

The coalition plans to reinvigorate local political leadership in major cities with elected mayors. Will local electorates say “Yes” this time?

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Directly electing mayors on the London model is back on the political agenda. Eleven core English cities will be voting in May 2012 to decide whether they want to have one. These votes may radically increase the number of elected mayors and set city government decisively on a new path. But there may be fierce resistance may from local politicians and political parties who prefer the council model. [Professor Wyn Grant](#) reviews the field of debate.



Currently 14 English towns have elected mayors, ranging from the rather special case of [London](#) to smaller cities and towns such as Bedford, Mansfield and Watford ([Leicester](#) is the only other major city with the London model, which it acquired through a different procedure). Now the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition wants eleven of England's largest cities, at the centres of all our major conurbations, to vote next May in a compulsory referendum on introducing the same model.

Elected mayors are likely to 'big up' what they have achieved in their areas. Yet in conversation with our researchers, mayors are also remarkably honest, and many find talking through their experiences cathartic. We also intend to talk to local leaders chosen from the local Council (on the existing model) and to others who think the referendums represent a step backwards.

Many questions arise about the future. If some big cities do choose to have mayors in 2012, is there anything that can be done to make them more effective? What is the role of elected mayors in providing leadership to their cities and can they do this better than council leaders? Do elected mayors make a real difference to their cities and how do we know that they do? These are some of the questions we shall be answering on the [Warwick Commission](#).

It is, of course, possible that all the referendums will result in a negative vote. UK voters are often conservative with a small 'c', and hence tend to vote "no" in referendums, particularly if they see it as a way of protesting against the government. If voters also don't understand something, and think that it might cost more (however false that perception is) they are even more likely to vote no.

The city currently most likely to vote in favour of change is Birmingham. There is a 'yes' campaign which has got up and running early, even if it is strapped for cash. Popular local Labour MP Gisela Stuart, a one time junior minister, has thrown her hat into the ring as a candidate for the new Mayor (if adopted) which has created additional attention. She is already campaigning to tell voters about the benefits of a directly elected local leader. Birmingham likes to think of itself as the 'second city'. But it is overshadowed by London and sometimes seems to be eclipsed by Manchester, and not just in football. There are major economic challenges in the area. An elected mayor could enhance the UK second city's profile and boost economic development work.

Our early consultations suggest that a number of challenges need to be met if the concept of an elected mayor is to succeed outside London, where its perceived success is a big stimulant for the government proposals. First, it is arguable that the powers of the elected mayor in other cities are too confined. Votes will be held subsequently in these cities on electing police commissioners, whereas in London the mayor has a strong role in policing. These commissioner votes are a complication, although Steve Bullock the elected [Mayor in Lewisham](#) reckons that he has built up an effective working relationship with both the police – and the local NHS, another area that mayors will not control.

However, one can argue that the whole government scheme for city mayors is currently too timid and insufficiently radical. There are powers in the [Localism Act](#) for the Secretary of State to transfer additional powers to those local authorities which go down the mayoral route. But, knowing ministers' and Whitehall's preferences for control, will these powers actually be used in a constructive way that will make an impact and encourage other cities and towns to follow down the elected mayor route?

Second, it may be that the spatial structure of English city government needs re-thinking, rather than just having elected mayors. Manchester and Salford are two relatively small adjacent authorities and both could

have elected mayors (there has been a [petition for one in Salford](#)). Would it be better to have a metropolitan authority with a directly elected mayor? The same argument could be made for Merseyside and the West Midlands. Of course, we have been there before with 'two-tier' metropolitan government, which didn't work particularly well (the top tier was abolished by Margaret Thatcher's government). But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try again, particularly when it comes to economic development, infrastructure and transport issues.

One of the most successful experiments we have found so far is in [Auckland in New Zealand](#), where a directly elected mayor has been able to override eight separate local authorities to produce a coherent strategy for a congested city. In London, the mayor's principal policy responsibilities are transport, police, the fire service, planning and economic development. It is perfectly possible for the London boroughs to have their own elected mayors to handle their own more local services.

Third, how much of the benefit is dependent on getting the right person in the job? One of the attractions of having an elected mayor is that it can bring in new faces from outside the traditional political class. [Stuart Drummond](#) in Hartlepool got out of his monkey suit at the local football club, was elected as an independent and is now on his third term. Being mayor was a steep learning curve, but he has worked well as a facilitator bringing people together. Those who derided his initial victory as showing that mayoral contests could be won by fringe candidates have been wrong-footed by his record in office, including getting re-elected twice.

Yet not all the experiments so far have had happy outcomes. Stoke, for instance, tried a mayor and then got rid of the whole idea. To be a good elected mayor, you need people skills, but you also need the leadership and management skills to run a complex organisation. That combination is not easy to find. My initial hunch is that direct election may not be a 'one size fits all' idea and that it may be quite context specific. However, that does not mean that one cannot extract some useful general principles.

Warwick University has launched a [Commission on Elected Mayors](#) which I am chairing. It does not have a prior commitment to support or oppose elected mayors. That is for voters to decide in a referendum. But we hope that we can inform them and local political leaders about the pros and cons when we report in March 2012. Our researcher Clare Holt and research director Keith Grint have already conducted a series of interviews with elected mayors in Australia, Canada and New Zealand. We have started interviews in the UK and Clare has work-shadowed the recently elected Mayor of Leicester. In the real world too the topic has already generated a lot of interest. Last week I spent over two hours at the BBC's Coventry studio talking to local radio stations about the idea. We want our investigation to be evidence-based, and we will also have a window in January 2012 for the public to take part.

At present there seems to be a lot of scepticism and lack of knowledge out there, but the debate is just getting started. People understandably complain about the deficiencies of existing democratic practices and efforts to promote accountability and transparency often encounter pervasive cynicism. That doesn't mean that one shouldn't try out innovations.

The [Commission for Elected Mayors](#) is chaired by [Professor Wyn Grant](#), Professor of Politics in the Department of Politics and International Studies at Warwick, and its director is [Professor Keith Grint](#), professor of Public Leadership and Management at Warwick Business School (WBS).

As well as gathering evidence and case studies from examples of existing elected mayors, the Commission on Elected Mayors welcomes submissions from organisations and individuals with a view on the impact of elected mayors on city leadership in the UK. It will be launching its public consultation phase in January. The Commission aims to report formally on its first phase in March 2012.

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About the author

Professor Wyn Grant is a senior tutor of the Department Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick. He is a member of the Population and Diseases Research Group in the Department of Life Sciences and teaches there and at the Warwick Crops Centre, Wellesbourne. In 2010 he was presented with the Diamond Jubilee Lifetime Achievement award of the Political Studies Association of the UK at their Awards Ceremony. He was elected an Academician of the Academy of Social Sciences in 2011. His most recent book is (co-edited with Arne Niemann and Borja García) ['The transformation of European football: Towards the Europeanisation of the national game'](#) (Manchester University Press, 2011).