

Goodbye to the GLC

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The GLC's achievement under Ken Livingstone was remarkable. It became a genuinely popular local authority - something unknown to Londoners prior to 1981.

NOW THAT WE'RE saying goodbye to the GLC, it's worth reminding ourselves of life before the Left took power at County Hall. The Livingstone administration didn't come out of nowhere - it represented an attempt to learn from and at the same time break with forms of political administration associated with the grand old godfather of local government, Herbert Morrison.

The old GLC and LCC were the embodiment of the Morrisonian tradition. The organising principle was the management of local government, and the motto was the excellence of that management. The management, the Labour party, was to produce excellent administration and services for the clients who were the public. For labour it historically achieved the entrenchment of that client relationship with the party's public. It never empowered the people, but it produced at its best well-managed services which for a period were renowned throughout Britain and even internationally.

What started to undermine that tradi-

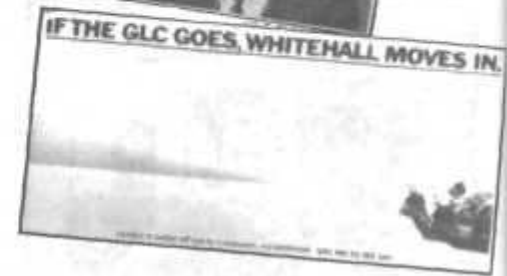
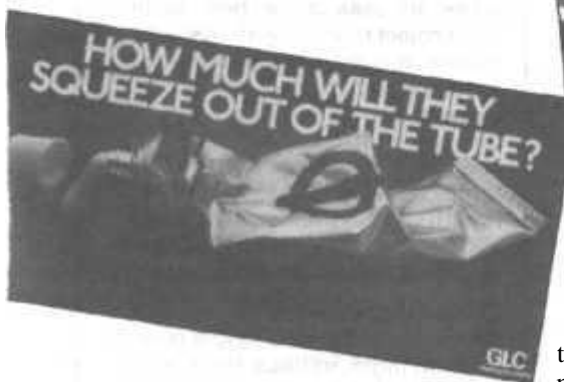
tion was the financial crisis that began to envelop local government in the late 60s and 70s. Labour's old relationship with its constituency began to fall apart in that period. Disillusionment and unrest characterised the cities and was completely unrepresented by Labour. Indeed, Labour in local government was the

Class of 81

problem for ordinary people in many cities. Labour's County Hall administration hit that crisis just like everybody else, its 1973-7 council failing miserably to deliver on its main promises. In 1977 a neo-Thatcherite regime was elected to County Hall. It set about splattering the elaborate Morrisonian local government structure. The housing function started to be redistributed to the boroughs and the frontiers of this strategic state authority were rolled back. Meanwhile, in opposition, the Left in the GLC Labour group dug itself deep into

ment, the Vietnam campaign or wherever. Their view of local government had been radicalised by writings like those of Cynthia Cockburn on the local state and *Red Bologna*.

Because they hadn't lived their lives entirely in the Labour party moreover, they had a different relationship to the Left. They weren't those Labour godfathers who hate everybody who's not in the Labour party. They were people



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the London Labour party, and found a new generation of candidates to stand in the 1981 election. The 1981 GLC election produced the class of 81.

It was a very different kind of Labour group, populated by a new kind of Labour activist. They were people who had often acquired political skills and ideas from outside the administration of local government - through feminism, community politics, the student move-

whose political life had encompassed alliances with Communists, with feminists, with trotskyists, with anarchists and Liberals. They were at least conscious of the new left politics of the 60s and 70s which was outside traditional parties. And therefore they didn't suffer from the same degree of sectarian resentment and fear.

The class of 81 was confronted with taking charge of an enormous institution in which they had to learn very quickly the skills of political administration. Most of them had, at most, previously been



local councillors. But because the political project was one they were very optimistic and brave about, they did not buckle in the face of the task. They had a manifesto that was extremely detailed and which had been unusually widely discussed, not least because the London media, particularly the *Standard*, had made a red scare out of it.

Now having a detailed, and much discussed, manifesto, doesn't in itself get you very far. Labour's 1983 general election manifesto had the same virtues. **But** it was in part an albatross. The 1981 one wasn't - because it was genuinely new, it grasped the realities it needed to confront, it glimpsed into the future, it wasn't a prisoner of the past. It was a beginning, it released energies, stimulated creativity, gathered momentum.

A strategic authority

What gave the GLC the extraordinary room for manoeuvre that it has ingeniously capitalised upon was that it was no ordinary local council. Indeed it wasn't

local at all. It was a relatively rich strategic authority, performing the elaborate functions of metropolitan management.

Its responsibilities ranged from the South Bank high culture complex - now visited by a million more people a year because of the GLC's popularisation plans - to traffic lights. Consequently it was able to stand back and ask the big questions: about the culture of the city and who has access to what, who benefits from the subsidy that we give to the opera houses? Or, for example, do we want a city in which we get clogged up constantly by the private car and big lorries, or a cheap fares policy that is going to liberate the city from traffic congestion and also make it a place which working class people who live ten miles from the city centre can enjoy? Once feminism began to

the GLC felt unmistakably of the 80s

course through the committees they confronted problems like: what makes the city dangerous for women, how could it become a women's city, what would 'safe transport' mean, what were the political needs of mothers, what was the consequence of heterosexism?

There was another factor that 'liber-

ated' the GLC, a negative one, a power that by and large it didn't have. Unlike most local authorities, it had very little housing in its command. Therefore it was unencumbered by what, above all, has discredited and ground down Labour local authorities: their authoritarian and undemocratic relationships to their constituents expressed through landlordism.

The GLC's position as a strategic authority had an added twist - London is the capital city. That at once made the GLC an institution of national importance. County Hall stares at the House of Commons across the Thames. The GLC had authority over national institutions on the South Bank and elsewhere. It had to get its mind around a city in which people not only worked and lived but also visited in their millions. London Transport caters not only for the people who live in London but also for many tourists. One thing the GLC never did, in this context, was to play off, in a shabby and philistine way, London as a capital and cosmopolitan centre, against the London of Londoners. Indeed, it did the opposite. It sought to make them work better together. This recognition of London as a capital was intimately linked to its recognition of London's cosmopolitanism, one of the most ethnically diverse cities in Europe. Previously, Labour had largely ignored this. Now it tried to profile London as it was, in all its diversity, new and old. This had another

effect. It allowed the GLC to plug into the many powerful radical traditions that London has - be they associated with its ethnic communities or its position as a great artistic and cultural centre, or whatever. There is a *radical* London which the GLC explored and gave expression to in contrast to those London traditions which the Tories have traditionally profited: the Queen, Buckingham Palace, the city, the Guards etc.

Cheap fares

Undoubtedly the issue which galvanised the GLC was the cheap fares policy. It was this issue which *made* the GLC popular, which struck a chord with millions of Londoners. And it wasn't just about cheaper travel. It was about rebuilding the commuter's relationship to the public transport system; about the crisis of traffic in London which is chronic; about democratising the city so that if you live in the working class suburbs of the outer perimeter, then central London is not unreachable; about having pleasure in the city rather than it being inaccessible because of cost. In short, how to make the city belong to the people again, how to make it more egalitarian, how to restructure it.

This was the turning point for the administration, the moment it became popular. Up to that point the GLC had been identified with the IRA and support for gays. Almost overnight that changed. It reminded people why they'd voted for it. What is more, the Tory and judicial response reinforced this. In trying to undermine the policy, and then subsequently turn London Transport into a quango, the Tories were seen as anti-London, and the GLC as pro-London. This was the moment when people became not just sympathetic to the GLC but actually began to be partisan about it, not pro-Labour, but pro-GLC, pro-London, a state of affairs which was consummated subsequently in the anti-abolition campaign.

The grants policy

A very innovative feature of the GLC was its grants policy. A disproportionate amount of the GLC's resources came from the rich boroughs and the City. The GLC sought to redistribute these resources, partly to the poor inner-city boroughs and partly to groups to do things themselves. In this latter context, it hugely expanded the voluntary sector, that whole army of

agencies that house the homeless, provide facilities for the disabled, assist black and poor people's community organisations, fund play groups for kids and help sports clubs. At the very moment when the voluntary sector was being asset-stripped by the cuts, the GLC moved in and picked up the tab.

In supporting the voluntary sector, the GLC recognised that it was much better to allow groups to organise their own nurseries, if that's what they wanted to do. It allowed for the factor of self-determination, a quality of the voluntary sector which the Left has never really understood.

What the GLC did was develop a new concept of the relationship between the state and the voluntary sector. Thatcherism is strongly pro-voluntary sector, at least in rhetoric, and anti-statist. The Morrisonian tradition sees at best an essentially paternalist relationship between the state and the voluntary sector. In contrast, the GLC was pro-state and pro-voluntary sector, for a new symbiotic partnership. This was powerful stuff because it denied Thatcherism the high ground in the argument about initiative, enterprise and decentralisation. The GLC responded to the challenge in a way the Left has generally failed to do, to create a positive pro-state, pro-public solution. 'Do it for yourself doesn't belong to the Left, but in the context of London it does. Instead of seeing the state - in this case the local state - as the fount of all things good and positive, the GLC saw the state in part as enabling the voluntary sector, as resourcing people in their own things, in being creative, in having an identity. Put more theoretically, the GLC was pro-civil society not just pro-state. That's a

the politicians learnt from *Red Bologna*

powerful potion, especially in London where civil society is highly developed, a dense and rich undergrowth of activities and organisations.

New constituencies

In its preparedness to see and profile London as it is, the GLC began to identify new constituencies previously unrecognised and buried by Labour's politics. The GLC's politics were heterogeneous. In a unique way, it crossed the boundaries of the Left's agenda. This was not least

because of Ken - not only because of brilliant PR, but because of the issues which changed the political universe Londoners live in. It was Ken's commitment to causes like Sinn Fein and sexual politics which caused seizures not only in the media but in his own Labour group. Contrary to myth they actually made Labour more representative of Londoners. He broke with myopic notions of political majorities based on minimal and inoffensive programmes, by facing Labour's traditional support base with the lives of those it had shunned. He's been the only politician who's dared utter the kind of closet common sense that comments like 'well, we're all bisexual really' express.

For the first time, the cause and culture of gays and lesbians in London became associated with Labour. It identified gays and lesbians as *citizens* with civil rights, rather than deviants who were a civic nuisance. That was confirmed in the growing consciousness within the GLC itself, prompted by lesbian staff who challenged the limits of Livingstone's civil rights approach, that gays and lesbians were in fact citizens who subsidised the heterosexual community and got nothing but aggravation in return. It was an extraordinary moment for gays to feel that coming out wasn't simply a personal moral imperative, but that straight politicians were identifying with it too.

This *dynamic* within the GLC also applied to feminism and the ethnic minorities. The GLC discovered these areas as it went along. By establishing and heavily funding equal opportunities and ethnic minority units it enabled its own politics to expand and grow. These units - albeit with much struggle - came to inform other areas, including internal staffing policies (the atmosphere at County Hall was genuinely multiracial in a quite new way); the introduction of contract compliance (for the first time in Britain, and evidence of the GLC's progressive eclecticism, the idea being imported from the US), or arts policy (the GLC's cultural repertoire stretching from family fun days on the Thames, through a women's open-day at County Hall to the black experience festival).'

The GLC thereby began to define a new agenda. It not only resurrected the politics of rates and redistribution which had been buried by Labour's pessimism and Callaghan's sub-Thatcherism in the 1970s. It began to outline a new set of

priorities - gender, race, sexuality - which will surely be a central part of the agenda of the 90s. And here was Labour actually taking responsibility for them, rather than assuming they are not political and thereby assigning this responsibility to other movements and organisations.

Now if Labour was to renew itself in London, it had no choice but to seek out

it broke with myopic notions of political majorities

and define these new constituencies, and interest groups. The traditional labour movement, and its old core constituencies are very weak in London. The manufacturing base is very small. The major sources of employment are increasingly the finance, administrative, service and cultural sectors. There now are but a handful of dockers. The printworkers face a not so dissimilar future. The old labour movement, in that sense, is becoming increasingly marginal. The trade union movement is very disparate - and the culture of the 'newer' unions is as yet less 'political' than the older traditions, being confined almost exclusively to the workplace. The GLC was thus obliged to break out and seek new relationships with a range of diverse constituencies, old and new.

Here, there and everywhere

To reach and define these constituencies, the GLC had to explore new forms of communication and style as well as policy. Livingstone was the epitome, a popular figure whom everyone could relate to, as at home on a tv chat show as at a Labour party meeting, Mr London no less. The GLC used press advertising and the billboards, hosted a plethora of popular entertainment, and had that GLC motif everywhere, from the Thames Barrier to the South Bank, from Crystal Palace to the London marathon. This visibility helped define the GLC in a different way, making it integral to the life of the city.

It also had a wider meaning. As new forms of communication have come to characterise life in the city - be it tv, press advertising, the billboards, or the plethora of entertainment - the labour movement has by and large failed to respond. It is invisible. Its cultural emphasis has remained backdated, out of time. Trade unions hardly exist outside the workplace. The Labour party as a

party - as distinct from an administration - is mainly out of sight. This cultural absence makes the labour movement feel of the 40s or 50s. The GLC, on the other hand, felt unmistakably of the 80s. This absence of the labour movement serves to accentuate the fact that the emblems on the hoardings, in sports sponsorship or on tv are those overwhelmingly of the market, be it cornflakes or petrol. The labour movement, in absenting itself, has reinforced the market image as the modern image. There are exceptions of course, like CND and Greenpeace. But the GLC - with its pots of gold - was the exception *par excellence*. The advertising was not confined to abolition. They ran a long campaign for London as a nuclear-free zone. It was as sophisticated as commercial advertising but the images could hardly have been more contrasting.

Abolition

The abolition of the metropolitan councils, including the GLC, was contained in the 1983 Tory manifesto. Its inclusion at the time may well have had something to do with the early 'panics' about the IRA, gays and so on. But at root it was the use of the resources of the biggest local authority in Britain to support a new kind of radicalism that excited abolition. The whole cultural enterprise - the new social base that was being constructed, from the transport policy to the recruitment of women and black people to the fire brigade - was anathema to the Tories. But because the GLC had quite consciously plugged into what the city actually was, by putting all those bits of the life of the city that had previously been seen as non-political into the political agenda, it held the high-ground in the argument. The issue was defined not in party terms (the London Tories could not support abolition and found themselves hopelessly marginalised) but in terms of how London was going to be run. That was not simply an issue of 'us in the Labour party', but 'us running the GLC, an administration which you're involved in and interested in, and we're protecting from what they're trying to do'.

In the 1983 general election, the Tories argued the abolition case on the grounds of efficiency and economy. The GLC fought the issue on the needs and rights of London. It traded brilliantly on the scandal of losing your vote, together with people's pessimism about Whitehall and Westminster's lassitude in administra-

tion. In practice, the efficiency and economy argument was rapidly sidelined. It was replaced by a different priority, that of democracy. When that happened, the Tories lost the argument. This was a great achievement in two senses. Firstly, the power of Thatcherism has been its ability to set the political agenda and the weakness of the Left has been its failure to do that, its constant adjustment and adaptation to the agenda of the radical Right. Secondly, one of the issues on which the Left has got such a caning since 1979 is democracy, the trade unions being the notable example. For the GLC to seize the banner of democracy and use it against Thatcher was a remarkable feat.

The GLC fought the anti-abolition campaign in a style which matched the argument. From the outset the appeal was to virtually everyone, and certainly cross-party. Much of the advertising campaign targetted Tory voters in particular. Immediately after the 1983 election, Livingstone did fringe meetings at the Liberal, SDP and Tory party conferences in the autumn. This was at a time when sectarianism was at a high-water mark on the Labour Left, especially in its attitude towards the SDP. A later incident is worth recalling here. Livingstone and a number of others resigned to fight

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by-elections as a sort of popular plebiscite on abolition. The Tories didn't stand but the Alliance did. When Livingstone was asked on tv, 'what happens if the Alliance wins and Labour is defeated', he replied to the effect that, 'it doesn't matter, because whatever happens an anti-abolition candidate will win'. This was dead against the grain of much left thinking which sees such cross-party attitudes either as a dilution of socialist politics or as unprincipled compromise. The GLC never made that mistake, never reduced the fight to defend a democratic right to a party interest. And ultimately, of course, the Labour GLC was the prime beneficiary of this approach. Eventually all the streams and tributaries flowed into the Labour administration at the GLC. All other political forces in London were marginalised. The net effect of this campaign with everything else was to make Labour truly popular in London. This, in retrospect, was remarkable. In

1979, the idea that Labour - in the shape of the GLC - would be popular in London by the mid-80s was a dream. It turned out to be one of those rare dreams that actually come true.

And the problems . . .

We also need to strike a critical note here however. The two great *causes celebres* of the GLC - cheap fares and abolition - won popular support in London. But on neither were people really actively mobilised. Take widespread cheap fares. Once the matter was out of the realms of the courts, and the council chamber, what kind of direct action could workers and commuters in the city take to defend a policy which was popular with both? What became apparent was nothing. In fact the worst thing happened, which was that action by either - the users or the producers of the service - appeared to be in conflict with the interests of the other. Strike action hit the commuters, not paying the fare hurt the workers. Nobody solved the problem. It was a sad ending.

This raises a wider question though. The GLC defined, sensitised, inspired new constituencies of support - ethnic

groups, women, gays and lesbians, arts groups, transport users. It fashioned a new progressive coalition. But two things proved problematic in this enterprise and were never resolved, the Labour party and the trade unions. The Labour party remained essentially external to these developments, it did not feature as an active agent in the processes we have been describing and was never transformed by them. Likewise, the trade unions outside County Hall never found a new place, a new role for themselves. The politicians learnt from *Red Bologna*, but the trade unions didn't. In short, the GLC, an administration, was transformed, the labour movement was not.

This problem was clearly expressed in the rate-capping debacle. The GLC's attitude was no better than the boroughs. It fell for the same kind of rhetoric; an exaggeration of the imminent consequences, a completely unrealistic expectation of the kind of support that would be forthcoming from people on the ground. Livingstone appeared on a platform saying the people of London would bring London to a standstill. Unlike the fares issue, where they didn't go for anything

they knew they couldn't pull off, the rate-capping campaign became shrouded in ultra-left rhetoric. Rate-capping required a long and subtle campaign, but they did the opposite, and it got bogged down in a hard left mentality. Now one of the reasons for this was that the rate-capping campaign wasn't just the GLC, it was all the London Labour authorities. It therefore reflected the currents in and temperature of the London Labour party more generally. It was a reminder of what hadn't changed, of the failure of wider reconstruction.

Be that as it may, the GLC stands as the *greatest* achievement of the labour movement since 1979. It shows what can be done. Creativity and imagination have been in desperately short supply in the labour movement, the GLC had bags. And look where it got them. Ken is London. Where are London's Tories and the Alliance now? We've had a glimpse of what the future can be - and it doesn't depend on a constant trimming of the sails. GLC - thanks, and we'll miss you. •

¹ Another important area of innovation, economic policy, is not considered here.

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◀ It's a sad day if proprietors can only think of introducing new technology by forcing people out of the door ▶
Harry Conroy, NUJ

◀ In the absence of right of reply legislation, trade unions in the national papers have stepped in time and time again when the press are printing downright lies. Without a union presence, that's going to go ▶
Brenda Dean, SOGAT '82

◀ What we have with the electricians is collusion, subterfuge, and a deliberate attempt to undermine the conditions and indeed the employment of print workers. ▶
Tony Dubbins, NGA

