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The role of city leadership in European recovery

Robin Hambleton,

This is the full speech delivered by Professor Robin Hambleton to the Eurocities Cities Social Summit on 6 May 2021.

Opening

I am most grateful to Eurocities for the invitation to contribute to this, the first-ever European cities social summit.

It is worth recalling that Eurocities represents 130 million people living in 198 cities.

My starting point is that cities should play an important role in European recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and in this talk I will set out some of the reasons why.

I will divide my remarks into five parts.

1) Context: The importance of the European Pillar of Social Rights

The European Union is to be congratulated on developing the European Pillar of Social Rights. Launched at the Gothenburg Summit in 2017 this major commitment puts Europe ahead of other continents when it comes to recognising the importance of developing inclusive strategies to improve society.

The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, published in March 2021, takes this effort forward. Importantly the Action Plan makes it clear that delivering these rights is a '**shared responsibility**' - and the role of regional and local authorities in delivering the Action Plan is recognised.

The Eurocities initiative, Inclusive Cities for All, provides a helpful account of some of the steps European city leaders have already taken.

2) The complex challenges cities face in the post-COVID-19 era

In my recent book, Cities and communities beyond COVID-19. How local leadership can change our future for the better I suggest that cities across the world now face four major challenges at once:

- The COVID-19 health emergency

- A sharp economic downturn arising from the pandemic

- The global climate and ecological emergencies, and

- Disturbing increases in social, economic and racial inequality

These challenges need be addressed in an integrated way and many cities are doing precisely this.

In my view COVID-19 has had a double impact on our lives.

First, it has delivered appalling suffering – over 153 million people have been infected and over 3.2 million have died.

Moreover, the disease has revealed just how shockingly unequal many societies had become long before COVID-19 arrived on the world scene.

Second, on the upside, the lockdowns have created an enormous upsurge in social solidarity and community-based caring.

It is important for policy makers to pick up on this second aspect of the pandemic. This awful calamity is prompting many people to rethink their priorities in fundamental ways and this presents new opportunities.

In particular we can see that, in many societies, the role of the state has already shifted dramatically. I would like to highlight two shifts:

- First, a shift in values towards caring for people and the planet

- Second, an upsurge in imaginative community-based problem solving at the local level – with the public, private and voluntary sectors actively collaborating with civil society.

3) Why cities matter

There are three main reasons why cities should play a prominent role in societal recovery from COVID-19.

First, place has meaning for people and, notwithstanding the growth in internet and mobile phone technologies, much of life remains, and will always remain, stubbornly place-dependent. Locally led initiatives release all kinds of new problem-solving energies.

Second, place provides the spatial basis for the exercise of democracy. Elected local authorities provide the democratic building blocks that underpin nation states and, ultimately, international democratic institutions, like the EU.

Third, places are different and, most important, local leaders understand these differences better than those working in distant national governments. City leaders see urban challenges 'in the round' and this enables them to develop more effective responses.

In addition to these three arguments I suggest in my book that cities can act as a constraint on the exercise of place-less power.

By place-less power I refer to decision-makers who are unconcerned about the impacts of their decisions on communities living in particular places. Consider for a moment the spectacular growth in the scope and scale of multinational companies operating on a global basis.

Place-less decision-makers often adopt an approach that fails to care for people and the planet.

City leaders, because they are place-based, are uniquely well positioned to understand the links between social and environmental policy objectives – they are experts in caring for people and the planet at one-and-the-same time.

They can see, for example, that social and green agendas have to be pursued together – they are inextricably linked.

I am sure we will learn of many examples of this integrated approach to decision-making when distinguished speakers offer their inputs later this morning.

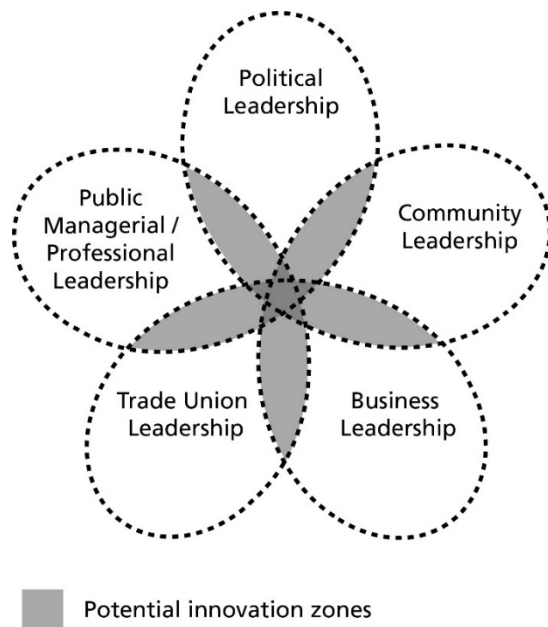**4) The role of city leadership**

In my new book I set out a conceptual framework – the New Civic Leadership – to throw light on how to build strong, collaborative governance at the local level. This model provides one way of delivering an inclusive approach to decision-making.

In essence the New Civic Leadership model unites public purpose in a city by bringing together five overlapping realms of leadership:

- Political leadership
- Public managerial/professional leadership
- Community leadership
- Business leaders who care about the place
- Trade union leadership

In particular it is the areas of overlap between these realms – I call these innovation zones – that provide 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.

Figure 1: The realms of place-based leadership

Potential innovation zones

New Civic Leadership can, then, help communities co-create new solutions and advance the power of place.

Many cities are developing inspirational approaches to collaborative governance. Allow me to mention just two: Bristol, UK and Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

The Bristol One City Approach

In the period since 2016 Marvin Rees, directly elected Mayor of Bristol, has used the New Civic Leadership framework to develop and deliver a One City Approach to the governance of Bristol. This approach, which is strongly place-based, acts as a catalyst for collaboration.

It draws inspiration and enthusiasm from the positive feelings people have about the place where they live. It unites public purpose in the city via a regular series of City Gatherings bringing together actors drawn from the five realms of leadership just mentioned. Seventy civic leaders participated in the first City Gathering in 2016 over 400 civic leaders participated in the most recent gathering in March 2021.

A Bristol One City Plan, which is a collective city plan, not a city council plan, looks forward to 2050. It is designed to create a fair, healthy and sustainable city and is rolled forward annually.

The City of Amsterdam Circular Economy strategy

The City of Amsterdam aims to ensure a good life for everyone within the environmental limits of the earth. The Circular Economy strategy aims to reduce use of new raw materials and, over time, create an economy that reuses raw and other materials over and over again.

The [Amsterdam Doughnut Coalition](#) aims, rather like the Bristol One City Approach, to stimulate collaboration across sectors and nurture trust by building solid relationships across the boundaries of organisations and perspectives.

5) A call to action

In closing my remarks I offer two parting thoughts for the discussion today. First, a claim and second a question.

First, European cities are, in my view, right to argue for a much stronger voice in the governance of Europe. This is because the evidence shows that place-based understanding can deliver much better outcomes for societies.

Second, I offer a question for everyone participating today. I have suggested that major choices for societies are opening up. What do you want cities in Europe to be like in 2030?

Once again, I thank Eurocities for the opportunity to contribute to this European cities social summit. I hope very much that you will have a very productive day.

Thank you for your attention.

Robin Hambleton

About the author

Robin Hambleton is Emeritus Professor of City Leadership, University of the West of England, Bristol and Director of Urban Answers.

His latest book is *Cities and communities beyond COVID-19. How local leadership can change our future for the better.* Bristol: University of Bristol Press.

https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/cities-and-communities-beyond-covid-19