

Beyond metro mayors and ‘secret deals’: rethinking devolution in England

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As the guard changes in Westminster and new government seeks to differentiate itself from its predecessor, it is timely to review the state of the devolution debate, argues [John Tomaney](#). Policymakers need to learn from the US experience and reconsider the fixation on mayors. Just as importantly, the problem with ‘secret deals’ must be addressed if devolution is going to have any real democratic credentials.



The Cameron/Osborne approach to devolution had a number of distinctive features. Chief among these was its fixation with the directly elected metro-mayor as the answer to urban governance problem. In the government’s diagnosis this model of governance addresses weaknesses in fragmented systems, improves democratic accountability and bring city- regions together round common economic development strategies. [The government claimed:](#)

The experience of London and other major international cities suggests that a directly elected mayor can cut through difficulties [of urban governance]. The government has therefore been clear that devolution of significant powers will rest on cities agreeing to rationalise governance and put in place a mayor to inspire confidence

But there is limited evidence to support these claims about the impact of directly elected mayors on local economic growth and the improvement of local services. Many of the assertions made in the English debate rest on more or less persuasive anecdotes drawn principally from the US experience and the limited experience in London.

The Limits of Metro-Mayors

Strong US mayors, with access to locally tax raised taxes, [are seen as leading the renaissance of US cities](#). For instance, the economic resurgence of New York City is often attributed to the pro-business policies of ‘strong mayors’ such as Michael Bloomberg. Rather less attention, however, is devoted to counterfactuals. We might look at the case of Detroit, where ‘strong mayors’ have presided over a vicious circle of economic decline and municipal bankruptcy. A high degree of local self-finance, far from ensuring resilience, was arguably a causal factor in the precipitous decline of Detroit. The mayoral system is in crisis there. In 2013, the sixty-fifth mayor of Detroit, Kwame Kilpatrick, was sentenced to twenty-eight years in prison after being convicted of a variety of corruption charges. The city of Detroit filed for bankruptcy in 2013 and the State of Michigan appointed an emergency manager to assume control of the council. Strong mayors can lead to hubris and overreach and be the antithesis of models of policy-making based on deliberation and increased accountability and scrutiny. Mayors have managed both the rapid recent growth of New York City and the catastrophic decline of Detroit. Isolating the influence of mayors among the many other factors at work in these cases is very difficult.

One thing that can be said with certainty is that the mayors have not presided over an era of a democratic renewal. On the contrary, the US mayoral system has been associated with declining levels of electoral participation in the big cities. At the time that Robert F Wagner Jnr was elected as mayor of New York City in 1953, voter turnout was over 90 per cent. By the time Bill de Blasio was elected 109th mayor in 2013, voter turnout was less than 30 per cent. [Similar rates of decline](#) in voter turnout can be seen in cities such as Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Chicago.

These declines in voter turnouts have occurred, moreover, in cities that are endowed with much more extensive

local media than is the case in northern English cities. A key feature of the US mayoral model concerns how it facilitates close relationships between local political and business elites in ways which typically lack transparency and scrutiny and which underpin models of economic development that favour urban property interests. It is this aspect of the US model that seems to have had a particular influence in UK policy debates. For instance, at the 2015 Conservative party conference in Manchester, George Osborne proposed that where elected mayors had been created, they would have the power to add a (capped) infrastructure levy on business rates.

There is considerable uncertainty about how both the devolution of business rates and the infrastructure levy would work in practice, but the government is clear that a levy can only be raised if a majority of 'business members' of the boards of Local Enterprise Partnerships agree. In effect, resources will only be allowed to be spent on infrastructure projects that are approved by a handful of 'business leaders'. It might fairly be asked why the interests of a small number of appointed businesspeople should trump the mandate of an elected mayor. It might even be argued that this development represents a partial return of the franchise property qualification which was abolished by the Representation of the People Act in 1918.

The problem with secret deals

The new devolution arrangements are not the product of wide public debate in the areas to be affected by them, but instead are the outcomes of 'secret deals' ('City Deals', 'Devolution Deals', etc.) between political and business elites at the national and local levels, [exemplified](#) in the case of Manchester. In essence, these deals are assembled locally from a menu of policies approved by HM Treasury. It stretches the imagination to see this approach as leading to meaningful democratic renewal. On the contrary, the model of devolution currently on offer is one designed to advance a narrowly defined set of business interests with very little democratic scrutiny. Arguably, it is this approach to politics that was rejected in the Brexit referendum.

Underpinning the new policy is a theory of economic development that fosters interurban competition and economic concentration, tolerates and indeed even celebrates high levels of socio-economic inequality, is comfortable with some groups and places being losers and locks-in enduring austerity, most especially in the places that have borne the brunt of public expenditure cuts to date. Innovation and entrepreneurialism in economic development is tolerated only within a highly restricted range of parameters. It is a form of devolution in which 'business' exercises a direct and indirect veto over the preferences of citizens. The emerging settlement is akin to the model of 'post-democracy', [as elaborated by Colin Crouch](#), whereby formal mechanisms of accountability exist, but their practical role is increasingly limited and embodies the interest of a small elite.

In a country as centralised as the UK, the case for devolution is strong in principle. But as the Cameron/Osborne era is put to rest, this might be an appropriate moment to reconsider the narrow model that has been on offer to date.

Note: This blog [draws from the journal article](#) 'Limits of Devolution: Localism, Economics and Post-democracy', published by Political Quarterly.

About the Author

John Tomaney is Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at UCL. A longer version of this article is published by Political Quarterly. It is based on work supported by the award of the Sir Ernest Simon Visiting Professorship at Manchester Business School for 2015/6.

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