

# Transatlantic lessons for UK cities

By [Robin Hambleton](#) | 02 May 2017

Imagine a city where local leaders have decided that tackling inequality is the top priority. They recognise that social and economic divisions are accelerating at a totally unacceptable rate.

Because they care deeply about the importance of creating a just city, the mayor and local councillors have put advancing equity at the heart of their city plan. Agreed in 2012 the progressive plan for the city is now being implemented through a wide range of actions designed to promote social justice.

In December, in an eye-catching move, Portland City Council passed a pioneering law that will impose a surtax on large corporations that pay their chief executives more than 100 times what they pay the average worker.

Recall that in the 1960s the chief executives of Fortune 500 companies received about 20 times the pay of their workers. In 2014 chief executives paid themselves 373 times as much, according to AFL-CIO's Executive PayWatch reports.

Ted Wheeler, the new directly elected mayor, shortly after taking up office in January, reaffirmed the importance of Portland's role in the Sanctuary Cities movement: 'We will not be complicit in the deportation of our neighbours. Under my leadership as mayor, the City of Portland will remain a welcoming, safe place for all people regardless of immigration status.'

Critics may claim this is just gesture politics. This is to fail to recognise that US cities have far more power than their British counterparts to advance social justice.

Thus, in March, commissioner Amanda Fritz filed an ordinance, co-sponsored by mayor Wheeler, providing a grant of \$50,000 to the Metropolitan Public Defender for their newly formed Immigrant Protection Project. This initiative provides legal services to immigrant communities in Portland.

What lessons can we draw from US city resistance to Trump?

First, it is essential to remember that a minority of US citizens voted for Trump and a minority of British citizens voted for Brexit.

Out of America's 250 million adults some 63 million voted for the reality TV showman – that's 25%. Some 73.5 million citizens voted against Trump, including 65.8 million who cast a vote for Hillary Clinton. Others either did not vote or did not have the right to vote.

In the UK, 54.5 million adults were entitled to vote and 17.4 million, or 32%, voted to leave the European Union. Some 16.1 million voted to remain, 12.9 million did not vote and, as David Lammy MP pointed out, 7 million eligible voters weren't registered and 1 million British expatriates were not allowed to vote.

The evidence shows, then, that a sizable majority of people in both countries did not vote either for Trump or Brexit.

Second, US city leaders have constitutional protection from an over bearing central state. President Trump may wish to tell cities what to do, but he cannot.

Leave aside the state laws of the fifty US states – these grant varying degrees of autonomy to local authorities within their boundaries – the fourth and tenth amendments of the United States Constitution stop, in effect, any President from issuing instructions to localities. How refreshing.

The difference with the UK could hardly be more startling. In the UK we live in a super-centralised state, one that has taken ever more power away from local government and local people.

The forthcoming elections of directly elected mayors to various city regions of England on Thursday do next to nothing to address the over centralised situation we have reached.

When compared with American city leaders the new metro mayors will be featherweight mayors. This is not a comment on the individuals who are standing for election. Rather it is to recognise that these mayors will have, in practice, very little independent authority to make radical changes in policies and practices to the city regions they govern.

For example, how many will be able to follow the City of Portland example and impose a surtax on large corporations that pay their chief executives more than 100 times what they pay the average worker? The answer is none. UK legislation does not allow this.

A clear lesson from the US is that in our country elected local authorities, whether they have mayors or not, need to have far more power and, most important, they need solid constitutional protection of their 'right to do things differently'.

Third, it is important to reassert that elected city leaders have the legitimacy and the opportunity to speak out for their citizens. The truth is that, even in super-centralised Britain, the central state cannot stop local leaders articulating an inclusive vision for cities and localities.

It is encouraging to note that cities and city regions are now bypassing lumbering central governments and developing innovative international city-to-city networks. The relatively new Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM) provides a good example.

A downside of globalisation is that place-less leaders – meaning people who are unconcerned about the consequences of their decisions for particular places and communities – have gained extraordinary power and influence.

The central transatlantic lesson for British public policy is that place-based power needs to be strengthened dramatically.

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