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How US local government resists Trump

Robin Hambleton argues that, at a time when national politics is being disfigured by angry populism, learning from progressive US cities can be inspirational

This month American President, Donald Trump, endorsed anti-Muslim hate videos manufactured by an extremist right wing pressure group, known as Britain First, one that has been described by our Prime Minister as a ‘hateful organisation’.

Theresa May was right to say that: ‘It is wrong for the President to have done this’. Some argue that this was a weak statement, falling some way short of the outright condemnation that many British citizens would have expected.

However, the Prime Minister is, in rhetoric at least, siding with the many Americans who reject the divisive policies being advocated by the 45th President.

While the anti-Trump movement in the US embraces many political and social campaigners, it is encouraging to be able to record that elected local governments, particularly those representing urban areas, are playing a vital leadership role, not just in criticising the President but also in actually stopping him from implementing some of his misguided policies.

For example, last summer, when Trump decided to withdraw the US from the Paris climate accord, a coalition of mayors, companies, faith organisations and universities emerged very quickly to reassure the world that many in the US would not be exiting the Paris agreement.

The We Are Still In coalition, which remains committed to the Paris targets, represents over half of all Americans. It includes over 100 cities – big cities like Chicago, New York City, San Francisco and Seattle, but also many smaller cities like Berkeley, Evanston, Portland and St. Petersburg.

US local governments are also playing a leading role in the Sanctuary City movement. Over 300 US jurisdictions, including cities, counties and states, have adopted sanctuary policies.

‘Sanctuary City’ does not have a precise definition in US law but, in essence, the leaders of these localities all make it clear that they want the area they represent to be a welcoming, safe place for all people regardless of immigration status.

These local authorities want to reduce fear of deportation and potential family break-up among people who are in the country illegally. They know sanctuary

policies result in such people being more willing to enrol their children in school, report crimes, use health and social services and so on.

Enraged by local opposition to his hard line immigration policies Trump issued an executive order last January aimed at withdrawing federal funding from Sanctuary City jurisdictions, like Chicago, New York City, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Two California counties took the President to court and, on 20 November, US District Court Judge William Orrick issued a permanent injunction blocking Trump's executive order.

This ruling represents a major setback to Trump's efforts to tell locally elected authorities what to do and, more than that, it prevents the federal government from punishing these authorities for thinking and acting independently. The ruling bars the administration from introducing new conditions on spending approved by Congress.

The successful place-based leadership shown by progressive cities and counties in the US reminds us that British elected local authorities are in a hopelessly weak position. They have no constitutional protection against an overbearing central state, no independent fiscal power and are required to comply with a continuing cascade of central directives and cutbacks.

There are many fine examples of place-based leadership in the UK but locally elected leaders, even those that are intended to benefit from so-called 'devolution deals', have very little political space within which they can act.

It is clear that if we are to develop localities that are both prosperous and inclusive we need to bring about a significant rebalancing of local/central power relations.

Without radical action feelings of powerlessness will grow and we can anticipate increasingly angry reactions from areas and communities that are being 'left behind' by current national policies.

It is time to set up a constitutional convention, one that can lead to the development of lasting legal protections for elected local authorities and a really significant strengthening of local fiscal power.

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<http://policypress.co.uk/leading-the-inclusive-city-1>

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