The new government of London

London government is subject to continuous pressure for reform. More than a decade after the Greater London Council was abolished, there is a strong political pressure - supported by opinion poll findings - for a new system of government for the capital. The existing system is both complex and politically weak. New partnership arrangements have filled some gaps in the governmental arrangements but cannot be seen as a substitute for effective government. Recent research by Tony Travers and George Jones of the Greater London Group, LSE, analyses the present system and considers the main options for reform.

f London's system of government is fragmented, complicated and unstable. It is almost inevitable that the present arrangements will be reformed within a few years.

f Given its complex and often unaccountable nature, however, the system of London government works surprisingly well.

f New arrangements, for example a Cabinet sub-committee for London, have been put in place since 1992 which tacitly accept the need for more co-ordination and governmental power in the capital.

f Existing institutions, including boroughs, joint committees and appointed boards all stand to lose power if and when a new mayor and/or authority is created for London.

f A directly elected mayor for London could add significantly to the visibility of the capital and would provide a sharp focus for the civic feelings of Londoners.

f A mayor and city-wide authority for London would only be effective if they were given financial and political freedom to deliver effective public provision.

JR JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION

Although it is now more than a decade since the abolition of the Greater London Council (GLC), a debate about how best to run the capital continues. Powerful arguments have been put forward for changes to the existing system of London government. The most important criticisms or proposals for change are:

- the need for a London-wide local authority and/or mayor;

- the lack of direct democratic accountability (to Londoners) for many public services provided in the capital;

- over-use of appointed boards and *ad hoc* bodies;

- poor standards of service provision in some boroughs;

- a lack of co-ordination of land use and transport provision;

- failure to tackle many key social and economic problems, for lack of resources and/or political capacity.

The boroughs

While there have been no radical proposals to reform the boroughs in recent years, there have been changes to the ways in which they operate within the overall system of London government: individual boroughs have become involved in London-wide initiatives, some borough leaders have assumed a visible role in London-wide politics, while there is now a single local authority association embracing all boroughs and the City.

Once the decision had been made to abolish the GLC, it was inevitable that the political power of the boroughs would be enhanced. For the first time since 1855 there was no upper-tier city-wide authority in London. Boroughs inherited a number of functions from the GLC and, in 1990 in inner London, from the Inner London Education Authority. For inner London in particular the abolitions of 1986 and 1990 left their authorities in an historically powerful position within the political system. It is most unlikely that, having developed such an enhanced position, the boroughs would easily revert to their previous low-key role.

Inter-borough co-operation and joint committees

London-wide - and part London-wide - committees have operated with surprising effectiveness and growing political consensus during the 1990s. Nevertheless, London is almost certainly the world capital of joint committees. Many important metropolitan governance functions are left to the whim of voluntary (or near-voluntary) joint arrangements.

The London-wide borough-controlled committees are a factor that will have to be taken into account when and if London government is reformed. Boroughs might object to any proposal to transfer control over, say, planning advice, research or parking regulation to a mayor or London-wide elected authority with a separate electoral mandate. Virtually any political institution threatened with abolition (or change) will want to protect its existing power-base. Moreover, some of the functions now performed by London-wide borough-controlled committees, for example, the provision of planning advice, would probably continue to be of direct interest to the boroughs.

Central government and London

Whitehall has many direct responsibilities for the government of London. It appoints the board members of bodies such as London Transport. It is the police authority and the strategic planning authority for the capital. The muddle of Whitehall-appointed boards and agencies remains difficult to understand and virtually impossible to hold to account.

The Government has tacitly accepted the validity of criticisms about fragmentation in London government by making a number of reforms to the Whitehall machinery in the years since 1992. New institutions have been created, including a Cabinet Sub-Committee for London, a Minister of Transport for London, a Transport Working Group, the Government Office for London (GOL) and the business-led promotional body London First. In addition, the Secretary of State for the Environment has assumed the title of Minister for London.

The Government Office for London is headed by a Regional Director, sounding rather like a *Préfet de la Thames*. Yet GOL does not have control over many important aspects of public provision in London (i.e. the health service, revenue grants to local authorities) or over funding for such key organisations as London Transport or the Highways Agency. GOL's budget (just over £1 billion) represents only a fraction of total government spending in London.

Ministerial departments are still responsible directly for many of the most important policy decisions affecting London. However, GOL's capacity to represent London within Whitehall has been of benefit to the capital. Over issues such as the Millennium Exhibition and the location of the new national sports stadium, GOL has played a leading representative role, fighting for the capital. But GOL is not and could never be an effective regional authority. It lacks the powers, the resource base and the democratic legitimacy to undertake such functions.

Non-government agencies and partnerships

A further distinctive feature of London government arrangements since 1992 has been the emergence of partnerships. The most important development was the creation of London First, a 'growth coalition', bringing together leading London-focused businesses, the boroughs and the voluntary sector.

London First has developed as an all-embracing institution. It has acted in a number of ways, including facilitating new partnerships, funding research, publishing strategy documents, holding social events and taking a high profile - on London's behalf - in the media. London First has co-ordinated initiatives such as the London Pride Partnership, which in turn has advised the Cabinet sub-committee for London through the Joint London Advisory Panel (JLAP).

Partnerships are not unique to London, but the perceived lack of strong, city-wide, government in the capital has proved the catalyst for partnerships to be formed at neighbourhood, borough, sub-regional and London-wide levels.

Bodies such as London First, the London Pride Partnership, the Association of London Government and the Government Office for London have, working together, formed a 'Grand London Coalition' - a new 'GLC'. However, partnerships are not - as they are sometimes seen in London - a substitute for effective governmental action.

A lack of political power in London

London is a city with much government but relatively little political power, particularly for matters that cross borough boundaries. While this contrast has been true in the past, the demands of a modern, advanced democracy make the failures of weak and fragmented government more important than before. Fragmentation of government - and the lack of effective political power that goes with such a system - is now worse than in the past. The recent creation of new London-wide committees and

boards, the growth of new Whitehall involvement and the rapid development of partnerships together suggest there is a power vacuum.

Possible reforms

Two distinct approaches to the future reform of London government have emerged. The first, put forward by the Conservatives, involves little or no change from the current arrangements. The second, supported by Labour and the Liberal Democrats, would create a new London-wide elected authority. Labour has recently proposed a directly elected mayor in addition to an authority.

Reform of London government could strengthen a system that is currently very weak and where there is a serious lack of capacity to achieve policy objectives. The jungle of borough joint committees, appointed boards, government departments and looser partnership-type bodies is ripe for rationalisation. At the very least, more power needs to be built into the system of London government.

The main reasons given for the creation of a new authority and/or mayor are:

- to provide a 'voice' for London;

- to introduce local democratic control to a number of public services currently provided by government agencies, joint bodies and departments;

- to increase the capacity of London government to achieve particular policy objectives;

- to override local, parochial, interests for the good of the capital as a whole.

In deciding which provision would best be administered by an upper tier of London government, three tests would need to be applied: is the service most appropriately administered on a London-wide basis? Can funding and control reasonably take place outside Whitehall? Are the powers and resources of the upper tier of London government sufficient to ensure effective provision?

On the assumption that London were to have a directly elected mayor with a separately elected city-wide authority, it would be necessary to determine the functions for which the upper tier would be responsible and what the respective duties of the mayor and authority would be.

The mayor would be likely to initiate appointments to all boards and chief officer posts, though subject to approval or consultation with the

city council.   Thus the mayor could be a relatively strong or weak individual, depending on the extent to which he or she could act free of constraint by the city council (this would also apply to the budget). Budget-setting would be likely to be in the hands of the mayor in a mayor-and-authority system, though subject either to a veto or consultation with the authority.

A reforming government would face the problem that the present system of local government finance in Britain, where local authorities have little freedom over revenue or capital spending, would risk rendering any mayor or authority almost powerless.

A mayor would give London and its population a far higher political profile than at any time in the recent past.   Politicians of national stature would undoubtedly be attracted to the possibility of being mayor of as large and important a city as London.

Conclusion

Reform of London government will never be easy. Too many organisations have a view about what is best for them and for the city The boroughs remain powerful political entities. But, a mayor and London-wide authority are favoured by a majority of Londoners. It is difficult to see why, in a democracy, people should be forever denied the political institutions they want.

Such new institutions would be badly disabled if they did not have sufficient political and financial power. There is a risk, in a country as centrally run as Britain, that no government would give London the effective governmental arrangements its electorate desire.   New, weak, institutions would achieve little or nothing. Reform must produce a system of government capable of changing one of the world's greatest cities for the better.

About the study

This report updates an earlier study, first published in 1991. It is based on several research projects undertaken by the Greater London Group since this study, *The Government of London*, was published. In addition, a small number of interviews were conducted with key individuals directly responsible for aspects of the capital's government and administration. Several of these individuals have also spoken at seminars held at the LSE during the last five or six years.

Further information

The full report, The New Government of London   by Tony Travers and George Jones, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The full text of The Government of London   is included as an Appendix. The New Government of London   is available from York Publishing Services Ltd (Price £11.95 plus £1.50 p&p, ISBN 1 85395 026 7).

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