LEADING LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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The Role of Directly Elected Mayors

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This book is dedicated to our families.

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Professor John Fenwick
Professor Lorraine Johnston
Northumbria University
2020

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INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE OF THE BOOK

The focus of this book is upon leadership and local governance, with particular attention to the ways in which directly elected executive mayors may be having a significant impact upon the leadership of local government. In the context of continuing institutional change at a local level, our discussion seeks to highlight the limitations of purely structural changes to local government systems and therefore focusses upon human agency and wider processes of political change in understanding local governance today. Our principal focus is upon the UK from which we draw upon our own research with elected mayors and other influential local actors. This is set in the context of wider European and American experience where directly elected mayors are more firmly established as parts of the system of local administration, but we find that the different political context of different countries limits the value of such comparisons. Overall, rather than simply describing the changes that have brought elected mayors to the UK, and specifically to England, we aim throughout for a critical perspective on how we are governed locally.

The discussion begins with a review of traditional local government wherein local authorities were classic examples of Weberian rational-bureaucratic systems within which rule-bound employees carried out their allocated duties in order to provide statutory services to the public. This includes some attention to how local government is organised, and how it has been reorganised, in pursuit of finding some elusive structural arrangements for local administration which would face up to the challenges of a rapidly changing society. We suggest that during the twentieth century it would largely have been impossible to envisage 'leaders' in local government: it would literally have made no sense, for bureaucracies cannot be led. They can only be administered or managed. Local government, organised through a formal committee system of elected representatives, carried out its designated tasks as a guardian of public money and as a system of local administration. In the centralised polity of the UK, local government remained a creature of central government with no legal autonomy. Mayors have long existed in local government of course, but until the arrival of the directly elected mayor in the twenty-first century they were merely ceremonial post-holders with no executive powers.

We will then move to some early examples of where local leadership began to be asserted against the grain of organisational structures, demonstrating that human agency may be effective even when the institutional context is unpromising. Joseph Chamberlain in Birmingham in the late nineteenth century and T. Dan Smith in Newcastle upon Tyne in the 1960s cast themselves as reformist local leaders with, as we shall see, a controversial idea of what such leadership entailed. This trend was manifested once again in Ken Livingstone's role in the Greater London Council in the early 1980s. Such examples were exceptions to the accepted practice of how local areas are to be run and their legacy remains, to some extent,

unresolved in the public mind. However, they demonstrated the possibility of assertive and effective local leadership, perhaps linked to a reinvigoration of local government itself.

We turn to an examination of the efforts of local leaders to attract funds and to promote economic development and local growth. We see this as the primary rationale of (government-inspired) attempts to create forms of local leadership that will work. Yet, the public endorsement of these forms of leadership – such as that of the elected mayor – is lacking. Leadership is being pursued largely for material reasons and as part of the search for resources. Democratic legitimacy is, it appears, a secondary consideration. Nonetheless, some commentators (e.g., Sweeting & Hambleton, 2017; in their evaluation of new mayoral governance in Bristol) do think that the mayor has made a difference. Much depends, we suggest, on local factors. Indeed, as we argue, the mayor may be seen locally as the solution to some specific problems of local governance.

Our discussion finally re-focusses upon our main topic of the directly elected executive mayor. This utilises our original research and the evidence thus collected. This refers primarily to England as this is the only nation of the UK to have so far introduced the office of the elected mayor.

> *By acting as a lightning-rod for public engagement the office of directly elected mayor has fulfilled one of the objectives of its introduction into English local government: to provide high-profile and visible political leadership. (Copus, 2006, p. 139)*

We will seek to assess whether this claim is accurate. Following legislation in 2000, and after a lengthy period of institutional change in local government, it became possible for the first time for the public to directly elect an executive mayor throughout England (and in Wales, although no mayors have

yet been introduced there). Inspired by the big city leaders of Europe and the United States, the introduction of the directly elected mayor was pursued with vigour by central government and enjoyed a large measure of cross-party support. The elected mayor was enthusiastically advocated by Michael (Lord) Heseltine and was taken up as an important element of New Labour's reform of local political management, though party political attitudes varied much more at local level depending on perceived local political advantage. As Headlam and Hepburn (2018) noted, elected mayors were expected to reconnect voters with local politicians and also to occupy a key point within the new patterns of local governance wherein networks, co-ordination and interaction with other tiers of government were increasingly important. 'Here mayors are expected to act as a focal point in the network, setting goals and coordinating decision making and service delivery' (Headlam & Hepburn, 2018, p. 71).

Thus, it seemed, the mayor could be a local leader with democratic credentials and with the powers to break through ineffective local bureaucracy. We shall argue that this was not quite how it turned out: the take-up of the local mayoral option was low and there was – and is – a distinct lack of the public engagement that was envisaged by government, notwithstanding the more optimistic view of Copus quoted above. This chapter draws from the primary research of the authors to examine why this government-inspired attempt to give power and legitimacy to local leaders can be deemed on balance to be a failure, notwithstanding successful individual examples of where the mayor can indeed make a difference.

Further legislation in 2009 and 2011 permitted the establishment of Combined Authorities as a way of grouping local councils in order to pursue delegated strategic goals relating to, for instance, economic development and transport. Separate legislation in 2016 gave authority to the creation of directly

elected mayors for such authorities. If such Combined Authorities are to attract additional government funds, they must be led by a directly elected mayor: explicitly, a local leader. To confuse matters, such 'metro mayors' for Combined Authorities may have a geographical remit which includes local authorities that already have their own 'city mayor', a matter we shall discuss. Here, we draw directly from the current primary research of the authors which provides insight into the how such processes of sub-national leadership are being enacted.

> *Over the past few decades, we have witnessed the reinvention of the role of the European mayor. Today, mayors are expected to make effective local decisions and bring much needed political legitimacy to local government. (Kopric, Hlynsdottir, Dzinic, & Borghetto, 2018, p. 151)*

Yet the UK remains by European standards a highly centralised country and provides a partial exception to the quotation from Kopric et al. We provide a brief guide to the inconsistent history of attempts to form a model of how local areas and regions may be led. The rise and fall of efforts to form a coherent pattern of regional and sub-national governance will be explored, together with our conclusions about why the task has proven so difficult, and whether directly mayors can be part of the solution – or perhaps just another aspect of the problem. This will include debates about devolution and local place.

We might note that the separate post of London mayor, established by different legislation in 1999, has rather different powers from mayors elsewhere in the country and is dealt with separately in this book. It can plausibly be said that the London mayor is closer to the European mayoral model and has a greater national profile than mayoral colleagues elsewhere in England.

On the basis of our review, and informed by up-to-the-minute research, we consider the conclusions that may now be drawn about the leadership of local government and sub-national 'places'. We briefly assess orthodox approaches to leadership and consider how the real world of local practice compares before addressing our central question of whether the directly elected mayor is a successful example of policy transfer or just another top-down policy failure for local government. In short, *is the elected executive mayor a local leader?*

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LOCAL ADMINISTRATION OR LOCAL LEADERSHIP? A BRIEF HISTORY

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In England and Wales, the history of local government is one of a rule-based system of local administration. Although there have been local forms of administration for hundreds of years, what is recognised as local government is broadly a product of the Great Reform Act of 1832 and the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. The local systems created at this time prevailed, through a series of structural reforms, until the late twentieth century.

Constitutionally, British local government remained (and remains) a creature of central government. Despite current debates around devolution – which we will come to – there is no formal autonomy for local government, and this differentiates England and Wales from many other European countries. When we refer to local government as 'rule based' we mean that it was a classic Weberian local bureaucracy wherein post-holders carried out duties allocated through a hierarchical system of formal authority, justified by the need

to safeguard public money via an accountability rooted in formal systems (Weber, 1947). In daily usage, 'bureaucracy' has negative connotations of delay and of rule-following as an end in itself, but in organisational theory it describes the supremely rational form of organisation whereby goods (or, more usually for local government, services) are allocated according to rules and eligibility rather than on the basis of nepotism or personal friendships.

> *In a bureaucracy, laws, rules, procedures, and predefined routines are dominant. They give form to a clearly defined system of administration where the exercise of 'due process' is all important. (Morgan, 1989, p. 49)*

Of course, it is not so simple in practice. Bouckaert and Brans (2019), in discussing four possible results from Peters's (2018) classic thesis upon the politics of bureaucracy – first published 40 years previously – refer to a *neo* Weberian bureaucratic state, that is a 'modern' Weberian bureaucracy wherein economic crisis, instability and competition have led to a reassertion of the values of a bureaucratic system informed by results as well as process (p. 535). Egeberg (2007) has drawn attention to some of the complexities of the classic bureaucratic structure, including the extent to which decision-making is either hierarchical or horizontal, the scale and size of the bureaucracy, and degrees of specialisation and demographic characteristics. In local government, the truly bureaucratic system – the ideal type, to use Weberian terminology – implies a large degree of stability in public expectations and in funding, factors which are now under considerable strain. The chief officer of a local authority may today be known as a Chief Executive, with its connotation of seniority and its parallels with running a business, but for many decades previously was known as the Town Clerk, a term which neatly