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(subject to final revision)

In asking whether it is time to put the dream of elected mayors to bed, Alex Marsh's thoughtful contribution hints at some textbook problems of public policy. What counts as evidence of policy success? What were the objectives of this innovation in the first place? Choosing an elected executive mayor by referendum has been available to the public in England and Wales for more than a decade. Since 2007 it has also been available through council resolution following 'consultation' rather than referendum. It continues to generate differing party attitudes locally but retains consistent cross-party support nationally. Yet even the most enthusiastic advocates of the elected mayoralty could hardly claim that it has been stunningly successful (Fenwick, Elcock and McMillan 2006; Elcock and Fenwick 2012).

Envisaged by both New Labour and the coalition as a solution to perceived problems of city leadership, it is striking that no city outside London chose the mayoral option by referendum until Bristol did so in 2012. (Leicester and Liverpool went down this route without referendum). What then of the ten city referendums in 2012? Alex Marsh rightly says that these referendums would have created mayors under "subtly different terms" from those already in office. There were ambiguities over accountability and precise powers. Whether this lack of clarity was relevant to the public in Bristol cannot be known but it seems unlikely that local voters would have suddenly been energised by scrutiny arrangements or a promise to give mayors more power. The public generally seems highly underwhelmed by the prospect of directly elected mayors.

The roots of public indifference to the mayor, and its rather half-hearted endorsement in Bristol, tend to lie in specific local factors rather than any institutional or procedural considerations. Alex Marsh draws attention to the positions of the political parties in Bristol and especially the opposition of the ruling Liberal Democrats to an elected mayor. The context of unstable local administrations in the city, the cross-cutting political strands and the low turnout all combined to produce a 'yes' vote but on the basis of local political variables coming together at the right moment. This is precisely the pattern that has produced elected mayors in the small number of areas that opted for them elsewhere: highly particular circumstances with no resemblance to the grand vision (of current and previous governments) of how civic bosses would combine political and managerial authority in a new leadership modelled on European or American examples.

The ten city referendums held by decision of central government were not the only ones in 2012. It is worth pausing to consider the local political factors (and opportunities) around the referendums to retain the mayor in Doncaster or (through public petition) to create one in Salford. Again, these reflect specific local factors.

The number of mayors is still very small: as Alex Marsh points out, only 15 local mayors (it will be 16 with Bristol) out of over 300 local authorities. So is it time to put the idea of the elected mayor to bed? For the electorate (if not for politicians) it seems the idea is already in bed, slumbering deeply.

What then of the future? An upsurge of public interest in elected mayors is highly unlikely, especially in the absence what Alex Marsh refers to as any "strong evidence base" about their impact thus far. Any future for this particular dream is likely to be based on one or more of the following.

- The possibility of locally-generated referendums in specific circumstances, as in Salford, may gradually generate modest expansion of the mayoral system.

- More likely, council resolution rather than referendum could provide a basis for mayoral expansion when local elites sense a political opportunity and act decisively, as in Liverpool and Leicester.

- Central government may simply determine that local authorities will henceforth be led by elected mayors, or even that council leaders are deemed to be mayors, with some revision of powers and duties enacted through simple legislation. Not all European mayors are directly elected, after all.

- 'Metro' mayors for the conurbations or wider city regions (rather than for current local government units), alluded to by Alex Marsh, could make more sense than city mayors (see Warwick Commission 2012) and indeed would echo arguments for mayors made in the 1990s. Yet this would fragment the already incoherent pattern of local governance in England to such an extent that no government is likely to have the appetite for the task (especially as it would yield no obvious political gain for them).

Ultimately Alex Marsh is right to say that the government has never really made the case for changing to a mayoral system (see also Orr, 2004). It is now being increasingly vague about what such a system might bring. This is unlikely to be the foundation for a dream to come true.

References

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