Abstract

This paper examines the continued reform of local political leadership in England. It traces the reform of the institutions of local representative democracy from the previous Labour Government’s attempts to ‘modernise’ local political leadership, to the current Government’s proposals for reform of local political leadership as introduced in the Localism Act. In addition to the directly elected mayors already in existence in England, the Government required the 11 largest cities in England to hold a referendum on introducing an elected mayor in May 2012. The analysis in this paper considers the current reforms in the longer term context of the reform of local political leadership since 1997. It examines the new structures and powers for local political leaders, the ways in which reforms have been interpreted in local authorities, and the influence of political parties in shaping and subverting the reform process. It is argued that, despite continued attempts at national level to introduce ‘strong’ leadership, the existence and traditions of local political parties, the frameworks of local governance, and the constitutional position of local government in the national polity tend to undermine attempts to introduce such leadership.

Introduction

The international debate over the transformation of local political leadership reflects the need for local government to come to terms with the processes of urbanisation, globalisation, Europeanization, increasing demands on services and growing participatory pressure within a representative system. That debate echoes around North-European (Anglo), South-European (Napoleonic) and middle-European variants of local government (see, Delters and Rose, 2005, Goldsmith and Page, 2010). Concerns about political accountability, democratic governance, citizen engagement and the role and quality of local democracy, are at the heart of the transformation of local political leadership across Europe (Berg and Rao, 2005). Yet, it is likely that the outcome of the debate will reflect the politics of maintaining local political office, protecting existing patterns of political behaviour, party loyalty and advantage and the politicians’ preferences about the nature of political leadership.

There is much to learn from England’s experiment with directly elected mayors, about whether crude politics can subvert attempts to transform the conduct, structures and processes of local politics. The direct election the mayor disturbs patterns of political
relationships and challenges long-held assumptions about the role of the councillor and the party of which he or she is a member. The introduction into England of elected mayors, as a result of the Local Government Act 2000, is still being met by fierce resistance from councillors, of all parties and support for this model of governance among councillors is rare.

Despite 58 referendums being held across the country (a requirement of the Act before a mayor can be elected) only 14 have delivered ‘yes’ votes (the paper excludes discussion of London, where the mayor has a different legislative base: the Greater London Authority Act 1999). Two councils have resolved to adopt a mayoral model without a public vote (see section 3). The Coalition Government’s, Localism Act required the 11 largest cities in England to hold a referendum on the introduction of an elected mayor. Any city agreeing to mayoral government had been promised increased powers for their mayor and locality. The results of the May 2012 referendum display the power of local political elites in defending their positions.

The paper explores the government inspired attempts to strengthen local political leadership and asks if the move to elected mayors, under the current guise, is able to meet that objective. It examines whether the English version of a directly elected mayor is a sufficiently robust model to transform local political leadership and forge a new local political dynamic by the simple restructuring of the formal institutions of political decision-making (Svara, 1994, Mouritzen and Svara, 2002). Local government in England is highly partisan so the paper explores the nature of mayoral leadership in a highly party-politicised context and how mayoral leadership has developed in this context. The paper is based on the findings of qualitative research conducted with all of the directly elected mayors in England, who were interviewed for the research and follow-up interviews also conducted. In addition, interviews were held with senior councillors and chief executives of mayoral councils. The first section explores government policy thinking behind the introduction of directly elected mayors; the second examines overall political reaction to directly elected mayors; the third section looks closely at how local political elites have reacted to the advent of elected mayors and specifically at the recent referendum campaigns. The paper concludes by drawing out the lessons for mayoral governance of the English experience.

The Journey to Mayoral Leadership: A Rocky Road

A particular element of the local leadership debate has focussed on who should choose the local political leader, or mayor: the voters, or the councillors they elect. The trend towards direct election of the mayor, across Europe (and beyond), emerges from the superior claim to political legitimacy that direct election provides and the need for more effective, accountable and identifiable local political leadership (see, Kirchner, 1999; Savitch and Kantor, 2002; Larsen, 2002: 113; Soos, et al, 2002; Stewart, 2003; Stoker and Wilson, 2004; Fredericksion, 2004; and, Swainiewicz, 2005: 111.). It also co-insides with a shift, across Europe, from local government to local governance; and, a move from hierarchical, closed government networks, to more fragmented, decentralised political networks (John, 2001). Thus, in a fragmented system direct election of the mayor provides higher tiers of government with a single, powerful local politician with whom to do business (see, Loughlin, 2000; John 2001; Haus et al, 2005).
The idea that directly elected mayors should form a key part of the local political landscape is not a new one for English local government. The idea was floated in a 1991 review of Local Government by the then Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Heseltine (D.o.E, 1991), but opposition from Conservative MPs meant it did not find its way into legislation. Heseltine has long been proponent of directly elected mayors and played a prominent part in the recent referendum campaigns. A select Committee report from the House of Lords (HMSO, 1996) suggested that councils should be able to experiment with different political decision-making structures – to include directly elected mayors. In 1997 Lord Hunt introduced the Local Government (Experimental Arrangements) Bill to give councils powers to introduce different forms of decision-making structures, again including directly elected mayors, but the Bill was superseded by the Local Government Act 2000.

Strengthening and developing local political leadership was a centre-piece of the Blair government’s (elected in 1997) local government reform agenda, which was set out in a number of publications: Local Democracy and Community Leadership (DETR, 1998 (a)), Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People (DETR, 1998 (b)), Local Leadership: Local Choice (DETR, 1999), and, Strong Local Leadership: Quality Public Services (Dtlr, 2001). The agenda sought, inter alia, to improve the efficiency, transparency and accountability of local political decision-making (Detr, 1998, para: 3.14). Local leadership was a constant theme of the modernisation of local government, particularly leadership that was highly visible, strong and focused outwards towards the community rather than inwards towards the council (detr 1998 (a) paras 3.6, 3.7, 5.14, detr 1998 (b), para 3.19): directly elected mayors fitted the bill. Indeed, Prime Minister, Tony Blair, had called for local government to have ‘recognised leaders’ and for those ‘politically responsible’ for decisions to be clearly identifiable (Blair, 1998). Further, local political leadership and decision-making should be transparent, open, visible and responsive to citizen concerns (detr, 1998 (b) and 1999). The way to achieve these aims was to have a single, recognisable individual elected to control the council with a clear line of direct accountability to the voters.

The committee system, which had been the way councils had made decisions since the Victorian’s gradual democratisation of local government, was condemned as failing on all the above assumptions as it was seen to be inefficient and opaque and indeed was ‘no basis for modern local government’ (detr, 1998 (a) para: 5.1), being a ‘poor vehicle for developing and demonstrating community leadership’ (para: 5.7). In addition, the committee system clouded political responsibility and further, that committee chairs, a vital part of the council’s political leadership, were often anonymous to the public. Committees had failed to ‘foster community leaders and leadership; and, local people had no direct say over their local leaders’ (para: 5.7).

The Blair government admitted it was ‘very attracted’ to the model of a strong executive directly elected mayor:

Such a mayor would be a highly visible figure. He or she would have been elected by the people rather than the council or party and would therefore focus attention outwards in the direction of the people rather than inwards towards fellow councillors. The mayor would be a strong political and
community leader with whom the electorate could identify. Mayors will have to become well known to their electorate which could help increase interest in and understanding of local government (detr 1998 (a) para, 5.14).

Indeed, the mayor would be the clear ‘political leader for the community’ (detr, 1998 (b), para: 3.19). Blair called for English local government to have recognised and identifiable leaders (Blair, 1998). According to the government’s analysis, the problem was that there was ‘little clear political leadership’ in local government and:

*People often do not know who is really taking the decisions. They do not know who to praise, who to blame or who to contact with their problems. People identify most readily with an individual, yet there is rarely any identifiable figure leading the local community* (detr, 1998, paras: 3.6, 3.7).

In the white paper *Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People*, (para: 3.14) the Government elaborated its case for a local separation of powers and argued that such separation would enhance efficiency, transparency and accountability in local government because:

- A small executive, particularly where individuals have executive powers, can act more quickly, responsively and accurately to meet the needs and aspirations of the community;
- it will be clear to the public who is responsible for decisions; and,
- increased transparency will enable people to measure the executive’s actions against the policies on which it was elected.

*Modern Local Government: In Touch with the People* presented the crystallisation of the Government’s thinking on what shape the mayoral council should take and that the role of the mayor would be as ‘the political leader for the community, proposing policy for approval by the council and steering implementation by the cabinet through council officers’ (detr 1998 (b), para: 3.19). Indeed, the government was attracted to the idea of elected mayors because they saw that model of governance as meeting the test of efficiency, transparency accountability that they had set themselves.

The Coalition government elected in 2010 accepted the case made by the previous government (and by former commissions and committees of inquiry which struggled with local political leadership but could not quite bring themselves to support directly elected mayors) and continued the previous government’s line of argument. There has been an emphasising of the international nature of mayoral governance and a re-stating of the case for visibility, democratic engagement and accountability to be achieved through directly elected mayors (DCLG, 2010 a and b and 2011). Elected mayors were again a cornerstone of Government policy towards reforming local political leadership. Through its Localism Act 2011 the Government, led by Prime Minister Cameron, required the 11 largest cities in England to hold referendum on introducing elected mayors at the same time as the local elections in May 2012. the results of these referendum are discussed in the next section.

The focus on developing local political leadership has not distracted attention from government, or councillors’ interest in the delivery and quality of public services. In
England local political leadership has long taken a back seat to councillors focusing on the management and provision of services, rather than the broad issues of governance and political direction (Copus, 2004). The political and representative role of local government has long been submerged beneath its functioning as a provider of public services, as well as being diminished by shifting roles and responsibilities and patterns of relationships between the centre and the localities (Rhodes 1997, Young and Rao, 1997, Sullivan and Skelcher 2002, Stewart, 2003). But, mayoral councils remain identical to those with indirectly elected leaders have been given no extra powers or responsibilities; mayors are however, expected to act differently. Moreover, English local government is highly party politicised with 92 % of councillors elected as candidates of one of the three main national political parties (see, Wilson and Game, 2006) and party politicisation and mayoral party connectedness provides the context within which mayoral government must operate and develop, a context which is often overlooked.

The way mayoral leadership displays itself, in any context, can be seen in the mayor’s ability, or otherwise, to bring resources of one sort or another, to bear on a range of problems, in such a way as to effect action (Stone, 1995). Indeed, mayors can be judged by what they make happen through the employment of institutional and political power, or through the use of political influence, alliances and discourse (Svara, 1990 and 1994, Mouritzen and Svara, 2002, Frederickson, et al, 2004). Mayors are, of course, constrained as leaders by the structural characteristics of any particular mayoral system (Morgan and Watson, 1996). There are common threads running through the analysis of mayoral political leadership. Kotter and Lawrence (1974) stressed policy-setting, policy implementation, or the management of the service delivering bureaucracy as the focus of mayoral activity. Svara (see 1990 and 1994) identified four areas in which mayors facilitate action: mission, policy, implementation and resource control and emphasised how the institutional setting within which a mayor is located can shape mayoral control (Svara, 1990). Where institutional power is lacking, mayors use influence, encouragement, coercion and the forging of alliances and coalitions to facilitate effective political action. Mouritzen and Svara (2002) focus on mayors as: public leaders, helping to determine with citizens the direction in which the area should develop; party leaders, promoting the interests of their political organisations; and, policy leaders, shaping policy programmes and projects. But, each of these areas of activity flow into each other and are not context free or easily compartmentalised.

Hambleton and Sweeting (2004) highlight the importance for mayoral governance of the policy environment, institutional arrangements and relationships with followers, which have a bearing on the scope, effectiveness and legitimacy leadership. These factors do not diminish the importance of mayors’ personal qualities but those qualities are constrained by external and system factors. Yet, in concluding that the power of party political groups in controlling the ‘behaviour of local leaders seems to be declining’ and that the English elected mayor can be expected to ‘exercise more independent leadership than the typical U.K. council leader’, they underestimate the power and resilience of the party system in local government and its ability to constrain mayoral leadership (Copus, 2004 and 2006 (a)). Indeed, the English mayor, by comparison with some overseas mayors, is relatively weak when it comes to powers (see, Larsen, 2002, Wollmann, 2004, Frederickson, 2004, Copus, 2006).
Mayoral councils have no powers or responsibilities beyond those of their non-
mayoral counterpart councils.

Leach and Wilson (2000: 11) stress the importance of leadership as a behavioural
approach, rather than the mere holding of a position; here, leadership is an
inspirational process, inducing others to follow the lead given, rather than responding
to system driven forces. But, can a mayor’s ability to inspire and persuade, overcome
system constraints on mayoral power? Leach and Wilson recognise that the political
context in which the leader finds his or her self greatly influences the ability to ‘lead’
and to achieve the key leadership tasks. Indeed, they remind us, by citing Harding
(2000) and Dunleavy et al (1995), that urban regime theory distinguishes between the
idea of holding political power (or office) and governing. Thus, mayoral leadership of
policy, party and people emerges from the political conditions the mayor faces and
those conditions shape mayoral leadership. Stoker (2004), for example, has described
English mayors as: change agents, altering a past ‘failed system’ and leading a
council out of political ‘turmoil’; as community representatives – advocates, who
adopt an ambassadorial role; and, as a ‘builder on past strengths’, where a former
leader has become mayor and pursued continuity rather than change. Stoker’s
typologies, as he points out, are not context free, rather, context has a powerful
influence on the development of mayoral leadership and the ability to take action.

The key contextual factor for English mayors is the domination of local politics by
national political parties. Being a party affiliate has a powerful impact on how mayors
act as political leaders. English mayors must not only lead the locality in a broad
sense - providing direction, displaying vision, constructing a shared political agenda,
 arbitrating between competing interests and political pressures, and, acting as the
point of responsibility and accountability for complex political decisions - they must
also carve a relationship with their party and develop leadership in a fraught and
complex party political setting. So, we turn to two questions: what role have local
political elites played in the journey towards mayoral government; and, what sort of
leadership do elected mayors in England provide?

The Political Reaction to Elected Mayors

The 1997-2010 Labour Government and the current coalition government in their
support for directly elected mayors as a model of local political leadership, both
overlooked one thing: the reaction of their councillors. The response from councillors
of all parties and none, to directly elected mayors, has been overwhelmingly hostile.
Very specific arguments are articulated in opposition to elected mayors reflecting
councillors’ concerns over the disruption of existing power, political and personal
relationships. Councillors often see the mayoral office resulting in a reduction of their
own political influence and posing a threat to the position of the party group as the
most powerful political decision-making forum within local politics. Indeed, the
views councillors express on the issue are often incongruent with the views of the
public (detr, 2001). Councillors express resistance to elected mayors precisely
because of the transference of power to select the political head of the council from
councillors, to the wider electorate, thus, broadening the constituency to which a
potential political leader must appeal.

The arguments maintained by councillors opposed to elected mayors, fall into three
broad categories of concern: undermining local party politics; concentration of power;
and mayoral corruption. A genuine unease exists amongst councillors of all parties that the elected mayor can and will act without reference to his or her party colleagues on the council. Indeed, the mayor may stray from manifesto commitments made by the group, or respond to political circumstances without consulting or involving the party or group. Even the parties’ ability to re-select or de-select a sitting mayor becomes an even blunter instrument in the councillors and party’s hands (Hodge, et al 1997).

Independent mayors attract particularly visceral reactions from party councillors. The common concern was that some local notable or worse a sport, film or music celebrity would decide to seek mayoral office and use the seemingly unfair advantage of an existing high profile to trounce a party candidate. The examples most often cited by councillors for this happening are drawn from the U.S: Clint Eastwood, the one time mayor of Carmel in California and Arnold Swartznegger are quoted as celebrity politicians that were not wanted by councillors in England (although the latter was a governor and not a mayor).

A specifically English example given in interview was David Beckham who one interviewee suggested might want to stand as mayor of Manchester and given his celebrity status would clearly defeat an unknown party candidate. That David Beckham neither lived nor worked in Manchester, qualifications for seeking the office in the first place, did not stop the obvious good example of a celebrity mayor that the interviewee feared. The train of thought is that: if a celebrity can become the elected mayor, then the system is wrong as elected offices are the property of political parties and of the political insider who knows how local government works – those outside the system of the political party lack that basic knowledge. It is the personalisation of politics, or the introduction of personality issues into political campaigns that deeply offends councillors – clearly the office of councillor should be a ‘personality free zone’. On the other hand, if the office is as powerful as councillors claim, knowing something of the personality of the candidates, becomes a necessity, not a side-show.

Linked to the fear of the celebrity candidate and personality in politics was the argument of possible ‘extremist’ victories. Councillors of all three parties mentioned the possibility that the British National Party, or an extreme Muslim grouping, might win mayoral office as a reason why mayors should not be introduced into English local politics. It now appears that not liking the result of an election is a sound enough reason not to have one!

Another concern for councillors is what they perceive to be the concentration of power into the hands of a single individual. The idea that mayors will be able to take decisions without first gaining the approval of councillor colleagues or even cabinet members, is seen as a gross concentration of powers. Careful probing uncovers however, that councillors are more concerned that power is not concentrated in the hands of a political leader chosen by the electorate, not councillors themselves, rather than the principle of centralised power per se. Not only does the office of directly elected mayor mean an end to the party group’s power to select the political head of the council; it also means the loss of power to appoint the entire political leadership of the council as it is the mayor, not the party group that appoints the cabinet.

Opposition to elected mayors is also rooted in concerns of wrongdoing and corruption. Corruption or wrong-doing, it seems, goes hand-in-hand with political centralisation and for councillors elected mayors will just be more corrupt, and or corruptible, than the holders of the office of councillor, or indirectly elected council
leader. There is no evidence provided to substantiate this claim, coupled with a convenient oversight of instances where councillors themselves have been accused and convicted of wrongdoing of one sort or another. Yet, political institutions are not inherently corrupt or corruptible; rather, it is the holders of political office that can succumb to the temptation of wrongdoing, whatever political model is in operation.

In addition to the above reasons to oppose a directly elected mayor councillors also state: the level of payment required for elected mayors; the removal or reduction in councillor power and responsibility; the four year term of office is too long. Although indirectly elected leaders – chosen by councillors, also have four year terms by virtue of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, thus it appears it is not so much the period of office, but still who chooses that is the problem for councillors. Other reasons cited by councillors to oppose elected mayors are confusion over the office of Lord Mayor, should a council have such a post and the lack of recall or ability to remove the mayor during a term of office existing for either councillors or the public.

These arguments are reducible to one central point which is the stimulus for councillor opposition to elected mayors: it is the voters and not the councillors who select the top political post on the council and thus it is a transference of power from the councillor to the public that most offends councillors about this way of governing. Councillors make their decisions about the council leader for a whole range of issues not associated with selecting the best person for the job: factionalism, ideology, age, geographical reasons related to the leadership contenders’ seat location, because someone else wants the job but calculates they would be unsuccessful and so support a stalking-horse that can be manipulated from behind the scenes, because a leadership candidate will offer them a position (or alternatively that another wont. In an interview a council leader confessed to telling two members he was unable to give them ‘a job’ (which would have accrued an allowance or at lest some influence and that both members had immediately started a campaign among their colleagues to remove the leader and had been questioning how that could be achieved; and, because they simply don’t like a particular leadership candidates – yes, for personality reasons (see, Copus, 2004)! Related to this point is the argument that elected mayors see a reduction in the power and role of the political party group – which is the central decision-making body and point of reference for party councillors and the forum in which they are able to shape and direct policy and decisions (Copus, 2004).

Given this review of why councillors oppose elected mayors we can turn to whether or not, in England, they have been successful in their endeavours to stave off a new way of governing the localities.

Assessing the Power of Local Political elites

Under the provisions of the Local Government Act 2000, the act which introduced elected mayors into English local government, there must be a referendum that produces a ‘Yes’ vote on moving to a mayoral system. Referendum can be called in two ways: by a petition demanding such, signed by 5% of the local electorate; and by direction by the Secretary of State. Alternatively, under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, a council can resolve, by a two-thirds majority, to adopt mayoral governance. Only two councils, Leicester City and Liverpool City, have used these provisions and resolved to introduce an elected mayor without a referendum. Prior to the 3rd May 2012 47 referendum had been held and the results are displayed in table one.
Table one: Referendum Prior to ‘Super Thursday’ 3rd May 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local authority</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Yes Votes</th>
<th>Yes Vote %</th>
<th>No Votes</th>
<th>No Vote %</th>
<th>Turnout %</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>7 June 2001</td>
<td>3,617</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10,212</td>
<td>74</td>
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<td>16,602</td>
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<td>7,140</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>22,724</td>
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<td>22,296</td>
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<td>6239</td>
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<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ealing</td>
<td>12 December 2002</td>
<td>9,454</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>11,655</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceredigion</td>
<td>20 May 2004</td>
<td>5,308</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14,013</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isle of Wight</td>
<td>5 May 2005</td>
<td>28,786</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>37,097</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td>60.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fenland</td>
<td>14 July 2005</td>
<td>5,509</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>17,296</td>
<td>75.8</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torbay</td>
<td>14 July 2005</td>
<td>18,074</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>14,682</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>32.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crewe and Nantwich</td>
<td>4 May 2006</td>
<td>11,808</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>18,768</td>
<td>60.8</td>
<td>35.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darlington</td>
<td>27 September 2007</td>
<td>7,981</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>11,226</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bury</td>
<td>3 July 2008</td>
<td>10,338</td>
<td>40.1</td>
<td>15,425</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tower Hamlets</td>
<td>6 May 2010</td>
<td>60,758</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>39,857</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>62.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Yarmouth</td>
<td>5 May 2011</td>
<td>10,051</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>15,595</td>
<td>60.8</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salford</td>
<td>26 January 2012</td>
<td>17,344</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>13,653</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: New Local Government Network 2012
The coalition government as part of its localism agenda and as part of a continuing desire at the centre to strengthen the accountability and visibility of local political leadership, and probably to make it easier for the centre to identify and negotiate with local leaders, required the 11 largest English cities to hold referendum on introducing an elected mayor. Those referendum were held on 3rd May 2012 on the same day as the English council elections. The results of the referendum are set out in table 2.

Table 2. 3rd May 2012 Referendum Results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Council</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
<th>Turnout</th>
<th>Electorate</th>
<th>Number of Councillors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birmingham</td>
<td>88,085 (42.2)</td>
<td>120,611 (57.8)</td>
<td>28.35</td>
<td>653,164</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradford</td>
<td>53,949 (44.9)</td>
<td>66,283 (55.1)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>341,126</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bristol</td>
<td>41,032 (53)</td>
<td>35,880 (47)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>318,893</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coventry</td>
<td>22,619 (36.4)</td>
<td>39,483 (63.6)</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>236,818</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doncaster</td>
<td>42,196 (61.7)</td>
<td>25,879 (37.8)</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>224,678</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leeds</td>
<td>62,440 (36.7)</td>
<td>107,910 (63.3)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>562,782</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manchester</td>
<td>42,677 (46.8)</td>
<td>48,593 (53.2)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>370,453</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newcastle</td>
<td>24,630 (38.1)</td>
<td>40,089 (61.9)</td>
<td>203,512</td>
<td>78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nottingham</td>
<td>20,943 (24.5)</td>
<td>28,320 (57.5)</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>207,312</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheffield</td>
<td>44,571 (35)</td>
<td>82,890 (65)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>390,890</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wakefield</td>
<td>27,610 (37.8)</td>
<td>45,357 (62.2)</td>
<td>28.84</td>
<td>257,530</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only one council, Bristol, recorded a yes vote in these government inspired referendum. Councillors in the cities campaigned almost exclusively for ‘no’ votes and were given powerful support from local trade unions. Indeed, we saw a victory for small ‘c’ conservatism of the labour and union variety in the results of these referendums. Councillors campaigned for ‘No’ votes despite the government offering attractive deals to each of the cities for enhanced powers for the mayor and council and a series of financial inducements for each council. It appears that councillor self-interest won out over what might in the long run be better for each of the cities concerned – such is the power of local political elite when their positions are threatened.

The government did campaign for ‘yes’ votes and that was spearheaded by local government minister Greg Clarke and Lord Heseltine (who had began his campaign back in the early 1990’s while at the Department of the Environment. They were supported by a Labour Peer, Lord Adonis. All of whom travelled the country setting out, in each city, the reasons to vote ‘yes’. In addition the prime minister promised to form a ‘cabinet of mayors’ to give these 11 English cities a prime spot at the centre of national policy-making; and, still councillors said ‘no’. The cabinet of mayors idea was however, undersold by the government and importance of this seat at the table was not fully explained – indeed, the new powers the mayors would have an dhows they would differ from the current model was not explained loudly and in the media by the Prime Minister – it was left to his team of senior politicians to take the word to
the country. The Prime Minister did introduce a dubious note to the campaign by declaring that he wished to see a ‘Boris’ in every city’; a reference to the popular and high profile mayor of London: Boris Johnson. Fine, if you like Boris and are a Conservative, but not such a draw for urban inner city labour politicians and not enough of a draw for convince the voters – who could see no local equivalent of Boris Johnson on the local horizon anyway.

Locally the campaigns were very one-sided with the ‘no’ camps often backed by the three main parties locally and the local trade unions, providing resources and campaigners for the ‘no’ effort. Thus, the ‘nos’ were well organised and resourced and supported by seasoned, battle-hardened political campaigners accustomed to the rough (often very rough) and tumble of local politics. The cross party campaigns meant that local political elites presented a cohesive, coherent, united and vociferous message focussing their message on four key areas: power, personality, cost and confusion. Moreover, they were able to capitalise on the low level of interest in local government to dampen down the campaigns, reduce debate and awareness around the issue and depress turnout – despite the vote being held on the same day as the local elections in those cities.

By contrast the ‘yes’ campaigners were under-resourced and were well intentioned but often newcomers to local politics local political campaigning. As one ‘yes’ campaigner put it: ‘it’s a real David and Goliath contest and we’ve left our sling-shot at home’. The ‘yes’ campaigns were often too diffuse and lacked a real focus and did not adequately set out the need for change, even failing to capitalise on the obvious point hat if the local political elite wanted a ‘No’ vote that’s reason enough to vote ‘yes’! The ‘yes’ campaigns also held large numbers of public meetings, while the ‘no’ campaigns concentrated on door-step campaigning (these are not exclusive points but indicative of a general pattern of approaches between the two camps). Moreover, the ‘yes’ camp was less likely to link their campaigns to specific local issues or concerns, focusing on a broader and general appeal. Finally, there was an element of over-confidence on the ‘yes’ side, most clearly displayed in the Birmingham campaign were a local MP resigned his seat to fight for the mayoralty – long before the referendum and where other local MPs had expressed interest in the office, again before ht campaigns had stared. Finally, those new to local political campaigning were shocked at the vociferousness of ‘No’ lobby with one ‘yes’ campaigner commenting: it just got very personal, very quickly and this isn’t about me – I’m not even going to run, but the things they [‘yes’ campaigners] have said about me, well, I just don’t believe it’.

It is in the results of the referendum on introducing elected mayors that we see the power of local political elites, especially when given the context of high level political support within government for such a model of local political leadership. It was central government under-estimation of the ability and willingness of local political elites to stave of fundamental changes that effected their power and influence and the structure within which they conducted business, which is a key lesson to be drawn from the referendum campaigns and results pre and post May 2012. The results are also a lesson in the disconnection of the public from local government and local politics more generally. Given the opportunity, the 650,000 voters of Birmingham, would rather the electorate was shrunken to the 31 councillors from 120 required to secure the council leadership, than select that individual themselves at a direct election of the mayor.
A conclusion that can not be drawn from the results is that English local government does not exist in such a centralised state after all. If local political elites can defeat at the ballot box the articulated policy of central government, then centralisation must be crumbling. That would be an erroneous conclusion. If central government had wished to impose directly elected mayors on all councils across England and could have passed appropriate legislation through both Houses of Parliament, then, as with all other legislation imposing change on local government, elected mayors would be the general model of governance. Local political elites would not be completely powerless and would no doubt use friends in both Houses to try and avoid such an outcome, but their room for political manoeuvre would be drastically reduced. It is interesting to note that when their own position and power is threatened local political elites are able to campaign to defend that positions far more effectively than they have been able to defend local government form other centrally inspired policy change which the localities have resisted. A key lesson that can be learnt is that sometimes, central power can and should be used to enhance and strengthen local democracy despite the views of local political leaders.

**Conclusions**

The arrival of directly elected mayors into English local government has had a long gestation period and with only 15 across the country the office is a long way from being an established part of the local political landscape. But, the office does have support at central level as it responds well to the centre’s desire to see the localities led by strong, visible, accountable and easily identifiable political leaders. Indeed, the office of directly elected mayor provides an easy reference and decision point for central government for communication and negation with individual councils and local government more generally. There is a clear intention at the centre to formalise local political leadership and to provide a leadership office that has a legitimacy with which the centre and other local plays, such as business and commerce, will recognise as a legitimate, single source of decision-making and responsibility. The committee system was slow and opaque; elected mayors are visible and speedy decision-makers: that is the prognosis.

The case that the localities must be ‘led’ is strongly made by government but it requires leadership of a particular kind, one which is linked directly to the voter, has a clear line of accountability to the voter and is publicly recognisable. It is the anathema to the party group system where council leaders are selected by the majority group, meeting in a closed and private session and using a range of political and personal criteria to select the leader. Even though leaders are now appointed by their group for a four year term, they owe their office and tenure to the small constituency that is the group, rather than the wider electorate. Even leaders with a four year term can still be ejected from the leadership – not by the voter, but by their own party group, as is the case with the leader of Leicestershire County Council who has just resigned rather than face a vote of no confidence by his Conservative group.

The idea that candidates beyond the usual local party political suspects might be attracted to the office can not be overlooked. While his point has not been specifically articulated by government an underlying theme is that the new office will attract a new sort of candidate and a successful one at that. The threat that new entrants to the
local political arena levels at existing local political elites has not gone unnoticed by them. It is a fear that has not been generally recognised. There are six Labour, two Conservative, two Liberal Democrat, one English Democrat and four Independent mayors (admittedly parties only hold 66% of these mayoralities, unlike the 93% of council seats they currently hold in England and on reflection quite a drop in control for the parties). In addition, among former mayors there are two Conservatives, three Labour and two Independents. Yet, the oft repeated fear of a celebrity candidate / mayor has not materialised: David Beckham is yet to throw his hat into the ring.

The arrival of an elected mayor at an English council may change political decision-making processes, structures and dynamics, but does not change the power, roles and responsibilities of the council in which mayors find themselves. While it does not alter the extensive hold on council seats that the three main national parties have in English local government by persoanlising political power in the mayor, parties may be marginalised. But, the power of party in local government is not fatally undermined by the arrival of elected mayors – far from it. As we have seen local political elites have shown themselves more than able to defend their interests against central government when it comes to this particular reform. They have also shown themselves able to convince local voters that the choice of who run the councils should be left to a small number of councillors, rather than the voters themselves. Indeed, they have been successful in restricting the local franchise in this regard. Ironically, it may be a centralist move by central government, to impose mayors on councils, that results in a more democratic, accountable and inclusive form of local political leadership.

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