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Who leads London?

Posted by [Andrew](#) on Jan 31, 2011 in [LondonSays](#) | [0 comments](#)

Today is a day of great historical significance for London. Our country isn't an island anymore, we're a leading European state, and I believe that this is the decade when London will become Europe's capital, having cleared away the outdated, we've got mile after mile and acre after acre of land for our future prosperity, no other city in the world has got right in its centre such an opportunity for profitable progress. So it's important that the right people mastermind the new London, proven people, with nerve, knowledge and expertise.

- Harold Shand, *The Long Good Friday* (1979)

Why move to the middle of nowhere when you can move to the middle of London?

- London Docklands Development Corporation advertising campaign slogan

It was just after new year that the news began to filter through via internet and tributes in the trade press of the death of Docklands visionary Reg Ward aged 82. Ward, as his unassuming and dutiful public servant-sounding name suggests, rose through the ranks of local government before being appointed the first chief executive of the Docklands development corporation set up by Michael Heseltine in 1981. The LDDC was the first, and certainly by any measure the most successful, of the English development corporations set up by Hezza during the 1980s, with his cabinet colleagues (Sir Keith Joseph in particular) far from signed up to the idea of an "interventionist project" to throw taxpayers' money at an unattractive derelict patch of land, of which a return on the investment was by no means certain. The tributes which flowed in for Ward provided recollections from his LDDC colleagues of its less than humble beginnings on a desk made from an upturned tea-chest in a disused warehouse, with the unease of the early Thatcher cabinets more than borne out by the fractious relationship between Ward and subsequent Secretaries of State (notably Nicholas Ridley), as well as the man in Whitehall serving them. The award-winning cheeky advertising slogan above was far from well-received in the Department of the Environment, who were desperately trying to persuade foreign investors to consider Milton Keynes instead. Despite the regeneration wins delivered and the entrepreneurial landmarks progressing from maps on a tea-chest to the London skyline, Ward was quietly left to move on to other regeneration projects on the global stage. There were no gongs for Reg. His passing however has reminded many of not only his visionary leadership but also the legacy of the LDDC, with the spirit of the Isle of Dogs Enterprise Zone looking set to return in March's Budget, if reports are to be believed.

Ward was joined, for a time at least, at the LDDC by former dockers' union staffer, Labour MP and future peer Bob Mellish, who as Vice Chairman served under industrialist Nigel Brookes, also knighted for his board-level function. It was Mellish's appointment as the token willing figure to represent Labour by the Conservatives which ultimately set in train the events which led to his resignation as MP for Bermondsey, precipitating of course the historic 1983 by-election won by the Liberal candidate (and London Says patron) Simon Hughes. Hughes is also of interest as one of the many unsuccessful candidates for the London mayoralty, although his 2004 campaign was in any case arguably just a marker for his attempts towards gaining the party leadership. To bring matters full circle, Hughes' mantle as Lib Dem candidate for London Mayor was sought last year, equally as unsuccessfully, by his opponent in the 2004 election for party president, Lembit Öpik. The party's regional nomenclature (I would describe them as faceless but they're pretty active on Twitter) however deferred the decision until next year as it felt the final shortlist (Öpik and two blokes) was too thin.

From the Lib Dems' perspective in 2012, they have to contend with their historic third position in the capital's races, the

continuing likely unpopularity of their role in the coalition and the unshakable media concentration on Ken vs. Boris. So when it comes to denying Öpik even the chance of appearing on the members' ballot for candidate, it isn't so much a question of what they think they have to gain by it, but rather what do they think they have to lose? If the reconvened panel feels that household name Öpik remains a figure of fun and could cost them that vital third place, there's always grassroots favourite (Lord) Navnit Dholakia (who at age 75 in 2012 will make Ken seem sprightly) waiting in the wings (no, me neither.)

The outcome of the 2012 election and its effects on the capital's governance was also debated at length in the House of Commons recently during the first stages of the Localism Bill, which as you may recall proposes to give sweeping new powers to the mayor to establish his own development corporations. Rather than the benign hand of Reg Ward however, it fell to former Labour minister for London (a post since scrapped by the coalition) and the GLA's legislative architect Nick Raynsford to point out that if, for argument's sake, Boris was to lose next May and another mayor took office (that'd be Ken then) then the dynamic between him and central government could be fraught to say the least if the mayor was to 'massage' the legislation to create bodies which could impose his housing policies on reluctant Tory boroughs.

The government policy to transfer responsibility for the Royal Parks from their current centralised quango to the mayor's burgeoning remit (a measure requested by the mayor with the support of the assembly and the boroughs as it happens) also caught the attention of Raynsford (a Labour mayoral hopeful for all of 11 days in 1999), whose Greenwich constituency is home to one of the eight parks covered by this and who aired his concern that a cash-strapped City Hall might not be able to maintain the current high standard of upkeep of such significant national assets. The (current) mayor, for his part, has already warned the government against "budget dumping" under the move, though experts have noted the GLA's lack of experience in managing physical spaces (currently only Parliament and Trafalgar Squares). Given the speed and enthusiasm with which the culture department all but abolished the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment however, such concerns aren't likely to feature very prominently. As the idea has been quietly dropped from the Localism Bill and awaits separate legislation from the busy department, Boris actually may never get his hands on the St James' Park sprinkler system.

From wary Thatcher era cabinets, to gravitas-seeking Lib Dem regional hierarchies and former ministers and mayoral hopefuls, it seems that the centralist impulse under the cloak of the national interest can rarely ever give way to simply trusting Londoners. Don't have nightmayors.

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