

City Regions and Mayors: Can they rescue local democracy?

Introduction:

Community spirit is a precious thing these days. As individuals have become richer and more mobile, the bonds which used to link people together within their community have dramatically loosened. The loss of community is blamed on many things. Consumerism, the breakdown of family, the shift from rural to urban economies, the decline of old industries, long distance travel, globalization, the rise of secularism, the primacy of the individual – all are held to have played their part.

The continued erosion of the social and physical infrastructure which is required to make communities viable should be a cause of acute concern for anyone who cares about the future of Britain. A recent trend towards gigantism in both the public and corporate sectors appears to be making matters worse: 60 local and cottage hospitals closed in 2002 alone. Britain lost a third of its local bank network from 1992 to 2002; up to 20 traditional pubs close every month. The average person now has to travel 893 miles a year to buy food, as local food shops give way to large supermarkets. Large, impersonal institutions – both public and private – now overshadow our everyday needs, from buying food to seeking medical help. No wonder sociologists talk about the angst of an atomised society, where individuals no longer know who is responsible for what, where the value of face-to-face relationships has been elbowed aside by institutional and commercial economies of scale. Powerlessness, alienation, and anger inevitably follow as individuals seek to make sense of a world organised by people and institutions they no longer know nor can communicate with.

This essay is a short attempt to highlight one important aspect of this crisis: the role of central government in Britain in actively emasculating local communities, and what could be done to devolve more power to communities from the stifling grip of Whitehall's bureaucratic machinery.

One of the most disingenuous features of the current British political debate is that politicians of all parties are falling over themselves to laud the virtues of decentralization, and condemn the sins of excessive centralization. Yet many of the same politicians have either actively connived in the destruction of local political identity in this country, or have little practical idea how to reinvigorate local political autonomy, especially in England.

This essay suggests that the emerging model of city-regions in many other parts of Europe could serve as useful inspiration for devolution in England, especially following the rejection of the regional model in the referendum in the North East last year. It also argues that Mayoral politics, whilst not without flaws, has



the potential to reinvigorate local politics by dramatising and personalising those political issues which voters most care about.

Democracy Destroyed:

It is fashionable to claim that we have too many politicians, doing too little, at great expense to the public. The truth is that we have far too many politicians who are powerless to do anything meaningful because so many decisions are now taken by an army of unaccountable quangos, political appointees, boards, and yes-men and yes-women whose only real allegiance is to the highly centralised apex of power at the top of Government. The fabric of our democracy has been steadily weakened as a small coterie of Government Ministers and officials in London have arrogated ever more power to themselves by evading Parliament and by passing local government through the erection of a vast panoply of subservient, and largely invisible, technocratic bodies in the country at large.

In his pamphlet, *Big Bang Localism*, Simon Jenkins cites the example of London, which in the year 1900 elected 12000 politicians to run local services. By 1997, the number of elected people had shrunk to 2000, whilst the number of Whitehall appointees had ballooned to 10000. According to Jenkins, we have 2605 electors on average per elected official, compared to 116 in France and 250 in Germany. Our local councillors are outnumbered three times over by 60000 unelected officials, appointed by Whitehall, running 5200 local quangos that dominate the running of our local services. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister is supposed to exercise direct oversight of 410 councils (and 10000 parish and town councils), 47 fire authorities and 39 police authorities.

This infrastructure of centralized control is underpinned by a relentless barrage of central targets. Central auditing costs now run at £600 million, and the Government's inspection regime costs a staggering £1 billion per year. The first Blair term imposed no less than 6000 targets on councils and quangos, enforced by financial straitjackets, ring fencing, capping, invasive inspectorates and crude political threats. The tyranny of targets, particularly in the health service, has produced meaningless official records worthy of a dark comedy of Soviet Russia; like the 88-year-old whose 24-hour wait to be seen at his nearest casualty ward was officially recorded as 30 minutes. Some hospitals have evaded the target that is supposed to limit patients' time on hospital trolleys to four hours, by seating them in chairs instead.

No wonder, despite the massive recent increase in public funding of the National Health Service, health outcomes are still constrained by the effects of over-centralization. Hospital infections, in part a direct result of bureaucratic



mismanagement of local hygiene conditions (contracting out of cleaning services etc), cost the NHS a whopping £1 billion. The rise of medication errors in the NHS, now costing £500 million a year, have also been linked to the effects of a system which administers care without considering the specific needs of individual patients, preferring instead to administer formulaic remedies under great time pressure.

The key point is that our public services remain largely unaccountable to those who use them, the long suffering British public. There is unambiguous evidence from abroad that public services that are disaggregated and made more accountable to local users become more responsive to the needs of local communities. In a comparative study of secondary education systems in Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK, Dr Richard Grayson and myself discovered a direct correlation between the degree of financial and political devolution in the school systems, and the satisfaction which parents expressed in their local schools. Strikingly, there also seemed to be a direct correlation between the amount of local tax voters are prepared to pay and the level of fiscal devolution in the running of public services. Put simply, if parents feel that their taxes are going to local schools accountable to the local community which will benefit local children, their willingness to provide the resources necessary for a first class education rises.

The British example, of schools increasingly accountable only to distant Ministers and officials in London, dependent directly on Whitehall largesse and regulated only according to national standards and targets, is a guaranteed recipe for public alienation and poor performance.

The political challenge, then, is clear: to make the case for devolution not just in dry institutional terms, but as a rallying cry for the renewal of our public services and public life generally. It has always been difficult to sell devolution “on the doorstep”. Most of the time, the debate on devolution is couched in excessively abstract terms, as if the benefits of devolved Government are taken for granted. The case can only be made successfully if voters feel that their local schools, hospitals and services would directly benefit from less central regulation. As the Government arrogates to itself ever more central authority (in a verbal twist worthy of Orwell, the Government often describes the reduction in powers of local political bodies as an act of “empowerment” for local schools and hospitals), the effects are becoming more obvious to voters. I have been struck, for example, by the increasing anger amongst residents in my constituency about the lack of accountability in local bus services. The way in which local bus franchises operate entirely out of the control of locally elected Councils is just one example of the unaccountable nature of our public services. It is becoming increasingly possible



to build a case against centralization which does not just enjoy the support of long time advocates of constitutional devolution, but the support of the public as a whole.

City Regions – Inspiration from Europe?

If the political case for devolution is to be made fully credible, it needs to be allied to a model of devolution which also enjoys public support. The failure of advocates of a regional model of devolution to win public support in the North East referendum holds two key lessons. First, voters were shrewd enough to see that the proposition put to them included only very limited new devolved powers. Devolution cannot be successfully sold as a cautious, incremental process. It must be seen to represent a real break with the past, with substantive powers being reallocated from the centre downwards. Second, even in areas such as the North East which has a strong regional identity, the scale of the regional units were too large to elicit much loyalty or affection amongst voters. As someone who struggled to represent an amorphous region in the European Parliament for five years, in which I met countless voters who were not even aware they were residents of the East Midlands region, it is clear to me that the imposition of oversized artificial political boundaries is guaranteed to fail in creating meaningful new political identities.

Whilst progressive centralization has been the dominant trend in England for over twenty years now (Wales and Scotland, of course, have enjoyed a contrasting move to greater devolution), the trend elsewhere in Europe has been in the reverse direction. A broad shift in greater regional and local self determination can be seen in many countries, including in formerly centralized systems such as France.

The manner in which devolution has occurred is neither consistent between or within countries. Whilst the German Lander enjoy constitutionally devolved powers administered in a uniform way across the country (though tensions between the richer and poorer Lander, and between Lander and the federal Government, are great), countries such as Spain have witnessed an uneven move towards devolution, with Catalonia and the Basque region wielding far greater powers than, say, the region of Castilla y Leon.

Yet, notwithstanding these inconsistencies, there seems to be a recognisable increase in the powers and identity of what can loosely be termed “city regions”. In Belgium, the Brussels Capital-Region has emerged as one of the three principal territorial regions in the country. Whilst it is held back by persistent tensions



between the French-speaking city centre and the outlying Flemish speaking suburbs, it has developed a wide range of responsibilities from planning, housing and transport to employment policy and even scientific research. The Brussels region has the power to raise taxes on inheritance, property, entertainment and cars, though it still remains dependent on large transfers from the federal Government.

Barcelona is one of the most autonomous city-administrations in Europe, though tensions between the city itself and outlying areas have prevented it from expressing a truly regional identity which extends beyond the metropolitan area. In 2003, 57% of its consolidated revenue was derived from local taxes. The City Mayor remains the leading political figure, coordinating the city's affairs with a General Council composed of 300 representatives from industry, the trade unions, and local government bodies.

The Berlin-Brandenburg city region extends well beyond the city of Berlin itself, even though a full merger between the city and the Land of Brandenburg was rejected by voters in 1996 (a second referendum is planned for next year). A Joint Spatial Development Department, headed by an official from Brandenburg with representation from the city of Berlin, is the lead body which coordinates strategic planning decisions across the whole area.

The Stockholm Metropolitan Region covers both the city of Stockholm and large parts of the outlying Malar river valley. The powers of the County Council, which represents most of the region, are primarily focused on strategic planning. The subsidiary municipal councils, by contrast, enjoy extensive autonomy in everything from education to transport, energy and elderly care, reinforced by local income tax raising powers. Recognising the need to create a more coherent political identity for the whole city region, there is now a debate underway about the possible creation of a parliament for the city region, or a standing forum for the municipal councils.

Finally, the Frankfurt Rhine-Main region stands out as a highly urbanised, polycentric city region, covering not only Frankfurt but also other major cities such as Wiesbaden, Mainz, Darmstadt and spreads across three Länder (Hessen, and parts of Rhineland-Palatinate and Bavaria). Again, latent rivalries between the dominant city, Frankfurt, and outlying areas have prevented moves towards an overarching city region political organisation. But a number of coordinating bodies have nevertheless emerged. A planning forum, with representatives from each of the 75 municipalities of the region, provides strong guidance on planning and environmental issues. A Council of the Region, with 2 representatives from each town with more than 50,000 inhabitants and 3 representatives (often



Mayors or district leaders) from each administrative district, has an oversight role in setting the strategic direction for the region. A number of subsidiary coordinating bodies, including an active regional chamber of commerce, provide input on specific issues.

Can City Regions Work in England?

This thumbnail sketch of the growth in city regions elsewhere in Europe is revealing. First, there is a widespread pattern of tensions between the dominant cities in each of the regions, and outlying urban or rural areas. In all of these examples, political debate is currently focused on how to resolve those tensions and so create a greater whole of the different parts. None of the examples can be said to demonstrate a flawless example of a city region. But all are unmistakably attempting to move towards a more coherent city-region identity. Second, planning policy seems to be the area in which city regions are most adept at taking early control, whilst health, education and other policy areas tend to be tackled in different ways by different levels of Government. Third, the power to raise taxes autonomously has a huge impact on the ability of city regions to develop their own identity. It is little wonder, perhaps, that of the examples cited here, Brussels and Barcelona have the greatest fiscal autonomy, and by far the strongest political identity.

How, then, can these examples be translated to England?

Much as there is no ideal model of a city region in other European countries, city region devolution in England will not follow a single pattern. In one area a cluster of cities might begin to act in concert. The tentative steps by Leicester, Derby and Nottingham to create a tripartite identity as the inner core of the East Midlands region is one example which may one day bear fruit. In other areas, the dominance of one city will serve as the organising principle, such as the suggestion from Graham Stringer MP that the local authorities in the Greater Manchester area should be encouraged to merge, with elected mayors of all the local authorities exercising collective leadership. The contours of the old Metropolitan Regions, still retained in the shape of Passenger Transport Authorities, present another geographical unit which is substantially smaller and more manageable than the now discredited super regions, but still big enough to create real political and economic clout. The South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Authority, for instance, covers Sheffield, Barnsley, Doncaster and Rotherham – an area which has far greater political resonance than the larger Yorkshire and Humber region, and yet is sizeable enough to act as a meaningful city region.

The distribution of England's 39 police authorities provides another promising



building block for city regions (notwithstanding recent Government proposals to reduce radically the number of police authorities). Police authorities are tried and tested administrative units which coincide neatly with publicly recognisable county boundaries (though a number of police authorities cover more than one county). They already enjoy a fairly pronounced degree of autonomy, including the ability to raise funds through a precept on council tax bills, and so are not entirely unfamiliar to voters.

They offer an obvious geographical space into which a number of strategic functions, presently exercised by a plethora of regional and sub regional quangos and bodies, could be folded. Fire authorities could be brought under the same roof, as has happened in London. England's 28 Strategic Health Authorities could also be scrapped. Their purpose is already under question as subsidiary health organisations (Hospital Trusts, Primary Care Trusts, GP surgeries etc) have become more autonomous, and their residual function could usefully be absorbed into city regions. The logic of Regional Development Agencies has virtually evaporated as the political momentum towards regionalism in England has slowed. They, too, could be disaggregated into city regions mapped onto police authority boundaries.

In other words, it is possible to imagine different models of city-region government which would be capable of taking on a range of public functions presently dispersed at different levels and across different organisations. Experience elsewhere in Europe provides unambiguous evidence that the devolution of core policies to city regions - notably planning, police, fire, education and health functions - is workable. Above all, any model of new city region governance must include the prospect of meaningful fiscal autonomy. Granting tax raising powers, within clearly understood parameters, to new city regions is the inescapable test for real devolution. Those politicians who laud the virtues of decentralization without biting the bullet of fiscal devolution are striking a disingenuous pose. The manner in which Whitehall has contrived to increase the financial dependency of local services on central Government under the guise of greater local "autonomy", for example by offering individual grants to those schools hoping to gain "specialist" status, should serve as a clear warning that devolution is at best a chimera as long as Whitehall continues to hold all the purse strings.

Mayoral Politics – A Catalyst for Devolution?

If European-style city regions provide a promising model for devolution in England, a major question mark still looms over the attitude of voters towards a process which can appear technocratic and irrelevant to their immediate needs



and aspirations. Something is needed to bring the push for devolution in England alive.

When the Local Government Act of 2000 was passed, some hoped that the provisions which allow local authorities to move to Mayoral systems by way of local referenda would offer a catalyst in the reinvigoration of local politics. These hopes have been dashed by the less than enthusiastic reaction from local authorities. Only 28 referenda were held, on a dismal average turnout of 26.42%, resulting in no more than 11 “yes” votes.

The objections to this patchy experiment in Mayoral politics are well known: without meaningful additional powers granted to Mayors, they risk offering little more than the illusion of greater local autonomy to voters; the concentration of elected authority in the hands of one individual creates understandable unease amongst those who rightly believe political power should be as widely dispersed and shared as possible; the marginalisation of elected local councillors by Mayors is a real danger; and the temptation for mavericks (some would say egotists) to seek Mayoral office to gratify an agenda of personal glorification is no doubt a real one too.

But these objections, and the disappointing take-up of the Mayoral option by local authorities, should not obscure the record of Mayors in devolved political systems in Europe and North America in acting as the lifeblood of local political autonomy. Whilst it is undoubtedly true that the concentration of political authority in the hands of one individual can weaken the existing mechanisms of Town Hall scrutiny and accountability, there is a more important political relationship the accountability of which can be immeasurably strengthened by the existence of a Mayor: that between the voters and the local authority run by a Mayor.

Local democracy in England is in a state of profound crisis. Voter participation in local elections continues to decline, and public identification with their local councillor is dismally low. In this context, it is surely right to place the greatest emphasis in any proposal for political devolution on the effect it will have on the relationship between the electorate and those they elect, rather than on the internal balance of power between different elected members in local councils? The essential ingredient for any political revival in English local government is the reawakening of voter interest in local elections. Mayoral contests provide a means by which greater voter involvement can be boosted.

Early polling evidence of recently established Mayoralties in England confirm this. Figures from the New Local Government Network suggest average recognition



of Mayors to be 57% (or as high as 73% in the North East), compared to 25% recognition of Council leaders in other local authorities. Turnout in Mayoral elections seems to be on an upward trend, in some places, a very sharp upward trend (from 42.32% in 2002 to 61.38% in 2005 in North Tyneside, from 24.04% in 2002 to 50.79% in 2005 in Stoke-on-Trent, but only from 35% in 2000 to 36.95% in 2004 in London). A study for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has also highlighted that those Mayors who appear to have governed well, generally have done so by making themselves available to fairly extensive cross-party scrutiny in the Council chamber. The assumption that Mayors would escape meaningful Council and public scrutiny does not seem to be borne out by the reality of Mayors in places as diverse as Watford, Lewisham and Middlesbrough where a number of innovations have taken root including Public Mayoral Question Times, interactive Mayoral websites, radio phone-ins, and even a Youth Mayor shadowing the work of the elected Mayor.

There is also significant evidence that Mayoral politics provides real potential for dynamic politicians to escape the sometimes stifling effect of party-political affiliations. Ray Mallon, elected on a “crime and grime” ticket in Middlesbrough, may have adopted somewhat hyperbolic political postures, but he nevertheless focused relentlessly on the issues of crime and public disorder which had dominated his election, marshalling the efforts of the police and other local bodies in a coordinated fashion. He pledged to resign if he failed to reduce the crime rate by 20% within 18 months. He achieved his goal with 9 months to spare.

The fact that two of the boldest public policy achievements in recent times – the introduction of London’s congestion charge and the successful bid to host the 2012 Olympics in London – were both heavily associated with the political efforts of Ken Livingstone, the Mayor of London, is striking. Setting aside for a moment whether these two achievements are desirable in themselves, it is surely undeniable that either would have occurred without the individual leadership of a Mayor?

At a time when the quality of leadership and personal conviction in politics is widely derided, it is also surely welcome that new routes by which talented individual politicians can enter into public life have opened up. The experience in countries as diverse as France, Italy and the United States suggests that the Mayoral route often produces the most talented politicians, many of whom go onto successful national political careers.

So the case for Mayoral politics as an important catalyst in the renewal of political localism appears to be strong. There are legitimate concerns and



criticisms of Mayoral systems, but they must be balanced by the evidence which suggests that they can do much to strengthen both voter interest in local politics and dynamic local political leadership. These are precious assets in view of the way in which local politics has been so summarily emasculated by successive British Governments. Mayors, as long as they enjoy clear powers exercised in an accountable and transparent manner, could prove to be invaluable in the rescue of local political autonomy in England, especially if allied to a model of City Region devolution.

Conclusion:

Political devolution is not a panacea for all our political ills. As experience in other countries shows, devolved local government can lead to difficult tensions between different localities, notably between urban centres and rural hinterlands or richer and poorer local authorities. Any system which includes significant fiscal devolution will also have to grapple with the politically tricky issue of reallocating resources to ensure that the poorest localities are not left to fend for themselves. Given that growing voter apathy seems to be a trend in elections at all levels in most developed democracies, political devolution should also not be regarded as a magic wand to increase voter participation.

But there is something unique about the malaise in British democracy that is directly related to the extraordinary level of Government centralization, especially in England. Central government now assumes a level of almost complete control of local services which is without precedent elsewhere in Europe or North America. Whitehall possesses a dizzying array of legislative and financial instruments which guarantee that every aspect of our public life is regulated, tested and monitored in minute detail. The political effect is devastating, as the electorate has grown weary of a system in which local politicians are unable to respond to their concerns, and national politicians are indifferent to their local preferences. Powerlessness now pervades England's warped body politic.

In this context, the need to reinvigorate local political autonomy in England has become an urgent necessity, rather than merely a desirable reform. The most recent model of tentative devolution – regional government – has been left in tatters by a lack of Government conviction and a resounding defeat in last year's regional referendum in the North East.

In order to restore momentum to the stalled process of devolution, it is crucial that new models of devolved governance be identified. The emerging pattern of city regions in many other European countries seems to offer a promising way



forward, applied in a flexible manner to suit different political circumstances in different parts of England. Some existing administrative units, notably the sub regional police authorities, offer the outlines of politically viable city regions which could, over time, develop the capacity to act in areas as diverse as planning and health, education and fire control. Such an approach, however, will be stillborn unless it includes real fiscal devolution, with specific tax raising powers, set within agreed limits, conferred upon city region authorities.

But local politics cannot come alive without effective local leadership. The halting experiment in Mayoral politics in England does not seem, at first glance, to hold much promise in reinvigorating local politics. Legitimate criticisms of Mayoral systems, based as they are on the individual personification of local political power, are also strongly held. But experience elsewhere in Europe and North America, plus promising signs in the early Mayoral experiences in England, suggest that Mayors, if they enjoy clear powers exercised in an accountable manner, can do much to reignite voter interest in local politics. The reservations about the balance of power in local Councils dominated by Mayors should be set against the very real benefits of a system which can enhance, rather than diminish, political accountability to the people who really matter, the voters.

A combination of European-style city regions and Mayoral politics seems to offer a promising recipe for the future devolution agenda in England.