

The Kerslake Review has shone a light on the deeply dysfunctional nature of Birmingham local government

By Democratic Audit UK

*The former Head of the Civil Service Sir Bob Kerslake recently published a government commissioned report into the governance of Birmingham City Council, and was withering about its shortcomings. **Pauline Geohegan** argues that the report simply confirms what was already widely known: that the city is disfunctionally run, and that its time for a big rethink of how things are done, and by whom.*



Chamberlain Square, Birmingham (Credit: [brianac37](#), CC BY 2.0)

The coalition government's deep seated contempt for Birmingham is no secret, and savage cuts to council funding have definitely sliced into the council's capacity to maintain the status quo. But even so, it is the polluted political culture which permeates Birmingham city council – like [Blackpool stamped through rock](#) – that has rendered it a lame duck, infamous for the left hand not knowing what the right is doing; but none of this is new or limited to this current Labour leadership. This council operated in a similar vein under the “progressive partnership” the Conservative and Liberal democrat coalition that ran the city before Sir Albert Bore wrestled control of the authority from Mike Whitby and Paul Tilsley in 2012.

The [Kerslake Review](#) paints a picture of a city council at odds with itself, a disconnected, dysfunctional and paternalistic authority with serious governance issues. The council has been famously hammered for its abysmal handling of children's services, its corporate failure to safeguard its most vulnerable residents, the children of Birmingham. The city council's PR machine cannot erase the negative publicity generated by this year's *Trojan Horse* debacle either, where officers and politicians in equal measure, over many years, failed to address major issues of concern. Kerslake now correctly advises Birmingham to get its priorities sorted quickly, echoing the words of so many others who have marched into Birmingham to find out what on earth is going on.

But strange rumblings leaking from the council house reveal that the leadership and senior officers are now busy rebutting Kerslake's review. One senior director apparently informed 100 managers from the Place Directorate on Wednesday that Sir Albert Bore is a strong and visible leader and Birmingham is still the best council in the country. Sir Albert, she declared, is leading the charge against Eric Pickles, Kerslake's Review is not evidence

based, his information was gleaned from simply chattering and nattering with people. Other senior officers are actively railing against Kerslake's findings, preferring to bury their heads, refute the reality and evangelise on behalf of the current administration.

There are none so blind as those who will not see and are lost in denial. Claims that the Review is politically engineered abound, but Kerslake's team comprised expert heavyweights from local government so shouldn't be so flippantly tossed aside. Yet certain officers still feel entitled to comment politically after yet another damning criticism of the authority, in a year dominated by reviews and reports that have exposed the council's multiple failures to address child protection, settle equal pay claims, and deliver Sir Albert Bore's dream legacy of devolution.

Under [Sir Albert Bore](#) the council has been busy trying to destroy silos, creating new portfolios, establishing "the quadrant" (don't ask) keeping cabinet members in the know and backbench councillors in the dark; certain officers are fearful, others are contemptuous, feeling answerable to the leader, rather than to the new chief executive Mark Rogers. In the current reign of Sir Albert Bore, the sense of a politically driven workforce at play at the top of the council is crystal clear, but again this really is not new terrain in Birmingham. It is an unhealthy and undemocratic climate and as Bob Kerslake says, cosy relationships between council officers and elected members need to cease.

Confusion, ego and blurred vision also means certain councillors are wrongly micromanaging council services whilst the majority, cross party, are rendered impotent to influence or engage with council decision making at any level. Cabinet members exude an impression of power but rarely express any dissent at cabinet meetings as the invisible rubber stamp flies through the air, pushing through controversial cuts. Democracy in the Second City is not a pretty sight: it's a famously male, predominantly pale and defiantly stale culture, in a council that naturally alienates and patronises communities whilst deluding itself that nothing is systemically rotten in the state of Birmingham. Cabinet members are chosen by the leader himself and the criteria for his hand picked choices are both a corporate and a political mystery. It may be untrue, but the perception exists that the loyalty of cabinet members is assured in return for big allowances that see Birmingham cabinet members paid very handsome salaries to deliver the leader's agenda.

Like many other authorities Birmingham loves fancy language and has, for example, imported a wealth of rhetoric into its public budget consultation meetings. Which literary impresario writes this nonsense, overloading the public via power point with references to jaws of doom, the end of local government as we know it, but worst of all, by hurling around references to the new era of localism and misconceived devolution, without offering any explanation of such lofty terms, which have no meaning for the general public ?

What is happening in Birmingham is a modern day rendition of the Emperor's New Clothes, a veritable political pantomime played out in public and broadcast on the world wide web, whilst the bean counters within the council applaud their own success.

Sir Bob Kerslake firmly recommends that Birmingham quickly reduces councillor numbers by a third, from 120 to 80, and advocates single councillors representing individual wards with all out elections every four years replacing the status quo, whereby one third are elected annually. Kerslake's proposed electoral reforms will no doubt unseat and destabilise sitting councillors in all parties, escalating back bench discontent and insecurity, particularly amongst the ruling Labour group; these radical changes threaten to erase Labour's sizeable majority and deliver constant coalition to the city for the foreseeable future.

Mr Pickles must be clapping his hands with glee whilst Albert Bore is reportedly furious with this political meddling. Little wonder if the leader is hopping mad with the proposals; rumour is he's simply hoping that the new Labour government he anticipates for 2015 will ditch this audacious nonsense. Sir Albert Bore has been dreaming of devolution for decades but Albert's devolution agenda has been roundly trashed and trumped by Kerslake's Review and deemed to be a failure.

Bore's devolution template creates District committees, a fancy new name for constituencies, and awards certain councillors titles and lucrative allowances, but little genuine power. Kerslake criticises leader Sir Albert Bore's insistence that District Committee meetings are held centrally within the council house during working hours, an

issue that has constantly been raised by public and councillors alike, but is defiantly ignored by the leader who cannot be swayed on this or any other contentious decisions; like the controversial garden tax, a charge to collect green waste that has alienated the city's MPs from the leadership as they worry about its impact on them in the 2015 general election. This man is not for turning.

Council officers attend District committees with plump reports in hand, and proceedings can be followed live on the council's webcasting system hashtag #bcclive. District committee meetings have the distinct air of a game of charades: Webcasts are archived online, all in the interests of democracy, but disappear forever after six months. With reduced minuting of committee meetings, due to staff cuts, we might therefore wonder why the council has paid such a big fat fee via Service Birmingham's stranglehold, for a flawed and transient webcasting service. Plenty of meetings are not live streamed or adequately minuted, but that's another story for another time.

What's really happening is fantasy politics of little value to Birmingham residents or businesses in this era of pain and austerity.

There is so much to chew over in Sir Bob's 68 page report, but for those not swimming in political circles and unfamiliar with the internal terrain in Birmingham council house, these findings will be of little interest or significance. But the reality is that the "organisational disobedience" flagged up so eloquently by Sir Bob captures the climate perfectly and tells the tale of a deeply dysfunctional council, where certain officers wield far too much political power.

The much feted new Library of Birmingham was a vanity project delivered to much acclaim by the outgoing Conservative leader Mike (now Lord Michael) Whitby, which lumbered the incoming labour group with a financial burden that is now seeing vital community libraries closed and others at peril of disappearing. 100 staff are to lose their jobs and opening hours are to be reduced from 73 to 40. The new library is a symbol of Birmingham's twisted historical emphasis on the glamorisation of the city centre at the expense of the majority of the people in the city, since the eighties, when Albert Bore first had a dream, a vision, to regenerate the city centre of Birmingham.

That is how politics is being delivered in this city, privileging vanity projects and ballet before youth services and community libraries, propping up the arts before protecting the poorest. Property disposals are another mystery: Who knows why certain council properties are sent to auction via local estate agents Bigwoods, to optimise their value, whilst others slip off into the ether via informal tender ? Talk of community asset transfer is a farce because councillors do not uniformly have access to a database of community assets by ward or constituency. Councillors are not notified of properties at risk of disposal so cannot share information with their community. Senior council officers have been delegated significant property disposal powers which means decisions do not go to cabinet for discussion or a vote so do not reach the public domain. The council newsroom does not list property tender or auction results. None of the council's many social media accounts refers to property despite Birmingham being asset rich cash poor and having an active disposal programme.

Birmingham is a tale of two cities headed up historically by a political leadership historically consumed with the toxic notion of legacy, be that a shiny new library or a fantasy of devolution. Ian Kershaw earlier this year correctly noted the long term cross party political apathy displayed by all the leaders towards the welfare of vulnerable children in Birmingham. Children simply were not a priority. That single fact says everything about how we arrive at the current scenario, whereby Birmingham is reportedly now the most reviewed city in Europe. Send in the improvement board, even if Eric Pickles is sniggering, so what ? Improvement must triumph over ego at this critical point in Birmingham.

Birmingham city council employs both a tranche of external media organisations, and a raft of press officers and has long established relationships with city journalists. Yet In a city replete with food banks, this Labour council fails to garner the media to adequately promote its own safety net, the delegated local welfare provision fund, and in fact plans to halve it without debating this in the council chamber, on the say so of a senior council officer that the fund is underused. Ironically, the leader Sir Albert Bore dreamt up a glossy new policy to protect the city's at risk services this year entitled "Stand up for Birmingham" but his administration can't or won't ring fence a crisis fund for the most vulnerable, chopping it by a sleight of hand at a small scrutiny committee meeting, minus the knowledge of the majority of councillors. That this decision doesn't make it to the heady heights of the cabinet agenda or interest the local media shows the lack of empathy for the poorest and most vulnerable in this era of

austerity. This is precisely how the political disconnect Kerslake identifies threatens people's welfare, increasing the impact of poverty, exacerbating stress and putting children at clear risk of increased neglect.

Kerslake rightly says the new Chief Executive Mark Rogers needs a director of economy to increase his capacity. Devolution needs to be reconfigured and explained in clear terms to the people of Birmingham. Councillors, need to be equipped to get on with their roles as community advocates championing the needs of their constituents. Information is power so councillors need to be made privy to the aspirations of the council, and business conducted behind closed doors needs to be put on the table.

A new order in Birmingham politics is imperative, one which sweeps out the old to embrace entrepreneurialism, skill the unemployed and build a fairer city where prosperity is shared. The city needs a new style of governance where the ideals of transparency and accountability really do mean something. The current style of governance is riddled with secrecy; too many deals and reports are not public but instead get pushed onto private agendas; they relate to finance property disposal, children's services, procurement, lucrative council contracts amongst others. The council is required to publish expenditure over £500 monthly, but an aggregation of this expenditure for the past two years reveals redactions to the tune of £22 million.

Finally, no one can doubt the tenacity and diligence of the current leader Sir Albert Bore. He is a micro managing man with one eye on his city and another foot very firmly in Europe. This city needs a champion of and for the people. It needs a visible strong and effective leader. The old guard in Birmingham city council are fading away. The succession battles are well under way.

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