

WILL THE REAL BORIS PLEASE STAND UP?

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On 5 May 2009, the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, came face-to-face with his alter ego – a wax figure of himself at Madame Tussauds. It was the occasion, predictably, for some good jokes, although not many British politicians would have had the courage – or knowledge - to liken the event to “Goethe beholding his Doppelganger on the footpath to Drusenheim”.

The unveiling of the other Boris Johnson seemed an apt metaphor for the Mayor’s first year in office: on the one hand, the unashamedly populist, outspoken, sometimes clownish, “Boris”; on the other, the Mayor who has actually implemented a fair amount of his manifesto and who – reportedly – harbours ambitions for higher office.

So what has Boris achieved in his first year, and where does he go from here?

Annual Report

Those who believed – or hoped – that the new Mayor’s regime at City Hall would prove a shambles were given some early encouragement by the revolving doors of the first few weeks, as political appointees came and went with apparent regularity, accused of misdemeanours in the past or of loose talk which could prove embarrassing for the new dispensation. But in retrospect these were teething troubles and have had no lasting impact on the Mayoralty.

Johnson also confounded expectations in some quarters that he would be lazy or ineffectual by deciding, somewhat controversially, to chair three leading London bodies personally: the Metropolitan Police Authority, Transport for London and the Homes and Communities Agency Board for London. His activist and unorthodox style has been most evident in the first of these roles, where he has repeatedly clashed with the Home Secretary, though often he has appeared to come off best from these bruising encounters.

Johnson himself, in the – lengthy - Foreword to his Annual Report, made claim to these achievements:

Taking control of expenditure, for example by reducing publicity budgets; this has enabled him to freeze the Mayoral share of council tax for 2009/10

Increasing accountability – all payments over £1000 made by the GLA are published and all advisers’ interests are published

Tackling crime and anti-social behaviour – both at its roots, by seeking to provide more opportunities for young people (eg in sport), by deploying more police at key transport hubs and by a ban on drinking alcohol on public transport

Launched an Economic Recovery Action Plan to help combat the effects of the global financial crisis on the City of London, including a £24m. package for small businesses

Announced plans for a new Routemaster bus entering service in 2010 to replace the 'bendybuses' and new air-conditioned carriages for sub-surface tube lines.

In addition, on 29 April the Mayor and London Councils, the body which represents the London Boroughs, agreed a new "London City Charter", which sets out how the boroughs and the GLA will work together. Although at this stage only a framework, the Charter gives expression to a manifesto commitment both to work co-operatively with boroughs and, effectively, to pay more attention to the needs of outer London, there being many more outer than inner London, boroughs. It also of course underlines the better relationship between Johnson and the leaders of London councils than was generally the case under Mayor Livingstone. This is partly founded on political sympathy, more London Councils being currently under Conservative control, but also reflects an ideological approach by Johnson to devolve more decisions (or not to intervene in decisions) by the boroughs. Livingstone's more meddling approach was sometimes resented by borough leaders, even those nominally of his own political persuasion.

Housing and Planning

At the end of April the Mayor published for consultation with the GLA his Initial Proposals for a formal review of the London Plan (a draft for public consultation is due in the autumn). Like all Regional Spatial Strategies this will have to undergo an Examination in Public (effectively a Public Inquiry) in the course of 2010/11, and is due for final publication in winter 2011/12.

Because of the nature of the document it is currently written at a fairly general level and is therefore lacking in detail; it is also more concerned with setting the context for planning policy in the capital (eg population growth and climate change) than in firm policy formulation. However, some themes can be discerned: for example, maintaining a balance between heritage (supported eg by the Views Management Framework) and modernity. The Plan obviously will need to support the Mayor's (draft) Housing Strategy (see below). Other touches which bear Boris' hallmark are in the aspiration to build a "city that delights the eye".

The mayor's draft housing strategy was published for consultation with the GLA in November 2008, and was published for general consultation recently. In the meantime the Assembly has commented on the document, with some splits on party lines. The most contentious element of the draft strategy is the Mayor's pledge to abandon his predecessor's 50% target for affordable homes. All parties except the Conservatives in the Assembly supported the retention of the target, but in responding to them the Mayor noted that the 50% target had never in fact been achieved. In its place there is a new target to deliver 50,000 affordable homes in 2008-11, and he claims to have negotiated 75% of those in the first round of negotiations with boroughs. Every borough now has its own affordable housing target.

Transport

In May 2009 the Mayor issued his Statement of Intent on his proposed new Transport Strategy, for initial consultation with the Assembly. The document states that the existing programme of investment from TfL, Network Rail and TOCs will not be sufficient to meet all the challenges facing London. The paper therefore proposes additional policies, particularly designed to take effect from 2017 when current plans should have been achieved.

The specific policies under consideration include:

Evaluating possible alternatives to Heathrow expansion (including a possible Thames estuary airport)

Smoothing traffic flow to reduce congestion

Possible travel demand management through pricing incentives

Improve north-south connections in the Thameslink corridor and east-west (Crossrail, the river Thames)

Improve orbital connections both in inner and outer London

Specific measures to improve quality of life and to reduce carbon emissions.

At this stage the document deals only in general policy positions; more detailed policies should emerge after a two-stage consultation. The final Transport Strategy is planned for publication in spring 2010.

Economic Development

Also in May, the Mayor published an initial revision of the Mayor's Economic Development Strategy, for consultation with the Assembly. Public consultation will follow in the autumn.

The Mayor describes his aims as being to:

position and promote London as the undisputed business capital of the world

ensure that it has the most competitive business environment in the world

make it a leading global low carbon capital

give all Londoners the opportunity to share in London's economic success

invest to ensure growth is spread across London, and in particular outer London.

A National Stage?

Another prediction widely made at the time of his election as Mayor was that Boris Johnson's Mayoralty would be used by the Tory High Command as a laboratory for some experiments in "Cameron Conservatism"; political opponents waited for City Hall to fall apart, so they could involve David Cameron in Boris' ruin. In fact, this prediction also proved to be wide of the mark, not least because Boris himself has refused to play ball. Although many of his initial advisers were loaned to – or foisted on – him by Conservative Party HQ, in fact he has subsequently reached out to a wide spectrum of London Conservatives to staff his senior team and has shown himself more than willing to strike out on his own when it suits London – or him - better. So, for example, Mayor Johnson has been quick to defend the City when the near collapse of the banking system saw even leading Tory figures queuing to denounce them.

While the new Mayor has – unsurprisingly - shown less interest in international solidarity than his predecessor, he has not shrunk from offering his views on national political issues. Some of these – just – have some bearing on London: his attack on the 50p tax rate could be justified because of its perceived effect on the City, but grammar schools?

Although Boris Johnson's personal ambitions, perhaps one day to move diagonally across the river into Downing Street, or his personal relations with the man who is far more likely to beat him to it, David Cameron, may not appear to matter very much, they could easily have a bearing on how the Mayor behaves in office particularly after May 2010. They could also affect his decision whether to seek re-election.

In the meantime, the Mayor will have to continue to devote himself to the daily grind of life in City Hall, and to tackling the big issues facing London: crime and policing, the resurrection of the financial services sector, and the repair of a creaking and under-financed transport system. Not to mention the need to do his best to ensure a successful Olympics in 2012 – whether or not he personally carries the flag all the way there from Beijing.

Conclusions

It would be easy to assume that London under Boris Johnson's Mayoralty might develop into a jolly roller-coaster ride through a political theme park, with Boris himself as a hilarious tour guide. In fact, underneath the joking, and the political ambition, Mayor Johnson has the opportunity to shape London for a decade or more to come. His opposition to Heathrow expansion, rolling back of the Congestion Charge, hands-on involvement in policing strategy, defence of the City of London and championing of the "suburbs" against the Metropolitan centre could all have important consequences for one of the world's leading cities and the powerhouse of the UK economy.

From a stakeholder perspective, the upcoming revisions of the London Plan, and the Mayor's housing, transport and economic development strategies, provide significant opportunities to shape the future development of the capital.