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The leadership of place and people in the new English combined authorities

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Introduction

Into the complicated structure of English local government, a new type of
organisation a combined authority (CA), has been introduced. A CA can be formed
by two or more local authorities that come together to agree a bespoke 'deal' with
central government permitting some powers to be devolved to the CA. So far, ten
CAs have been established, eight led by a directly elected 'metro-mayor', a new
political leadership role strongly promoted by central government.

Drawing on the literature on place and leadership, documentation and on in-depth
interviews with senior politicians within the first six combined authorities established,
officials from local and central government and other informed commentators, this
paper offers a preliminary analysis of the combined authorities' political leadership.
The paper focuses on the early leadership of the metro-mayors from the perspective of
the leadership of place - how place was construed and how leadership of place was
being exercised - within the wider context of local governance in England. Given the
first metro-mayors were only elected in 2017, this paper necessarily presents
emerging insights, along with data from interviews in the initial period of the mayors'
tenure.

The paper first reviews the historical context of English local government and the
more proximate factors that have led to the creation of the CAs, including the place of
'place'. It then examines the approach to political leadership of the metro-mayors first
elected, drawing on the empirical work undertaken and leadership theory, including
place leadership, and institutional formation. It suggests that public policy and the
literature on political leadership could usefully recognize the power of place in the
exercise of leadership. The paper concludes by raising questions around the
development of CAs and their mayors within the wider governance landscape.

This paper contributes to scholarly work on local governance, devolution and place
leadership as an empirically based overview of the early leadership of the early CAs,
set within the wider context of English governance and literature on place and
leadership.

Context of UK and English local governance

Local governance structures and the relationship between local and central government have a significant bearing on the degree of agency that is possible through local political leadership. Since the sweeping reforms introduced into England and Wales by the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, local government had held sway over a wide range of functions of central importance to people's daily lives (Stewart, 2000). The British government in the 19th and early 20th century had pre-occupations other than local government, not least an empire to run (Travers, 2017).

Since the 1960's however central government increasingly concerned itself in matters that hitherto had been left to the municipalities. Apart from legislation in 1888 and 1972, changes introduced have been piecemeal and incremental in nature (Leach et al, 2018) with persistent tension between reform and pragmatism (Parr, 2017) adding to the complexity of the picture. Often changes to structure have been later reversed, a so-called 'circularity of policy' (Parr, 2017).

Legislation gathered pace later in the 20th century with increasing constraints on local government. Local government in the UK has less autonomy than elsewhere in Europe (Hambleton, 2016), at times regarded as an administrative arm of central government rather than local democracy (Leach et al, 2018). Local government and its leadership have long been held in low esteem with '*elite contempt'* expressed towards it by Whitehall (Stewart, 2000: p.96).

In the last two decades, significant constitutional change has taken place with devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, leaving the governance of England outside London largely unchanged once an attempt at regional devolution (in the North-East) was voted down. Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) set up in the early 2000's to stimulate local economic growth had limited success in addressing the economic and political dominance of London (IPPR, 2017). It is into this fragmented, complex landscape that CAs have been added.

The background to CAs

Since the mid 1980s, the ten local authorities in Greater Manchester had been working together as the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) on strategic issues after the demise of the metropolitan county council, an arrangement they wished to formalise. The emergence of a CA was, as one government official put it, '*the answer to the question that Greater Manchester asked*'. This arrangement, a CA, was enshrined in the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act of 2009. The Act permitted the establishment of a CA with two or more contiguous authorities if transport functions, economic development and regeneration would be enhanced. It added a further requirement that a CA should also '*reflect the identities and interests of local communities*' (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2009: p.72).

In 2010, the national coalition central government abolished RDAs and introduced business led, unelected Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) with bespoke packages of funding, City Deals, in order to encourage partnership working between business and the public sector. An influential review in 2012, *No Stone Unturned* ('the Heseltine report') recommended merging different pots of funding and devolving funding to LEPs to galvanise local economic growth. For such a step-change, '*appropriate accountability structures*' were deemed necessary (Government response to the Heseltine Review, 2013 p. 5). Once the Greater Manchester CA (GMCA) had been set up in 2011, CAs (including 'conurbation mayors') came to be seen as the vehicle by which devolution deals could be delivered. The first 'devo deal' was agreed with GMCA in 2014 (facilitated by the strong relationship that had developed between local and national figures) including, with some local reluctance, a metro-mayor to lead the CA.

Heseltine championed the imperative of prominent, individual leadership, echoing the drive of the earlier Blair government (1997-2007) for directly elected local authority mayors. George Osborne, Chancellor of the Exchequer, strongly promoted mayoral CAs, financially incentivizing CAs to be led by a mayor through (time limited) devolution deals. The amount of money on offer, however, has been very small in comparison with local authority funding generally, even despite cuts to municipal funding. Councillors across the political spectrum have mostly been sceptical about directly elected mayors and the public largely indifferent (The British Academy,

2017). Central government has argued that only a directly elected mayor will bring the visibility, legitimacy and accountability that is necessary (Osborne, 2014) despite little supporting evidence. It promoted metro-mayors as a high profile, visible presence that would drive agencies across the public, private and third sector to work strategically together to boost local economic growth. Party political considerations have influenced the drive for elected mayors with the Conservative party keen to make electoral inroads into northern Labour heartlands (Peters, 2017). Indeed, in 2019, the government has four of the eight mayors of its political persuasion including in traditional Labour areas.

Central Government from 2016

The Conservative government under Theresa May was less enthusiastic about devolving funding and powers and pre-occupied by Brexit (Fai, 2018). Negotiations nevertheless continued under the framework established by the 2009 Act, but amended by the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 that removed the necessity for constituent local authorities within a CA to be contiguous.

The government adopted a relatively laissez-faire approach to how local authorities cluster together, waiting for proposals from authorities themselves. Nevertheless, a government official maintains that any proposal had to have *'a sensible economic geography'*. Proposals for a CA and the subsequent bespoke deal is subject to private negotiations with central government. Sandford (2016) argues that in this 'contractual' approach, accountability, governance and geography take second place to the demands of central policy imperatives. CAs therefore differ considerably from one another in terms of the extent of powers devolved to them, their size and their budgets. They also differ in the degree to which previous partnership arrangements had been in place and the degree of coterminosity with other agencies. Greater Manchester's long history of collaborative working has stood it in great stead with GMCA having by far the most powers and devolved funding. The picture is constantly evolving with some devolution deals and/ or CAs initially agreed only later to collapse. Some CAs cover areas that appear to be relatively cohesive and identifiable from a perspective of place, such as GMCA, while others are less obviously identifiable.

With turmoil over Brexit, the Government's repeatedly delayed devolution framework is not be published until after the UK has left the EU (Peters and Larsson, 2019). It is possible that the Johnson Conservative government from 2019 will more actively devolve powers, particularly with regard to transport, to elected mayors (Pidd, 2019).

The metro-mayors

A CA mayor should be distinguished from the long-standing ceremonial civic mayor and the more recently introduced directly elected executive mayors from 2000. Confusingly, mayoral CAs may have a directly elected mayor in one of its constituent local authorities. The CAs differ in the constitutional powers accorded to the mayor or to the CA (Sandford, 2016). In each case, however, metro-mayors chair the CA with a cabinet composed of the council leaders of constituent local authorities. Of the six metro-mayors elected in May 2017[1], five had political experience, in Parliament (two) or local government (three), and one had been a prominent retail businessman. Two others (an MP and a councillor) have since been elected.[2] All are white men.

In summary, the concept of mayoral CAs has emerged over time rather than being part of a national design and the original Greater Manchester model has been subsequently 'reshuffled' (Lanzara, 1998). Governments of all persuasions have seen them as a usefully disruptive force in a sector held in low esteem: they are able to speak with a limited number of individuals rather than many leaders and with a devolution deal in place, contractual 'delivery' can be easily monitored. The UK government has no plans to evaluate the effectiveness of CAs despite such a recommendation from the National Audit Office (2017).

The interviews

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[1] In Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, West Midlands, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, West of England and Tees Valley). All but the more rural Cambridgeshire and Peterborough are city regions.

[2] In Sheffield City Region in 2018 and North of Tyne in May 2019. West Yorks CA and North East CA have no mayor.

33 interviews using a semi-structured protocol were conducted within 18 months of the 2017 mayoral elections. Interviewees were approximately evenly distributed between all the CAs and included three metro-mayors (two were interviewed twice, a year apart), a number of council leaders and chief executives within CAs and other informed commentators.

The interviews probed participants' views on the role of the metro-mayor, how those in post were approaching their leadership role in terms of how place was construed in the CAs, how they exercised leadership of place and how they worked with others in that place. An interview protocol probing key lines of enquiry drawn from the literature was used but interviewees were able to reflect widely on the developing leadership of the CAs. Interviews were often very frank, revealing strong feelings and not uncommonly, conflict within the CAs. They lasted from about 45 to 90 minutes. With consent, all the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were thematically analyzed.

Themes

Lowndes and Lempriere (2018) view institutional formation as *'as a process through which new rules -in-use and supporting narratives are established, but within institutional context and animated by particular sets of institutional actors'* and focus on '*leaders, legacies and localities.'* Not dissimilarly, the themes considered in this paper are place, model of leadership and individual leaders. Leadership here is understood as mobilizing others to shape what happens and achieve (possibly difficult) mutual goals (Heifetz, 1994). Leadership then necessarily involves a series of relationships.

Place

Place can be defined as 'meaningful location': '*Place is how we make the world meaningful and the way we experience the world ... is space invested with meaning in the context of power'* (Cresswell, 2015: p.19). **T**here is however relatively little reference to place in UK Government documentation and in academic literature on spatial perspectives and economic development in terms of attachment to place, the

governance of place and the leadership of place. In establishing a CA, the Secretary of State must *'also'* have regard to the need to reflect the identities and interests of local communities. No proposal for a CA has been turned down on this criterion (MHCLG official, 2018, personal communication).

Yet, local government has long been mindful of the importance of place. Taylor observes, '*Ironically, leadership of place is nothing new, it is actually a return to the historic role of local government'* (Taylor, 2006). Stewart (2000) emphasizes how the relationship between local authority and locality is expressed through the political process with councillors drawn from and immersed in the locality. The Lyons Inquiry introduces the term 'place-shaping' to describe how *'the ultimate purpose of local government should not solely be to manage a collection of public services, but rather to pursue the well-being of a place.'* (Lyons 2007: p 61). With communities now more diverse than ever, Lyons suggests that there is greater need for local knowledge and understanding, echoed by the Core Cities report on Whole Place Leadership, (2016).

Most people have a sense of rootedness in where they live and a sense of attachment to that place – or more often, places (Nicholson, 1996). Place(s) helps people make sense of who they are as individuals and in relation to others. Places may be multi-layered with fuzzily defined boundaries but what happens in places - everyday experiences and interactions that individuals have with others, the stories from the past, the present and the anticipated future - weave a complex tapestry that encompasses something about who we are.

The places where people live, work and play have a profound impact on local economy, culture and political traditions (Lowndes, 1999) that lead to (often proudly recognized) differences between places. Place matters from an economic perspective (Lyons, 2007). Local characteristics, whether in the form of physical or human assets, are important to outcomes. While some attempts have been made by UK governments to focus on place (e.g. the 2010 Total Place initiative), they can only be sustained if there is a shift of power from central to local government, a move that Whitehall has long been reluctant to make (Hambleton, 2015).

Place has recently crept into public debate since the 2016 referendum on UK membership of the EU. Part (only) of the explanation of the 'no' vote has been attributed to the dissatisfaction of people in towns and coastal communities where austerity has bitten deep, compounded by a profound political disengagement from remote Westminster politics (Evans and Tilley, 2017) or more pithily, 'the revenge of the places that don't matter' (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018).

Despite little formal recognition in the literature and in public debate, place figured strongly - with pride, passion and a sense of personal identity - in interviews with both mayors and council leaders. 'Home' for them all had long been located within the authority and/ or (less often) the wider region. They relayed powerful stories of the values and identities of people within their areas, describing how they differed both within and external to their patch. Such identities were not fixed; they were a rich, constantly evolving amalgam of stories, referring either to a part or the whole of a city, the county or the wider region or usually a mixture of them all. Local history, geology, industry (or its demise), music, patterns of migration and seminal events were woven through. Historic fierce rivalries, including those between football teams, played strongly into current relationships between authorities. Place was articulated by one as a means to promote a sense of wider community among people for which they shared responsibility. Both metro-mayors and council leaders explicitly saw themselves as leaders of place, and the manner of their election – directly or indirectly – made little difference.

However, the CA area itself was mostly not seen as a 'place'. Even Greater Manchester was described as having an 'emerging' identity, despite its worker bee symbol having become more commonplace. A MHCLG official saw metro-mayors as a vehicle by which a sense of place in the CA could be promoted. The Tees Valley mayor is promoting a local fried delicacy, the 'Parmo' (although it is more identified with Teeside, itself a political construct). Other than Greater Manchester, boundaries were hotly contested, whether on place, economic and/ or political geography grounds and described as '*horrendously complicated*' between different bodies. Nomenclature matters: a refusal to countenance a Bristol and Bath City Region led to the 'West of England' CA.

This paper argues that leaders – metro-mayors and council leaders - who are steeped in their area are potentially able to harness effectively the power of place as they understand more intimately the richness and subtle distinctions of people and places within their patch, echoing Horling et al's (2018) emphasis on the importance of place leadership in building collective agency to attune the institutional setting to the specificities of place. Drawing on the sense of place, leaders can articulate a vision that pulls people together into a shared social identity (Haslam et al, 2011) that speaks to their values and beliefs, and more effectively advocate on behalf of their place for inward investment. Furthermore, if political leaders are embraced as of the place, they are more likely to be able to articulate the public culture of their community (Galston, 2014) and mobilize the energies of people. It is notable that MPs and MEPs increasingly are likely to hale from the area that they represent (Gandy, 2018).

Model of leadership in the CAs

The Heseltine report argues for knowing unambiguously 'who is in charge' in local political leadership. Chiming with Burn's term 'transforming' leadership (Wren, 1995) and the Weberian notion of 'charismatic authority', he extols such leadership in contrast to, he implies, the (more mundane) 'transactional' version that has been on offer previously. Taking Heseltine's lead, the Government set up directly elected mayors predicated on the 'strong leader' model of leadership (critiqued by Leach et al (2018) where a powerful individual leader is a dominating presence across public policy. Metro-mayors can be seen also in terms of the 'personalization' of politics (McAllister, 2007) whereby attention focuses on the character of the political leader rather than the values and policies of the party that they represent. The Government envisaged that leading figures from other walks of life might be attracted into this new political role. But the notion that high-profile individuals can simply slot into powerful mayoral positions without a good understanding of the local political terrain – or at least without astute advisors – is risky: negotiating through complexity requires sophisticated political leadership skills (Hartley and Benington, 2011). Some interviewees highlighted not only political nous but the specific importance of an understanding of local government, and its absence had been keenly felt in one CA.

Effective leadership is more complex than that implied by the 'strong' leader theory, despite popular yearning in some quarters for decisive individuals who may eschew complexity (Brown, 2014) although there is a performative element to political leadership (Gaffney, 2014). Effective democratic leadership involves '*bargains and transactions – hard, cold tit-for-tat tradeoffs – but within a context of goals, purposes and objectives,*' (Ruscio, 2008: p.10). While individual leaders are crucially important, democratic political leadership is dispersed more widely (Kane et al, 2011).

Within the CAs, distributed leadership is inevitable given their constitutions that constrain mayoral power. Although promoted as harbingers of great change, metro-mayors must work closely with cabinet portfolio holders, mostly the leaders of the constituent local authorities, if they are to advance their agenda. On the other hand, through the interpretation and behaviour of individual actors, political institutions evolve meaning and effect (Lowndes and Leach, 2004): metro-mayors thus have a considerable opportunity to shape the development of CAs. The English metro-mayors appear to be at the nexus of the debate about the relative merits of the popular and media conception of a strong political leader and a more facilitative style of leadership, *primus inter pares,* on the other.

The government argues that a directly elected mayor is necessary to enhance the visibility, legitimacy and accountability of the CA leadership (Osborne, 2014). The argument on visibility has merit – mayoral candidates seek approval from a wider electorate than in indirect elections. They must set out their wares and seek to convince the general public of their offer with hustings, door-step canvassing and considerable media attention. However, although 22 per cent of people in England live within the first six mayoral CAs, there is little public understanding of their role with low turnouts ranging from 21 per cent to 34 per cent (NAO, 2017) - but it is early days. Indirectly elected council leaders could however be more visible and promoted far more vigorously than currently they are. Even a cursory look at councils' websites demonstrates how curiously coy most councils are about their leader.

More fundamentally, it should be clear why enhancing visibility of the CAs' leadership is important: if CAs are seen as offering a new form of democratic governance in which citizen engagement is key (Blunkett et al, 2016), then visibility is crucial. On the other hand, if the objective is to promote economic growth by the concerted efforts of a number of local authorities, each accountable, acting jointly on specific issues, then arguably visibility of an individual leader is less important.

The argument on legitimacy is less convincing. Legitimacy rests on the assertion that rightful political power is derived from public authorization, direct or indirect (Galston, 2014). The UK does not have a presidential system. Is the Prime Minister any less legitimate because s/he is indirectly elected, or any less accountable? The accountability of metro-mayors to the public is more direct but arguably, no more (or less) for that. Accountability is however less clear when there is little transparency in the deal making between a CA and the government (Tomaney, 2016; NAO, 2017).

In their interviews, metro-mayors were full of enthusiasm for their new role and to improve the profile of their authority and its infrastructure. There was powerful sense of frustration with the '*London-centric nature of politics*' graphically demonstrated, said one, by the lack of national resource dedicated to northern moorland fires in 2018. One contrasted his current role with that previously as an MP as that between a racing driver and a taxi-driver, '*you need the same sort of skills but all of a sudden they are being tested at every single corner.*' Another described the collective sense of agency now in place to tackle homelessness despite - or perhaps, because – of the catalysing effect of having publicly taken councils to task on the issue.

Most of the council leaders however were cautious about the additional value of an elected mayor. They too were clear about a vision for their place and in no doubt about the importance of aligning activities and resources across boundaries to deliver transport and other infrastructure. But many felt that this could be achieved just as effectively, if not more so, without a mayor given the buy-in to cross-authority working that had been developed with the establishment of the CA. One welcomed the clarity of leadership offered by a mayor. Two others valued the ability of a mayor to broker between competing councils' interests but they acknowledged similar tensions arose for leaders between their council area and ward/ division and for MPs

in government and their constituency. The council leaders accepted that their accountabilities were different from directly elected mayors but mostly rejected the notion that they were any less accountable. All interviewees recognized how important was the style of the individual mayor within their constitutional constraints with some metro-mayors (highly) praised and others (sorely) lamented.

Council leaders recognized the importance of the CA constitution, one describing, *'the inverse law of mayors … the bigger the geography, the more powerful the mayor on the national picture which is what you want …and the more influence councils have over the mayor just in number terms'* potentially minimizing harm arising from a 'bad' mayor. As one bluntly put it to his mayor, *'The cabinet you can't appoint, you can't tell what to do and you can't get rid of.'* Despite their reservations, the council leaders recognized that pragmatic acceptance of a mayor had been necessary to progress with some measure of devolutionary powers and funding from central government, with the gains made by Greater Manchester enviously acknowledged.

The business community was described by a number as enthusiastic for the creation of the metro-mayor role – but perhaps, thought one official, under a misapprehension about the extent of their executive powers, having envisaged *'a Heseltine mayor'*. One leader observed how a CA had, for business, become '*totemic*', a proxy for the ambition of a place.

Local context, as ever, is crucial. The metro-mayors came into different legacies, to lead authorities with very different institutional contexts and historically different degrees of partnership working. Authorities in Greater Manchester had a long history of collaboration in contrast to some others. Existing strategic plans and/ or City Deals had smoothed the path of cooperative working in some areas but were a source of friction in others. Some interviewees observed how the CA was becoming more *'them'* than *'us'* with CA officials seen to act as if they were a '*cut above*' local authority colleagues and Whitehall civil servants seen to view CAs as '*their creatures*', not dissimilar to the old Government Offices of the Regions. In at least two areas, the existence of the CA was lamented to be perversely diminishing collaboration between authorities. Said one official, *'All you've got with a bigger area is more people to appease'*. A matrix structure has been set up at senior level within

most CAs but the importance of governance structures below the CA cabinet level was highlighted for successful collaborative working. The robustness of CA governance arrangements seemed to vary considerably with deep concerns raised in some quarters.

Six mayoral CAs include individual authorities with their own directly elected mayor, each with a direct mandate from a significant proportion of the CA electorate although little consideration had been given to possible implications. Even if the powers and responsibilities of different authorities are mostly delineated, grey areas remain. Where the remit of the CA and councils overlapped – digital connectivity, transport, housing and homelessness, e.g. – considerable tensions had arisen.

Sandford (2017) suggests that metro-mayors began by focusing on hard power and seeking further devolution deals with government. Understanding both mayoral 'hard' and 'soft' powers was repeatedly highlighted in the interviews: while mayors had 'hard' statutory powers - and some limited money - to drive economic development, the symbolic aspects of their role covered a wider canvas. Given the constraints on metro-mayors, their 'soft' powers acquire particular importance. With a potentially high profile, metro-mayors can raise the flag for their area nationally and some mayors had proactively sought to do so on the international stage. The power to convene key players from sectors outside their formal mayoral remit was being actively deployed by some. While the emphasis was on powers devolved down from central government, the risks of powers being sucked up from local authorities was acknowledged with many specific examples cited. A MHCLG official explicitly welcomed candidates' manifestos that had exceeded the mayoral remit.

Within their constitutional context, the role of a metro-mayor necessarily involves operating through relationships rather than through executive power (Sandford, 2019). Metro-mayors sit within a complex web of relationships within regional, national and supranational arenas multiple arenas, echoing Hartley's (2012) five arenas of local political leadership. In addition, most metro-mayors are leading the formation of new organizations, building capacity and carving out a new role in a context where the geographical composition of the new CA may have been highly contested - as one council leader remarked, '*Learning to work together is part of how it works.*' But how

the metro-mayors work with others varies considerably chiming with Lowndes and Lempriere's (2018) finding that *'the agency of political leaders at local level was found to be critical'*. It is to individual leaders that this paper now turns.

Individual political leaders

Individual leaders undoubtedly matter in politics (Brown, 2014; Copus and Leach, 2014) even where leadership is explicitly distributed. Who political leaders are, how they are seen, how they behave and the extent to which they use their powers - hard and soft (Blondel, 2014) - have considerable influence on what can be achieved in democratic societies. The capabilities of the individual leader make a crucial difference, including their persuasive ability, judgement, capacity, integrity, collegiality (Brown, 2014). The capabilities of the new metro-mayors in all these areas were perceived very differently in their first year, not least their approach to envisioning, negotiation, and convening and collaboration (Sandford, 2019).

The current metro-mayors vary considerably in profile and perceived dynamism. While the mayors interviewed were clear about their long-term vision for their area, they were aware of the need for some quick wins with most of the next mayoral elections in 2020. One was explicit about the key leadership skills for the mayoralty: '*utter clarity'* about the way forward and '*bringing hearts and minds behind the journey … a sense of everyone being part of that journey.'* Not all mayors were said to demonstrate such insight.

Some local authority interviewees ruefully acknowledged having under-estimated the mayoral '*power of the press release'*. Indeed, an official observed how the balance during the first mayoral year had shifted from long term strategic thinking to the shorter term with more focus on press and communications from the mayoral office than in the previous partnership. Another remarked on *'a notable shift to announcement-led policy rather than policy-led announcements.'* The current metro-mayors however vary considerably in their public profile, from national status to barely visible and in at least one CA, there is a separate mayoral and CA press office. Mayor Burnham was thrust early into the national spotlight after the Manchester

Arena attack notably rather than the long-standing Manchester City leader, Sir Richard Leese. As any effective politician, he was not averse to taking the lead.

While mayors may have been envisaged as swashbuckling figures, they will make little progress if they do not work collegiately within their place(s) particularly with their constituent councils but also with business and third sector leaders, civil society and political parties. As one mayor put it, the model will work *'if the relationships are good, but if there is a souring of relationship, it could spectacularly not work.'* But the first six mayors appear to have had very different approaches to developing relationships: interviewees in some areas reported the building of trust or, in others, the undermining of trust.

Relationship with constituent councils and party politics

The degree of collegiality shown by the metro-mayors so far is critical with CAs varying considerably in the degree in the trust and confidence between the mayor and the leaders of the constituent councils. Tensions inevitably arise but how they are addressed - predominantly by the mayor - makes a significant difference. One thoughtful mayor, acknowledging the *'real politik'* necessary in bringing council leaders together, regretted not having thought more about the subtleties involved. Party politics plays some part in such tensions, particularly where the elected mayor is from a different political party from the majority of council leaders within the authority, but power and sovereignty trumped party politics according to one official. Labour leaders recognized the usefulness of a Conservative mayor to provide another channel of communication with the government and to attract resource to the area. While in some areas with one dominant party the influence of party politics was small, with two mayors professing not to have to engage in such matters, interviewees in other areas relayed how party political disputes had been inflamed with the establishment of the CA. The aspiration that mayoral CAs might obviate the role of party politics (Perkins, 2018) seems naïve.

The importance of informal meetings and time to develop relationships with colleagues was underlined by two council leaders, chiming with the importance of Ayres, Sandford and Coombes' (2017) 'back-stage' settings. An official observed the

positive impact of the style of one mayor who took care to reach out to all on a personal level, in contrast to the alienation aroused by another. A mayoral precept will not be agreed unless reasonable trust has developed between constituent members. Notably, only one precept had been agreed (a second was agreed in 2019), in Greater Manchester. Managing the internal tensions between the mayor, his staff and local authority officials and/ or leaders, was acknowledged as a key issue from the start even where relationships historically had been mature. Who claims credit for what – the pronoun used, 'I' or 'we' - was often a source of tension between council leaders and mayor, as was disgruntlement at encroachment on to local authorities' turf. Resentments were commonplace, not least arising from the bruised egos of those who might have hoped to have been elected as mayor. One mayor aspired to a potentially highly contentious reorganization of local government in his patch.

Relationship with other agencies

Relationships with other agencies in the private, public and third sector including higher and further education were in the early phase of developing but the mayors had been active in using their (soft) power to convene in different policy areas. The situation is often complicated by the lack of coterminosity between different public sector agencies with different areas covered by Sustainability and Transformation Plans in healthcare, LEPs and CAs. Relationships with MPs and Police and Crime Commissioners (currently separate posts except in GM) varied between co-option into a mayoral cabinet to infrequent meetings only.

Relationship with the electorate

Representative democracy necessarily involves a relationship between elected politicians and those whom they represent. The mayors acknowledged that despite their election by the wider electorate, there was little public awareness of their role or responsibilities. Given looming mayoral elections, they recognised the imperative to raise the profile of the role and of them as individuals. Mayoral (and/ or CA) press and communications teams, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts (the latter demonstrating the very different mayoral styles) were mostly in place but it was early days. Only the more proactive mayors had held public Question Times.

Relationship with central government

With central government, the CAs' relationship appeared less delicate than with local councils. Central government, after all, set out to have a significantly different relationship with metro-mayors than with other local government leaders. Channels of communication and access to ministers were more open for mayors although this depended on the individual Secretary of State and mayor but a powerful (preferably Conservative) mayor can simply phone a minister to the likely advantage of that CA. In contrast, a letter from the Core Cities' leaders to a Secretary of State had gone unanswered (Blake, 2018, personal communication). The metro-mayors between them were allocated half of a new Transforming Cities Fund in 2017, as 'preferred providers' (Sandford, 2018). But there were concerns that the government had been slow to deliver their part of negotiated devolution deals with the Department for Transport and the Department for Education reluctant to engage.

On the other hand, after the initial honeymoon there is evidence of more distance between some metro-mayors and Whitehall whether as a result of a new Secretary State at MHCLG and/ or the displeasure of central government at, for example, Mayor Burnham's vocal criticism of train services in the north. Central government has used its leverage to quieten such voices. Yet, Heseltine was quoted by one interviewee that if mayors were not upsetting central government, they were not doing their job. It is a tricky balance. There was a sense from many that central government had *'unleashed this beast'* (the CAs) and now did not know what to do.

Concluding thoughts

This paper demonstrates both commonalities and differences between the early leadership of the first mayoral CAs arising from their context, national and local, and the actors (past and present) working within them. The context of local political leadership is inevitably multi-layered from the socio-economics, geography and culture of the place, and the constitutions of the authorities involved through to national, European and global pressures. As the interviews suggested, new organisations are constrained by their institutional context, particularly the local

political and organisational culture. Lowndes and Roberts (2013) suggest that actors are constrained through the rules, practices and narratives, formal and informal, of institutions. Such constraints tend to lead to continuity and stability, the so-called 'stickiness' (Lowndes, 2005) associated with the 'path dependency' suggested by earlier institutionalists.

It is through collaborative working, sometimes during testing times, that trust and confidence can develop. Other factors include the coherence of the economic geography; the degree of coterminosity with other public and private sector bodies; the cohesiveness of the local governance culture and to some extent, party political affiliations within the CA. Greater Manchester on all these counts scores highly, as the interviews and Lowndes and Lempriere's (2018) study of institutional formation demonstrate.

CAs may be constrained by 'path dependence' but their advent can also be seen as a critical juncture, that is a time when there is more opportunity for change in formal institutional rules. As the 'new kids on the block', CAs can contribute to the evolution of a different tone and set of practices. In this endeavour, the leadership of the CAs plays a significant part given that institutions and individuals are '*mutually constitutive*' (Lowndes, 2005). Indeed, the interviews in this study with a wide range of actors within the CAs have illustrated the very different degrees of agency, personality and style of the first six metro-mayors and some of their implications.

It is unclear how metro-mayors fit within the wider governance system, if at all. Nor is it clear to what extent mayoral CAs will impinge on areas that are the remit of local authorities and suck up powers rather than be the recipient of truly devolved powers from government. Issues such as public sector reform and homelessness have appeared on mayoral agenda, neither formally a mayoral responsibility. Little thought has been given to the role of local authorities particularly with their budgets having been significantly cut since 2010. Nor has there been attention to the role of councillors who may be closely in touch with their communities but even further removed from executive decision-making (Stanton, 2019). There are grey areas in the roles of an elected mayor, a council leader and even a local MP not least in terms of who speaks for that place. That mayors are directly elected may well impact on the

degree to which they reflect the diversity of the populations that they represent. Women, people from black and minority backgrounds and from poorer socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to stand in direct elections (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2007). Lastly, what is the public to make of the ever more confusing and fragmented governance picture in England?

While it is too early for conclusions to be made at this stage, there is a compelling case for genuine devolution within the UK, one of the most centralized European states. Any form of devolution in England is likely to be messy and complex – any neat solution would have been arrived at years ago - but can identity of place, factors that stimulate local sustainable economic growth and elements that enhance people's sense of political agency be better aligned than currently? It is currently a bewildering picture. Useful principles could include reducing the fragmentation and complexity in the local governance landscape - to which CAs add - and seeking to align where possible the boundaries of different public sector agencies. Public understanding might be enhanced, delivery of public services made more efficient and productivity boosted (Ahrend et al, 2014).

There is more uncertainty about the objectives sought amidst current devolutionary plans, or the basis and form of devolution to meet those objectives - and therefore what model of leadership is most appropriate. 'Place' has not featured prominently in the debate about the merits of CAs either in principle or in agreements in practice about their boundaries. Yet the metro-mayors and council leaders interviewed in this study were in no doubt about the importance of place to their political leadership role and to the people that they represented. How the metro-mayors promote and use a sense of place in CAs that currently have little place identity may well be a key element of their leadership. Place is not the only means by which to mobilize people but it is one way, that has been insufficiently recognized (Hambleton, 2019).

The future is uncertain. Even if metro mayors have arisen from a convenient accounting mechanism for central government, the genie may well be out of the bottle, at least in the major cities. Ambitious mayors may be able carve out more space, powers and opportunities, 'wedges' in the 'cracks' (Ayres, Flinders and Sandford, 2017) opened up by devolution deals, not least as central government is

pre-occupied with Brexit. It is too soon to know what impact mayoral CAs will have on promoting economic development, the visibility of local political leadership, or on the local governance landscape. Are mayoral CAs 'the next big thing' (Morphet, 2017) paving the way for significant devolution or are they a flash in the pan, to be consigned to Parr's (2017) 'circularity of policy'? Perhaps most likely, existing mayoralties are destined to remain but the devolutionary agenda to stall, mostly excluding rural areas and many towns and thus perpetuating the metropolitan divide that has long characterized English local governance. It is not obvious that mayoral CAs are the means by which England's deep economic, political and social divisions can be addressed. They may simply be a distraction in perilous times, further confusing the governance landscape - a landscape that warrants a much wider strategic view of the governance of England and the UK.

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