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Innovation in progressive urban leadership: Why bringing 'place' to the centre of public leadership studies is vital in our globalising world

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Abstract

The new, directly elected mayor of Bristol, Marvin Rees, has set out a vision for a new kind of civic leadership for a progressive city. Launched at a citywide event, in September 2016, Mayor Rees's 'City Office' concept brings together most of the interests in the City of Bristol that care about the city. The aim is to tackle growing inequality in the city by developing new forms of collaboration. This is, potentially at least, a significant innovation in the design and development of urban public leadership.

This paper examines the progress made with this initiative and sets the Bristol innovations in urban governance within a wider international context. It discusses the challenge of place-less power in modern society, and considers the nature of the major struggle that is now taking place in different countries between place-less and place-based power. By drawing on arguments set out in the author's recent book, *Leading the Inclusive City*, the paper outlines concepts that may be able to help us understand the power of place and, more specifically, the emerging possibilities for place-based leadership in particular geo-political settings. The paper is divided into six parts:

- 1) Introduction
- 2) Framing the power of place
- 3) The 'New Civic Leadership' (NCL)
- 4) The introduction of mayoral governance in Bristol, UK
- 5) The City Office Concept – a new way of governing a city?
- 6) Emerging themes for leadership studies

1) Introduction

The importance of place in public leadership studies, and in public policy making more generally, has been seriously neglected. This disregard for the importance of place is particularly noticeable in the UK where power has, over the years, become over concentrated in Whitehall. Elected local authorities in the UK have seen their powers eroded dramatically in the last thirty years or so. However, when viewed from an international perspective, it would appear to be that, in some countries at least, the power of place is on the rise. The election of Donald Trump, an authoritarian TV showman, as President of the USA, has spurred not just major public protests in cities across America, but also the rapid development of place-based city-to-city networks standing for a different vision for the future of society.

Place-less power has grown significantly in the last thirty years or so. By place-less power I mean the exercise of power by decision-makers who are unconcerned about the impact of their decisions on communities living in particular places. Some writers take the view that the forces of globalisation have now completely undermined local democracy. They believe that the growth of multi-national companies operating on a global basis is now so well developed that localities are best viewed as helpless victims in a global flow of events. Distant, unelected decision makers now determine city futures, not urban residents. This paper rejects this view and offers a fresh way of thinking about the future of urban leadership. The presentation draws on arguments that are set out at greater length elsewhere (Hambleton 2015).

2) Framing 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, however, 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. 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. We can assume that, in democratic societies at least, elected leaders who pay little or

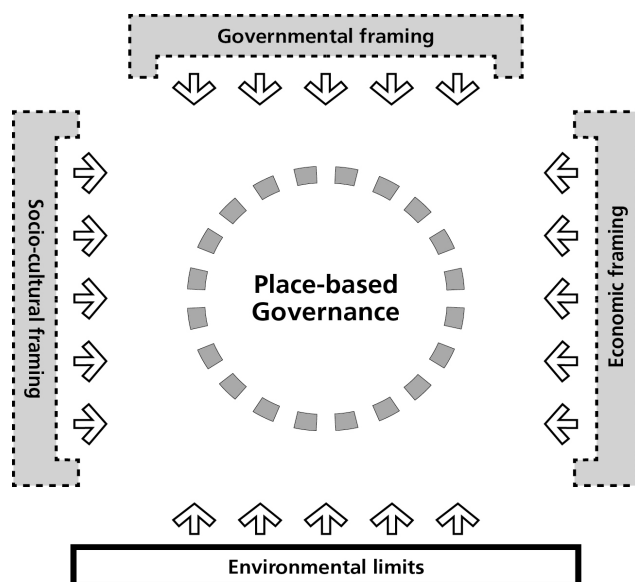
no attention to these political pressures should not expect to stay in office for too long. Expression of citizen voice, to use Hirschman's term (1970), will see them dismissed at the ballot box.

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).

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. 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.

3) The 'New City Leadership' (NCL)

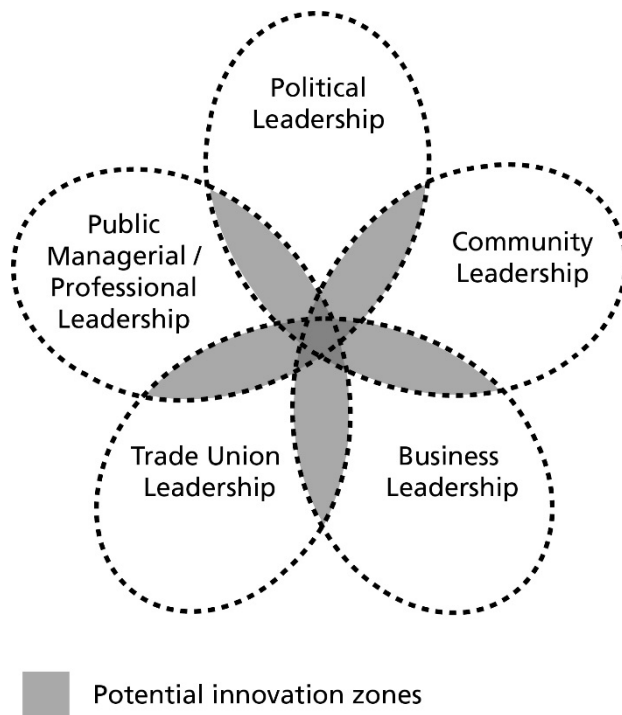
In the 1980s *New Public Management (NPM)*, which involves the use of private sector management practices in the public sector, gained popularity in many countries. In essence, the approach stems from the belief that government should be run like a private business. In my recent book I argue that the 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



Source: Hambleton (2015) p 127

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 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 author’s definition of leadership is: ‘Shaping emotions and behaviour to achieve common goals’ (Hambleton 2007 p174). This definition puts emotions centre stage and stresses the importance of the co-creation of new possibilities.

4) The introduction of mayoral governance in Bristol, UK

In 2011 the UK Coalition Government passed the Localism Act which required, *inter alia*, the big cities of England to hold referenda to allow local citizens to decide whether or not they would like to adopt a directly elected

mayor form urban governance. In the event ten referenda were held in May 2012. Nine cities voted 'no'. Bristol, by contrast, voted 'yes' and a mayoral election was organized for November 2012. A longitudinal study of the impact of mayoral governance on the city of Bristol has been carried out, and this shows that the change in leadership arrangements had a major impact on the governance of the city (Hambleton and Sweeting 2015; Sweeting 2017).

The details of the research findings are set out elsewhere and need not detain us here. However, as background for the analysis presented in this paper, it is important to provide a very short summary of the conclusions. On the positive side the research shows that many civic leaders and citizens felt that the leadership of the city improved following the introduction of a directly elected mayor. Leadership was far more visible, a clear vision for the city was set out, and few would doubt that Mayor George Ferguson, an independent politician who became the first directly elected mayor of Bristol, was very successful in using the position of the office of mayor to raise the profile of the city nationally and internationally.

On the down side the research revealed that this particular version of the mayoral model can concentrate too much power in the hands of one individual, and that citizen trust in decision-making and timeliness of decision-making did not improve that much. In particular, many councillors felt excluded from decision-making, and formed a negative view of the mayor. Interestingly, members of the public in different parts of Bristol tended to think differently about the impacts of the reform. Often, but not universally, those people living in the better off parts of Bristol are inclined to view the reform more positively than those living in the less well off parts of Bristol.

In May 2016 the citizens of Bristol elected a new mayor. Marvin Rees, a young and charismatic candidate, delivered an emphatic victory for the Labour Party. Mayor Rees has a very different leadership style from Mayor Ferguson. He favours delegating power and responsibilities to members of his Cabinet of senior councillors. Interestingly he has retained Mayor Ferguson's innovation of having all four parties (Conservative, Green, Labour and Liberal Democrat) in the City Council Cabinet. As directly elected mayors in English local government have a four-year term Mayor Rees will next face the electorate in May 2020. The research on Bristol suggests that having a mayor for a four-year term of office gives welcome stability to city leadership.

5) The City Office Concept – a new way of governing a city?

Marvin Rees began to develop the idea of creating a 'City Office' in the summer of 2015. He was, at that time, preparing to compete to be selected as the Labour Party candidate to run for Mayor of Bristol in the May 2016 local election. He was keen to offer some fresh ideas on how to go about the task of city governance. In the simplest of terms the City Office represents an attempt to unite public purpose in the city, one that seeks to bind together all those who care about the city in a much more effective collaborative effort. This might sound like cosy and familiar rhetoric, but the idea is to stride well beyond familiar concepts of partnership working.

In a headline on his campaign website in August 2015 Rees signalled the nature of this shift: 'Bristol shouldn't be run from the council chamber'. This, in itself, was a radical statement for a politician seeking office. In various speeches he explained that, while elected local government is enormously important in city governance, it is the way that public organisations work in creative collaboration with other interests in the city that holds out real promise for making social and economic progress. Bear in mind that Rees had considerable experience, from earlier in his career, in partnership working in Bristol - he was, for example, Director of the Bristol Partnership for a period. Rees became well acquainted with both the strengths and the limitations of the partnership arrangements of the past. In essence, he felt that they had become too complicated and bureaucratic and, as a result, soaked up and dissipated the enthusiasm of local leaders.

On his campaign website, *Marvin for Mayor*, Rees indicated, in August 2015, that:

'The City Office would be a real city team made up of representatives from every major sector in the city, including politics, health, local government, business, unions, education, criminal justice, and community, voluntary and faith sectors.'

Intellectual underpinning for the City Office concept is supported by, *inter alia*, research on successful place-based leadership in fourteen different countries (Hambleton 2015). Mayor Rees is using the evidence set out in the author's book, *Leading the Inclusive City*, to guide his approach to place-based leadership. Mayor Rees finds the 'flower diagram' shown in **Figure 2** to be helpful and is keen to build connections between the different realms of leadership in the city. The City Office is located at the heart of this 'flower diagram.'

The City Office aims to mobilise energies from the different realms of leadership for the benefit of the whole city. The central ethos is to focus on making an **additional** contribution over and above the activities of existing agencies and established collaborative arrangements. The City Office will not duplicate or replace existing networks and structures. Rather it will try to add value by accessing networks and resources that otherwise would not be available.

The City Office is intended to have three striking characteristics:

- Orchestrating 'big picture' strategy development for the city
- Including a diversity of voices in the design and development of progressive initiatives
- A strong emphasis on innovation and experiment linked to a firm commitment to learning by doing

From the outset the City Office approach has emphasised the co-creation of new possibilities for progressive action. This is unusual. The long-

established, and increasingly outdated, approach to civic leadership, sometimes referred to as the 'city boss' model in American urban political science, anticipates the newly elected mayor or leader of a city setting out a vision and then, more or less, instructing or pressuring city hall officials to implement the vision. Mayor Rees rejects simplistic top-down management models of this kind. He stresses that effective place-based leadership requires a much more inclusive and much more flexible approach, one that involves a process of opening up conversations with different stakeholders and one that involves risk taking and experiment.

The style of mayoral leadership

A few days after being elected Mayor Rees, at his 'Swearing-In Ceremony' on 9 May 2016 in the M-Shed, a museum documenting the history of the people of Bristol, demonstrated his strong commitment to developing a collective, not an individualised, approach to city leadership. Note that this ceremony was **not** held in City Hall, the headquarters of municipal government in Bristol. Rather this important civic event was located in a public building in the centre of the city that is visited by large numbers of Bristol residents. The symbolism was clear – City Hall is only part of the governance of the city. Important civic events could and should happen elsewhere in the city.

Most unusually for a 'Swearing-In Ceremony' the Mayor was not the only speaker on the platform offering ideas on the future of the city. After the formal swearing-in Mayor Rees introduced Miles Chambers, later to become the first Bristol Poet Laureate, who read a passionate poem about the history of the city. Mayor Rees then invited three other civic leaders in Bristol to offer their contributions: Deborah Evans, Managing Director of the West of England Academic Health Sciences Network; Steve West, Vice-Chancellor of the University of the West of England; and Jon Riley, Bristol Area Commander of Avon and Somerset Police. From the get-go, then, Mayor Rees was signalling his interest in sharing power and valuing the leadership contributions of other agencies and actors. In his own speech Mayor Rees emphasised that the City Office model of city leadership was intended to improve partnership working and would emphasise the co-creation of new ideas and ways of working.

Five strands have emerged in the work of the City Office since Mayor Rees was elected in May 2016:

- Inclusive City Gatherings
- City Office organisation and ethos
- Task and finish projects to demonstrate the City Office way of working
- The idea of developing a One City Plan
- Developing place-based leadership talent

Brief remarks on each strand now follow.

1) Inclusive City Gatherings

Three City Gatherings of civic leaders, all designed to build collective purpose in the city, have been held so far:

- City Office Founders Meeting, July 2016
- City Office Launch, September 2016
- Launch of the Bristol Resilience Strategy, December 2016

City Gathering (1) - City Office Founders Meeting

Held in the @Bristol Science Centre in central Bristol on 13 July 2016 the City Office Founders Meeting was, originally, intended to bring together 20 to 30 civic leaders to discuss the idea of creating a City Office. However, the Mayor found overwhelming interest from civic leaders across the city in being part of this new initiative. Some 70 civic leaders, drawn from all of the five realms of civic leadership shown in **Figure 2**, participated in the event. A highly interactive series of 'city conversations' (with participants working together on different tables in three episodes) considered the major challenges facing the city and explored ideas on how to develop the City Office concept. The emotional tone of the event was optimistic, energising and curious.

A key outcome was that there was widespread agreement that, while Bristol is a prosperous city with many advantages, the central challenge facing the city is growing inequality. Key pointers for the future were that: the City Office should focus on addressing this challenge; it must add value to existing efforts; and that it should emphasise social innovation. Examples of possible Task and Finish projects, designed to demonstrate new ways of working, were explored during the Gathering.

City Gathering (2) - City Office Launch

The City Office was launched at a second City Gathering held on 29 September 2016. The venue was to have been the offices of a law firm in Bristol (Burgess Salmon), but the widespread enthusiasm from civic leaders to be part of this event meant that a much bigger space was needed. Approximately 120 civic leaders participated in the City Office Launch that took place in a newly designed multi-purpose space, known as the Cash Hall (a name that reflects how the space had been used in the past) in Bristol City Hall.

The launch had five main elements: 1) A scene setting session outlining the City Office concept and approach; 2) A presentation of initial ideas on how the City Office might be organised; 3) A working lunch in which participants gathered in organised groups to share ideas on what the City Office could do for Bristol and what civic leaders could do for the City Office; 4) The introduction of two Task and Finish projects; and 5) Identification of next steps.

The Task and Finish projects, which emerged from consultations that took place in the summer months, were announced as i) the Homelessness Challenge, and ii) providing Meaningful Work Experience for all young people

in the city. At the end of the launch Mayor Rees drew attention to the work the city was then doing in relation to the *Bristol Resilience Strategy*. He also introduced the idea of creating a One City Plan, that is a shared plan that brings together the plans of all the major institutions in Bristol.

City Gathering (3) - Launch of the Bristol Resilience Strategy

In 2014 Bristol was selected by the Rockefeller Foundation to participate in the *100 Resilient Cities* initiative. The Foundation provides financial support for a Chief Resilience Officer to work, for a two-year period, with stakeholders on the preparation of a long-term (usually fifty-year) plan for each chosen city. The *Bristol Resilience Strategy* was launched at the third City Gathering that was held at Trinity Centre, a community building, in central Bristol on 12 December 2016.

The resilience strategy stems from an extensive process of consultation involving 17 public events and involving around 1,600 people. Mayor Rees welcomed the strategy and highlighted the importance of tackling social and environmental justice at one and the same time. Sarah Toy, the Chief Resilience Officer, outlined the contents. The strategy, a 60-page document, contains 42 actions ranging from short-term to long-term. The content of the strategy responds to the early work on the City Office and, in particular, many of the actions identified focus on tackling inequality in Bristol.

2) *City Office organisation and ethos*

As with other local authorities in the country, Bristol is suffering from swingeing public spending cuts being imposed by central government. In the ten-year period 2010-2020 central government financial support to the city will be cut by 78%, from £201 million per year to £45 million per year (Hambleton 2017 p 8). These cuts are unprecedented in local government history and will have a significant detrimental impact on many needed services. It is essential to be aware of this financial context when considering the arrangements for organising and developing the City Office approach. Because of central government cuts the City Office has to be reliant on a very small amount of funding and on a large amount of good will.

The City Office now has a Director, David Relph. Bristol Health Partners agreed to second Relph, the Director of the health partnership, to the City Office (on a two days a week basis) starting on 1 December 2016. Relph works closely with Mayor Rees and a growing number of colleagues, who have been seconded into the City Office on a part-time basis, to advance the agenda of the City Office.

An unusual feature of the way the City Office works is the creation of an innovation zone in City Hall just outside the Mayor's Office. This area is part of a well-lit open plan office. People, from any realm of leadership, who are working on activities relating to the City Office agenda, are invited to work in this area on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. In addition, the City Office operates a regular 'open house' on Tuesday mornings (10.00-12.00) in this open plan

area. This provides a regular opportunity for partners to drop in, share ideas and develop 'asks and offers' relating to City Office work.

Mayor Rees has arranged for people who are not employed by Bristol City Council to have ready access to this zone, which is also close to an area where local authority Cabinet members work when they are in City Hall. The creation of this space is a simple step that has already enabled a good deal of informal communication to take place between stakeholders from the different realms of place-based leadership shown in **Figure 2**.

Steps are now in hand to formalise lines of accountability for City Office activities. It is likely that a City Office Steering Group, comprising senior leaders in the city, will be created to strengthen links into the various agencies and to ensure a continuing high level of senior leader participation in future City Gatherings.

3) Task and Finish projects: Example - tackling homelessness

The commentary in this section focuses on the activities of the Homelessness Task and Finish group. In 2012 less than 10 people were found to be sleeping rough in Bristol on any one night. By 2015 this figure had increased to over 90 and, in December 2016, the figure stood at 74. Golden Key, an inter-agency partnership (funded by the Big Lottery) set up to develop more effective ways of helping people with serious and complex social needs, found that: 55% of rough sleepers have mental health support needs; 45% have problems with drugs; 43% have problems with alcohol; 35% have financial difficulties; and 35% exhibit offending behaviour. It follows that effective approaches to tackling homelessness are about much more than providing housing; lasting solutions require a multi-agency approach.

Shortly after the City Gathering on 29 September 2016 Mayor Rees gave all local leaders (via the City Office) the demanding task of reducing homelessness and rough sleeping in Bristol dramatically. To give added momentum to this initiative he proposed creating '100 beds in 100 days'. This specific challenge asked local leaders to work together to create 100 extra beds for homeless people in the first 100 days of 2017. A Project Group, chaired by the City Office Director, was set up to develop ways of achieving this ambitious target and it has been meeting on a fortnightly basis since December 2015.

Striking progress has been made in a short space of time. City Office partners launched a 'spectrum of activity' to tackle homelessness (Morris 2017). Clearly a good number of these efforts will not have an impact within 100 days. Identifying plots of land that could be used for housing, designing and building housing schemes, and unlocking space in empty office buildings to create safe space for people in need all have a relatively long lead-time. However, even within a short timescale important measures have been taken. For example, the eleven social landlords operating in the city have, between them, already provided 25 units of accommodation. It is clear that these units

would not have been provided without the drive and enthusiasm provided by the City Office model of working.

It is, of course, too early to make firm claims about the success or otherwise of this Task and Finish group – it is working flat out right now. We can note, however, that the City Office has, already, made a difference to the way this important public policy issue is addressed. New stakeholders, organisations not normally associated with tackling homelessness, have been brought into the conversation. For example, First Bus, the local transport company in Bristol, has agreed to provide two buses to be refitted with beds for rough sleepers. In addition, the business community is now actively exploring how to bring empty office space into use as temporary living space for homeless people, a model involving the creation of new legal ‘guardianship’ arrangements – with local lawyers working out feasible legal arrangements.

4) The One City Plan

This innovation is at a very early stage of development. The idea is to produce a high level ‘One City Plan’, one that unites the plans of all local agencies. The aspiration is to develop this plan in such a way that the City Office adds value to all the existing planning efforts taking place in the city.

5) Developing place-based leadership talent

This fifth strand is, also, at a very early stage of development. However, the City Gatherings, outlined earlier, identified the importance of developing and delivering new kinds of civic leadership development programmes. Existing agencies in Bristol – Common Purpose, the University of the West of England, the University of Bristol, and many others – have impressive leadership development programmes. The idea is for the City Office to orchestrate a step-change in the provision of place-based leadership programmes – ranging from city leadership courses for young people (Under 18s) through to advanced place-based leadership programmes for senior leaders from all the five realms of leadership shown in **Figure 1**. The City Office has arranged a Mayor’s Breakfast on 26 April 2017 to host presentations from a diversity of organizations on new ideas to develop the power and effectiveness of local leaders.

6) Emerging themes for leadership studies

A number of important themes emerge from the analysis presented above and the PUPOL conference provides a welcome opportunity to explore and discuss them. In a spirit of encouraging new thinking I would like to close this paper in a rather unusual way. Rather than summarise key insights I would like to raise a series of possible questions for discussion.

1) Is it helpful to distinguish place-less power from place-based power? Related to this, do scholars interested to examine the effectiveness of public and political leadership need to pay much more attention to place? Are the forces shaping the power of place in **Figure 1** helpful? Can we build

improved links between urban political scientists and leadership studies scholars who have, perhaps, paid insufficient attention to the power of place?

2) Does the institutional design of local governance matter? If so, can we discuss the merits of alternative institutional designs? Do local leaders need to pay attention to institutional design? Variations within the directly elected mayor model are available. But there are also other models.

3) Is it helpful to envisage, as shown in **Figure 2**, five overlapping realms of place-based leadership in a locality? What new insights does this way of thinking generate? What is wrong with this diagram?

4) Is the Innovation Zone a useful idea? Is the suggestion that a central task of effective place-based leadership is to orchestrate the co-creation of new possibilities by actors operating in these innovation zones on the right track? What are the drawbacks with this suggestion?

5) Do the innovations in urban governance in Bristol spur fresh thinking relating to the future of urban leadership? If so, how? And, in what way?

6) What are the opportunities for international city-to-city learning and exchange? Can place-based leaders become more effective, on an international basis, in mobilising support for progressive values?

I look forward to an enjoyable conversation.

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