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# Leadership, urban structure and place: evidence from Bristol and Dorset

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**ABSTRACT**

Local leadership has become of increasing interest in the context of a renewed focus on local government and local development. In parallel, new interpretations of thinking about leadership drawing on Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Foucault suggest that leadership needs to engage with a wider range of participants. In the modern context, one way of understanding this engagement has been termed 'facilitative leadership'. Using this literature, we analyse leadership in two contrasting 'places' (urban and rural) and we discuss how prevailing conditions facilitate, or hinder, the emergence of 'facilitative leadership' in relation to urban structure, economic structure, institutional capacity, and identity. The wider implications for leadership and local development are then briefly discussed.

## Introduction

Leadership, in the sense of 'legitimate (political) leadership' in Western liberal democracies, has long been a focus of research in national and international politics (cf. (Masciulli, Molchanov, and Knight 2006) (Born and Megone 2019); and increasingly in relation to management (Grint 2007). Much of this has been driven by Max Weber's work (cf. Beetham 1989; Breuilly 2011). Moreover, Denhardt and Denhardt (2011) note that traditional conceptions of leadership are deeply ingrained in modern society because the practice of leadership is deeply rooted in military domination. The study of leadership has grown out of political leadership and corporate management, and both are tied to superordinate (the 'sovereign') notions of power and authority.

More recently research has begun to consider the implications of writers such as Aristotle (Born and Megone 2019) and Machiavelli (Cosans and Reina 2018) for the study of leadership, providing alternative ways of thinking about leadership. Despite this blossoming of 'new ways of thinking' the focus on leadership has tended to be at the international/national political level or on top-level management. However, the issue of 'local leadership' has attracted attention particularly since the emergence of an increased interest in forms of inclusive local development from the later 2000s (see Beer and Clower 2014) and a 'new localism' focussed on local development.

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The purpose of this paper is to examine alternative understandings of facilitative leadership, what constitutes it and how it can operate. Following on from this, our 'research question' in this exploratory article is twofold: 1) what traits might constitute facilitative leadership and 2) how does facilitative leadership at local level operate in a structurally constrained context?

This article addresses leadership in relation to two 'places' with very different urban structures and examines the forms of leadership that have developed in the City of Bristol and the former local authority district of West Dorset in the UK. By selecting places with different urban structures we consider the influence this has on leadership but also the different forms of leadership that developed related to the particular 'character' of a place within the context of local development and the wider structural and institutional constraints on local government. The use of an urban and rural area provides contrasting cases which allows us to explore how the emergence of any form of leadership is constrained by not only wider structural forces but also local factors such as settlement structure (degree of urbanisation) and identity.

As part of this we also take into account the forms of territorial capital (see Servillo, Atkinson, and Russo 2012) a place has and how this and the factors mentioned above structure what is possible in terms of local development and leadership. In addition, we use the literature considered to draw some conclusions regarding what we term 'facilitative leadership' and the (local) conditions that may be conducive to the emergence of such a leadership form.

Place is also related to the issue of identity (Paasi 2003) and the extent to which people identify with the place they live in. We suggest this will vary between different places depending on urban structure and location. Moreover, there are very different ways of defining what a 'place' or 'town' is. Servillo, Atkinson, and Hamdouch (2017) identify three basic ways of approaching this: morphological, functional, and administrative. None of these is perfect, all have advantages and disadvantages; in essence it requires a 'mixed' approach with differential weighting applied to each factor. We follow the compromise to place they provide (ibid, 9) that we should focus on:

> … to what extent [they] are embedded in wider regional macro dynamics … have their own specific socio-economic, cultural and administrative capacities and thus have a certain degree of territorial autonomy to 'steer their own path'…

However, this is complicated by the notion of identity which implies that a 'place' (e.g. a rural village) may lack the capacity to 'steer their own path' but nevertheless be identified as a 'place' by those who live there. Clearly there is no ideal solution to this conundrum, and it is necessary to bear this in mind. It is in these complex contexts that leadership takes on a particularly important role in being able to achieve/build a cohesive and inclusive sense of place and identity allied to local development.

We develop further the notion of 'facilitative leadership' as a way of representing and understanding the style of leadership that arguably is able to drive forward an inclusive approach to local development. This requires us to consider both 'formal' and 'informal' leadership (e.g. local social entrepreneurs) and the temporal dimension (i.e. the ways in which leadership may change over time as the situation changes). We also need to take into account the territorial dimension as local development requires the consideration of spaces that transcend traditional administrative boundaries.

In the UK these developments are happening in a context in which places are increasingly not treated equally. In particular, there has been an emphasis on 'city regions' as the main drivers of economic growth in an increasingly knowledge-driven, global economy, such as the Northern Powerhouse, Midlands Engine, and Western Gateway, which Beel, Jones, and Rees Jones (2021, xi) define as the: 'larger constellation of cities and towns that constitute a functional economy within build up areas'. To attract government attention and resources, places need to 'represent' themselves in such a way that they can claim to be part of such a constellation. Those that cannot are in danger of being neglected if not ignored; Bristol can make a 'legitimate claim' to be part of a city region economic powerhouse whereas West Dorset cannot. In this context the role of leadership may be more crucial than ever for places that are not priorities of the 'levelling up' approach.[1]

The article is structured in the following way: we first discuss the notion of leadership and the various forms it takes, drawing out implications for local leadership. After setting out our research methods we consider our two case studies describing their urban structure and local territorial capital and discussing how, if at all, they have addressed local development. Here we focus on Bristol's Inclusive Growth strategy (BCC 2019c) as encapsulated in the One City Plan (BCC 2019a, 2020, 2021); in the West Dorset case we examine the roles of West Dorset Council and the Dorset Local Enterprise Partnership (DLEP). Finally, we draw out implications for the various forms of local leadership that have emerged in our case study areas and seek to identify more general conclusions regarding leadership and local development.

## Leadership: new and old approaches – an overview

There has been considerable analysis of leadership in local government. At the comparative, international level, this has taken in the impact of different leadership forms on various aspects of governing localities (Mouritzen and Svara 2002), coverage of how political leaders in different countries carry out their role and view various aspects of local democracy (Bäck, Heinelt, and Magnier 2006) and how leadership might combine with community involvement to improve urban governance (Haus and Heinelt 2005). The trend towards stronger, more individualised leadership positions in different countries has also been noted (Borraz and John 2004).

Let us be clear at the outset we are not seeking to suggest other approaches/ disciplines have not contributed to the study of local leadership. However, much of this focuses on internal relations within local authorities. Thus, much of the main focus remains on internal relationships within local government. For instance, Svara (2003, see also Svara 2006), who has undoubtedly made a major contribution to 'facilitative leadership', largely focuses on the relationship between the City Mayor and the Chief Executive in the US where the City Mayor model is widespread compared to the UK. Furthermore, much of this literature seeks to construct models/ideal types which is not our intention here; we wish to explore and understand what constitutes facilitative leadership and how it might be identified.

Bassu and Bertels (2014) come closest to the approach to facilitative leadership we take, albeit drawing on different sources and using a different conceptual language. They argue:

> Comparative analysis of both participatory planning processes confirmed and developed four key insights on facilitative leadership: facilitative leadership proved to be: (1) important for making things happen; (2) best understood as situated practices; (3) an emergent property of the practices and interactions of a number of local actors and (4) a democratic capacity for dealing with the continuous challenges of participatory processes, beyond the outcomes of individual projects. (ibid: 2257–2258)

In addition, they also recognise facilitative leadership is a response to internal pressures within the local authority and external demands for greater participation – it is an 'emergent property' linked to what they describe as '…practices and interactions of various key individuals, who had not deliberately planned to act as facilitative leaders' (ibid, 2269). They also recognise the neglect of this type of leadership albeit for somewhat different reasons than those we outline below. However, their research is limited to two local authorities, one, Bologna, somewhat smaller than Bristol and not part of a much larger metropolitan region, and a medium size town, Prato. There is not the urban–rural contrast nor the focus on urban settlement structure and local identity and the role this can play in influencing the emergence of any form of leadership, let alone facilitative leadership. Moreover, they have a somewhat different focus to ours – the renewal of local democracy in Italy whereas we are concerned with leadership and local development.

We would argue that leadership has largely been understood in a top-down manner – often focussing on charismatic leaders who bring about transformation whether in terms of political or organisational change. Weber's work on charisma, legitimacy, and authority has been influential in this discussion even though he stressed the inherently unstable nature of such leadership. This form is in stark contrast to that based on rational action and the attendant notion of bureaucracy which Weber considered to be a necessary element of modern (Western) societies, industrial capitalism, the modern state, and indeed any modern organisation. In modern liberal democracies there is an 'inherent distrust' of charismatic leadership not least shaped by the experiences of Germany between 1933 and 1945 and by the recent impact of Donald Trump.

There are, however, other conceptions of leadership with deeper historical roots which have recently been 'rediscovered', in particular Aristotle and Machiavelli. It is worth a brief detour to consider their influence. Several articles dealing with leadership in politics, management, and associated 'business ethics' have appeared over the last two decades drawing on Aristotle. Much of this literature emphasises that leadership is a social process about ethics, wisdom, and virtue (or 'good character') (cf. Born and Megone 2019; Grint 2007; Masciulli, Molchanov, and Knight 2006).

Grint (2007) draws out the *general* implications of Aristotle's work:

> Leadership is not just a technical problem requiring greater skills – what Aristotle referred to as *techné* … Nor is it just a problem of understanding, requiring greater knowledge, what Aristotle called *episteme* … In addition, it may also require greater wisdom – Aristotle's *phronesis* – through which leaders develop the wisdom to see what the good might be in the particular situation and then enact the processes that generate the good. (Grint 2007, 242; see also Flyvbjerg 2001, Ch.5)

He also argues that what is termed 'apperception' is crucial to 'good leadership', meaning:

> ... the ability to relate new experiences to previous experiences, in other words to recognize patterns in situations that facilitate understanding and resolution. By definition, this is something that we can only acquire through experience but experience alone is insufficient to ensure apperception because some level of reflective learning needs to have occurred if patterns are to be understood.

What can be derived from Aristotle's work is a set of principles by which leadership, in a general sense, *could* be judged.

The other rediscovery is Machiavelli. For a long time his work was confined to the 'dark side' of politics and leadership with the term Machiavellian being one of abuse, signifying someone not to be trusted as they rely on cunning and guile. This reassessment of his work on leadership and sovereignty is partly down to Foucault's re-reading of his work, particularly *The Prince* (see Clegg 1989).

Cosans and Reina (2018) writing largely in relation to business leaders seek to provide a 'more holistic' and contextual understanding of Machiavelli. The authors argue that Machiavelli provides valuable lessons/guidance/insight on issues such as '...humility, information sharing, and power dynamics' (ibid, 295) which are equally applicable to political leaders. They also point out that his work provides lessons on: 'Political skill, or the ability to understand others at work and use this understanding to influence others in order to achieve organizational or personal goals' (ibid, 294). Cunha, Clegg, and Regio note he was not concerned with '...how government should work ... but how it actually works' (Cunha, Clegg, and Regio 2013, 452). Thus his concern was not with normative issues but with what Flyvbjerg (2001) refers to as the *Realrationalität* of governing and power in a particular context. Machiavelli is concerned with the nature of power dynamics and the capacity to 'read a situation' and respond flexibly as circumstances dictate. Thus the emphasis is on power as the ability/capacity of leaders to develop and deploy strategies and tactics to realise objectives.

The above points to the significance of several general factors. Charismatic leadership is deeply problematic and can cause serious problems even in established liberal-democratic regimes. Notions such as ethics, wisdom, virtue, learning, information sharing, and humility all need to be taken into account when assessing what makes a 'good leader'. However, this should not lead to an exclusively normative notion of 'good leadership'. There is also a requirement to take into account *Realrationalität* – how governing and the exercise of power actually works. Moreover, the above, Weber apart, have little to say about legitimacy. Finally it is important to view leadership as a social process.

Whilst this work is instructive, what these writers have in common is that they all view leadership in superordinate terms. There is no sense of 'leadership from below', of co-decision making or co-production. These are issues that have become increasingly important with the turn, particularly at local level, to inclusive government, citizen participation, and the need to transcend narrow party politics without falling into the trap of the charismatic leader.

Some authors have turned to Foucault's work to study leadership as this moves us away from a sole focus on the superordinate leader or 'sovereign'. Here leaders become 'subjects' constrained by the field of forces in which they operate – in other words context dependent. For instance, Ladkin and Probert (2021, 2) use his notion of power

as '...a structure of actions ... bearing on the actions of those who are free'. This means the actions of leaders are dependent upon (constrained by) wider structures, the (re) actions of others and their ability to operate through social networks to 'convince' others to comply with and/or follow their instructions. The implications are they operate within a 'relational field' and must navigate this field if they are to achieve their objectives. Thus, the exercise of 'power' is always contingent, dependent on the situation and the capacity of a leader to gain compliance.

One final point is that:

> Foucault's thinking reminds leaders to imagine power as a force to be harnessed rather than a tool to be possessed. In particular, for Foucault, language is a critical way in which power is exercised, and thus leaders are encouraged to strategically position themselves through language and stories (ibid, p.10).

This point highlights the importance of developing and deploying narratives that project a particular version of reality, seeking to organise it in a certain manner whilst simultaneously attempting to mask or deny contradictions within that reality and limit our perception of such contradictions.

The above literature does not provide a 'model' or 'blueprint' for what we have termed 'facilitative leadership' (or any other form of leadership). What it provides, however, are 'ways of seeing' vis-à-vis leadership and what it entails. Following Aristotle, it is possible to identify criteria that could be used to judge 'facilitative leadership' – what is required to be a 'good leader'. Whereas Machiavelli is more concerned with power and how it is exercised and the ability of leaders to analyse and act on the existing situation and respond by deploying appropriate strategies and tactics to realise objectives – what Flyvbjerg (2001) terms *Realrationalität*.

In a rather similar manner, work derived from Foucault highlights that leaders operate within and are constrained by a 'relational field' and that power is not something they 'possess'. It requires that they obtain the 'consent' of those involved. They also need to deploy appropriate language and narratives to 'persuade' others and gain this 'consent'. The 'flip side' of the exercise of power is resistance and the need on the part of leaders to minimise resistance by being inclusive.

All of the above emphasises the contingent nature of whatever form of leadership emerges at the local level. Furthermore, it points to the need for leaders to recognise, navigate, and understand the local 'relational field' if they are to achieve their objectives. What we can say in general terms is that 'facilitative leadership' requires leaders who are prepared to engage with a wide range of stakeholders over a sustained period. Then on this basis establish a long-term consensus vis-à-vis their objectives and strategy to achieve them. This also necessitates that the strategy is the outcome of a process of co-production to ensure 'buy in' – it cannot be imposed from above. Finally, in governance terms some form of supporting 'urban regime' will need to be put in place that will ensure support for the strategy and involve stakeholders in its implementation. This will embed it and allow it to transcend electoral cycles.

## Research methods

This article's research is based on an EU Horizon 2020 Project (see acknowledgements). We utilised a variety of relevant data sources: 1) national data/statistics; 2) national policy documents; 3) local statistics; 4) local policy documents; 5) interviews (a minimum of 20 per case study) with key actors from the public, private, and community/voluntary sectors. We followed wider project guidelines and initially focussed on key strategic policy and associated documents for each case study area.

We examined what territorial problems, relevant to the location and wider national discursive frame, were identified, how they were defined, and what 'solutions' and associated policies (if any) were articulated in the documents. We supplemented this analysis by drawing on the interviews from each case study to provide additional evidence of how the organisations producing the document(s) and the approaches they articulated were perceived by key actors. This entailed identifying:

- forms of territorial capital (in terms of strengths and weaknesses),
- relevant policy audiences,
- how the documents were produced,
- who produced them,
- who defined the dominant policy narrative?

Initial interviewees were identified from the documentary research, and at the end of each interview the interviewee was asked to suggest additional interviewees (snowballing). Interviews were semi-structured based on a topic list for each sector but allowing for wider reflection and for the interviewee to raise topics/issues they considered relevant. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for more in-depth discussion of issues the interviewee had most knowledge on. Then through a process of triangulation we compared the results obtained from different data sources and were able to draw more reliable conclusions. This also provided the basis for supplementary interviews as necessary.

Finally, most interviewees did, to varying degrees, discuss and provide their views on key issues relevant to local development, the ability/capacity of the leading organisation to understand key problems and policy issues relevant to the areas, develop a strategic approach to the problems, engage in partnership working (including territorial governance), work collaboratively, and engage with various audiences. The interviews allowed us to reflect on the extent to which key actors from different sectors thought the strategies outlined in key documents were appropriate to addressing local development, the area's problems; how, if at all, they had been implemented and whether or not different sectors (public, private, and community/voluntary) had been involved in the policy process and implementation. In addition, there was reflection, to varying extents, on the nature of leadership in the case study areas.

In terms of the type of case approach adopted we follow Flyvbjerg (2021, ch. 6) as he provides a subtle and nuanced identification of different types of case study. We consider our cases to be examples of what he describes as 'Information-orientated selection' and within that his subdivision described as 'Maximum variation cases'. In

our case, an Urban–Rural contrast. Such contrasting cases are ideal for the exploratory approach we have adopted.

## Comparing Bristol and West Dorset

### Contextual introduction

[2]First, we need to provide some background as the case studies have very different urban structures, economic structures, degrees of functional integration and relationships to the wider region. The issue of identity is also significant particularly in West Dorset.

Bristol is an urban local authority, economically a successful city, illustrated by high concentrations of employment in business and financial services, the creative industries, health, and education. It is 'rich' in terms of economic, social, and cultural capital, although somewhat deficient in institutional capital. However, it is one of the most polarised cities in regional England with large areas of disadvantaged neighbourhoods: 16% of the population live in areas classified in the 10% most disadvantaged in England (BCC 2019b). The city has a population of 472,400 (Census 2021). The Bristol City Region, the morphologically, economically, and functionally integrated area, has a population of 1.2 m. The city is well-connected to the rest of the country by road and rail and has an international airport.

Significant changes in local governance have been implemented, most notably to have an elected mayor (City Mayor) in Bristol (although this will be abolished in 2024) and a Combined Authority (Metro Mayor) (Sweeting 2017). Arguably a place-based approach is implicit within these governance changes (BCC 2019a; Hambleton 2020).

The City Mayor appears to have improved coordination within the city council and with other stakeholders in the public, private, and voluntary/community sectors. An innovation introduced by the City Mayor was the setting up a City Office charged with developing the One City Plan (BCC 2019c, 2020, 2021) and Inclusive Growth Strategy (BCC 2019a) underlying the Plan (Hambleton 2015a, 2015b; Hambleton, Sweeting, and Oliver 2021). The aim is to base growth on a high productivity economy in which all citizens are able to enjoy the benefits – i.e. inclusive and sustainable growth. The plan brings together different actors and interest groups seeking to mobilise their collective power to enhance the impacts on the city's aims and address underlying problems. Its aim is to do this by supporting partners, organisations, and citizens to help solve key challenges such as driving economic growth for everyone.

An important caveat is that the city region stretches beyond the City of Bristol and includes three local authority areas outside of the council area. This reflects the historical, administrative, and territorially defined nature of local government in England. The city region is a 'functional space', arguably a discursive construct in itself, and local government does not generally coincide with such spaces. Currently there is no policy document or strategy for the wider metropolitan region as a whole that is similar to the One City Plan.

West Dorset[3] has an affluent population, but there are specific places (e.g. Portland) with areas of concentrated disadvantage and embedded inequalities. In addition, there

are isolated pockets of rural poverty, as evidenced by the growth of food banks in many affluent rural villages, which tend to be 'hidden' because of their small size that even super output data cannot detect.

Apart from the urban areas of Weymouth and Portland, West Dorset is made up of small towns, the largest of which is Dorchester with a population of 21,366 (Census 2021), the next largest town is Bridport (population 13,543, Census 2021), and the remaining towns have populations under 10,000. The area is overwhelmingly made up of villages making it a 'classic' English rural area which brings with it attendant issues of rural isolation, access to services/facilities and poor connectivity both internally and externally. West Dorset has a low population density characteristic of many English rural areas. The highest proportion of residents in the district (31.6%) is classified as residents of isolated rural communities (Statistics 2018). In 2018 West Dorset had a population of 102,754, while Weymouth and Portland had a population of 66,844 (Census 2021).

It has concentrations of employment in agriculture, tourism, and public administration albeit the number of people employed in agriculture is relatively small. Its greatest strength in terms of territorial capital is environmental capital (beautiful landscape and the Jurassic Coast) and to a lesser extent localised social capital. Wage levels are lower than the national average, and there is a reported shortage of labour with relevant skills or training. There is also a significant affordability gap between wage levels and house prices, with the cost of the average home being 14 times the average salary, as well as a wider housing problem (i.e. lack of housing and affordability).

In terms of economic development, DLEP is the key player. It aims to invest in different industrial sectors across the county, boost business, create new and more highly skilled jobs, and ensure the county's infrastructure is in a strong position to promote growth. However, its approach and interviews indicated it lacked an appreciation of the diversity of Dorset, there was a strong focus on 'territorial homogeneity' and no clear approach to local development in rural areas, thus failing to address the diversity of Dorset. This is accentuated by the overwhelming emphasis on the urban agglomeration of Bournemouth-Poole-Christchurch (what DLEP refers to as the 'city by the sea') as the 'key driver' of the Dorset economy, and the ambition to convert Dorset into a single city region by 2033. It is not part of West Dorset being located in the South-East corner of the county. Furthermore, there was no reference to the notion of inclusive growth and of social inclusion/cohesion, and the community and voluntary sectors were most notable in terms of their absence from its approach. This all indicates a deficiency in institutional capital.

### Bristol case study findings and discussion: leadership and governance

The City Mayor, Marvin Rees (elected in 2016 and 2021) was the driving force behind the One City Plan and the associated Inclusive Growth Strategy (see Atkinson and Tallon 2023 for an in-depth analysis). The approach was based on Rees' interest in inclusive growth, civic leadership, and the development of new ways of including 'core voices' in urban governance (Sweeting, Hambleton, and Oliver 2020).

In terms of this recent innovation, a BCC Economic Development Officer stated:

> Part of the problem of not getting things done was until we had a single accountable individual, at the head of the tree, it was difficult to identify who was running the place and a lot of the time, the concentration was on keeping running the place rather than running the place well….then there are a range of very active community voices around the city and part of the trick of bringing the city together has been enabling them to come in and have direct access to the people who make the decisions and to involve them in decision making.

Leadership and governance structures in Bristol can be characterised as two types of linked 'coalitions'. First, the construction of a discourse coalition of 'urban managers' (Hajer 1993). Such coalitions are made up of '…a group of actors [including organisations] who share a social construct…' (Hajer 1993, 45) about the world, or some part of it, and how it functions. They will tell similar stories that seek to account for why things 'are as they are' in the city and what needs to be done to 'treat' them. Second, a coalition of multiple stakeholders that collectively 'owns' the One City Plan, this aims to transcend electoral cycles by embracing a wide range of interests and operates in the 'public interest'. The evidence from our interviews suggests that a wide range of public, private, and voluntary sector actors directly contributed to the creation of the Plan. The One City Plan is claimed to be a 'co-production' based on extensive consultations over an 18-month period with organisations from the private and third sectors (Hambleton 2019, 2020). Further, the document may be seen as attempting to engage with 'multiple audiences' and gain their consent for the Plan and ensure its longevity beyond electoral cycles: 'There has been a wider "buy-in" that will allow it to survive a change in leadership' (advisor to the City Mayor).

What the above suggests, in the light of the literature review, is that the City Mayor has, in an Aristotelian sense, sought to be a 'good leader' but that he is also cognisant of the fact that he operates in a Foucauldian 'relational field' and needs to gain the 'consent' of a wide range of stakeholders vis-à-vis the Plan. Taken together this represents an attempt to develop a form of 'facilitative leadership' rooted in the 'place'. The problem is, as with any form of leadership, how others view it.

Moreover, those in the City Office have sought to deploy a corresponding narrative and related stories that support the Plan. This should minimise resistance and hopefully assist in the development of a form of 'urban regime'. Collectively the intent is to establish the Plan as something that can transcend electoral cycles and hopefully the abolition of the City Major. This last point may reflect a recognition of the *Realrationalität* of politics in the sense that party politics is no respecter of 'good intentions' and that party 'self-interest' and alternative ways of 'doing things' exist. This is demonstrated by the Bristol opposition parties' argument that the position of City Mayor concentrates too much power in one person and undermines accountability. Clearly the oppositional elements in the city did not regard this particularly institutional form of leadership as 'facilitative leadership'.

### Leadership, place, and Bristol's One City Plan

The One City Approach claims it has established a network of 'new' governance mechanisms that bring 'order to the chaos' it argues previously characterised the governance of the city. A key objective of the City Office is to tackle long-term entrenched spatial inequalities in the city:

You had this change in leadership in Bristol … with Lib Dem, Labour, different leaders having a go at leading … I think they were trying to tackle inequality … but perhaps didn't do that much, and then in 2016 we get Mayor Rees elected … on making the city a fairer place and he has tried to push the inequality agenda quite strongly. (advisor to the City Mayor)

It is important to emphasise that the approach and strategy are 'in the making'. Nevertheless, there are many potentially contradictory elements within it. For instance, how will the emphasis on productivity driven growth in high value-added economic sectors be reconciled with the deeply embedded deficits in education and training in the socially and spatially marginalised parts of the city that currently excludes people living there benefiting from productivity driven growth?

The One City Approach has been supported by the institutional capital developed in Bristol during the 5 years preceding the publication of the Plan, which saw a much more strategic approach developing in terms of networking, partnership, and collaboration across sectors and between groups in the city. It also represents a new way of governing the city which can be seen as a form of inclusive leadership that diverges from a traditional top-down directive form of leadership. The approach to leadership of local socio-economic and spatial development is collectively orientated, open to co-decision making, and enhanced democratic engagement. Arguably this is a recognition of the need to operate in a 'relational field' to exercise power and influence which can be described as 'facilitative leadership' (Hambleton 2019).

While making occasional reference to national policy domains (e.g. vocational and educational training, labour market policy, and child care) that would need to be oriented towards the local strategy in order to support its objectives, the Plan never really engages with them. The problem is that these are policy domains over which the local authority has no direct control; it may be able to influence their operation at the local level but this will be reliant upon getting delivery bodies or agencies on board potentially as partners, and the centrally determined metrics or targets that structure the action of these bodies or agencies coinciding and aligning with Bristol's strategy.

The issue of identity within the city was rarely raised by interviewees. There is certainly a thriving and lively cultural and community/voluntary sector which indicates there is a 'sense of identity' within the city as a place. However, the complexity of this issue was highlighted by one council member: 'Identity politics are strong in the city but with both positive and negative connotations varying from cultural and creative identities to stigmatised identities related to poverty, deprivation and crime'. Similarly, an Economic Strategy Manager argued: 'There is a strong identity between people and place in different areas of the city, however, this identity politics has also led to rivalry in the city'.

The issue of identity, or more correctly different identities within the city, is one that was never really addressed head on. The very title 'One City', along with associated narratives and stories, clearly seeks to suggest that 'everyone is in it together', but this sits uneasily with the deeply embedded spatial and social inequalities within the city. Those living within these spaces and experiencing deprivation and exclusion clearly had problems identifying with the Plan, as can be seen by the referendum vote to abolish the position of City Mayor so closely associated with the Plan.

## West Dorset case study findings and discussion: leadership and governance

In West Dorset it is important to be aware that there are several structural factors that shape the context. First, the County of Dorset is economically and demographically dominated by the 'city by the sea' in the South East of the county. Second, the settlement structure of West Dorset is dominated by small towns and villages with an adjacent 'urban' area of Weymouth and Portland in the South West. Third, this fragmented place structure means that identity is organised around individual places and is inward looking. As the head of one community organisation operating across Dorset noted: 'if … I had to really characterise Dorset, you've got … independent towns with a great sense of self-identity, but not necessarily pulling in the same direction'. Fourth, there is a complex economic geography that further fragments the area, a point emphasised by a West Dorset Council economic regeneration officer:

> … as you go around the edges of Dorset the businesses look different ways. You go to Bridport and Lyme Regis they look west towards Exeter and Axminster, if you go north to Sherborne they're gonna be looking towards Yeovil and Bristol and if you go further around to Shaftesbury they're gonna be looking … [towards] Wiltshire. And, therefore, those natural linkages those businesses have with suppliers, consumers, customers and employees, aren't within the natural boundary of Dorset …

Together these factors have created conditions that make it problematic for forms of leadership orientated to the wider place of 'West Dorset'.

One of the key problems West Dorset faced in terms of the emergence of any form of leadership was that the governance structures were fragmented and coordination and collaboration within local government and with other stakeholders was often limited and intermittent.[4] As an economic regeneration officer pointed out while they try to coordinate with planning, and agree this is necessary, it is not systematic, more ad hoc. In part, this reflects the different operational procedures structuring their work but also the different timescales they work to; businesses want quick responses to requests for development sites while planning tends to work on a longer timescale.

A multitude of community organisations existed in the area but tended to be based on towns, villages, and hamlets with an overwhelming focus on the issues/problems of place. Thus there were real problems of developing a 'collective approach' as pointed out by the head of a community organisation working across Dorset: '…don't assume that each town is very similar. They're not. They're very, very different, and they're quite unique in their own ways'. This means the community sector finds it difficult to agree on common issues/problems, develop collective responses to them that transcend particular localities, and collectively represent their interests to local government.

Portland is an isolated town with a strong sense of its spatial 'separateness' from the mainland that has developed its own sense of identity. If anything this has been intensified by severe economic decline due to the closure of defence-related establishments. Nevertheless, this was one of the few places where an example of what could be termed 'facilitative leadership' was found. The town has a more working-class community than the rest of West Dorset with serious problems of deprivation, low levels of income, and limited life-chances in terms of social mobility. An individual best described as a 'community organiser', albeit one with no official status, recognised that multiple community organisations

existed and focussed on a range of different and discrete issues but worked in isolation. By creating a community partnership, he pointed out '…what happened, from 2011 onwards, we used the localism neighbourhood planning agenda to … give some legal basis to what we were trying to do'. Building on this, the community developed a detailed Neighbourhood Plan that included both a community plan and an economic plan which allowed them to engage with and involve the largest employer in the town – Portland Port.

As a member of the Port management team said regarding the Plan:

> I've engaged on that … he [the community organiser] was responsible really for the … economic plan as well and always keen to get us involved and you know I saw the benefit of that and it sort of led to me being chairman of that group when they were sort of setting, designing of those plans.

The Neighbourhood Plan was used as a basis to engage with the local authority, as the community organiser pointed out: '…it's a question of influencing those who can then take that forward … that's where we're at and I've used the neighbourhood plan as a frame of influence…'. This can be seen as a recognition of the need to operate in a 'relational field' in order to exercise power and influence, albeit circumscribed by place. Moreover, it implies a recognition of the *Realrationalität* of what an 'isolated community', regardless of how united it was/is, could achieve on its own within this wider 'relational field'. At best it could only aspire to influence this wider field through the use of existing instruments (the Neighbourhood Plan).

While this provides an example of what we have termed 'facilitative leadership' it remained confined to Portland and did not translate into a wider sense of leadership not even in relation to the adjacent town of Weymouth which was considered to be a 'different place'.

One organisation that might have been expected to provide some form of leadership that transcended local places was the business-led DLEP, the main strategic organisation in Dorset which bids to central government for funds to support development. However, it never sought to address issues of collective action or territorial governance. The community and voluntary sectors were most notable in terms of their absence from its mode of operation – in a sense they were excluded. Nor was there much evidence of an appreciation of the problems faced by the rural areas that characterise West Dorset, a point emphasised by several interviewees.

A DLEP senior officer pointed out the difficulty of achieving a genuine consensus across Dorset about how to address the area's problems, housing being the classic issue. This person argued everyone agrees that there is a shortage of housing, particularly affordable housing to buy and rent:

> I think we all know that, one of the solutions is to significantly increase the supply of housing, and that's difficult in a place like Dorset because politically there's no will for it. The councillors are elected on the back of keeping Dorset how it is.

Whilst DLEP works at the strategic level, there are relatively few examples of working at lower levels. Generally there was a view that West Dorset, and Dorset more generally, lacked any form of leadership that was able to address the different sectors and forge

a common sense of identity, or develop a direction for the development of the area through the creation of a shared vision.

The structural and institutional conditions described above make it very difficult for any form of 'facilitative leadership' to emerge other than in very specific places with a strong sense of identity engendered by 'separateness' and difference. These factors make it extremely difficult for such a location-specific form of 'facilitative leadership' to transcend its place of origin.

## Discussion and conclusion: place and leadership

Before comparing leadership in our two places, we provide a summary of our key findings in each.

Overall, in Bristol, local leadership appears to be significant in terms of seeking to address deeply entrenched social and economic inequalities in the city, as well as delivering public services. While leadership can take a variety of forms, the experience of Bristol implies traditional top-down bureaucratic and directive forms of leadership do not support more innovative approaches to social and economic issues linked to the governance of place. The presence of aspects of 'facilitative leadership' is important, Bristol's One City Plan builds on a different type of institutional leadership characterised by inclusion, facilitation, innovation, and co-creation of new possibilities. Moreover, the City Mayor appears to have recognised that he is operating within a 'relational field' and needs to engage with a wide range of stakeholders (i.e. be inclusive) to create a sense of 'ownership' and longevity of the Plan. This has also involved deploying corresponding narratives and stories to try and create an associated sense of 'One City'. The extent to which this has been successful is questionable and demonstrated by the fact that the position will be abolished in 2024 with a return to decision-making by council committees. The key argument is that placing power in the hands of one person weakens democracy and accountability and diminishes the role of councillors.

The evidence from West Dorset suggests that there were local examples of place-based elements of 'facilitative leadership' (Portland). However, there was little to indicate the presence of any form of leadership, particularly political leadership, able to transcend highly localised interests and identities. Several interviewees confirmed this and pointed out that any forms of leadership that emerged were localised and came from individuals (social entrepreneurs). These problems were compounded by weak governance, particularly territorial governance which are indicative of deficiencies in institutional capital.

DLEP might have been expected to provide some form of leadership in terms of development of territorial governance, but it was regarded by interviewees as lacking the capacity, and political will, to do so. Moreover, it largely focused on the east of the county, particularly the urban agglomeration of Bournemouth-Poole-Christchurch, where it was able to achieve key output targets. This may account in part for its inability to take a strategic lead in stimulating processes that could facilitate the development of territorial governance.

The situation in West Dorset and lack of political leadership appears to a large extent to be rooted in the area's settlement structure. Place identity is strong and those living

in towns, villages, and hamlets do not wish to see the 'character' of the place altered and councillors are largely elected to ensure this is not changed. Thus there are inherent problems in developing approaches to county-wide issues that transcend particular place identities and are perceived as a 'threat' (e.g. location of new housing). This makes it even more difficult for a fragmented council committee system to develop transcendent policies without strong political leadership and the evidence we collected suggests this is lacking.

Where leadership exists it is place specific and provided by 'social entrepreneurs'. In Portland an individual recognised this and brought isolated community groups together to increase their 'collective action capacity'. This 'social entrepreneur' possessed what Aristotle described as *techné*, *phronesis,* and *appreciation*. However, more than that, he recognised that Portland was situated in a wider local context that needed to be influenced – the *Realrationalität* of governing and power in Portland's context. Thus when a Neighbourhood Plan was developed, the largest employer in the area (Portland Port) was involved and the Plan explicitly sought to engage with the local authority and its development plans. This amounts to a form of what Foucault referred to as a 'relational field' that needs to be navigated in order to achieve particular objectives – in this instance economic development to provide further employment and educational opportunities, promote community development and address poverty and housing issues in the area.

The situation in Bristol was very different with the presence of an elected City Mayor with 'legitimate authority' and considerable associated 'powers'. While the Mayor was central to developing the One City Plan his role seemed to be that of a technocrat and a 'manager'. This technocratic managerial style of governance was predominant in Bristol albeit articulated with a more inclusive and participatory approach (see Iusmen and Boswell 2017). As Sweeting and Hambleton (2020) note, this produced both a depoliticisation of urban governance and arguably a more 'consensual' form of governing. They also point out that it led to more concentration of power and decision-making in an executive that was conceivably more remote from traditional party politics. The extent to which other parties were happy with this is questionable, particularly in the light of subsequent developments (i.e. the referendum in which the vote was to abolish the position of City Mayor).

Clearly Rees played a key role in reorganising the internal governance of the council by streamlining both the organisation and its governing processes and bringing together a wide range of previously disparate strategies into a single coherent strategy. He and his team deliberately sought to engage with all sectors/key stakeholders in the city and get them signed up to the Plan in an attempt to develop its collective ownership and longevity.

First, this provides evidence of what Aristotle termed *techné*, *episteme,* and *phronesis* in order to develop the Plan and try to create a 'governing regime' able to transcend electoral cycles by including key stakeholders from a range of sectors. It also represents an example of recognising that the Mayor was operating within a 'relational field' in which a leader has to navigate in order to exercise power to develop and deploy strategies and tactics to achieve objectives and of 'facilitative leadership' vis-à-vis these stakeholders. However, whilst in one sense this was a success in another it was also a failure as the opposition parties on the council came together to require

a referendum on needing a City Mayor, with the result being to abolish the post. This may be seen to illustrate that despite the inclusion of key stakeholders outside the traditional party system, there was a failure to deploy convincing narratives and stories that persuaded opposing political parties to join a 'governing regime'. Similarly, they can be seen to have failed to transcend the wider tendency of embedded party politics to take on 'oppositional forms', in other words, the *Realrationalität* of party politics in the UK.

At a general level, when comparing the two cases several things are clear: 1) In terms of territorial capital the variety of Bristol's economic assets means it is able to benefit from agglomeration economies while in West Dorset the natural environment is its major, albeit underdeveloped, asset. 2) With regard to each place and the relationship between it and the wider hinterland, Bristol is part of a 'functional metropolitan region' and has a coherent urban structure. West Dorset's settlement structure is fragmented and is 'marginal' in terms of its relationship to the 'metropolitan region' of Bournemouth-Poole-Christchurch. Moreover, places on the fringe of West Dorset look outward to surrounding areas accentuating the area's fragmentation. 3) The two have different governance structures, related to this there is/was a clear political 'leader' in Bristol (the City Mayor) whereas West Dorset lacks a 'leadership figure'. Moreover, the governance structure in Bristol means it has a greater capacity to act and deploy policy bundles than West Dorset. 4) In Bristol, the development model is driven by the One City Plan/Inclusive Growth Strategy, while in Dorset the DLEP is the major 'economic lead' and its strategy focusses on the development of the metropolitan area. 5) In Bristol, while the Plan has been led by the public sector, engagement with and inclusion of the private and community/voluntary sectors and social entrepreneurs is seen as vital to its success. In Dorset, these groups are barely mentioned by the DLEP. Moreover, the community/voluntary sector is fragmented, being largely centred on places and thus uncoordinated. 6) In West Dorset, the situation is further complicated by the role of identity (and 'leadership') which is orientated almost exclusively around 'place' (small towns, villages, and hamlets) and has prevented the emergence of any collective 'West Dorset identity' and coordination between local organisations. This strong identification with place may well be a common factor in rural areas (see Belanche, Casaló, and Rubio 2021). In relation to Spain when comparing urban and rural areas they conclude:

> … the affective and evaluative dimensions of place identity are higher in rural than urban areas … rural residents develop more affective links and value their localities more … people from rural areas develop a higher bond with their place related local community (affective dimension), and a higher feeling of membership pride and positive evaluation of this environment (evaluative dimension) … this may be explained by the fact that in rural areas community ties are stronger … there is a greater norm of reciprocity … and there is a wide range of activities related to the natural environment … in addition, there is less urbanization and there is the threat of large scale migration from rural areas, with the concomitant danger of loss of the rural way of life. (ibid, 250)

This would chime with findings from West Dorset, and we surmise it may actively work against the development of wider notions of leadership that transcends particular places.

Despite these advantages, 'facilitative leadership' in Bristol as embodied in the City Mayor ultimately foundered on the *Realrationalität* of traditional party politics. The technocratic, managerial, and consensual style of governance articulated by the City Mayor failed to embrace and 'neutralise' the conflictual nature of party politics. Moreover, this is an indication that he failed to fully comprehend the 'relational field' and power dynamics of the context in which he was working.

Nevertheless, despite the rejection of the City Mayor and the return to a more traditional Council Leader post-2024. In early 2023, it emerged that discussions had been taking place in 'private' between a cross-party group of councillors to discuss post-2024 arrangements for the governance of the council. As part of this discussion a relevant document was produced and eventually became available to the public on the Bristol City Council website (BCC 2022). It is clear from this document that the One City Plan will be retained as will the associated One City Office. Moreover, this group of councillors was composed of nominated representatives from each party on the council which demonstrates it was not an ad hoc group with no legitimacy. Thus, despite the rejection of the City Mayor's approach to governance, the One City Plan and One Office will be retained which strongly suggests that it *has become embedded within the future thinking and planning of the council*. In this sense it represents a success for the City Major; how the new council leader will seek to 'govern' is an open question and it is possible the 'facilitative approach' will be retained, only time will tell.

Finally, it needs to be acknowledged that England remains a highly centralised country and the nature of local government (lack of resources and powers) means that there are fundamental limitations on what can be achieved in terms of local development. These limitations have been compounded by the restructuring of the state and the associated delivery systems for a range of key services. In such a context, 'facilitative leadership' may find it difficult to flourish, develop, and implement long-term local development strategies. Whereas in countries such as Germany where sub-national government (the *Lander*) have significant powers and resources at their disposal it may be possible to achieve more and provide conditions that are more conducive to the emergence and longevity of 'facilitative leadership'. However, as Atkinson and Zimmermann (2018) noted with regard to Area-Based Initiatives as a means of participatory governance in Germany, the results varied considerably between *Lander*; overall they did not suggest the emergence of 'facilitative leadership'. Something similar may be possible in countries with traditions of cross-party cooperation at national and sub-national levels to facilitate local development.

## Notes

1. In the priority list of places the City of Bristol is 142nd and Dorset 276th out of 369 (HMT 2021). Although in June 2022 Bristol was awarded £95 m from the Levelling Up Fund and a further £14.5 m in January 2023.
2. All the data in this section derives from in-depth case studies carried out as part of the H2020 project ?, the national case studies can be found at: https://www.cohsmo.aau.dk/
3. The County of Dorset underwent a major local government reorganisation from 1st April 2019 after we had carried out our fieldwork.
4. It is hoped the reorganisation of local government in Dorset will address these issues.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Ethics approval

Approval from the ethics committee in the Faculty of Technology and Environment, University of the West of England, was obtained before the commencement of data collection.

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