European Urban Research Association, Torino, Italy

16-19 June 2016

Paper for Track 3: Governing cities: Stressed institutions and new shapes of urban democracy

Can local leadership advance the cause of social inclusion?

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Abstract

Across the world cities are becoming more and more unequal. A growing body of literature shows that ostracized groups exist in all countries, rich and poor, and that processes of social exclusion now prevent many people from participating fully in their nation’s political, economic and social life. These are troubling features of the ‘neo-liberal’ world that we all now live in. The paper starts out by suggesting that prevailing ‘ways of seeing’ present a major challenge to all progressive leaders. Effective efforts to advance the cause of social inclusion require local politicians, and those that support them, to develop a compelling counter argument to the ‘neo-liberal’ narrative that has come to dominate public policy making in many countries. This is not easy, but, unsung by the national and international media, place-based leaders in cities across the world are mapping out and implementing radical reform strategies. This paper, by drawing on evidence that is set out at greater length in the author’s new book, Leading the Inclusive City (2015), outlines the forces that shape the scope for place-based leadership in our globalising world. A new conceptual framework for understanding civic leadership – the New Civic Leadership (NCL) – is presented. The three main elements of the framework concern: 1) The forces shaping the power of place in any given locality, 2) The different realms of place-based leadership encountered in most localities, and 3) The relationship between leadership and public service innovation. Examples of progressive place-based leadership in different countries suggest that ‘neo-liberal’ patterns of thinking can be challenged.

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Introduction

Ideas shape events. In an early, and perspicacious, analysis of the role of ideas in shaping public policy making Donald Schon explains how ways of seeing the world, ways that might be resting on the far outskirts of public policy thinking, can move, sometimes quite quickly, to become ‘ideas in good currency’ (Schon 1971 p141-142). The startling and widespread acceptance in many governments of ‘neo-liberalism’ as a sensible way forward for public policy is such an idea. Over a period of time, but particularly in the 1980s in Western Europe and North America, the emergence of ‘neo-liberalism’ provides a vivid example of the process Schon describes. Markets and the pursuit of profit-driven behaviour were, we were told, the right way to enhance the quality of life in the modern world. Michael Sandel offers an extended analysis showing how, without quite realising it, without debating it, ‘… we drifted from having a market economy to being a market society’ (Sandel 2012, p10).

Owen Jones, in his study of ‘The Establishment’ in the UK, shows how the ideology of ‘neo-liberalism’ is based around a belief in so-called ‘free markets’. His forensic examination of the evolving power structure in Britain shows how members of the establishment have developed a ‘shared mentality’ about what is claimed to be ‘right’ for the country: ‘… a set of beliefs and policies that, rather conveniently, guarantees them ever-growing personal riches and power’ (Jones 2014 p6).

This paper offers a counter-argument to the so-called ‘neo-liberal’ way of seeing the world. It examines the nature of values in the policy process and explores how local leaders, in particular leaders of cities and particular localities, are pursuing policies that offer a different way of viewing the world. The paper explores the role of place-based leadership in creating a different narrative for public policy and, in particular, whether the directly elected mayor model of governance can contribute to progressive policy-making. In this context I am using the word ‘progressive’ to mean the active implementation of policies and practices designed to move away from exploitation of people and the planet. In contrast to ‘neo-liberal’ politicians, progressive civic leaders strive for just results while caring for the natural environment on which we all depend.

First, I discuss the role of values in the policy process. This is important and needs to be centre stage in any sound analysis of city and regional governance. The discussion then considers the way place-based power is exercised and the idea of ‘New Civic Leadership’ is introduced. Three examples of mayoral leadership in three different countries are then presented. These are chosen to illustrate the progressive possibilities of the directly elected mayor model of urban governance. They cover experiences in three countries and outline examples of mayoral governance at three very different geographical scales: 1) Greater London, UK (in the period 2000-08); 2) Portland, Oregon, USA; and Freiburg, Germany. The paper closes with a comparative discussion of the progressive potential of place-based leadership for moving politics into a post ‘neo-liberal’ age.
Values in the policy process

Young (1977) explains how those involved in public policy making occupy ‘assumptive worlds’, by which he means they have ways of perceiving the world that often go unquestioned. This blindness to new possibilities limits thinking and the invention of new possibilities. While Owen Jones does not cite this literature on assumptive worlds his analysis of the rise of ‘neo-liberalism’ is entirely consistent with it. In particular, he highlights a concept known as the ‘Overton Window’, an idea put forward by Joseph P. Overton, the late vice-president of the right-wing think tank the Mackinac Center for Public Policy. Basically, everything within the Window is seen as mainstream and common sense. The Window has a powerful effect in framing what is seen as politically feasible:

‘Ideas that are outside the Window are dismissed as extremist, dangerous, impossible, “what planet are you living on”. (Jones 2014 p 295)

The key point is that the Window is not static. If the Window can be shifted ideas that were once seen as ludicrous can become, in line with the argument presented by Donald Schon (1971), ‘ideas in good currency’. Jones shows how ‘outriders’, in his analysis neo-liberal thinkers in the various right-wing think tanks funded by big business, were able to propagate ideas about the virtues of ‘free markets’ that were not too radical to be written off as unacceptably extreme, but radical enough to introduce pathways for sympathetic politicians. These think tanks were, it has to be said, successful in shifting the dominant ideology to the right, in moving the Window framing what is seen as politically possible, and, as a result, political leaders in many countries, now appear to be wedded to a belief in so-called ‘free markets’. This ‘neo-liberal’ stance believes:

‘… in transferring public assets to profit-driven businesses as far as possible; in a degree of opposition – if not hostility – to a formal role for the state in the economy; in support for reducing the tax burden on private interests; and in the driving back of any form of collective organisation that might challenge the status quo.’ (Jones 2014 p6)

Weaver (2016), in his extended analysis of the emergence and development of neo-liberalism in the United States and the United Kingdom, shows how neo-liberal ideas appealed not just to politicians of the radical right, but also to the Bill Clinton administration in the US and to New Labour politicians in the UK. He shows how these ideas led to a ‘durable shift’ in the relationships between the state, market and citizen. Weaver suggests that the development of a credible alternative to neo-liberalism will not occur overnight. However, it does not follow that neo-liberal ideology is now permanently embedded in western societies. Social movements and elected politicians can decide to reject this limiting view of collective possibilities. Just as the ‘Overton Window’ can moved to the right it can be moved to the left. This paper explores how this is happening at the local level. Local leaders are constrained by global forces but they are not without power. As we shall see
place-based leaders can set out the basis for a different way of viewing the world from the prevailing ‘neo-liberal’ ideology and, more important, they can deliver progressive results on the ground.

The power of place

Place-based leaders are not free agents able to do exactly as they choose. On the contrary, various powerful forces shape the context within which civic leaders operate. These forces do not disable local leadership. Rather they place limits on what urban leaders may be able to accomplish in particular places and at particular moments in time. Figure 1 provides a simplified picture of the four sets of forces that shape the world of place-based governance in any given locality.

At the bottom of the diagram, are the non-negotiable environmental limits. Ignoring the fact that cities are part of the natural ecosystem is irresponsible, and failure to pay attention to environmental limits will store up unmanageable problems for future generations (Girardet 2008; Jackson 2009). This side of the square is drawn with a solid line because, unlike the other sides of the square, these environmental limits are non-negotiable. On the left hand side of the diagram are socio-cultural forces – these comprise a mix of people (as actors) and cultural values (that people may hold). Here we find the rich variety of voices found in any city - including the claims of activists, businesses, artists, entrepreneurs, trade unionists, religious organisations, community-based groups, citizens who vote, citizens who don’t vote, children, newly arrived immigrants, anarchists and so on. The people of the city will have different views about the kind of city they wish to live in, and they will have differential capacity to make these views known. Some, maybe many, will claim a right to the city (Brenner et al 2012). We can assume that, in democratic societies at least, elected leaders who pay little or no attention to these political pressures should not expect to stay in office for too long. Expression of citizen voice, to use Hirschman’s term (1970), will see them dismissed at the ballot box.

On the right hand side of the diagram are the horizontal economic forces that arise from the need for localities to compete, to some degree at least, in the wider marketplace - for inward investment and to attract talented people. Various studies have shown that, contrary to ‘neo-liberal’ dogma, it is possible for civic leaders to bargain with business (Savitch and Kantor 2002). Recognising the power of economic forces, including the growth in global competition between localities, does not require civic leaders to become mere servants of private capital. For example, a detailed study of the governance of London, New York, Paris and Tokyo concluded that:

‘Global forces are not making the politics of place less important. Globalism and local governance are not mutually exclusive but are deeply entwined… important differences remain in the ways particular world cities-regions are mediating international forces’ (Kantor et al 2012 p 241)
On the top of Figure 1 we find the legal and policy framework imposed by higher levels of government. In some countries this governmental framing will include legal obligations decreed by supra-national organisations. For example, local authorities in countries that are members of the European Union (EU) are required to comply with EU laws and regulations, and to take note of EU policy guidance. Individual nation states determine the legal status, fiscal power and functions of local authorities within their boundaries. These relationships are subject to negotiation and renegotiation over time.

It is clear that Figure 1 simplifies a much more complex reality. This is what conceptual frameworks do. In reality the four sets of forces framing local action do not necessarily carry equal weight, and the situation in any given city is, to some extent, fluid and changing. For example, Richard Flanagan in his analysis of American mayoral leadership stresses the importance of timing (Flanagan 2004 pp 13-16). The space available for local agency is always shifting, and a key task of local leaders is to be alert to the opportunities for advancing the power of their place within the context of the framing forces prevailing on their area at the time.

Figure 1 Framing the political space for place-based governance

Source: Hambleton (2015) p 114

Figure 1 indicates that place-based governance, shown at the centre, is porous. Successful civic leaders are constantly learning from the environment in which they find themselves in order to discover new insights, co-create new solutions and advance their political objectives. Note that the four forces are not joined up at the corners to create a rigid prison within which civic leadership has to be exercised. On the contrary the boundaries of the overall arena are, themselves, malleable. Depending on the culture and context,
imaginative civic leaders may be able to disrupt the pre-existing governmental frame and bring about an expansion in place-based power.

**The New Civic Leadership**

In the 1980s *New Public Management (NPM)*, which involves the use of private sector management practices in the public sector, gained popularity in many countries (Christensen and Laegried 2001; Hoggett 1991; Hood 1991). In essence, the approach stems from the belief that government should be run like a private business. In my recent book I argue that the introduction of *New Public Management* techniques has often done great damage to the public service ethos, and that treating citizens as self-interested consumers is a peculiarly narrow way of thinking about public service reform (Hambleton 2015 pp 61-63). I suggest that those interested in progressive public policy making might find a notion that I describe as *New Civic Leadership (NCL)* to be more relevant and useful.

*New Civic Leadership* involves strong, place-based leadership acting to co-create new solutions to public problems by drawing on the complementary strengths of civil society, the market and the state. If we are to understand effective, place-based leadership, we need a conceptual framework that highlights the role of local leaders in facilitating public service innovation. Here I provide a sketch of a possible framework.

**Figure 2** suggests that in any given locality there are likely to be five realms of place-based leadership reflecting different sources of legitimacy:

- **Political leadership** – referring to the work of those people elected to leadership positions by the citizenry

- **Public managerial/professional leadership** – referring to the work of public servants, including planners, appointed by local authorities, governments and third sector organisations to plan and manage public services, and promote community wellbeing

- **Community leadership** – referring to the many civic-minded people who give their time and energy to local leadership activities in a wide variety of ways

- **Business leadership** – referring to the contribution made by local business leaders and social entrepreneurs, who have a clear stake in the long-term prosperity of the locality

- **Trade union leadership** – referring to the efforts of trade union leaders striving to improve the pay and working conditions of employees

**Figure 2: The realms of place-based leadership**
These roles are all important in cultivating and encouraging public service innovation and, crucially, they overlap. I describe the areas of overlap as innovation zones – areas providing many opportunities for inventive behaviour. This is because different perspectives are brought together in these zones and this can enable active questioning of established approaches.

It is fair to say that the areas of overlap in Figure 2 are often experienced as conflict zones, rather than innovation zones. These spaces do, of course, provide settings for power struggles between competing interests and values. Moreover, power is unequally distributed within these settings. This is precisely why place-based leadership matters. The evidence from my research on urban governance is that civic leadership is critical in ensuring that the innovation zones – sometimes referred to as the ‘soft spaces’ of planning (Illsley et al 2010) or ‘space for dialogue’ (Oliver and Pitt 2013, 198-99) – are orchestrated in a way that promotes a culture of listening that can, in turn, lead to innovation. Civic leaders are, of course, not just ‘those at the top’. All kinds of people can exercise civic leadership and they may be inside or outside the state.

The role of directly elected mayors in place-based leadership

We now turn to consider how this discussion of place-based power and realms of place-based leadership bears on the debate about directly elected mayors. But first we should sound a warning note. It is far too simplistic to claim that directly elected mayors are ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for local democracy and place-based leadership in general. For a start there are many different forms of mayoral governance. There is no one model. In the UK context we can
note that the Conservative Government, elected in May 2015, is imposing the ‘directly elected mayor’ model of governance on city regions in England via the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016. The government has offered no evidence on why this is a superior model of governance to other forms of city region governance. The author has been invited by the UK Local Government Association (LGA) to provide national guidance on ‘combined authority’ governance (for city regions and non-metropolitan regions) and this will be published shortly (Hambleton 2016).

We should also note that political cultures vary significantly and institutional design ideas that might be seen as attractive in one country, or locality, may be seen as unhelpful in another. It follows that we should guard against generalising too freely about the ‘mayoral form of governance’. Notwithstanding this caveat we can, perhaps, make three general points about the mayoral model.

First, there is, usually but not always, a ‘separation of powers’ between the directly elected mayor (let’s call this person the Executive) and the other politicians elected to serve the city (let’s call them the Assembly). The balance of power between the Executive and the Assembly can vary dramatically. For example, Clarence Stone notes that, in the USA, the strong mayor form of governance ‘… is in some ways a miniature presidency’ (Stone 1995 p110). In the strong mayor form the Executive is enormously powerful. By contrast, in cities where the Assembly remains strong, the Executive will have much less administrative power and budgetary control. In US cities the balance of power between the Executive and the Assembly is constantly up for reconsideration – cities are free to modify or transform their governance structures and they do (Svara and Watson 2010). Moreover some US cities, and we will encounter this later in the paper when we consider governance arrangements in Portland, Oregon, have a directly mayor working alongside directly elected commissioners.ii

Second, the process of direct election appears to give mayors a level of personal legitimacy that they would not otherwise have. In the UK context there are a number of directly elected mayors who, in an earlier period, served as council leader. These individuals are well placed to know, from their own direct, personal experience, how the process of direct election influences their effectiveness as leaders.iii When asked about the difference between being council leader and being directly elected mayor Sir Steve Bullock, Mayor of Lewisham, said:

‘Local residents hold me directly accountable as executive mayor in a way they never did as council leader. It gives my decisions legitimacy but also places a responsibility on me to clearly explain how and why I have made them – and to listen before I decide’ iv

When asked the same question Sir Peter Soulsby, Mayor of Leicester, said:

‘A directly elected mayor gives the executive a clear democratic mandate from those they represent, and makes the office-holder accountable to the
public and not just to members of the council. A council leader has to be constantly responding to the political dynamic of their party group to ensure re-election each year, and is much less able to make longer-term decisions unencumbered by looking over their shoulder and by the necessity to appease their group members.

Another insight is provided George Ferguson, Mayor of Bristol up until May 2016. While he never served as a council leader in the past, he is forthright about the value of being directly elected:

‘Being elected by the whole electorate creates a huge difference to my authority to do things. It also gives me the courage to make changes that, otherwise, would be very difficult to make’ (Hambleton 2015 p135)

A third general point about the mayoral model is that directly elected mayors usually see themselves as ‘leader of the place’, rather than ‘leader of the council’. In most models of mayoral governance the mayor is elected for a term of three or more years. This enables them, in theory, to be more outward looking than a leader who is answerable, often on a month-to-month basis, to her or his party group.

In terms of the realms of place-based leadership shown in Figure 2 the directly elected mayor is clearly in the political realm. In practice, effective city mayors often locate themselves at the heart of the realms of leadership, that is, at the centre of this figure. They put great value in positioning themselves at the hub of leadership networks, and put considerable energy and effort into working closely with leaders from the other four realms of place-based leadership.

Two other important general points about mayoral governance should be highlighted. First, the context within which mayoral leadership is exercised is critical. Effective leaders tune their efforts to the environment both within and outside their organisation. The forces shaping local political space – see Figure 1 – need to be understood. Knowing what steps to take, and at what point, to advance the cause of place-based power requires political judgement. This, in turn, requires an understanding of civic capacity and civic drive in the local population. By this I mean:

‘… the desire and motivation to be involved in social issues and to see new social opportunities’ (Sun and Anderson 2012 p317)

Clarence Stone understands this well enough and notes that leadership goes to the heart of politics, that is, to the capacity of citizens to act together on their shared concerns. He draws on Hanna Arendt’s ideas to suggest that leadership involves contributing to a creative process that calls something into being that did not exist before:

‘… leadership alters events, not as an individual act of heroism, but through interaction with followers’ (Stone 1995 p98)
Second, and it is a closely related point, the personal qualities of the leader matter. Qualities, like vision, resilience, persistence, energy, inventiveness, passion, humility and judgement are associated with successful leadership in the public and the private sectors. This personal element is a critical factor for our discussion. It is clear that the individuals involved in local leadership can shape the performance of an urban governance system. It follows that the directly elected mayor model of governance creates possibilities for the exercise of progressive leadership. Institutional design cannot, in and of itself, guarantee improved civic leadership – the qualities and wisdom of the people in leadership positions matter.

Progressive mayoral leadership: three inspirational examples

In this section, we consider three examples of mayoral leadership. These have been selected to illustrate how directly elected mayors can exercise progressive civic leadership at different geographical scales and in very different countries. These cameos cover experiences in three countries at three very different geographical scales: 1) Metropolitan leadership in Greater London, UK (in the period 2000-08); 2) City leadership in Portland, Oregon, USA; and 3) City leadership in Freiburg, Germany.

Progressive metropolitan leadership: the London Congestion Charge

In May 2000 Ken Livingstone, when he was elected Mayor of London, became the first directly elected, political leader in UK history (Sweeting 2002). He became the leader of the Greater London Authority that, it should be noted, is a strategic metropolitan authority, with a population of around 8.3 million people. Livingstone, a very experienced left-leaning politician, had a reputation for daring initiatives and his approach to mayoral leadership in London in the period 2000-08 reflected his willingness to push at the boundaries of what might be possible. In his autobiography, You Can’t Say That, Livingstone provides his own account of a remarkable environmental initiative - the introduction of the London congestion charge (Livingstone 2011 pp 469-478). He notes that it was very challenging - even his own political advisers told him not to do it.

A congestion charge is a fee imposed on most motor vehicles operating within a designated zone within a city. Singapore deserves credit for being the first major city to introduce such a scheme in 1998, where the approach is known as electronic road pricing. But the London scheme introduced by Livingstone is far larger, and his decision to take such a radical step has attracted interest from city leaders from across the world. The aims of the charge were to reduce traffic congestion, enhance the environmental quality of central London and raise funds to invest in major improvements to London’s public transport system.

In the period before the introduction of the charge, particularly during 2002, there was massive opposition to the idea. The London Evening Standard, the
capital's newspaper, orchestrated a vitriolic campaign against Livingstone in general, and the charge in particular. Opposition also came from the Conservative Party, car users, petrol companies, motoring correspondents, theatre 'luvvies', various residents groups and numerous business interests, including Smithfield meat traders. As the pressures mounted Livingstone's advisers concluded that it would be a foolish move to introduce the charge. They advised him that he would be finished politically if he went ahead because the media would portray him as: 'The Mayor who introduced a new tax'. They begged him to delay the idea until after he had won a second four-year term in 2004. To his lasting credit Livingstone ignored all of them.

Mayor Livingstone introduced the London congestion charge in February 2003. On the first day of operation, traffic in the congestion charge zone declined by 25%, a figure that shifted to around 15% to 20% of pre-charge levels in subsequent weeks. Livingstone pumped the income generated by the charge into public transport improvements. An independent evaluation of the policy concluded:

'It is clear that the scheme has been a great success in its primary target of reducing traffic congestion within central London, and contributing to improving access by bus' (Richards 2006 p216)

Additional new buses were introduced and there were big improvements in bus reliability. The roads were made more attractive to cyclists, whose numbers increased significantly, and there was a 20% reduction in carbon emissions. Within ten days Livingstone's opinion poll ratings were up 10%. The following year, in the May 2004 Greater London elections, Mayor Livingstone was rewarded for showing vision and courage in leadership. He was elected mayor for the period 2004-08. Moreover, more people voted for him in 2004 than in his previous victory in 2000. He had imposed a new tax and become more popular than ever. This is because he used the funds generated to advance the public good, and voters appreciated the benefits.

We can note that Boris Johnson, the 2008 incoming Conservative Mayor of Greater London, did not discard the congestion charge. Indeed, no serious politicians are now advocating its abolition. It seems clear that the main reason why London was able to make this major step towards a more sustainable city was the exercise of bold civic leadership by a powerful directly mayor in the capital.

Progressive city leadership in Portland, Oregon

Portland, Oregon has acquired an international reputation for progressive city planning (Ozawa 2004; Irazabal 2005). A city of 610,000 in a metropolitan area of 2.3 million, Portland has a long-established commitment to sustainable urban development. Over a long period the political leadership has secured an integrated approach to land use and transportation planning, and the city is regularly praised for its leadership in increasing public transportation and bicycling, energy efficiency and recycling. For example, the city’s first bicycle master plan was completed in 1996, and the city now
has a higher percentage of workers commuting by bike than any other city in the USA (Fitzgerald 2010 p160). Portland was the first US city to adopt a firm position on climate change – it set ambitious targets for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in 1993.

Support for a progressive approach to local policy making comes from an active network of neighbourhood associations. Campbell (2012 p114) notes that an important driver of change is ‘… a system of internal networks of trust formed by mainstream civic-minded persons who care about the city and devote professional and personal time to community deliberation, discussion and planning’. In 2012 the City Council adopted a new plan for the city – The Portland Plan. Developed by Mayor Sam Adams, who was mayor from 2008-2012, this bold plan puts advancing equity at the heart of city policy. The city council is, then, attempting to build on its successful approach to sustainable development by introducing a stronger commitment to social justice in the period through to 2035.

The governance arrangements for the city are rather unusual. As explained with great clarity by Morgan et al (2010), the city has gained its own distinct, international reputation for being different, if not ‘weird’. The city is odd in that it is the only major US city to retain a commission system of government. And, upon closer examination, Portland’s commission system is, in itself, weird when compared to the traditional commission model. The original commission form involves the election of officials who run to be commissioner of, for example, police, roads, fire and so on. In Portland, commissioners run for office without portfolios; the directly elected mayor assigns portfolios after their election. The city has six directly elected officials: the mayor, four commissioners and the auditor. The appointment power of the mayor is supplemented by the power to prepare and present the annual budget to the commission for adoption. In theory this arrangement grants significant powers to the directly elected mayor but, in practice, the mayor needs to maintain at least three votes to support her or his agenda.

In the period since he took office in January 2013 Mayor Charlie Hales has focussed his efforts on four priorities: 1) Creating liveable neighbourhoods with fair access to services and jobs, 2) Growing the number of jobs in the city and improving access to employment, 3) Police reform and 4) Improving governance. His report on priorities and accomplishments offers an assessment of progress (Hales 2015). The theme of enhancing fairness in the city builds on the efforts of the previous city mayor – Sam Adams. As mentioned earlier, advancing equity is the central plank of The Portland Plan adopted in 2012.

Several factors explain the continuing commitment of the elected City Council to a progressive agenda for Portland. Three stand out. First, there is a long-established civic culture at both neighbourhood and city levels:

‘There is a rich web of professional, political, grassroots, formal, and informal relationships across organisational and jurisdictional boundaries that has accounted for Portland’s success’ (Morgan et al 2010 p297).
Second, the political will shown, not just by a succession of mayors but also by commissioners, has maintained a strong commitment to sustainable development and, more recently, to equitable development. Third, the professional leadership of appointed officers, across numerous departments and agencies, has ensured good quality work on topics like transportation, energy conservation, and access to services. The role of the directly elected mayor, and Sam Adams and Charlie Hales provide good examples, is to set a tone for local leadership. By working in a collaborative way with the commissioners and other civic leaders, the directly elected mayor is able to orchestrate a variety of progressive initiatives. At the same time the commission form diffuses leadership and provides an effective mechanism for holding the mayor to account.

Green leadership in Freiburg, Germany

Freiburg, Germany’s southernmost city, has established itself as a world leader in relation to sustainable development. The city, which has a population of 230,000, has been successful in promoting a civic culture that combines a very strong commitment to green values and respect for nature, with a buoyant economy built around, amongst other things, renewable energy. The UK-based Academy of Urbanism was so impressed with the achievements of the city that it published The Freiburg Charter for Sustainable Urbanism to promote imaginative city planning and sound urban design (Academy of Urbanism and Stadt Freiburg 2012).

Visitors from across the world flock to the city to learn about the many green innovations the city is now famous for – in public transport, renewable energy, and city planning. Many head for the Vauban district on the south side of the city. Here they find a newly created, family-friendly neighbourhood full of green spaces and attractively designed homes. The energy to power this neighbourhood is 95% from renewable resources. Joan Fitzgerald, an American sustainable development expert, was astonished by what she found when she visited the area, saying:

‘Vauban goes beyond anything we are thinking of in the United States under the banners of smart growth, transit-oriented development, or new urbanism’ (Fitzgerald 2010 p2)

The origins of the community activism that underpins current innovations in Freiburg can be traced to the late 1970s. A successful, local and regional campaign against a proposal to locate a nuclear power station in nearby Wyhl provided the original impetus. A colourful coalition of anti-nuclear activists was born and, from small beginnings, this new green movement became increasingly successful. As early as 1986, the year of the Chernobyl disaster, the City Council declared Freiburg to be a nuclear power free zone. Many articles have now been published on Freiburg’s high quality approach to city planning and urban design, and Peter Hall provides a good overview in a chapter in his recent book headed ‘Freiburg: The city that did it all’.

13
to explain the success of Freiburg Hall highlights the importance of civic leadership:

‘… what stands out in Freiburg is the role that visionary leadership can play in changing a city’s direction’ (Hall 2014 p248)

Freiburg is located within the state of Baden-Wurttemberg and the local authority has two political institutions: 1) The City Council (Gemeinderat) with 48 members who are elected on an ‘at large’ basis for a term of five years, 2) The Mayor, who is directly elected for a fixed term of eight years. The Mayor is the Chief Executive Officer of the city administration and is supported by four deputy mayors. Local authorities in Germany are relatively strong – they have a constitutional right to local self-government and they have the legal power to levy their own taxes to finance activities as they think fit.

The leadership provided by successive directly elected mayors has had a significant impact on the quality of life in the city. Special praise should go to Dr Rolph Bohme, a Socialist mayor. Elected in 1982 he was to remain in office until 2002 and, during this period, he was very active in bringing about many of the innovations that now make Freiburg famous. He worked closely with appointed officers, and special mention should be made of his close working relationship with Wulf Daseking, Director of Planning and Building in Freiburg for many years, before retiring in 2012. Mayor Dr Dieter Salomon, a member of the Green Party, who was elected in 2002 and re-elected in 2010, is deeply committed to the green agenda for the city.

Successive directly elected mayors and elected councillors have promoted ambitious thinking in Freiburg. Their consistent commitment to green values, coupled with an enthusiasm for trying out new approaches, has set the tone for the pursuit of a forward looking progressive agenda for the city.

**Progressive mayoral leadership: themes and possibilities**

Having examined experience on the ground in three progressive cities, we can now address the question posed in the title of this paper: Can local leadership advance the cause of social inclusion? The examples of mayoral leadership presented in this paper suggest that the answer is ‘yes’. We have seen how directly elected mayors in rather different countries – in this instance, the UK, the USA and Germany – have been able, by working in a collaborative way with other actors, to develop and implement world-leading policies designed to create more inclusive and more sustainable cities.

It is important to emphasise that the progressive achievements of these cities are substantial. These cities have gained international recognition for breaking new ground and independent researchers have praised their efforts. In addition, it is clear that the directly elected mayors in these cities have played a key role in bringing about progressive change. Moreover, our examples show that progressive mayors have been successful at very different geographical scales: London is a vast metropolis with a population of 8.3 million; Portland is a sizable city with 610,000 residents; and Freiburg is a
relatively small city of 230,000. The evidence presented here suggests, then, that the argument that directly elected mayors will inevitably serve powerful economic interests at the expense of progressive possibilities is disproved. Contrary to the dominant 'neo-liberal' discourse, these case studies show that place-based power can be mobilised to erode the impact of place-less forces and, at times, make significant steps away from exploitation of people and the planet.

In making these points I am not advocating the virtues of a particular model of urban governance. Rather I am trying to stimulate a more sophisticated debate about ways of advancing the progressive potential of urban – or place-based - governance. For too much of the time the arguments for and against the directly elected mayor form of urban governance have been needlessly polarised. Simplistic claims and counter claims proliferate. This is particularly noticeable in the British public policy discourse, but gut feelings for and against the model run high in other countries as well, for example Australia. In the discussion that follows I seek to open up a more thoughtful conversation about the strengths and weaknesses of mayoral governance. Our starting point is that directly elected mayors can contribute to progressive urban leadership – the case studies demonstrate this. But, and this is equally important, introducing a directly elected mayor form of governance will not, in and of itself, advance the cause of progressive politics. The discussion below is structured around three inter-related themes.

1) The role of mayors in expanding place-based power

Earlier in the paper I explained how various powerful forces shape the context within which place-based leaders operate. Figure 1 provides a simplified picture of the way these forces bear on any locality. The examples of mayoral leadership presented in this chapter show that directly elected mayors – in these three cities at least – have been able to articulate the importance of environmental issues (bottom side of the diagram), listen to community-based pressures (left side of the diagram) and push back against narrow economic interests (right side of the diagram). The directly elected mayors in the three cities presented here have, by exercising proactive place-based leadership, taken advantage of the political space available to them to pursue progressive policies.

The governmental framing (top side of the diagram) has, in all three examples, been relatively supportive to local, democratic decision-making. For example, the Greater London Authority Act 1999 contains powers enabling the authority to establish and operate schemes for imposing charges on road users. Without this power Mayor Livingstone would not have been able to introduce the London congestion charge. The City of Portland and the City of Freiburg operate within federal government systems and, in both cases, the elected local authorities have considerable freedom to act in ways that elected members think fit. The higher levels of government, at state and federal levels, do not exercise detailed control of local policymaking. There is a clear lesson here for central and state governments. It is important for
higher levels of government to trust elected local authorities to get on with the job of local governance.

The examples presented in this paper suggest that the directly elected mayors in each city have exercised sound judgement in the way they have promoted radical measures. They have assessed the political prospects for reform, taken risks by pursuing untried policies and practices and, in a subtle way, they have expanded the place-based power of their cities. It would be misleading to suggest that only cities with directly elected mayors can expand the amount of political space available to local communities. Copenhagen, for example, provides a world-class example of place-based leadership, and the city has pursued socially and environmentally progressive policies for decades. It does not have a directly elected mayor – the approach to urban leadership is more collective. However, the evidence presented in this paper suggests that directly elected mayors can use the political legitimacy granted to them by the process of direct election to advance progressive policies.

2) Connecting the realms of place-based leadership

The directly elected mayors in our three case studies have been effective in working with other leaders in their locality. In Figure 2 I suggested that, in any locality, there are likely to be several overlapping realms of place-based leadership. Effective mayors facilitate collaboration across the realms of place-based leadership. For example, while Mayor Livingstone was pretty much forced to adopt a public strategy of ‘go it alone’ leadership in driving forward the introduction of the congestion charge, it is also the case that he worked very closely indeed with his officers to ensure that the scheme was workable.

The Mayor of Portland, partly because of the distinctive commission form of governance, is required to operate in a collegial way with the four commissioners. The mayor needs votes from commissioners to deliver change. However, the mayor is not rooted in city hall – he, or she, works closely with leaders in all the realms of civic leadership shown in Figure 2. In this context it is important to highlight the care and attention the mayor gives to the neighbourhood associations within the city. As mentioned earlier, there is a very active network of neighbourhood organisations in Portland. The city has an Office of Neighbourhood Involvement (ONI) to support the work of these bodies and to promote the civic life of the city. For example, Mayor Hales spends a lot of time out in the neighbourhoods and his first priority is to create liveable neighbourhoods.

The Mayor of Freiburg also works closely with leaders in all the realms of civic leadership shown in Figure 2. As with Portland, neighbourhood activism is vibrant in Freiburg, and civic leaders ignore grassroots pressures at their peril. In practice, under Mayor Rolph Bohme, Freiburg developed sophisticated arrangements for ensuring that local communities have an important say in the design and management decisions affecting their neighbourhoods. Mayor Bohme was also aware that the officers and professionals appointed by the city have an important role in pushing at the boundaries of good practice. His
partnership with Wulf Daseking, Director of Planning and Building, was particularly effective. Directly elected mayors in Freiburg, as in Portland, have also worked closely with place-based business interests to enhance the economic performance of their city. Freiburg is experiencing rapid economic growth, and it is significant that the local university and the city meet very regularly to discuss common issues.

3) Bringing progressive values back into city politics

Benjamin Barber, in his largely favourable account of mayoral leadership in a variety of countries, argues that successful mayors exhibit ‘a preference for pragmatism’ (Barber 2013 p90). In his view a virtue of mayoral leadership is that it can focus on getting things done. Barber notes that, in a world that seems to be growing increasingly cynical about politics, mayors remain astonishingly popular, and this is, he believes, because they focus, not on ideology, but on problem solving. A number of other scholars have also noted this trend towards pragmatism in the public policy discourse. However, they are troubled by it. They note that shifting the focus of political attention away from ‘big picture’ debates about the kind of society we want, towards ‘what works’ runs the risk of removing important political choices from the public discourse. There is now a substantial body of literature on this process of ‘de-politicisation’, and a variety of terms have emerged in an effort to characterise aspects of this shift – for example, terms like ‘post-political’, ‘post-democratic’ and ‘post-politics’ all have their adherents (Crouch 2004; Mouffe 2005).

What are the implications of this discourse for city politics? A central point made by many critics of ‘neo-liberalism’ is that it subordinates the political to the economic. Despite the unprecedented breakdown of the so-called ‘free market’ system in 2008/09 we are told that there is still no alternative:

‘As banks are bailed out with public money and the welfare state is dismantled in the name of austerity, electorates are told that “We’re all in this together”, and are called upon to unite in support of the expert managers of the global economy.’ (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014 p8)

A fundamental flaw in ‘neo-liberal’ thinking is that moral judgement is edged out of the picture. State and business actors work to construct a political ‘mainstream’ – one that emasculates fundamental value conflicts. In my view it is misguided to suggest that we have entered a ‘post-political’ era. Political dividing lines may well be in a process of being redrawn, but this does not mean that fundamental political conflicts about who gains and who loses in the modern city have disappeared. A more accurate phrase to describe current developments would be to suggest that, in many public policy settings, and in urban governance in particular, we are at risk of experiencing a managerialisation of politics. Political clashes are hidden from view if public attention is focussed on ‘what works’ – on how to manage change - and such an approach is bound to foster unadventurous thinking and cautious behaviour.
The examples of mayoral leadership presented in this paper challenge the view that urban political leadership is becoming a ‘post-political’ arena, one in which ideology has been replaced by a focus on the practicalities of getting things done. By standing up for specific social and environmental values and, to some extent, taking risks, these directly elected mayors have raised the bar for civic leadership. For example, many transport and technical experts regarded Mayor Ken Livingstone’s proposal to introduce a congestion charge in London as impractical – at best, a very risky idea. The fact that, over a decade after the scheme was introduced in 2003, very few other cities in the world have been able to introduce a congestion charge scheme covering a large area, despite it’s manifest benefits, suggests that such a policy continues to be regarded as politically impractical in most cities. Mayor Livingstone was, then, not pragmatic – he made a political judgement, took a bold step and it came off. Mayoral leaders in Freiburg and Portland have also demonstrated a high level of willingness to try out new kinds of progressive policies and practices.

The successful directly elected mayors discussed in this paper are all, to be sure, competent city leaders - competent in the sense of being able to plan and manage major public services and work in a collaborative way with other civic leaders. They know how to ‘to do things that work’. But the main reason why they have acquired international recognition for their achievements is not because they were pragmatic and they were good at ‘getting things done’. These mayors have gone beyond pragmatism and made significant improvements to the quality of life in their cities by exercising bold, forward looking leadership.

References


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In this paper, when I refer to mayoral governance I am referring to arrangements in which the mayor, that is, the executive leader of the city, is directly elected by the citizens. There are, of course, many examples of mayoral governance around the world in which the mayor (or leader) is indirectly elected by, for example, the elected councillors.

Portland’s commission form of government is almost certainly unique. In the US context it is unusual for a sizable city to have not just a directly elected mayor, but also four directly elected commissioners and a directly elected auditor.

Sir Steve Bullock, Mayor of the London Borough of Lewisham, and Sir Peter Soulsby, Mayor of Leicester, are both directly elected mayors who previously served as council leader in their local authority.

Personal communication with the author 1 July 2015

Personal communication with the author 1 July 2015

The three examples are discussed at greater length in Hambleton (2015)

This local activism was to lead, with inputs from many others, to the creation of a new political party – The Green Party.