



Japan Local Government Centre, London

Monthly Report for October 2011 – Metropolitan Government

The purpose of this report is to set out the recent history surrounding the government of Greater London and the six former metropolitan counties of England. As noted in the May 2011 Monthly Report, the urban centres of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have been affected by different processes of reorganisation and now have exclusively single-tier local authorities.

Post-war reform

In 1945 a Local Government Boundary Commission was established, which reported in 1948 with recommendations for a varied system for England (outside of London) and Wales of single-tier and two-tier authorities depending on population size. Its recommendations were not followed however. A second commission was established in 1958 (as well as a separate one for Wales) but this did not report before its abolition as a result of the new Labour government elected in 1964 for a more radical reorganisation of English local authorities. In London the Royal Commission on Local Government in Greater London (the 'Herbert Commission') was established in 1957 to look at "the problem of London" (as historically referred to) and reported in 1960 with recommendations of a 'Regional Council' for Greater London (an area greater than the County of London formed from the early Greater London Strategic Planning Committee) formed from the abolition of the County of London and neighbouring Middlesex, as well as incorporation of parts of the counties of Essex, Kent, Hertfordshire and Surrey, with a lower tier of London Boroughs and the City of London. The London Government Act 1963 realised the commission's proposals and created the Greater London Council and the 32 London Boroughs.

The Labour government of Harold Wilson abolished the earlier 1958 commissions and instead created a new Royal Commission on Local Government in England (the 'Redcliffe-Maud Commission') which ran from 1966 to 1969. Its recommendations were for 58 single-tier unitary authorities, as well as three two-tier metropolitan areas (for the conurbations around Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool) with a lower tier of metropolitan districts. These would then be covered by (including Greater London) eight Provincial Councils. A Memorandum of Dissent was published by one commission member, Derek Senior (*The Guardian's* planning correspondent), who instead proposed 35 'city region' authorities and a further 148 district councils. However, the 1970 general election then intervened and while Labour remained committed to implementing its commission's recommendations, Edward Heath's Conservatives were openly hostile to the notion of scrapping county councils and chose not to implement them on their return to government following the election, instead

issuing a White Paper in 1971 clearly influenced by the views of the Association of County Councils.

Metropolitan and non-metropolitan

The Conservatives' 1972 Local Government Act retained some elements of the Redcliffe-Maud Commission (such as boundaries), but rejected outright the unitary and provincial proposals and instead introduced from 1974 a two-tier structure of 46 non-metropolitan county councils and 296 non-metropolitan district councils and six (Greater Manchester, Merseyside, South Yorkshire, Tyne and Wear, West Midlands, West Yorkshire) metropolitan county councils with 36 metropolitan district councils below (all hereafter known as 'principal authorities'). The key distinction between non-metropolitan and metropolitan areas was that in metropolitan areas the districts held responsibilities for education, libraries and social services, in non-metropolitan areas this was the responsibility of the county council. In all other respects they enjoyed a similar division of responsibilities. While the Act did not go as far as Redcliffe-Maud in replacing historic areas with 'artificial' or new ones (for instance, the proposed SELNEC – South East Lancashire North East Cheshire), it did modify substantially the boundaries of England's county landscape, with several new counties created around former river boundaries (Avon, Cleveland and Humberside) which had not been in existence previously and were therefore considered alien to the provincial map. Furthermore, the three traditional 'ridings' of Yorkshire (North, East and West) were scrapped in favour of the hitherto unknown metropolitan county of South Yorkshire as well as Humberside County Council, while the more urbanised parts of Co. Durham and Northumberland were fashioned into the metropolitan county of Tyne and Wear. As such, over the next few years, the existence of the new counties was regarded as controversial locally in terms of postal addresses and civic identity. The town of Saddleworth, traditionally regarded as part of West Yorkshire, was transferred to Greater Manchester under the Act. Protests in the form of vandalism against county signs and petitions continue to this day in those areas affected.

The new system was widely regarded as a compromise and the failure of the Conservative government to also introduce reforms to local government finance was widely lamented by its own members, with a 1976 commission set up under the Labour government (elected 1974) to investigate options for reform. It could be said that the 1972 Act did not bed down well and doubts continued to be aired about the benefits of the changes introduced from 1974 by both parties, following the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979, the pendulum had swung the other way in subsequent local elections to the point that while the Conservatives were in power nationally, Labour councils were the norm locally (governing all six metropolitan counties under radical socialist administrations). Amid the polarised politics between Margaret Thatcher's 'new right' and the 'new urban left' of Labour, Conservative politicians of all stripes considered abolition of the metropolitan counties as well as the GLC to be absolutely necessary in the name of efficiency (despite their being created by a Conservative government, albeit a more centrist

one), although this was fiercely resisted by all local authorities and staff unions in the metropolitan areas as a 'political' act (nationally Labour was divided on the issue, still committed to Redcliffe-Maud). The *Streamlining the cities* White Paper of 1983 by Environment Secretary Michael Heseltine argued that the metropolitan districts and London boroughs already provided most local services in those areas (compared to the rural counties who provided the lion's share) and that the strategic role of the upper tier bodies was therefore expensive, confusing and unnecessary, proposing their abolition and replacement with joint boards drawn from the districts/boroughs' membership. In addition to the arguments about scale, the local government landscape was already changing again in urban areas, for instance the business-led Urban Development Corporations (which usurped councils' planning powers) created in post-industrial English urban areas from 1981 onwards. The GLC was also not popular with (Conservative) outer London Boroughs (particularly the London Boroughs Association) as it was seen as a 'Labour institution' (for instance the 'Fares Fair' case brought by LB Bromley against the GLC or the activities of its Grants Committee).

The 1985 Local Government Act had the effect of abolishing the Greater London Council and the six metropolitan county councils, with their functions passing to the London Boroughs and the metropolitan districts, operating as single-tier authorities. Within London however, the former County of London area had been constituted since 1965 as the Inner London Education Authority (consisting of borough representatives sitting alongside those of the GLC as a joint committee) as a result of the compromise between the various new boroughs and their responsibilities (Herbert had recommended the GLC and the boroughs share distinct roles in education but this was rejected by the former county areas incorporated as well as the then Ministry of Education) as local education authorities (only the 20 'outer' London boroughs had acquired LEA powers in 1965). This body was therefore allowed to continue as a directly elected body until 1990, when the 12 inner London boroughs acquired LEA status. The London Residuary Body, which was appointed following the GLC's abolition in 1986, existed until as late as 1996 as the functional body charged with disposing of the GLC's substantial assets and property portfolio on behalf of all 32 London Boroughs, maintaining them as a property services agent until sold (for instance, London County Hall was sold to Shirayama Shokusan in 1993). Other functions such as public transport and planning were passed to either the appointed South East Regional Planning Authority or the UK Department of Transport.

The unitary question and return of Greater London

The question of the pattern of English local government was by no means settled by the contentious 1986 reforms, with a two-tier system left in place outside of London and the former metropolitan counties. Michael Heseltine had returned for a second time as Environment Secretary and having abandoned Margaret Thatcher's hated and regressive Community Charge (or 'poll tax') following her demise in 1990 in favour of the Council Tax (which remains in place), set about reforming the structure of local government in non-

metropolitan England and (pre-devolution) Scotland and Wales. His Local Government Act 1992 established the Local Government Commission for England which was tasked with reviewing England's two-tier structure and recommending the introduction of single-tier unitary authority areas. In its first phase the commission successfully oversaw the abolition of 'hated' artificial counties such as Avon, Cleveland and Humberside. The commission was however hamstrung by the political environment, with the Conservatives enjoying only a slender majority in Parliament, while the first chairman Sir John Banham was regarded as weak and ineffectual in driving the change desired by Heseltine. In the event, the slender parliamentary majority saw Conservative MPs from rural seats effectively vetoing any abolition of county councils in favour of unitary authorities and the only unitary authorities created being in Scotland and Wales (exclusively unitary on account of not having many Conservative MPs or councils) and England's urban centres (Brighton, Derby, Hull, Leicester, Nottingham, Peterborough, Portsmouth, Plymouth, Southampton and Stoke on Trent). In the rest of England however the two-tier system remained, until a limited further reorganisation of several largely rural counties and small cities at the behest of the Labour government in 2009.

The changes under the 1992 Act were largely implemented on account of secondary legislation issued under it in 1995 by the Conservative government. Labour had (in spite of a 1983 election manifesto promise to reintroduce the Redcliffe-Maud proposals) voted against the legislation in the hope of causing the Conservative minority government to collapse. However, in the 1997 election, Labour's policies on local government were largely concerned with local government finance rather than structures, save for London and its proposals for referendums to introduce elected regional assemblies outside of London (which would if approved require unitary reorganisation). Labour's plans for London saw Tony Blair rescind earlier pledges to restore the GLC in favour of introducing (if approved in a referendum) a more streamlined Greater London Authority headed by an elected Mayor of London and scrutinised by a 25 member London Assembly. The 1998 referendum approved the measure with 72% on a 34% turnout in London. This then led to the passing of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 to establish the GLA. However, the creation of the GLA initially had little bearing on the activities of the London boroughs as its strategic powers were passed from national government or appointed boards (for instance, policing from the Home Office, transport from the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions and fire from the London Fire and Civil Defence Authority). In 2005 however, the Labour government agreed to establish a review of the GLA's powers, particularly in the areas of waste, planning, housing and skills. While the subsequent Greater London Authority Act 2007 gave the London mayor increased powers and functions in housing and skills (by ceding a number of national level functions to him from agencies), as well as the final decision in large-scale planning applications to the London boroughs, he was not awarded responsibility for waste (which he had requested in his submission to the review).

More recently the new Conservative-led government has scrapped its earlier (2005) pledge to abolish the GLA and has agreed to give the London mayor more powers over regeneration and development in the forthcoming Localism Act. Outside of London, the Conservative-led government has also legislated to create the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, the only 'city region' proposal to come to fruition following 'pilots' by the last Labour government (see April 2011 Monthly Report). In the 2010 election the Conservative Party pledged to halt the remaining unitary council reorganisation planned for Exeter and Norwich city councils and legislated quickly following the election to do so.

Following devolution, English and Welsh local authorities were separated from their common structure and the Labour administration in Wales is currently under fire for its proposals to group the principality's 22 unitary authorities into six service partnerships to deliver education and social services across council areas, accused by the Welsh Local Government Association of attempting reorganisation "by the back door".