

The Government's approach to "Metro Mayors" amounts to imposition rather than devolution

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The newly elected Conservative majority government have made city deals and metro area devolution one of the cornerstones of their policy offer, with Greater Manchester set to get a metro mayor and others set to follow suit. **John Pugh MP**, in a recent Westminster Hall speech, argued that the Government's policy threatens to ignore communities just outside of the metro areas in questions, and that it amounts to imposition, rather than devolution.*



There are two key themes of the newly elected Government's agenda which I am personally keen on. One is devolution and the other is the 'northern powerhouse', both of which I support in principle. For England, we are largely talking about devolution to city regions, but it is wholly unclear, as many MPs have already said in the House of Commons, what will happen to those areas outside city regions.

I understand city regions, because they are essentially the rediscovery of what we used to call metropolitan counties, which were abolished as collateral damage when Mrs Thatcher got rid of the Greater London Council. She was so antagonised by signs across the road from County Hall that she decided it had to go, and to make it not seem personal and vindictive she got rid of the metropolitan counties as well, just to prove the point. There has always been a necessity for sub-regional bodies of one kind or another, which was proved by the need to recreate the GLC as the Greater London Authority, with an associated Mayor's office. It was also proved by the fact that the met counties more or less persisted in one form or another. They persisted in most areas as four joint boards or authorities dealing with police, fire, transport and waste.

That is what Mrs Thatcher did. What we are seeing now is almost a reversal of Thatcherism—the Minister may not be comfortable with that, but that is what is happening. Police authorities, which Mrs Thatcher and the Conservatives who followed her tried insistently to depoliticise by adding to them cohorts of magistrates, independents and so on, have now become politically accountable police and crime commissioners – I am not

particularly fond of that proposal, but nonetheless it is a politicisation. There is a promise of a devolution of power from Whitehall to what we have learned to call our combined authorities, which have essentially replaced the joint boards and the met counties before them. The only real difference is that they are indirectly nominated rather than directly elected.

Governments are often trapped into having to reinvent the wheel. There is always a need for a sub-regional structure to make the big economic and transport decisions that are beyond the individual competence of even a sizeable council. Governments have also learned that those kinds of decisions cannot be made well or to local satisfaction by Whitehall.

What is odd about the Government's proposals is their insistence that this sort of devolution requires something called a Metro Mayor—a 'Mr Big' or a kind of 'civic Mussolini' – which is different from having an effective council leader or a figurehead, for which many people see the need in certain areas or for certain purposes. It is essentially the appropriation of executive power to one individual.

The interesting thing is that this is the sort of devolution that people have requested and want. There is clamour up and down the northern cities and conurbations—people are saying, "Let's have a Metro Mayor." But it is a Government-knows-best, procrustean model. The Chancellor has been explicit in stating that proper, full devolution will be on that model. If I were being unkind, I could accuse the Government of dogmatism, ideological stupidity, blind prejudice or even a predilection for civic Mussolinis, but I am genuinely struggling to follow their argument. There is no evidence from anywhere in the world that conurbations with all-powerful mayors thrive any better or any worse than those that do not. Some clearly do, but a lot do not; governance is not always a decisive factor. There is no evidence that one man alone always makes a better decision than a leader surrounded by his peers or a group of adequately informed and able people.

There is an appreciable body of evidence that shows that systems that invest power in a single decision-maker are vulnerable to a number of things. They are vulnerable to cronyism—that kind of accusation has been made against the Mayor of London. They are vulnerable, in the long term, to an element of corruption, as decisions become less transparent, and to political obtuseness and political kite flying – for example the "Boris Island" airport. Collective decisions, rather than individual decisions, are always more transparent and more open to challenge, because they have to be argued for. They are not always quicker, which may be why the Government are infatuated with the Metro Mayor idea, but if corporate bodies are required to make quick decisions, most can think of an intelligent scheme of delegation that enables them to deal with the particular problem. Few people would argue that a President of the United States, surrounded by advisers, perforce and naturally makes better decisions than a Prime Minister of England, who has a Cabinet and has to get things through Parliament.

In Merseyside, we have a particular problem. From our point of view, it is essential that decisions that affect the whole region have proper input from all parts of the region. All voices—those of Southport, Sefton, the Wirral and St Helens—should be heard. It is not simply all about Liverpool. One person, however good, qualified and sensitive they are, is unlikely to be equally alert and caring or equally bothered about all areas.

In my area—right on the margins of the Liverpool city region—we worry about marginalisation. We are already in a borough that is controlled by no one elected by Southport or who belongs to a party that has been elected in Southport. There is genuine unhappiness about being in the council we are in, and we will make representations later in the Parliament about boundary changes. But how much worse will it be for my constituency when not even a Sefton voice is involved in the decisions that directly affect us? We will become a marginalised community.

Our tourism, for example, could be overlooked in Liverpool's drive to boost its own tourist economy. There does not seem to be an adequate restraint on that. What we want is a better engagement with the areas immediately outside the city region. It is important to us to find out what is going to happen in our neighbouring authority, west Lancashire—a district highly dependent on the city region economy, but exiled from it, no part of it and not able to join it. We need to talk about transport links with west Lancashire, and it is not obvious that having a Metro Mayor would be of

any assistance to us.

The situation genuinely would not be so bad if, as in the ResPublica pamphlet, which backed the proposal of “Devo Manc”, the prospect of a Metro Mayor was presented as an option—as something in the toolkit. But it is not; it is a precondition, regardless of local opinion. It is not devolution by demand, but almost devolution as the Chancellor demands. To that extent, it has to be questioned.

I do not think these problems are unique to the area of Merseyside, or even just to Merseyside, Manchester and the north-west. The same issues can be found in Tyneside, the Sheffield area and Birmingham. The fact that Manchester has been such a success recently in terms of its devolution—it was picked as an early candidate for devolution without a Metro Mayor—proves how tangential the presence of a Metro Mayor is to genuine devolution.

Let me conclude by summarising the problem. We want devolution, just like the Scots—it would be nice, of course, to have the same level of per capita funding—but the Government’s offer, as it is at the moment, is simply piecemeal. We are leaving many areas completely orphaned. We are patronising other areas by suggesting that they can only have one particular form of governance, regardless of what the electorate actually wants, otherwise they will not get the funding that devolved areas will have. We are marginalising communities, such as my constituency of Southport, within the city region, and we are confronted with a wholly unproven, unevidenced strategy.

The worst thing is that there is absolutely no opportunity for the people who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of this devolution to have or express a view on the template that the Government offer them. That is not devolution; it is imposition.

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This post is based on a speech given by John Pugh MP in a recent Westminster Hall debate. It represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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John Pugh has been the Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament for Southport since 2001

