

# An elected mayor in a time of local government change

Nick Webb



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**An elected mayor in a time of local government change** – In this short paper Nick Webb argues that the time has come in Wales to seriously consider the case for having elected mayors.

The principle of directly elected mayors has enjoyed some political and think tank support. For the most part, though, it has failed to capture the public imagination. Of 51 local authorities who have held votes on the issue, only 16 gained the required level of public support - and two of those have subsequently abandoned the system. Nonetheless, the arguments in favour remain valid:

## **Accountability and the need to reach out beyond party tribalism**

Under an elected mayoral system, every elector has a say in choosing the mayor - and in sacking them at election time if they deem it appropriate. With a leader and cabinet structure, the leader needs only to retain his or her council ward and the support of 50%+1 of the council's majority group. This can encourage them to focus attention on their core base of support rather than reaching out to all voters.

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## **A mandate to deliver big projects**

Two major projects in Bristol, the Arena and the Redcliffe regeneration, had been caught up in the regular changes of administration at the City Council. Both are now moving ahead and the presence of a Mayor with a mandate from across the city and a clear term of office has been cited as a major factor. In London, it is unlikely that 32 boroughs, along with the City, would have come together to create a coherent Olympic Games bid without a London-wide mayor in place.

## **A recognisable figurehead for the area**

Sir Peter Soulsby, elected Mayor of Leicester, said "People come to the UK and, frankly, don't want to meet the 'man with the chain'. What a potential investor in Leicester wants to meet is the person who can deliver. And a council leader, or a chief executive, does not look or sound like that sort of person."

If the history of public support is patchy in England it barely exists in Wales. Ceredigion is the only authority to have held a referendum and the principle of an elected mayor was rejected with 73% voting "no". Former Conservative Assembly Member, Jonathan Morgan, advocated an elected mayor for Cardiff, a cause which

is now promoted by Labour Councillor Ashley Govier. Newport Civic Society and the Institute of Welsh Affairs hosted a debate on the idea of a Newport mayor, but this was intended to spark discussion on how the city is governed, rather than start a referendum campaign.

The recent City Deals in England which have allowed elected mayors and council leaders to access or retain a greater range of funding for their area offers a more tangible advantage which can be seen by voters. While such opportunities should not be exclusively available to local authorities with a mayoral structure there is logic to the person with the city or county-wide mandate being able to negotiate with central Government for bespoke funding arrangements for their area. In turn, a powerful elected mayor is likely to be a more attractive option to voters and offer greater added value to the locality.

If the principle has a strong case, but public support has thus far been lacking, why is now a particularly good time to raise the issue once again? Local government in Wales is facing large scale reform in two distinct ways. Firstly, on the back of the Williams Commission recommendations, we can expect at least a halving of the number of the local authorities. Secondly, the principle of city regions is being pursued, albeit slowly. These factors combine with a centralised Welsh political

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system which has not adopted even the localism we see in England. Yet, people's association with place matters. There has been resistance to the Cardiff Capital Region in Newport for fear of a "Cardiff takeover". That is a message which would resonate with residents of the Vale of Glamorgan who opposed a merger with Cardiff. Both objections may be over-stated, but they do underline the passion with

which people define their local identity.

When announced, Cardiff Capital Region and Swansea Bay City Region were at the forefront of British political thought on how to govern effectively over a larger area, rather than within the often tight boundaries of a local authority. City regions are broadly defined as the area within which people commute for work, education, socialising and to use services. They are a pragmatic response to the reality that none of us live our lives in local authority shaped boxes. Since the city region announcement in Wales there has not been much sign of momentum whereas the more recent decision of local authorities in Greater Manchester to form a city region complete with its own metro-mayor has captured the headlines, if not yet the imagination. Interestingly, the residents of Manchester local authority had rejected an elected mayor in 2012 and the proposed city region mayor will not be subject to a referendum.

City regions make sense, but they do not offer an answer to those concerned that their local identity is at risk. An elected mayor could respond to this. We do not know quite what the new local government geography of Wales will look like, but an individual with a democratic mandate to speak on behalf of their city or county would be a strong voice, far less susceptible to being overlooked. If Newport adopted an elected mayor, he or she would instantly have a larger mandate than any other politician in the Cardiff Capital Region. Politicians in Cardiff Bay or the combinations of councillors and business people on the city region boards could not afford to ignore that democratic weight.

*If you wish to make a comment on Nick Webb short article then you can email him via [info@gorwel.co](mailto:info@gorwel.co)*