



Elected Mayors and City Leadership

Summary Report of the Third Warwick Commission

What is the Role of Elected Mayors in Providing Strategic Leadership to Cities?

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www.warwick.ac.uk/warwickcommission/electedmayors/commissioners

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Contents

Foreword from the Vice-Chancellor 4

Introduction from the Chairman 5

Executive Summary 6

Statement from the Commissioners 8

Introduction to the Report 12

History of Local Government 16

Governance 20

Directly Elected Mayors – Why Now and What Now? 26

1) Placeless: Civicism and Social Identity 26

2) Accountability and Facelessness 28

3) Politics and Pointlessness 32

Costs 35

Recommendations 36

References 39

Endnotes 42

Foreword

From the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Nigel Thrift

I am delighted to welcome this report, a summary of the work to date of the Third Warwick Commission.

On 3rd May 2012, registered voters in several cities in England will decide whether to adopt a new system of local leadership. As this report explains, in some ways this is just the latest stage in the evolution of local government in England. However, with cities increasingly important in terms of the economic, social and cultural development of the nation as a whole, the decisions of ten electorates could have far reaching consequences. As a research university of world standing with a network of global connections, we set out to bring international experience to bear on an important national and local policy area.

In the best traditions of intellectual discovery, Warwick Commissions are charged with carrying out independent analysis of a particular issue with the goal of making practical and realistic recommendations about how to move it forward. The University aims to draw on its scholars, their expertise and their networks of professional contacts to address issues of global importance. The aim of the Commissions is to make thought-provoking contributions to the debate, thereby assisting policymakers to find solutions to sometimes seemingly intractable problems.

Many commentators have cited the lack of empirical evidence on the subject of

elected mayors and, in particular, whether such a model provides for more effective strategic leadership of cities. We have drawn on national and international experience and data to inform a debate which is often extremely parochial, although one which is not necessarily divided on party lines.

We wanted to share our work to date in advance of the forthcoming mayoral referenda to enable electorates as well as policymakers to have access to the research and our initial findings. We plan to continue this work, including publishing the evidence from a series of interviews in due course.

Warwick Commissions present us with an opportunity to harness scholarly expertise from across the University and to draw upon the expertise of other distinguished figures in the field. I am delighted that we were able to bring together Professor Wyn Grant from the Department of Politics and International Studies and Professor Keith Grint from Warwick Business School to lead the Commission and its research programme.

Meanwhile, I am extremely grateful to all the external Commissioners who agreed to work with us. Their insight has been invaluable and I hope that, together, we can continue to make a constructive contribution in this arena.

I commend this report to you.

Introduction

From the Chairman of the Commission, Professor Wyn Grant

I was delighted to accept the invitation from the Vice Chancellor to chair this Commission. Elected mayors and city leadership are central to the localism agenda on which the Coalition Government has placed such emphasis.

This report represents a timely summary of the Commission's work, including the international research programme led by my colleague Professor Keith Grint and supported by Clare Holt.

We will be publishing further material in due course and hope to continue our work through the summer and beyond if any cities choose the elected mayoral model. In particular, we are keen to support the transition process, looking at areas from remuneration to management structure. As highlighted in this report, we also want to take forward the work we have started in terms of cost benefit and measurement.

The Statement from our Commissioners begins to set out some of their thinking based on the research presented to them, their own experiences of the subject and our deliberations. By its nature, it goes further than the evidence base can definitively take us. However, the Statement is well informed and seeks to offer practical observations and recommendations.

At moments such as these when looking to make decisions about the future, learning

from history can be incredibly helpful. As Prof Grint lays out, understanding how we reached this point in terms of local government helps to explain the context of the choice in front of ten cities.

The Warwick Commission has undertaken more international comparative research, at least in relatively similar political systems in the 'Anglosphere', than has been the case to date. We are grateful to a number of mayors, council leaders and their staffs in providing time for interviews with us. I am also grateful to academic colleagues involved in the work, including the Warwick-Boston partnership which has assisted with our research in North America.

To anyone looking for a simple yes/no answer on the issues of elected mayors from the Commission or my fellow academics will be disappointed. The evidence and the arguments are, of course, too complex. Our evidence suggests that elected mayors offer a real opportunity for change in a place where change is needed. However, major questions remain over powers and footprints of the proposed mayors.

We hope this report assists voters in determining their choice and supports central government, councils and candidates to take forward the model with optimal effectiveness in those places which change their system of city leadership.

Executive Summary

The Localism Act (2011) made provision for the creation of directly elected mayors, subject to confirmatory referenda, in England's largest cities. Referenda in those cities will take place in May 2012. Where the outcome is a 'yes' vote, elections will take place on 15th November 2012. In response to this development The University of Warwick has funded a Warwick Commission into Elected Mayors and City Leadership. In turn, the Commission is funding a doctoral researcher to undertake a sequence of interviews with mayors, their officers and related experts, across the world, and so far that has involved 38 interviews in Australia, England, Canada and New Zealand as well as group discussions and a short ethnographical study.

The Commission has set itself the following key question: **"What is the role of elected mayors in providing strategic leadership to cities?"** The purpose of the Warwick Commission on Elected Mayors and City Leadership is not to judge whether directly elected Mayors are the right system of democratic governance, as this will be a matter for electors. Rather, the Commission sets out the background to this development in terms of the history of local government, considers why elected mayors have risen to the surface of the political agenda now, and explores what existing mayors and their officers, and opponents, consider the advantages and disadvantages of directly elected mayors; in effect, the optimal scale and structure for the offices of elected mayor if one or more city votes to adopt the system.

The Commission is strictly party and candidate neutral and has been open to any stakeholder with an interest in the subject of elected mayors, city leadership and governance.

There are probably two critical points in the development of local government in the UK. First, it has progressed incrementally with little strategic direction except in so far as the central government has been forced at various points in time to address the byzantine local structures and processes that have embodied the consequences of this reactive incrementalism – the 'Saxon heritage': as long as 'the locals' kept their house in order then London was content to ignore them – only when disease, squalor or riot infringed upon the metropolis did Whitehall decide to 'do something' about the 'locals'. Second, the state has often attempted to realise, but seldom achieved, its aim of centralising control and its own authority for almost a thousand years – since the Norman invasion of 1066. The history of local government in the UK, then, can be described as one rooted in these two dichotomous traditions: the centralising fetish of the state – the veritable 'Norman Yoke' – bolted on to the decentralised chaos of the Anglo-Saxon heritage. The history of local government has consistently reproduced the centripetal forces of the centre versus the centrifugal forces of the locale and, by and large, England has ended up with one of the most centralised governments in the world. In turn, that seems to have demobilised the electorate in many localities and one of the



“What is the role of elected mayors in providing strategic leadership to cities?”

underlying thrusts of the Localism agenda of the government is to reinvigorate the local body politic by giving power away to elected mayors. Precisely what that power might look like remains unclear at this point in the debate and that, in itself, may undermine the possibilities of some cities voting for a mayor.

The data which the Commission has accumulated suggests that elected mayors may provide a viable alternative for invigorating some locales, especially at a time when the forces of globalisation are setting city against city across the globe in their competition for capital, labour and knowledge. In some cities an elected mayor may not be necessary because they have already constructed a significant identity and are vigorously and strategically led, but there are many other places that might look to elected mayors to signal a radical change of governance and political direction.

Directly elected mayors offer the possibility of greater visibility, accountability and co-ordinative leadership as well as re-enchanting the body politic, and much of this derives from their relative independence from party discipline through their direct mandate and through their four year term. But they also

hold the dangers of electing mayors whose popularity obscures their inadequacy in leading their communities. This remains the danger of all forms of democracy and elected mayors are just a different form of the democratic system that links accountability to the electorate rather than the council.

Ultimately directly elected mayors may be a way of answering the most important question at the heart of governance: what is the purpose of politics? If politics is about how we mediate our individual and collective conflicts then we had better pay some attention to reinvigorating the body-politic: politics is too important to be left to politicians.

Statement from the Commissioners

Introduction

It is not for the Commission to say whether the voters of any or all cities facing a referendum on 3rd May 2012 should vote for or against the directly elected mayor model.

There are other successful models of leadership, for example the Combined Authority in Manchester, and voters will need to consider a range of options before making their decision about whether to vote for an elected mayor.

This report is based on an assumption that some cities will choose the mayoral model and therefore there is a need to consider how directly elected mayors might work in practice following the referenda. It aims to give national and local politicians, policy makers and advisers, other stakeholders as well as the electorate access to a wide range of evidence to inform their views and decisions.

As well as contributing to the debate in the lead up to the referenda, the Commission seeks to assist stakeholders of cities that choose the directly elected mayor model ahead of elections on 15th November 2012 and support those Mayors who come into office.

'Power' and 'Powers'

- 1) The difference between 'powers' and 'power' is critical in discussing elected mayors.
- 2) Whilst the debate about clarity over which *powers* (and budgets) Whitehall will hand to cities with directly elected mayors will continue, it is also important to recognise the soft and invisible *power* that has often been accumulated by elected mayors that sits outside their statutory remits has been considerable. In many cases, it has led to the granting of more *powers*.
- 3) Some of the most successful mayoral models have evolved gradually over time where success has been demonstrated and therefore greater powers have been granted.
- 4) The wider the powers, the greater the power. There is therefore a need for clarity from candidates before election as to what powers they would seek to provide for an even stronger mandate in discussions with Westminster and Whitehall post-election.
- 5) Government has indicated that new mayors will be able to ask for powers they include in their campaign manifestos. There should also be a mechanism to review the 'suite of powers' once in office to allow further evolution of the mayor's role in the medium term, ie. in advance of the next four-year election cycle.



- 6) Welfare, education/skills and social care/health will all be critical in the future running of cities, as well as economic development, planning and transport. Extending the mayoral powers and influence in these areas will require further and sophisticated conversations with central government.
- 7) The direct nature of election gives ‘power’. Mayors should examine the totality of the public spend in a place and hold bodies over which they do not have budgetary control to public account in a wider sense, eg. the combined impact of social care, recidivism amongst low level offenders, impact of welfare and work and training. The development of Community Budgets from existing pilots under the auspices of elected mayors may be worthy of detailed consideration.
- 8) The areas people identify with are not bounded necessarily by city council boundaries. Mayors are more likely to be effective, both in supporting the economy and making effective decisions for local citizens, if they are responsible for functioning economic areas. The Commission’s research indicates: “there is no point in electing a mayor whose remit does not cover the necessarily boundary-spanning regions that could foster economic growth – the so-called Metro-Mayor.” Government should return to considering extending to city region/metro mayors where this is appropriate for local areas at the earliest opportunity.
- 9) In the short to medium term, there is a need to develop the basis for how elected mayors would relate to other parts of the public framework, notably but not exclusively Police and Crime Commissioners and Local Enterprise Partnerships. There will need to be support from Government in terms of institutional frameworks but much will rely on office holders developing effective working relationships.
- 10) The cities chosen for the referenda have their own distinct histories. These have shaped the possibilities that now exist for each area and the mayor would need to connect to this in order to connect with local people. Mayors will be powerful if they can tell a strong story on behalf of their place that creates a sense of shared endeavour amongst their communities and is attractive to external audiences including central government and inward investors. Indeed, central government could be considered one of the largest inward investors in an area governed by a mayor.

Place

- 8) The areas people identify with are not bounded necessarily by city council boundaries. Mayors are more likely to be effective, both in supporting the economy and making effective decisions for local citizens, if they are responsible for functioning economic areas. The Commission’s research indicates: “there is no point in electing a mayor whose remit does not cover the necessarily boundary-spanning regions that could foster economic growth – the so-called Metro-

- 11) The mayor's role would be built around three things:
- a) **identity** – who is the 'we' and what are 'we' really about here, promoting who the city is and what it offers;
 - b) **relationships** – who do we connect to, within our boundaries and beyond, and how do we connect with them, establishing strong relationships within the city boundaries and beyond, enabling people to communicate better and do business better; and
 - c) **information** – what's really going on here and how do people get to know, finding out what is happening in the city and ensuring the relevant people have access to that information.

Structures and Management

- 12) A mayor simply sitting upon existing full council, cabinet and management structures is likely to be limited in their effectiveness.
- 13) Mayors need to be able to appoint cabinet members and advisers – open to a full scrutiny and overview process – that would together create an effective leadership team with the right balance of skill, knowledge and wisdom.
- 14) Setting levels of remuneration for mayors and their principal officers and advisers can absorb significant time and political capital. Where possible, developing models and approaches to remuneration should be explored at the earliest opportunity.
- 15) Mayors, whether elected through traditional political party arrangements or as an Independent, need to act in the best interests of their city, to appoint the best talent available and to work outside of traditional party political confines in order to do a more effective job.
- 16) Most successful mayors are more focussed on *place* than *party*. They are likely to need to spend less time in handling party management, with more room for strong, visible and transparent leadership.
- 17) Notwithstanding structures, mayors need to establish appropriate relationships around the city, with regional infrastructure and government and with businesses both locally, nationally and internationally. There is not a single right answer; they will be driven by local circumstance and history.

Scrutiny

- 18) The relationship between mayor and full council needs to be constructed so the mayor is visibly held to account, yet their mandate should not be undermined by a body which has been separately elected.
- 19) The election of mayors could provide an opportunity to considerably strengthen the existing scrutiny and overview process, with councillors more focussed on delivering visible and effective scrutiny and less constrained by the party discipline of the local party leader.
- 20) Elected mayors focussed on strategic leadership may benefit from encouraging ward councillors to have a greater say in the delivery of council services in their areas and ensure the voice of citizens is represented to the mayor.
- 21) Further research, commissioned by Government, would be helpful in sharing best practice and ensuring localism reaches as far as possible.
- 22) There needs to be an appropriate recall process which enables the removal of an elected mayor in office in extremis. The report includes the example from Japan of the Local Autonomy Law with a system of Mutually Assured Destruction involving both local government leader and local assembly.

Transition

- 23) Transition plans prepared by officers under the outgoing structure and administration should not constrain the incoming administration in detail or culture. Induction should be planned to provide basic elements of information on the constitution, finance and existing organisation but not in such a way that it imposes non-statutory processes on new mayors. Wherever possible, elected mayors should be encouraged and empowered to deliver innovation in the administration of city leadership.
- 24) The transition needs to be drawn up in consultation with official candidates, where possible, to enable as smooth a transition and induction as possible.
- 25) There needs to be greater clarity over the role of Chief Executives in local authorities and the freedom mayors will have to change both principal officer roles and their postholders. Whilst employment rights will need to be honoured, new elected mayors are likely to require a degree of freedom.
- 26) Mayors might benefit from independent support through this process.
- 27) If identity, information and relationships are critical, consideration must be given as to how the mayor's office will work in respect of providing governance and leadership of the Council. Effective mayors usually act as *city mayors* rather than *council mayors*. The location and working arrangements for the mayor's office are likely to be far more important than simply taking possession of the council leader's office.

Making a Difference

- 28) Given the constraints of existing council boundaries, mayors will make little difference if they do not actively seek to go beyond the familiar. This will mean negotiating new arrangements locally and nationally, particularly around transport, skills, welfare, social care and criminal justice as well as economic development and infrastructure.

- 29) Savings from realising the benefits of a more holistic approach to the public spend in our large cities could amount to billions of pounds. For this reason they must not be shy of using their mandate across the range of public and private bodies in a place to surface contradictions and poor practice.

Cost Benefit and Data

- 30) The most significant challenge for the Commission was to identify data sets that could empirically answer the question: what difference do elected mayors make to the strategic leadership of cities?
- 31) The Commission hopes to undertake further work in this area and will seek to work with Government and other stakeholders to design a process to formulate appropriate measurements and indicators of effectiveness and impact.
- 32) However, we believe a commitment to open data and general transparency will be helpful in assessing the impact of elected mayors.
- 33) The introduction of elected mayors should be accompanied by an increased level of innovation and experimentation in city leadership and local government.
- 34) Effective mayors and their offices should at least be cost neutral in net terms over their period of office.

A full list of Commissioners is available at:
www.warwick.ac.uk/warwickcommission/electedmayors/commissioners

Introduction to the Report, Professor Keith Grint

The Localism Act (2011) made provision for the creation of directly elected mayors, subject to confirmatory referenda, in England's largest cities. Referenda in some or all of those cities will take place in May 2012. Where the outcome is a 'yes' vote, elections will take place on 15th November 2012. In response to this development The University of Warwick has funded a Warwick Commissions into Elected Mayors and City Leadership. In turn, the Commission is funding a doctoral researcher (Clare Holt) to undertake a sequence of interviews with mayors, their officers and related experts, across the world, and so far that has involved 38 interviews in Australia, England, Canada and New Zealand as well as group discussions and a short ethnographical study. Matthew Maguire, a graduate student from the Department Of Political Science, Boston University, undertook interviews with four mayors from the State of Massachusetts.

The Commission set itself the following key question: **“What is the role of elected mayors in providing strategic leadership to cities?”** The purpose of the Warwick Commission on Elected Mayors and City Leadership is not to judge whether directly elected mayors are the right system of democratic governance as this will be a matter for electors. Rather, the Commission sets out the background to this development in terms of the history of local government, considers why elected mayors have risen to the surface of the political agenda now, and explores what existing mayors and

their officers, and opponents, consider the advantages and disadvantages of directly elected mayors; in effect, the optimal scale and structure for the offices of elected mayor if one or more city votes to adopt the system. The Commission is strictly party and candidate neutral and has been open to the deliberations to any stakeholder with an interest in the subject of elected mayors.

The history of mayoral referenda is not great: 27 of the 42 so far undertaken have resulted in a 'no' vote with the turnout averaging 29 per cent but varying from 10 per cent to 64 per cent.¹ That level of disinterest is also manifest in the number of responses to the government consultation on elected mayors for twelve cities in England: only 58 replies were received and only 19 came from the public (DCLG, 2012).

Although elected mayors remain an insignificant minority of governance systems in the UK (only 3 per cent [12 of 410] of local authorities have adopted them since the possibility was made available through the Local Government Act of 2000) it is clear from the case of London that an elected mayor offers political possibilities that traditional party political governance systems do not (Swinney et al, 2011). Indeed, five reasons (Borraz and John, 2004; Randle, 2004) are often cited for the rise of the elected mayor:



- 1) A response to the rise of the network society that otherwise disperses responsibility and a demand for greater accountability from political leaders
- 2) An attempt to reinvigorate democratic politics and civic engagement in the face of apparently widespread political apathy
- 3) A localist and decentralising reaction against the rise of the centralising power of the state or super state (European Union)
- 4) The realisation by some local politicians in certain areas that they can make the most impact through elected mayors, not traditional party politics
- 5) The return of 'personality' to the political agenda in place of depersonalised party systems.

The intent of this Commission has been to evaluate the case for elected mayors from the perspective of strategic leadership. In other words, it is not designed to consider alternative electoral systems or how to ensure elected mayors become more popular, but to set out the advantages and disadvantages of elected mayors in advance of the referendum to be held on 3rd May 2012 in those cities covered by the legislation.

Research Questions

To this end the most important initial research questions are set out below but the most critical is 'What is the role of elected mayors in providing strategic leadership to local authorities?' In effect we sought to evaluate the strategic role that elected mayors have had. We did this by considering their effects in the UK and more widely in the world where appropriate. The effectiveness of the London Mayor is already the subject of much debate (Sweeting, 2002a, 2000b), as are the differing governance and allegiance systems posed by the mayoral model (Copus, 2004; Fenwick, et al, 2006; Travers, 2002), the importance of local conditions and characters (Campus and Pasquino, 2000; Game, 2003; Rallings et al, 2002; Rao, 2003) and while the role of elected mayors in Northern Europe (Goldsmith and Larsen, 2004; Wollmann, 2000, 2005) and the USA is already relatively well covered (DeSantis and Renner, 2002; Elcock and Fenwick, 2007; Frederickson et al, 2004; Hambleton and Sweeting, 2004; Judd, 2000; Leach and Norris, 2002; McNitt, 2010), there is little on multi-comparative international approaches (Gough, 2006) and even less within political systems that closely resemble the UK's political system, such as parts of Australia [NSW and Northern Territory] (Grant et al, 2011; Sansom, 2012), New Zealand, Canada or the commonwealth more broadly.

What, exactly, should mayors be concerned with? Leach and Wilson (2000) suggest that four priorities should dominate the focus of council leaders: maintaining political cohesion within the council to secure decision-making – though this is less important for mayors because of their independent political mandate and relative independence from party discipline; providing strategic direction; representing the authority to the outside world; ensuring the execution of decisions made.

Contemporary council leaders and elected mayors, according to Stoker (2004: 12/13) both have greater individual decision-making powers than previous local government systems and this is particularly the case for mayors who can require the council to reconsider its decisions. Equally important, a mayor's decisions can only be overturned through a two thirds majority vote by the council and mayors cannot be removed by the council or ruling group for the four years of their tenure. The fifth role that Stoker (2004: 16) highlights is the representation of their place – the face of the place – while the sixth is the role of accountability and visibility; unlike many council leaders, most mayors seem to be known to their public.²

The Commission recognises that the precise nature of the historical and cultural context may make a significant difference to the answers given to the primary question, thus the comparative nature of the research with the focus on those areas not already adequately covered in the extant research. Hence we focused not just on directly elected English mayors but also on elected mayors in Canada, Australia and New Zealand because their local governance systems bear some clear resemblance to that in England. We also took a limited look at the most important US city mayors recognising that the latter system is very different from the one considered here (Pimlott and Rao, 2002).

Subsidiary Research Questions

- 1) Do elected mayors make any difference to their local areas?
- 2) How do we know what difference elected mayors make?
- 3) Why is the debate about elected mayors surfacing now?
- 4) Is the primary role of elected mayors one of:
 - a) Strategic leadership?
 - b) The co-ordination of different interests?
 - c) Cutting through red tape?
 - d) Mobilising coalitions of the willing?
 - e) Generating a local identity?
 - f) Helping drive economic growth?
- 5) What difference does the local/national context make?
- 6) What are the different models of elected mayors and their associated local governance systems – and what difference do they make?
- 7) What definition of leadership does the elected mayors debate imply?
- 8) What is the connection between elected mayors and the more general decentralisation debate?
- 9) What is the connection between elected mayors and the apparent decline in the popularity of traditional political parties?
- 10) What is the role of charisma and personality in the election of mayors?
- 11) What is the link between elected mayors and elected police commissioners?

Methodology

We realised that gathering data from a sample of the world's elected mayors is both difficult, time consuming and expensive. To that end we secured the services of a PhD student (Clare Holt) who had the experience and ability to start the research almost immediately and undertook 38 interviews in the period between November 2011 and February 2012. Matthew Maguire, a graduate student from Boston, also undertook four interviews in the USA in February 2012 with elected mayors from the state of Massachusetts. Given the complex nature of the topic we used a qualitative approach to the interviewing supplemented by an array of more quantitative data generated from a trawl through the published literature and the unpublished reports of the various elected mayors. The method involved allowing the interviewees to 'tell their story' and generated some extremely rich narratives of leadership, as well as providing a cathartic experience from the majority of those interviewed. We then adopted the narrative analysis methods of Gabriel (2000, 2004a, 2004b) to interpret the data.

Following publication of this report, Clare will plan a series of short ethnographic periods with newly elected mayors (assuming at least some are elected) and follow them for their first few weeks in office to assess their experiences in the light of the existing theory. All quotations, unless otherwise attributed, are drawn from the research interviews. Before we explore the narratives of the mayors, their officers and their opponents let us consider the history of local government to frame the current developments.

42 interviews

6 council leaders

11 mayors in England

7 mayors in
Australia, Canada
and New Zealand

4 in the United States.

History of Local Government

There are probably two critical points in the development of local government in the UK. First, it has progressed incrementally with little strategic direction except in so far as the central government has been forced at various points in time to address the byzantine local structures and processes that have embodied the consequences of this reactive incrementalism – the ‘Saxon heritage’: as long as ‘the locals’ kept their house in order then London was content to ignore them. Only when disease, squalor or riot infringed upon the metropolis did Whitehall decide to ‘do something’ about the ‘locals’. The longevity of this approach is displayed in Michael Heseltine’s frequently repeated story that the only time when he was in government that a meeting was about ‘a place’ rather than ‘a service’ such as ‘education or health or housing’ was when the riots occurred in Liverpool in 1981. Second, the state has often attempted to realise, but seldom achieved, its aim of centralising control and its own authority for almost a thousand years – since the Norman invasion of 1066. The history of local government in the UK, then, can be described as one rooted in these two dichotomous traditions: the centralising fetish of the state – the veritable ‘Norman Yoke’ – bolted on to the decentralised chaos of the Anglo-Saxon heritage.

In some ways the possibility of elected mayors marks a return to an older system of local government in England. Originally, in Anglo-Saxon times (roughly 700-1066), local

government was administered through the King’s Ealdorman who was responsible for a Shire, while law and order operated through the Shire-Reeve, or Sheriff as it became known. Below the Shire the land was subdivided into Hundreds (ten groups of ten households [Tithings]) who individually survived off a piece of land considered large enough to support a single family (a Hide). Members of Tithings and Hundreds were held responsible for their members’ behaviour thus creating a very decentralised administrative system.

Despite the romanticised notions of Saxon freedom that the Victorians often wallowed in (typically to mark Britain out from the centralised authoritarianism that they perceived to have held France in its death-like grip), there was always a grain of truth in this historical lineage and it can also be traced through the predominance of collective forms of national political leadership in the UK compared to the USA (Churchill, Thatcher and Blair are the exceptions that prove the rule according to Greenstein {2004}).

The Norman Conquest effectively dispossessed the Anglo-Saxons of almost all the land, centralised ownership under the Norman monarchs, called the shires ‘counties’ and then rewarded the Norman nobility with ‘fiefs’ which were parcels of land large enough to act as a unit of loyalty to the monarch but small enough to prevent the development of rival power centres to that same monarch. Ironically the Victorians frequently referred to



the decentralised ‘Saxon’ origins of Britain as the explanation for its apparent disinterest in centralisation – and argued that the Norman Conquest was a mere historical blip that had little long term effect; the ‘truth’ of this could allegedly be seen the centralising frenzy of the French under Napoleon compared to the decentralised nature of Britain (Hunt, 2004: 259-312).

The problem for the Saxon romantics was that decentralisation seemed to be both a cover for the self-interest of the local elite and an excuse for doing nothing about the terrible inequalities of wealth and health that so plagued mid-nineteenth century Britain. Thus all attempts by the central government to impose the requirement for improvements at the local level were met with extraordinary hostility by the local establishment, and indeed by the national media.

The limitations of the central state can also been seen through the inhibitions against a national police force. Before Peel’s Metropolitan Police took control of the streets of London, for example, (consciously clothed in blue uniforms not military red) the local establishment lobbied very effectively to prevent anything approaching a national force. How else could they stop an organisation that would be ‘expensive, tyrannical and foreign’, especially when most people (that is the landed establishment) ‘would rather be robb’d... by wretches of desperate fortune than by ministers’ (quoted in Flanders, 2011: 76).

A similar distrust of the effects – and costs – of a standing army on the landed local establishment (in contrast to several monarchs who were desperate to have a standing army to launch wars all over the world) also prevented the development of such a force after the civil war when the New Model Army, and the Rule of the Generals, had shown just how effective – and expensive – such an organisation could be (Hoppitt, 2002: 156-8). This is most obvious in considering the origins of the Bank of England – initiated in 1694 to cover the government’s debt accumulated from foreign wars. In fact the majority of central state expenditure until the late nineteenth century was on war and the Empire (Mann, 1986; 1993). This is important not just in considering why the central state was so disinterested in the periphery, the local area, but also why the local area was so resistant to the centre – because it believed itself to be just a milch cow for the state to finance its wars and empires. Moreover, the resistance to a central authority also mirrored the strength of local, rather than national, identities, especially amongst the English whose nationalist fervour has so often been noted as radically diluted compared to their Irish, Scottish and Welsh cousins (Paxman, 1999).

As the Middle Ages emerged, the centralising impetus of the Normans continued apace with the Hundreds losing their judicial and regularity powers to parishes, manors and towns; many of the latter became ‘boroughs’ – that is, relatively self-regulating urban

centres with similarities to the autonomous privileges that had always marked London out from the rest of the country. Boroughs were run by corporations of self-selected Aldermen and the council was temporarily chaired by a Mayor. Both counties and boroughs 'elected' two members of Parliament, though the representative nature of both the electorate and the geographical region became increasingly dubious over time. Some of the larger cities (York and Chester for example) were also granted larger administrative roles and responsibilities for their domains while the local justices of the peace took on more and more responsibilities (including local tax raising – 'the county rate') for county-wide activities such as road repair (Parishes were responsible for local roads and the Poor Law from the 17th Century), licensing, bridge and prison building through 'the quarter sessions'.

The Great Reform Act of 1832 addressed the corrupt practices of elected members of Parliament and 'rotten boroughs' and enfranchised both a larger proportion of the (male) population and some of the towns, but local government was not radically changed until the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 which oversaw the election of 'town' (including the larger industrial centres) councillors by rate payers. Yet local administration remained poor, especially regarding the state of health and housing, and the sequential outbreaks of cholera, typhoid, typhus and just about every other medical malady, eventually persuaded the central state to 'do something' (Hunt, 2004: 13-44). There then followed a series of public welfare and health reforms at the local level to cope with the consequences of industrialisation and urbanisation, in particular the 1848 Public Health Act which established local health boards to oversee a co-ordinated water, sewerage and drainage scheme to overcome the persistence of cholera, followed by the 1858 Local Government Act which extended the powers of these boards.

But, as Hunt (2004: 311) suggests, 'by the 1860s there was a festering impatience with the classic, Victorian way of doing things: of voluntarism, civic association and muddling through'. Indeed the hostility of the Birmingham conservatives was so great that four years after the city was incorporated a petition was issued to revoke it and thereby reduce the rates. And as late as the mid-1850s Birmingham council was cutting road expenditure by half to cut costs. In contrast, a group of radically Nonconformist ministers had other ideas and set about canvassing for a 'new Jerusalem' in Birmingham; they found their own prophet in Joseph Chamberlain and the appropriate context in the Second Reform Bill of 1867 which doubled the size of the general electorate but quadrupled the number of working class male voters in Birmingham. The 1869 Municipal Franchise and Assessed Rate Act also helped by effectively undermining the monopoly grip of the anti-expenditure 'shopocracy' group.

Much of this was achieved through Chamberlain's Machiavellian transformation of the position of Mayor from ceremonial chain wearer to political leader, though he did this as leader of the council not as a directly elected mayor. However, we should note that at the time Chamberlain led Birmingham, Whitehall was relatively uninterested in local government – except in so far as they had to 'do something' about the locals. Chamberlain achieved his successes mainly through his ability to align radically different interests. For example, the political desires of his own supporters to own utilities like gas and water so as to ensure significant health benefits, with the demands of local businesses to acquire regular, and cheap, energy.

It is also worth pointing out that oftentimes it was the central state that adopted the ideas developed at the local level rather than vice versa. For instance, the 1866 City of Glasgow Improvement Act, which cleared 88 acres of slums in the centre of the city, formed the basis of Octavia Hill's support for the 1875 *Artizans' and Labourers' Dwellings Bill* that Disraeli oversaw and which transformed many urban areas (Hunt, 2004: 322/347).

However, by 1888 it had become clear that the disparate array of parishes, boroughs, towns and counties could no longer cope with the demands of massively expanding local economies, and the Local Government Act of that year radically reorganised the system. At this point the reconstructed counties became the focus for county councils while those areas deemed too large because of their urban populations (50,000+) became separate county boroughs. The metropolitan county of London was also established at the same time and it remained in place until 1965 when the new county of Greater London was established from what had been Middlesex and London, and this Greater London was then divided into 32 metropolitan boroughs. Outside London the 1894 Local Government Act introduced a second level of urban or rural districts into the county councils or borough councils and also a layer of civil parishes.

This system prevailed until the 1966 Royal Commission established by the then Labour Government which followed the majority report and imposed a unitary structure on all 58 non-London authorities (which favoured the pro-Labour urban areas) but this was subsequently overturned in 1972 by the Conservative Government which attempted to restart local government *de novo*, reconstructing the status quo into a two-tier system of county borders (which favoured pro-Conservative rural areas) with lower level districts (40,000+ people for each district council), and established six new metropolitan counties for the largest urban conglomerations with their own associated lower level boroughs (250,000+ people for each district or borough council) (Copus, 2001). In 1986 the Greater London Council and the metropolitan Councils were abolished and some of the previous county boundaries were restored.

“...a group of radically Nonconformist ministers had other ideas and set about canvassing for a ‘new Jerusalem’ in Birmingham; they found their own prophet in Joseph Chamberlain...”

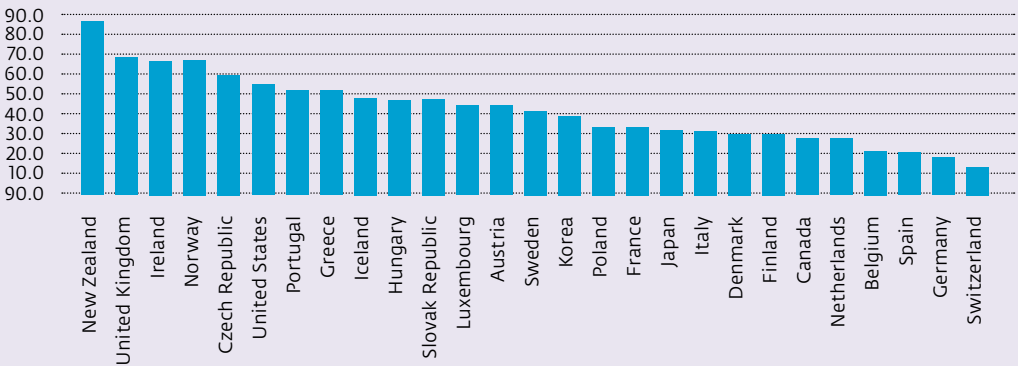
Much... was achieved through Chamberlain’s Machiavellian transformation of the position of Mayor from ceremonial chain wearer to political leader, though he did this as leader of the council not as a directly elected mayor.”

Governance

From this historical quagmire we can trace the significance – and limits – of the locale, the place, for it is constituted as a bulwark against the perceived tyranny of a high spending and taxing Westminster, a site of personal and collective identity, and simultaneously an arena where frugality and *laissez faire* were the orders of the day; what Young (1989: 6) describes as a ‘Ratepayer Democracy.’ This also locks into a general disinterest in local government on the part of the electorate with low turn-outs, little knowledge, and a widespread disengagement

(Copus, 2001: 488-9). That, of course, might just reflect the widespread assumption that since power emanates from the centre there is little point in local political engagement, and since Whitehall still controls around 70 per cent of public expenditure compared, for example, to the 20 per cent that the central German state is responsible for (only New Zealand has a higher proportion of central expenditure than the UK), it is clear that popular assumptions about who pulls the strings at the local level are broadly accurate.³ The comparative details are in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Central government expenditure as a % of total government expenditure



Source: OECD Government at a glance 2009. Accessed on 31/3/2012 via http://www.oecd.org/document/0,3746,en_2649_33735_47736841_1_1_1_1,00.html



“Another issue that feeds into this cycle of indifference is the reluctance of the government to prescribe particular powers to newly elected mayors and to prefer to await the demands of the locally elected mayors – who may not be elected because they are perceived to lack the powers necessary to instigate change.”

To some extent this poses a classic chicken and egg problem, for the absence of powers undermines the point of the local engagement and the mayoral alternative is perceived by some to be aimed at addressing this very issue. Another issue that feeds into this cycle of indifference is the reluctance of the government to prescribe particular powers to newly elected mayors and to prefer to await the demands of the locally elected mayors – who may not be elected because they are perceived to lack the powers necessary to instigate change. In effect the ‘power’ of the mayor to make a difference generally may well be restricted by the specific ‘powers’ allocated to the role.

Furthermore the precise ‘power’ of the mayor may well be limited by the austerity measures in place generally and the rise of particular forms of expenditure that are, in many ways, non-discretionary. For example, the social care budget and all its inherent problems for coping

with the increasing costs of adult social care might well leave any new mayor with precious little material resource for discretionary spend.

A further difficulty is the political and geographical boundary of any mayor, for while most are designated as local authority mayors there are good reasons to suggest that a political mandate needs to coincide with a viable economic footprint. In other words, there is no point in electing a mayor whose remit does not cover the necessarily boundary-spanning regions that could foster economic growth – the so-called Metro-Mayor. The utility of this is perhaps best seen in Auckland where Len Brown was elected as Mayor of the ‘Supercity’, an administrative region that replaced the previous eight directly elected local mayors with a single city region. This has allowed the Mayor to unlock the administrative blocks that have bedevilled the city’s transport infrastructure for years. Mayor Sullivan from

Braintree in Massachusetts also spoke of this ‘linkage’: ‘How is this project going to be beneficial to our town, not only in terms of revenues and jobs, but how can we leverage, in the appropriate way, an investment by a developer to help the town on a greater level [such as the South Shore Plaza development, that came with a US\$1.3M mitigation package].’

The other side of this particular ‘power’ coin is indeed the aforementioned power of the central state uninhibited by any judicial review such as a predominant supreme court or even a written constitution, and rooted in a first-past-the-post electoral system that can – and does – generate majorities in the House of Commons from minorities in the national vote.

In recent history (the latter half of the nineteenth century onwards) control over the local council has been through political party domination with the council leader elected by his or her party and personally controlling several significant local committees while the remaining committees were ‘packed’ with party councillors. In some places a ‘Lord Mayor’ or ‘Town Mayor’ was appointed by the council but restricted to overseeing ceremonial functions.

Perhaps more significantly this vested authority not in the council leader and cabinet, as in parliament, but in a committee structure that ensured no party leader could act as a local Prime Minister with the power to call elections, or dismiss cabinet members. This also meant the council leader was always in danger of being displaced by discontented party activists within the council – what anthropologists call ‘reverse dominance hierarchies’ (Boehm, 2001), in which no dominant individual can survive if the subordinates organise to discipline or oust the leader. Thus council leaders were denuded of the significant levers of power that prevail at the national level and were often locked in a cycle of short incumbencies that encouraged the development of more powerful service-dominated fiefdoms and the absence of local ‘barons with hitting power’, though there have always been individual leaders that acquired significant bases of support – and opposition (John, 2010: 87). On the other hand, local politics has spawned very influential political parties with domination of the industrial north by the Labour Party and the rural south

“...there are good reasons to suggest that a political mandate needs to coincide with a viable economic footprint.”

by the Conservative Party and these dominant parties, rather than dominant individual leaders, were at the heart of most local political decision-making. Again, the consequence of this has tended to be a relatively weakened individual leadership.

As long as the local political agenda was just the efficient deployment of services, the professional control of local authorities by ‘expert’ service chiefs suited the context. However, the centralising thrust of the Thatcher governments effectively undermined some remaining vestiges of local authority, such as abolishing the Greater London Council and the Metropolitan County Councils in 1986. In the absence of significant local support for local politics or local politicians the changes stimulated little local protest though, as John (2010: 89) notes, the central government in France would never have even contemplated doing the same to Paris or any of the fiercely protected 30,000 local communes.

Despite this, the more recent period has witnessed several significant changes to local government. First, the 1989 Local Government and Housing Act required committee membership to reflect the proportion of elected local councillors, theoretically undermining the blanket domination of some local politics by the majority political party – though whether it has done, or whether local politics ever was in the hands of a single party in many areas, is disputed (John, 2010: 92/3). Second, the 2000 Local Government Act also changed the system, this time requiring councils to move to an executive system with either a ‘council leader and cabinet’ – where the leader chooses a small number of councillors to form a cabinet – or a directly elected mayor (either with a cabinet of elected councillors or with a council manager) acting as the executive and being held to account by an overview and

scrutiny committee composed of the remaining councillors. This latter requirement has posed some problems for a party system built upon loyalty for it often requires councillors to abandon the very loyalties that secured their political success in the first place.

Some smaller district councils (with less than 85,000 populations) have retained the previous system but 81 per cent adopted the council leader and cabinet system and only 3 per cent went for the Mayoral system – which is hardly surprising given that in one mid-1990s poll 82 per cent of councillors opposed such a system, while 75 per cent of the population supported the idea but generally chose not to insist on a referendum by garnering the necessary minimum support of 5 per cent of the electorate (Stoker, 2004: 6/7). One unitary council (Stoke) opted for a mayor and council manager option though Stoke has witnessed significant problems that may bear no relationship to the governance system. Doncaster is also often cited as proof of flaws in the mayoral system but, again, it is the case that, like Stoke, Doncaster's problems long predated the switch to an elected mayor (Parker, 2012: 20).

Unusually for local government reform, this approach embodied significant local decision-making and the research seems to suggest that most people think the leader and cabinet system in itself has generated stronger, more visible and more decisive, leadership (Stoker et al, 2006). Partly this was facilitated by the 2007 Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act which allowed council leaders to be in place for four years – though that is still checked by the scrutiny committee – but beyond the traditional short term party challenges. Ironically, then, those opting out of the elected mayoral route to avoid the problems associated with stronger leadership have often found themselves with stronger leadership and these seem to be associated with greater levels of general satisfaction all round.

Support of just 5 per cent of the local population was required to trigger a referendum but such was the general disinterest, coupled to the hostility of most local politicians, that only 30 referenda were held, and all had relatively low turnouts ranging from 10 per cent in Sunderland to 64 per cent in Berwick upon

Tweed. The latter coincided with the General Election. Eleven councils (twelve including London, but significantly no county councils) originally adopted directly elected mayors after referenda: three London boroughs [Hackney, Lewisham and Newham], two Metropolitan districts [Doncaster and North Tyneside], two unitary councils [Hartlepool and Middlesbrough], and three district councils [Bedford, Mansfield and Watford]. As expected, the elections returned a higher proportion of Independent candidates and Stoker (2004: 10) has suggested that three quarters of the successful candidates were returned on the basis of some kind of protest vote. That, of course, implies that the situation is often ambiguous – so poor that the new mayor has a good chance of improving things and simultaneously so poor that the new mayor has few resources with which to improve things. For others the mayoral change has been a chance to build on existing strengths.

Intriguingly, it may be that the city mayor referenda trigger much greater interest in the whole process than previously was the case. For example, John Stevenson (MP for Carlisle) has recently suggested that smaller cities should be given the option of electing mayors and that the threshold for holding a referendum should be reduced to 2 per cent to encourage change, mainly because the very changes at large city levels would induce an 'armaments race' that might leave the smaller areas in the wake of the large cities.⁴

The turnout problem is one that has always bedevilled democracy: do low turnouts indicate electoral satisfaction with the system or disinterest in the system? Conventionally election winners have insisted on the former interpretation while election losers have suggested the latter is a better interpretation of the results. Perhaps the more important issue is to reflect on those places that have high turnouts (other than those countries where voting is mandatory) and consider whether the results relate to the assumption on the part of the voter that their vote will make a difference in this particular instance. For instance, where a political party has traditionally dominated local politics or the local council appears to have little or no ability to change the status quo then it seems that low turnouts are self-

evidently explicable. Perhaps, again, the point is to note that executive mayors are unlikely to achieve widespread popular support unless it is clear that they have the necessary powers and spatial responsibilities to achieve change. However, as Lord Heseltine pointed out at a public event in Birmingham on 29 March 2012 sponsored by the Institute for Government, Alex Salmond has not been *asking* Whitehall for more powers – he has been *demanding* them! In many ways this relates to the difference between leading with and without authority: the new mayors have been reliant upon their ability to persuade and cajole people into accepting a new direction rather than using their formal powers – what Joseph Nye (2008) calls ‘soft power’.

Stoker’s (2004) review of survey data on mayors suggests not just that mayors are more visible than council leaders but, perhaps as a consequence, that the public tend to have what Meindl et al (1985) called ‘a romantic notion of (mayoral) leadership’. In effect, the voters consider mayors to be either very good or very poor, to have a strong understanding of local issues – or none at all – and to be able to achieve radical change – or none at all.

But in the last decade to 2012 only a few referenda have been held and only in Torbay was it successful. Many of the successful mayors were either campaigning against unpopular local party domination or were in themselves regarded as charismatic by their supporters. In February 2012, Liverpool City Council voted for a directly elected mayor from May 2012, spurred on, no doubt, by the prospect of acquiring £130m through a ‘city deal’. Moreover, Liverpool council has also decided that the mayoral count should take precedence over the local election count. Salford also voted for a mayoral referendum in 2012 by 56:44 (on an 18 per cent turnout) after a petition of 10,500 signatures in July 2011.

Much of the recent past can be captured in the rise of ‘Localism’, a term officially locked into the Coalition Government and the decentralising thrust of Eric Pickles as Secretary of State for Local Government and Communities. It is also captured by the pre-coalition experiments with Total Place, the Big Society (Grint and Holt, 2011), and

the move towards elected Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) enshrined in the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Bill which will abolish Police Authorities. Moreover, in March 2012 the Prime Minister announced a ‘mayors’ cabinet’ chaired by himself to meet at least twice a year, to swap ideas, lobby the government and ‘really drive’ political and economic renewal in England.

Of course, a critical issue for ‘localism’ is how local is local? For example, does the decentralisation imply that central power (Westminster) will be diminished as local authority power increases or, as in the Free School arena, that local authority power will be decentralised to a much lower level whilst retaining a central overview? In some ways the dispute over localism reflects a much older dispute between the political right, such as de Tocqueville, Burke and Nisbet, and their equivalent on the political left, such as the early friendly societies, trade unions, William Morris and the socialist movement. While the former suggested that volunteerism and local political activity would keep the tyrannies of the central state at bay, the latter suggested that local activism was the only way for the poor and powerless to protect themselves from the ravages of industrial capitalism. Thus while Cameron considers Big Society as a means to give responsibility back to the local people who need to take it to break the cycle of welfare dependency and engage in positive self-help, Saskia Sassen has likened the same process to ‘economic colonialism’ where a local community is denuded of its resources and then required to compensate for the resulting problems by volunteering (Sennett, 2012).

This, in many ways, mirrors the dispute about democracy: are elected mayors less democratic than traditional councils or are they just different versions of democracy with neither more legitimate than the other? Since executive mayors are directly accountable to their electorate it could be argued that they are more democratic than the indirectly elected council leaders but it might also be that directly elected councillors who hold their indirectly elected council leader to account are more accountable. In effect democracy appears to be what Gallie (talking about ‘power’) considered an ‘essentially contested

concept'; no appeal to a greater logic or more legitimate understanding of politics will bring us closer to what counts as 'more democratic'. Thus it may be that executive mayors do not undermine the democratic mandate of ward councillors whose responsibility is to represent the interests of that locale, rather than engage in the representation of the whole area – that may be the remit of the mayor. In effect the ward councillor and mayor might focus on mobilising social capital in different places without necessarily treading on each others' representative toes.

Where the roles of the ward councillor and the executive mayor do necessarily interrelate is probably over the issue of scrutiny. As we have seen, in the traditional system political party loyalty poses a particular dilemma for executive mayors who are rooted in political parties for traditionally the council leader exerts party discipline upon the councillors but the executive mayor model implies that the councillors should provide a stronger scrutiny role to ensure the integrity of the political system as a whole. As Ian Greenwood (Labour Party Council Leader of Bradford City Council) insists, 'Leadership in local government is about leading the party you represent...the elected mayor posits dictation... you need consent from people and take them with you as a leader.'

This is perhaps less significant for independent mayors whose affiliations lie outside the traditional party boundaries and are therefore removed from the traditional party discipline system. However, John (2012) is clear that the history of mayoral referenda points to the importance of support – or opposition – from the local party elite.

Naturally the scrutiny function should not automatically impede the development of good relationships amongst the political leadership of a council and indeed there is strong evidence that the development of such relationships, and those between the political and managerial leadership, are important for the functioning of any local authority or council. However, it is also clear that an over-dependent relationship can reduce the power of those outside the 'magic circle' to influence developments or even ensure proper scrutiny (Wilson and Game, 2006: 321). Nonetheless it

seems clear that mayors have tended to adopt more of an 'outward-facing' or 'public' role in contrast to their chief administrative officers who have tended to focus on the 'inward-facing' role of running – managing – the authority. A similar issue relates to the position of deputy mayors – they may be appointed to serve particular constituencies either internally or externally focused and they may be appointed directly by the mayor or elected by the wider council group.

The move towards directly elected mayors has the same socio-economic context – the economic and social decline of several cities and urban areas – but a rather different genesis. In 1991 Michael Heseltine, then the Conservative government's Secretary of State for the Environment, had been sufficiently enamoured by the apparent success of the American experience of directly elected mayors for the idea to be floated in a Green Paper. That paper sank with little trace, except in the interest it stimulated amongst a variety of groups, including the Labour Party and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE). This eventually saw the light of day in Blair's Modernisation Agenda and particularly in its associated developments with the reform to local government in London. The subsequent direct election of Ken Livingstone to Mayor of London enabled the implementation of traffic congestion charging, a significant success story of co-ordinative political action, and even though the London mayor's remit is largely restricted to transport, the success of Boris Johnson's support for the 2012 Olympic bid demonstrates some of the more symbolic aspects of directly elected local political leaders, as well as the possibility of less party-political partisanship. But why have elected mayors risen to the top of the political agenda now?

Directly Elected Mayors – Why Now and What Now?

Placeless, Faceless and Pointless: A Tripod of Fatalism

The rise of elected mayors in the early 21st century is probably not a coincidence and seems to relate to a growing unease with, but acquiescence to, the status quo. Indeed, there seem to be three related aspects of this tripod of fatalism that might explain the phenomenon: (a) the world that we live in could literally be anywhere in the world because the world all looks the same – it is ‘placeless’; (b) we now live in a world that – to some people – appears to be out of their control but controlled by some anonymous bureaucracy or global corporation – it is ‘faceless’; and (c) that faceless and placeless world seems to be proceeding in a directionless way because all routes lead to the same valueless direction – it is ‘pointless’. All three could be locked into the apparent powerless nature of individuals in contemporary society, what Durkheim might have called ‘anomie’, that is an uprooting of the familiar patterns of life and a casting adrift in a sea of anonymity. Let us delve briefly into this deracinated brave new world.

1) Placelessness: Civicism and Social Identity

One explanation for the rise of the importance of elected mayors is globalisation which has, allegedly, removed all kinds of barriers of space and time and generated a world where every place looks the same and everyone is connected to everyone else. ‘Think Global Act Local’ is the phrase that attempts to transcend this conundrum: how to retain some degree of political, economic or social independence when the seismic shifts that appear to command and control world events are controlled in some other place. In effect, the geographic location appears irrelevant – we appear to live literally in a placeless location.

Yet this is a relatively recent phenomenon. In 1800 only three per cent of the world’s population lived in cities. In 2012 22 per cent of the world’s population currently live in 600 cities and generate 60 per cent of the world’s GDP. The number of megacities (more than 10 million inhabitants) is set to double over the next 10-20 years and the greatest growth will be in Asia. It is predicted that 40 per cent (590 million) of Indians will live in cities by 2030. As a stark example, the Chinese city of Chengdu had a population of under a million



in 1950; in 2012 seven million lived in the city and a further seven million on the outskirts. So rapid has been the growth that Chengdu's mayor, Ge Honglin, has begun improving the infrastructure of the surrounding rural areas to encourage people to stay in the countryside and not migrate to the city. As a consequence Ge Honglin has claimed that Chengdu is the only Chinese city that has combined rapid economic growth *and* narrowed the urban-rural income gap (Webster and Burke, 2012: 36-7).

The rise of the city has been called the new 'civicism' by Bell and Shalit (2010) and they allude to the similarities to the Ancient Greek polities – the city states of Athens, Sparta and the like. 'The like', according to Bell and Shalit is an understatement because many people have an emotional affinity with a city that is most aptly captured in the spread of the 'I Love New York' or 'I Love London' T-shirts and so on. Certainly Glaeser (2011: 269) argues that the density of city living encourages the spontaneous face to face connections that facilitate such high levels of innovation amongst well educated citizens because, ultimately, 'our ability to connect with one another is the defining characteristic of our species.'

Elected mayors tend to combine several aspects of this global development that both incorporate and transcend it. They are usually associated with cities: the drivers of globalisation, the centres of innovation and the places that – alone – seem capable of imposing

their will and identity upon the anonymous nature of globalisation. In other words, elected mayors offer the possibility of displacing the Placeless nature of contemporary life with a Place to call home. Mayor Stephen Mandel of the City of Edmonton in Canada reflected this issue in his argument that:

"Mayors are elected to have a city-wide focus. They are looked to as the leaders of the city, they are the major spokespeople of governance, budgetary and policy issues. They act as the city's official representative and spokesperson on intergovernmental relationships and major city issues. The position requires an ability to use moral persuasion than actual power, but it offers significant opportunities, because of the platform, to advance a strategic vision."

Stuart Drummond (independent mayor of Hartlepool) also captured this aspect well: 'The public see the mayor as the representative for the town, the person who can make a difference; the mayor plays a big ambassadorial role, representing the town, tourism, local businesses, council at a regional level.' Or, as Steve Bullock suggested, he was 'Mayor of Lewisham not the Leader of Lewisham Council.'⁵ Fiona Skene, Director of Human Resources at Leicester City, talks of the same issue of place:

"The mayor needs to take care of partnerships, be an ambassador and take a strategic role. The head of paid service role is best left with an officer having the influence of the mayor."

Management of the day-to-day organisation should be left to an officer but the running of the city to the mayor... Council leaders are chosen for political reasons not for their leadership. Mayors are more about leadership but it is important to ensure the right person is elected – this is very important.”

The switch from a council leader to a mayor can also appear to inject some rather indefinable dynamic into the place. ‘It is all fairly intangible’, suggested Sir Peter Soulsby (Labour City Mayor of Leicester):

“Maybe because it is too early to really tell, but there is now a real sense of momentum, direction and purpose. There are now cultural debates – a real buzz in the city – it’s not just about buildings but what happens around them. There is now a feeling of going somewhere with very positive feedback from the “meet-the-mayor” meetings.’ Mohammed Dawood, Assistant Mayor in Leicester, supported this assumption: “The “Meet-the-Mayor” event does have its downfalls but overall it gives everyone an opportunity to debate and be engaged, but the mayor and the councillors can’t rehearse! It gives the public an opportunity to air their grievances.”

Part of the debate, therefore, is about the appropriate ‘place’ for executive mayors and indeed, the importance of place generally in local government (Brookes, 2010). The origins of democracy itself clearly lay with the Ancient Greek city states (Dunn, 1994) and the general concern that mayors should be restricted to the city state equivalents in contemporary society – the large cities – are distant refractions of these earlier memories. They also pose crucial questions about the precise nature of those boundaries: cities may be geographically clear but often the socio-economic boundary that supports the same city may be significantly larger. If this is the case then aligning the boundaries of the mayoral reach with that of the socio-economic region seems to be a self-evident issue. Here we may turn to the likes of Sassen (2001) who has argued that the city, especially ‘global cities’, are the place where the global economy is distilled into the local and at the very same time it undermines the role of the nation state. In effect the global and the local are captured in the same geographical space by the rise of the city.

It is for this reason that Greg Clark, the coalition government’s ‘cities minister’ suggested that:

“Today the great challenge before us is one of economic growth, and I’m convinced that the battle for Britain’s prosperity will be won or lost in Britain’s cities... the world’s great cities have mayors who lead their city on the international stage, attracting investment and jobs”

(quoted in Reid, 2012: 1). This also explains the ‘city deals’ that are on offer to particular cities and accounts for Liverpool council’s decision to adopt the mayoral model in advance of the May referendum.

2) Accountability and Facelessness

The second leg of contemporary anomie is the faceless nature of political life. Here the restless world of globalisation has not just a geographical anonymity but also an accountability crisis: nobody appears to be responsible or accountable for anything. Susan M Kay, Mayor of Weymouth in Massachusetts, spoke of how her town had switched from a town meeting system to an elected mayor system because under the previous model nobody knew ‘who was really in charge’ when things started to go wrong.

This element goes beyond the consequences of globalisation and focuses instead on the nature of contemporary political life, dominated as it is by the traditional machines of party politics. In this world the shift away from the domination of political life by charismatic leaders, by personalities and by the attendant fears of corruption have generated a world dominated by committees, by distributed leadership and by decision-making behind closed doors. That the public often have complete access to these council decisions does not necessarily mean that political decision-making is seen as transparent and the mayoral debate seems to have tapped into this. It is also the case that many members of the public are confused by the distribution of powers and responsibilities between central and local government and between the various elements of local government and this merely serves to feed the appetite for a more transparent

political system – where the face of the person accountable is known to one and all. Indeed, in a recent poll for the Institute for Government in 2012 only 15 per cent of the 2,299 people polled said they knew the name of their local leader – but only half of these (eight per cent of the total) got the name right (Adonis and Gash, 2012: 6-7).

The four year appointment of elected mayors does at least provide a rather more stable platform for ‘putting a face to the place’ and achieving significant – and sometime controversial – change through a council that might otherwise be difficult for council leaders wary of the fragility of their own political base. This advantage is supported by data which suggests that leadership turnover in places with mayors is 50 per cent lower than those with council leaders (Parker, 2012: 20).

One such face that is well known to the electorate is Mayor Nenshi of Calgary who suggested that his direct public election gave him not just the political authority but the ‘moral authority’ to lead the city. Mayor Nenshi also seems to represent a growing trend amongst mayors: they have to be adept not just at leadership but the performance of leadership: the spinning of a narrative that catches the voters’ imagination and binds them to the inclusive vision of the mayor. Or Mayor Brown of Auckland suggested:

“Tell a story about the city, past and future... people have to see your love for the place and if you have that sense of passion about the place that you live, and you care about that passion and the people, then the story will present itself.”

This performative aspect of leadership is especially influential in an era where new social media provide greater access to voters and greater exposure to them (Alexander, 2010, 2011). Celia Wade-Brown, Mayor of the City of Wellington, New Zealand, reproduced the importance of this aspect in her concern that ‘Overall, you need to give the role the face time as a directly elected person. It’s more than just being strategic and policy – people need to feel connected to the mayor.’ And her deputy, Ian McKinnon, was equally adamant that the mayor was ‘a moral leader who is a

“cheerleader” for the city and citizen...It’s very much a representative democracy – listen to the people – it is a vocal community.’ This is echoed in the comment by Mayor Kay (Weymouth, Massachusetts) about the importance of being outward facing:

“Make sure that you are out there. Connect with your people, with the residents. Because if you stay out of touch, then you are going to lose it. You have to have very good knowledge of all your departments, especially the key ones. But you also need to be out there in the street ... I’m out there all the time; and they expect it ... I’m one of those ‘out there in the public’ mayors. It works for me. I’m very social. It may not work for another. Someone else may be really administrative and kind of standoffish, not as social, but a really good administrator.”

‘Putting a face to the place’ also exposes the belief that it is – and perhaps should be – ‘lonely at the top’ (Grint and Scholes, 2008). The idea that leadership involves some mechanism of ‘distance’ between leader and follower is commonplace but that this is a necessary aspect of leadership for both leaders and followers is less common. In both the contemporary world of work (Collinson, 2005) and the history of military leadership (Grint, 2007) the belief that proximate leaders are significantly better than distant leaders is pervasive. In contrast, Bogardus noted in 1927 that distance enabled rather than disabled leadership, an echo of Machiavelli (1997: 63) who was keen to note that distance was a useful device for preventing followers from perceiving the ‘warts and all’ nature of leaders, for ‘men in general judge more by their eyes than their hands; for everyone can see but few can feel. Everyone sees what you seem to be, few touch upon what you are, and those few dare not to contradict the opinion of the many who have the majesty of the state to defend them.’ It is also worth considering the utility of ‘acting at a distance’ as a means of enhancing power by enabling the more powerful to influence the less powerful without being physically present (Latour, 1988, 1991, Law and Hassard, 1999). This also implies that acting at a distance enables leaders to take unpleasant but necessary decisions for the benefit of the whole, often at the expense of a particular part.

Yet distancing the mayor from the rest of the politicians or officers or citizens is always a matter of skill: too little and the proximity becomes claustrophobic, too much and the gap becomes a chasm. Thus Sir Peter Soulsby (Labour City Mayor of Leicester) spent the very first weekend after his election moving the mayor's office next to the officers' offices to reduce what had been perceived as a political chasm between the political and the managerial leadership teams. The Leicester City Mayor also appointed a team of a Deputy and five Assistant Mayors from the existing councillors to distribute power away from the centre – a move in sharp contrast to the prevailing assumption that mayors would necessarily centralise power. Sarah Russell, one of the Assistant Mayors, said she felt 'more challenged [by the change], but in a good way. It is an opportunity that I wouldn't get in any other capacity. I now have more influence to change things.' This, perhaps, is another important aspect of switching systems – it can provide greater opportunities for less experienced leaders to learn the ropes of leadership in a small area prior to taking on greater portfolios. As she explained, for significant things, each Assistant Mayor has a one-to-one slot with the City Mayor – it is a more approachable and open relationship with better access to the Mayor, giving reassurance: 'He has experience and is an extra pair of eyes; he is someone who will back you up. Previously, under the council leader you were lucky to get one meeting every 12 months – it was never a functional part of running the team. It is now a big part.' A similar response was made by a senior civil servant from Mayor Mandel's office (Edmonton, Canada):

“The power of his [Mandel's] leadership in Edmonton is obvious – by empowering the councillors (and the people) it stops them focusing too much just on themselves but it makes people look at other initiatives and look at what's right for the city and the community – it stops competitiveness between councillors. The councillors are now being given more opportunities. A mayor cannot be an expert in everything, so why not use the resource of the expertise within the councillors. The mayor appears to have institutionalised the office and the administration by ensuring that everything has a councillor with an administrative officer associated with it.”

Stoker (2012) also suggests that this facilitative or participative leadership style is more likely under a mayoral system and that on many measures mayors are performing better than their council leader alternatives.

Moreover, one of the benefits of the distance from party politics that mayors bring is that it enables the latter to focus outwards and to avoid the scourge of committee work: more information is needed before a decision can be made. Sir Steve Bullock, who was previously council leader of Lewisham before becoming Mayor, acknowledged that the compulsion to 'discuss the minutiae' was not limited to the opposition but rooted in the nature of the system: 'the committee system just seemed to defer decision-making because they always wanted more information. The committee system didn't let the council leader stand up for what he wanted to do.' Or as he put it rather more bluntly later, 'having a council leader was a way of not making a decision.' This problem was also highlighted by Mohammed Dawood, one of Leicester's Assistant Mayors: under the previous council leader system 'cabinet meetings were long... They could take up to six hours!... They are now short, sharp and focused.' Peter Kelly, Mayor of Halifax Regional Municipality in Canada, was even more direct about the problems of party politics: 'I do not favour political alignments at the municipal level; politics detract from the debate. The public good is not always served by political alignments at the local level. Council's focus should be public issues and not on one's politics... Politicians can fail to recognise that they are the servants of the people and that they are there to serve the people's interests, rather than their own interests; after all, it is the people who have elected them.'

A very similar experience can be gleaned from the American interviews with elected mayors. Joseph Sullivan, Mayor of Braintree, MA, noted the advantages of switching from a town meeting system to an elected mayor system:

“Town meeting was very cumbersome ... it was hard to get something done ... Honestly, town meeting sometimes was a little more of 'well, you know, it's my neighbor, I can't vote against him'.... We can adjust our budget within two or three weeks ... we don't have to wait months in

order for town meeting to get together ... I cannot say I miss town meeting, but there was a social element to it that was fun ... a good gathering [but] if you look at it objectively, you have to say that the town is a much more efficient and responsive government than it was before."

Latham (2011: 97-128) mounts a vigorous left wing challenge to this distancing approach and suggests that the consequential concentration of political power in the hands of one individual leads inevitably to corruption, cronyism and patronage – witness its significance in US-style directly elected mayors. In contrast, Latham suggests that the more distributed nature of political power under the traditional committee structure simultaneously undermines corruption and distributes political power in a more equitable way. It is indeed the case that the USA has suffered from political corruption at the state and federal level for some time but the issue is probably best captured by the assumption that there are no incorruptible systems; there are just less corruptible systems and procedures to limit the chances of corruption and inhibit the damage done by it. As Lord Acton so clearly put it in 1887: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men."

This concern is reproduced in the 'Vote No to a Power-Freak' campaign in the anti-mayoral lobby, and also in the No-campaigners from Birmingham who launched a poster with the words 'Brummies have always fought back against dictators, don't elect one, vote No!' Or as one council leader put it, 'There is a danger of elective dictatorship. A failing council leader can be ditched by their party at any time – or face a no confidence motion of the full council. A mayor would probably be much harder to get rid of between four-yearly elections.'

But you don't have to wander into the path of European dictators to recognise that many traditional councillors are concerned at the possibility of poor decision-making by an individual. As John Mutton (Labour Council Leader of Coventry) put it:

"The public have faith in the ability of ten councillors who individually may not get it right but working together the right decisions are made

for the right reasons. We don't need a six-figure salary person to achieve things!... The idea that a DEM (Directly Elected Mayor) would provide strong leadership is rubbish! It's all down to the individual... it doesn't matter about the title."

The significance of getting the right individual for a mayoral position is a concern for many; take Fiona Skene, Director of Human Resources at Leicester:

"The elected mayor model is good as long as it is the right person. If it is the wrong type of person, someone who is too bullying and domineering, it could go the wrong way. The role requires a balanced personality so the power doesn't go to their head. It is overall a good model, but in the present situation the Mayor doesn't have enough power."

The problem, of course, is that the concentration of power which facilitates corruption is the very same concentration of power that facilitates a greater degree of co-ordination and decisive decision-making, especially in a political system that seems to have ground to a halt in the face of bureaucratic wrangling or public acquiescence. Hence, the choice is not really between the elegance of a perfect decentralised democratic system and the elegance of a perfect centralised decision-making system but some combination of both approaches; a pragmatic but 'clumsy' alternative (Grint, 2008; Verweij, 2011).

Indeed, many mayors considered that selecting and empowering their cabinet was critical to success and far beyond the popular assumptions that the mayors made all the decisions and made them on their own. Dorothy Thornhill (Liberal Democrat Mayor of Watford) spoke of how 'the cabinet is to make things happen so you have to choose the best people for the job. There is no 'watching your back' for the political group ... and it allows the mayor to be outward facing.'

It is also worth pointing out that part of the skill of any leader is to select a team that includes dissenting voices – constructive dissenters – rather than destructive consenters. This also buttresses an argument for selecting non-traditional team players, beyond the middle aged white men that so often seem

to prevail in councils. Nor is this problem restricted to England: listen to Stephen N Zanni, Mayor of Methuen, Massachusetts: ‘I employ ‘fresh, young people with prior experience working for the people in local governments from around the area. I want to surround myself with well-qualified people, not with people that are going to ‘yes’ you to death but don’t have any knowledge.’

3) Politics and Pointlessness: The Nautilus, The Saviour and The Centaur

Max Weber, a German sociologist writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, argued that the future would increasingly be constrained by, and contained within, an ‘iron cage’ of bureaucracy. By this he meant an increasingly predictable and controlled (western) world that would proceed through the advance of science and rationality to dismantle all prior systems of thought – including magic, religion etc. This was the project of Modernity. Simultaneously, the progressive rationalisation of cultural life eroded the value basis of political life as the rule of law, the autonomous judiciary and the depoliticised bureaucracy increasingly enhanced the role of the expert at the expense of the patriot, the technocrat at the expense of the idealist, and the bureaucratic leader at the expense of the charismatic leader. This was the process of Modernisation and, according to Weber, it was the *process* of Modernisation that undermined the *project* of Modernity. Or, in his original formulation, formal procedural rationality – *zweckrationalität* – subsumed *wertrationalität* – substantive rationality. While the former has significant advantages in terms of generating huge leaps in predictability, impersonality and productivity that facilitated the rise and rise of capitalism, it simultaneously constructed an ‘iron-cage’ of bureaucracy that led, ultimately, to a loss of freedom and meaning. In other words, it constructed a metaphorical nautilus – an extraordinarily efficient mollusc that had no way of directing itself against the currents of the oceans that it floats within.

But Weber also argued that the other side of this increasing rationality was the associated demystification of life, where those that

have eaten of the tree of knowledge not only dispense with religion and magic through the process of disenchantment but dispense with its associated common values so that the only thing holding the collective together is the efficiency of the administrative governance system, not a collective and common value system. Equally important, the resulting iron cage was not populated by rational liberal individuals in some kind of ‘end of history’ technocratic utopia, but by warring deities and it is this inherently conflicted zone that threatened the entire project of modernity.⁶ We might envision this in terms of rival political tribes in permanent conflict with each other about the best way to clean the streets and always more concerned about maintaining control over the council and their political party than with setting out and pursuing any kind of significant political vision. Indeed, many mayors commented on this change from being ‘leader of the council’ to ‘leader of the place’. Linda Arkley (Conservative Mayor of North Tyneside), for instance, noted that:

“I had previously been a councillor for a number of years, and felt that the old system was unbalanced and was too lop-sided towards maintaining a status quo. There were changes of leaders in the authority, but there was no proper focus on strategy and the future... It is important for decisions to be taken for the whole of the borough, with everyone treated the same regardless of who voted for whom. That is how it should be. It needs to be above party politics.”

There were – and are – (at least) three possible routes scenarios that play out this project: the Nautilus, the Saviour and the Centaur

- a) **The Nautilus Option.** This first option sees the modernity project continue under the rise of a political class that is concerned with notions of efficiency and that, whilst inhabiting different political parties, actually have a very similar political project at heart. In effect all problems are treated as if they are ‘Tame’ problems of efficiency not ‘Wicked’ problems of dichotomous political values (Grint, 2005). Here we might also consider Osborne’s (2007) argument that the UK has witnessed the rise and triumph of a political elite – the term originally used

by Mosca (1939) – a political class (including the media elite) – that has less to do with the same educational background (private school and Oxbridge) and more to do with having the same career paths and the same intention: to rule, but not to rule to achieve some political ideal, just to rule. What previously drove politically interested individuals to stand for parliament, that is, class interests, their locality or some other civic good or goal, no longer separates out the party faithful. According to this approach where once public service, duty and civil liberties were enshrined at the heart of the establishment now sits the corrupted venality of self-interest and an interest in politics that is restricted to a professional ‘career’ not ‘a calling’ – or a ‘vocation’ – the term that Weber used to describe those whose values propelled them into the political world.

This first route foresees a flat land devoid of value but dominated by a professional elite whose activities can be measured by the slow erosion of interest in traditional political parties and the gradual erosion of the proportion of the electorate bothering to vote. Here we might consider Yates’ (1977) notion of ‘boss’ leadership where resources are rich but the only vision is to maintain the system – a management approach to a Tame Problem of efficiency (Grint, 2008) – and Stoker suggests Chicago’s Mayor Daley fits this model but that English mayors would probably not have access to the resources to make either this, or a variant of this model – the entrepreneur – work. An example of the latter might be Mayor Giuliani of New York who, in the wake of 9/11 had the resources and some sense of direction to focus those resources.

The other side of this nautilus option is that the domination of local politics by the traditions of the political elite may also appear to encompass the rise and rise of middle class white men. Certainly this is a danger highlighted by Adonis and Gash (2012: 8) who suggest not just that the national mayoral scene is dominated by men but that the same occurs internationally. In fact both Canada and New Zealand have significant numbers of women mayors.

- b) **The Saviour Option.** The second route foretells of two disparate but possibly related responses to the era of austerity that marked the transition to crisis from the previous decades of plenty: the shift from what we might call the second *Belle Époque*, a century after the first one, to the contemporary *Années de plomb* (the years of lead). This has witnessed the rise of the ‘powerless’, the invasion of the ‘occupiers’, the ‘99%’ and so on, but also the possibility of charismatics who would forcefully impose their will upon what might seem to be a rudderless populace – what Yates gets close to with his ‘Crusader’ type, though the politically charged nature of this term suggests we might seek an equivalent alternative: ‘the saviour’ captures this messianic element better. Stoker (2004: 11) suggests Ray Mallon in Middlesbrough might embody some of these aspects. Mallon first won the mayoral election in 2002 with 62.7 per cent on a turn-out of 41 per cent, then retained his mandate in 2007 with 58 per cent of the vote on a turnout of 30.5 per cent. In 2011 he was elected for a third term with 50.4 per cent of the vote on a turn-out of 36.5 per cent.

The ‘saviour’ is doubly problematic because the four year tenure that allows mayors to focus externally and not worry too much about internal dissent – the very structural feature that liberates mayors and their decision-making from bureaucratic party politics – also generates two counter-productive possibilities:

- i) The public expectations are very high that an elected mayor can perform miracles – and satisfying those expectations will prove very difficult. This is especially so when it is not clear in advance what the powers of a mayor will be. As Dorothy Thornhill, Mayor of Watford Town Council suggested, ‘The public expectation is that you have power – it needs to be looked at or you’ve got one hand tied behind your back. Until you are in the job, you don’t really know what powers you need and what frustrations you face. Every city/town is different so you need to be flexible with each area’.

ii) Saviours are very susceptible to the three H's: the Horrible Habit of Hubris, and the voters are very susceptible to their nemesis: the three S's: See the Scapegoats Suffer! Perhaps this reflects the concerns of many, especially councillors, that the scrutiny and recall powers are too weak. We might turn to the Japanese approach to reflect on this problem: Article 178 of the Japanese Local Autonomy Law notes that a vote of no-confidence in the local government leader by the local assembly (66% quorum and 75% of those present) automatically dissolves the assembly itself after ten days; in effect a system of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) ensures a level of collective sacrifice that inhibits game playing by political parties.

- c) **The Centaur Option.** Weber heralded a third alternative – the ‘politician with a sense of vocation’ (*berufspolitiker*) – someone who could harness the utility of the rationality of the modern world to a moral vision. This he recognised as a tension ridden contradiction because it combined ‘the ethic of conviction’ – the value based vision of the political end that could not be constrained by concerns about the means, with the ‘ethic of responsibility’ – the realisation that politics was ultimately about compromise. This person Weber calls a ‘total personality’ (*gesamtpersönlichkeit*). Yates (1977) captures some of this route with his notion of ‘broker’ acting to co-ordinate different interests in pursuit of community advantage and Stoker (2004: 11) consider Sir Steve Bullock of Lewisham to be close to this model. Do mayors fit this strange centaur – half human/half beast – image with the ability to re-enchant the body politic where it needs re-enchanting, to inject some sense of political vision into a sterile political world where the political class is deemed to be bereft of ideas except for self-aggrandisement, yet grounded in enough common sense to avoid the apparent lunacy of charismatic dictators across the world? Of course, the contemporary lack of interest in elected mayors may represent the opposite of this gloomy prediction: that most politicians are not merely interested in a career, that most political parties are responsive to their supporters and do, indeed, have a

significant value-based political vision, and that most voters are happy with the existing system.

But listen to Daniel Donahue, Director of Policy for the Office of Mayor Joseph M. Petty in the City of Worcester, Massachusetts, on the importance of defining what you want to achieve as a new mayor:

“Have an agenda laid out ... If you don't have your agenda laid out, you can get caught up in the little things. Our office deals with filling potholes to the \$1.5 billion [City Square] project. The Mayors that I have seen that have been the most successful have been the ones who have had an agenda, an overarching look forward of where they want be, and then really focus their powers on achieving that agenda by driving the legislative body of the Council and by making sure that you have the five or six votes you need, by turning people, getting into the real game of politics, and doing things like that. I think those have been the most successful Mayors.”

“Article 178 of the Japanese Local Autonomy Law notes that a vote of no-confidence in the local government leader by the local assembly automatically dissolves the assembly itself after ten days...”

Costs



The debate about costs of the alternative Mayoral system is commonplace amongst the literature but it is difficult to establish, mainly because – if the system works properly – it is the mayor who decides what the priorities should be and therefore what the costs are. In effect, the costs could be significantly lower than the traditional council system or significantly higher. But what is clear is that the basic salary costs of a mayoral office are often significantly less than for an equivalent organisation in the private sector. In an IoG survey five of the twelve mayoral local authorities were planning to reduce the number of councillors so the costs need not be higher and may be considerably lower. Thus should a mayor be voted for in Birmingham the budget under her or his control would be £4 billion – a large budget under any criteria and one that would attract a much higher salary than the mayor of Birmingham is likely to acquire. Moreover, if we do not provide our local political leaders with realistic salaries then, ironically, we discourage many people from applying for the position – unless they already have significant capital to their name. This, of course, ignores the costs of the referendum itself – which could be minimised by holding it in conjunction with local government elections.

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Recommendations

1) Time for a change or change for a time?

Whether it is the right time to change from a council leader system to an elected mayor system seems to depend upon the status quo. Where the electorate is relatively happy with the current situation – as they appear to be in Manchester and Wakefield – then switching to a mayor may not be appropriate. As Peter Box, Labour Leader of Wakefield Council, suggested, ‘Wakefield is the only district in West Yorkshire that has the stability of a leader in place for more than a decade – it’s about the job and what’s right for the city.’ He may well be right: in six years Wakefield went from one of the worst, to one of the best, councils.

However, where the status quo is deemed inappropriate then a mayoral system might well prove beneficial, both in terms of offering a change that might, in itself, improve the system, and equally important in offering a way of diluting the centralised nature of political life and enhancing the status of the locale at the expense of the centre. This may also mean enhancing the powers of the mayors and increasing the political footprint to match the economic footprint of decision making in many places – the so-called Metro Mayor option. It might also be the case that a mayoral option is a temporary change rather than a permanent shift: it might be a change for a time rather than just time for a change.

2) The call of the Centaur – or the Saviour?

In times of crisis it is common for societies to look towards charismatic leaders – saviours – to resolve the Wicked Problems that bedevil everyone but, as the author of the charismatic literature that began this debate – Weber – suggested, seeking out a charismatic can be a poisoned chalice if the leader comes to believe that he or she is ‘the chosen one’, rather than ‘the temporarily elected one’. The mayoral option does seem to create both the advantages and disadvantages of charismatic leadership – the ability to instil a level of enthusiasm amongst voters than can mobilise a hitherto apathetic electorate – but also the danger that choosing the wrong person could leave a city with a significant short term problem.

The Centaur may offer a more sophisticated and sensible option for voters to choose but such are the expectations of many that no elected mayor is going to be able to deliver the miracles that are required of the incumbent. It may be, then, that a large effort to educate the electorate about the limits and possibilities of local politics is required, and that an even greater effort is necessary to mobilise that same electorate to address its own problems: to take responsibility rather than deflect it back upon the mayor or the council leader. This also requires a mature debate about the indicators of success by which we can evaluate the performance of mayors. Unless mayors are unlike every other kind of organisational leader



“...our evidence suggests that elected mayors offer a real opportunity for change in a place where change is needed and also a way of invigorating a body politic...”

then it will prove very difficult to establish a series of objective metrics to hold them to account: there are usually just too many variables involved to apportion responsibility accurately – including the difficulty of assessing what time period we should judge to be useful. Boris Johnson’s successful 2008 campaign for London Mayor promised to ‘make London the greenest city in the world... to make our streets safer... to get Londoners moving [by resolving the industrial relations problems with the tube drivers]... to put the smile back on London’s face.’ But after the worst riots in 30 years, more tube strikes than under Ken Livingstone (his predecessor), and poor air quality it is difficult to conclude that he has succeeded. Yet, as Beckett (2012:6) notes, London doesn’t feel like it’s in decline at all, perhaps because many of the major projects begun under Livingstone are now coming to fruition (Crossrail, Thameslink, St Pancras and the Olympics). Or as Chou En Lai once allegedly said in response to a question about the

impact of the French Revolution on Western civilisation – ‘after just two hundred years it was too early to tell.’ We may just have to revert to the lodestone of democracy and trust the public to judge, four years on, whether the alternative system worked and who the best person might be.

3) The best system or the least worst system?

Many of the arguments from both the No and the Yes campaigns seem to be locked into a dystopian or utopian vision: either the current system is perfect or the alternative is perfect. This binary approach allows both extremes to trade insults on the basis of precious little empirical evidence: Stoke failed and Doncaster has been close to failure – so clearly the whole mayoral model is flawed or, alternatively, the evidence from Auckland, Calgary and Leicester self-evidently points to the unbounded advantages of directly elected mayors. In reality neither side seems to have a compelling case for or against but our evidence suggests that elected mayors offer a real opportunity for change in a place where change is needed and also a way of invigorating a body politic that seems to look more like a nautilus than the vigorous and committed body of leaders and voters that once turned the Victorian slums that shamed us into the Victorian cities that the world envied. In this sense the mayoral system might not be the best system but it might be better than the current system in some places; it might be the least worst.

4) Short term adjustment or long term transformation?

For some participants in the debates the mayoral option offers the hope of a radical transformation, but without falling back into scepticism it is worth recalling the significant constraints on local control, either because of the central control from Whitehall or simply because no individual actor can bend the system to his or her will. In an era of globalisation many of the forces at work are probably beyond anyone's direct control so the question is not 'can mayors transform the local world' but 'can mayors make a significant difference given the constraints they face'? The answer seems to depend upon the individual incumbent, hence the importance of choosing wisely, but also on the team that surrounds and supports the team. Here the analogy might be what Graham K Wilson calls 'the gearbox' problem: how does the leader connect to the political engine that drives the machine – except through a 'gearbox' full of staff that may help but also hinder the development and execution of policies. Or to use a different analogy, does the 'court' of the mayor end up isolating the leader from the citizens in the same way that courtiers have historically done with monarchs across the ages? Certainly mayors like Tony Eggington (Independent Mayor of Mansfield) likened conventional politics to this: 'Politicians have built their kingdom. They are parochial and protective of the egos and the empires they have built.'

5) Trusting the people: you get the leaders you deserve

While the council leader system functions through indirect democracy and requires the councillors to elect the leader, the mayoral system functions through direct democracy and requires the population to elect the leader. The former system attributes greater responsibility to the council on the grounds of their greater expertise and knowledge of the system, the requirements and the person. The latter system attributes responsibility directly to the electorate – and this requires a high level of trust in the ability of the public to differentiate between better or worse candidates and between charlatans and worthies. In many ways it reproduces debates

from Ancient Greece: do we side with Plato and simply distrust any voting system that involves the voters or 'the mob' as he termed them, or should we side with Aristotle and suggest that democracy might be a useful element in a system of governance? Or, as Stuart Drummond (Independent Mayor of Hartlepool) puts it rather more robustly: 'Politicians underestimate the public. The public are not daft!' Mark Bentley, communications officer at Leicester City, put it similarly when reflecting on Sir Peter Soulsby, 'Under the cabinet model the leader is chosen by the elite in a back room somewhere, but now for the first time the public have voted for who they wanted – Peter. This has had a huge effect on the local media because it is difficult for them to be overtly critical of a politician who has support of core readership.'

Precisely which form of democracy is most useful – direct or indirect – depends upon the status quo but one thing seems clear: you get the leaders you deserve and leaders get the followers they deserve too. 'At the end of the day', suggested Julie Hardaker, Mayor of Hamilton City Council, New Zealand, 'if the public wants that person, then so be it. It is up to the public to decide.' Perhaps more importantly we should finish on why all this matters? What is the purpose of electing mayors and underlying this is a more critical question: what is the purpose of politics? If politics is about how we mediate our individual and collective conflicts then we had better pay some attention to reinvigorating the body-politic: politics is too important to be left to politicians.

"Where the electorate is relatively happy with the current situation... then switching to a mayor may not be appropriate."

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Endnotes

- 1 Data from the PSA briefing on 27 March 2012, at the IoG, London.
- 2 For example, a short *vox populi* on BBC 1 New at Ten on Friday 23 March asked random voters in Leicester and Bradford who a photograph of their local political leader was: most in Leicester recognised Sir Peter Soulsby, the Mayor of Leicester, none recognised Ian Greenwood, the council leader of Bradford. Ironically, perhaps, the radical George Galloway won the previously safe Labour parliamentary seat of Bradford West by-election on 29 March 2012 with a 10,000 majority (56 per cent of the vote) and beat the Labour candidate Imran Hussain whose vote declined 20 per cent on the previous election.
- 3 Figures quoted by Tom Cash at the IfG event in Birmingham on 29 March 2012.
- 4 Reported in the *News & Star* 30 March 2012.
- 5 Quoted at the IfG event in Birmingham on 29 March 2012.
- 6 Ironically the current debacle of Italy has seen the rule of the charismatic Berlusconi displaced by what has become known as the rule of the technocrats – the expert economists placed in control to steady the ship.

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