

Elected mayors: dead in the water?

Wyn Grant chaired the Warwick Commission on Elected Mayors. Here he reflects on why nearly all cities voted 'No' in the referenda, examines some of the arguments for and against elected mayors, and ponders what the future may have in store.



When I was asked on Radio 4 the day after voters in all but one city ([Bristol](#)) voted against elected mayors in referendums whether I was disappointed at the outcome, I had to point out the Warwick Commission on Elected Mayors, which I chaired, was not an advocate for elected mayors. Some of our commissioners were, but we tried to assess the arguments for and against elected mayors based on international research in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the US as well as the UK. In many ways the more important part of our report was where we attempted to address some of the challenges that would arise in any transition to elected mayors, but events made that largely redundant.

My personal view was that much depended on local circumstances. I thought that the case was strongest in Birmingham because I considered that the city was punching below its weight, a view which many local economic and political leaders shared. However, one of them told me two weeks before the vote that he thought it was lost.

Voters, who often were confused by the difference between an elected mayor and a lord mayor, were possibly influenced by the arguments of one local MP in the 'Second City' that it was a vote for an 'elected dictatorship'. In fact mayors would and should be subject to scrutiny and we recommended a recall procedure to be available in exceptional circumstances.

Stuart Wilks-Hegg has already [explained](#) some of the main reasons why voters generally voted 'no'. However, I would like to develop some of these points. During the campaign I took part in debates in Birmingham, Bradford and Coventry. The meeting in Bradford was particularly well-attended and lively given that an elected mayor was being backed by Respect. I also took part in a large number of local radio interviews, so although I have no detailed survey evidence to base my views on, I think that I was in touch with the debate.

What was noticeable was how resistant local political leaderships were to mayors. In Coventry the result was finally declared at 3.40 a.m., but local politicians mounted the platform in turn to denounce the idea in no uncertain terms, predicting that Doncaster would throw out the elected mayor system the following day (they didn't). The local political class was undoubtedly unnerved by the threat they saw that elected mayors posed to the status quo. They made much of the fact that mavericks could be elected but one of the attractions of the idea was to recruit candidates from outside the established political class.

I went to the Number 10 reception that launched the referendums and I have no doubt that David Cameron genuinely supported the idea. Admittedly he had to listen to a series of jocular barbs directed at 'Dave' by Boris Johnson, although Lord Heseltine was able to point out that whatever happened to Boris in the future, he would always be remembered as the person who succeeded him as MP for Henley. After that the campaign was largely left to the minister for cities, Greg Clarke, who did his best, but was not helped by the fact that the Government in essence said that 'city deals' would be negotiated after mayors were elected so no one knew what was on the table.

Voters became very concerned about the cost implications of bringing in elected mayors. However, we thought that they would be cost neutral in the short term. The mayor would need to be paid a salary, and that has been a contentious topic in Leicester. Pay too small a salary and you would not attract candidates of the right calibre. Pay too much and it would lead to resentment. A salary of £90-£100k a year in line with what is paid in Canada would probably be reasonable.

The mayor would need a small support staff, but that could be offset by savings elsewhere. In the long run we thought that there was real potential for efficiency savings and a better delivery of services in a more holistic way. However, voters were evidently not convinced by this argument. One of the difficulties here is the geographical boundaries on which mayors are based. It can be argued that one of the main roles of a mayor is to promote economic development, to publicise the attractions of her city or town and act as a 'one stop shop' for prospective investors. Indeed, existing mayors that we interviewed saw this as a key role and one in which they felt they had made a difference.

Unfortunately, city-regions are usually much larger than the cities at their core. Thus, Liverpool now has an elected mayor but really Merseyside's economic development needs to be addressed as a whole. Of course, there are other ways of doing this, for example through the effective cooperation that exists between local authorities in Greater Manchester.

The new Local Economic Partnerships have different boundaries again while elected police commissioners will also serve wider areas, even though the government suggested that an elected mayor could also undertake this role. During the campaign Greg Clarke did say that the government would consider creating metro mayors, but this would have to happen organically on the basis of local initiatives (which is probably the best route giving the tensions there are in some city-regions between different areas).

In my opinion, one of the most convincing arguments related to the different roles of council leaders and elected mayors and the implications for democratic accountability. Council leaders are elected, generally in secret, by the party caucus. They are beholden to the caucus and the divisions within it may constrain them. They represent the council rather than the city as a whole. Most voters in a city cannot name them.

A mayor has to be outward looking rather than inward looking. Mayors often find innovative ways of communicating with the people. Using social media is one way. In New Zealand one mayor went to the city square every month and voters could question her about anything.

In the end, voters were not excited by the topic which is not surprising given that campaigning was sporadic and often poorly coordinated. The referendum question was complicated and if voters don't understand something they tend to vote against it. At a time of great distrust of politicians, they simply did not want another politician, even if they could choose an independent.

George Jones, in his [contribution](#) on this blog, makes the case against elected mayors well, although I am not convinced that they are technocratic or that giving people the chance to vote on them was a step back for democracy, even though the choice of cities where votes were held was open to question. Elected mayors are not a one size fits all answer or a panacea for more fundamental problems.

One thing that most participants in the debate agreed was that the system of governance in Britain was overly centralised, but doing anything about this or securing any institutional reform in the face of electoral apathy and suspicion is an uphill task. That could apply equally well to other efforts at institutional reform (e.g., the [House of Lords](#)).

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About the author

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