Directly Elected Mayors: Guaranteeing Better Urban Governance?

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Elected executive mayors: an American export...

- The United States is well-known for its system of elections for individuals at the Federal, State and city level.
- Ireland, the UK, Australia, Canada and many other countries have evolved ‘party leader’ models, without direct elections to national or local government leadership roles.
- France has ‘indirectly elected’ mayors.
The UK’s experience of elected executive mayors?

- Councils in England and Wales have long had ‘lord mayors’ or ‘mayors’ who are ceremonial and non-political figures.
- Tony Blair favoured a directly-elected executive mayor for London.
- Subsequently, 14 authorities have voted in a referendum to introduce a mayor, though Stoke then reversed the decision.
- Today, there are 13 directly-elected mayors in England, plus the Mayor of London.
The politics of reform

- Most existing politicians in most parties in the UK are opposed to directly-elected executive mayors.
- Many see the idea as an alien import to Britain’s long-developed democratic structures.
  - Also, the awkwardness of directly-appointed deputies, advisors, etc.
- Many also fear losing their own power as and when a mayor is introduced.
The Mayor of London

- Created in 2000, following the abolition of the Greater London Council by Mrs Thatcher in 1986
- Thus, created in a vacuum
- A directly-elected figurehead for a city of eight million people
  - ‘Supplementary Vote’ elections
  - 4-year term, no ‘term limits’
  - Powers over transport, planning, economic development, fire & emergencies, the police
  - Overseen by a 25-member Assembly (elected using a form of PR)
The wider London government system

- Central government strong in UK/England
- 32 boroughs and the City of London provide ‘local government’ services within London
- Thus, London has a system with two ‘balanced’ tiers of government
  - Mayor for ‘city-wide’ issues such as transport
  - Boroughs for local and neighbourhood issues
Key impacts

- The Mayor of London has become a powerful political figure within Britain
  - A voice for London in an unsympathetic political environment
- Has effectively lobbied for resources and powers for the city
- Successes:
  - Massive Underground re-investment
  - Crossrail
  - Congestion Charge
  - Bike Scheme
  - A powerful civic leader
Extending the mayor’s powers

- Original powers have been increased in 2007 and 2011
  - Planning, Housing, Royal Parks
- Devolution within Britain has seen more powers for Scotland, Wales and London
- But nothing for the rest of England...
- However, the Mayor of London is widely seen as giving London a greater international profile
  - More powers strengthen this potential
Drawbacks

- Thus far, a ‘celebrity’ contest
  - Ken Livingstone x 4 elections
  - Boris Johnson x 2 elections

- Expectations of mayor probably exceed reality of powers
  - London’s government is still very complex

- Too much power in one pair of hands?
  - Much media scrutiny, however
Referenda in other cities

- Referenda will take place in Birmingham (1m); Leeds (750,000), Bristol (450,000), Liverpool (450,000) and several other English cities next May.

- If a ‘yes’ vote, a mayoral election will follow.

- Mayors in these cities would be relatively more powerful than the London mayor.
Conclusions

- It is possible to add directly-elected executive mayors into a very different (democratically conservative) system.
- London and other British local authorities have generally prospered.
- Hard to ‘prove’ the benefits.
- But mayors have generally been popular where introduced.
- A number of cities are introducing this kind of office.
  - There is a trend...
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