

GOVERNANCE

We're in danger of creating featherweight mayors



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Last month I chaired a husting for the West of England metro-mayor.

The West of England Combined Authority (WECA), which has a population of just over 900,000, brings together three existing local authorities: Bath & North East Somerset Council, Bristol City Council and South Gloucestershire Council.

On the upside, those who attended were able to participate in a lively debate. Around 200 citizens came to the meeting at the Bristol and Bath Science Park on 3 April.

Five mayoral candidates – four representing the main political parties (Conservative, Green, Labour and Liberal Democrat) and an Independent – set out their ideas for the future of the city region.

This particular debate focused on the potential role of the metro-mayor, and on substantive issues relating to transportation, digital infrastructure and skills and education.

We used a format resembling the BBC's Any Questions? programme. Each candidate gave a two-minute pitch and then responded to questions from the floor. The questions were thoughtful and relevant. All the candidates were given a good opportunity to explain their ideas and win support for their views.

So what's not to like when it comes to metro-mayors?

There are three main sets of problems with government policy. First, the powers to be exercised by the new metro-



Weak mayors could cause a devolution nosedive

mayors are far too limited. They have no tax raising powers and the budgets they will control are vanishingly small in relation to the scale of the challenges being faced.

In the case of the WECA, the government is providing £30m a year for new investment. At the same time, in the period 2010-20, central government is cutting its financial support to the three WECA local authorities by at least £200m over the decade. Do the maths.

The recent report from the RSAs Inclusive Growth Commission is just one of a number of well-researched studies arguing that, if the economy is to be rebalanced, the government will need to be much bolder in devolving far bigger budgets to the new combined authorities.

Second, few voters know there is a metro-mayor election on 4 May, and fewer

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still have a clear grasp of the powers and functions of the combined authority. Despite the efforts of local media, including the BBC and local newspapers, it is likely voter turnout will be very low. If there is a low turnout the metro-mayors will lack strong electoral legitimacy.

Third, as set out in the report I wrote for the Local Government Association last year, *English Devolution: Learning Lessons From International Models of Sub-National Governance*,

successful devolution abroad has created powerful, independent governmental units answerable to local people.

In England the 'devolution deal' approach is not leading to the creation of powerful territorial governance. On the contrary, the evidence suggests the government is introducing a form of top-down contracting in which combined authorities are expected to deliver outputs in line with central government requirements.

It follows that, notwithstanding the talents of the individuals elected, we are in danger of creating featherweight metro-mayors; political leaders lacking the necessary power and authority to really get things done.

● Robin Hambleton's latest book, *Leading the Inclusive City*, is published by Policy Press