic step of rate capping. As it happened, both abolition and ratecapping eventually found their way onto the agenda in another myopic victory for the Treasury.

As a participant in the Greater London Group's *The Future of London Government* project (T. Clegg *et al.* 1985, London School of Economics) I was especially interested in what both books had to say in the field of political and organizational astrology. Wheen'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, Wheen chooses to toe the current party line. 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 *pizza* model is the apt description) are analysed 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 virtue 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, Strathelyde 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 reformation 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 refreshed 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, freed 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.*, p169), but maybe that suggests that the biographer of Herbert Morrison is in the wrong party.