

# english devolution – time for a radical rethink

## It is time to reverse the super-centralisation of the English state, argues Robin Hambleton

The way that the Government is handling the so-called 'devolution' of power within England is a dog's breakfast – and it is doing great damage to local democracy as well as to the cause of sound city-region planning.

Instead of an intelligent public conversation – one that is open and transparent, one that enables citizens, local organisations, political parties and others to articulate their views on how local governance should be reformed – we are witnessing the development of a secretive, super-centralised process of decision-making. The lofty rhetoric about devolution masks a dramatic centralisation of power. Behind closed doors the constitution of the country is being redesigned in a series of rushed 'devolution deals'.

Think about it: detailed criteria for assessing devolution proposals have not been made explicit by the Government; instead, Ministers, on the basis of their own unpublished preferences, are picking and choosing which localities are to benefit from so-called 'devolution deals'. Ministers decide the criteria, Ministers decide the contents of each 'deal', and Ministers decide what funding will flow to the selected areas.

These are classic 'divide and rule' tactics. The solidarity of local government is, in some areas at least, a casualty as localities argue over which local authorities should or should not be included in particular newly created 'Combined Authorities'.

### Incoherent national policy leads to local incoherence

Take, for example, the current squabbles relating to the Sheffield city-region in South Yorkshire. Two local authorities that are not part of South Yorkshire – Chesterfield in Derbyshire and Bassetlaw in Nottinghamshire – have applied to be part of the

Sheffield City Region Combined Authority, a new city-region authority that will be headed by a directly elected mayor. However, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire are opposed to their districts' plans to join the city-region. Derbyshire County Council is particularly strident in its objections and, at the time of writing, is seeking a judicial review of the proposal to include Chesterfield in the Sheffield city-region. The councillors in Chesterfield hope to gain access to funds that will flow to the new Combined Authority.

Without taking sides in this particular debate, we can note that Chesterfield does not even share a boundary with the Sheffield city-region. If Chesterfield becomes part of the Combined Authority, it will be a detached 'island' sitting in Derbyshire.

Similar noisy disputes about local governance changes are under way elsewhere in England. Competitive, fractious, short-sighted – these are the adjectives that characterise devolution in England in 2016. Thankfully, the fact that the Government's approach to devolution is misguided has not gone unnoticed.

### Expressions of concern

Three well informed reports have appeared in the last few months drawing attention to the flaws in the Government's rushed and haphazard approach.

First, the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, in *Devolution: The Next Five Years and Beyond*,<sup>1</sup> published in February, has noted that 'the policy risks being rushed and appearing driven by a purely political timetable.' (page 3). The Committee does not mince its words: 'From what we have seen and heard, we are very concerned that the public will not understand who will be responsible for what in their local area.' (page 34).



There are many inspirational international examples of successful city governance models on which England could draw, such as that used in Portland, Oregon in the USA

Second, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Reform, Decentralisation and Devolution Inquiry into Better Devolution for the UK, chaired by Lord Bob Kerslake, argued in its report *Devolution and the Union*,<sup>2</sup> issued in March, for a much more thoughtful approach. It noted that ‘Progress to date has been piecemeal; devolution arrangements emerging through bilateral conversations and narrow constitutional amendments that fail to take a view in the round.’ (page 4).

Third, in July, the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee weighed in with a devastating critique of government devolution policy. In its report *Cities and Local Growth*,<sup>3</sup> the Committee set out nine sensible recommendations. It said that the Government has not thought through the implications of devolution for central government departments. The decision on ‘Brexit’, which came after the report went to press, makes this criticism about the failure to consider the implications for Whitehall even more troubling. The Committee also criticised the breakneck pace: ‘The speed of the process so far has already led to a lack of meaningful consultation with stakeholders, including local MPs, councils and voters.’ (page 6).

In previous efforts to redesign our country’s governance structure there has, on the whole, been a thoughtful examination of the evidence. The views of different interests have been sought – we used to have independent Royal Commissions to gather evidence and present recommendations – and changes to the governance structure emerged from a thoughtful consideration of alternatives.

### Drawing lessons from other countries

In my new book, *Leading the Inclusive City*, I examine place-based leadership in 14 different countries, and draw lessons from the experiences

of some of the most innovative cities in the world.<sup>4</sup> This international comparative analysis of urban policy and the changing dynamics of city and city-region governance suggests that the super-centralised approach to devolution in England is curiously out of step with progressive policy-making in other countries. I found no other country that is pursuing such a top-down ‘we know best’ approach to city-region governance.

In researching the book I discovered many examples of inspirational city planning practice – in, for example, Copenhagen, Curitiba, Freiburg, Malmö, Melbourne and Portland. In Denmark, Brazil, Germany, Sweden, Australia and the USA we find elected local authorities making remarkable progress partly because the central state is not interfering in what the locally accountable local authorities are doing.

### Widening the conversation

Earlier this year the Local Government Association (LGA) invited me prepare an international review of models of sub-national governance in other countries. The aim of this study is to widen the conversation about devolution policy in England. The report, which was launched at the LGA Annual Conference in Bournemouth in July, is available in two versions on the LGA website: a short, accessible report for busy practitioners; and a longer research report providing a more detailed overview of the dynamics of devolution in England and a fairly full account of international innovations in sub-national governance.<sup>5</sup>

Based on consultation with city leaders in England, the report sets out six principles for good governance that should be helpful for those creating Combined Authorities:

- civic leadership;
- effective decision-making;
- transparency and efficiency;

- accountability;
- public involvement; and
- business engagement.

The international literature on metropolitan and non-metropolitan governance suggests that reform options lie along a spectrum. At one end the solutions involve the merger of existing units of local government into larger municipalities. In the middle area of the spectrum we find various collaborative arrangements designed to produce effective collective action for large areas through inter-local agreements, coalition building and/or the introduction of an additional tier of government. And at the far end we find those who try to make a virtue out of governmental fragmentation. From this 'public choice' perspective, small units of local government should behave as if they are in a market place.

#### Four respected examples of sub-national governance

By drawing on an analysis of successful city-region governance models around the world, the report provides profiles of four models that have won praise internationally:

- Auckland Council, New Zealand;
- the UK's Greater London Authority (GLA);
- Portland Metro, in Oregon, USA; and
- Stuttgart city-region, Germany.

The examples have been chosen to illustrate very different ways of governing large areas. And the six principles of good governance are used to provide an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of these different models.

Two of the examples – Auckland and London – have directly elected mayors, the other two do not. In 2010, the New Zealand Government abolished eight local authorities in Auckland and created a large unitary authority, led by a directly elected mayor and 20 councillors. In addition, there are now 21 elected local boards that have responsibility for decision-making on local services. The GLA was created in 2000 and is a strategic metropolitan authority. It has a directly elected mayor and a London Assembly comprising 25 assembly members. It is a second tier of government, and the London boroughs continue to provide most local government services.

Created in 1978, Portland Metro is, rather like the GLA, a metropolitan level of government operating above existing municipalities. Voters elect a president and six councillors to run the Metro, and they also elect a Metro auditor to hold the Metro politicians to account. The president appoints members to committees and commissions but does not have any powers independent of the council.

The Association of the Region of Stuttgart is different again. Introduced in 1994, the directly

elected regional assembly has 87 members. They are elected using proportional representation, and the assembly chooses the chair. As with the Portland Metro, this person has very little independent executive power.

#### Lessons from abroad

The international evidence shows that cities and city-regions in countries across the world have adopted different models of leadership. In particular, my research shows that directly elected mayors should not be seen as the only option for providing leadership of sub-national governance in England. On the contrary, if devolution is to mean anything, elected local councillors should be free to design and develop alternative forms of governance for Combined Authorities. Welcoming such flexibility would open up creative opportunities, and a variety of ways of refreshing local governance could emerge.

Given the complexity of the issues, the weaknesses in the current approach to devolution, and the need to think through options, hear different voices and design robust models of governance for Combined Authorities, it would be wise to give more time to the institutional design process – and to considering moving the city-region mayoral elections back from May 2017 to May 2018.

In relation to devolution in England, rushing ahead is one option. Engaging in a sensible rethink is another.

● **Robin Hambleton** is Emeritus Professor of City Leadership in the Centre for Sustainable Planning and Environments, University of the West of England, Bristol, and Director of Urban Answers. His new book, *Leading the Inclusive City*, is published by Policy Press (<http://policypress.co.uk/leading-the-inclusive-city-1>). The views expressed here are personal.

#### Notes

- 1 *Devolution: The Next Five Years and Beyond*. HC 369. First Report of Session 2015-16. Communities and Local Government Committee, House of Commons, Feb. 2016. [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmcomloc/369/369.pdf](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmcomloc/369/369.pdf)
- 2 *Devolution and the Union: A Higher Ambition*. Report of the Inquiry into Better Devolution for the Whole UK. All-Party Parliamentary Group on Reform, Decentralisation and Devolution, House of Commons, Mar. 2016, p.4. [www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/6917361/Devolution+and+the+Union+-+a+higher+ambition.pdf/fd980893-cb5c-465f-a711-d241d22364b5](http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/6917361/Devolution+and+the+Union+-+a+higher+ambition.pdf/fd980893-cb5c-465f-a711-d241d22364b5)
- 3 *Cities and Local Growth*. HC 296. Sixth Report of Session 2016-17. Committee of Public Accounts. House of Commons, Jul. 2016. [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmpubacc/296/296.pdf](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmpubacc/296/296.pdf)
- 4 R. Hambleton: *Leading the Inclusive City. Place-Based Innovation for a Bounded Planet*. Policy Press, 2016
- 5 R. Hambleton: *English Devolution: Learning Lessons from International Models of Sub-National Governance*. Local Government Association, Jun. 2016. [www.local.gov.uk/devolution/publications](http://www.local.gov.uk/devolution/publications)