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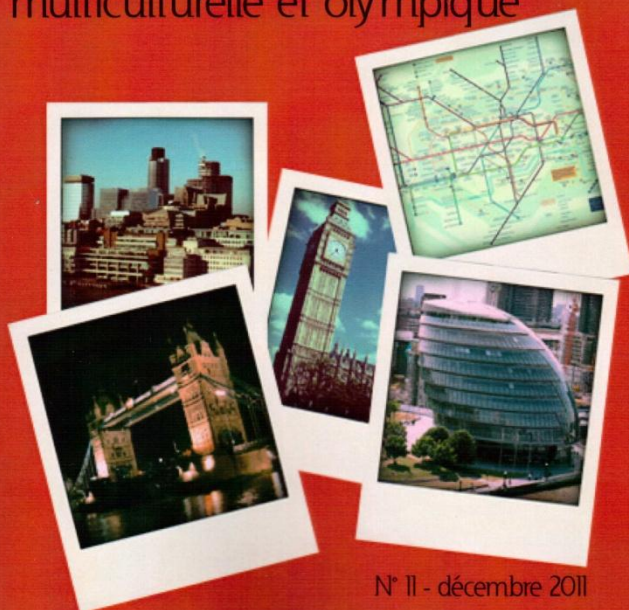
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Over to you Mr Johnson

Timothy WHITTON

Résumé

In 2008, Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson defeated Ken Livingstone in the third elections to become the executive mayor of London. Livingstone had held this post for the previous eight years during which he had implemented his personal brand of municipal politics and given London back the voice that the city had lost in 1986 when Mrs Thatcher abolished the Greater London Council. It was thought that he would have no credible opponent in 2008 but observers underestimated the potential of “Boris” who was able to oppose “Ken” on his own turf, that of personalising the election almost *ad nauseam* to the extent that his slogan “Time for a Change” rang particularly true. This article recalls the main characteristics of Ken Livingstone’s rise to fame before focussing on the 2008 transition chosen by the London electorate.

Keywords: Livingstone, Johnson, Greater London Council, Greater London Authority

Introduction

In the run-up to the 2008 elections for the post of mayor of London the general feeling was that Ken Livingstone would have no credible challenger. Indeed, in 2000 he had become London's first executive mayor and this election victory was repeated four years later. Back in the early days, when Livingstone was leader of the Greater London Council (GLC), he had been quite prepared to take on central government when it came to promoting the choices that he felt were first and foremost in the interests of the capital city. This belligerent attitude goes a long way to explain why in 1986, Mrs Thatcher's government went to such lengths in order to get rid of the Metropolitan Councils whose municipal socialism did not tally with the Conservatives' dominant ideology.

The abolition of the GLC in 1986 left the thirty-two London boroughs to grapple with pan London projects but despite increased government funding, somehow the voice of the capital – the only one in Europe not to have a central authority – had been extinguished. Still sitting on the benches in Parliament reserved for Her Majesty's Opposition, the Labour Party very timidly suggested that a central authority should be restored in order to reinforce London's ability to maintain its status as an international capital city. But Labour had to be particularly cautious given that the more radical left-wing fringe of the party, symbolised by “red” Ken and his friends at the GLC¹, had been very instrumental in bringing about the demise of the party during the 1980s. It goes without saying that the modernisers were prepared to go to great lengths in order to stifle any reference to this troubled period of their party's recent past. According to them, if London was to have a new central authority it would be small, efficient and audible, very “new” Labour and a far cry from the labyrinthine organisation of the GLC based in County Hall.

With this in mind and after their fourth successive defeat in 1992, Labour produced several papers devoted to the organisation of London but it was only during the run up to the 1997 General Election that they came down firmly on the side of creating a mayor and an assembly for London should this be approved by Londoners through a referendum. As it happened, their electoral victory left no doubt as to the support the electorate was prepared to give them and true to their manifesto pledges, a referendum was organised producing an endorsement of plans to create the Greater London Authority.

¹ Known as the “loony left”.

The main political parties had quickly realised the political leverage that the position of mayor could provide and New Labour strove to make sure that one of the party loyal should be selected to be its candidate. Ken Livingstone's efforts to be given a chance to compete were constantly thwarted and following an internal selection process that somewhat unfairly forced him out of the race, he declared his independent candidature. For this act of defiance, Livingstone was excluded from the party for five years but despite this handicap, he was popular enough to romp to victory in the first mayoral election on May 4th 2000.

Livingstone's spent a good deal of his first mandate opposing central government about the latter's plans to use a Public Private Partnership (PPP) to renovate the London underground but this period also witnessed the introduction of the congestion charge in central London. Following the success of this policy, New Labour came to terms with the fact that its only real option was to bring Livingstone back into the fold to fight the next election under its banner. Livingstone's exclusion was duly lifted and although with a slimmer margin, he won the second election to become London's mayor in 2004.

The GLA and central government had by this time buried the hatchet of fratricide war and never was collaboration between the two more obvious than when London was given the Olympic Games in July 2005. Because of his highly praised leadership following the 7/7 bombings Livingstone reached a new height of popularity and it seemed as if nothing stood between him and a third term of office. Yet there were signs that he was outwearing his welcome at the GLA and this weakness was adroitly exploited by Boris Johnson when he began mounting his challenge. If at first no one believed that Johnson would be a credible opponent, attitudes changed when "Boris" played the personality card that had become the hallmark of municipal politics in London especially after "Ken" had been in charge for so long.

Power in London changed hands in the 2008 election and it would be hard to pinpoint the precise reason for this swing all the more so as in the days leading up to the election, opinion polls were only separating candidates by a hair's breadth. Livingstone lost the election as much as Johnson won it both emphasising each other's weaknesses: Boris had little experience of municipal politics let alone running such a huge organisation as the GLA and his ideas for public transport sometimes appeared to be more the result of hopeful guesswork than well thought through policies. Even so, his campaign team was particularly efficient

in canvassing the outer Conservative dominated boroughs where they knew that votes for their candidate were to be gleaned. On the other hand in the run up to the 2008 election, Livingstone had to deal with a prolonged period of accusations about cronyism, sleaze, and underhand dealings at the London Development Agency to the extent that many of his opponents referred to the capital as a “kenocracy”.

Yet perhaps the most convincing argument peddled by Johnson neatly summed up in his campaign slogan was “Time for a Change”. After eight years of Livingstone, Londoners were prepared to give someone else a chance especially given that “our Ken”, as many of them fondly referred to their mayor, had somewhat lost the knack of defending the everyday interests of London in his traditionally independent way.

Early days: from opposition to abolition

When Livingstone became leader of the GLC in May 1981 after wresting power² from the far more moderate “natural” candidate, Andrew McIntosh, the British press leapt on the Labour Party for not being able to keep its troops on a tight rein: London was now in the hands of “red” Ken and his cronies. When she heard the news, Mrs Thatcher was in Scotland and during the Scottish Conservative Party conference declared that “the GLC will impose upon this nation a tyranny that the peoples of Eastern Europe yearn to cast aside”³. Livingstone’s “tyranny” took the form of policy choices that would constantly put the GLC at odds with the government. *Fares Fair* was perhaps the best example whereby the GLC slashed the price of public transport in the capital very nearly plunging the GLC into bankruptcy⁴.

It was Livingstone’s personal brand of municipal socialism that was to really get the government’s goat especially given that he excelled in the art of provocation. Shortly after becoming leader of the GLC he refused an invitation to the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana and a few months later expressed compassion with the IRA in the wake of its bombing campaigns. “Red” Ken was branded the most odious

² A detailed account of this “caucus” vote is given in chapter 3, ‘Phew what a caucus’, in Carvel, J., *Turn Again Livingstone*, Profile Books, 1999, p. 60-86.

³ Speech by Mrs Thatcher, 8 May 1981 at Perth City Hall.

⁴ For Livingstone’s account of this episode see Livingstone, K., *If Voting Changed Anything They’d Abolish It*, Collins, 1987, p. 2008-2017.

man in Britain by *The Sun*⁵ and his antics at the GLC came across as being unacceptable. This attitude was compounded by his tendency to tamper with the sort of international politics that had very little to do with the remit of London government^{6/7}.

Yet despite this hostility, Livingstone could rely on a groundswell of support from people who felt that the GLC was the only decent opposition left in Britain to the economic juggernaut of the Thatcher governments. The erection of huge billboards on the roof of County Hall showing the unemployment figures in London was a demonstration of the protest role that the GLC could play at that time. Indeed, the first years after 1979 had witnessed a steep rise in the number of jobless nationwide which could easily be imputed to the political and economic choices made by the government. Official political opposition was nonetheless deemed feeble given the disarray within the Labour Party and in this context, at least the GLC was seen to be publicly voicing some form of disagreement with central government.

Ken Livingstone quickly became a thorn in the government's side to the extent that following her second election victory in 1983, Mrs Thatcher decided to abolish the metropolitan councils and above all the GLC. This policy choice was enshrined in the White Paper *Streamlining the Cities* in which the government explained that this centralised layer of local government had become superfluous and in London for example, the borough councils would easily be able to take on the responsibilities of the GLC. The truth of the matter was that Livingstone represented everything that Mrs Thatcher loathed about local politics and she was quite prepared to do away with the GLC in order to stamp out municipal socialism. But the GLC had become a well oiled protest machine finely tuned in to the defence of lost causes and right up until abolition on April 31st 1986, fought every inch of the way. Just as the roof of County Hall had been used to underline the rate of unemployment in London, the façade, a stone's throw across the

⁵ 13th October 1981.

⁶ Councillors were often amazed at the time spent debating the Palestinian question, the miners' strike and the Falklands to quote but three examples. People were so fascinated by this approach to municipal politics that starting in 1983, the *Times* regularly devoted a column to life at County Hall. See also Whitehouse, W., *The GOC – the Inside Story*, James Lester Publishers, 2000.

⁷ The internationalisation of London government was reinforced during Livingstone's two terms of office as mayor of London. Johnson has returned to a more traditional approach to the international aspect of London governance.

Thames from the House of Commons, was ideal to unfurl large banners sporting messages stating the GLC's anti-abolition case. The whole show quickly used the slogan *Say No to No Say* and while every attempt was made to inform public opinion of how the GLC ran London, perhaps the greatest victory achieved was the Lords' refusal to approve the government's paving bill given its undemocratic nature⁸.

Livingstone emerged from this campaign a folk hero, the David who had taken on the Goliath of the government and although he had not succeeded, this reputation was to stand him in good stead to become the first mayor of London in 2000. Andrew Hosken reports that soon after this first victory, Livingstone thanked Patrick Jenkin, the Minister in charge of the Paving Bill used to abolish the GLC, for giving him the reputation that made this victory possible⁹.

Citizen Ken

Perhaps one of the more obscure chapters of Livingstone's political life was his nomination to become the Labour Party's candidate in the constituency of Brent East¹⁰. In essence, as soon as abolition became unavoidable, Livingstone needed a bolthole, a place out in the wilderness of life after the GLC where he would be able to continue his political career. It must be said that Livingstone had few friends in Parliament, either in or out of the Labour Party, especially among the latter's modernisers who were desperately trying to make the party electable once again. The fourth defeat in 1992, albeit something of a surprise, bolstered their belief that the only way back to power was a fundamental renovation of the Party's political credibility. This meant that when calls were made to create a new central authority in London the emerging "new" Labour Party trod very carefully knowing full well that any reference to the "loony" GLC days could endanger attempts to modernise. If London were to be given back the voice that it had lost, the new authority would speak the language of the modern Labour Party.

⁸ The government had planned to do away with the 1985 municipal elections one year prior to abolition and replace elected councillors with appointed officials but the Lords prevented them from doing this by prevaricating sufficiently to upset the parliamentary calendar. For a detailed account see Hosken, A., *Ken. The Ups and Downs of Ken Livingstone*, Arcadia Books, 2008, p. 202-206. The Lords were thanked for their contribution with yet another banner fluttering from the roof of County Hall.

⁹ *Ibidem* p. 206.

¹⁰ This is related in Carvel, J., *op.cit.*, p. 142-149 & p. 208-210.

While the Conservatives continued to be particularly generous with London in an attempt to prove that the decision to abolish the GLC had been legitimate, various papers¹¹ were published by Labour stating the case for creating a new central authority in the capital. In the run up to the 1997 election it was decided that in the event of victory, a referendum would be organised to let Londoners decide¹². Had New Labour foreseen the extent of its historic victory, then it would certainly have dispensed with this tactic but true to its word, and in the wake of the referenda in Scotland and Wales, Londoners were called to the ballot on May 7th 1998 in order to give the government the green light or not. Although turnout was low – 34.6% - the “yes” vote was victorious and New Labour felt that having taken so long to come back to government, the least it could do was to respect its election pledges.

The main political parties had predicted the result and had started seeking a suitable candidate to become mayor of London for quite some time. The general feeling was that this post would be the ideal relay for a party’s political project in the capital city and that candidates would need to be aware of the political responsibility involved. Having first criticised¹³ the idea of having an executive mayor in London, Ken Livingstone quickly realised that this position was tailor-made for him in all but one main aspect: if he were to represent the Labour party and be its candidate in the mayoral election, he would have to toe the party line. This he found difficult to do especially when the government issued its plans to use a Public Private Partnership (PPP) in order to renovate the London underground. Even though this had been written into the party’s manifesto, Livingstone now felt that it was not the right strategy for London or Londoners. His own idea was to encourage Londoners to subscribe to a public bond system in order to retain control of their transport system.

After a good deal of equivocation¹⁴, Livingstone was finally allowed to compete in the primaries but the system used meant that political

¹¹ *Working Together for London* (1994), *A Choice for England* (1996), *A Voice for London* (1996).

¹² For full information concerning the referendum see Whitton, T., « La pratique référendaire et la Mairie de Londres », *in*, 'La pratique référendaire dans les îles britanniques', *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, Hors série n°2, été 2009, pp. 67-84.

¹³ *Hansard*, 6 June 1997, col. 717.

¹⁴ See Whitton, T., « 'Nightmayor at City Hall', les coulisses d'une investiture, d'une élection et d'une réélection à Londres », *in*, Susan TROUVE, directrice de publication, *Les Coulisses du pouvoir*, Observatoire de la Société Britannique, n°6, juin 2008, p. 197-225.

organisations affiliated to the Labour Party could use the block vote thus giving them far greater influence than individual members. In view of this, the party's apparatchik, Frank Dobson, had a distinct advantage over the other candidates and in February 2000, duly emerged victorious from the primaries. Livingstone, outraged at such skulduggery, declared his independent candidature and was excluded from the party for five years. He took this in his stride and launched his campaign aboard a purple bus which enabled the "cheeky chappy" to link up with everyday Londoners, those who were keen on the idea of their city being run by a maverick rather than a run-of-the-mill politician kowtowing to his party¹⁵. "Our" Ken, as many Londoners would fondly refer to him, fitted the bill perfectly, was well versed in municipal politics and knew how to harbour the groundswell of support that he could muster given people's disappointment with national politics. Nevertheless, the campaign was difficult and even bitter at times given that he had no party machine to help him, with New Labour doing their utmost to emphasise how difficult it would be for London if the mayor were at loggerheads with central government. The media went to town about Livingstone's past and his tendency to defend obscure causes but despite this onslaught fuelled by the May 1st protests in the capital, on May 4th, 2000 he became London's first executive mayor, albeit on second preference votes¹⁶. Livingstone's first words on hearing the election result will go down in history: "As I was saying before I was rudely interrupted 14 years ago...". Meanwhile New Labour's candidate had come a sorry third, well behind the Conservative candidate, Steven Norris. London was Ken's.

Congestion charging to a second victory

Livingstone almost immediately locked horns with the government over transport policy and more precisely the PPP that was to be used to renovate the underground. While expressing his hostility to the PPP, Livingstone also announced his plans to introduce a congestion charge in central London, one of his flagship policies that had been clearly put forward in his manifesto¹⁷. New Labour was in two minds about such a

¹⁵ Livingstone's campaign slogans were *Vote4Ken*, *Ken4London* and *Hoot4Ken*, all of which figured in huge letters on his purple bus.

¹⁶ The whole story is told in D'Arcy M., & Maclean R., *Nightmare. The Race to Become London's Mayor*, Politico, 2000.

¹⁷ Ken4London, "Ken Livingstone's Manifesto for London".

policy: on the one hand it tallied perfectly with their quest for innovation but on the other, if successful, it would mean that Livingstone, the renegade, would have the capital firmly in his grasp. The first attempt to readmit Livingstone failed, incidentally the day that *City Hall* was officially inaugurated by the Queen. But with the congestion charge looming large, Livingstone's political future was at stake especially since his attempts to derail the PPP had run out of steam. True to his word, the mayor forged ahead and despite problems in the underground which could have made him postpone the congestion charge, it came into force as planned on February 17th, 2003. In a relatively short time the charge was hailed as a success and New Labour had to come to terms with the fact that Livingstone was set to be re-elected mayor of London in 2004. By hook or by crook his five year sanction had to be shortened to enable him to fight this election for the party that he had belonged to since coming into politics.

This step was not easy given that New Labour wanted to avoid giving the impression that it was going back on its word. The eighteen years spent sitting on the benches of Her Majesty's Opposition and four successive General Elections lost meant that despite its recent successes, the Labour Party was still keen to protect its political credibility. Added to this was the fact that the party had already chosen its official candidate, Nicky Gavron, to compete in the next mayoral elections. Also, some of the major figures of the Labour Party - Gordon Brown in particular - were extremely hostile to the readmission of Livingstone both for reasons linked to what they considered to be his treachery and their personal dislike of both the man and the politician behind the mayor of London. Despite this, ever the opportunist and *realpolitik* aficionado¹⁸, Blair made it clear to Gavron that she should step aside and ordered his lieutenants to bring Livingstone back "into the fold"¹⁹. The Prime Minister was perfectly aware of the fact that the opinion polls were giving Livingstone victorious in the next mayoral election *whatever* his status and *whichever* party he should stand for especially since he had been declared the most influential person in British public

¹⁸ In his memoirs entitled *A Journey*, Tony Blair says that in the 2000 election "Frank [Dobson] had about as much chance of beating Ken Livingstone [...] as Steptoe and Son's horse had of winning the Grand National", p. 264. Blair goes on to express a certain admiration for Livingstone. Only one single sentence is devoted to the 2004 mayoral election.

¹⁹ "Blair wants Livingstone back in fold. Mayor set to rejoin Labour Party", *The Guardian*, November 10th, 2003.

services²⁰. But Labour's NEC rapidly found the necessary loophole: by asking Livingstone to fulfil a mission for the party – ie to fight the next mayoral election in its name – reintegration became automatic. Rumour has it that Gordon Brown found it hard to contain his fury and that John Prescott held his nose when the NEC voted but all the same, Livingstone's exclusion ended on January 7th, 2004.

Thus began Livingstone's connivance with the Labour Party which inevitably weakened his stance as an independent politician. A few days after reintegration, despite his announcing that both Thatcher and Blair had tried to crush him and both had failed, the reasons for Livingstone accepting to accomplish a "mission" for the Labour Party became clearer: on January 16th, London officially presented its request to host the 2012 Olympic Games²¹. Secondly, *CrossRail*²², a project to construct a new, partly underground railway across London was approved by the government as was, a short while later, the mayor's plans to build a new toll bridge across the Thames. There was some dismay therefore at the thought that Livingstone could have sold his soul to the devil of New Labour and accepted too docilely to become "Blair's mayor".

Yet, Livingstone knew only too well that despite this climate of cooperation, the electorate was in the mood to punish New Labour given the overall political situation and of course the turn that the war in Irak had taken. In light of this, New Labour kept a very low profile during the campaign leading up to the elections in June²³ and at times it seemed as if the incumbent mayor was striving to revert back to an "old Ken" style of politics by being deliberately provocative and swashbuckling²⁴. To a certain extent this attitude paid dividends if the overall results of the elections are taken into account: whereas New Labour came a real cropper losing hundreds of seats nationwide, Livingstone held his head high in London and albeit with a slimmer margin, was re-elected mayor on June 11th²⁵. The main quarrels with central government now seemed to be a thing of the past, the PPP was in full swing to renovate the underground and the congestion charge

²⁰ "Livingstone judged most influential figure in Britain's public services", *The Guardian*, September 10, 2003.

²¹ It goes without saying that no Olympic committee would have given the games to a town where local and central government are seen to be at loggerheads.

²² <http://www.crossrail.co.uk/>

²³ Both GLA and local elections were to be held on the same day.

²⁴ On various occasions, Livingstone made some startling headline statements about the Saudi Royal Family, Georges Bush and Ariel Sharon.

²⁵ Labour also lost two seats on the London assembly.

had become part of everyday life. To all intents and purposes, the GLA and New Labour could envisage the Olympic calendar with some degree of serenity. Somewhat tragically though, the Olympic bid was going to allow Livingstone to reach a new peak of popularity before falling foul of the exercise of power.

Olympic and international Livingstone

In the wake of his election victory, Livingstone quickly hit the headlines in the first of a series of provocative stances that were going to dog him right up to the 2008 elections. Several of these stand out as being instrumental in his downfall since they emphasise the drift that the mayor's governance of London had undertaken. Indeed, Johnson's campaign team adroitly exploited the tendency for Livingstone to consider the capital city as a "Kenocracy" whereby the mayor was seen to be dictating the rules that the GLA had to abide by. One of these was that the rights of minorities and groups should be a priority and the mayor's opponents were only too pleased to point out that these decisions were all too often taken to the detriment of the majority. This goes a long way to explain why during his campaign, Johnson insisted so consistently on his intention to revamp the old much loved Routemaster buses: they had been gradually replaced by the new "bendy" buses, which Londoners – and particularly cyclists – disliked, apparently to accommodate the necessary ramps for wheelchair users. Given the frequency of ramp use, Londoners were inclined to believe that once again, their mayor had responded vigorously to a minority need and that the majority could only grin and bear it²⁶.

In a first instance, Livingstone invited the muslim preacher, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi to City Hall. Because of his views on certain issues such as women and homosexuality, Al-Qaradawi was considered by many people as an extremist and as such, was banned from entering the United States. Secondly, in February 2005, a few – drunken – words to an Evening Standard journalist had Livingstone branded an anti-Semite. All that was requested of the mayor was to offer a few words of apology but in the style that had become the hallmark of his action, Livingstone refused, preferring to spend considerable amounts of public money on court cases that dragged out over a two year period, the main aim of

²⁶ Little do Londoners possibly know that the GLA was obeying a European directive whereby all public transport has to be accessible to the handicapped by January 1st, 2017.

which was to determine whether the mayor was guilty or not of inappropriate behaviour.

Despite this accumulation of *faux pas*, undoubtedly the high point of this second mandate came on July 6th, 2005 when at 12.47pm, Jacques Rogge, the president of the Olympic Committee, announced that the 2012 Games would be organised by London. Tony Blair, whose party had won its third successive General Election two months earlier, rejoiced in Scotland where he was heading the G8 meeting and in Singapore, Livingstone hugged David Beckham, a photo which gave rise to many wry smiles: “red” Ken conniving with such an icon of capitalism. Yet there joy was short lived for a few hours later London was struck by a series of bomb attacks which left more than fifty people dead and many hundreds wounded. A week later, Livingstone gave one of his most poignant speeches when in Trafalgar Square he told the terrorists that they would never force Londoners to turn on one another “like animals” and that London drew considerable strength from being one of the most tolerant and multicultural cities in the world²⁷. Livingstone quickly became the spearhead of a national rejection of these acts of terrorism and for a short while, even his opponents left him in peace. At this point it seemed indeed as if Livingstone was set to become the long term mayor of London.

Yet the mayor’s tendency to speak his mind was soon to destroy this new found aura when after the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes, a Brazilian electrician mistaken for a terrorist on the underground, he explained that in certain circumstances, and notably in Palestine, certain oppressed people are forced to commit acts of terrorism. This justification for terrorist attacks in the wake of the bombings in London raised Londoners’ shackles and the mayor’s new found popularity was quickly transformed into a trough of opprobrium. But Livingstone seemed to be at his best in the face of adversity and quite untroubled even when the placing of the statue of a naked, pregnant, handicapped woman on the forth plinth in Trafalgar Square sparked off a series of sarcastic comments most of which were centred on his weakness for promoting minority groups’ interests²⁸. And a short while later, with the court case concerning the Jewish journalist still in the offing, Livingstone publicly insulted the Reuben brothers after an altercation concerning the Olympic building site in Stratford in which the two men were playing a leading role. Livingstone was again accused

²⁷ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BSIBPsbL9c>

²⁸ The statue was called *Alison Lapper Pregnant*.

of anti-Semitism but unable to hold his tongue, only three weeks later he accused the American ambassador in London of being a “chiselling little crook” for not paying the congestion charge on the fleet of embassy vehicles. In April 2006 during a visit to the Olympic site in Beijing, the mayor declared that Great Britain would do well to take a close look at her own record with Amnesty International before criticising China’s record on human rights.

But it was perhaps the “brooms for oil” deal that really convinced Londoners that Livingstone had become divorced from the reality of his mission as mayor of London and that a certain degree of arrogance had crept into his attitude vis-à-vis the GLA. In May 2006, the Venezuelan president, Hugo Chavez, was invited to London and after a few days of pomp and ceremony during which the two accomplices revelled in anti-capitalist discourse, an agreement was signed whereby Chavez was to sell cheap oil to London – how it was to be stocked and where remain a mystery – in exchange for GLA expertise on urban management²⁹. The Conservative members of the GLA were aghast at this use of public funds to promote – according to them - transatlantic socialist causes and underlined the free rein that the mayor of London’s had in running the city³⁰. This aspect of Livingstone’s governance was emphasised once again when in February 2007, the congestion charge was extended to the west despite consultation that had shown major hostility towards such a project. Despite the fact that Livingstone seemed unchallengeable, the time was perhaps ripe for change in order to bring the mayor back into check and show him that there were limits to his scope of action especially concerning the international role of the GLA. All that remained for his opponents was to find a suitable candidate capable of opposing him.

“Boris” versus “Ken”

Boris Johnson was by no means the “natural” candidate of the Conservative Party which had approached a string of people potentially capable of winning the contest, only to be turned down on each occasion³¹. In July 2007, one year before the elections, Boris Johnson’s

²⁹ “Hugo Chavez divides world opinion. But who is he and what is he up to in Britain?” *The Independent*, May 13th, 2006.

³⁰ “Ken’s Tricks”, *The Daily Telegraph*, May 16th, 2006.

³¹ Greg Dyke, former director of the BBC, Lord Coe, head of London’s Olympic Games’ bid, Sir Digby-Jones, former director of the Confederation of British Industry,

name was put forward and although at first he refused, given his safe parliamentary seat in Henley-on-Thames, he finally accepted having understood the opportunity he would then have to be a front scene politician within his party. David Cameron had just reshuffled the Shadow Cabinet and Johnson had not been given any new political responsibilities. Above all, Johnson was well equipped to challenge Livingstone on his own turf where both were natural media performers, candid, articulate, funny with the ability to be irresistibly self-deprecating. This was evidently going to lead to a highly personalised campaign where the electorate would be inclined to choose between different personalities rather than different manifestos³². This was all the more true given that no candidate could make any major innovative claim – such as the congestion charge – especially given that since July 2005, all eyes were riveted on the Olympic Games. Even though the budget seemed to have spiralled out of all control and was a far cry from the £9 billion originally touted, work was definitely under way and the whole Olympic machine lumbering towards the 2012 deadline. Mayoral candidates' propositions were therefore going to be mainly cosmetic, each one promising better transport, more policemen, cleaner air and more affordable housing to list the main points underlined in the manifestos. Livingstone had the advantage of being able to be judged on what he had already achieved and was using his mayor's prerogative to announce his plan to introduce a new bike hire scheme along the lines of the Parisian *Velib*. The other candidates had to rely on their ability to persuade the electorate that they would carry this legacy forward.

Livingstone quickly understood the personality battle that was going to take place but magnanimously stated that he would concentrate on policies rather than people. Meanwhile his campaign team combed through reams of material written by Johnson in search of items that might contradict his claim to be in tune with London governance. Soon the mud was flying between the two camps and at this game, Johnson was likely to lose not being accustomed to the grubby fray of municipal politics. Added to this weakness was the fact that his campaign lacked lustre which explains why the conservative headquarters took the decision to draft in the Australian political strategist, Lynton Crosby who had masterminded four successive victories for John Howard. This recruitment was to pay huge dividends insofar as Crosby was able to

Lord Stevens former police commissioner, Nick Boles, head of the think tank "Policy Exchange" and Nick Ferrari, well-known radio host.

³² As it happened, as we shall later, the personalisation of the campaign was not the only clinching factor in Johnson's victory.

pinpoint where Johnson could garner large numbers of votes – essentially in the outer Conservative dominated boroughs - and oversee efficient canvassing there by persuading voters that they were playing an active part in getting one of their own kind elected to the post of mayor of London.

Seemingly undaunted by the election looming, late in 2007 Livingstone oversaw the opening of two “Kenbassies” in Delhi and Mumbai³³. But while he led a delegation of 81 people around India, Lee Jasper, Livingstone’s close friend and advisor on race issues at the GLA, was becoming the focus for investigation for the misuse of public funds. He had become the latest target of the *Evening Standard* journalist, Andrew Gilligan who was ratcheting up his relentless campaign to unseat Livingstone with whom the newspaper had been at odds for the past few years³⁴. Livingstone did all he could to defend Jasper, but at this point in the campaign, any scandal about cronyism and wasting public funds was going to be damaging, possibly far more than rising crime and teenage murders which were becoming frequent in the capital. To this end, the Channel Four documentary *Dispatches*, broadcast in January, went to great lengths to underline the weaknesses in Livingstone’s administration based on a six month study by journalists from *New Statesman*. This documentary was followed by accusations that some GLA staff had worked full time on Livingstone’s campaign in 2004 and when another employee, Rosemary Emodi, was caught lying about a free trip to Africa, her immediate resignation did little to quell the outcry. Yet it was probably the suspension and then resignation of Jasper that did the most damage especially when in his follow-up article, Andrew Gilligan underlined the other five police investigations that were currently underway into alleged misuse of GLA funds. David Cameron even questioned Gordon Brown over impropriety at the GLA during Prime Minister’s Question Time³⁵.

The last two months before election day were devoted to permanent meetings, visits, hustings and other activities during which the candidates laboriously hammered out their plans for London while

³³ *The Express*, November 20th, 2011.

³⁴ This antagonism is said to be due to a personal conflict between Livingstone and the chief editor of the Standard, Veronica Wadley. In *the Independent*, February 9th 2008, Andrew Grice explains just how important the *Evening Standard*’s campaign was proving to be. See “Back Ken to hang on to his £11bn budget”.

³⁵ *Hansard*, March 5th, 2008, col. 1740.

challenging their opponents³⁶. The third candidate, the Liberal Democrat, Brian Paddick, nurtured the hope that the weary electorate might turn to him quite simply as an alternative to the two main candidates and that second preference voting would enable him to win. But Livingstone had already clinched a deal with the Greens over second preference votes, Johnson had kept quiet and during BBC's *Newsnight* hosted by Jeremy Paxman, Paddick quite openly declared that in his opinion, his main opponents were equally bad for London³⁷.

Meanwhile opinion polls showed that while the Conservative Party was increasing its lead over Labour nationally speaking, in London, Johnson and Livingstone were neck and neck. It was too late to hope that the more technical details concerning the recurrent themes of crime or transport would have more than a superficial impact on the outcome whereas the *Evening Standard* caused substantial damage - yet again - for Livingstone with its front-page photo of Yusuf al-Qaradawi alongside a suicide bomber. At this stage and with polls narrowing the gap even further just a week ahead of election day, this sort of publicity could clinch victory for Johnson. In the same vein, an editorial in *The Sun* on April 22nd, "London Calling", called on the electorate to vote for Johnson, praising his straightforward plans to finally change the capital while underlining the incumbent's "stale" and "exhausted" campaign and "crackpot" schemes. Livingstone hit back by declaring that Londoners should not entrust their city's colossal budget to someone as inexperienced as "Joker" Johnson. The last few days were peppered with claims and counterclaims and it must be said that during this final stage, Livingstone actually seemed to be feeling the strain referring - albeit fleetingly - to the possibility of his losing³⁸.

Conclusion

On May 1st, 2008 Boris Johnson was elected mayor of London receiving 1,043,761 votes to Livingstone's 893,877 on the first count, Paddick coming in third with 236,685. After second preference votes had been integrated, Johnson's score was 1,168,738 (53,2%) and Livingstone's 1,028,977 (46,8%). Participation was up on the 2004

³⁶ This period is described in great but somewhat fastidious detail in Edwards, G., & Isaby, J., *Boris v. Ken. How Boris Johnson Won London*, Politico's, 2008, p.110-195.

³⁷ It was broadcast on April 6th.

³⁸ *The Evening Standard*, "People may toy with the idea of voting for Boris but when it comes to it they will find they can't do it"; Mayor elections". One day to go. April 30th, 2008.

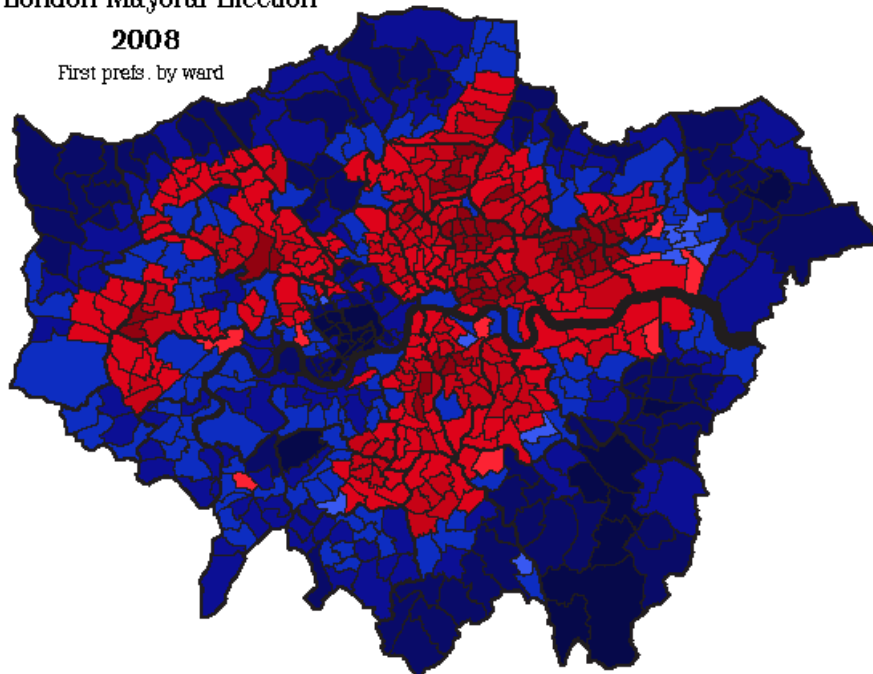
election and doubtlessly the confrontation between the two main rivals had attracted many people to the ballot boxes. Johnson's victory speech was gracious, Livingstone's tearful.

This result can be explained in a variety of ways but despite the highly personalised side of the election epitomised by the "Boris versus Ken" duel, the Conservatives had undoubtedly run a far superior campaign. Lynton Crosby had concentrated the party's efforts on the outer boroughs³⁹ where he knew the party had a good chance of garnering votes thanks to traditional political allegiance rather than sympathy or empathy vis-à-vis the main contenders. In turn, this strategy portrayed Livingstone as essentially a "zone-one" mayor, as the following "first preference" map highlights:

London Mayoral Election

2008

First prefs. by ward



Johnson 30 40 50 60 70

Livingstone 30 40 50 60 70

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Source: <http://www.vote-2007.co.uk/index.php?topic=1586.870>
(consulted 15/01/2011)

This said, there is no denying the impact of the *Evening Standard's* relentless onslaught on Livingstone especially during the last six months

³⁹ This strategy was called "doughnut tactics" whereby efforts are concentrated on the outer ring leaving a hole in the middle.

when the GLA became embroiled in sleaze. Above all, the allegations of corruption, especially those surrounding the Jasper affair, enabled Livingstone's opponents to exploit what they deemed was the mayor's overall amateur approach to the financial management of London. Given the colossal budget involved, the incumbent's long-term political credibility was bound to suffer. The cost of the Olympic Games was a case in point with the budget literally spiralling out of control. Indeed, in the run up to the 2008 election, on several occasions Livingstone brushed aside queries about the Olympic budget stating that the government would foot the bill come what may and that he was quite prepared to put up with three weeks of sport to harness sufficient funding for the renovation of a vast area in the east of London. However pragmatic this may sound, it was not at all in keeping with the Olympic spirit that Londoners were supposed to be imbued with.

In another area, Johnson was able to reap some benefit from one of his initial weaknesses, namely his gross miscalculation concerning buses. Indeed, given the pride of place of the traditional Routemaster in Londoners' hearts, Johnson's hostility towards the "bendy buses" struck a sympathetic cord with many electors who were totally oblivious to the more technical details. By stating that he wanted to retain bus conductors as well, Johnson gave the impression that he would listen more to Londoners and refrain from imposing choices made by the GLA and the executive mayor, one of the main criticisms levelled at Livingstone. By declaring that he would severely reduce the international dimension of the GLA by immediately closing the "Kenbassies", Johnson also sent a clear signal to Londoners namely that if elected, he would be their mayor and cease strutting the international stage.

London has definitely changed since the first mayoral election in 2000 the oyster card and the congestion card acting as daily reminders of what mayor Livingstone achieved during his two mandates. Livingstone will also go down in the history of London as having promoted the sort of multiculturalism which makes the city an international capital. Yet for many, defending the cause of the hundreds of minorities which make up the rich patchwork of London's population had become the mayor's hallmark, his personal ideology and crusade, to the detriment of the majority.

When the idea of creating an executive mayor was first touted in 1998, Livingstone had found the idea ludicrous but having come round to the idea, he stated that the mayoralty should be limited to two mandates so as to avoid the corruption and dogmatism that inevitably

sneaks into this level of governance. This statement backfired on him and made Boris Johnson's simple campaign slogan ring even truer: "Time for a Change".

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