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Local self-government denotes the right and the ability of local authorities, within the limits of the law, to regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs under their own responsibility and in the interests of the local population.¹

Introduction

- ¹ Referenda in Britain have consulted citizens on devolution (1979, 1997 and 2015), establishing the office of Mayor of London (1997), directly elected mayors (2002-2012) and the voting system (2012). The office of Mayor has a long-standing history in Britain. What is new is the manner in which some are now elected and the significance this office has taken on with the changes in their electoral legitimacy. This paper examines the debates about the advantages and disadvantages of directly electing mayors in the general context of the issues of the nature of democracy and the reliability of democratic institutions in Britain. This paper will consider this development in the context of debates about the working of democracy in Britain and specific questions raised about devolution and subsidiarity and by the neoliberal paradigm. It also analyses reasons for the relative successes and failures of the changes introduced, looking in particular at the scale at which direct democracy can operate.
- ² In the United Kingdom, devolution was put forward as an answer to perceived difficulties in the constitutional settlement, by which, according to the principle of consent by the people, principle which underlies the supremacy of parliament as legitimate authority representing the sovereignty of the nation² - although the representativity of Members of Parliament has long been debated³ -, but which also implies self-determination,

participation and power-sharing. Since 1999, legislative power on domestic matters and government has been devolved from Westminster to Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, in answer to a perceived democratic deficit.⁴ Among features said to be curbing democracy in the United Kingdom, interfering with the channels of parliamentary practice, denying voice to the electors through their representatives, were supranational trends - European integration, global firms, international markets⁵-, and sectarian interest groups - political parties, trades unions, lobbies.⁶

- 3 One way with which to check these incursions has been a continued scaling down of democratic institutions, a return to localism, favoured by activists on the fringes and mainstream political parties: communities and neighbourhoods becoming keywords in political discourse from the 1990s. Is this trend, identified as New Localism,⁷ to become a permanent feature of the British political system and part of the “quiet democratic Revolution”?⁸ Will the local demos become the new locus for democratic reassertion in the face of globalisation,⁹ a training-ground for political leadership, bringing in new generation and quality of political actors, “new sites of power”, “an important new route into politics for people from different backgrounds”?¹⁰ Does scale matter? What is the ideal size for effective political representation? Boundary commissions work ceaselessly to define the demographic-geographic limits for each parliamentary constituency, in an attempt to maintain fairly equal numbers per seat (average 95,000 population and 70,000 voters).¹¹ Can the debate opposing direct democracy to representative democracy be decided numerically? Is there a cut-off point at which direct elections no longer appear to be attractive to the voter? Might it be said that representative democracy is in crisis and that directly elected mayors are part of a phenomenon that represents a major challenge for national parliaments?¹² These questions which will be addressed in the light of the introduction of democratically elected mayors in the English political landscape.
- 4 On 15 November 2012 A Directly elected mayor was elected in Bristol, following legislation introduced by the Conservative-LibDem coalition government, taking the number of directly elected mayors (DEMs) in the United Kingdom to sixteen (Table 1). The first direct mayoral election in 2000 concerned the high profile election of the mayor of London,¹³ followed by a further nine elections in 2002: three London boroughs and a bevy of northern English towns. A few towns in the south followed suit in 2005.¹⁴ The *localism act* (2011) and the provision for referenda for locally-elected mayors required that the people living in the twelve largest towns in England,¹⁵ hitherto unenthusiastic about the idea, should choose by direct consultation whether or not to maintain the ancient indirect election of the mayor by the elected town council or choose a mayor elected directly by the local people. Ten of the twelve towns¹⁶ held a referendum on 3 May 2012, local election day for the council elections. Without consulting their electorate, the town councils of Leicester and Liverpool opted directly for an elected mayor and duly elected Peter Soulsby in 2011, MP for Leicester South since 2005 and previously member of Leicester council, and Joe Anderson in May 2012, Labour leader of Liverpool Council since 2010. Salford joined their ranks after a petition for a referendum in 2011. Analysts predicted: “*by the end of 2012, directly-elected mayors will be leading the vast majority of England’s largest cities. [it is] a potentially decisive moment for local democracy: the point at which the mayoral model could tip from being an interesting innovation to the accepted model for governance of England’s cities.*”¹⁷ Their optimism was dashed by the results of the May 2012 referenda.¹⁸ Nine of the ten towns consulted (all but Bristol) rejected the proposal. In addition, subsequently three towns have reverted to the former system (Doncaster,

Hartlepool and Stoke-on-Trent) and only one has since chosen to directly elect its mayor (Copeland).

- 5 Local councils provide and control services to the local population, and are responsible for education, social care, housing, transport & highways, culture, environment, planning. The larger towns given the opportunity to choose a DEM, have between 15 000 (Coventry, population 315 000) and 58 000 employees (Birmingham, population 1.036 m).¹⁹ In view of the importance of these councils in the daily lives of their inhabitants and local government in major, and, for some, symbolic urban areas, what reasons can be adduced to explain this resounding rejection?

Table 1. Directly Elected Mayors in England, July 2015

| | | | |
|------------------|------|-----------------|----------------------|
| Bedford BC | 2002 | Frank Branston | Independent (d.2009) |
| | 2009 | Dave Hodgson | Liberal Democrat |
| Bristol CC | 2012 | George Ferguson | Independent |
| Copeland | 2015 | Mike Starkie | Independent |
| Doncaster MBC* | 2002 | Martin Winter | Independent (Labour) |
| | 2009 | Peter Davies | English Democrats |
| | 2013 | Ros Jones | Labour |
| Hackney LB | 2006 | Jules Pipe | Labour |
| Hartlepool BC** | 2002 | Stuart Drummond | Independent |
| Leicester CC | 2011 | Peter Soulsby | Labour |
| Lewisham LB | 2002 | Steve Bullock | Labour |
| Liverpool CC | 2012 | Joe Anderson | Labour |
| London | 2000 | Ken Livingstone | Labour |
| | 2008 | Boris Johnson | Conservative |
| Mansfield DC | 2002 | Tony Egginton | Independent |
| | 2015 | Kate Allsop | Independent |
| Middlesbrough BC | 2002 | Ray Mallon | Independent |
| | 2015 | Dave Budd | Labour |
| Newham LB | 2002 | Sir Robin Wales | Labour |

| | | | |
|---|------|-------------------|------------------|
| North Tyneside MBC | 2002 | Linda Arkley | Conservative |
| | 2005 | John Harrison | Labour |
| | 2009 | Linda Arkley | Conservative |
| | 2013 | Norma Redfearn | Labour |
| Salford CC | 2012 | Ian Stewart | Labour |
| Stoke-on-Trent*** | 2002 | Mike Wolfe | Independent |
| | 2005 | Mark Meredith | Labour |
| Torbay Council | 2005 | Nick Bye | Conservative |
| | 2011 | Gordon Oliver | Independent |
| Tower Hamlets LB | 2010 | Lutfur Rahman | Independent |
| | 2015 | John Biggs | Labour |
| Watford BC | 2002 | Dorothy Thornhill | Liberal Democrat |
| <p>Key: BC - Borough Council, CC - City Council, DC - District Council, LB - London Borough, MBC - Metropolitan Borough Council.</p> <p>* Doncaster rejected the abolition of the DEM in a referendum in 2012.</p> <p>** Hartlepool returned to the committee system in 2013 after a petition by its citizens in 2012.</p> <p>*** The DEM system was abolished for Stoke-on-Trent in 2009 following consultation by the council in October 2008 over the government's withdrawal of the executive model they had adopted (Elected Mayor and Manager). The Elected Mayor and Cabinet system was rejected for a return to a Council Leader and Cabinet structure.</p> | | | |

Origins of the office of Directly Elected Mayor

- 6 The office of mayor is rooted in medieval origins (Anglo-Saxon or Nordic hundreds, wapentakes and shires, and Norman counties, boroughs, parishes) representing the burghers and freemen in towns. Elected by his pairs, the mayor was *Prima Inter Pares*, the leading councillor. Lord Mayors remain figurative chain-wearing ceremonial personalities representing cities, or, in the case of London, the corporations of the town which have little or no power outside their self-regulatory role of professions.
- 7 The arcane nature of local council politics in the second half of the twentieth century have been described in detail.²⁰ Local government in Britain had evolved in the final quarter of the 20th century into a hotch-potch of different levels of local responsibility and size of area and population. The range of denominations, borough council (BC), district council (DC), metropolitan borough council (MBC), city council (CC), but also county council and parish, give an idea of the complexity. Given the fact that

conglomerations merge boundaries between neighbouring areas it is difficult to define the scope of a 'city' or town: Merseyside is a "city-region" centered on Liverpool functioning since 2008 with its own 'super cabinet' comprised of leaders of the five Merseyside local authorities.²¹ For statistical purposes, a new entity, the Primary Urban Area, now takes into account the main concentrations of population in England, often incorporating several distinct cities. The prime example of this is the London area, composed of thirty-six London boroughs (LB) but encompassing the whole area within the London orbital motorway, the M25, and beyond.

- 8 The contradictions inherent in the system of local government, the way in which it evolved over centuries, paradoxically becoming a locus of pride and resistance to centralization, but with little real power to intervene in peoples' lives, have contributed to an overbearing sentiment of the general aimlessness of local government and a lack of interest in local politics.

From this historical quagmire we can trace the significance – and limits – of the locale, the place, for it is constituted as a bulwark against the perceived tyranny of a high spending and taxing Westminster, a site of personal and collective identity, and simultaneously an arena where frugality and laissez faire were the orders of the day; [...] This also locks into a general disinterest in local government on the part of the electorate [...] since power emanates from the centre there is little point in local political engagement, and since Whitehall still controls around 70 per cent of public expenditure.²²

- 9 In 1997 the Labour Government came to power with a manifesto including wide-ranging constitutional reform designed to modernise the British political system by extending and reforming the democratic processes that included devolution of power to Scotland, Wales & Northern Ireland, the reform of the House of Lords and the reform of the electoral system. The introduction of directly elected mayors is part of this process and can be seen as a logical extension of the devolution path. With the collapse of the promotion of the idea of regional assemblies in England, signalled by the resounding no-vote from voters in the North-East (4th November 2004), intended to counter-balance the powers granted to Scotland,²³ further solutions to increasing democracy for England were sought. Directly elected mayors can be placed directly within the context of "England's most profound and stifling democratic deficiency – namely the excessive levels of centralization that characterize its governance".²⁴ The UK clearly remains among those countries with a centrally organized administration.²⁵
- 10 The shaking up of local government by the Thatcher & Major governments, the spreading quangocracy (5000 NGOs employing 60,000 people performing services previously provided by local and national government) described as having "usurped the role of local authorities"²⁶, and the electroshock of the Poll Tax (1989-90) had all stimulated debate. Local government was described as being "under siege".²⁷ The Commission for Local Democracy, an independent, all-party review body was established in 1993, when it was feared that local democracy was in danger, suffering from its own inertia and lack of impact. The Commission recommendations involved a reformed local government election system whose first premise was that "local authorities should consist of a directly elected Council and a directly elected Leader/Mayor".²⁸
- 11 Thus the idea of directly elected mayors surfaced as a way of making local politics more powerful and reinforcing the politically weak local authorities and councils after a long period during which central government had grown stronger. The priority given to this reform is indicated by the number of discussion papers published. In the first year of the

Blair government, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions produced three white papers on *Modernising Local Government*.²⁹ A further fourteen papers giving guidance and instructions for the implementation of the reforms envisaged were produced over the next three years by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

- 12 Discussions involved not only the principle of a directly elected mayor, but also the executive/non-executive distribution of power. The *2000 Local Government Act* required the local authorities in England and Wales to express their preference not only in terms of direct/indirectly elected mayor, but also in terms of the executive model: indirectly elected leader and cabinet/directly elected mayor and cabinet/directly elected mayor and council manager (an import from the American urban government model). Local referendums, required if the direct election model was chosen by the council, were held from 2001 on, and the first direct mayoral elections were held in 2002. Despite the change wrought with the emergence of new political personalities, unconnected with the old, traditional party system, the less than enthusiastic adoption by sixteen cities in a largely urban country and the turnout and percentage of votes obtained by the successful candidates were disappointing.³⁰
- 13 In 2010, when David Cameron became Prime Minister, a new impetus was provided by the Conservative-LibDem Coalition government anxious to firstly provide a political framework for Cameron's Big Society and, secondly, to pay lip service to the LibDem agenda for greater democracy. On a visit to Bristol in April 2012, prior to the referendum on directly-elected mayors and the local elections, David Cameron, as the fist-banging proponent of local city life, expounded his version of participatory democracy:
- You can see that place you live in stagnate or reach for something more. Join the race or fall behind. If you want a powerful figure who loves your city running your city – get out and vote Yes. If you want your local champion speaking to the heart of government, banging their fist on the table for Birmingham, or Bristol or Leeds – get out and vote Yes. If you want to see your city grow more prominent, more powerful, more prosperous – get out and vote Yes.³¹
- 14 Cameron's arguments draw on those of centralism v localism, democratic renewal and greater efficiency. The Warwick Commission, appointed to examine the role of elected mayors "*in providing leadership to cities*" put the shortcomings of previous local government bluntly: "*faceless, placeless, pointless local government*".³²

Democratic deficit?

- 15 Enquiries into the workings of local government and surveys of public opinion about them, revealed that these three points, personality, identity & dynamics, were the major elements which a change in the set-up was intended to remedy. The winning combination would provide accountability, visibility and civic pride, getting things done, sweeping away the drawbacks local councils were infamous for: bureaucratic stasis, apathy, and party political polarization.³³ It would also allow more forward-looking policies and long-term development: "*due to the fact that mayoral democratic mandates are stronger and come from a wider constituency*".³⁴
- 16 The increased kudos and powers inherent in a stronger mandate, would in turn "*herald a more radical shift in powers from central to local government*" providing effective leadership, a clearly identifiable person in charge, "*greater local autonomy*", comprising a powerful

lobby if “a group of mayors acting in concert” spoke with one voice to central government.³⁵ The idea of democratically elected mayors was a way of continuing the momentum for constitutional change and establishing a form of devolution for England by other means. “Mayors, we argue, are therefore necessary if we are to begin to unravel the excessive levels of centralism that characterize English governance. As well as their undoubted local merits, elected mayors may also contain one part of the answer to the increasingly vexatious ‘English Question’”.³⁶ Reviving less than lively democratic practices, directly elected mayors would further “reconnect(...) voter and politician”, thus anchoring democratic practice soundly at the local level, or creating a “localised demos”.³⁷

- 17 The local election and referenda turnouts are thus gauges by which popular participation in democratic procedure can be measured. Ironically, in view of dissatisfaction with the local council set-up and theoretical preferences showing only 25% support for previous or existing system of local elections,³⁸ “the history of mayoral referenda is not great”,³⁹ both in terms of turnout and of result. Four-fifths of the local referenda on the question to date (forty-two out of fifty-six) resulted in a rejection of directly elected mayors. Turnout in local elections has not improved, peaking only when the local elections coincide with general elections in 2001, 2005 and 2010. Despite the referenda, despite the direct election of mayors already in place, the 2012 turnout was significantly lower, the lowest since DEMs were introduced in 2000, 10-11% in Sunderland, and two London Boroughs: Southwark and Ealing. The local public’s disinterest in itself registered their disenchantment with the proposed changes as a way of improving participation.
- 18 In addition, the number of referenda held following the possibility for participatory democracy, offered by the clause allowing a petition by 5% of the official number of electors to initiate change, by which citizens can take charge of the process thereby countering the supposed stranglehold by local politicians opposing changes, remains unsurprisingly low: Tower Hamlets in 2010,⁴⁰ Salford in 2011, Copeland in 2014. In 2013 a petition for a referendum for the abolition of the Directly Elected Mayor successfully led to the return to the council system. Five further northern and Midland towns were being canvassed by lobbies for a referendum,⁴¹ while in Oxford, a Campaign for a Democratically Elected Mayor pushed for a new referendum in view of the previous low turnout.⁴² All councils now publish the petition figure for the year in hand. In itself, this revived facility to obtain political change by petition, used extensively in Scotland since devolution,⁴³ is a novelty, but its lack of take-up indicates that DEMs have not made an impression on the public or that dissatisfaction with the leader-council system is not as widespread as suggested.
- 19 It is in fact the profiles of the new mayors that suggest that councils and leaders have to be unpopular for the idea of a DEM to catch on. Adonis & Gash underline the importance of local campaigns and the efforts of local elites to protect their advantages. According to Lodge,⁴⁴ the number of independents among the newly elected DEMs (seven out of twenty-two – see Table 1) represents the unclamping of political parties grip on local politics, whereby DEMs “counter public concerns about the monolithic character of the traditional political class”. Indeed it has also been suggested that protest votes contributed to the success of three out of four new DEMs.⁴⁵ However, the electoral geography of DEMs suggests that those areas where protest votes operate, are areas suffering from urban decline and poverty, thus making the challenge for improvement and the risk of failure even greater: “the situation is often ambiguous – so poor that the new mayor has a good chance of

improving things and simultaneously so poor that the new mayor has few resources with which to improve things".⁴⁶

- 20 Bar the notable exceptions of Bristol and Torbay, the cities with a DEM remain heavily concentrated in distinct areas: the London area (7) and the Midlands and the North (10). Similarities however can be detected in most of these localities. These come under two headings: deprivation and disaffection. Locally "*referendums were more often sparked by a sense of either political or economic failure.*"⁴⁷ In the London area: "*Each authority was of a similar stripe. All are in east London, had suffered as a result of the decline in London's docks and manufacturing and were in desperate need of investment and regeneration and all had long histories of Labour Party domination.*"⁴⁸
- 21 A similar portrait of the towns in the Midlands and North would tell the same story, social deprivation, decline of old industries, and traditional left-wing politics. "*Birmingham has long been perceived as an underperforming city. This is partly because of local political and economic history, and partly because of regional issues such as a traditional resistance on the part of the other six West Midlands authorities to Birmingham exerting "too much" influence.*"⁴⁹ That does not mean that all socially and economically deprived Labour strongholds would be tempted to adopt direct election of mayors, indeed the nine cities rejecting DEMs in 2012 - including Birmingham - prove the contrary, but certainly should provide food for thought for Labour councillors in such areas.⁵⁰
- 22 Traditional local political party strongholds had become counter-productive. This is not the first time since the 1990s that Labour government reforms have upset the Labour party apple cart. Significantly, mayoral candidates from the Labour party have frequently been disavowed by their party and stood as independents in the face of opposition from local party selection committee. The "*relative independence from party discipline [of directly-elected mayors] through their direct mandate and through their four year term*" (Warwick Commission, 2012: 7) gave them a clear advantage when "*Many of the successful mayors were either campaigning against unpopular local party domination or were in themselves regarded as charismatic by their supporters*" (24). As *The Guardian* editorial put it: "[...] it is not just cities. Politics could get a boost too. As the party of urban England, Labour in particular has much to gain from elected mayors. Too often, though, it seems preoccupied by what it might lose"⁵¹, whilst Professor Keith Grint reflected diplomatically "*It is clear from the case of London that an elected mayor offers political possibilities that traditional party political governance systems do not.*"⁵² The Bristol election in November 2012 further confirms the disenchantment with traditional party politics, with an independent candidate winning against the Labour candidate, in a town where the council had a majority of LibDem councillors, proclaiming in his manifesto what could be taken as criticism of the previous political set-up, "*I want a truly democratic Bristol, governed for everyone.*"⁵³
- 23 Alongside arguments in favour of independence from traditional local or national party political division, the visibility and accountability offered by a directly-elected mayor, are seen as advantages which would cancel out the anonymity of a 'local council' where the 'buck' could be passed on to a committee. This would be replaced by approachability and interaction with an accountable mayor. Evidence suggests links between civil society and local leaders has been increased. "*In a democracy, political power cannot legitimately be exercised invisibly.*"⁵⁴ The Mayor of Watford, explained: "*As a directly elected Mayor I am elected by my town, whereas a Leader of the Council is elected by their own party - councillors choose their leader, people choose the Mayor. It's more of a public facing role, so I am more well-known in the Borough, and am therefore more directly accountable to local people.*"⁵⁵ Recognition

in the street may seem anecdotal, but it does indicate public support and increases independence from advisors and councils.⁵⁶

- 24 The change in organizational model in local government brings changes in management methods. The qualities of leadership bringing cohesiveness, direction and representation together in the office of mayor⁵⁷ were thought to be likely to reinvigorate what were considered out of date, ineffective procedures, thus releasing local government from the paralysis it appeared to be locked into: shackled, lacking in willpower, afraid of taking decisions. “*One of the benefits of the distance from party politics that mayors bring is that it enables [them] to focus outwards and to avoid the scourge of committee work*”.⁵⁸ Or, as the Mayor of Lewisham, Sir Steve Bullock, himself former leader of the council, remarked disparagingly ‘*having a council leader was a way of not making a decision*’.⁵⁹
- 25 Increased devolved powers would be the reward for increased responsibility and matching the greater efficiency expected.⁶⁰ The Conservative-LibDem coalition government policy Unlocking Growth in Cities, launched in December 2011, specified: “*Where cities want to take on significant new powers and funding, they will need to demonstrate strong, visible and accountable leadership and effective decision-making structures*”.⁶¹ In February 2012, Liverpool City Council – without resorting to a referendum – agreed to the idea of a DEM, attracted by the financial rewards the ‘city deals’ available could bring (£130m).⁶²
- 26 But it was not just the city council which would benefit from new powers in local development, business too seems to have taken on board the directly elected mayor as a positive turn for local businesses. In Bristol, where “*some of the most vocal supporters of an elected mayor are entrepreneurs with a strong dash of impatience about their home city*”,⁶³ and in Salford, the business lobby supported the direct election of mayors as a way of enhancing local issues and removing city politics from the local political parties, deemed to be more concerned with national politics than with city interests. During the debate in Leeds preceding the vote on a DEM, “*the pro-mayor lobby felt that local government was failing in the north of England and that all the powers were going to London. An elected mayor would be able to meet with influential figures like David Cameron and business leaders and secure investment and more powers in the city*”.⁶⁴
- 27 The advantages ensuing from the new directly elected mayorships were thus both political and economic. On the one hand, a mayor had a direct mandate from the public that gave him/her greater leverage over the council while providing a single figurehead for the town who could stand above local political party in-fighting and be a credible spokesperson in the national arena. On the other, local businesses would be reassured by the independence, efficiency and powers of a mayor, whose remit was to serve the whole community (not just the political party in power), ensuring the social and economic development of the city, encouraging investment, employment and improved infrastructures.

Democratic surfeit?

- 28 However these very aspects were also those that could be deemed negative. The “*risks and delusions of Superman politics*” were highlighted in the debate about the usefulness of DEMS: “*two very dangerous factors [...]: low and unrepresentative turnouts and powers that can be exercised with surprisingly little scrutiny, let alone checks and balances*”.⁶⁵ In Leeds, the lack

of definition of a mayor's powers "raised the spectre of power-hungry dictators accruing powers to themselves".⁶⁶ Fears that direct elections pandered to populists were frequent. Direct elections were thought to be a travesty of the British political tradition according to the Burkean definition of representative democracy. "The concept of directly elected mayors is both un-British and dangerous because it concentrates for too much power into the hands of one man (or woman) with the required check and balances. [...] Are we to have a directly elected Prime Minister (Fuehrer?) next? That would be very dangerous indeed!"⁶⁷

- 29 In 2012, Peter Davies, Mayor of Doncaster, member of the far right party, English Democrats, and former UKIP member, gained a legal judgment against his own council to allow volunteers run council libraries.⁶⁸ His declared priorities show how a Mayor can have a specific programme that differs from the council membership – Doncaster council had a Labour majority (50 councillors) and a Conservative and Lib-Dem opposition (8 and 3 councillors respectively).⁶⁹ In Nottingham, fears of a similar situation, with the election of a far right mayor might be elected, led the Lib-Dem chairman, despite his castigating local Labour council management and his party's support of DEMs, to approve the No-vote in the town in April 2012 which led to the city refusing to adopt a DEM.⁷⁰ Further rejection of elected mayors came from those who thought that the idea, along with other policies and strategies introduced by the Blair government, DEMs, was an American graft inappropriate for the British political tradition. The Labour Leader of Coventry Council, a town where 63% of those voting rejected the idea of a DEM, explained: *The public have faith in the ability of ten councillors who individually may not get it right but working together the right decisions are made for the right reasons. We don't need a six-figure salary person to achieve things!*⁷¹

- 30 The successful no-vote campaign in Manchester bears out the words of its council leader Richard Leese: "What is on offer at the moment does not – in any way, shape or form – help us with what we want to do".⁷² The Warwick Commission concluded, "Where the electorate is relatively happy with the current situation – as they appear to be in Manchester and Wakefield – then switching to a mayor may not be appropriate". Despite these reservations, the Warwick Commission concluded in favour of elected mayors who:

offer a real opportunity for change in a place where change is needed and also a way of invigorating a body politic that seems to look more like a nautilus than the vigorous and committed body of leaders and voters that once turned the Victorian slums that shamed us into the Victorian cities that the world envied. [...] the mayoral system might not be the best system but it might be better than the current system in some places; it might be the least worst.⁷³

Conclusion

- 31 It is difficult to establish the role and impact of directly elected mayors with so few examples over such a relatively short period. Researchers embedded in the political process are to examine these in regards to Bristol over the coming term of mayoral office, the "Bristol Civic Leadership collaborative project on change in local governance"⁷⁴. It would seem that those who have been elected have been better at sharing power with their councils, have effectively had more authority, and given both more direction and a better performance, at least as far as London borough mayors are concerned.⁷⁵ Jules Pipe (Hackney), Sir Robin Wales (Newham) and Sir Steve Bullock (Lewisham) have been "among the most successful mayors".⁷⁶ Dave Hodgson in Bedford and Dorothy Thornhill

in Watford have also continually held office since 2009 and 2002 weathering respectively two and three re-elections.

- 32 Outside London, there are twelve established mayoralities at the time of writing⁷⁷. These are considered to have better performance in terms of internal management and of quality of services provided to taxpayers, lower turnover of leadership implying greater stability. For what have been considered failures (Doncaster & Stoke on Trent) there are notable successes (Hartlepool & Hackney) – although the former has abandoned the system – with “*the quiet competence of mayors in Watford and Mansfield*” perhaps indicating the happy medium.⁷⁸ In terms of mayoral 'performance', analysts claim that on the whole the introduction of the office has been successful with the improvements towns with DEMs have achieved in providing services.

The popular electoral mandate of elected mayors, their high profile, capacity to embody a particular place, and relative independence from local parties, mean that they are well placed to practice such a style of leadership. The coordination of partnerships involving public, private and voluntary sector bodies has been a hallmark of this group of mayors.⁷⁹

- 33 However, by 2012 it was still only an “*insignificant minority of governance systems in the UK*” with 12 out of 410 local authorities having chosen the system since the 2000 Local Government Act.⁸⁰ The increase in that number to 16 takes the percentage of local authorities affected from 3% to 4.5% of local authorities.
- 34 Does size matter? It could turn out that the directly elected mayor is suitable not for the conurbations but for more easily identifiable medium-size towns. “*Ironically, while advocated for big cities, the directly elected mayor may prove to be more suited to the smaller town than for a big city with its complex issues and mixtures of communities*”.⁸¹ The towns with DEMs to date appear to bear this out. Only three of the towns, cities and districts with a population over 300,000 in the UK, London, Liverpool and Bristol, have a directly elected mayor. The nine towns refusing to adopt them in 2012 are all over or near that size⁸². Conversely, the other towns or London boroughs with a DEM all have a population of under 300 000⁸³.
- 35 Is there a cut-off point at which direct elections no longer appear to be attractive to the voter? Can the debate opposing direct democracy to representative democracy be decided numerically? Should the dream of directly elected mayors “*as a gateway to the kind of far-reaching programme of devolving greater responsibility for revenue generation, public service management and economic development that many national politicians are beginning to envisage*”.⁸⁴ Will success breed success? “*For others, the mayoral change has been a chance to build on existing strengths. Intriguingly, it may be that the city mayor referenda trigger much greater interest in the whole process than previously was the case*”.⁸⁵ Will the face of politics in the UK be changed by the election of DEMs as it was by devolution? “*The result may well be a fundamental shift away from Whitehall, both in terms of raw power and in what could be the real tipping-point of localism, where the aspiring politician of the future chooses to seek office*”.⁸⁶ While regional autonomy has advanced considerably in Scotland, Wales & Northern Ireland, local democracy on the city scale nevertheless remains difficult to envisage as the sole pattern for local government in the UK. Are national parliaments likely to divest themselves further? Will new autonomous locally elected entities be given more control, a form of devolution English-style?
- 36 The plans revealed in 2014 to grant the Greater Manchester Combined Authority⁸⁷ greater autonomy in its provision of services appear to indicate that the format suits both.

Manchester voted no to a DEM in 2012, but after consultation with the ten leaders of the local authorities, an interim Mayor (selected by the Greater Manchester councilors) was appointed from June 2015, prior to a direct election in 2017. The additional powers and budget attributed to the GMCA, together with a two-thirds majority veto for local councils, appear to have won over the local leaders. With a 40% increase in central government grant, it will also be responsible for health and social care, but not education which remains in the hands of the boroughs, giving the mayor more power over the daily lives of citizens than the mayor of London. The “devo-deal” was promoted as a democratic advance by the Manchester mayor Sir Richard Leese, apparently happier with the terms than he had been two years earlier: “*Greater Manchester has been in the vanguard of the national devolution debate. It was clear that an over-centralised national system was not delivering the best results for our people or our economy. (...) we can now demonstrate what a city region with greater freedoms can achieve and contribute further to the growth of the UK.*” (*Manchester Evening News*, 3 November 2014) It remains to be seen whether Birmingham and Bradford-Leeds will follow suit.

- 37 By mid-2015, over one-quarter of the total population in England was affected by DEMs, 14.5 million people (total English population 53m), with the metropolitan areas of London (8.5m), Manchester (2.7m) and Liverpool (1.5m) making up the vast majority (12.7m). The powers granted to Manchester were promoted as a counterpart to devolution for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Contrary to English regions, these cities have effective coordinated policies and a civic identity. Following the success of the democratic debate engendered by the Scottish referendum in September 2015, calls were made to continue to roll out enhanced powers for cities in England: “*It is our job now, inspired by Scotland, is to demand devolution to cities at the very least.*”⁸⁸
- 38 Five of the cities which have had DEMs are located in the six metropolitan counties of England⁸⁹ (Manchester, Salford, Liverpool, Doncaster, North Tyneside) each totaling between 1.3m and 2.6m inhabitants. Whether these metropolitan counties could become city-regions with an overall mayor is a mute question. In Greater Manchester, the component cities metropolitan boroughs have successfully worked together and agreed to one. On Merseyside, despite calls for a city-region DEM to represent the whole conurbation, local rivalries are paramount.
- 39 While these new powers and DEMs in cities in England appear to be an answer to the issues of power-sharing, participation in the elections has not vastly increased. Voice has been given through the possibility of citizen petitions for referenda, traditional political parties have been less prominent in the process, access to power widened and unaligned mayors elected. DEMs have so far not appeared to directly challenge Westminster. The ideal size for effective political representation also appears to be undecided. The majority of the sixteen DEMs are in towns with under 50 000 inhabitants. However, four of the ten largest cities in England – London, Liverpool, Manchester and Bristol, have adopted the format. It remains to be seen whether the supposed democratic advantages of DEMs and/or financial incentives from central government can persuade Birmingham (1m), Leeds, Bradford and Wakefield (1.5m), or Sheffield (0.5m) to abandon traditional local party politics and representative democracy and either jointly as metropolitan regions or singly embark on this new path.

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Cardigan to Aberystwyth –, held a referendum which rejected the idea of a DEM. This paper thus deals with England, the only nation in the United Kingdom to have DEMs.

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72. Harris, *op.cit.*
73. Warwick Commission: 36, 37.
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76. Parker, *op.cit.* : 20.
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78. Parker, *op.cit.* : 23.
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82. Birmingham 1,020,589; Leeds 726,939; Sheffield 530,375; Bradford 483,422; Manchester 430,818; Wakefield 317,342; Coventry 306,503; Nottingham 283,969; Newcastle-upon-Tyne 282,338.
83. Bristol 432,500; Leicester 294,830; Doncaster 291,804; Stoke-on-Trent 254,438 (reverted back to council leader system in 2009); Lewisham 255,000; Newham 243,891; Tower Hamlets 235,000; Salford 229,179; Hackney 219,200; Gateshead 200,968; North Tyneside 193,619, Bedford 157,500; Middlesbrough 140,500, Torbay 134,000; Mansfield 99,600; Watford 79,726, Copeland 55,860.
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85. Warwick Commission: 24.

86. Thomson, *op.cit.*

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ABSTRACTS

Over the past decade and a half in Britain, citizens have been consulted by referenda on questions of devolution, the office of Mayor of London (1997), directly elected mayors (2002-2012) and, more recently, the voting system (2012). The office of Mayor has a long-standing history in Britain. What is new is the manner in which some are now elected and the significance this office has taken on with the changes in their electoral legitimacy. This paper examines the debates about the advantages and disadvantages of directly electing mayors and on the nature of democracy and the reliability of democratic institutions in Britain. It also analyses reasons for the relative successes and failures of the changes introduced, looking in particular at the scale at which direct democracy can operate.

Depuis quinze ans au Royaume-Uni les électeurs ont été consultés par référendum sur des changements concernant la dévolution des pouvoirs exécutifs, la création d'un poste de maire de Londres (1997), l'élection des maires au suffrage direct (2002-2012) et, dernièrement, le système électoral (2012). Le poste de maire a une longue histoire au Royaume-Uni. La nouveauté est la manière dont ils sont élus et l'importance accrue de ce poste qui va de pair avec l'autorité qu'apporte le scrutin direct. Cet article analyse les débats sur les avantages et les inconvénients de l'élection directe des maires dans le contexte de la problématique de la nature de la démocratie et d'interrogations sur l'efficacité des institutions démocratique au Royaume-Uni. L'article examine les raisons qui expliquent le succès ou non des changements que représente cette nouvelle forme démocratique, en particulier l'échelle à laquelle la démocratie directe semble être opérative.

INDEX

Chronological index: contemporaine

Keywords: direct democracy, mayor, local authorities, councils, devolution

Mots-clés: démocratie directe, maire, autorités territoriales, conseils municipaux, dévolution des pouvoirs

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Geographical index: Royaume-Uni

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