

LEARNING IN LONDON LOCAL GOVERNMENT



Interviews with Cllr Sir Merrick Cockell
and Cllr Chris Roberts

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FOREWORD



Politicians come and go, just like people in any other line of work. But I believe that we don't always value what they do or, more importantly, capture the lessons they have learned - which probably explains why so many of them go on to publish their own autobiographies!

In London two long standing leaders have recently stepped down after a combined quarter of a century at the helm of their respective councils. They are Sir Merrick Cockell from the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea (K&C) and Chris Roberts at the Royal Borough of Greenwich (Greenwich)*.

Both have had interesting political careers, albeit from different ends of the spectrum. Both have led high profile councils through a time of significant change in London's political structures. And both care passionately about local government and its role in shaping and hopefully improving the lives of Londoners.

To mark this moment and to try to capture some important issues for the future, we decided to commission this pamphlet. To ensure it has a robust and engaging narrative we asked Pippa Crerar, City Hall Editor at the Evening Standard, to interview both men separately and then together. The end product, I hope you will agree, provides some fascinating and in places perhaps contentious thoughts from Merrick and Chris which no doubt will contribute to the debate about London's future.

* This project was carried out before Michael White stepped down at Havering council after a decade

FOREWORD

I myself have been involved now in London's political scene for 24 years – almost as long as Merrick and Chris have been Leaders. One central theme that comes through their comments is that, in the not too distant future, London's local government structures may well be reviewed. It is, after all, 50 years since the Greater London structure of 32 councils (plus of course the country's oldest local authority – the Corporation of London) was enacted. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the first elections and, in 2015, 50 years since the 20 outer London councils, created in the Act, came into being.

This review will no doubt also include regional government in the capital and, I would hope, the issue of money. The recent important report by Tony Travers and his London Finance Commission must not be forgotten in this debate and it behoves all of us who want to see greater delegation of powers and funds from central government to continue to press this case.

I hope you enjoy this read and if you have any views you want to share with us at LCA, please do contact me.



Robert Gordon Clark

Executive Chairman

London Communications Agency

[@ldncomms](#)

www.londoncommunications.co.uk

LONDON PAST LOOKING BACK

Entering Politics

The world of local government was a different place when Sir Merrick Cockell and Chris Roberts first became councillors. Although eight years apart – one stood in K&C in 1986, the other in Greenwich in 1994 – they both arrived before the dramatic changes that took place in 2000.

Councillors of old, who might have popped in to their town hall for a few hours of committee meetings in wood-panelled chambers after work, were replaced by what often amounted to full-time professional politicians, sitting in executive cabinets, scrutinised by back-benchers. They had more power, and with that came more responsibility, which the two men have borne over their 13 years as borough leaders in very different ways.

When Roberts became a councillor in 1994, aged 34, he worked for the GMB and had already been active in the Labour party for several years. He chaired the borough party so had a chance to look at the council “fairly close up” before deciding whether to stand.

In the end he was persuaded by his desire to create jobs in an area which had suffered chronic unemployment, and the opportunity to regenerate huge swathes of old industrial land.

His arrival at Greenwich coincided with a “changing of the guard” which ushered in a new generation of councillors. None of the old guard had particularly inspired him, though he admits to being a “big fan” of Neil Kinnock and the way he moved the Labour party back towards electoral viability.

“I don’t think I knew what it would be like as a councillor so it could never live up to your expectations, you’re never prepared for it,” he says.

Cockell was just 29 when he went into local government in 1986, although he had his first brush with politics as a child in South Africa, where he was born. Back in the UK, he became active in the Conservative party when Margaret Thatcher became leader, before moving to Chelsea and joining the local association.

"I got engaged on the day I stood for the council so the two went together. I was stabilising, settling what I wanted to do in life," he says. Cockell is frank that he didn't know much about what he was letting himself in for. "I thought I understood, but of course you don't," he says.

He moved up through the community relations committee and the education committee.

"Suddenly I found myself in a world I knew very little about. But I'm a great believer in if you're asked to do something, do it, unless there's a really good reason not to."

He claims he had no life plan mapped out. "I never did this Michael Heseltine 'back of an envelope, let's work out my life' plan, so I'm not sure I consciously sat down and said well what's it going to be like to be leader."

However, it ended up "far exceeding" expectations.



"I got engaged on the day I stood for the council so the two went together."

LONDON PAST LOOKING BACK

Changes

Roberts admits that before he joined Greenwich it had been “a bit of a basket case”, was rate-capped every year and was regularly the last in the country to satisfy the legal requirement of setting its budget. One year the council even set a budget which its own leader opposed.

“I sat in the chamber watching this nonsense taking place and it was just chaos,” he says.

When he took over sick leave was rife, council reserves had been run down, multiple schools were in special measures and senior figures were failing to talk to each other about their priorities.

K&C, in contrast, was “pretty steady” and “well-run” when Cockell took over, but “it needed a freshen-up” so Labour’s changes to local government in 2000 came at a good time.

“The role of leader was very different before then. You are far more hands on in all sorts of areas that my predecessor never went near,” he says. “It was supposed to speed up decision making, I’m not sure it has, but it has put politicians firmly in the driving seat.”

The two boroughs, at opposite ends of the capital and in many ways of the spectrum of London life, have changed dramatically. K&C, always one of the capital’s wealthier areas, has moved out of the reach of more ordinary Londoners.



"There's still a lot of hidden deprivation but clearly the area overall has become over those years more prosperous," says Cockell.

He believes relatively low council tax, efficient services and improvements to the public realm have all played their part in attracting people to the borough. The down-side, of course, is that "crazy, soaring" house prices have pushed many locals on average incomes out, resulting in a "less balanced" community.

"I sat in the chamber watching this nonsense... it was just chaos"

"I hope those in social housing, less advantaged, see their services are better, their housing is better... but overall it has changed."

When Roberts arrived in Greenwich he was faced with a much starker picture. It was a year after Stephen Lawrence's murder, the third high profile murder in the area. Unemployment was chronically high and poverty was wide-spread.

Now, however, he believes the borough is "more confident, more aspirational" than the early 1990s. "Although you'll still find deprivation it's a lot different from how it was. There's private sector investment as opposed to private sector flight," he says.

The council itself has also moved on from its "basket case" days. Roberts brought in a performance management framework, a joint management team, streamlined council buildings and cut back office functions.

The property assets freed up by this strategy have been sold off and the capital invested straight back into regenerating the borough, he says, with the council "kicking off" growth in a number of masterplan areas.

LONDON PAST LOOKING BACK

Leadership highs

The regeneration of Greenwich has progressed further than Roberts originally thought it might – with the Millennium Dome, latterly the O2, and swathes of new housing – while other South London boroughs along the river have not all developed at a similar pace.

He's also proud of his local labour scheme which has found jobs for 16,000 people since 1997. The template for the scheme - which originally found jobs in the Dome - was then used by the Olympic host boroughs and now for welfare claimants affected by the benefits cap.

Cockell lists K&C's urban realm projects among its biggest achievements - with Kensington High Street and the area around Exhibition Road the most successful of these.

He believes the way an area looks - its parks, streets, public spaces - is important as "that's how people judge a place and how they vote as well."

But he denies that the freedom to focus on the local environment - as opposed to jobs or regeneration - is a luxury only available to wealthier boroughs.

"A large chunk of what people - visitors, everybody - see as London is here so really it's a London wide responsibility," he says.

"Getting that right and making London appealing and interesting and attractive is not a luxury, actually it's an essential."

*"...making
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LONDON PAST LOOKING BACK

And Leadership lows...

Both men have areas of regret.

"There are things I wish we'd achieved that we haven't been able to but where it's relied heavily on the delivery of others," Roberts says.

He is clearly frustrated by his lack of control over Thames river crossings, which he claims the borough desperately needs. He quotes managers from the Tate & Lyle factory in Silvertown, just north of the river, who were "incredulous" when he asked how many staff they employed from the borough.

"They said it never occurred to us to advertise for jobs in Woolwich. It's the mentality of the river," he says.

"The frustration that we and Newham have had was that if we had the powers we would act as the client and get on and build the links".

Cockell has his own disappointments over getting the private sector involved in helping to transform the borough's social housing. He had big plans for major investment in some of the estates but by 2011 realised there were too many hurdles.

"Our tenants wanted the council to keep it (social housing). There was a very strong commitment from residents but we just couldn't see how we could fund long-term major investment including rebuilding estates."

"That was disappointing," he says. "You could actually see the potential business case that would make it stand up on its own two feet. We thought we could do some really revolutionary stuff."

Cockell also wishes he could have done more to capitalise on the success of the Notting Hill Carnival, describing it as "a wonderful asset with enormous potential which has never been remotely met".

He blames “really tricky” dealings with Ken Livingstone, concerned residents and a poor organising committee for preventing it turning into a year-round affair with art exhibitions and job training, part-funded by the private sector through sponsorship.

He also laments the failed redevelopment of Sloane Square where the council proposed creating a crossroads but the “thundering” result of the consultation was that the public didn’t want it. As a result safe Conservative seats in the ward were at risk in the 2006 elections from residents threatening to stand on a single issue “Save Sloane Square” ticket.

“There was enormous community outrage. Politically that was a difficult time. We were coming into local elections. It was pretty bumpy,” Cockell concedes.

“a wonderful asset with enormous potential which has never been remotely met”.

LONDON PAST LOOKING BACK

Education, education, education

Over the past 30 years London schools have improved across the board, with both Greenwich and K&C amongst the most dramatic. When Roberts and Cockell began their town hall careers their local schools were failing, regularly near the bottom of league tables. Now they are much improved, and among their proudest legacies.

Cockell chaired K&C's education committee at a time of "live, febrile debate" after the borough had helped lead the campaign to abolish the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) in 1990.

The central London council took an interventionist approach, claiming to have spent more per head on schools than anywhere else at the time. "That was a conscious decision and politically very different from places like Westminster which walked away from it," he says.

"We said no, schools are in a mess, we've got to, despite everybody's expectations about a Conservative authority... that we'd just leave them, we wouldn't invest. We did quite the opposite."

Taking over control of schools - which made up about 40 per cent of the council's budget - from ILEA provided boroughs with the opportunity to track progress. K&C focused on school building - the new Chelsea Academy, a rebuilt Holland Park and more recently the Kensington Aldridge Academy and a swathe of primaries as well - and on educational standards. "We had big expectations of them and their pupils."

The picture was equally unsatisfactory when Roberts took over in Greenwich.

"We were bottom (of the league tables) every year for years. We might occasionally get above one council and then nationally out of 149 top tier councils, we'd be 146 or 144. Now we'd be much higher."

LONDON PRESENT HERE AND NOW

Just two months after becoming leader, Roberts proposed the closure of a number of primary, secondary and special schools which were not fit for purpose.

"I remember one woman in floods of tears coming and talking to this meeting about what she thought was going to happen to her child if we closed the special school he was in and went into mainstream school."

*"We were bottom
(of the league
tables) every
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Now we'd be
much higher."*

"It's really hard to make those sorts of decisions. I was all but pinning my director of education to the wall and saying are you absolutely sure this is the way

forward. We can look at where we are now, and it's taken a long time, but sticking with those processes we've seen our school results just get better and better."

Yet until four or five years ago, Greenwich parents were still choosing to send their children to schools in neighbouring Bexley, which has the 11+, with two thirds of top banded children leaving the borough. Now 83% are staying, he says, which has had a dramatic impact on results.

In the era of academies and free schools, both men say they believe in choice. However, Cockell thinks local councillors should be able to challenge educational standards as they do in the maintained sector whilst Roberts says it's "critical" that councils should be able to intervene if schools are failing.

He adds: "In reality, the debate on structure is irrelevant. It's all down to the quality of leadership and teaching in the school".

Keep your friends close...

A borough leader's single most important relationship, beyond his or her own chief executive, is with the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). Whether the pair ever actually meet is not of the greatest relevance, as the minister ultimately controls almost every facet of town hall life. Government draws up the rules, oversees them in action and controls funding, as well as cuts. In reply, borough leaders almost unanimously cry freedom.

Cockell has come into close contact with several DCLG Secretaries during his stints running London Councils and the Local Government Association (LGA). He found most of them – including Labour's Ruth Kelly and Hazel Blears "open and accessible" but, perhaps unsurprisingly, Tory incumbent Eric Pickles "enormously so".

He is part of a select group that is invited into the DCLG's inner sanctum every week – a meeting he says Pickles "sticks to religiously". But even though they are long-standing friends, Cockell admits there are tensions, not least over the Minister's apparent willingness to offer up councils for cuts.

"The idea that the Government is promoting localism by telling councils when they should empty their bins... is almost petty,"

"We don't always have conversations like the future of local government funding but he knows where we stand," he says. "He sees it in a different way which is 'if you think this is bad, you should've seen what they (the rest of government) were trying to do'." He acknowledges that Pickles sees funding cuts through "a different end of the telescope" - with the Treasury as his master, rather than council constituents - but suggests his viewpoint might be coloured by his time in local government being "quite a long time ago".

Roberts has mixed views of Pickles. He was impressed when the Minister rang the night of the Woolwich murder and then visited four weeks later "without any fanfare or any cameras or reporters". But, like many council leaders, he is frustrated by the level of intervention from a government that claims it supports more local devolution.

"The idea that the Government is promoting localism by telling councils when they should empty their bins... is almost petty," he says. "If we're going to reinvigorate local government, having that type of approach isn't helpful".

Roberts was, however, impressed by John Prescott who as deputy Prime Minister - like Heseltine before him - pulled together different Whitehall departments on development of the Thames Gateway. He singled out Labour's David Miliband and Yvette Cooper for recognising that with new housing must come access to work, and John Healey for trying to make up for lost ground by pushing through "significant" development in housing.

He also had a special affection for Charlie Falconer with whom he worked so closely over the transfer of the Millennium Dome into the O2.

LONDON PRESENT HERE AND NOW

City Hall Empire

The partnership between the Mayor of London and the borough leaders has been a complicated one since its inception. Where there is give – of powers, funds or services – there is also take. Where there is harmony – over housing, local policing or schools – there is also discord. Personal relationships have become key to navigating the choppy waters that often exist between town halls and City Hall.

Chris Roberts, as you might expect from a Labour council leader, does not hold back when it comes to his views of the current Mayor.

"There's two Boris's, aren't there? There's that Boris that frankly didn't know too much... In the first term it was like you were talking to a blank wall, there wasn't even any residual knowledge of the issues," he says.

He is more generous in his appraisal of Johnson's next four years. "There's a Boris that has got a team around him that has had four years to bed in and actually in the second term has found his feet."

But Roberts confirms that the relationship between the boroughs and Ken Livingstone was not exactly smooth sailing either. "Ken would use the fact that London Councils was Conservative led, if not controlled, and play the boroughs off against that," he says.

"So if those of us who were in control didn't like an argument he would speak to Labour leaders who weren't in control and say, well I'm the best thing you've got so therefore you've got to listen to me."

He claims Livingstone was also "more directional" than his Tory successor. "Boris is more willing to allow the boroughs to do what they want," he says. "If Ken had an idea, the boroughs weren't going to knock him off that... There were things where we said you should leave us to do that and he was less keen on that."

But he praises Livingstone for his focus on affordable housing. "Ken did have a view about need and deprivation which I don't really see coming through Boris's regime."

Cockell agrees that Livingstone ran London by “divide and rule” and that the boroughs were often “played off” against one another. He believes his own dealings with Livingstone were probably easier than those of some Labour borough leaders, who had notoriously testy relationships with the Labour mayor.

“We knew what we thought of him and he knew what we were like. We didn’t have all the history,” he says.

Cockell was partly responsible for Johnson’s very different approach to the boroughs, impressing upon him early on the necessity of working with the boroughs. “I went to see Boris and said if you stand, the Conservative boroughs will back you and we’ll bring the troops out and we’ll do our best to get you elected,” he says.

“We got it into Boris’s mind that he’d actually lead London better if he was doing it with all the boroughs. His approach was entirely different to working with Ken.”



Sharing Services

Many boroughs join forces on occasion, but Kensington & Chelsea, Hammersmith & Fulham and Westminster sparked a local government revolution with their tri-borough agreement in 2011. Children's services, adults' social care and libraries are among those already merged. Councils country-wide are now asking if this is the future?

Cockell is the man behind one of the most ground-breaking schemes in recent local government history – sharing services with his inner West London neighbours on a large scale. The three boroughs have already saved £13.5 million and are on track to save over £45 million in a few years time through merging some services.

But he is cautious about advocating the roll-out of the initiative across the rest of the country, as some in government have suggested.

"Everywhere is going to be different, I've never believed, in fact I violently disagree, that there is this sort of model," he says.

"Some councils not too far away from here have decided that they have this model for the future and if everybody only followed that model everything would be fine. Well actually I don't subscribe to that. Clearly you can learn from others, but everybody has got to do something they can work with."

He says there are some principles - such as recognising what matters to local people and what does not - that are well applied within the tri-borough agreement.

"The stuff that matters to them - can they park, what is the refuse like, have they got children's centres, what's the care for the elderly like - those sort of things matter to them," he says.

"You can take parts of tri-borough and you can run it anywhere."

But the services that residents “don’t care about how you do it, just want it cheaply, efficiently done” – like facilities management, trading standards or benefits payments – could easily be merged. “That’s the lessons from tri-borough - look to economies of scale, look to working co-operatively. You can take parts of tri-borough and you can run it anywhere.”

Cockell insists he is not advocating “over-oppressive, large, governmental units” but instead wants to take the services to people. But Roberts maintains that many Londoners still feel that the boroughs are too large and that he’s “not overly keen” on the idea of sharing frontline services. “I could see that it might prove attractive to some people but I think it’s the wrong battle to fight,” he says. “I’m not averse to looking at it in terms of learning but I think the centralisation of services in Whitehall silos ends up moving services further away from people.”

Instead, he believes that local people want much more local integration between different services within their borough – between health and social care, or

environmental enforcement and the police, for example. “The battle for me is how we build services around our residents. The big problem in the delivery of public services is that Government treats people as pupils, passengers, patients, but not often as whole human beings,” he says.

“There are things we can do better together, but actually joining up public services in a geographical area so the lines are blurred is much better. I’m much more interested in that kind of integration.”

Roberts has ruled out following the lead of certain local authorities which have out-sourced services and ask residents to pay for extras Easy Jet-style. “As far as possible we try to keep ours in-house. About half our workforce is local and that’s more likely to be maintained by services that are directly provided than not. There are more levers to pull when you’ve got direct control and in a borough like ours the local spend in the economy is quite important.”

LONDON PRESENT HERE AND NOW

Getting in – and moving up

With a combined 46 years in local government both men have plenty of advice for new councillors starting out on their career – not least for dealing with the media. They both believe that over time councils will become more diverse employers and insist town halls are a better platform than central government for making things happen.

When they entered local government most councillors either made fleeting part-time appearances or were financially independent enough to devote themselves to local government almost as a hobby. Now the expectation is that they're more professional and commit more time.

Roberts is to the point. "Don't politically run before you can administratively walk," he tells new councillors.

"Don't think you're going to change the world immediately. Take time to get to know the organisation you're in. Make sure you know the absolute basics, like where you get headed note-paper, who you can give your problems to."

He warns of a "first-termitis" where young councillors think "if you've trodden on an ant on a pavement people are going to vote to get rid of you" but adds with re-election comes a sense of perspective.

Cockell adds: "If you're ready for it then do it, and learn on the job. Don't go in with a big game plan. See if you're suitable for it and if it suits you. It will take time but it's worth it."

He adds an insight into why he never stood for Parliament. "We're really lucky, when you've got political control you're in a relatively secure position. National politicians never have the time to actually achieve anything."

Roberts is more direct. "I think I'd be bored as an MP and I've always wanted to do something rather than be something."

But Cockell warns that would-be councillors need a "thick hide" once they get to leadership level – a change from pre-2000. "You've got to learn to do what you think is right and not just respond to the people that shout the loudest or say they are the ones who know best. Stick by your convictions and beliefs."

Media coverage, in particular, has changed dramatically since they entered politics. "It's different from the relatively parochial stuff of 12 years ago where old Harry was the local government guy on the local paper," he says. "We can't put the genie back in the bottle. It's changed, there's a different perspective to it. You're game, you're meat."

Cockell admits that some councillors at K&C get a bit "spooked" by the interest in particular from the "stalking websites" that many leaders attract. Roberts agrees that council leaders get singled out for online abuse but has a different strategy for coping. "I never look at it," he says.

"I think I'd be bored as an MP and I've always wanted to do something rather than be something."

LONDON PRESENT HERE AND NOW

In the news

The capital's town halls are regularly in the headlines but never more so than recently, as they have to oversee much of the latest round of Government changes to the welfare system. Greenwich and K&C are each dealing with the impact of the benefits cuts on their poorest residents, while the South East London borough was unexpectedly thrust into the media spotlight last year after the tragic killing of Drummer Lee Rigby.

Sir Merrick acknowledges that some residents in K&C, one of the capital's most expensive boroughs, will be priced out by the housing benefits cap. The borough has talked to towns including Peterborough about buying land to build homes for its residents - easing pressure on its housing waiting list of 8,500 people.

"It seems likely that the very poorest will not be able to afford to live in K&C and will have to look to cheaper parts of London or elsewhere within the benefit limits," he says.

"But the work outside London was never on the basis that we would export the most disadvantaged up the A1. It was that we would be able to offer families and others more space that will never be possible in K&C. That would then free up accommodation in K&C to help us meet our statutory duties."

But Greenwich is taking a different approach. "We're not trying to move anybody out of London. We're trying to get them into work instead," says Roberts. "Sending them to different parts of the country is not likely to improve their job prospects and possibly not their children's education."

He says Greenwich took pre-emptive action by finding out which residents were most likely to be affected. Many have ended up in an employment project - a six month work placement with the council which would give them a CV and a record.

They found 440 local people, with 50 per cent losing £50 or more a week and a quarter losing £100 or more a week, and spoke to them all in advance. Roberts says they include examples that would fit every political viewpoint.

"You can find people who you think 'Actually, why have you just been sat around?' Then we've had people in desperate states which has prompted us to provide our own staff with training from the Samaritans," he says.

In May 2013, Greenwich made the headlines for all the wrong reasons after a young soldier, Drummer Lee Rigby, was hacked to death in broad daylight on the streets of Woolwich in an alleged Islamist attack. Dealing with the aftermath was one of the biggest challenges of Roberts's career.

He took the decision not to talk to the media - in part because he did not want the blame "inadvertently" pinned on the local community.

"We became the focus of national attention that we didn't want. We had the media down, the parade of

national politicians," he says. One or two colleagues were less helpful. There were also plenty of outside organisations who, in his view, were intent on causing trouble. Requests to come and march came thick and fast in the days after the murder. But the council turned them all down - even groups that would have been seen as sympathetic - because they could have prompted ugly counter-demonstrations and fanned the flames of media attention when all the community wanted to do was to be left alone like a family to grieve.



LONDON FUTURE LOOKING FORWARD

Shape of local government

London's current structure of 32 local authorities, including 20 new outer London boroughs, was created in 1963. The structure – around 650 wards giving a total of 1,861 councillors across the capital – survived the abolition of the GLC in 1986 and then the creation of the Greater London Authority in 2000. Now 50 years on from that historic moment, what should be the future shape of London's local government?

Both Cockell and Roberts believe London has to come up with its own solution. "Is London capable, does it have the appetite, to change itself before government actually gets round to doing something really nasty to us?" asks the former K&C leader.

One option would be to dramatically reduce the number of existing boroughs. With between 200,000 and 300,000 constituents each – compared with almost 500,000 each in Manchester – they are smaller than many across the country. But neither man believes super-boroughs are on the horizon.

"I can't imagine if anybody wanted to embark on local government reorganisation they would start in London rather than addressing the two-tier stuff in the counties," says Roberts. In fact, he says, there's pressure to devolve more powers within local authorities. "People underestimate how to some, boroughs still feel too large."

Cockell thinks it more likely that the capital will keep its relatively small councils – which are at least democratically accountable – and merge services instead. K&C has taken the lead with its tri-borough deal with Hammersmith & Fulham and Westminster. Other groupings such as Richmond, Kingston and Sutton could follow suit.

Cockell, former chair of the Local Government Association, stresses that borough leaders in the capital must recognise they have to transform, or be transformed. "Otherwise any government, when it runs out of things to do, will come. London is a prime target, particularly if the national ruling party is not in control of the capital."

It can have so much fun with the cost of London government and all those thousands of councillors."

Roberts appears almost gung-ho in his willingness to reduce the number of London's 1,861 councillors. "I'm for slashing politicians at every level," he says.

He suggests that cutting the number of councillors per ward - currently three - could help improve performance. Cockell agrees the number could be reduced to one or two.

"If you force party selection panels to say you've only got one person you can select, you ought in theory to raise the quality," says Roberts. "There's then only one person representing those 15,000 or 16,000 people so you need somebody who has a broad range of skills."

Both men hope that with time their council groups will become more reflective of the communities they represent. Roberts suggests slimming down to a dozen full-time paid councillors, rather than the 50 or so who currently serve on a part-time basis, would help.

"Is London capable... to change itself before government actually gets round to doing something really nasty to us?"

At least one Labour woman candidate has to stand in every ward but so far attempts to do the same for ethnic minorities have been knocked back.

Cockell adds: "If you're retired or on private means you can dabble around in local government but actually it's a terrible indictment if you're a woman with a young child or if you're at the prime of your earning life that you're told you can't remotely do it," he says.

LONDON FUTURE LOOKING FORWARD

Financing London

One of the biggest bones of contention with successive governments has been how town halls are funded. The London Finance Commission, set up by the Mayor published a report in the spring of 2013 which set out a future path where the capital could keep more of the money it raises – and councils could have greater control of taxes.

Professor Tony Travers, the h, proposed that London government should be able to invest in its own infrastructure to cater for its booming population and to boost growth. Restrictions on borrowing for capital investment should be relaxed while the full suite of property taxes - including stamp duty - should be devolved. He argued this would increase both investment in the capital and local government's accountability to residents and businesses.

But there are fears the report could be left to gather dust on a Treasury shelf. Local authorities want change now.

"We need to move to a system where more of the resources are raised locally,"

Roberts believes it is time for local authority funding to be overhauled, and that the balance between income raised through council tax and central grant is wrong. "I think the whole system needs to be reformed. We need to move to a system where more of the resources are raised locally," he says.

Cockell agrees. Councils have four main income sources – business rates, grants, money generated from selling services and council tax. "You can't run public services on such a narrow range," he says.

In his June 2013 spending review the Chancellor announced that the council tax freeze, due to come to an end in 2014, would be extended for a further two years. Roberts criticises the Government's short-termist approach to town hall funding.

"We don't put the one-year money into the budget because we don't know whether it will be repeated next year. So they should tell us they're giving three years, or let us do what we want to do with it," he says.

He describes the decision to offer all councils a freeze in council tax as "quite bizarre" politically. "Actually if you get a few Labour boroughs turning round and saying we have to put it up, then isn't that helpful if you're a Tory minister?"

Cockell is even more damning about the decision to freeze. "It's all governments keeping control and still treating us as the agents of central government rather than being democratically accountable and legitimate on our own," he says. "They don't call it a cap but it is a cap. It's totally ridiculous because we're limited on how we raise money... we're completely stuffed."



LONDON FUTURE LOOKING FORWARD

London Assembly

In 2000 a new level of local government came into being in the form of the Greater London Authority, comprised of the executive branch of the Mayor and the 25 members of the London Assembly who scrutinise his policies and hold him to account.

The Assembly has practically no powers and as a result has gained a reputation for being toothless, with some critics - including several of its members - calling for it to be scrapped.

Cockell is unimpressed by the institution. "I don't think it works for Londoners. They don't understand what it does," he says. "They think they do the things that we do. They think they're far more powerful and influential than they actually are. It just feels a bit like it's not going anywhere. They're not authoritative. I don't know how much notice Boris takes of it."

He describes Assembly hearings as "game-playing" and suggests Mayor's question time is "sometimes dire" as Johnson and members vie to see "who can be clever and who can score points".

Roberts is equally underwhelmed. "It's difficult to know what they're trying to influence."

"What's the point of an Assembly that has never in 14 years been able to overturn a mayoral decision?"

He suggests that borough leaders hold greater sway with the Mayor than Assembly members. "The Assembly is so weak, I can't recall a time when it has overturned the Mayor... What's the point of an Assembly that has never in 14 years been able to overturn a mayoral decision?"

The most commonly proposed solutions to the Assembly's reputation for being weak are both radical - scrap it or give it more powers.

Cockell is suspicious of the latter. "Who are you going to take them from? Whose powers are you going to take? If it's the boroughs, forget it." Roberts adds: "I would probably scrap it. I don't think it has done anything."

But neither is enthusiastic about borough leaders - who in areas such as housing and economic development are responsible for delivering some of the Mayor's policies - holding him to account instead. "For us to be scrutinising would sever the (existing) relationship. It doesn't make sense," says Cockell.

Instead, he proposes that councillors from across the capital - possibly one nominated by each borough - could sit on a select committee-style panel to scrutinise both the Mayor and council leaders.

But in return for giving up a degree of oversight town halls would expect more powers - in particular over taxation - from central government. "It would be worth it for the boroughs to give that

up - not to give powers over their day-to-day scrutiny, but if you wanted to look at London's overall services - provided there were powers coming, something moving in the other direction," says Cockell.

However, Roberts raises the fear many council leaders have about pushing central government for more devolution. "The issue for me about powers is that they seem to stop at City Hall."



LONDON FUTURE LOOKING FORWARD

Powers wish list

Cockell, in common with most borough leaders, would like local councils to decide their own tax and spend priorities, instead of being constrained by the capping of council tax and central control of business rates.

Local authorities often accuse the Government of underfunding them through central grants that impose additional duties that they must fulfill. He calls for them to have the fiscal freedom to impose local levies such as a bed tax, tourist tax or sales tax. "If we thought that was right, let people do it".

He believes the inability of councils to set local business rates is an anomaly, given they already have control over council tax rates. "If you're taking from citizens as council tax, why is it not a perfectly reasonable discussion to have with your business community about the levels of tax they pay?"

Roberts would like council chiefs to have more control over welfare - other than a few centrally set benefit levels - and employment.

He believes that ever since last year when councils have been operating some benefits, they have already shown why the national welfare bill is so high.

One example is the devolved welfare assistance scheme, which issues emergency cash if benefits payments have not yet come through on, for example, a Friday night. While the DWP would reissue the payment, in effect paying out twice, Greenwich sent claimants "back across the road so they do get their giro", saving hundreds of thousands of pounds a year.

Since last year both the Mayor and the borough leaders have, in fact, been pushing for more fiscal powers through the London Finance Commission. But Roberts is concerned the report has been "parked" by Treasury ministers who have previously promised much but ended up failing to deliver.

"If you're taking from citizens as council tax, why is it not a perfectly reasonable discussion to have with your business community about the levels of tax they pay?"

"We've been here before, it will gather dust on the shelves. I fear that having watched the Heseltine review and £49 billion turn into £2 billion of what was effectively local government money hoovered upwards to LEPs... we won't get there on the LFC."

He suggests the finance commission's backers should be cautious about seemingly encouraging conversations with senior Labour Party figures.

"We're going through what every Opposition party does and that is saying that everybody who is in favour of devolution to local government should vote Labour at the next election."

Cockell is similarly reserved about Tory backing, though he adds: "It's the people who might be thinking about writing a manifesto at some point, can you catch their attention?"

Both borough leaders agree, however, that government should have more respect for local authorities, which have so often been the whipping boys of ministers. Cockell says: "The big, simple, one would be that national government treats us as grown-ups and not as supplicants, and as mature experienced administrators and politicians and on the basis of our performance trusts us much more and lets go."

LONDON FUTURE LOOKING FORWARD

Devolution of powers from City Hall

Roberts feels that neither Boris Johnson nor Ken Livingstone have helped their case for greater devolution by failing to distribute more powers from City Hall.

"The point is that neither of the mayors has devolved themselves and that isn't helpful because if they were able to say I've given some of my powers to boroughs, they could say to government you should give me some of yours," he says.

If he were able to cherry pick from the Mayor's empire he would go for three areas of responsibility: local bus routes, medium-sized infrastructure projects such as a Thames crossing, and even more local funds from the Local Enterprise Partnership.

"London is in real risk of missing out because we've got one centralised LEP, which isn't even a LEP in other people's terms. It doesn't do housing, it doesn't do transport infrastructure."

He praises the LEP for focusing on jobs and growth, but says it leaves a "whole scope" for boroughs to concentrate on other sectors if LEP resources were shared with them.

Cockell agrees that local transport - including buses and red routes - should be handed down suggesting it is "bizarre" that Transport for London has such micro-control.

He calls for sub-city deals in London, suggesting that in K&C had been "completely divorced" from LEPs, unlike leaders in other cities.

"They may not be happy with it, it may not be working well, but at least it's something they're intimately connected with."

However, he suggests that local CLG minister may have "shifted a bit" from their previous refusal to consider city deals with different parts of the capital.



LONDON FUTURE LOOKING FORWARD

The England question

Both men think that the Mayor could add weight to his case for greater fiscal devolution if he talked to other city leaders across England.

Cockell believes the issue fits into the English devolution debate, at a time when both Scotland and Wales are inheriting more powers.

"Otherwise is England ever going to get a sniff of any of this freedom and powers and different taxation?" he says. "Somebody has got to be answering that. On the back of that you can make a London story, or a Manchester story. You can make something that fits in."

Roberts views it differently. He believes that an "English settlement" would be viewed with suspicion by large tracts of the country outside London and the South East.

He suggests the Government should instead concentrate on a funding settlement based around cities and large conurbations.

"We need a regional debate, rather than an English debate," he concludes.

CONCLUSION



While these two men come from very different political backgrounds, it is remarkable how similar their views are on many of the issues Pippa has explored with them. Much of this may be due to the fact that they are both strong localists – politicians who passionately believe in the importance of making decisions as close to the electorate as possible.

Sir Merrick's comments about sifting the things that matter to constituents from those that don't tallies with Roberts' views about treating people as human beings rather than 'patients' or 'pupils'. And whether this approach leads to a tri-borough agreement or to a pledge to keep as much as possible in-house, it is surely the right starting point for the new influx of local councillors elected last month.

For any councillor who hopes to improve life for their constituents there is much to be learnt from these two veterans. At times both have been frustrated or felt hamstrung – either by local residents, press or other tiers of government and bureaucracy – but both have learnt when to fight for a solution and when to simply move on. Neither of them is scared to speak up and both have an obvious appetite for change.

Being a council leader is certainly not for the faint-hearted; the job description is to improve jobs, homes, schools and streets and those are just the basics. The lessons learned by these two stalwarts will be crucial for the next generation of London leaders whether they are navigating structural reform, finance reform or simply the natural evolution and growth of the capital.



Jonny Popper

Managing Director

London Communications Agency

[@ldncomms](#)

www.londoncommunications.co.uk

ABOUT PIPPA CRERAR



Pippa is City Hall Editor of the Evening Standard and covers London politics across the boroughs, the Greater London Authority and also in Parliament. She deals with the Mayor, borough leaders, MPs and ministers on a daily basis and also contributes to the Standard's coverage of Transport for London and the Metropolitan Police.

Previously she was a Political Correspondent based at the House of Commons for more than five years. She has been a journalist for 15 years, initially on newspapers in Scotland and then on Fleet Street with the Press Association, The Guardian and the Daily Mirror.

She has three children and lives in South East London.

LONDON COMMUNICATIONS AGENCY

**8th Floor, Berkshire House, 168-173 High Holborn, London, WC1V 7AA
020 7612 8480 londoncommunications.co.uk @ldncomms**

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