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Governing England: Why not widen our horizons?

Emeritus Professor Robin Hambleton considers the recent history of devolution in England, outlines his view that debates on devolution in England should take greater account of devolution elsewhere and sets out his view that place matters.

Public debate about the devolution of power within England appears to attract only sporadic attention. Some will argue that distractions caused by conflicts over Brexit explain the relatively low level of public interest in the important constitutional issues raised by so-called 'devolution' to metro mayors and the like.

This claim is not without substance. But, could it also be the case that the quality of the English devolution debate lacks both rigour and imagination?

The [Governing England](#) project at the British Academy is doing good work aimed at lifting the quality of discussion about the introduction of new city region governance arrangements. In particular, the [events that the British Academy organised at various locations around the country in 2016-2017](#) helped to advance public understanding of the impact of recent legislation on various city regions and localities.

However, three obstacles seem to be constraining the development of bold and imaginative solutions to the various English devolution challenges we now face:

- 1) An inadequate critique of the way power has been super-centralised in Whitehall in the last forty years;
- 2) A failure to compare the perilous state of local democracy in England with the healthy state of local government in other western democracies;
- 3) Insufficient attention to the shifting relationship between place-based and place-less power in our globalising world.

First, when ministers make speeches claiming that they are in the process of devolving significant power to sub-regions within England, many commentators appear to be taken in. The rhetoric about a 'Northern Powerhouse' and a 'Midlands Engine' often goes unquestioned.

The Whitehall press-relations machine is constantly issuing announcements claiming that, for example, the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016, and associated measures, are designed to deliver radical devolution of power to the great cities of England.

Examination of what powers are actually being devolved shows that there is a serious mismatch between this rhetoric and reality. In my view, and I provide the detailed evidence elsewhere, ministers are engaged in a deliberate ‘devolution deception’.¹

Others appear to share my view. For example, in August 2017 northern political and business leaders gathered in Yorkshire to advocate for significant transport investment in the North. Andy Burnham, elected as metro mayor for Greater Manchester in May 2017, spoke for many when he pointed out in an article for *The Guardian* on 22 August, timed to coincide with the Northern Transport Summit, that: ‘Having been promised a Northern Powerhouse ... [we find] ... ourselves still waiting for any real evidence of it’.

Ministers are showing by their actions that, in truth, they are not at all interested in creating a powerful system of sub-national governance within England, one in which elected local leaders have significant fiscal power and are answerable to their electorates.

Rather, the changes are designed to strengthen Whitehall control of local strategies, via so-called ‘devolution deals’, for specific localities. The metro mayors, six of them were elected in May 2017 to lead so-called ‘combined authorities’, have next to no local tax raising power and they have vanishingly small budgets in relation to the challenges their sub-regions face. The central/local relationship in the metro mayor model resembles the relationship between a Victorian parent and a young child: ‘Do as I say and I will give you some pocket money’.

This super-centralised approach to sub-national policy making is a peculiarly English model. In other western democracies the central state devolves significant fiscal and constitutional power to regions and sub-regions within the state.

This leads to my second point. Devolution debates in England should pay much more attention to successful devolution models in other countries.

In December 2015, the Local Government Association (LGA), impatient with the piecemeal and unprincipled approach to devolution being pursued by the Conservative Government, invited me to conduct a short study designed to widen the public conversation about devolution in England. The brief required me to provide an international review of different models of sub-national governance, to assess them according to explicit principles of good governance, and to draw out lessons for councils and others involved in developing devolved governance arrangements. My report, [*English Devolution: Learning lessons from international models of sub-national governance*](#), benefited significantly from inputs from senior city leaders in England.

Four highly respected examples of metropolitan governance emerged from the comparative analysis: Auckland Council, New Zealand; Greater London Authority, UK; Portland Metro, Oregon, USA; and the Association of the Region of Stuttgart, Germany. These city regions are chosen to illustrate a range of design options for devolved city region governance, ones that have been internationally recognised as relatively successful. In all four cases the elected leaders of the sub-regions have significant fiscal power and they have the freedom to do things differently.

Interestingly the research shows that it is perfectly possible to have excellent sub-national governance without introducing directly elected metro mayors. Two of the four highly respected models of sub-national governance featured in my report - Portland Metro, Oregon, and the Association of the Region of Stuttgart –eschew the directly elected mayor model. It follows that the Conservative Government's insistence on introducing directly elected metro mayors, or for that matter mayors for other sub-national territories, represents an evidence-free policy stance.

Allow me to turn to my third, and last, point. It is important to better understand the nature of place-based power in our globalising world. Urban studies scholars, here in the UK but also elsewhere, have, in recent years, advanced our understanding of the interplay between the various forces shaping urban fortunes. By drawing on this scholarship I have suggested in my recent book that it is helpful to distinguish place-based power from place-less power.ⁱⁱ

Place-less leaders, who are not expected to care about the consequences of their decisions for particular places and communities, have gained extraordinary power and influence. This place-less power needs to be challenged, and people living in particular localities need to regain the authority to decide what happens to the quality of life in their area. My book provides 17 examples of inspirational place-based leadership, drawn from fourteen countries and covering all continents, to show how place-based power can make a real difference to the quality of life.

The British Academy [Governing England](#) project is important and deserves our support. But in 2018 devolution debates would benefit from bringing a more critical eye to UK government policy statements and practice. Moreover it would be wise to widen our horizons and realise that the super-centralisation of power we are experiencing in England is curiously out of step with progressive policy making in other western democracies.

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His latest book is '[Leading the Inclusive City. Place-based innovation for a bounded planet](#)' published by Policy Press.

References

ⁱ Hambleton R. (2017) 'The super-centralisation of the English state – Why we need to move beyond the devolution deception', *Local Economy*, 32 (1) 3-13

ⁱⁱ Hambleton R. (2015) *Leading the Inclusive City. Place-based innovation for a bounded planet*. Bristol: Policy Press