

THE GOVERNMENT OF LONDON

LONDON IS PROBABLY the most dominant capital city, relative to the country it governs, of any major state. In one sense, this has always been so: the seat of political power at Westminster and the financial centre in the City of London have been fixed there since the Middle Ages. This was challenged to some degree by the emergence of huge factory conurbations in the English Midlands and North, in Central Scotland and South Wales, from the early-nineteenth century; but the eclipse of British industrial power since the Second World War has reinforced London's dominance. The city limits house nearly 9 million, a historic high, which doesn't count an enormous travel-to-work zone that gives it a metropolitan area encompassing some 14 million people—around five times the size of its nearest UK rivals, Greater Manchester, Birmingham and Glasgow. In terms of regional divergence, the results have been stark. As Tom Hazeldine points out, the vast gulfs in wealth, living standards and productivity between the London area and the North, Wales and Midlands make Britain by far the most regionally unequal country in Europe.¹

In terms of scale, Greater Paris and the Île de France may be a match for London, but Parisian dominance is softened by the strength of genuine regional power centres in Lille, Nantes, Lyon, Bordeaux and Marseille. Somewhere like Le Havre, home to 170,000, enjoys a far more developed cultural and public-transport infrastructure than, say, Leeds, with a population of 790,000. Berlin and Madrid, the first and second largest cities proper in the European Union, each have less than half the population of London; along with Rome, Warsaw and Bucharest, they face much stronger regional rivals. And although Athens's dominance is extreme, Greece is a much smaller country; its sway is more akin to that of the marooned ex-imperial capitals of Vienna and Budapest over shrunken Austria and Hungary, or Riga's dominance over tiny Latvia.

Istanbul, bigger than London, is nonetheless governed from Ankara. Only Moscow, with its rapacious vastness and radical economic variance with its impoverished host nation, is truly comparable; and even then, St Petersburg is more of a genuine rival than Manchester or Birmingham.

This was not inevitable. London shrank dramatically between 1940 and 1980, losing around 2 million inhabitants. This was deliberate, the result of the systematic resettling of Londoners in new towns and as ‘overspill’ across the suburban Home Counties. By the early 1980s, London faced the same problems of unemployment, deindustrialization and ‘managed decline’ besetting cities like Liverpool, Manchester and Glasgow. What made its present leverage possible—and ultimately created its stark electoral divergence from the rest of England—was a peculiar combination of cultural and economic trends emerging in that decade. On one level, it was a historic consequence of the demand by Thatcher’s Rottweiler, Norman Tebbit, that the Northern unemployed ‘get on their bikes and look for work’; the new jobs came in part from an expansion of business and services, powered by the newly deregulated City of London. But the capital’s growth was also due to its being the centre of the culture industry, a much-trumpeted beacon of sexual and racial tolerance, a post-imperial melting-pot.

Yet London’s character as melting-pot—it has taken in not only millions of people from West Africa, East Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe, but equally numerous escapees from the stricken landscapes of Barrow-in-Furness, Bridgend, Bradford and Bilston—is a long-term consequence of this ultimate capitalist city having largely been governed, when it has been governed, *from the left*. The December 2019 general election marked the fourth time in four years that London has veered from most of the rest of the country in a national vote, supporting Corbyn’s Labour in face of a Conservative landslide. In the 2015 election, the Tories lost hundreds of thousands of votes and important seats in the capital. In the 2016 EU referendum, London joined Scotland as the most monolithically pro-Remain part of the UK. In most of England, the 2017 election saw strong votes for both Labour and the Tories, but in London the May government was routed, with even Kensington falling to Labour, and several of the South-East’s commuter and ‘overspill

¹Tom Hazeldine, ‘Revolt of the Rustbelt’, NLR 105, May–June 2017.

towns' registering sharp leftward swings, as if London's politics were seeping outwards.

A local city

Conventional accounts of London's history concentrate on the 'two cities'—twin centres of wealth and power, each with its monumental buildings—and their explosive growth between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. The City of London's Square Mile is the Roman city, the boundaries of its 'Corporation' those of the Roman walls: a financial centre and entrepôt comparable to Amsterdam or Hamburg, with its Cathedral at St Paul's and its docks just downriver from the Tower of London, a fortress founded in the eleventh century by William the Conqueror, who also created the governmental seat at Westminster, a few miles further up the Thames, identifiable now by the industrial fantasy Gothick of the Houses of Parliament and the spiky accretions of Westminster Abbey. Lovers of Jacobean theatre would add the City of Southwark, just across the Thames from St Paul's, with its shabby Cathedral set until recently among stinking warehouses.

The standard history then tends to trace from these a semi-accidental spread of suburbs. By the seventeenth century, the City and Westminster were linked by Covent Garden and Holborn along the axis of the Strand; the dockside industrial towns emerging in Deptford, Greenwich and Woolwich would eventually be absorbed by London.² But the real explosion came in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, when imperial London became the biggest city in human history, an accolade it would hold until the 1920s. The flat-fronted 'Georgian terrace' began to carpet Middlesex, Essex and Surrey, giving the resulting city its inner districts: aristocratic (Mayfair, Belgravia), bourgeois (Camberwell, Islington, Notting Hill) and proletarian (Stepney, Paddington, Lambeth). These were joined in the mid-nineteenth century by 'railway suburbs', similar to those in the industrial North—New Cross, Tottenham, Finsbury Park, Acton—while the City's East End expanded into an immense, impoverished, sub-proletarian zone of casual dock labourers and 'informal'

² The persistent myth that London's industrialization was some sort of belated, early-twentieth-century phenomenon, and hence a brief period in the capital's history, rests on ignoring these south-east London districts, or considering them somehow 'not London'.

trades.³ In the twentieth century, new-built suburbs stretched out into open countryside—Pinner, Sidcup, Hillingdon, Ilford—until a legal limit was set by the creation of a ‘Green Belt’ in the 1930s.

The legend has it that this was all laid out by the Invisible Hand. Historically, London was never subjected to a plan; after the Great Fire of 1666, Christopher Wren, the principal architect then restyling the City’s skyline with domes and steeples, proposed a rational, ‘continental’ reshaping around straight streets and *rond-points*; but any construction that would hold up business was vetoed by the City’s burghers.⁴ This was a stark contrast to Absolutist capitals like Paris, Berlin, Vienna or Petersburg; the monarchy and its military accoutrements still occupy large chunks of the city centre, but Buckingham Palace looks like a Victorian hospital compared to the Winter Palace. London’s inner-city terraces were knocked up on the cheap, their ‘classical’ straight façades applied to chaotically built speculative ventures—the famous phenomenon of ‘Queen Anne front and Mary-Ann backside’. So it would continue, up to the ‘mock-Tudor’ semi-detached suburbs of the inter-war era.

In this reading,⁵ London was suddenly besieged by an outbreak of ‘planning’ after the Second World War, with unpopular concrete housing estates and motorways stamping their rectangles across the winding streets and alleys—a mercifully short interruption of a *laissez-faire* reign that resumed under Thatcher, when ‘market forces’ reshaped derelict docklands into a second home for the City at the gleaming skyscraper enclave of Canary Wharf. What this narrative has no room for—what is almost written out of popular histories, bar a few token references to ‘Red Ken’ Livingstone—is London’s third centre of power. Not simply the seat from which the empire was governed, this was also a centre of

³ On this zone, and the left’s failure to reach it, the classic text is still Gareth Stedman-Jones’s *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society*, London 1982.

⁴ A partial exception to this, constructed via a typically English capitalist mix of royal patronage and graft, are the Regency-era ‘improvements’ of John Nash, a cheap and flamboyant neoclassical bourgeois spine carved across central London from Piccadilly Circus to Regent’s Park.

⁵ A recent and representative example is Simon Jenkins, *A Short History of London: The Story of a Wealth Capital*, London 2019; the classic is Peter Ackroyd’s *London: The Biography*, London 2000. Both draw on the Danish historian Steen Eiler Rasmussen’s much subtler and more ambiguous study, *London: The Unique City*, Harmondsworth 1960 [1934].

municipal socialism, the place from which the capital governed itself. Over ninety years, from the 1890s to the 1980s, London built up a local welfare state that rivalled those in Vienna, Bologna or Stockholm.

This third centre also had—to a degree, still has—a specific and easily identifiable geographical location, colloquially called ‘the South Bank’. It begins, if you cross the Thames at Westminster, with the enormous County Hall, built in the 1910s and 20s to house the London County Council (LCC), London’s government between 1889 and 1964, and the Greater London Council (GLC), its successor from 1965 to 1986. The LCC bought up various light-industrial sites here for the 1951 Festival of Britain, and gradually built up the South Bank as the cultural showcase the *laissez-faire* city never had: the Royal Festival Hall and National Film Theatre in 1951; smaller concert halls—the Queen Elizabeth Hall, the Purcell Rooms—and the Hayward Gallery in 1968; the National Theatre in 1979. This was then continued in the 1980s by the GLC-sponsored Coin Street Community Builders, opposite St Paul’s, joined by the Albert Speer-sized Tate Modern in the late 1990s. Finally, in 2000, the ensemble would be completed by City Hall, housing London’s new mayor and Assembly in a sleek glass building opposite the Tower of London. Some indication of changed priorities could be seen in the way that the new City Hall was rented from the developers of a privately run office complex, part of the 13-acre ‘More London’ estate, largely owned by Kuwait’s sovereign-wealth fund.

Looked at this way, London’s status as political outlier starts to make more sense. It has much more often been a majority left-wing city than a conservative one, and even the neoliberal success story that it has become since the 1990s has for the most part been administered by the left. In the twenty-first century, the capital has spent eight years under the rule of a professedly socialist administration, and four under the ‘soft left’. Residues, habits of mind and ways of living created by socialist administrations and social movements have lingered in the financialized capital. Moreover, the first victims of London’s system are usually Londoners, whether the millions forced into insecure and dilapidated housing and 60-hour working weeks, or the 72 residents murdered in the inferno at Grenfell Tower. Reviewing London’s ignored history as a centre of local socialism also offers a potential way out for a city now under the dominion of a Tory government that has as little legitimacy here as it does in Scotland. There is much precedent here, and much for the left to learn

from; after all, the capital's two most extensive and radical experiments in municipal socialism, in the 1930s and 1980s, were direct responses to Labour's catastrophic national defeats. More than this, a great deal about what a Boris Johnson government may be like can be ascertained from how he governed as Mayor of London between 2008 and 2016; acquiescing to London's cultural and social settlement, while lucratively exacerbating its appalling housing situation—a combination that eventually rendered the Tories unelectable in most of London.

I. LCC: BUILDING THE TORIES OUT?

London was no pioneer in municipal socialism. Birmingham and Glasgow, offering 'gas-and-water socialism' from 1872, were decades ahead of the capital. Their examples were only partially paralleled by London's Metropolitan Board of Works, belatedly established in 1855 to administer what was already a giant conurbation. The Metropolitan Board's most famous project, the London sewers, was built in the wake of the 'Great Stink' of 1858, when a raft of raw sewage drifting down the Thames came to a halt right outside the Houses of Parliament, causing much mirth. Despite its achievements—the sanitation system, the Embankment, many London parks—the Board was less an example of 'municipal socialism' than a rather shabby emulation of Haussmann's Paris. It cut several boulevards through central slums, always refusing to rehouse slum dwellers. These new thoroughfares—Charing Cross Road, Shaftesbury Avenue, Southwark Street—remain bleak, seedy and visually uncoordinated. It took several corruption scandals to see the Metropolitan Board finally replaced in 1889 with the London County Council, elected through to the early 1900s on a property suffrage. The LCC covered most of London, though later industrial complexes—such as the vast Park Royal site in Willesden, to the north-west—would be strategically placed just outside its boundaries, to escape regulation. The LCC also had to co-exist with the local municipal boroughs, themselves often incorporating the administrative functions of the traditional church parishes.

The LCC was officially intended to be non-partisan, but this was always a fiction. For its first eighteen years, from 1889 until 1907, the LCC was run by the Lib-Lab Progressives—the forces, then operating within the Liberal Party, who would eventually form the backbone of Labour.

Sidney Webb was a member at the Progressive LCC, as were working-class trade unionists such as John Burns, Labour co-founder Will Crooks and Ben Tillett, then a member of the vaguely Marxist Social Democratic Federation.⁶ Though many of these figures ended up as Bernsteinian ‘social-imperialists’, cheering Britain’s entry into World War One, their social ambitions were surprisingly extensive. In the 1890s, the LCC established a Works Department, a direct-labour organization paying union rates, to carry out its building projects.

First among these was the Boundary Estate in Shoreditch, hailed a century later in Patrick Keiller’s modernist city-film, *London*, as ‘a fragment of utopia’. We see it for around a minute, in a static camera shot of leafy, bright-red Arts-and-Crafts tenements, with Asian children playing games between the flats. The Boundary Estate has a claim to be the first municipal housing estate in the world, and it set a standard that would not often be surpassed in the subsequent century. Its combination of high-quality materials, urbanity and spaciousness—continued soon after at the Millbank Estate in Pimlico—made it arguably the finest mass housing constructed in the capital until the Camden Council projects of the 1970s. The Boundary Estate’s visual lushness and spatial generosity contrasted sharply with the charitable Peabody Trust ‘model dwellings’ of the Victorian era, with their resemblance to barracks or prisons; but like these, this was a project for the ‘deserving poor’. The estate swept away the Old Nichol slum, but charged relatively high rents to cover the loans used to buy off the site’s many slum landlords.⁷ This led to a change of tack with later projects, such as the White Hart Lane estate in Tottenham, or Totterdown Fields in Tooting; both were beyond the LCC boundaries, where land was cheaper and the buildings could spread out, with single-family houses rather than flats. They retained the Boundary and Millbank estates’ William Morris-inspired attention to detail, craft and elegance, as well as utility, and their cheaper rents meant that they housed more working-class tenants. The Victorian ‘out-cast London’ of the East End would seldom benefit from such projects:

⁶ John Davis, ‘The Progressive Council, 1889–1907’, in Andrew Saint, ed., *Politics and the People of London: The London County Council, 1889–1965*, London 1989, p. 32.

⁷ Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History*, London 2007, pp. 53–6. Here and throughout this article, I am much indebted to John Boughton’s *Municipal Dreams*, London 2017, and the blog of the same name, which has profiled nearly every significant housing estate in London.

the colossal, proto-modernist dosshouse of Carrington House, Deptford, built in 1903, is a late and telling exception.

These and other LCC ventures of the time—in education, public transport, the fire service, much of which would be rehoused in fine Arts-and-Crafts Fire Stations by the Works Department—were intensively publicized by the Progressive administration. This made it vulnerable both to parliamentary hostility—Tory governments regularly vetoed the LCC’s attempts to expand its power—and to national electoral shifts. The Progressives lost London in 1907, and the Municipal Reformers—essentially protectionist Tories, who had gained the LCC as a result of a suburban revolt against taxation and ‘grand projects’ for the working class—would govern until 1934. In fact, they carried on some of the Works Department projects, which became even grander, at least in scale. They included the enormous Becontree estate to serve the new Ford factory in Dagenham, and the LCC’s new headquarters, County Hall.

Begun in 1911, this mammoth neo-baroque complex was placed directly opposite the Houses of Parliament. County Hall’s chilly, Piranesian grandeur was closer in effect to the various imperial government complexes being built at the time, in Pretoria, New Delhi or Belfast, than to the warmth and irregularity of earlier LCC projects.⁸ Yet the inter-war Tory administration was also surprisingly interested in the experiments of Vienna City Council under the Austro-Marxists, then the largest showcase of municipal building in the world. Alongside the likes of Becontree, the LCC of the 1920s would build several inner-city tenement schemes in a monumental, neo-Georgian style, usually with decent flats but poor, scrubby public spaces. The grandest, the Ossulston Estate in Somers Town, near Euston, most closely resembles the Viennese precedent, with a sequence of heroic archways nearly capturing the spirit of Vienna’s Karl-Marx-Hof. Its central building, Levita House, was named after the head of the LCC at the time, Lt Col. Sir Cecil Bingham Levita. By the inter-war years, the city’s proletariat was less that of ‘outcast London’ and more like that of the North, with co-ops, unions and labour

⁸ Upon seizing this building in 1981, Labour-left councillors were shocked at its labyrinthine complexities—seven miles of corridors—and attendant culture. On the fifth floor, behind a door secured by a heavy chain and padlock, they discovered ‘a huge Masonic temple’, which was ‘swiftly turned over to the newly formed Women’s Unit’: Andrew Hosken, *Nothing Like A Dame: The Scandals of Shirley Porter*, London 2006, p. 56.

clubs spreading across the inner boroughs. At the same time, London was expanding rapidly outward into a vast new zone of semi-detached suburbia, built mostly by speculators and largely outside the LCC's jurisdiction. Heavy industry followed suit, along with light industries for consumer goods, as in the 'golden mile' of art-deco factories along the Great West Road. This spread was actively encouraged by the two rival private conglomerates developing the tube lines: Metropolitan, which bought up and developed swathes of the Home Counties into a petty-bourgeois 'metro-land'; and the Underground Group, founded by the Chicago magnate and criminal Charles Tyson Yerkes, which built the first deep-level tubes from the 1900s onwards and developed its own pet property speculations at Edgware and Golders Green.

Brick by brick

It was this situation—a professional middle class moving beyond the LCC boundaries, via an incoherently administered transport system, and an increasingly active, unionized proletariat—which led to Labour winning power in 1934 and holding onto it for the next 33 years. Led by Herbert Morrison, a South London policeman's son and former Mayor of Hackney, its project was an explicit response to Labour's colossal defeat at the general election of 1931. Morrison's administration of London was of central importance in defining what 'socialism'—which he notoriously defined as 'what Labour governments do'—would mean in practice for the party, right up to the 1980s. The 1945 Attlee government's nationalizations were tested in London a decade earlier, in Morrison's creation of London Transport, as were its mass council-housing policies and the creation of health centres and hospitals free at the point of use. Even the radical pageantry of the 1980s GLC can be seen as a continuation of Morrison projects such as the Festival of Britain.

Due to his conservative role in Attlee's government—especially during his brief stint as Foreign Secretary, bombing Korea, meddling in Palestine and trying to outgun the Americans in the overthrow of Mossadegh in Iran—Morrison's name has been mud for the internationalist left. On the home front, as Paul Foot argued in a piece snappily headed, 'Portrait of an Appalling Man', Morrison's idea of 'public ownership' meant a top-down state capitalism, merely turning the old managers into bureaucrats, without any sort of democratic accountability or workers' control. Foot did note that 'substantial changes were made to the workers' advantage'

under Morrison's reign at the LCC: hospital patients got better treatment, as did the blind and mentally ill; schools improved; and more swimming pools, refreshment places, paddling pools, athletic grounds and bowling greens were built.⁹

Most importantly, perhaps, the tube services were nationalized, with most of the management of the new body taken from the Underground Group, under the leadership of its Anglo-American boss, Lord Ashfield. The Underground Group's branding—the 'roundel', Edward Johnston's typeface, modernist posters and hauntingly elegant station designs by the architect Charles Holden, all devised by Ashfield's second-in-command, the Ruskinian socialist Frank Pick—would become the face of London Transport. For the design historian Michael Saler, London Transport's fusion of continental modernism with Arts and Crafts in the 1930s was the only real British analogue to the Bauhaus or De Stijl—an all-encompassing programme of art, design and architecture in the public interest, with everyone from Man Ray to Moholy-Nagy designing posters for the nationalized tubes and trams. In this, Frank Pick was the only British figure of the period to parallel inter-war social-democratic planners such as Martin Wagner in Weimar Berlin.¹⁰

The strong public profile of London Transport provided the model for Labour's idea of the independent public corporation, managed by a board of 'independent' experts.¹¹ The other crucial policy of the LCC under Morrison was the creation of a Green Belt to limit suburban development. This was the first step in a process which led to London's post-war shrinkage, with working-class families encouraged to move to a series of New Towns in the Home Counties: Stevenage, Hemel Hempstead, Basildon, Harlow, Crawley and Hatfield were built on the self-contained,

⁹ Paul Foot, 'Portrait of an Appalling Man', *International Socialism*, February 1974. Foot was reviewing Bernard Donoughue and G. W. Jones's biography, *Herbert Morrison: Portrait of a Politician*, London 1973.

¹⁰ Michael Saler, *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England: Medieval Modernism and the London Underground*, Oxford 2001. It's instructive to compare the high quality of London Transport's early architecture, profiled in David Lawrence's *Bright Underground Spaces*, London 2009, to the mostly shoddy buildings of British Rail, showcased in the same author's *British Rail Architecture*, Manchester 2018. On Frank Pick, see also Jonathan Glancey, *London: Bread and Circuses*, London and New York 2003; Oliver Green, *Frank Pick's London*, New York 2014.

¹¹ James Gillespie. 'Municipalism, Monopoly and Management: The Demise of "Socialism in One Country", 1918–33', in Saint, ed., *Politics and the People of London*, p. 110.

light-industrial garden-city model that had long been a Fabian *cause célèbre*.¹² This enthusiasm for moving workers into Hertfordshire sits oddly with the apocryphal, oft-quoted Morrison line that he intended the LCC to ‘build the Tories out of London’, and little to this effect was done in the years he ran the capital. Instead, as in Vienna, the major effort was in wresting inner-city housing out of the hands of slumlords. Tenement flats were bigger and better built, and rents were sharply reduced for those coming into council housing from slums, which the LCC was now clearing on a large scale. Much of inner London is still defined by the modest four-storey, deck-access flats, in brown-brick and tile—a little modernist, a little Georgian—built under Morrison.

After the war, Morrison’s last London project was the make-over of the South Bank for the 1951 Festival of Britain—a lightweight showcase for a future modernist Britain, denounced by Winston Churchill as ‘three-dimensional socialist propaganda’.¹³ Initially modelled on the more classical Gorky Park in Moscow, the South Bank’s transformation was the work of a re-organized LCC Architects Department, staffed by idealistic and often just-demobbed young modernists, fresh out of the architecture schools. Their inaugural major project was the Royal Festival Hall, an egalitarian, spatially extravagant modernist building that was the first of its kind in Britain. The LCC Architects Department rejected the dour brick tenements of the 30s, with their bleak, paved public spaces, and instead designed leafy, panoramic, Corbusian maisonettes and towers. Frequently these were built on aristocratic estates that had been compulsorily purchased, preserving the trees and paths of eighteenth-century formal gardens. The largest, the Alton Estate in Roehampton, was described by an American critic as ‘the finest low-cost housing in the world’.¹⁴

An important if unintentional aspect of London’s post-war development was its avoidance of the Parisian model of a *banlieue*, a segregated—later, racialized—working-class peripheral belt. This was the consequence of a

¹² Morrison himself had briefly lived in the first Garden City at Letchworth, and there met his first wife Margaret Kent, a worker in the Spirella Corset Factory.

¹³ On the Festival and its mythology, see John Jervis, ‘Raining on our own Parade’, *Icon*, February 2019.

¹⁴ G. E. Kidder Smith, *The New Architecture of Europe*, London 1962, p. 40. The LCC Architects Department helped train a generation of designers and thinkers, including Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson, Ron Herron, Colin St John Wilson and Alan Colquhoun.

curious mixture of planning and awful accident—the Luftwaffe, though it carpeted the Docklands, bombed the rest of London rather at random. This meant that most of London’s post-war housing was built on bomb-sites scattered right across the city; there is no district of London, outside of Belgravia and Mayfair, that does not have council estates of significant size.¹⁵ Migrants from the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s were usually first put up in poor-quality, subdivided Victorian terraces, but over time many would be housed in the hundreds of LCC and borough estates. Although London is enormously unequal in terms of race and class, it is not segregated. This was partly because its population declined so sharply in those decades: for every Jamaican or Ugandan Asian to move to the capital in the post-war era, many more Londoners moved to Stevenage, Luton, the Essex or Kent suburbs, usually with the LCC’s encouragement. The plans for reducing London’s density were a major cause of the process that Jane Jacobs would later call ‘unslumming’: the New Towns beyond the Green Belt absorbed an enormous part of London’s skilled working class.

2. GLC: BATTLE FOR COUNTY HALL

The emergence of ‘Swinging London’ in the 1960s, the attendant appeal of the capital as a bohemian draw to bored provincial youth, and even the first flashes of ‘gentrification’ in inner boroughs shouldn’t distract from what was otherwise a pattern of depopulation and decline.¹⁶ Large parts of London remained wholly unreformed by three decades of Labour rule. The City of London retained its arcane privileges and self-government. Its most impressive project, a luxury multi-level council estate for City workers on the bombed Barbican site, was deliberately intended to boost the numbers of people actually living in the City

¹⁵To declare an interest, I live in a small, green and quiet council estate in inner-city Camberwell that was built on the site of a terrace destroyed by a V1 rocket in 1944.

¹⁶The term ‘gentrification’ was coined by the brilliant Weimar-emigrée sociologist Ruth Glass, to define what was taking place in ‘slum’ areas like Islington, Camden or Notting Hill, in the pivotal essay ‘London—Aspects of Change’ (1964), collected with the similarly prescient ‘The Mood of London’ (1973), in *Clichés of Urban Doom and Other Essays*, Oxford 1989. It’s worth noting that gentrification’s exclusionary effects were alleviated to a large degree at this stage, both by the general population decline and by continued council-house building, both of which would cease by the 1980s.

so as to preclude a Labour government from abolishing its privileges altogether.¹⁷ The first tall office blocks began to emerge in the 1960s, some in the City and others outside its boundaries—the Euston Tower and Centre Point, at either end of Tottenham Court Road, were the consequence of deals with the LCC, in which the speculative developers would promise to build road improvements or public squares in return for being allowed to build high; a foretaste of how Livingstone would try to manage corporate interests in the 2000s. Centre Point, a chic and kitsch Niemeyer-like expressionistic design by the hugely prolific Richard Seifert, became notorious, sitting empty until occupied by militant squatters. Even so, right up until the start of the 2000s, London's skyline, like that of Sheffield, Glasgow or Berlin, was defined more by public housing than by offices or condos.

'London' legally defined and London as it really existed were no longer the same place. In 1964 the LCC was replaced by a Greater London Council, extending to the suburbs, whose inhabitants now had to pay their share of city taxes. Labour opinion was largely against this because of an understandable fear that the new London body would be winnable by the Conservatives, which is exactly what happened. Or rather, Greater London became a marginal, a bellwether. Until its abolition by Thatcher in 1986, the GLC would pass between the two parties with each election: Labour victorious in 1964, the Tories sweeping the board in 1967, with smaller wins in 1970 and 1977, while Labour would reclaim it heavily in 1973, and narrowly in 1981. As an entity, the GLC had fewer powers than the LCC, particularly over housing, and the Architects Department was reduced and restructured. The GLC retained ultimate control over planning and London Transport (from 1970), and still owned much of the capital's council housing. Geographically, its boundaries encompassed most of the land within the Green Belt, an enormous area stretching from Croydon to Watford, retained by the Greater London Authority to this day.

Of equal importance for London's local government was the consolidation of large municipal boroughs, each of them with the population of a Coventry or Hull. From 1964 on, most of the power to build council housing, which continued at a clip until the 1973 oil crisis, rested

¹⁷ See architectural historian Barnabas Calder's profile of this remarkable 'banker's commune' in his *Raw Concrete: The Beauty of Brutalism*, London 2016.

with these local councils. This led to radically uneven results. Those local authorities that could raise a lot of money from suburbia or business—Lambeth, with the Communist and William Morris architect Ted Hollamby as its borough architect, and especially Camden, under architect Sydney Cook—embarked upon housing programmes of still unrivalled humanity, intelligence and originality. Low-rise, high-density estates like Cressingham Gardens, Myatt's Fields and Central Hill in Lambeth, or Highgate New Town, Alexandra Road and Branch Hill in Camden, far surpassed the private housing of this or any period in terms of space, warmth and design. By contrast, East End councils such as Tower Hamlets and Newham did not have the same budgetary and geographical luck, and built mostly cheap and repetitive towers, funded through prefab package deals with volume housebuilders. Many more councils were somewhere between, with boroughs such as Southwark, Islington or Haringey alternating between bespoke schemes and stark slabs, depending on budgets and resources. This was the vast reservoir of public housing that would be sapped by Thatcher's 1980 Housing Act, which gave council tenants the 'right to buy' their homes at fire-sale prices, backed by eye-popping financial incentives. This 'privatization from below' set the scene for the ground-breaking Labour administration taking over at County Hall.

A South Bank commune?

For the Corbynist left, the Livingstone era of the early 1980s often figures as a sort of social-democratic Paris Commune. Savaged at the time by the tabloid press and the Labour right, it is remembered by today's young socialists as the period when their forbears constructed a new and viable idea of socialism, so successful that it had to be eliminated. At the time, Corbyn was a newly elected Labour MP, close to the GLC's debates and sharing its ideas; Diane Abbott worked as its press officer; John McDonnell was the GLC's chair of finance and Livingstone's second-in-command. Livingstone himself, soon after winning office in 1981, told the Eurocommunist monthly *Marxism Today* that the new ruling group at the GLC was 'the post-1968 generation in politics'.¹⁸ That is, it was gloriously, explicitly, anti-racist, anti-homophobic, anti-imperialist, anti-sexist; it was celebratory, creative and propagandistic. It loved murals,

¹⁸ John Gyford, *The Politics of Local Socialism*, London 1985, p. 19.

pop music, bright colours and clothes, it scorned Morrisonian nationalization and funnelled money into co-ops and communes.

Yet Livingstone's GLC was not sectarian, and tried to build bridges with the old trade-union left, expanding upon, say, the tentative pan-racial and pan-regional solidarity shown between Asian women strikers and flying pickets bussed in from Yorkshire in the Grunwick dispute in Dollis Hill in the late 70s. In the memory of the radical urbanist Doreen Massey, who worked for the GLC in this period, this was a brief moment where 'the inter-place, twinning solidarities of the miners' strike', the linked arms of Livingstone and Arthur Scargill, seemed 'potentially momentous—the beginnings of conversation between the old resistance and the tentative experiments with the new.' Within months, however, 'both wings had been defeated'—and defeated not only by Thatcher and her troops, but also by 'the bulk of the Parliamentary Labour Party, and those elements across the political spectrum that took it upon themselves to sneer at the attempt to develop a politics that was feminist, anti-racist and anti-homophobic, as well as challenging to capital'.¹⁹ This, too, was prescient.

But there is another way of seeing the GLC era. In many respects it served to initiate the multicultural capital of the 'creative industries' that we know now; the first time that its government declared, 'London is Open', as the current Mayor repeated after Brexit. This was when the tide turned. Livingstone put it thus to *Guardian* journalist Andy Beckett in the 2010s: 'We didn't want to see London continue to decline, though I don't think we saw it challenging New York in the way it eventually did.'²⁰ That is precisely what happened, although not in the way Livingstone would have imagined at the time. To assess the impact of the GLC's project, it's worth distinguishing between its industrial programme and its cultural interventions. The GLC's large budget was mostly ploughed into the Greater London Enterprise Board (GLEB), a pregnant experiment in 'people's planning'. It was intended by Livingstone, McDonnell and its director, Mike Cooley, as a way of creating state monopolies based on workers' control and workers' self-management which broke with the old bureaucratic models; 'totally unresponsive to consumers', as Livingstone

¹⁹ Doreen Massey, *World City*, Cambridge 2007, pp. 79–81.

²⁰ Andy Beckett, *Promised You a Miracle: UK 80–82*, London 2015, p. 147.

put it, these were ‘responsible for the hostility to public enterprise that undoubtedly exists’.²¹

Desolate light-industrial sites were rejuvenated with co-ops and small enterprises, while ‘People’s Plans’ were produced for former heavy-industrial areas, such as the project for co-operative housing and industries on the gigantic Royal Docks site in Newham. The GLC bought up putative sites for similar plans at Coin Street by the National Theatre, Battlebridge Basin near King’s Cross, and Courage’s brewery in North Southwark. In each case, as GLEB activist-planners Hilary Wainwright and Maureen Mackintosh made clear, ‘these projects would not have existed were it not for a history of organized struggle on the part of local groups’.²² GLEB’s experimentalism is arguably one of the sources for the ‘community wealth-building’ embarked upon by Preston City Council since 2014.²³ London Transport was also part of the experiment—given proper investment for the first time in decades, with passenger numbers expanded by a cheap-ticket policy known as Fares Fair, spitefully defeated in court by Tory Bromley Council.

Yet the radical economics of the Livingstone GLC attracted less attention than its brilliant political propaganda and pageantry. The contrast with the old-Labour regime was dramatic, not least on post-colonial questions. During the Brixton riots of 1981—a mass protest against aggressive racist policing—the new Chairman of the GLC was seen, as *The Times* noted with horror, ‘on the streets of Brixton at the height of the rioting’. Livingstone publicly defended the rioters and refused an invitation to the Royal Wedding taking place elsewhere in the capital, so he could be in Brixton on the ‘front line’.²⁴ In 1983, discussing the surprising popularity in inner London of the GLC’s policies of loud support for the ANC, for Irish unity, for black sections, and for gay rights—all of these absolutely monstered by the press, far more so than McDonnell’s

²¹ Ken Livingstone and Tariq Ali, *Who’s Afraid of Margaret Thatcher?*, London 1984, p. 53. Mike Cooley, head of GLEB, had been the prime mover of the ‘Lucas Plan’ of 1976, which aimed to turn arms manufacturer Lucas Aerospace into a concern producing useful, non-lethal goods, self-managed by a workers’ collective.

²² Maureen Mackintosh and Hilary Wainwright, *A Taste of Power: The Politics of Local Economics*, London and New York 1987, p. 280.

²³ For a sympathetic account, see Aditya Chakraborty, ‘In an era of brutal cuts, one ordinary place has the imagination to fight back’, *Guardian*, 6 March 2019.

²⁴ Beckett, *Promised You a Miracle*, p. 143

economics—Livingstone concluded that ‘you can’t transform society’ solely on the basis of the white male working class: ‘You need a coalition which includes skilled and unskilled workers, unemployed, women and black people, as well as the sexually oppressed minorities’—‘that means *we* have to change’.²⁵

Most of all, this entailed a series of public festivals, concerts and events. The foyers, terraces and cafes of the LCC Architects Department’s Royal Festival Hall were opened up to the public all day as a ‘front room for London’, taking a cue from Stockholm’s Kulturhuset.²⁶ The new-left GLC broke totally with the cultural puritanism that had always lurked in the London Labour Party. In the early 1980s, the bohemian subcultures that had emerged in—and moved to—the capital since the 1960s were given their own taste of power. The peak was a July 1984 festival at the height of the miners’ strike, as Mackintosh and Wainwright recall:

Throughout the day, County Hall swarmed with young punks, skinheads, Rastafarians and a host of other Londoners. They camped on the grand staircase (in the past reserved for VIPs only) and in the wood-panelled corridors of the Principal Floor . . . The council chamber was used for a rolling debate on the abolition of the GLC, which at one point was also given over to speeches by Anne Scargill and the miners’ wives. The atmosphere was quite extraordinary—no one at County Hall had seen anything like it before.²⁷

This was a performance of democracy and accessibility, a momentary vision of the city the London new left wanted to build; we will never know if it could have been sustained, but Thatcher was evidently fearful of it might. Livingstone, like Morrison, governed a left-shifting capital in a country that had—in 1983 almost as much as in 1931—turned sharply to the right. Livingstone, as much as Morrison, intended London to be a microcosm of what socialist government would look like. The Tories—goaded by the unemployment figures constantly displayed atop County Hall, facing Parliament—knew this, and crushed it.

The legislation abolishing the GLC, along with six other metropolitan councils, was passed in 1986, the same year that Thatcher’s ‘Big

²⁵ Livingstone and Ali, *Who’s Afraid of Margaret Thatcher?*, p. 66.

²⁶ Despite the sell-off of the Festival Hall’s undercroft to chain restaurants, this policy remains in place.

²⁷ Mackintosh and Wainwright, *A Taste of Power*, p. 386.

Bang' deregulated the City of London.²⁸ 'Gentlemanly capitalism' was replaced by no-holds-barred computerized trading and money markets. A second, even less regulated City was then built in the late 1980s on the Docklands where the GLC had once prospected a 'people's plan'—creating a North American-funded waterside skyscraper colony based at the Canary Wharf on the Isle of Dogs. Though trumpeted as a purely *laissez-faire* 'non-plan', Canary Wharf was, of course, backed up by massive central-government investment in public transport—a new Docklands Light Railway ran on spindly viaducts throughout the area—and by post-industrial clean-up and dredging. This created in London a wholly new Atlanticist elite, as Massey would later argue. The City became Europe's Wall Street, a conduit between New York, Frankfurt, La Defense and Shanghai, while the second City at Canary Wharf became something else entirely, an area where the likes of Lehman Brothers could play their riskiest games; in Peter Gowan's words, it was 'Wall Street's Guantanamo'.²⁹ The London of today is, more than anything else, the consequence of these two events in 1986.

3. GLA: FAUST IN CITY HALL

Midway through Patrick Keiller's *London*, as Robinson walks obsessively through the city, striving to understand the triumph of Thatcherism and its apparent break with a European capitalism of public infrastructure, quality consumer goods and modern architecture, there comes a moment that is repeatedly shared on social media by the young London left. Robinson and the unnamed narrator who accompanies him are witnessing the Tories' victory celebrations in 1992, having snatched the election from Labour. As John and Norma Major wave their little flags, the narrator, his voice seething with barely controlled rage, lists the predictable consequences: increasing homelessness, deteriorating public transport, pollution, bad health—and the fact that the city would still be denied its own elected chamber. London was occupied territory, and its inhabitants' desire for 'the freedoms of city life' would be crushed

²⁸This was paralleled by a final industrial defeat: the demolition by Rupert Murdoch of one of the last strongly organized trades in London, the printworkers, in the course of the battles over News International's Docklands fortress at Wapping, between January 1986 and February 1987.

²⁹Peter Gowan, 'Crisis in the Heartland', NLR 55, Jan–Feb 2009.

continually by a vindictive, racist, puritan and philistine ‘suburban government’. There was ‘no longer anything a conservative government could do that would allow it to be voted out of office.’ The clip is shared so much because it captures the shock and alienation young socialist Londoners have felt in 2015, in 2016, and 2019, and their realization each time of how alone and unrepresentative they are, something only compounded by the fact that so many of them have escaped to the capital from Conservative areas in the South, the Midlands and, in recent years, an increasingly Tory North.

But the suburban, depopulated, car-centred, dilapidated city depicted in Keiller’s film has largely disappeared.³⁰ One of the reasons for that is the governing body—or rather, governing individual—set in place by New Labour. This ‘American-style’ elected Mayor, as it was usually described, testified both to Blair’s mortal hatred of local democracy and his deep Atlanticism. Looked at in detail, the new governing body for London was a barely democratic shadow of the GLC. The elected Mayor was to have responsibility for only three areas: producing a ‘London Plan’, regulating the Metropolitan Police and Fire Brigade, and overseeing London’s transport. It could not raise taxes nor build or manage housing, and it had no control over schools, which would be overtaken by what Mark Fisher called ‘business ontology’. Below the Mayor’s unelected officers was an elected Assembly whose members’ powers were roughly limited to those of a Russian Duma deputy under Putin; a matter of rubber-stamping and the production of reports. It was believed by Blair and Brown that such a Mayor would be a combination of manager and showman, and accordingly, the mooted mayoralty was described by the last elected leader of London as ‘a bloody stupid idea’.³¹

Blair and Brown desperately tried to keep Livingstone off the ballot as Labour candidate at the first mayoral election in 2000; beginning with personal bullying, they moved on to procedural obstructions and ended

³⁰ Keiller himself realized this early, and his sequel, *Robinson in Space* (1997) changed tack completely, focusing on the outer suburbs and the countryside, rejecting the first film’s ‘Nairn–Anderson thesis’ on English decline and anachronism in favour of a ‘Wood–Brenner’ analysis of England as a ‘pristinely’ capitalist country that is very successful on its own sadistic terms.

³¹ Livingstone never abandoned this view. See for example ‘Ken Livingstone: ‘I was London mayor for years, but I hate the mayoral system’’, talkRADIO, 23 August 2016.

with outright ballot-rigging. Livingstone duly stood as an independent, was expelled from the Labour Party and won by a landslide—58 per cent of the vote. Yet although he proceeded to staff his office with members of the Trotskyist sectlet Socialist Action, Livingstone never made any attempt—unlike George Galloway a few years later—to set up an organized alternative to New Labour’s neoliberal compact. There was no return to the insurgent popular socialism that had distinguished the old G.L.C. Livingstone was well aware how little actual power his new role entailed, something which could not have been symbolized better than in Norman Foster’s new City Hall. A grub-like glass form, appearing as a sort of stray testicle severed from the same architect’s phallic ‘Gherkin’ in the City, it copied the metaphorical ‘transparency’ from Foster’s glass dome for Berlin’s bombed-out Reichstag—the appallingly simple-minded view that being able to ‘see’ the politicians hobnobbing inside amounted to a form of democratic oversight. Now rather worn, muddy and sad, the building looks like an oversized cafeteria for the office blocks of (*sic*) ‘More London’ around it.

Livingstone put most of his energies into transport. He mounted the only serious attack on the motoring lobby in British political history, instituting an inner-zone Congestion Charge, which quickly reduced traffic in the capital by over 10 per cent. It was bitterly resisted, particularly by London’s only real newspaper, the right-wing *Evening Standard*,³² and received no support from the New Labour government, which appeared to regard it as Livingstone’s personal eccentricity. More cycle lanes were built than anywhere else in the country. Bus fares were kept low and routes expanded, leading to a massive increase in usage. Transport for London (as it was now called) set about taking the city’s privatized railway network into public ownership, reorganized into London Overground, a system similar to the German S-Bahn. New trams glided across the south London suburbs, from Croydon to Wimbledon. Even the passenger boats on the Thames were made part of a publicly regulated system. Moreover, all this was in the face of often fierce opposition from Blair and Brown. Livingstone fought Brown’s plans to part-privatize the tube in court, and lost; the new private operators, Metronet and Tube Lines, were inept and insolvent, and were quietly nationalized by his successor,

³² Londoners under 40 are often amazed to discover that the vacuous weekly listings magazine *Time Out* was once a radical campaigning journal run by a co-operative, until it was bought out in 1981. Since the collapse of its rival *City Limits* in 1993, London has, astonishingly, had no significant press apart from the Tory *Standard*.

Boris Johnson, in 2008 and 2010 respectively. By then, Gordon Brown was no longer able to block it.³³

The Livingstone of 1981 might have seen these improvements as an update on the 1930s dream of a Ruskinian-modernist network that would tie London, and Londoners, together. But one wholly unexpected effect was that Transport for London became a means to inflate property values, as the professional middle classes and the employees of financial services—and even more, their children—abandoned their big cars and suburban houses and returned to the metropolis, lured in part by a better public-transport system. Whereas housing next to railway lines was once seen as sooty, cheap and blighted, from the 2000s onwards new flats in close proximity to a tube, DLR or London Overground station would be more rather than less expensive. This was connected to Livingstone's great failure, which was on the question of housing and planning—an inextricable consequence of his deals with the enormously powerful City and its allies in real estate.

Building Dubai-on-Thames

The most serious and sympathetic analysis of Livingstone's mayoralty was by his old GLC comrade, Doreen Massey. In *World City* (2007) she pointed out that the GLA had achieved much more than Blair had wanted or expected, showing 'a strong commitment to combating inequality', and more public access to open spaces, lakes and nature reserves. None of this could obscure the fact that 'the main economic axiom that underlies it all is to support the continuation of the existing growth in financial and business services'. London actually became more rather than less unequal during Livingstone's second incarnation. This was often read as an epiphenomenon, rather than the direct consequence of his new approach to growth and distribution; as Massey noted, the 'regretful caveat' about 'exuberant, champagne-swilling' London—that 'there is "still" poverty there'—missed the fact that London's 'success and the poverty are intimately related'. As new luxury flats were built in boroughs like Newham, Southwark and Tower Hamlets, all near the top of the UK's indices of multiple deprivation, it was starkly obvious that

³³ Livingstone did however begin a London mayoral tradition of fighting with the rail-workers' union, the RMT, and infuriated one-time ally Bob Crow by calling on tube drivers to cross picket lines. Crow vacated the union seat on the TfL board in protest.

inequality between rich and poor was ‘more marked than anywhere else in the country’. Most of all, ‘it is not just that the poor in London have to live (“paradoxically”) cheek by jowl with the rich, it is also that their very co-presence makes their lives much harder.’ The place where this would be seen most is housing.³⁴

Livingstone was never a strong proponent of council housing; in the early 2000s, he would probably have found it hard to build much even if he had wanted to. Instead, he claimed he would make the private developers build it. The idea was to use the ‘Section 106’ agreements, a *quid pro quo* by which property developers, in exchange for the free rein they were given by Thatcher’s legislation, agreed to contribute towards building basic public infrastructure. The London Plan required developers—given a licence to print money by the staggering inflation of land and property prices in the capital since the mid-1990s—to build ‘affordable housing’.³⁵ Livingstone insisted that 50 per cent of all developments be ‘affordable’, but provided no definition of what ‘affordable’ was supposed to mean. Developers duly applied it to a range of ‘products’: studio flats, one-bedroom flats, shared-ownership schemes, ‘starter homes’, cheaper flats in less desirable parts of a given development, away from water, sunlight and views, or flats on different sites altogether, with the affordable housing for a development in Chelsea being bunged away somewhere in Hammersmith. Compared to even the most careless LCC housing construction, this was pathetic.

Worse, these micro-initiatives were then caught up in the perfect storm of house-price inflation and population increase that raged from the late 1990s, fanned by stepped-up incentives for the ‘right to buy’ council housing, the end of new council-house construction and a yawning rent gap, leading to a massive rise in landlordism. It was during Livingstone’s tenure, too, that the City was allowed to spiral out of all control. Defined for years by two lone skyscrapers—Richard Seifert’s NatWest Tower in the old walled City and César Pelli’s pyramidal One Canada Square

³⁴ Massey, *World City*, pp. 86, 54–5, 67.

³⁵ At their best, such as Gillett Square in Dalston, the architectural results could be confident and well laid-out, sometimes connected with new schools, libraries, galleries and transport hubs. One influence here was the architect and New Labour peer Richard Rogers, whose manifesto *A New London* (1992) advocated for a ‘European’ urbanism of squares, flats, parks and public housing (the latter would be the missing factor in the built reality).

at Canary Wharf—high-rise office blocks were suddenly built in huge numbers, often encouraged by the City’s aesthete Planning Director, Peter Rees, to take perverse, experimental shapes, twisting and turning to frame the ‘viewing corridors’ from London’s parks towards St Paul’s Cathedral, one of Livingstone’s cherished planning policies. Skyscrapers then began to be built outside the City’s undemocratic fiefdom, with the express approval of Livingstone’s office, which believed the developers could thereby be squeezed for ‘affordable housing’ and transport. The results could be farcical. The Section 106 agreement for the 95-storey ‘Shard’ in Bermondsey—the tallest building in Western Europe, oligarchic in both its form and its royal Qatari ownership—entailed the construction of a few bus stops.

Under New Labour, developers were directed to build on ex-industrial ‘brownfield’ land rather than on the Green Belt. The upshot was two new axial cities, slicing through London. One stretched east–west along the formerly industrial south bank of the Thames, a shallow spine of ‘stunning developments’, their multicoloured balconies giving out onto the silent river and their backsides turned against Southwark, Rotherhithe, Wapping, Greenwich, Charlton, Woolwich. This culminates in the forest of towers known to developers as VNEB, an acronym for Vauxhall Nine Elms Battersea, an ex-industrial site turned into an ‘opportunity area’ under Johnson, stretching two miles from the ziggurat headquarters of M16 to the gutted Battersea Power Station, much of it standing empty, devoid of the most basic social facilities, like a high-rise Becontree for international investors. The other new city, running north–south down the River Lea, was part of the build-out for the 2012 Olympics that Livingstone had fought so hard to secure. It turned East End industrial suburbs like Hackney Wick and Stratford into colonies of luxury high-rises. Livingstone’s comment on this hugely expensive new district was that ‘this was exactly the plan. It has gone perfectly’.³⁶ But though the new riverside park is pleasant, and Zaha Hadid’s vaulting, organic swimming pool delightful, more social housing was destroyed in its construction—in the form of the erased Clays Lane Estate—than was built.

Livingstone’s record at the GLA also compared poorly with the achievements of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, both of

³⁶ For a vitriolic account of the Olympic redesign of the Lea Valley, see Iain Sinclair, *Ghost Milk: Calling Time on the Grand Project*, London 2011.

which have straightforwardly repealed the ‘right to buy’ council housing. Although London’s population is much larger, more new social housing has been built in Scotland than in the capital since 2000. Livingstone claimed he wasn’t free to tax the opulent districts of London harder so as to subsidize the poorer ones; in Scotland, Alex Salmond demanded that freedom, repeatedly, and got it.³⁷ Rather than being unable to move against the powerful representatives of property and finance, it’s more likely that Livingstone and his allies were unwilling to do so. Transport aside, what Livingstone did continue from the GLC years was an official policy of anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-homophobia and anti-imperialism, denouncing Bush as a war criminal at a Stop the War rally in 2004. Yet there were exceptions, the main one being Livingstone’s backing for the Metropolitan Police—extending to a defence of the Met’s shooting of the Brazilian worker Jean Charles de Menezes on the basis of racial profiling in 2005, one of the grimmest events in London’s War on Terror, and a sad epilogue to the career of the London leader who joined the Brixton rebellion in 1981. Combined with the spiralling cost of living, this would demoralize Livingstone’s base enough for the Tories to be able to retake the capital in 2008, with the assistance of the *Evening Standard*, installing Boris Johnson as London’s mayor.

4. THE BORIS JOHNSON YEARS

Johnson represented a particular clique in the Conservative Party which was, for the first time in decades, metropolitan rather than suburban. His electoral strategy in the 2008 mayoral campaign was a mix of what his campaign manager Lynton Crosby called the ‘Zone 5 Strategy’—Islamophobic dog-whistling for older racists in the outer suburbs, through the *sotto voce* bigotry of *Evening Standard* articles on Livingstone’s friendly relations with Muslim clerics—with an appeal to the inner-London upper classes, topped off by TV-personality banter and a willingness to steal policies from his opponent whenever necessary. The Stop Boris campaign, strongly endorsed by the *Guardian*, tried to focus on just one of this chameleonic politician’s many careers—his tenure as editor of the *Spectator*, a right-wing political-cultural weekly, in which capacity he would throw around racist slurs with abandon, the more antiquated the better. The aim was to disassociate Johnson from his

³⁷ Massey, *World City*, p. 146.

second media career, as a liberal Tory—all floppy hair, self-deprecation and Tommy Cooper-style studied ineptitude—who regularly appeared on, and occasionally hosted, the liberal comedy news quiz, *Have I Got News for You*. The *Guardian's* attempt to reveal a Victorian bigot behind the jolly Tory it's OK to like was a spectacular failure.

The various boondoggles that marked Johnson's eight years as mayor are expertly documented by the architect Douglas Murphy in *Nincompoopolis*.³⁸ Along with the work of journalists such as Dawn Foster, Adam Bienkov and the late Tom Barry (blogger at *Boris Watch*), it marked one of few attempts to work out exactly what Boris was doing at City Hall. As it turned out, the fears that a Johnson administration would mean the *Spectator* in power in London were unfounded. Though Livingstone's proposed transport policies were mostly discarded, the continuity elsewhere was clear. Private railway lines were taken into public ownership under the London Overground banner, the tube was re-nationalized, and Johnson took over Livingstone's plan for a bicycle-hire scheme, to which he added sponsorship from Santander and the name, 'Boris Bikes'. Livingstone's official multiculturalism was continued; Johnson trumpeted his distant Turkish ancestry and headed to the Notting Hill Carnival every year.

Johnson was in office during the 2008 financial crisis, the student occupations of 2010 and the inner-city riots—sparked by the Met's shooting of the unarmed Mark Duggan in Tottenham—the following year. Predictions that the financial meltdown might lead to a 1991-style bonfire of mortgages in the capital, with riverside yuppie flats turning into negative-equity ghettos, were disproved within months. Instead, the Great Recession and turmoil in the Eurozone actually intensified the city's housing crisis, as London became a place to stash 'disaster capital'. Every time a catastrophe struck elsewhere in the world, the effects were felt in London's property market. The Greek financial crisis saw the capital of Hellenic shipbuilders slosh into Fitzrovia. Each new iteration of the wars in the Gulf saw Qatar and the UAE buy up ever larger swathes of London's real estate. Post-crisis restrictions on speculation in Malaysia and Singapore—which models its 85 per cent council-housing system on the old LCC—saw investors there snap up off-plan luxury high-rises in Nine Elms. The war between Russia and Ukraine was accompanied

³⁸ Douglas Murphy, *Nincompoopolis: The Follies of Boris Johnson*, London 2017.

by oligarchs from both countries moving into the most expensive flats in the world, at Richard Rogers's One Hyde Park.

This 'super-prime crisis', as Anna Minton calls it in *Big Capital*, her essential study of the Boris years, consisted of 'a very large-scale injection of global capital into London's safe haven, including corrupt money', combined with 'quantitative easing, limited regulation, flexible employment and some of the lowest corporate tax rates in the world' to transform the capital.³⁹ The resultant rise in house prices, with an inrush of capital chasing an undersupply of homes, was openly marketed as a selling point for speculative investment by both the Tory GLA and Labour councils.⁴⁰ As Minton points out, the rise in London's house prices since the 1970s has been above inflation by 513 per cent, as against 166 per cent for the rest of the UK. The result has been a situation in which 'those who own gain directly from rising prices that exclude everyone else'. London was becoming a massive concentration of the propertyless, who have almost no legal rights—most tenants are on assured-shorthold leases that last a year at best, six months at worst, and are subject to regular rent rises, well above inflation, and potentially to 'no-fault' evictions. Some 42 per cent of ex-council flats lost in London through the 'right to buy' have become private rentals.⁴¹ Within Europe, home ownership is now lower only in Austria, Denmark and Germany, all of which still build large quantities of social housing and have strict rights for tenants. This was a landlord's paradise.

Social purge

The project of getting private property developers to build social housing was killed stone dead when 'affordable' housing was finally defined, in Johnson's 2013 London Plan, at 80 per cent of market rent—thus excluding the entire London working class from the 'product' that was

³⁹ Anna Minton, *Big Capital: Who is London For?*, London 2017, pp. 7, 14–15.

⁴⁰ Labour-run Tower Hamlets council produced a brochure for overseas investors in the Blackwall Reach scheme—which would replace Robin Hood Gardens, an architecturally acclaimed council-housing estate—noting the under-supply of homes and London as a 'safe haven' as reasons to invest: Anna Minton, 'Setting the Scene', in Alberto Duman, Dan Hancox, Malcolm James and Anna Minton, eds, *Regeneration Songs: Sounds of Investment and Loss from East London*, London 2018, p. 57.

⁴¹ Minton, *Big Capital*, pp. 30, xv.

supposed to solve their housing problems. Rather than councils picking up the slack, the exact opposite began to happen. The London boroughs, most still Labour-run, started to cannibalize the housing that had been built by the LCC, the GLC and their municipal forbears, demolishing estates in vast clearances and selling the land. The new strategy owed much to supermarket heiress Shirley Porter, Tory leader of Westminster Council in the 1980s and one of London's most notorious politicians. Noting that the large housing estates in her borough were increasingly outvoting Tory homeowners, Porter adopted a policy of demolishing council housing in desirable areas, moving the tenants to asbestos-ridden 'hard to let' blocks and replacing it with new private-public 'stable communities'. Westminster considered this to be 'revenge for Morrison' and his apocryphal plan to build the Tories out of the capital.

It was incredible to see Labour local authorities engage in the same policies throughout the 2000s and 2010s, and arguably, it had the sort of effects Porter imagined it would; Battersea, a seat that once elected a Communist MP, went to the Tories in 2010, at least in part because of the stunning new 'riverside colonies' dotted across it. The inner-London boroughs of Tower Hamlets, Newham and Southwark were the worst offenders, selling off with abandon the large quantities of land they had acquired over the course of the twentieth century. Between 2005 and 2015, fifty council estates with a population of 30,000 were subject to 'estate regeneration', which saw the number of private homes in the estates increase tenfold, with an eventual net loss of 8,000 social homes. The GLA's own report demonstrated beyond all doubt that the capital's housing policies, pursued by Labour and Tory councils alike, had been an appalling failure.⁴² Either that, or to misuse Livingstone's phrase, 'this was exactly the plan. It has gone perfectly'.

With his usual chutzpah, Johnson assailed the results of estate regeneration as 'Kosovo-style cleansing', while at the same time helping the process along. He did make some strictly aesthetic changes, particularly through a Mayor's Design Guide which damned the 'Dubai-on-Thames' (another Johnson coinage) slurry of shiny, aluminium and trespass-clad executive flats through the simple expedient of building exactly the same

⁴² London Assembly Housing Committee, *Knock It Down or Do It Up? The Challenge of Estate Regeneration*, February 2015. The committee was chaired by Darren Johnson (Green) and Tom Copley (Labour).

flats but cladding them with a half-inch skin of biscuity brick. Johnson's proposed solution to the mounting crisis was always that sheer numbers of new flats would, through the laws of supply and demand, bring down prices and rents. This was nonsensical; when supply *fell* during the brief recession in London after the financial crisis, so too did housing costs.⁴³ Accordingly, many Londoners pray for another economic meltdown.

By 2016, when he shifted back to Parliament to pursue his political career, Johnson's attempt to paint himself as a different sort of Tory appeared to have succeeded; even the shouts of abuse from passers-by as he bicycled to City Hall seemed theatrical and basically affectionate. Accordingly, the Tories tried to repeat the trick by selecting Zac Goldsmith, another liberal Tory and a long-standing environmentalist, as candidate for the 2016 mayoral election. Promises to continue favouring public transport and 'building houses' were backed by an unsubtle Islamophobic campaign in the *Evening Standard* against Labour candidate Sadiq Khan, the MP for Tooting and a protégé of Brown and Miliband. Yet the racism directed at Khan backfired, and Goldsmith's attempt to present himself as something other than, well, a Tory, failed. Labour won the GLA and the mayoralty by a handsome margin.

This trend was already visible in the 2015 election, when a strong swing in the capital saw the suburban seats of Enfield North, Ilford North, and the onetime 'Queen of the Suburbs', Ealing, all fall to Labour. These were the sort of places that had once despised Livingstone and the radical GLC—'where the racists all moved to', as he assumed in 1984.⁴⁴ It's hard to be sure whether this was a matter of inner-London's politics seeping out to the suburbs, as younger people were priced out of the inner boroughs, or a radicalization among those already there. But suddenly, there was a coalition under construction, where young ex-students, usually in insecure work and terrible housing, black and minority-ethnic voters who had always voted Labour, and the scattered remnants of the unionized working class were all shifting to the left. By the end of 2015, Labour's leadership was in the hands of three 1980s London radicals—Corbyn, Abbott and, resuming his old GLC role as the left's Chancellor, McDonnell.

⁴³ Minton, *Big Capital*, p. 36.

⁴⁴ Livingstone and Ali, *Who's Afraid of Margaret Thatcher?*, p. 48.

Very little of this has been visible in the way the mayoralty has been run by Khan. Extreme caution has been the watchword, accompanied by savage attacks on Corbyn—and a welcome for Johnson’s victory in December 2019.⁴⁵ On the environment, Khan has been deeply contradictory, combining campaigns against emissions with commitment to build a second motorway tunnel and support for airport expansion. The last couple of years have seen public-transport usage in London fall for the first time in two decades; buses are significantly worse—less frequent, more often stuck in traffic, their routes truncated. Khan is probably the first leader of London’s government to have actually been raised in a council estate—specifically, above the grand archways of the very pleasant, Red Vienna-style Henry Prince Estate in Earlsfield, south-west London. Initially, Khan appeared to think just mentioning this amounted to a council-housing policy, but over time there has been some encouragement of local authorities to build, as well as the introduction in 2018 of ballots in estate-regeneration schemes. There have been attempts to train a new generation of borough architects—though as this scheme is partly funded by developers, new council housing is only one of many products that it offers to design.⁴⁶ Most of all, the mayoralty is committed to London’s growth at all costs, with enthusiastic official backing for a city of 10 million people by the end of the decade, based on massive overseas investment, weak tax regulations and letting the City do whatever it likes. The faith that constantly inflating the bubble can be the means for social transformation is asinine, but Khan shows no signs of abandoning it.

5. HORIZONS OF THE LONDON LEFT

After 2017, hopes were high that Corbyn’s leadership and the strength of Momentum on the ground would at last bring a reckoning for the right-wing Labour local authorities that had demolished great swathes of council housing to build luxury flats (Southwark, Tower Hamlets), or that had involved themselves in property boondoggles explicitly marketed to overseas investors (Newham, most flagrantly). Despite some

⁴⁵ People in Britain ‘made the right choice’, Khan told *The Times*. See Rosamund Urwin, ‘Sadiq Khan Interview: Voters were right to shun Jeremy Corbyn’, *The Times*, 5 January 2020.

⁴⁶ For a sharp critique, see Tom Cordell, ‘Best Laid Plans’, *Tribune*, 11 May 2019.

notable battles, that reckoning never quite came. In Southwark, the left threw its efforts into trying to save the old centrepiece of the Elephant and Castle, its titular shopping centre—a 1965 megastructure whose commercial failure as a normal shopping mall led to it being taken over by genuinely unusual shops and spaces. By the 2000s, it had among other things an Irish Republican bookshop, a Polish restaurant, a bowling alley, a bingo hall and most famously, many shops, cafes and restaurants owned and used by the local Latin American population. For a while campaigners, with the assistance of many Labour councillors, managed to get approval of the demolition blocked, but it was eventually pushed through by the council's Labour leaders forming a voting bloc with the Liberal Democrats. There is usually graffiti in the area referring to this: 'CLLR PETER JOHN IS A TOENAIL'.

Defending the record of Enfield, one of the more creative London councils, former councillor Alan Sitkin defined its strategy as being an 'entrepreneurial state', borrowing Mariana Mazzucato's term for post-war technological innovations.⁴⁷ In this post-industrial outer London borough there have been some successes: Enfield has a shell company to build council housing, runs its own heating network and, more radically than any other local authority, has started to municipalize private rented housing on a large scale. To see the limits of these strategies, though, it's instructive to look at a borough that has seen particularly drastic inflation in housing costs—Hackney. There, the municipal shell company has been widely praised for its redevelopment of the Colville Estate in Hoxton. Rather than selling out to developers, Hackney itself balloted residents, built new housing and moved them into it, subsidizing this by building two David Chipperfield-designed residential skyscrapers, with flats that sell for £1 million each. How clever! How ingenious! Except, as soon as you can charge £1 million for a flat in Hoxton, every landlord in the borough knows it. More and more people are put into insecure housing, are forced to move out of the borough, or join the council waiting list. Meanwhile, the council is praised for putting people already in council housing back into council housing.

There is a reason why 'entrepreneurial' has seldom been a term of approbation on the left. The only way to break with this in the long-term is

⁴⁷ Alan Sitkin, 'Eight years on the frontline of regeneration: lessons from the Enfield experiment', *Soundings* 68, Spring 2018; see also Aditya Chakraborty's important series of dispatches from the borough for the *Guardian*, 'The Enfield Experiment'.

by analogy with other resource curses, particularly where they have such toxic effects—that is, leave it in the ground. Don't sell your land, and don't speculate on it either. Don't build private housing if it is beyond the budgets of most of your residents. Don't play the property market. But resisting that temptation is proving difficult for the most committed socialists.

Political bulwark

Campaigning in the December 2019 election in London felt surreal. Despite the energy and enthusiasm of the mostly young Labour canvassers, there was an enormous sense of dread, an intimation that this could be the last chance, the last throw of the dice before climate change and apocalyptic nationalism foreclosed any possibilities of building a fair society. The Labour Manifesto and the often-bizarre official campaign threw ideas out on a daily basis, most of them good ones; but this was a period of terror rather than hope. On the night, sitting in a room full of people who had almost all canvassed—many of them shifting between a London constituency and their hometown—the BBC exit poll foretelling a Tory landslide caused a sharp scream of shock.

Weeks later, when it was possible to look calmly at the election results—the swings, the vote shares—it was clear London had almost the exact same election in 2017 as it had in 2019. Several inner London seats saw a modest *rise* in the Labour vote; long queues outside polling stations were seen right across the capital. The strange southern gains of 2017, such as Canterbury, Bedford, Portsmouth South and Reading East, mostly former bellwethers, voted Labour on a day that saw a Tory landslide, as did almost every seat in a large 'core city' in England and Wales.⁴⁸ Labour-held marginals were retained—tightly in strongly Brexit-voting Dagenham—except for Kensington, lost by just over a hundred votes, after a campaign in which an ex-Conservative Cabinet Minister standing for the Liberal Democrats libellously accused the MP most associated with the efforts to get justice for Grenfell victims of having signed off on its cladding.⁴⁹ The rage at this, and at the narcissism of those for whom the European Union surpassed all other issues, shouldn't distract from

⁴⁸ The only seat within the 'core group' of cities to go Tory was Birmingham Northfield, though the outer towns of the metropolitan boroughs of Greater Manchester, West and South Yorkshire and the West Midlands saw a Labour meltdown.

⁴⁹ See the interview, 'Defend Emma Dent Coad', *Tribune*, 8 December 2019.

the reality that if London were representative of the rest of the country, Labour would have won by a crushing landslide. Of course, it is not.

The exit polls revealed a stunning generation gap. If only the over-70s voted, there would be Tory MPs in every constituency apart from South Wales, Merseyside, the City of Manchester and inner London; if only under-30s did, there would be no Conservative MPs anywhere in Britain. The much-mythologized Red Wall, invented by Johnson's advisors in 2019, bands together many ex-industrial areas whose young people have been forced to move to the cities—and, especially, to London—leaving a resentful-nationalist pensioner class living in horrendously neglected towns, but personally insulated from the worst of austerity by the triple-lock on pensions and by widespread home ownership, often of ex-council housing. London, as the youngest part of the UK by some distance, has been the epicentre of this generational politics, and again, there is no special reason to resort to 'culture' to explain the divergence in voting patterns. Rather than 'working-class voters shifting to the Tories', it's easy to argue the exact opposite has taken place. On a classical definition, of people who have to sell their labour power to survive and do not own property, London is the most proletarian city in the country. Similar points could be made about the dominance of zero-hours contracts, insecure working conditions and a relative lack of unionised public-sector jobs. Londoners also have on average the lowest disposable income in the country, because of its immense cost of living. This is a strange elite.

The problems of the 'left behind' Midlands and the North are real—different to those of London, but real. But outside of the large cities, they are not apocalyptic. The mass homelessness, the tent cities, the deportations, the fires: these are a metropolitan phenomenon; small Northern towns like Blyth or Bolsover see instead a grinding, gradual decline, one that began at least forty years ago. Thousands upon thousands of people in London were *desperate* to overthrow the Tories in 2019; elsewhere, in places with less hope, it was just another election. The inhabitants of London have, for all their insecurity, some sense that life can plausibly be improved. They have not watched nothing but dereliction, Matalan and Sports Direct overtake the places where they live. It is easier to imagine rebuilding and renewal in a place that is regularly radically reshaped, albeit in the interests of capital. There is no obvious reason to say 'But, can we afford it?' when presented with socialist policies, if hot money

slashes around you every time you leave the house—even if you yourself cannot access it. In London, working-class voters can see the ruling class every day; their skyscrapers, their capital-investment flats, their high-security Georgian houses. That makes it rather harder to blame Lithuanian bricklayers for social ills. Londoners did not imagine themselves voting against the rest of the country, but against the minority of Londoners who vote Tory and Liberal Democrat—who are also, as a rule, the people who run the country.

Retaking City Hall

Londoners have already lived for eight years under a Boris Johnson government, so they know what one looks like. Unlike liberal op-ed writers, they will not be amazed as he nationalizes railway franchises or denounces the effects of his own policies. Infrastructural bungs will be thrown at the North and Midlands with abandon, most likely exacerbating the housing crisis that affects London far more severely than anywhere else. In these conditions, the best tactic for the London left may be to turn inward—to use its huge advantage in the capital as a way of building an alternative, as it did under Morrison and Livingstone. There is little chance of Khan undertaking that, unless he is put under enormous pressure. But the Momentum slate for the next GLA election includes some outspoken socialists such as the youthful Corbyn aide Liam Young. One can hope that young Corbynists' plans for the immediate future entail the seizure and radicalization of a capital which already, demonstrably, supports left-wing policies.

As a programme, the 2019—not 2017—Labour Manifesto is a plausible blueprint for what should be done with London's profound problems and its absurdly skewed presence within the country. It cannot be enacted in one city, and with Keir Starmer as Labour leader, little of it is likely to be national Labour policy in 2024. But it is worth making some more general points as to what a London government could plausibly do within its means. These would have to go beyond the creative shortcuts out of neoliberalism discovered in the very different conditions of Preston. They would include *looking outward*. Paris has built thousands of new—as opposed to replacement—council flats, often in wealthy parts of the city, and has refurbished and extended tower blocks without clearances or rent rises; it has been much more aggressive with the car and carbon lobbies than London. Berlin has instituted its own city-wide

rent freeze—it has more powers than London, but this is still likely to be fought in the courts. Barcelona has municipalized energy and water companies on its own, in the absence of a nationalization programme from above.

Of equal importance: *London needs to stop*. Within its current boundaries, a city of 10 million will be unbearably dense and overcrowded, and the idly proposed ‘solution’ of densifying the semi-detached streets of the suburbs will not take place, as it would involve compulsory purchase on a revolutionary scale. The centre-left city government in Seoul has introduced an official policy of ceasing the growth of the South Korean capital—the flagship of its City Architects Department has been the refurbishment, rather than demolition, of the Sewoon Sangga centre, a dilapidated and informalized 1960s structure with similarities to the Elephant and Castle. London needs to recognise that its incessant growth, its thirst for infrastructure and concrete, is environmentally, geographically and politically disastrous.

London’s government should not be afraid to be *confrontational* with the powers-that-be, in the interest of its citizens. The powers the GLA has managed to squeeze out of Parliament, compared to its cousins in Cardiff and Edinburgh, has been minimal. Demand them, and put them in the London Plan, the only really powerful instrument the Mayor has. If he won’t, the GLA needs to change the Plan, something the campaign group Just Space has already called for. And perhaps most of all, the London municipal left needs to *draw on its own past*. London is not a uniquely capitalist city, but a capital which has had more than 120 years of socialist and social-democratic governments, usually strongly supported by its population. They have done good things, and they have done bad and indifferent things. But they have done them, and done them most often in conditions of great hostility. If they could do it, so can we.