

The Greater London Group after 50 years

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My first contacts with the Group

My first contact with the Greater London Group [GLG] was in the autumn of 1960 as I was making preliminary inquiries for my doctoral thesis at Nuffield College, Oxford. The GLG had earned a reputation as the leading centre for the study of London government, and I wanted to tap into the advice of a research officer of the Group, Jim Sharpe, and his colleagues. My meetings with them took place in rooms the GLG occupied on two sites. The most imposing was at Clements Inn in a tall red-bricked Victorian block, gloomy with dark wood-panelled walls and a steep staircase; and on the Strand in a dingy clapped-out noisy room fronting the Strand, which must have been part of King's College.

My next contact was in the autumn of 1966 when as a new Lecturer in LSE's Department of Government, I joined the Group as a member. For many years my timetable was dominated by the regular weekly meeting of the Group on Monday from 3 pm to 5 pm held in the LSE's Old Building, Room A582, next to the Senior Dining Room's bar. Here under the imperious chairmanship of Emeritus Professor W. A. Robson, we argued over drafts of reports and chapters. As Robson turned each page, one had to be quick to interject ones comments both on issues of substance and on grammar and style. These meetings set strategy, decided the Group's line, and, if no papers were before us, heard visiting speakers, either academics or practitioners.

My first meeting with Robson had been about 1965 at a conference in Jesus College, Oxford, when he asked me to help him use the phone. Squashed with him in a booth I put coins in the slot for him and dialled. He gave me his helpless-old-man act. At Group meetings he was alert as he turned the pages, but when visitors spoke he seemed to fall asleep but was always able at the end of the speech to ask the first question right on target.

GLG's First big project

The Group was Robson's creation, and he was its driving force until his death in 1980 [His life and writings can be found in Greater London Paper number 17, C.E. Hill and G.W. Jones, *A Bibliography of the Writings of W.A. Robson* (London: LSE, 1986)]. He set up the Group in 1958 to give evidence to the Royal Commission on Local Government in Greater London. Its chairman Sir Edwin Herbert had asked the Vice Chancellor of the University of London for a group of scholars to do research and give evidence to his commission. Robson gathered an interdisciplinary team from LSE's teaching staff. Eminent professors and later professors participated from many disciplines: Economics (Alan Day), Social Administration (David Donnison), Geography (Michael Wise and Emrys Jones), Law (John Griffith), Sociology (Donald Macrae), Political Science (Richard Pear), and Public Administration (Peter Self).

Of course they could not agree. Professor Griffith felt that local democracy should not be considered a factor and wanted administrative efficiency to be the only criterion. The other members of the Group put in two schemes, A and B. They differed over what size of local authority was necessary to provide an adequate standard of service

while remaining an acceptable unit of representative local democracy. Scheme A sought authorities of between 250,000 and 500,000, a county-borough, or in modern parlance a unitary solution: Scheme B wanted authorities of between 1,000,000 and 1,500,000, a county solution. Despite this division the Group's evidence, 120 pages out of a total of 200 pages submitted to the Commission, helped shape the Commission's report. The Commission grilled the Group for two whole days.

After the Royal Commission

Robson kept the Group going to study what happened to the Commission's recommendations, why the eventual Act diverged from these recommendations, and then later how the new system of London government was operating following the London Government Act of 1963 which set up the Greater London Council and 32 London Boroughs. The new system began in 1965, and I joined the Group in the middle of its assessment of how the 1963 Act came about. The outcome was a book by the Group's Senior Research Officer Gerald Rhodes, *The Government of London: the struggle for reform* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), whose chapters were pored over by the Group.

Next Rhodes edited a volume examining the first five years of the new system: Gerald Rhodes (ed.), *The New Government of London: the first five years* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972). It contained chapters by members of the group, again scrutinised in detail at the Monday meetings. The topics covered show the wide range of the Group's concerns: party politics, elections, personal health and welfare services, children's services, education, housing, highways, traffic and transport, planning, finance, the Greater London Council, the London Boroughs and an appraisal of the new system as a whole.

Robson ran a model research centre, with academics taking the lead in their specialised fields of study. Research officers, many of whom went on to later academic fame, like Ken Young, carried out the detailed research. Some of the research officers were LSE doctoral research students. Seminars brought in outside experts.

The output was not only in major volumes. There were more focused monographs like the two from the research officer S.K. Ruck, *London Government and the Welfare Services* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), and *Municipal Entertainment and the Arts* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1965). Another research officer, Enid Wistrich, produced *Local Government Reorganisation: The first years of Camden* (London: London Borough of Camden, 1972). The Group produced a series of Greater London Papers, including as number two the authoritative "Theories of Local Government", by W.J. Mackenzie who was a member of the Herbert Royal Commission.

Transport in London was a topic often considered by the Group, with major contributions from Ernest Davies, Gil Ponsonby, and from Michael Thomson who had an antipathy to cars and was an early champion of road charging. The most massive contribution to transport was the 660 page volume by Michael F. Collins and Timothy M. Pharoah, *Transport Organisation in a Great City* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974). Land-use planning was another frequent concern of the Group, with Peter Self, Peter Hall and Derek Diamond urging rational methods to order London's

chaotic development, at first urging the decanting of economic activities, factories and offices, to beyond London's boundaries, and later urging they be brought back.

Wider Concerns

The Group was not blinkered by its focus on London. It considered London in the wider setting of the South East, especially in its studies of land-use planning and transport. In 1965 Greater London Paper number 12 was Gerald Rhodes, *Town Government in South East England* (London: LSE, 1967). The Group watched what happened in other UK cities, and monitored the attitude of central government towards local government. Robson continued to criticise centralisation and the erosion of local government. This message ran through the three editions of his book, *The Development of Local Government* (London Allen and Unwin, 1931, 1934 and 1948, up to *Local Government in Crisis* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966). The Group's seminars heard speakers about other cities, like the ever-boyish City Treasurer of Manchester, Noel Hepworth.

Robson was keen for the Group to see London in its international context. He edited the magnificent two-volumed *Great Cities of the World*, which had three editions, 1954, 1957 and 1972, [W.A. Robson and D.E. Regan [a former research officer] (eds.), *Great Cities of the World: their government, politics and planning* (London: Allen and Unwin, 3rd ed. 1972)]. He involved overseas visitors in the work of the Group, like Wallace Sayre who was insightful on New York. A stream of Japanese visitors kept the Group in touch with Tokyo, including the Governor of Tokyo who came in a state of some alarm that the abolition of the Greater London Council in 1985 might lead to abolition of Tokyo's metropolitan government.

Later developments – the Travers regime

The Group's office moved around the LSE's buildings, with Robson fighting hard to escape exile to distant corners near Euston station and delighted to fetch up on the top fifth floor of the Library. The papers of the Group followed the chairmen who succeeded Robson after his death in 1980: Peter Self and then Derek Diamond. Tony Travers now emerged as Research Director and then Director, and his office was the hub of the Group. Indeed from the 1980s Tony Travers had become the dynamic centre of the Group, carrying on and extending the work of Robson.

In 1992 he orchestrated a series of Greater London Papers, numbers 19 to 23, about five specific policy areas and their problems: planning, transport, police, housing, education, and government generally. He and I, with June Burnham, undertook studies of local authorities outside and within London: on whether the success or failure of local authorities were correlated with their size, - the answer was no. Success or failure depended on the quality of political leadership. Good leadership attracted good officers. We looked at the changing roles of chief executives, and the attitudes of central government ministers and civil servants towards local government – they were full of disdain for what they regarded as second-raters. We were unable to raise funding for a survey of what local government councillors and officers thought about central government.

By the 2000s the Group was under the umbrella of LSE London. Together they carried on the tradition of Robson's GLG. Within LSE London are representatives of many disciplines at LSE, and under its auspices it has produced many reports and

papers about London's economy, its population, immigration, land use, housing, and transport, the latter often in collaboration with Stephen Glaister. The involvement of Ricky Burdett from the 1990s gave an impetus to the look of London with his focus on design and architecture. The concerns the Group had at its outset persisted.

The structure of London Government

A core interest of the GLG has remained the organisation of London's government. Robson's last significant contribution to official inquiries into London's governance was his participation as an adviser to the Marshall inquiry of 1978 into the strategic role of the Greater London Council. The Group produced a guide to the pattern of government in London in the 1980s: Michael Hebbert and Tony Travers (eds.) *The London Government Handbook* (London: Cassell, 1988), noting over 60 separate bodies and nearly 30 different ways of dividing London for administrative purposes. Tony Travers and I produced two books in the 1990s about the structure of London government and eight ways in which it might be reformed: Tony Travers, George Jones, Michael Hebbert and June Burnham, *The Government of London* (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1991) and Tony Travers and George Jones, *The New Government of London* (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1997). The story of the dismantling of the structure created in the 1963 Act was told by Michael Hebbert and Anne Edge, *Dismantlers: The London Residuary Body* (London: STICERD/LSE, 1994), and Tony Travers wrote a masterly, comprehensive account of the saga of London's government, including an assessment of the Greater London Council, the period without a London authority, and the start of the new Directly-Elected Mayoral system: Tony Travers, *The Politics of London: Governing an Ungovernable City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

Robson's long-held vision was that London needed both an overall strategic authority and a layer of boroughs beneath for more personal and local services. He was also concerned that there should be a government body responsible for the centre of London, the heart or core that people from all over the world recognise as London. He wrote a GLG paper, number 9, "The Heart of Greater London: Proposals for a Policy" (London: LSE, 1965). Derek Diamond, a former Chairman of the Group, addressed this issue too in his 1991 chapter "The City, the 'Big Bang' and Office Development" in Keith Hoggart and David R. Green, *London: A New Metropolitan Geography* (London: Edward Arnold, 1991, pp. 91-94). In 2008 Tony Travers and I produced a report on the same topic for the London Development Agency, although this time the "heart" was called the "Central Activities Zone – CAZ), an area fragmented between a number of boroughs with concerns wider than the central area, and rarely considered as a whole by the Greater London Authority whose remit ran far beyond the central area.

Robson believed that academic study should inform the public and help improve public policy. Tony Travers has carried on that tradition, as a member of various Government and Parliamentary bodies, submitting evidence and assessing the evidence of others, acting as a consultant to local authorities and to numerous groups and agencies concerned with London issues, like the Corporation of the City of London, and the West End Theatres. He has become the reliable voice for objective analysis of London with the media, called in first by TV, radio and the press for his observations, and in all this activity he promotes the name of the Greater London

Group. Indeed media watchers say he obtains more mentions in the media than the Director of LSE.

The continuing relevance of the Group

A survey of the fifty years of the GLG reveals that Robson's vision and his choice of topics are still relevant. Throughout its fifty years the Group has continued to explore similar questions, and they are salient today.

1. How should London be governed, and what are the dilemmas posed by different solutions?
2. What should be the relationship between the government of London and central government?
3. What should be the relationship between the various parts of the governance of London, between the tiers, and between elected bodies and appointed bodies?
4. How should the government of London adapt to changes in London - economic, social, physical and cultural, both domestic and global?
5. What assessments can be made about how particular policy areas have been dealt with in London, and what factors make for success or failure?
6. How should London government be financed?
7. What lessons can London's experiences teach other urban areas in the UK?
8. What can London learn from the experiences of other world cities?

I have some additional questions I would like to see answered.

1. How are popular perceptions of London shaped, and how can false impressions be corrected?
2. How can one overcome the jealousy and dislike of London that persist outside London?
3. How can the dynamism and vitality of London be encouraged, and not stifled? London after all provides benefits for the whole country.
4. How best can the pockets of poverty and exclusion in London, worse than anywhere else in the UK, best be tackled?

The Group's work is of crucial importance today, with a new Mayor of London; pressure from central government on local authorities to increase the directly-elected mayor model and to devolve power to entities below local government; new issues on the policy agenda, like responding to climate change, sustainability, drug use and worries over terrorist attacks; and old issues that have not gone away, like crime, policing, transport, education, pollution and litter; and all in the context of tighter limits on resources, public resistance to higher taxation, sensationalising media and growing contempt for parties and elected representatives. As Jerry White has recently written, "At the end, it was to government and leadership that Londoners would need to look if progress were to be made with London's enduring challenges. [Jerry White, *London in the 20th Century* (London: Vintage, 2008), p. 407]". The work of the Greater London Group is certainly needed.

Robson's approach was first to find the facts, then make judgments, and finally disseminate the findings. That is still the approach of the Greater London Group. Long may it thrive.