

Elected mayors cannot deliver a localist revival

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*In response to a recent OurKingdom article by Guy Lodge ([Mayors for all English cities? A democratic argument](#)) **George Jones** argues that it is wrong to force referendums on the adoption of elected mayors on the localities and that there are better ways to break with suffocating centralism.*



It is ironical that **Guy Lodge**, who wants to “combat” our centralized system of governance”, should welcome the Government’s decision to impose referendums in May on 11 English cities about whether they should adopt directly-elected mayors (DEMs). A genuine localist would have left it to localities to decide if they wanted a referendum. These 11 cities have had the opportunity to hold referendums since 2001 but did not want them. They could have had one if a public petition from only 5 per cent of the electorate had been in favour of a referendum, but none reached the threshold. Central government has forced an unwanted referendum only once before, in 2002 on Southwark, where the “no” vote was 68.6 per cent.

The case for leaving the choice to localities was brought home to me vividly when I chaired two all-party commissions in Hackney and Brent about their constitutional structures. The unanimous decision in Hackney was to go for a DEM, and in Brent for the leader-cabinet model. Hackney’s choice arose because there was no chance of a stable single-party majority or coalition. Its key local conditions were bitter inter- and intra-party fighting, so a DEM was needed to enable effective governance. It needed one person to cut through the intense factionalism and paralysis. Brent rejected the DEM model because its parties were more evenly balanced and not as internally divided. The lesson from these two experiences was clear: local councils not central government know best their distinctive local factors. DEMs may be useful in some areas but not in others. But still central government persists in forcing referendums on 11 cities.

Who wants DEMs?

Between 2001 and 2011 there were 39 referendums on whether to have DEMs, in which the “no” vote won in 26, the “yes” vote in 13 - none in large cities. There was no evidence that English cities wanted either a referendum or a DEM. Public demand was minimal.

Who wants DEMs? The early champion was Michael Heseltine who wanted local authorities to be run like businesses. When he was brought back to help shape Conservative policy he pushed his pet notion, which was taken up by the party and by Andrew Adonis. They have been travelling around the provinces carrying their technocratic message, with the blessing of the Prime Minister conveyed at a No. 10 reception.

Celebrity, leadership and one-person rule

Guy assumes DEMs would improve “the quality and everyday experience of democratic life”. His assertion is undermined by the current electoral campaigning for the Greater London mayor. It has degenerated into a clash of personality. The aspects of personality that are focussed on are not about the candidates’ personal styles of leadership but about personal aspects of their private lives. It is the politics of celebrity, not about competing programmes of principle and policy.

Guy assumes strong leadership is absent in leader-cabinet systems. But Joseph Chamberlain and Herbert Morrison were not directly-elected, nor were Shirley Porter and Ken Livingstone when he led the GLC, and yet they were acknowledged as leaders and were highly visible to their localities.

Guy advocates embodying the processes and machinery of local government in one figure. But the

main argument against the DEM model is precisely its concentration of power in a single person. The assumption of the advocates of DEMs is there must be individual leadership rather than collective or team leadership. The advantage of collective leadership is it enables exploration of policy from different perspectives. Colleagues can consider possible impacts of policy in a variety of contexts, spotting pitfalls ahead and the consequences for different people and groups in their areas. A single person is unlikely to represent the diverse complexities of large urban areas better than collegial leadership.

A further drawback of DEMs is they enhance bureaucracy over democracy. The DEM cannot cover all the functions of the local authority. They have to rely on personal aides – unaccountable cronies – or else power slips to full-time chief officials. With the leader-cabinet system elected councillors can cover specific sets of services and ensure a democratic contribution is made to policy-making. Settling disputes in cabinets and committees enables coordination of policy, which can be achieved better horizontally than vertically by one-person from above. DEMs diminish the role of elected councils and relegate councillors to asking questions and scrutiny that have scant public impact.

What if the city is lumbered with a bad mayor?

Guy recognises a major objection to DEMs is the lack of a power of recall. However, this deficit is built into the model the government is pushing – if a DEM turns out bad or ineffective during the four-year term, there is no possibility for the removal of a DEM until the next election. Many states in the USA and Germany and other countries have a power of recall leading to a new election, either through a petition from the people or a council vote of no-confidence with a special majority. Advocates of community empowerment should give councils the right to a vote of no-confidence and enable the people to petition to submit the DEM to a new election.

The better way ahead

There are two main ways to break the suffocating centralism Guy so rightly deplores. The first is to reform central government. Its dominant culture that the silo departments of Whitehall know best needs to be transformed into one that respects local choice by local government. Here the current consultation, jointly sponsored by the Local Government Association and the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform select committee, about codifying the key principles of central-local-government relationships offers a practical step forward. The second essential change is reform of local taxation, which should not be treated as Guy's "holy grail".

The basic principle is that local authorities should become less dependent for their income on their fix of central-government grant and draw most of their revenues from their own voters with taxes and charges whose rates they determine. These two approaches would revitalise "England's stale political culture" brought on by central governments' reduction of local government's powers and curbing its discretion. The campaign for DEMs is a distraction from tackling the real defects in central-local government relationships.

This article first [appeared](#) on OurKingdom on April 16th. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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