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LOCAL POLITICAL LEADERSHIP
The voters or councillors – who chooses who governs?

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Introduction
Central and regional governments can rarely resist the temptation to reshape, reformulate and reorganise local government. That temptation is greater when faced with social, economic and political problems stemming from austerity, urbanisation, Europeanisation, globalisation, increasing service demands and public assertiveness (John 2001; Berg and Rao 2005; Denters and Rose 2005; Kuhlmann and Bouckaert 2016). The tendency to respond to such issues by reforming local government structures reflects centralist thinking that exists even in states where local government has constitutional recognition or a degree of constitutional protection (Baldersheim and Rose 2010; Denters et al. 2014). Re-shaping the architecture of local political decision-making is as much about the centre’s need to respond to its policy agenda as it is about ensuring local government can respond to the local manifestation of international and national problems. The distribution of territorial power relationships in any national context tells us that facilitating local leaders in taking political action by changing the structure, powers and processes of local leadership must be articulated so as to create a critical mass of support from local elites themselves (Stone 1995; Svara 1987, 1994; Jeffery 2008; Swianiewicz 2010; Loughlin et al. 2011).

Central to the debate about the reformulation of local political leadership are discussions about who should choose that leader and how far the public should be involved in that choice. Related to that point is ensuring the transparency of political decision-making, the visibility and profile of local leaders and enhancing the legitimacy of the local leader to take political action as well as questions about the appropriate role of citizens in local democracy (see Kersting and Vetter 2003; Magre and Bertrana 2007; Elcock 2008; Wollmann 2008). Who chooses the local political leader is condensed into two constituencies: the voting public or councillors. The debate about whether to directly elect the mayor or not is often addressed through different conceptualisations of political leadership to ensure that visibility, transparency and legitimacy fits with those conceptualisations – as well as asking to whom is the local leader accountable (see Steyvers et al. 2008; Loughlin et al. 2011; Rhodes and t’Hart 2014).

In addition to practical and conceptual matters about the characteristics of political systems and the founding principles on which they are based, is the need to accommodate the role and
power of political parties in local government particularly the leading national parties. The direct election of the mayor is a challenge to the role of political parties in some local government systems (see Egner 2017; Gendzwill and Swianiewicz 2017). Currently, in England, some 90% of all councillors are members of the three main British national parties: Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat. These national parties bring into local council chambers their national rules, their standard operating procedures, their approaches to party discipline and loyalty and their national policy and philosophical differences (Jones 1969; Maor 1997; Copus 2004; Leach 2006) as well as their own approaches to the political recruitment of councillors and local leaders (Brand 1973; Barron et al. 1989; Meadowcroft 2001; Verhelst and Kerrouche 2012; Verhelst et al. 2013).

In countries such as Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, the US, Canada and Japan elected mayors were introduced to enhance the legitimacy, visibility, openness, transparency, responsiveness and accountability of local government. Yet, the introduction of the potential for the direct election of mayors in England turned out to be one of the most controversial aspects of the Local Government Act 2000. Currently, across the UK only England has directly elected mayors and then only 16 of them sitting within 352 traditional councils. That number does not include the six combined authority elected mayors created by the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016 or the Mayor of London, created under the Greater London Authority Act 1999, and these second-tier offices are not discussed here.

The chapter reviews the arguments deployed by reformers of local political leadership and their opponents as to why the mayor of a council should or should not be directly elected by citizens. It examines why directly elected mayors have had such a sustained interest for policymakers (Marsh 2012) and why in some countries councillors have displayed such animosity to this office. The next section of the chapter reviews the arguments for and against elected mayors that have been debated by reformers in an international context. The third section explores the introduction of elected mayors in England which has had one of the most protracted and troubled births of mayoral office, despite central governments (of all parties) being willing to otherwise force change on local government (Copus et al. 2017a). The chapter concludes by drawing together the strands of the arguments in favour and opposing direct election to assess whether the number of elected mayors will increase or whether the strength of the collectivist local political decision-making tradition means there may be a ceiling to this number.

Developments in local political leadership: an international context

Direct election of the mayor is not necessarily about whether the mayor is politically strong, as strength of office is not an automatic outcome of direct election (see Stone 1995; Kotter and Lawrence 1974; Svara 1987; Leach and Wilson 2002; Navarro and Sweeting 2015; Copus et al. 2017a). The strength of local political leadership rests on a series of relationships between leaders and those they seek to lead set within varying structural, cultural, political and social contexts which in turn influence the way political leaders operate. Borraz and John (2004) identify four trends to explain the contexts of local political leadership: the development of new, complex and multi-faceted governing networks; the set of political values held by local political leaders and how they develop over time (citing Clark and Hoffmann-Martinot 1998; see also Szucs and Stromberg 2009); the emergence of models of stronger executive local leadership; and the transfer of ideas and views about leadership forms across national boundaries. Indeed, part of the leadership context is the inter-dependence of political actors when taking political action and the need to negotiate, bargain, influence and pressurise others into action
the leader wishes to see taken (John and Cole 1999; Borraz and John 2004; Goldsmith and Larsen 2004). Further, local political leadership structures balance hard and soft powers and as a result ‘political, cultural and institutional heritage’ and traditions of getting things done come at a premium (John and Cole 1999: 106).

Goldsmith and Larsen (2004) suggest that understanding context as well as role and responsibilities is not sufficient to ensure the transformation of the structure and powers of local leaders. Using Nordic local government as the contextual setting they show that change in local political leadership can be successfully resisted by opponents of ‘presidentialist’ or single executive systems – elected mayors – basing their opposition to change on historical, cultural, political, economic, social and structural arguments (Goldsmith and Larsen 2004: 121; see also Aars 2009). Indeed, they assert that the consensus based, collectivist decision-making of Nordic local government has prevented reforms towards stronger, individualised local political leadership. Similar successful resistance to institutional change has been seen in England (Kukovič et al. 2015) and to a similar extent in Ireland.

Reform of structure and power of the local leader rest for their success as much on the political and personal capabilities of the leader – their skills, capacities, experience, knowledge, abilities and personality – as they do on the leader inhabiting the correct structure and system (Greamion 1976; Lowndes and Leach 2004). Lowndes and Leach (2004: 565) indicate that the ability of local leaders to interpret context as a way of mobilising political support for a set course of action is related to any given institutional environment and that such environments reflect hard and soft aspects of power and power relationships. Thus, for the elected mayor or council leader there are formal and informal rules and settings which provide the contextual boundaries within which they operate, such as: the power relationship between the mayor (or leader) and council; local political and organisational traditions and culture; the framework of legislation within which the political leader operates; the external governance network; and, the profile of the local area, sub-region and region.

So the question for reformers becomes: how much reform do you want? Is the search for powerful local leaders with a direct line of accountability to the voters that can take political action in complex governing networks through the use of hard, legislatively based political powers? Or, do reformers want to simply operationalise principles such as openness, transparency, visibility and accountability, without granting the political leader – directly or indirectly elected – any hard political power which would make local political leadership much easier. In most cases across Europe the answer has been the latter rather than the former (Copus et al. 2016). Thus, expectations can be raised that elected mayors will be able to solve all local problems but may lack the power, functions responsibilities and budgets that would be required to do so. Yet studies in the USA, notably Morgan and Watson (1996), Svara (1990, 1994), and Mouritzen and Svara (2002), have shown that the right local leader with the right political skills can transcend system constraints; this can even include those constraints deliberately designed to prevent the development of powerful local leaders. Local leaders with the right skills can act so as to accumulate extra resources to support their political action.

**Individual or collective decision-making and leadership?**

The debate about whether citizens or councillors should choose the political head of the council has been a European-wide phenomenon which must reconcile the individualistic or collectivist options – directly elected mayor or council appointed political leader – and address whether or not local political leaders should have hard or soft power (see Kersting and Vetter 2003; Berg and Rao 2005; Denters and Rose 2005; Magre and Bertrana 2007; Elcock 2008; Wollmann 2008).
The debate has reflected concerns about the legitimacy to act, visibility and profile of local leaders, the transparency of political decision-making, the most effective structures and systems for ensuring leadership accountability and the role of citizens in local democracy (see Larsen 2002).

In the former Communist countries of eastern Europe the debate about the direct or indirect election of the mayor has echoed the themes already outlined of visibility, accountability, legitimacy and the desire to adopt an individual or collectivist political decision-making structure. Countries such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Hungary, Macedonia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia adopted a system of direct mayoral election. While the powers, resources and functions of the mayor and the national local government context in each of those former Communists states varies, the need for a local leader to enhance legitimacy and gain visibility from public election is a reaction against a dictatorial past. It also indicates that any fear of the concentration of power in one set of hands is diluted by the legitimacy given through a direct public mandate. Further, it points to a reaction against opaque collectivist decision-making taking place outside of a democratic framework. Other former eastern bloc countries however, adopted a more collectivist approach to the appointment of the local political leader, granting that power not to local citizens but the council. Election of the mayor by the council occurs in the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. However the tendency has been for former communist countries to mainly embrace an elected mayor including late adopters such as Croatia.

There is a hybrid alternative to indirect and direct election which finds favour in France and Spain where the leader of the winning party list of candidates becomes the mayor (Borraz and Negrier 2007; Navarro and Sweeting 2015). That system enables the public to know who the mayor will be before the election but keeps the choice of candidates firmly with local party managers who draw up the lists. Even where the mayor is directly elected the local party will decide the party’s mayoral candidate. Only in systems where a large number of independents are elected as mayors can the power of the party be diluted – and even then the disguised independent, who is an undeclared member of a party, or who receives endorsement and support from a local branch of a national party, means that large numbers of independent mayors cannot be taken as a signal of the demise of party control (see Kukovič and Haček 2013; Gendzwill and Zolţak 2014; Gendzwill and Swianiewicz 2017).

The debate about the direct election of the mayor has been far from settled across Europe, with countries such as Sweden, the Czech Republic and Spain continuing the debate (Wollmann 2008, 2012; Steyvers et al. 2008; Elcock 2008; Sweeting 2009; Loughlin et al. 2011). Those debates include fundamental questions about the role, purpose, powers and responsibilities of local government and whether local self-government can comfortably continue to exist alongside central governments responding to international political and economic pressures (see Copus et al. 2017a). The US, with a longer, more established experience with directly elected mayors than European nations, has itself seen shifts over time between direct and indirect election (Frederickson and Johnson 2001; Schragger 2006). It is still possible, in some US municipalities, depending on the local charter, to shift governing models from indirect to direct election and vice versa. Elected mayors were seen by some early US reformers as a way of reducing the power of local political parties and party machines (see Allen 1993; Finegold 1995; Burrows and Wallace 1999) echoing contemporary concerns about local party politics (Copus 2004). Any form of powerful local leadership that emerges from reforms however, will be reshaped locally by local political elites with the ability to make sure such reforms accommodate the raw politics of the localities (Svara 1990; Vogelsang-Coombs 2007; Kjear 2014).

In systems where central or regional government can impose reforms on local government local political elites can still act to either prevent or distort change in leadership structures
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(see Copus et al. 2017b). On the other hand, if centrally inspired change to leadership structures suits the purpose of the local political elite, they themselves may drive change locally (see Copus and Dadd 2014).

Where written constitutions exist there well may be some degree of protection for local government from central interference or interference from a region or state. However, Egner and Heinelt (2006) have shown that where constitutional protection for local government exists it does not free it from centrally inspired reforms. Indeed, Loughlin et al. (2011) have identified a pattern across Europe, where relatively strong local government has been reformed or re-organised through pressure by upper-tiers of government or through some form of political pressure or financial inducements (Baldersheim and Rose 2010). The introduction of changes to local leadership structures can be introduced by nationwide reform, such as Italy’s adoption of elected mayors in the early 1990s, or it can be successfully resisted, as in the Nordic countries (Goldsmith and Larsen 2004: 121; Aars 2009), and as it has been, to some extent, in England.

Directly elected mayors: the English experience of reforming local political leadership

There has been a 50-year ongoing debate in England on the best form of local political leadership set within the context and constraints of a highly centralised political and governing system. Those constraints mean that any reform of local leadership must take account of and match the existing constitutional position of local government as well as its roles, tasks, functions and purpose. So, when reformulating the office of local political leader, reformers need to reconcile the competing tensions between service delivery and management and the democratic and political role of local government and whether it can indeed govern in the strictest sense – that is, does the structure and powers associated with the leader’s office enable effective political action to be taken? Inquiries such as the Herbert Commission (HMSO 1960), the Maud Committee (HMSO 1967), the Redcliffe-Maud Commission (HMSO 1969), the Widdicombe Committee (HMSO 1986) and the Bains Report (Bains 1972) explored those tensions with the consideration of local government as part of the infrastructure of the welfare state. Such centrally inspired inquiries, as these were, shied away from radical reform of the powers and structures of local political leaders and settled for revisions to the committee system. The committee system of political decision-making was not unassailable however, despite the lack of a radical alternatives being proposed.

Individual or collective leadership: the official position

As early as 1967 the Maud Committee recognised the failures of the committee system and the proliferation of committees and sub-committees which it saw as time consuming and causing delays in decision-making. Maud noted the frustration generated by the tendency of committees to involve councillors in administrative detail (Maud 1967: 35). But the solution was to recommend yet another committee, this time a small management board consisting of five to nine councillors. In this can be seen the early development of the Policy and Resources Committee emerging, as the management board would set the principle objectives for the authority, review progress, supervise management and take decisions on behalf of the council beyond the responsibilities of senior officers. It would also be responsible for presenting business to the council. Indeed we can see not only the beginnings of a Policy and Resources Committee but also the beginnings of council cabinets (Maud 1967: 41–42). Maud stopped far short of recommending an elected mayor.
The debate about reforming local political decision-making continued for another twenty years or so when the Widdicombe Committee (HMSO 1986) stressed the advantages of a management committee of senior councillors with a similar role to that which Maud had identified and also shared Maud’s aim of improving local accountability and decision-making. However, Widdicombe set out a warning about concentrating power in too few hands within local government and consequently diminishing the role of councillors and that warning set the tone for the arguments that still continue about elected mayors today. The Widdicombe Committee, for example, criticised the personalisation of politics it saw as inherent in directly elected mayors which is more easily accepted, it argued, where a national presidential system operated. The committee made the rather bold claim that such a system would be ‘generally disliked in Great Britain’. Concern was expressed that different electoral cycles could result in the mayor and council majority coming from a different party (HMSO 1986: para. 5.26), thus rejecting what could be an important check and balance as an inconvenience for decision-making.

The Widdicombe Committee was concerned at conflict arising between an executive mayor and the council. There was no acceptance of a separation of local powers or of direct election to executive office, rather a fear of political deadlock locally emerging from arguments about who had the strongest mandate – the mayor or council. That concern reflected a traditional and majoritarian view of local politics and an acceptance of national party control of local government. Such concern was both strange and understandable at the same time. Strange because the committee had been set up to investigate what the centre perceived to be problems associated with party political control of local government and that the Widdicombe Committee researched and reported at the time of the mandate wars between the central government of Margaret Thatcher and the urban Labour left in local government. Such a context shaped the committee’s thinking. Understandable, because at the time of its formation the intense political conflict between local and national government was unlikely to result in a centrally inspired committee of inquiry recommending stronger, more powerful elected local leadership which could be directed against the government of the day.

A number of factors resulted in these two influential and powerful committees (and Maud and Widdicombe committees) failing to recommend radical reform of local leadership. There was a fear of concentrated local political power and the strongly felt desire to avoid creating a powerful elected mayor; an office could pose a serious challenge to the policies and preferences of central government. There was also historic and long-standing support for a collectivist system of local decision-making and leadership; a reluctance to challenge well-established patterns of national party political control of local government; and reluctance for change expressed by councillors. Little has changed in the opposition expressed by councillors to elected mayors in the 30 years since Widdicombe reported and in the 50 years since Maud reported on such matters.

The debate about how to reform local leadership continued in the 1990s with reports from the Department of the Environment (1991) and the Commission for Local Democracy (1995). The latter being an independent body made up largely of academics. Both these reports made the case for elected mayors more confidently and more forcefully than ever before. Elected mayors at this stage found an enthusiastic supporter in the then Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Heseltine, who was however unable to convince the government to enforce such a change. What we saw in the 1990s was new thinking about local political leadership. Indeed, the arguments for reform of local leadership were formulated on the basis of following a western European trend of moving towards elected mayors and a local separation of powers. A separation of powers was articulated by reformers as a way of overcoming problems with existing political leadership systems as they sought ways to counter-act the secrecy of leadership activity and opaque and blurred
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decision-making through committees. Knowing who was responsible for what decisions became a touchstone of the debate, so too did providing clearly identifiable local leadership (Department of the Environment 1991; Commission for Local Democracy 1995).

Elected mayors in England: arguments for reform

The Labour Government elected in 1997 had accepted the arguments of reformers that local leadership needed to become more visible, transparent, accountable, legitimate and responsive. Moreover, that Government began to challenge, cautiously, the role and practices of political parties in local government which it saw as contributing to the secrecy, opaqueness, lack of transparency and visibility about who was responsible for political action. The local government modernisation agenda of the Labour Government and the arguments on which it was based, were set out in a number of publications which laid the ground work for the Local Government Act 2000. It was that Act, while introducing elected mayors into English and Welsh local government, did so remarkably tentatively, given the forceful nature of the arguments set out in the modernisation publications (Labour Party 1995; Blair 1998; DETR 1998a, 1998b; DETR 1999). The reaction from councillors, in opposition to elected mayors, was itself so forceful that it was necessary to continue to present the arguments for change after the 2000 Act (DTLR 2001; ODPM 2004, 2005; see also Copus 2006).

A set of assumptions underpinned the proclaimed modernisation of local government: the need to separate the executive and scrutiny roles of the councillor; the need for a clear source of legitimacy for local leadership because councils were operating in complex networks of public and private players (DETR 1998a); and that political leadership should be visible, open, transparent and responsive to citizens (DETR 1998b, 1999). The committee system failed the test based on these assumptions as it was inefficient and opaque: ‘no basis for modern local government’, and a ‘poor vehicle for developing and demonstrating community leadership’ (DETR 1998a: paras 5.1, 5.7). Moreover, the Labour Government’s reformers argued that the committee system obscured responsibility for political action and failed to ‘foster community leaders and leadership; with local people having ‘no direct say over their local leaders’ (DETR 1998a). Political leadership and holding of those leaders to account needed different types of councillors and the creation of a political division of labour to produce: ‘greater clarity about who is responsible for decisions and who should be held to account for decisions’ (DETR 1998a: paras 5.9, 5.11).

Party politics, or at least the behaviour of political party groups, attracted a very concise analysis, linked as it was to the weaknesses of local leadership, thus: ‘in most councils it is the political groups, meeting behind closed doors, which make the big and significant decisions’ (DETR 1998a: para. 5.4). What is seen here is a challenge to long-standing and well established patterns of political behaviour among councillors, but one which stressed that such practices undermined leadership and the need for leaders to be open and identifiable. As a consequence the government was ‘very attracted’ to 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 1998a: para. 5.14)
The introduction of elected mayors was presented as a new era of local political action based on legitimacy, transparency, visibility, openness, accountability and responsiveness. What is surprising given the forceful nature of the government’s arguments and articulation of problems associated with the existing system was that rather than legislate to bring elected mayors into all councils the Local Government Act 2000 opted for a voluntary approach. Indeed, the decision to introduce an elected mayor into a locality was placed in the hands of local citizens to decide in a referendum. The lack of a total reform through the introduction of elected mayors across local government was attributable to raw political reality in the shape of overwhelming opposition to it from councillors and the government’s reluctance to confront a key part of their activist base on the issue.

In attempting to promote the idea of elected mayors further, the 2007 Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act enabled councils to resolve to adopt an elected mayor without a referendum. It was as though the government had failed to recognise the opposition from councillors to the idea or believed that certain powerful council leaders would convince reluctant councillors to accept such a model of governance. As should have been expected, this Act did not lead to a widespread adoption of directly elected mayors. So far only Liverpool and Leicester have chosen this route and at the time of writing there are only 16 elected mayors (excluding the mayor of London as the Greater London Authority is not a traditional style of council) in England from a total of 352 councils. But while in traditional local government the reformers’ arguments about elected mayors have failed to convince either councillors or the public, the centre has taken a different route into the direct election of a sub-national political executive.

**Sub-regional reform: devolution and elected mayors**

The devolution agenda started by the 2010 coalition government and continued by the Conservative government of 2015 (which has lately stalled under the current conservative government), has also been based on a similar articulation of the need for visible, high-profile, accountable and legitimate political leadership (HMG 2010). The Government linked the devolution of significant budgets and powers over the public sector to the creation of ‘combined authorities’ – collections of existing councils which come together as a result of negotiations with central government to receive devolved responsibilities and budgets. The Cities and Local Government Devolution Act (2016) states that, in order for a combined authority to take on additional powers to that granted when they were formed, a metro mayor must be elected for the area.

Thus, the opposition to elected mayors which is a feature of the traditional landscape of local government has been partially by-passed through offering devolution to combinations of existing councils and the creation of a new sub-national system of government headed by an elected mayor. However, that attempt to out-manoeuvre local government opposition has not been totally successful as devolution negotiations across England have floundered on the insistence of an elected mayor for a combined authority. Indeed, some councils have rejected opportunities to extend their control over the local public sector; to receive substantial funding decisions and to have powers long sought by many in local government, because of their opposition to elected mayors. Any acceptance of elected mayors for some is the thin end of the wedge – if the arguments are accepted for combined authorities then this weakens opposition to their arrival in local government which has so far been successfully restrained by local political elites (see Copus 2006; Kukovič et al. 2015).
On 4 May 2017 six English combined authorities held elections for new mayors: Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, Tees Valley, West of England and the West Midlands. Together these six combined authority areas account for 9.5 million people, almost 20% of the population of England. In Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Tees Valley, the West of England and the West Midlands, Conservative Mayors were elected; Labour won the mayoralties of Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region. Yet, the debate about the need for elected mayors to personify these huge combined authority areas and to provide a face to an artificial area with which few people will have an affinity continues unabated. Negotiations have collapsed in areas such as Hampshire and Yorkshire with potential broader area agreements suffering as a result of local political differences, geographical tensions and the objection to directly elected mayors.

It may be that the objections from councillors to elected mayors in many parts of the country is what has caused the government of Theresa May to retreat on the issue of elected mayors for rural areas and certainly for single county devolution deals. The weight of opposition among councillors who, as in local government, have the most to lose from the arrival of elected mayors, may also defeat this reform of leadership for sub-national, semi-regional government. It could also be that a minority government with Brexit negotiations as a priority simply lacks the time, energy and enthusiasm for a fight with councillors over devolution. One thing is clear though, the arguments about ensuring the legitimacy, visibility and accountability of local political leadership is the same for both local government and combined authorities. Two instances illustrate this point:

The first is Birmingham, the largest traditional unit of local government in England; it currently has 120 councillors, so that 61 councillors are required for a majority on the council, which in turn means that 32 votes are needed in the majority group for a person to become leader of the council. So, although the electorate of Birmingham is approximately 650,000; the effective constituency is only 32 when it comes to choosing the local political leader.

The second case, for comparison is the Greater Manchester Combined Authority which consists of 10 constituent councils with an electorate of 1,845,121. Prior to the first election of the combined authority mayor, the leader of the combined authority was chosen by the 10 council leaders, meeting in private. When the current mayor of Greater Manchester was elected on 4 May 2017 all 1,845,121 residents had the chance to vote for their preferred candidate.

That there are only 16 directly elected mayors across 352 councils in England and while some devolution deals have stalled because of opposition to elected mayors, shows that resistance can be successful in preventing the reform of local political leadership. Yet, the arguments about visibility, openness, transparency, legitimacy and accountability remain. It may be the case, as indicated in the Widdicombe Committee’s report, that elected mayors might be disliked in a country without a tradition of directly elected executives. That dislike is certainly apparent among councillors. More worryingly for localists, the lack of enthusiasm among the public for elected mayors may mirror a similar lack of enthusiasm for local government as an institution.

**Conclusion**

The arguments in favour of shifting to a directly elected local political leader, which echo across Europe, can be crystallised into what has become the reformers mantra: visibility, openness, transparency, legitimacy and accountability. Those factors reflect a presidential style conceptualisation of local leadership and are secured when the mayor has a direct line of accountability to voters, holding office as a result of local citizens making a specific and clear choice about
individual candidates. The opponents of elected mayors articulate a more collectivist, though certainly not always consensual, approach to decision-making which rests on the input – normally through committees – of all councillors into policy. Opponents of elected mayors stress the need to diffuse power among many, rather than concentrate it in a single office-holder.

The modernising arguments and the response of the opponents of direct election of the mayor have conceptual starting points that are not as mutually exclusive as they seem. Indirectly elected mayors can be visible, high-profile and accountable to voters, although that is attenuated by their tenure being bound to councillors rather than voters. They can also wield considerable power. Directly elected mayors, especially where they have been in office for some time (see Copus et al. 2017b), can be unresponsive, have weak accountability and act in ways that obfuscate responsibility for political action – although it is harder for an elected mayor to deflect responsibility and accountability than it is for their indirectly elected counterpart. Visibility is generally higher for elected mayors as they come from the obvious starting point of fighting an election as a sole individual and making themselves known to the public in ways that are not required by their indirectly elected counterparts (see Elcock and Fenwick 2007; Fenwick and Elcock 2014).

The arguments can be condensed on a less conceptual ground to one which reflects the raw realities of local politics. Dahl (1961) asked ‘Who governs?’; and a similar question sits at the heart of support or opposition to the direct election of the local political leader: Direct election means the voters make the choice who governs; indirect election means councillors make the choice who governs. Who chooses who governs, in turn, governs. Shifting the choice away from councillors to voters – even if political parties select the candidate – means that the influence over the political leader held by councillors is weakened. If the tenure of the leader in office does not rely on maintaining favour with councillors, or on deals, bargains and agreements made, for whatever reason, between councillors to support a particular leadership candidate that they elect, then the dynamics of council chamber and party group room politics are fundamentally changed.

But no matter how the debate develops, across time and country context, the pressures for reform of local leadership structure are always present and new pressures, as they emerge, will force the pace of change. Whatever the decisions made about the merits or otherwise of direct or indirect election of the mayor, or about any structural change to local leadership all become pointless if the local political leader does not have the power to govern or to take effective political action. The ever present danger is that central and regional government may be tempted to tinker with the way the mayor is chosen while avoiding the big question about the powers with which local leaders should be endowed. By avoiding that question any change could be muted and a new brand of leaders arrives without the powers to deal with intractable local problems. Expectations will then trump reality and that could have dangerous consequences for local government, wherever power is apparently located.

References


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