



Why there is now an opportunity for bold leadership in Welsh cities

Nick Webb

May 2017 will see local elections across each of Wales' 22 local authorities. Every one of these is important, but there is a fresh challenge to our city leaders following the recent devolution model being pursued in England. "Metro-mayors" could certainly offer benefits to Welsh city regions, but they will not be on the ballot paper in May. That should not, though, be an excuse for our councillors, working in the current structure, to avoid rising to the challenge.

Some might take this article as criticism of the current leadership in Cardiff, Newport and Swansea, but that is genuinely not the intention. This piece, which is written prior to the publication of local government manifestos, is rather a call to be bold, to offer a city-wide vision, and to explain the importance of your city to the wider world.

It is also a polite challenge to those who have promoted with gusto what their city has to offer. Their input has been so welcome in countering the critics have sought to run down the prospects of their home town. However, it is not enough simply to promote every festival, new shop opening or sporting success, as if that is all we can aspire to. The positivity needs to be harnessed and the question asked "What can we build from this foundation?".

What can we build from this foundation?

Every local authority in Wales has its own characteristics, opportunities and challenges. This article focuses on cities because they are the key economic drivers and often the places which lead on innovation. Furthermore, they are more threatened by competition from the rise of English city region devolution. Yet many of the points discussed are applicable to all authorities.

What makes each city distinct?

Bristol has developed an identity around economic success, while embracing environmentalism and a bit of a rebellious streak. Manchester has pioneered cross-border working to grow in stature. Liverpool, led by the impressive Mayor Joe Anderson, has adopted an open, willing to work with all, approach which has transcended the near "one party state" that local election results would suggest. Liverpool recently announced it will be bidding to host the Commonwealth Games - for which Wales has opted not to pitch.

As they prepare their local election manifestos, a question which each political party should ask is “What is the nature of our city, what makes it stand out?” That should be a theme which can reach across many policy areas. Take Newport as an example. Three of its distinctive features are the velodrome, Celtic Manor, and the Office for National Statistics. So it might be appropriate to focus particularly on policies which address the cycle-friendliness of the city; support the development of businesses which service the conferencing industry; and encourage the growth of a data industry cluster. Cardiff has a tremendous cultural scene, while Swansea has a fantastic setting, and the major pull factor of Premier League football. There is plenty of potential.

Cities can do more to lead initiatives

Of course there are big schemes being proposed which will benefit Welsh cities, but the driving force for them is coming from higher tiers of government. The tidal lagoon for Swansea relies on a UK Government decision, while the South Wales Metro is being driven politically by the Welsh Government. That is no criticism of those projects, but it highlights the untapped potential for local leaders to seize the initiative and lay out a plan for the kind of a city they want to run.

Can localism coexist with a city-wide strategy?

There is an understandable electoral logic to embracing the very local. The trigger which gets people to vote for you in one ward might be an ultra-local issue which does not register on the radar of voters elsewhere in the city. This is often amplified in the more rural “edge-of-settlement” wards such as Pentyrch or Marshfield. However, these issues should be woven into the city-wide narrative. It is absurd to tell people in one part of the city that house building is the key priority while telling others that protecting green spaces is the focus, without some form of over-arching strategy on development.

Being smart with money

There is also a need to re-focus when it comes to local finances. The recurring spectre of council leaders telling people that their inflation-busting council tax rises are good value, despite services being reduced, has to end. In what other sphere is it good value to pay more and get less? Local government budgets are very tight. The Welsh Government could improve this by allowing for more revenue streams as has happened in England. However, even with current constraints, there is a long overdue need to change the broken record. Certainly there will be short, and probably medium, term financial challenges, but where are the civic leaders who are laying out a longer term plan so that “pay more, get less” comes to an end?

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The answer may well lie in technology, allowing more efficient delivery of services. Fully integrated smart cities will not be achieved in one council term; but steps can be taken in the right direction. While Bristol is at the forefront of this kind of innovation, just a few miles further west it hardly seems to register. The electorate deserves more than simply passing the blame for the state of the finances while carrying on business as it has always been done.

Cross-boundary working

In the introduction to this article I noted that metro-mayors are not on the ballot paper in May 2017. However, perhaps they should be part of the thinking that goes into local election manifestos. For all the debate and controversy about local authority boundaries, we enter the election with the format largely unchanged. There are imprecise unelected city regions whose development is some way behind what has happened in England, and a general but non-specific encouragement that authorities should work more closely together.

The lack of direction from Welsh Government presents an opportunity for local government to take the lead. In the first instance this should consist of a clear statement of support for the current city regions as a foundation to build from. In addition, for Cardiff and Newport there is a need to re-commit to their Great Western Cities partnership with Bristol. That is even less well defined and may not survive without its key enthusiast, former Bristol Mayor, George Ferguson. Nonetheless, it presents an opportunity to develop exactly the kind of pragmatic cross-authority thinking that can boost every part of a region rather than just the core city. Parochialism is the enemy of progress and no one is waiting for Welsh cities to play catch-up.

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In England, metro-mayors have been imposed by central government. The outcome will benefit the cities, but it is not unreasonable for opponents to question whether this process was overly top-down. The Welsh Government shows no inclination to act in a similar manner, perhaps fearing the mandate of a Cardiff Capital Region mayor. However, this presents an opportunity for bottom-up solutions. It is unlikely that the ten authorities of Cardiff Capital Region would agree en masse to have a metro-mayor. Here Newport and Cardiff could take the lead, with the two urban areas proposing a cross-authority mayoral structure in a way that allows the remaining valley and rural councils to join in due course if they wish.

Cross-boundary working is not limited to city regions as demonstrated by the recently announced North Wales Economic Ambition Board.

What is your city's role in the World?

Local issues matter, and the financial predicament cannot be ignored. But the big picture policies have never mattered more. Concern about the state of the pavement does not preclude the same person being concerned about their city's place in a competitive globalised world.

Biography:

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