

The Rise and Fall of the Metropolitan Authority?

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Introduction

Most advanced industrial states since about the early 1950's have been faced with the problem of enlarging the units of their local government systems in order to cope, firstly, with demographic change. That is to say, the considerable growth of urban centres well beyond the existing boundaries of their local governments. The second need for enlargement is derived from the expansion of local governments' service responsibilities which has raised the issue of economies of scale and service externalities. Increased scale of local governments is perceived as meeting both sets of problems (1).

The extent of the response to local restructuring has varied considerably among Western states from the United States, where it has been at its most modest, not to say non-existent, to the United Kingdom where an almost manic zeal seems to have been operating such that its local governments have been transformed into the biggest in the Western world (2). Some idea of the extent of the difference between these two extremes of local government modernization can be derived from the following table which covers the period in the 1970's when the UK undertook major changes. Today (1990) the difference between the two systems will almost certainly be greater.

Table1

Between these two extremes there is a wide range of responses which encompasses two broad tendencies. In what may be called the napoleonic group of West European states (Spain, France, Italy, Belgium) the local government structure has been changed only minimally, and instead a new regional level of government between the local government structure per se and the centre has been inserted (3). In the North European group (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, West Germany), on the other hand, the local government system has been extensively restructured, not with quite the revolutionary abandon of the UK, but certainly to a much greater extent than in the napoleonic group, with the possible exception of Belgium.

The Metropolitan Model

So much for the broad trends, within those trends there exists a special type of modernization, that of the government of the large urban agglomeration, which will be the principle subject of this paper (4). Such agglomerations can have different forms, but this paper will be principally concerned with the agglomeration that contains one dominant centre. As we shall see, the degree of restructuring of the government of the large agglomeration can vary in practice from the minimal area wide structure to a highly elaborate, entirely new system, but for the sake of convenience we will use the term metropolitan, or metro, model to cover all of them. This is justified on the grounds that the essence of the change is the recognition of the unity of at least the continuously built

up area of the agglomeration and that this unity is reflected in some form by area-wide institutions or arrangements. The term pure metro model will be reserved for the cases where not only is there a fully-fledged elected area-wide entity, but a consciously designed second, lower level of smaller units as well.

The rationale for treating the continuously built up agglomeration as a single entity is derived from two distinct sets of assumptions (5), which we will explore in greater detail. Before we do, however, it must be emphasized that the case for creating an area-wide authority, or, indeed, any structural change in local government, has been subject to considerable criticism, especially in the United States. Briefly, such criticism argues that small scale (i.e. the status quo) has special advantages for local government among which maybe noted that it maintains a quasi-market, i.e. that the existing fragmented metropolitan area corresponds to a kind of public service industry and competition between local governments takes place as a consequence of which the citizen gains much more than he loses by not having an overall authority. Secondly, it is claimed, any metropolitan authority will always have great difficulty aggregating consumer preferences and determining appropriate expenditure levels and at the same time avoid the perils of bureaucratic aggrandisement (6).

So much for anti-metro theory. We will now turn to the pro-metro theories and the first and the most widely acknowledged maybe called the externality principle. By this it is meant the principle that local services should, as far as possible, be self-contained so that they are paid for by the citizens that use them. For a local government that finds itself because of urbanization imbedded in a continuously built up area such self-containment is not possible simply because there is leakage, or externalities, for some local services which are provided by the said local government but "consumed" by outsiders. This problem is particularly acute in communications; for example, an arterial road running through the said embedded local government and maintained by it will be mainly used by outsiders who enter on the road at one end of it and leave at the other. In no sense can such a road be defined as being self-contained within the local government. A similar externality will arise for an underground railway system or trunk sewers. Equally, the embedded authority can never effectively exercise the land use planning function because the origin, and perhaps the solution, to its planning problems are more than likely to be outside its jurisdiction. In short, most of what may be called infrastructural services and especially communications may be deemed to be indivisible; that is to say they can only be effectively provided or coordinated at the area-wide level.

The second logic, or rationale, for creating a single authority for the whole of the urban agglomeration is derived from the tendency to spatial segregation of social and occupational groups within the metropolitan area (7). Although the occupational structure of the agglomeration reflects the needs of its various industries, local government fragmentation may mean (and may be intended to mean) that the higher income groups within the agglomeration can avoid the cost of redistributive services on

behalf of the lower paid, although such groups are essential to the economic health of the agglomeration. It should be noted, however, that the degree of class segregation between the local governments within a metropolitan area is likely to vary and in the US at least, may be less than is often assumed (8). However, segregation will certainly exist to some degree simply because high status suburbs are more expensive to live in. A similar redistributive problem may occur in relation to essential area-wide institutional services provided in the central area or central business district (CBD), but used by people throughout the metro area, such as, parks, reference libraries, museums, technical colleges and so on. There is a further set of area-wide services that the C.B.D. must provide that may be called facilitatory rather than institutional. These include traffic management, police, access highways, and public transport. Such services not only facilitate the ingress and egress of outsiders to the institutional services within the C.B.D. just listed, but more important, they make possible the diurnal flows of outsiders who work in the C.B.D. but live beyond the central city.

A great deal of controversy surrounds this problem because it can be argued that whereas it is true that the outsiders do not contribute directly to the cost of C.B.D. services, outsider expenditure while in the C.B.D. and the taxable values they generate by working there may compensate and even exceed the benefits they receive from the C.B.D.'s area-wide functions whether institutional or facilitatory (9). One of the best analyses of the issue by Bradford and Oates has concluded:

'Our reading of the evidence suggests that suburban exploitation of central cities interpreted as the failure of the suburbanites to bear their fair share of the costs of city services is typically of minor quantitative importance' (10).

Wherever the true balance of costs and advantages lies, and obviously that balance must vary from city to city, there can be no doubt that every service that is transferred to an overall metro authority counteracts these maldistribution problems because it can equalize on the service.

It is possible that the metropolitan-wide authority may be created simply by extending the boundary of the existing but underbounded core city authority. In this way the structure of government is unitary. Such is the model applied in Oslo, and, in effect, New York City at the time it was created. Its very unitariness does not in any sense detract from it being an example of the metropolitan model. It is not an option that is easily open to the very largest cities, however, simply because of scale. Moreover, it is usually politically impossible for central cities to obliterate and absorb the municipalities immediately surrounding them. Indeed, the almost universal political fact of the metropolitan area is some degree of antagonism between core and periphery. It follows that the most popular metropolitan model is a two level, or tier, structure. Some argue that there is an inherent logic in the two tier model since it can resolve the eternal conflict within local government between the values of participation, access and local identity on the one hand and functional optimality and production efficiency on the other. The lower

tier of the metro model can cater for the first set of values and the top tier area-wide authority the second (11). Within the two tier group a structure which leaves the existing pattern of municipalities covering the agglomeration intact and merely superimposes the metropolitan authority over it is perhaps the most popular of all. Examples of this type include Barcelona, Stockholm, Montreal and Copenhagen. There are a few examples of a restructured lower tier, the pure metro model, the best known being the London metro (G.L.C.) and the six metropolitan systems that were created in other parts of England (Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield and Newcastle), plus the most celebrated example of all, the Toronto metro.

Whatever structural model is chosen, there remains the problem of which functions are to be allocated to the metro authority itself. The list varies considerably from country to country, but ideally it should include the following high externality, high fixed cost, or indivisible functions:

- Master planning
- Arterial highways
- Traffic management
- Public transport
- Trunk sewers and main drainage
- Refuse disposal
- Water supply
- Police General utilities

Given that every function going to the metro level will usually mean a subtraction from the functions of the existing local authorities, the full compliment of such area-wide services is rarely, if ever, encountered among existing metro authorities. In some cases the area-wide administration of some of these services may be achieved by voluntary cooperation among the existing local governments without any formal transfer of powers or permanent structural change. This is certainly the preferred mode in the United States (12) which, as we have noted, has been the least keen to modernize its local government structure. There is, however, some evidence that cooperative arrangements in U.S. metropolitan areas extends well beyond the infrastructure functions listed earlier and includes social welfare services as well (13). Possibly such arrangements reflect the relatively greater fragmentation of American metropolitan areas. Voluntary agreements by adjacent local governments in the urban agglomerations is popular in many countries since it is the least difficult to create politically and can always be wound up fairly easily. Voluntary cooperation of this kind was, for example, the preferred method for tackling area-wide problems, particularly for planning in France and has persisted in the form of the communautés urbains despite the creation of regional governments in the early 1980's (14).

The Decline of the Metro Model

It has become increasingly clear during the 1980's that the metro solution is probably less popular than it was. This change partly reflects no doubt a general decline in the belief in governmental institutions that has become fashionable in that period. Of much greater importance, however, is likely to be the general retreat from planning that arose directly as a result of the end of the great post-war international trade boom in the mid-1970's. With the onset of the recession, slower economic growth, and consequently slower urban growth, has meant there is less need to plan for there is simply less to plan; yet the need to plan -to create a long-term Master Plan for the urban agglomeration- is at the very core of the metro idea. It would be inaccurate to link the decline on the importance of planning solely to economic causes. Placing planning at the pinnacle of urban government was also a fashion in the 1960s.

Given such trends, it is not wholly surprising that the metro idea has suffered a decline. In some cases the decline has been such that metro governments have actually been abolished. This is the case for Barcelona and Rotterdam where the metro governments were wound up in the mid-1980's. Perhaps the most famous abolition occurred in the U.K. in 1985 when not only was the Greater London Council abolished, but so were the 6 other metro governments in England as well (15). There is also some evidence that the metro governments of Copenhagen and Stockholm have declined in prestige (16). The question is therefore posed, is the metropolitan government idea on the way out as an interesting experiment that was essentially the product of the great post war international trade boom and the planning fever of the 1960's and early 1970's which accompanied it?

Obviously times and conditions change and governmental institutions are always likely to change to match societal changes. However, it would be a shade premature to write off the metro idea just yet. In the Barcelona case political antagonism seems to have played a major part in the abolition, especially between the socialist-controlled metro and the right wing regional Generalitat. It could also be argued that a metro for Greater Barcelona became to some extent less essential once the Generalitat got into its stride. The London abolition was even more sui generis for there can be little doubt that G.L.C. was abolished from political spite and the government which abolished it barely made the effort to mount even a modest case for abolition (17). There was also certainly no alternative overall authority to shoulder some of the tasks of the stricken G.L.C. Indeed, the G.L.C. abolition is one of the most bizarre in the history of western government for it leaves London, one of the major cities of the world, not simply without a metropolitan authority, but without any overall local government at all. So local government in London is now in the hands of 32 London Boroughs and the City of London and not even the London C.B.D. is accorded any unitary treatment institutionally for it is divided between no less than seven Boroughs and the City. There is, however, a joint committee of the C.B.D. Boroughs (18).

Two, then, of our three examples were abolished for reasons which have little to do with the inherent character of the metro model. Any write-off of the metro idea would also need to explain why the Toronto metro system still seems to be flourishing and has indeed recently strengthened the metro authority by making it directly elected. To Toronto's continued success would also have to be added Winnipeg, Tokyo and Paris. It is even possible to discern an unintended but nevertheless emergent metro authority in the form of the Madrid Autonomous Community which, like a social geographer's dream, embraces most of the city's commuter hinterland with room to spare for future growth. In other words, the picture the present day metro presents is a mixed one and it seems doubtful whether this ambiguous position will ever be very different, for it is a governmental design that is fraught with difficulties that will always make its life problematic. The remainder of this essay will be devoted to pin pointing the most salient of these difficulties.

Inherent Problems of the Metro Model

The first and perhaps the most obvious problem is where should the metro's boundaries be drawn? According to the tenets of the externality principle the boundary should encompass the core city's "influence area". But it is one thing to assume that such an area exists in the abstract; it is quite another to define it in a concrete case. Take the example of London, the G.L.C. boundary broadly corresponded to the continuously built-up area which embraced about 7 million population. In planning terms it was nothing like wide enough to exploit the advantages of self-containment. To do so it needed to push out the boundary to cover what is known as the London Metropolitan Region, but that would have doubled the G.L.C.'s population and covered an area seven times bigger than the G.L.C.'s area (19). Even the narrowest boundary that would remotely satisfy the socio-geographic definition of the "true" London would have added another million population to the G.L.C. The problem is that self-containment for a metro for a major city will entail a very large unit of government which would be decidedly remote from its citizens and would raise the question as to whether it was local government in the accepted sense. One way of minimizing this outcome is to keep the range of functions of the metro as few as possible; that is to say to keep the extent of horizontal area integration to the minimum. It follows, however, that the lower tier will have to have more functions, but there is a basic range that the metro must retain in order to perform its minimal tasks and effect coordination, so some functions will have to be divided between the two levels. That is to say, there will have to be some vertical functional disintegration with all the costs that such division will necessarily entail. The essence then of resolving the metro boundary problem is a trade-off between the horizontal integration of area and the disintegration of functions between the two levels. There can be no right answers for this trade-off and whatever the balance that is struck, the system that emerges will be complex and still require high levels of informal cooperation between units within the system.

The second near-universal problem of the metro model, especially the pure metro model, may be an unresolvable tension between the original core city and what it may regard as being the upstart metro, and in addition tension between the core city and the incorporated outer suburbs. The first source of tension will arise because the core city may view the metro as a "fifth wheel to the coach" in the sense that the proud, formerly independent, city will now have to share its name with the metro and lose some of its independence to the unwanted interloper. In any case the core city is likely to be the dominant local government in the metropolitan area. For example, of the seven major metropolitan areas in Canada only in two does the central city not account for at least 50 per cent of the metropolitan area's population. The proportions are as follows:

Table2

The second source of tension may be more serious because of, firstly, the equalization problem. Almost certainly the core will be of a different social class complexion from the suburbs. In Southern Europe the core city will tend to be more bourgeois, in Northern Europe and in the "anglo" advanced Western states the core will tend to be more working class. Whatever the class distribution, core and periphery will have different interests in so far as the creation of the metro entails redistribution, and the conflict is likely to be all the greater in Northern Europe and in the U.S., Canada and Australia because, unlike Southern Europe, the core city being relatively poorer will have a stronger case for passing on some of the costs of the provision of central city public functions to the peripheral suburbs. These suburbs may also resent contributing to the bill for the usually higher general costs of central cities (20). As one observer has summarized the position for the US,

'In 1970 central cities spent 25 per cent more per capita on government services than their suburban counterparts, and had 95 per cent higher per capita non-educational expenditures than suburbs' (21)

These central city higher costs are likely to derive in part from the special circumstances of the central city, such as higher land costs, a more expensive labour market, and the 'honey pot effect' which attracts disproportionate numbers of high consumers of public services such as the unemployed, the indigent, the old, one parent families and so forth (22). But the suburbs may claim that the higher costs of the central city may also derive from diseconomies of scale (which a metro system could exacerbate) or just inefficient management.

All in all, it could not be said that the metro solution to the government of the urban agglomeration faces an easy future. It is a frail barque at best that must always have to negotiate choppy waters, so we may expect current successes to falter at some stage and new metros to emerge only to sink in the seas of party political interests and core city and suburban conflict. No one really loves metro government.

Table1

Local Government Restructuring: US & UK

Number of local governments units in:

	1972	1977	% Change
USA	22.185	25.869	+16
UK	1.391	422	-70

Table2

Inherent Problems of the Metro Model		
		% In core city
Calgary	(1978)	91.0
Edmonton	(1977)	82.0
Montreal	(1971)	62.8
Ottawa	(1976)	58.7
Toronto	(1976)	31.5
Vancouver	(1977)	38.0
Winnipeg	(1971)	45.6

NOTES

- (1) For a general discussion of this problem in local government generally see DENTE, Bruno and KJELLBERG, Francesco (eds.): The Dynamics of Institutional Change: Local Government Reorganization in Western Democracies, (London: Sage, 1988), Chs. 1 & 8. Also see, GUNLICKS, Arthur B. (ed.): Local Government Reform & Reorganization, (Port Washington: Kennikat, 1981); and ROWATT, Donald C. (ed.): International Handbook on Local Government Reorganization, (Westport.-Greenwood, 1980).
- (2) NORTON, Alan: The Future Role and Organisation of Local Government, (Birmingham: INLOGOV, 1986) Table C1, p. 27; and SHARPE, L.J.: "Local Government Reorganization: General Theory and U.K. Practice" in Dente & Kjellberg (eds.): The Dynamics of Institutional Change.
- (3) For a description of the origins and rationale of regional government in three napoleonic states, France, Italy & Spain, see KEATING, Michael: The State & Regional Nationalism, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1988).
- (4) For excellent short accounts of a number of metropolitan authorities around the world see NORTON, Alan: The Government of Metropolitan Areas in Western Democracies, (Birmingham: Birmingham University INLOGOV, 1983). The Institute for Governmental Studies at the University of California, Berkeley have also sponsored an invaluable series of the following case studies of metro authorities in North America and Europe: ROSE, Albert: Governing Metropolitan Toronto, (Berkeley: Berkeley Press, 1972); ANTON, Thomas J.: Governing Greater Stockholm, (University of California Press, 1975); BROWNSTONE, M. and PLUNKETT, J.J.: Metropolitan Winnipeg, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); SANCTON, A.: Governing the Island of Montreal, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); OWEN, C.J. and WILBURN, Y.: Governing Metropolitan Indianapolis, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
- (5) For a discussion of the case for the metropolitan authority, see, for example, KATZMAN, M.T.: The Quality of Municipal Services, Central City Declines and Middle Class Flight, (Cambridge: Harvard University Research Report R. 78-1, 1978) and CAMPBELL, A.K. and SACKS, S.: Metropolitan America, Fiscal Patterns and Governmental Systems, (New York: Free Press, 1967). For a detailed appraisal of the case for metropolitan government in London which although now thirty years old still has some pertinent points to make see The Royal Commission on Local Government in Greater London - Report, (Herbert) Cmnd. 1164 (London: H.M.S.O. 1960). Also see HAUCK WALSH, A.M.: The Urban Challenge to Government, (New York: Praeger, 1969); MILES, Simon (ed.): Metropolitan Problems, (Toronto: Methuen, 1970), and ROBSON, William A.: "The Great City of Today", William A. Robson and D.E. Regan (ed.): Great Cities of the World, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1972), vol. 1.
- (6) For a discussion of this anti-metropolitan authority school see, for example, OSTROM, V., TIEBOUT, C.M. & WARREN, R.: "The Organization of Governments in Metropolitan Areas" American Political Science Review 55:4 (1961) and MARGOLIS, J.: "The Structure of Government and Public Investment" American Economic Review 54:2 (1964).
- (7) For a discussion of this phenomenon see, for example, HILL, R.C.: "Separate and Unequal: Governmental Inequality in the Metropolis" American Political Science Review 68:4 (1974); NEWTON, K.: "American Urban Politics: Social Class, Political Structure and Public Goods" Urban Affairs Quarterly 11:3 (1975); COX, K.R. & NARTOWITZ, F.Z.: "Jurisdictional Fragmentation in the American Metropolis: Alternative Perspectives" International Journal of Urban & Regional Research 4:2 (1980).
- (8) That the separate local units may not be so class segregated as is often assumed, at least for the United States, see PACK, H. and PACK, J.R.: "Metropolitan Fragmentation and Suburban Homogeneity" Urban Studies 14:2 (1977) and WILLIAMS, O.P. & EKLUND, K.: "Segregation in a Fragmented Context: 1950-1970" in K. Cox (ed.) Urbanization and Conflict in Market Societies, (Chicago: Maaroufa Press, 1978). For a summary of the literature that casts further doubt on the degree of class and or ethnic segregation see OSTROM, E.: "The Social Stratification and Government Inequality Thesis Explored" Urban Affairs Quarterly 19:1 (1983).

- (9) For examples of this debate, which is entirely confined to the US, see, BRAZER, Harvey E.: "Some Fiscal Implications of Metropolitanism" in B. Chinitz (ed.): City and Suburb: the Economics of Metropolitan Growth, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 4) and BRADFORD, D.F. and OATES, W.E.: "Suburban Exploitation of Central Cities and Governmental Structure", in Hochman and G. Peterson (eds.): Redistribution Through Public Choice, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).
- (10) BRADFORD, D.F. and OATES, W.E.: "Suburban Exploitation of Central Cities", p. 84.
- (11) ROBSON, W.A.: "The Great City of Today".
- (12) BLUMENAUER, Earl: "Local Government Reorganization: the Alternatives" National Civil Review 68 (June 1979) and U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations The Organization of Local Public Economies, (Washington D.C. 1987).
- (13) AGRANOFF, Robert: "Managing Federalism Through Metropolitan Human Services" Publius 20 (Winter, 1990).
- (14) D'ARCY, F. and JOBERT, B.: "Urban Planning in France" in Jack Hayward and Michael Watson (eds.) Planning, Politics and Public Policy, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).
- (15) For an account of both abolition processes see FLYNN, Norman: Abolition Or Reform? The GLC and the Metropolitan County Councils, (Lodon: Allen & Unwin, 1985) and O'LEARLY, Brendan: "British Farce, French Drama and Tales of Two Cities: Explaining the Reorganization of Paris and London Governments, 1957-8611 Public Administration 65:4 (1987).
- (16) See the various papers the European metro governments presented at the Metropolitan Government Workshop E.C.P.R. Joint Sessions, Barcelona, March 1985.
- (17) SHARPE, L.J.: "The Debate on Metropolitan Government: the Functional Dimension" Governing London, (London: University College and LSE, 1984).
- (18) For an account of the post-abolition situation in London local government see TRAVERS, Tony: "Land After Abolition", Local Government Studies, 16:3, (1990).
- (19) Royal Commission on Local Government in England Research Study N1, Local Government in South East England Research Report N3, pp. 411-56.
- (20) For Europe, see, for example, BENNETT, R.J.: The Geography of Public Finance: Welfare Under Fiscal Federalism, (London: Methuen, 1980) C.D. Foster et al Local Government Finance in a Unitary State, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1980) and K. Newton et al Balancing the Books: Financial Problems of Local Government in Western Europe, (London: Sage, 1980).
- (21) HAIDER: "Fiscal Scarcity: a New Urban Perspective", p. 173.
- (22) SHARPE, L.J.: "Is There a Fiscal Crisis in West European Local Government: a Preliminary Analysis" in L.J. Sharpe (ed.): The Local Fiscal Crisis in Western Europe: Myths and Realities, (London: Sage, 1980).