Blog: Elected Mayors

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Written by: Chris Game

There are usually two reasonable expectations of Bills introduced by governments with safe parliamentary majorities. First, there won't be many significant changes or concessions, especially to any bits known to be personal enthusiasms of ministers. Second, there will be fewer uncertainties at the end than at the beginning. On both counts, the elected mayoral sections of the Localism Bill/Act have proved exceptional.

Last December, the original Bill outlined a clear **3-stage timetable** for all 11 designated English mayoral cities – Birmingham, Bradford, Bristol, Coventry, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Sheffield and Wakefield – the twelfth, Leicester, having already decided to jump the gun, save the trouble and cost of a referendum, and elect its mayor last May.

Stage 1: immediately following Royal Assent, existing council leaders would become shadow mayors, with mayoral powers, until (depending on the outcome of Stage 2) 2012 or 2013. **Stage 2**: in May 2012 there would be mayoral referendums. **Stage 3**: in May 2013 cities voting Yes would elect mayors, who, under 'mayoral management arrangements', would become **their council's most senior officer**, with most of the responsibilities of the Head of Paid Service. These mayors would also have **substantial, though unspecified, 'local public service functions'** conferred on them, to enhance still further their strong and strategic leadership role.

A year on, much has changed, largely during the committee and report stages in the Lords. Uncertainty, however, still abounds. **Shadow mayors** have gone completely, with few tears shed. **Mayoral management arrangements** have become permissive – adoptable only if, like Leicester's Sir Peter Soulsby, the mayor chooses.

Additional powers, which have all along been the biggest – and for some the only – incentivising carrot to support elected mayors, are still as undefined as in the original Bill. Indeed, DCLG Ministers have seemingly given up the struggle to get other Whitehall departments even to nominate powers that might be devolved and, at least temporarily, have handed the whole thing over to us – or, more precisely, to those who live and work in the mayoral cities. In early November 2011 – a touch late in the day, some might think – they produced a consultation paper, *What can a mayor do for your city?*:

"We do not presume to know what is best for each of the cities in terms of the specific powers that should be exercised by individual city mayors [perish the thought!] … We are thus proposing to look to the cities themselves to come forward with their own proposals [Localism lives!]…" (paras. 24-28)

It seems a faintly ludicrous exercise, because it is hardly the dearth of proposed additional powers that is the problem – just Google the New Local Government Network, Core Cities, or the Institute for Government – but the ministers' willingness and ability to deliver them. Moreover, thanks to another Lords-extracted concession in the Bill, that delivery problem may have become even trickier. The effect of the so-called **Core Cities Amendment** (see my blog, 23 September) is that any transfer of local public functions from central to local government is no longer restricted to mayoral cities, but is available to **any 'permitted authority'**, provided that the transfer "would promote economic development or wealth creation, or increase local accountability in relation to each local public function transferred". Translated: the big mayoral bribe has disappeared.

As for the rather fundamental question of when all, or any, of this is going to happen, where once there was clarity, there is now considerable opacity. Lord (Andrew) Adonis, former Labour Minister, mayoral enthusiast, and Director of the Institute for Government, toured most of the mayoral cities, met 'the usual suspects' – council leaders and senior officers, local businessmen, newspaper editors, voluntary sector reps – and was not, evidently, hugely encouraged. For, in an 'open letter' to the DCLG, he made several strong timetable recommendations: that the referendums be phased over two years, that just three – Birmingham, Leeds and Bristol – take place in May 2012, and that, if required, any mayoral elections follow in September 2012, rather than the following May (*Mayors and the Localism Bill*, pp. 7-8).

The response of the Communities Secretary at the time (mid-September) was that **"I think it's fair to say we're thinking about whether we should phase or not"** – and, for all the official comment that emerged subsequently on the topic, he was still be mulling it over when the Bill received its Royal Assent on 15 November. The consequence, in the West Midlands for example, was that Coventry assumed it was off the hook until 2013, while Birmingham was gearing up on all fronts: candidates confirming their intention to stand, pro- and anti-mayoral campaigns being launched, and both major parties considering open primary contests to select their candidates.

Finally, in a series of local newspaper interviews published on 17 November, Local Government Minister, Greg Clark, reconfirmed that all 11 referendums would take place in May 2012. As for the actual mayoral elections, he wasn't letting on. September? November, coinciding with the postponed elections of the new police commissioners? "By the end of the year or shortly thereafter"? Who knows – and what business is it of us voters anyway?

It seemed more like a news seepage than an announcement, but, whatever it was, it came too late for our recent **INLOGOV/DCLG Conference on 'Governance and the Localism Bill'**. However, with the two West Midlands cities both represented, this divergence of experience and approach was naturally one of the topics discussed at the workshop on elected mayors. Other questions raised during the day can also be guessed without too much difficulty from the above account of the Bill's progress through Parliament:

- **Despite the widespread opposition of councillors from all parties and a generally unenthusiastic reception by the public, could directly elected mayors, especially with additional powers, be a 'good thing' for urban local government?**
- **Would English cities – mayoral or otherwise – benefit from additional powers (and, if so, which)?**
- **Is there sufficient overlap in the roles of elected executive mayor and chief executive to make the latter dispensable?**

My own response to each of these questions is, at least on balance, 'Yes'. But, like Blair and his ministers ten years ago, this Government is making such a pig's ear of enacting, let alone implementing, a genuinely big, innovative and potentially exciting policy that it's hardly surprising most people can hardly muster even a Catherine Tatesque 'Am I bovvered?' If the policy's worth introducing, it's worth properly explaining and selling. In this case it's unrealistic to expect a substantially sceptical local government to do the job on its own. So, if ministers can't be bovvered, they can hardly expect the rest of us to be.

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