

## Local leadership is the answer to populism

*Robin Hambleton*

What do we do if we want to resist angry populism? The short answer is: develop the collective intelligence and leadership capacity of our localities.

In many cities across Britain, and in other countries too, we are witnessing a remarkable rise in collaborative approaches to local problem solving. In these innovative cities local leaders are redrawing the boundaries between the state and civil society in intriguing new ways.

Take Bristol. Earlier in January, at a City Gathering with over 200 participants from a wide range of backgrounds, civic leaders and activists shared ideas on how to develop and deliver a new One City Plan for the city.

[\[www.bristolonecity.com\]](http://www.bristolonecity.com)

The initiative is unusual in three respects. First, the plan covers the period through to 2050, setting a long-term vision for Bristol going well beyond electoral cycles. It outlines a strategy for each of the three coming decades and specifies, in detail, the actions that will need to be taken to create 'A fair healthy and sustainable city. A city of hope and aspiration, where everyone can share in its success.'

Second, the plan has been co-created over a two-year period by politicians, community leaders, local businesses, trade unions, academics and others working together in an intensive process - sharing experiences, exploring new ideas, disagreeing with each other and, finally, arriving at new strategies. Over 300 people have been directly involved in generating the Bristol One City Plan and the plan will be reviewed yearly.

Third, a new collaborative governance system for the city has been created to deliver the plan. The leaders of sixteen major organisations, straddling the public, private and non-profit sectors, have agreed to serve on a new City Leaders Group to oversee the work of six thematic boards working on the detailed implementation, and ongoing review, of strategies set out in the plan.

Marvin Rees, directly elected mayor of Bristol since 2016, is using ideas set out in my recent international book, *Leading the Inclusive City*, to orchestrate this One City Approach. This effort draws directly on the leadership experience of some of the most innovative cities in the world – for example, Freiburg, Germany, Malmo, Sweden and Portland, USA.

Three lessons for localities wanting to create progressive solutions to current challenges emerge from the Bristol experience.

First, place matters. It is clear that imaginative local leadership can tap into the feelings of attachment and loyalty many people have to the place where

they live. Public policy in the UK is largely ineffective because central government does not understand or value the power of place. It persists not just in the misguided policy of slashing financial support to elected local authorities, but also in pursuing narrow functional objectives when a place-based approach is essential if the complex challenges facing local communities are to be successfully addressed.

The One City Approach draws energy and enthusiasm from the enormous number of committed activists who care not just about the future of Bristol as a whole, but also the quality of life in the diverse neighbourhoods of the city.

Another lesson is that values matter. At a time when authoritarian forces are gathering in various countries, including our own, the importance of local leaders and activists standing up for progressive thinking relating to social, environmental and economic justice matters more than ever.

The Bristol One City Plan is values driven and the three top priorities for 2019, agreed at the City Gathering last week, provide an indication of what local leaders are most concerned about: 1) Tackling and preventing gang violence and knife crime, 2) Developing affordable child care and nurseries in three neighbourhoods, and 3) Ending period poverty for girls and women in the city.

My last lesson is that place-based leadership matters. This does not mean introducing old-fashioned top-down, city leadership, one in which senior figures claim to have the answers and strive to impose their ideas on local stakeholders.

Rather, the One City Approach in Bristol involves listening to diverse views, bringing people together and releasing the collective intelligence of groups, organisations and individuals.

Several new collaborative leadership programmes have been developed in Bristol. These efforts are not just contributing to the development of local leadership talent, they are also pointing to new ways of conceptualising effective civic leadership in a rapidly changing world.

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*His latest book is 'Leading the Inclusive City. Place-based innovation for a bounded planet' (Policy Press):*

<http://policypress.co.uk/leading-the-inclusive-city-1>

