

A view from London:

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Clown Prince of the City

By A. A. GILL

London

ONLY people who live outside cities realize the size of them. London turns out to be huge; there are great swaths, vast panoramas, a whole diaspora I'd never imagined. The place I live in tends to be manageably small, a few familiar journeys and destinations. But I've been covering London's mayoral election — the vote is Thursday — and have traveled the girth and depth of the place and it's revealed a strange parallel metropolis, a magical place that appears only every four years. A city made out of the wishful thinking and ambition of politicians, cast as their own self-justifying epic.

In 2,000 years, London has had only two mayoral elections. It's managed to rub along through great fires, blitzes, rebellions and riots, plagues, smog and 20 centuries of English cooking without ever needing to call upon the office of mayor. It's managed to be heard without a spokesman and be seen without a figurehead. But Tony Blair's New Labor government, in a fit of democratic largess, believed for a fashionable moment in devolved government. The one thing politicians will always vote for is more politics, so in 2000 they invented the post of mayor of London without ever really thinking what it was a mayor would do.

And there has been only one mayor. Ken Livingstone, an old-fashioned, hard-left socialist who rose through internecine pogroms and coups. He's famously cagey about his private life, which seems to include multiple children by multiple partners and a fondness for amphibians and gardening; he is backed by some very unsavory and unstable pressure groups, he's survived through guile, bullying, vulpine charm and the uselessness of the opposition to create a position of considerable personal power.

In both previous elections — 2000 and 2004 — he has strolled back to office barely breaking a sweat. In the first one his Conservative opponent, the novelist and politician Jeffrey Archer, was arrested and jailed on perjury charges. **Mr. Livingstone's main contribution has been to give the city a traffic congestion charge that is the envy of every metropolis that doesn't have one and that, in the minds of most people I know, in six years has made little or no difference to the traffic jams in central London.**

This has always been Mr. Livingstone's strong suit. When you consider what he's actually done, it doesn't amount to much — he wiped out the pigeons from Trafalgar Square because he didn't like them; paid for a lackluster municipal St. Patrick's Day parade in a city whose residents of Irish descent are so well assimilated they don't even register as a special interest or ethnic group. (The parade's main purpose seems to be to annoy the English by refusing to pay for a St. George's Day parade.) There have been grants and facilities for all sorts of local clubs and societies, most of them harmless good deeds, some open to petty embezzlement. Virtually none make the slightest difference to life in the city.

The things that made London an exciting place to be — a booming economy, rising house prices, the influx of rich foreigners — are also the things that make the future look rather bleak: a downturn in the economy and property prices, and the flight of rich foreigners. Neither fat years nor lean years have much to do with the mayor, so the election really comes down to personalities — who do you like? An old-fashioned left-winger with a fondness for newts and old-fashioned dirty politics, or a 19th-century “Masterpiece Theater” Tory with an embarrassing sense of humor, or a gay policeman? It sounds like the mayoral options from a “Tintin” book, and one harassed city worker I talked to said that he'd be voting for anybody who didn't do fireworks. This is a city, not a children's party.

A. A. Gill is the author of the forthcoming “Previous Convictions: Assignments from Here and There.”

Read the entire op-ed at:

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