

N L G N

NEW LOCAL GOVERNMENT NETWORK



Glad to be GLA?

Making London Government more accountable

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Introduction

Amidst the many column inches written about the 2008 London Mayoral contest, very little has been said about the parallel elections to the Greater London Assembly (GLA). The GLA elects 25 Members of the London Assembly (MLAs) every four years, elected either to one of 14 constituencies, which typically cover two or three London boroughs, or via a “top-up” list, which allocates 11 further seats, according to each party’s strength across London. At time of writing the political make-up of the Assembly is 9 Conservative, 9 Labour, 5 Liberal Democrat, 2 Green and 2 One London.

Whilst the big beasts of Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson have slugged it out in community halls and talk radio stations, scarcely anyone, it seems, has paid attention to who will represent them at a constituency level in the GLA. Yet MLAs are supposed to have a key role in checking the power and performance of the Mayor’s vast and considerable budget and responsibilities. So why is no-one taking any notice?

In this paper we argue that MLAs and the London Assembly are largely redundant and that their current responsibilities could be more effectively and efficiently substituted by the elected Borough Leaders of Greater London, combined with a London Regional Select Committee of MPs. We believe that these changes would improve the ties between the Mayor’s office and individual boroughs, while allowing elected leaders a greater say in the priorities for Greater London.

1 *Too much time on their hands?*

Governance in London has been a controversial issue ever since the introduction of the Greater London Council (GLC) in 1965. Following the abolition of the GLC in 1985 all previous powers were devolved to London boroughs, which in itself did not solve the problem as the process lacked co-ordination between boroughs.

In 1997 the incoming Labour Government introduced the Greater London Authority as a solution to this cross-authority co-ordination, albeit in the hope that they could avoid the political battles waged between the GLC and the Conservative Government in the 1980s. The first GLA elections were held on May 4th 2000, with Labour and the Conservatives winning 9 seats each, with the previous GLC leader, Ken Livingstone, reclaiming the keys to a new City Hall with the side-swipe of the political 'retread': *"...as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted by Mrs Thatcher 14 years ago..."*

The London Assembly's primary role is to scrutinise the activities of the elected Mayor of London and it is a role that it has performed adequately since its inception. However when reviewing the performance of the Assembly it should not only be reviewed by the daily work it conducts, but more fundamentally on why it needs to exist in the first place. While it is right that any Mayoral system should have an element of scrutiny, does London really need to employ twenty-five full-time politicians to fulfill this role?

The two main powers attributed to the Assembly of MLAs are (a) to approve or, with a two-thirds majority, amend the Mayors budget and (b) to be able to investigate issues of importance to Londoners, publish findings, making recommendations, and making specific proposals to the Mayor.

Recent reports and reviews have looked into:

- The Mayor's Budget
- Children and Young People
- London Governance

- Culture, Sport and Tourism
- Economic and Social Development
- Elections
- Environment
- General topics - including 7 July Review
- Health and Public Services
- Planning and Spatial Development
- Transport

Some of these investigations have undoubtedly helped to enhance governance in the Capital and should not be dismissed out of hand. Indeed the Assembly's investigation into the emergency service's response to the July 7th bombing is a prime example of a good, rigorous piece of work which highlighted failings in the London Underground system of antiquated tube radios.

This notwithstanding, many reports are either scrutiny documents of Mayoral strategies or of such an arguably spurious nature that one has to question the worthiness of the investigation. Would, for instance, the capital have suffered from a lack of exploration into *"Why and how free shopping bags should be removed from London's shops"* or *"The impact of the droit de suite on London's art market"*.

In this paper we do not seek to argue that MLAs are overly underperforming or lazy. The majority of MLAs serve as full-time politicians, although a number do have other posts, including a number of MLAs who also sit either in the House of Commons or the House of Lords. Moreover, the example of Bob Neill, often referred to as *"Two Jobs Bob"*, who sits as Member of Parliament for Bromley and Chislehurst as well as MLA for Bexley and Bromley do little to assuage opinion that being a member of the Assembly is not a full-time occupation.

Members of the London Assembly are, by and large, hard-working and committed. In particular, the *Evening Standard* has rated Len Duvall, MLA for Greenwich and Lewisham as the hardest working in the Capital. The crux of the problem is that, put simply, members simply don't have enough to do to justify full time engagement and as a result they may be spending time compiling superfluous investigations and reports that generally have little impact on the work of the London Mayor or help to inform its wider politics.

Could the Mayor stand alone?

While there are deficiencies in the weight and clout that the current Assembly has in acting as a countervailing force to the strong executive role of the elected Mayor, we do not believe that the Mayoral arrangements should exist without checks and balances.

A political body is needed with sufficient authority to ask searching and rigorous questions, based in the experiences of Londoners, and with reserve powers to rein in Mayoral excesses should there be an overwhelming need to do so.

This countervailing role does not necessarily need to be directly elected – indeed, in our Parliament we see the role of an entirely unelected House of Lords often stepping in to temper legislative sharp edges of whatever Government of the day.

We would prefer there to exist a 'golden thread' connecting any political authority to the electorate, and this is where the role of elected local authorities should come into play.

2 *Why Council Leaders?*

Removing the London Assembly's scrutinising role would naturally leave a vacuum in monitoring the work of the Mayor – a vacuum that would need to be filled. We believe that this role would be best served by the 32 elected Borough Council Leaders in Greater London.

The arguments for giving council leaders this greater role are clear:

- the 32 Council Leaders already offer identifiable local leadership and are directly accountable to their local populous
- Through day to day interaction with their local communities, the Borough Leaders would be best placed to offer first-hand guidance on the views and aspirations of ordinary Londoners
- Council Leaders are also well used to managing huge organisations and billion pound budgets and are excellently placed to understand the challenges of running a Greater London Authority that employs over 600 staff and controls almost £10bn of spending
- Asking the Borough Leaders to take on the scrutiny of the Mayor would be a constitutionally astute way of balancing powers between locality and the Greater London region
- Borough Leaders are already resourced and would not require additional salaries or bureaucracy, creating the opportunity for potential savings.

Therefore we recommend establishing a **London Leaders' Council (LLC)** of all elected Council Leaders in London, whose sole role would be to approve the Mayor's budget, to review his strategic plans and documents and to question the Mayor, his staff and organisations under the Mayor's control, namely Transport for London, the London Development Agency, the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority and the Metropolitan Police Authority.

The LLC would meet quarterly to specifically question the Mayor of London on issues relating to his responsibilities. Each Leader would have the power to

request information in writing from the Mayor's office on issues relating to his responsibilities. Currently the GLA hosts ten question time sessions each year at which the Mayor and members of the administration can be questioned by the Assembly about their actions.

In between meetings, sub committees or working groups of Borough Leaders in the LLC could meet on an ad hoc basis to explore in detail specific issues of concern. For instance, the LLC could form seven policy-themed scrutiny groups to examine strands of the Mayor's work; each group would be made up of seven London Leaders, with membership agreed between the relevant political offices. The groups might be themed as following: Economic Development and Transport; Crime, Security and Community Cohesion; Health and Well-being; Education and Skills; Audit; Housing and Planning and Environment. These groups of Leaders could meet monthly to scrutinise and discuss relevant Mayoral strategies or related committees. For example, the committee on Economic Development and Transport might be responsible for scrutinising the work of the LDA, while the committee on Crime, Security and Community Cohesion would scrutinise the work of the Metropolitan Police. The groups would have the power to interview the Mayor and his or her staff twice a year on their specific policy topic.

We argue it would be important to bolster the scrutiny powers of the LLC by ensuring that the Mayor's Budget could only be passed by a clear majority of Council Leaders from both inner and outer London. This would ensure that any Mayor would have to take into account the interests of all areas of London and liaise with all London leaders, regardless of political denomination. It would also put an onus on council leaders to justify their decision whether or not to back the Mayor's Budget to their local electorate, particularly if voting against elements of the budget included in the Mayor's election manifesto.

Some may argue that a disadvantage of this alternative to the current Assembly system is whether Council Leaders would be able to dedicate enough time and energy on top of running a busy London borough. We are confident that, whilst Council Leaders' time is finite and their workload heavy and demanding, this element can be incorporated into their work schedule with careful planning of the sub-committee / group enquiries. Considering

that all but one of London's Leaders work in the role full-time and that they receive secretarial assistance, there is no reason why this scrutiny cannot be performed to a high standard.

Would there be the likelihood that a Mayor's agenda could be blocked by renegade council leaders who don't share his agenda? Again, we cannot rule out this possibility – and of course this is a possibility under the existing Assembly arrangements too - but the responsibility would lie with Council Leaders to demonstrate that they are able to provide constructive and measured scrutiny in exchange for greater power.

3 *Rationalising and streamlining London's political positions*

An opportunity to bring together London MPs and Council Leaders

Abolishing the Assembly and replacing its main functions with a London Leaders' Council would be feasible, but could be supplemented by even more effective and alternative scrutiny activities by another set of politicians already in post.

Council Leaders could conduct the bulk of direct accountability work overseeing the Mayor, but we also recommend that a role be given to a new London Regional Select Committee of the House of Commons, under the auspices of a proportionate representation of London MPs. Regional Select Committees (RSC) were announced for all regions outside of London in the 2007 HM Treasury Review of sub-national economic development and regeneration, although Greater London will not currently such a Regional Committee because of the existence of the London Assembly.

Whilst the primary role of Regional Select Committees is likely to be the scrutiny of Regional Development Agencies, we believe that London's unique governance structure should allow a London Select Committee with slightly different responsibilities and terms of reference. The role of a London Select Committee would be to research and investigate policy issues of importance in Greater London and would have powers to call the Mayor and their team, as well as Ministers and civil servants, to account. The LLC would retain scrutiny over the Regional Development Agency (the LDA) and the Mayor.

London currently has 74 Members of Parliament and 32 borough leaders. A London Select Committee would reflect the proportion of the political party seats held by MPs in Greater London. They could be supplemented, perhaps, by the co-option of non-voting Council Leaders nominated from among the number of the 32 Borough Leaders. In this way, Parliamentarians could be employed in the oversight of broad policy issues affecting the capital, and have a link to the work of the London Leaders' Council as they lead in scrutiny of the Mayor more directly.

4 *Show me the money*

Expenditure on supporting Assembly Members is not insubstantial. Individual salaries are less than those paid to Members of Parliament, but more than paid to council leaders. Assembly members receive an annual salary of £50,582, whilst Assembly Members who are also MPs receive £33,721 (from May 2008, £16,861) and the Chair of the Assembly receives £60,675. The Mayor of London is receiving £137,579 per year.

The 2008 Mayoral budget has allocated £8.7 million to run the London Assembly, with £7.1 million of this allocated for services key to the work of MLAs.¹

Admittedly this figure is dwarfed by the £127,800,000 required to run the Greater London Authority, expenditure which is undertaken on direct services for the public and could not be deleted by the mere replacement of the Assembly with an alternative deliberating body politic.

However, one direct result of scrapping the London Assembly would be to dramatically reduce the expenditure needed on servicing the democratic counter-balance to the Mayor. Indeed, under the London Leaders' Council proposal, members would not be paid (in itself saving over £1.2 million) and it would not require the secretarial help and additional expenses on the scale associated with MLAs' inquiries and investigations. Obviously a small figure would be required to support LLC and London Select Committee meetings. Nevertheless, we estimate that this would only amount to a region of £500,000 per year, based on the current "Committee Services" expenditure by the Assembly.

There are a number of options for reallocating and reinvesting the saved £6.6 million. In its simplest terms the money could be give back evenly to each borough, meaning that every council would have an additional £206,250 to spend on its budget. The money could be used to increase the number

¹ £1.6 million is spent on London TravelWatch, a transport users group

of police and PCSOs on London's streets – around 165 police officer posts could be recruited, for example.

Alternatively the funds could be used to help London's estimated 6,000 homeless and temporarily accommodated people² by giving them a £250 grant to use as a rental deposit on a property.

With gang violence a key policy challenge in the capital, the money might be used to fund additional community workers to support young people who are vulnerable to being indoctrinated into gangs. Moreover, should Boris Johnson win the Mayoral contest, he may wish to contribute the money to his Mayor's Fund, which would invest in social projects for young people.

² http://www.london.gov.uk/gla/publications/factsandfigures/information_london.pdf

5 *Summary*

Whilst the money saved by this exercise might not be huge or be able to save the taxpayer a vastly significant sum, this is not the core purpose for reforming the Assembly. By bringing the Mayor closer together with London's Borough Leaders we suggest that better governance of London would result, improving the partnership between frontline services and the strategic view of the Mayor in a manner better informed about the real needs of local Londoners.

These reforms would not stymie the power of the directly elected Mayor, although it would oblige him or her to create greater consensus between all London boroughs, in the inner and outer reaches of the capital. They would also place an onus on Council Leaders that, as visible and accountable representatives of their communities, they have a responsibility to provide fair but effective scrutiny over London's major strategic issues.

Eight years after the establishing of the Greater London Authority led by the Mayor, it is right to review the detailed operations of this constitutional architecture, and we believe that it is time to seriously consider placing Council Leaders more at the heart of London governance, replacing the Assembly members, creating a more efficient system, with a better connection to neighbourhoods across the capital.





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