



## **Inclusive Place-Based Leadership: Lesson-Drawing from Urban Governance Innovations in Bristol, UK**

**Robin Hambleton**

### **Series: Progressive Mayors and Urban Social Movements**

*Across the world, progressive city leaders are working to limit the damaging impact of decisions made by “placeless” leaders, meaning powerful interests that are unconcerned about the consequences of their decisions for particular places and communities. Robin Hambleton outlines a new way of thinking about place-based leadership and reports on the steps being taken by Mayor Marvin Rees and other civic leaders in Bristol, UK, to test this model in practice.*

Elected as mayor of Bristol in May 2016, Marvin Rees is orchestrating the creation of an unusually inclusive one-city approach to governance in the city. Impressed with the strategy, the European Union has shortlisted Bristol for the International Award of European Capital of Innovation 2018.<sup>1</sup>

The context for modern mayoral efforts at local coalition-building is that the forces of economic globalization have resulted in the transfer of an extraordinary amount of power and influence from local communities to “placeless” leaders. Such leaders are unconcerned about the impacts of their decisions on particular localities. For example, profit-maximizing multinational companies, often operating on a global basis, tend to neglect the social calculus. A consequence is that current policies are creating increasingly unequal societies, divided societies, unsustainable societies (Mason 2015; Sandel 2012; Stiglitz 2012).

### **The concept of place-based leadership**

It would be misguided to suggest that all place-based leaders seek progressive outcomes. Indeed, the international evidence suggests that just about all cities contain neighborhoods where it is possible to find local leaders striving to exclude “other” kinds of people—gated communities provide an obvious example.

The argument presented here, however, is that, with the right kind of inclusive leadership, progressive mayors can mobilize the feelings of attachment people have to “their” place to advance economic, social and environmental justice in the city.

---

<sup>1</sup> The European Capital of Innovation prize—or iCapital, as it is known—is awarded to the city within the European Union that is considered to be the most innovative. The Bristol bid, which was shortlisted (meaning it is one of the last 12 cities in the competition at the time of writing), went beyond conventional “smart cities” and similar concepts to outline the benefits of developing inclusive, place-based leadership. See: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/funding/funding-opportunities/prizes/icapital\\_en#finalist-cities-for-2018](https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/funding/funding-opportunities/prizes/icapital_en#finalist-cities-for-2018).

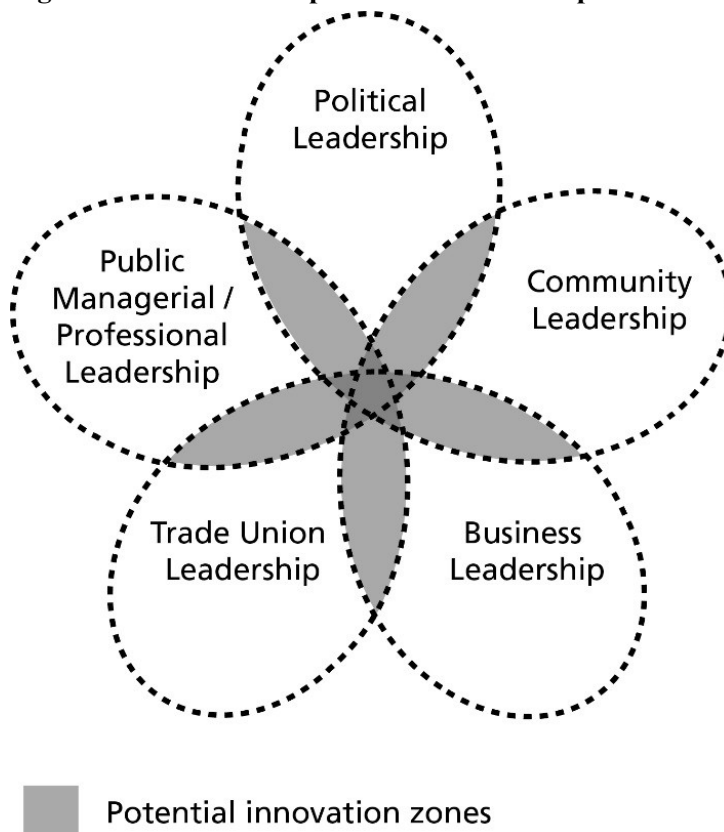
Place-based leaders are not free agents able to do exactly as they choose. On the contrary, various powerful forces shape the context within which civic leaders operate. These forces do not, however, extinguish the possibilities for progressive local leadership. Rather, they place limits on what urban leaders may be able to accomplish in particular places and at particular moments in time.

Places have traditions and identities that are built up over a long period of time; moreover, place has significant meaning for many people and can be an important source of identity (Bell and de-Shalit 2011; Tuan 1977). In my recent book, *Leading the Inclusive City*, I explore how these feelings of attachment and loyalty can provide a source of energy and power. The New Civic Leadership framework presented here stems from research on progressive cities and localities in 14 different countries.

Figure 1 suggests that, in any given locality, place-based governance is likely to comprise five overlapping realms of place-based leadership, with leaders in each realm drawing on different sources of legitimacy:

- **political leadership**, referring to the work of those people elected to leadership positions by the citizenry;
- **public managerial/professional leadership**, referring to the work of public servants appointed by local authorities, governments and third sector organizations to plan and manage public services, and promote community well-being;
- **community leadership**, referring to urban social movements and the efforts of many civic-minded people who give their time and energy to local leadership activities;
- **business leadership**, referring to the contribution made by local business leaders and social entrepreneurs, who have a clear stake in the long-term prosperity of the locality;
- **trade-union leadership**, referring to the efforts of trade-union leaders striving to improve the pay and working conditions of employees.

**Figure 1. The realms of place-based leadership**



Source: Hambleton 2015, p. 127.

All of these leadership roles are important in cultivating and encouraging public service innovation and, crucially, they overlap. The areas of overlap can be described as innovation zones—areas providing many opportunities for inventive behavior. These zones are especially fertile for innovation because they enable different perspectives to be brought together and this can prompt active questioning of established approaches.

It is fair to say that the areas of overlap in Figure 1 are often experienced as conflict zones, rather than innovation zones. These spaces do, of course, provide settings for power struggles between competing interests and values. Moreover, power is unequally distributed within these settings. This is precisely why place-based leadership matters. The evidence from my international research on urban governance suggests that civic leadership is critical in ensuring that the innovation zones are orchestrated in a way that promotes a culture of listening that can, in turn, lead to innovation.

### **The one-city approach in Bristol**

Marvin Rees, who was the Labour party candidate for directly elected Mayor of Bristol in the May 2016 local election, developed the City Office concept in 2015. In the simplest of terms the City Office, which underpins Bristol’s one-city approach, strives to unite civic purpose in the city; it seeks to bind together all those who care about the city in a much more effective collaborative effort. From an early stage, Rees made use of the New Civic Leadership framework set out above to develop his approach to collaborative governance.

In the May 2016 election, Rees, a young and charismatic candidate, delivered an emphatic victory for the Labour Party. Rees, who is mixed-race and was brought up in the less well-off parts of Bristol, is strongly committed to reducing inequality in the city. On election, he immediately attracted national media attention, partly because he was the first non-white political leader of the city of Bristol, a city that played a prominent role in the transatlantic slave trade.

**Figure 2. Marvin Rees, mayor of Bristol**



© Bristol City Council.

The swearing-in ceremony for Mayor Rees, held on 9 May 2016, took place in the M Shed, a museum documenting the history of the people of Bristol. Note that this ceremony was not held in City Hall; rather, this important civic event was located in a public building in the center of the city

that is visited by large numbers of Bristol residents. The symbolism was clear—City Hall is only part of the governance of the city.

Most unusually for a swearing-in ceremony, the Mayor was not the only speaker on the platform offering ideas on the future of the city. After the formal swearing-in procedure, Mayor Rees introduced Miles Chambers, later to become the first Bristol poet laureate, who read a passionate poem about the history of the city. Rees then invited three other civic leaders in Bristol to offer their views on the future of the city. Rees did not know in advance what these civic leaders were going to say. From the get-go, then, Rees was signaling his interest in sharing power and valuing the leadership contributions of other agencies and actors.

The City Office aims to mobilize energies from the different realms of leadership shown in Figure 1 for the benefit of the whole city. The central ethos is to focus on making an *additional* contribution over and above the activities of existing agencies and established collaborative arrangements. From the outset, the City Office approach has emphasized the co-creation of new possibilities for progressive action. Rees stresses that effective place-based leadership involves a process of opening up conversations with different stakeholders, one that involves risk-taking and experimentation.

It is possible to summarize the main aspects of the one-city approach by referring briefly to five features. First, inclusive city gatherings of civic leaders, drawn from the different realms of place-based leadership shown in Figure 1, have been held on a regular basis since the City Office founders' meeting of July 2016. City gatherings, which take place every few months in different locations across the city, create highly interactive “city conversations”, with participants working together in cross-realm teams, to examine the major challenges facing the city and to explore ideas on how to tackle them. These gatherings identify topics for in-depth work.

By way of example, the September 2016 city gathering identified homelessness as a priority for attention. Rees immediately asked local leaders to work together to create 100 extra beds for homeless people in the first 100 days of 2017. A Street Homelessness Challenge team, chaired by the City Office Director, was set up to develop ways of achieving this ambitious target. City Office partners launched a “spectrum of activity” to tackle homelessness.<sup>2</sup> The one-city approach brought in actors not normally involved in addressing this sort of challenge, such as local businesses—for instance, the local bus company helped to create 20 bed spaces by providing two double-decker buses for conversion into emergency accommodation.

A second step towards improving collaborative leadership was the creation of a shared workspace in City Hall not far from the mayor's office. People—from any of the realms of leadership in the city—who are working on activities relating to the one-city approach are invited to work in this space on Tuesdays. It is a simple, cost-free step, but it is an important one because it enables informal communication and relationship building to take place between stakeholders from the different realms of place-based leadership shown in Figure 1.

Third, the One-City Plan, now in preparation, is designed to deliver the main strategic aim of the Bristol City Office. It is orchestrating the creation of a “big-picture” strategy for the future development of the city, one that looks forward to 2050. As with progressive planning in some other cities, the plan is multi-agency. City partners and activists are actively involved in preparing the plan and are expected to commit to delivering it via their own policies, practices and actions. Interestingly, as part of the One-City Plan, a new initiative is being developed to provide a range of place-based leadership programs, including ones that target underrepresented groups in the city.

---

<sup>2</sup> See: Morris, S. 2017. “Bristol launches ‘spectrum of activity’ to tackle homelessness”, *The Guardian*, 25 January. Available online at the following URL: [www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jan/25/bristol-launches-spectrum-of-activity-to-tackle-homelessness](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jan/25/bristol-launches-spectrum-of-activity-to-tackle-homelessness).



**Figure 3. St Paul's graffiti wall, Bristol**



© CB Bristol Design/Bristol City Council, 2018.

A fourth feature of the model is the creation of a City Funds Board. Discussions at city gatherings in 2017 led to a suggestion that, partly because of the drastic cuts in UK central-government funding to local governments across the country, the city needed to create innovative ways of generating new funding streams to support public purpose in the city. Established in April 2018, the City Funds Board—which brings together representatives from communities, business, finance, the public sector and local universities—is developing new match-funding initiatives to focus finance, via repayable loans and grant-giving, on the priority areas set out in the new One-City Plan.

Lastly, the City Office is strongly committed to international city-to-city learning and exchange relating to progressive policymaking. The city of Bristol has a strong international strategy —“Bristol: Global City”<sup>3</sup>—and the city will host the Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM<sup>4</sup>) Annual Summit in October 2018. This international event, which will bring together up to 100 mayors, plus experts and global city networks, is designed to bring about an expansion of city, or place-based, influence in national and international policymaking.

The one-city approach is not without its critics. For example, some of those who are opposed to the UK central-government attacks on local public services and local democracy argue that an innovative City Office, in a particular city, is unlikely to make much difference in a country that has become so centralized. Others argue that a consensual approach, one that strives to bring together different stakeholders, just takes too long, when a more decisive approach to place-based leadership is needed.

Defenders of the one-city approach respond by noting that it is still early days and that, over time, it just might be that imaginative collaborative leadership at the city scale can bring about an expansion of the collective power of people living in the city. Over time, as more cities develop much more inclusive strategies for policymaking, it may be that the dominance of placeless, uncaring decision-makers can be challenged.

<sup>3</sup> See: [www.bristol.gov.uk/policies-plans-strategies/bristol-global-city](http://www.bristol.gov.uk/policies-plans-strategies/bristol-global-city).

<sup>4</sup> Website : <http://globalparliamentofmayors.org>.

## **Bibliography**

- Bell, D. A. and de-Shalit, A. 2011. *The Spirit of Cities. Why the Identity of a City Matters in a Global Age*, Princeton: University of Princeton Press.
- Hambleton, R. 2015. *Leading the Inclusive City*, Bristol: Bristol University Press – Policy Press.
- Mason, P. 2015. *PostCapitalism. A Guide to our Future*, London: Allen Lane.
- Sandel, M. 2012. *What Money Can't Buy. The Moral Limits of Markets*, London: Allen Lane.
- Stiglitz, J. 2012. *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Tuan, Y. F. 1977. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.

**Robin Hambleton** is Emeritus Professor of City Leadership at the University of the West of England, Bristol. He is the author of *Leading the Inclusive City. Place-Based Innovation for a Bounded Planet* (University of Bristol Press – Policy Press, 2015; see: <http://policypress.co.uk/leading-the-inclusive-city-1>).

## **To cite this article:**

Robin Hambleton, "Inclusive Place-Based Leadership: Lesson-Drawing from Urban Governance Innovation in Bristol, UK", *Metropolitiques*, 9 October 2018, URL: <https://www.metropolitiques.eu/Inclusive-Place-Based-Leadership-Lesson-Drawing-from-Urban-Governance.html>.