

This page shows the article as it originally appeared in the newspaper. The article itself can be read on the following page.

Opinion & Analysis

The tragic conflict between freedom and tradition



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The trouble with the world today is that it is a place where the forces of progress and change are constantly at odds with the forces of tradition and conservatism. This is a conflict that is often fought out in the most unexpected of places, and it is one that is often fought out in the most unexpected of ways.

Dublin could learn lessons from London over mayor

BY ANDREW MCCOY
The Irish government has a long way to go before it can match the standards of the London Mayor's Office. The London Mayor's Office is a model of efficiency and effectiveness, and it is one that the Irish government should emulate.

Minister must put arts sector on stable footing

BY ANDREW MCCOY



The arts sector in Ireland is in a state of flux, and it is one that is often overlooked by the government. The Minister for the Arts must take steps to put the sector on a stable footing, and it is one that is often overlooked by the government.

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Dublin could learn lessons from London over mayor

Ken or Boris? The mayor of London will be colourful. But would the same be true here?

LONDONERS WILL wake up today knowing they have either "Red" Ken Livingstone or maybe Tory twit Boris Johnson or perhaps – hardly – Lib Dem Brian Paddick, dubbed "the gay policeman" as their mayor. Given the candidates and the colourful history of London mayoral elections to date, is it any wonder commentators are voicing fears that the whole process has lost its dignity and been hijacked by the cult of personality?

The race to be mayor has proved divisive ever since a seething Jeffrey Archer handed the Tory nomination to Stephen Norris in 2000 in the face of perjury charges. Labour Party rank-and-file backed former Greater London Council leader Livingstone, who ultimately polled three times better than Frank Dobson, the charismatic challenger safe pair of hands his Labour

colleagues ultimately chose.

Tony Blair's engineering of various convoluted voting mechanisms, arising out of his desperation to deny Livingstone the job, led William Haig, then leader of the opposition, to quip at prime minister's questions: "Why not split the job in two, with Frank Dobson as your day mayor and Ken Livingstone as your nightmare?"

Livingstone, having failed to secure the nomination as Labour candidate, ran as an Independent, won convincingly and proved to be rather good. Even Blair, who had predicted Livingstone would be a disaster, relented and welcomed him back into the Labour fold in time for his re-election in 2004.

The directly elected mayoral model has long been a controversial element of British local government reform. Central government was initially enthusiastic, recognising that effective, high-profile and legitimate local leadership is essential to delivering high quality local public services.

Increased visibility appears to have engaged the electorate in the process. However, critics argue that local governance is all about teamwork and warn that too much power in one pair of hands may prove harmful. As the British political system gravitates ever closer to the US system of personality politics, they contend that ultimately personality cults like Blairism and Thatcherism are self-defeating as the individual at the centre grows increasingly messianic and out of touch.

With John Gormley proposing an elected mayor for Dublin by 2011, it is timely to review the success of the London experiment and consider what lessons it holds for our own capital. Gormley's Green Paper proposes that an elected mayor would exercise control over transport, planning, housing, waste, water provision and wastewater disposal.

These significant responsibilities are broadly similar to those of London's mayor. So what has been achieved there and has the larger than life incumbent overshadowed the whole experience?

Livingstone initiated some good schemes during his time in office, thereby easily retaining the chair in 2004. He is, perhaps, most closely associated with transport and the introduction of the highly controversial congestion charge. While this has reduced traffic, critics argue that, though lucrative for its private-sector operator, promised funding for public transport has not materialised.

In an Irish context, transport initiatives would be welcome but a Dublin mayor cannot hope to inherit an equivalently well-developed public transport infrastructure – at least the vast majority of Londoners had options, albeit ageing, to get them to and from the city.

Gormley is no doubt encouraged by Livingstone's environmentally friendly policies. He created the London Hydrogen Partnership and the London Energy Partnership in his first term and his "green light to clean power" strategy commits London to reducing carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent by 2010.

However, progress on waste and recycling has been slower than hoped. Livingstone has also embraced his city's multiculturalism, hosting a Jewish Hanukkah ceremony at City Hall, organising "Eid in the Square" in Trafalgar Square to mark the end of Ramadan and introducing an annual St Patrick's Day festival. He has long been a supporter of Rise: London United, the free anti-racism music festival to which he attributes, along with other anti-racist policies, a 35 per cent decrease in racist attacks.

However, the words "cronyism" and "corruption" are never far from the lips of detractors. He has hit the headlines in lurid fashion - likening an *Evening Standard* journalist to a Nazi camp guard, accusing Israel's prime minister Ariel Sharon of being a "war criminal" and referring to George Bush as "the greatest threat to life on this planet".

Livingstone has certainly stayed true to his rebellious roots and made the job his own. But would this be equally true of any future Dublin equivalent?

Eleanor Fitzsimons is a freelance writer. She lived in London from 1998 to 2001

ELEANOR FITZSIMONS

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