

# Britain: Labour moves to introduce US-style city mayors

Simon Wheelan  
8 November 2001

Conflicts are emerging within Britain's Labour Party regarding moves towards novel and previously untested forms of local government. Prime Minister Tony Blair strongly advocates the introduction of US-style elected mayors to run towns and cities. He believes a system of elected mayors will successfully circumnavigate public accountability, creating more stable forms of regional government. Other cabinet members, notably Stephen Byers, the secretary for transport, local government and the regions, are cool on the idea.

Byers spoke in favour of elected mayors only last month at the Labour Party conference. But in the meantime events have forced the minister to reconsider his position. Byers' parliamentary seat is in North Tyneside, where he was previously deputy leader of the local Council. North Tyneside voters have just voted in favour of an elected mayor, *against* the wishes of the ruling local Labour Party. The local Labour leader Rita Stringfellow, a close associate of Byers, has since had a word in the minister's ear regarding the conditions for their future support of their former colleague. As a result, the minister has now dropped his support for elected mayors.

Byers' cabinet colleague, Nick Raynsford, is in charge of the referendums to ask local electorates whether they are in favour of elected mayors. A yes vote by four out of six towns on the recently held "democracy day" has increased tensions within the party. The positive votes in North Tyneside, Lewisham, Middlesbrough and Hartlepool followed previous yes votes in Doncaster and Watford. None of these results, however, can be viewed as representing a genuinely popular mood in favour of elected mayors. Not only were the numbers of ballots returned pitifully low, but those who voted in favour did so largely due to deep frustration with the current state of their towns and cities rather than because of a wholehearted support for mayors.

Chronic levels of under-investment over the last 100

years have left England with the worst social and urban infrastructure in Western Europe. Housing and public services have deteriorated to such an extent that England has fallen behind less developed countries like Greece. Voters felt that anything had to be better than the existing system.

Elected mayors embody values cherished by Blair and New Labour. The mayors will be unfettered by a party history or political principles, other than a belief in the need to impose a regime capable of making cities and towns desirable to international investors. Until now mayors in British towns and cities have had only a ceremonial role, but under the new plans the elected mayors would replace the existing system of council leaders and a supporting executive. The new mayors will enjoy more autonomy in their respective fiefdoms than the mayor of London, Ken Livingston. They will be responsible for the day-to-day running of the council, including services like housing, social services, education and transport.

The Blair government dismisses charges that local government budgets controlled by elected mayors will facilitate corruption and intense business lobbying. But the large degree of control accorded to the prospective mayors is clearly meant to ensure that any elected body of representatives does not become a hindrance to implementing the demands of commercial concerns.

Pushing hard for elected mayors, Blair has repeatedly admonished his own party's local government bureaucracies as inefficient and corrupt. Roy Hattersley, a former deputy leader of the Labour Party, writing in his column in the *Guardian*, has remarked upon the apparent absurdity of Blair being the first leader in history to gerrymander votes in order to guarantee the defeat of his own party. Feeling threatened, local councillors have argued that a switch to elected mayors will expunge local democracy and lead to further public alienation from local

government.

While this is undoubtedly true, the local bureaucrats argue not out of principled opposition but because the new arrangements will likely abrogate their privileges. Their protests about prospective public alienation from local politics are rich, coming from administrations that have presided over a protracted and drastic reduction in the numbers voting in local elections.

Not all local Labourites oppose the election of mayors and some have adopted the most reactionary of possible prospective candidates. The economically depressed north-eastern town of Middlesbrough is a case in point. From 42 local councillors, 17 support the candidacy of Police Superintendent Ray Mallon in any future mayoral election. The election of such a man of action will, they claim, revitalise local government rather than denigrate it.

Mallon gained his Hollywood nickname, “Robocop”, by virtue of his vigorous pursuit of “zero tolerance” police tactics in Cleveland. In the movie *Robocop*, the protagonist’s satirical catch phrase when faced with a felon is “20 seconds to comply”. Mallon has only just slipped 14 disciplinary charges arising from a three-year, £17 million inquiry called *Operation Lancet* into alleged deals with drug informants. No criminal charges have been brought, but the suspended detective still faces nine disciplinary charges of neglect of duty, three of falsehood and prevarication, one of discreditable conduct and one of misconduct with regard to another police officer. In his regular column for the *Northern Echo* newspaper, Mallon has dismissed the charges out of hand as a “petty vendetta” waged by senior offices. It is Mallon’s macho aura and reputation for a “whatever it takes” attitude to law and order that endears him to New Labour.

The extent of support for elected mayors within the British elite—the opposition Conservative Party also supports the move—cannot be understood outside of an examination of the effects of globalisation upon economic and political life. Towns and cities have become increasingly reliant upon the world, as opposed to the national economy. Indeed the requirement placed upon the nation state by the global economy is for the creation of strong competitive city regions.

This effect can be witnessed in the 40 towns that have entered the current official competition to be designated as cities in order to celebrate the Queen’s golden jubilee next year. Aspirant towns were informed that three factors will determine those who win out; notable features, including regional or national significance; historical features, including royal ones; and a “forward looking

attitude” i.e. a business friendly one. City status is seen as a prerequisite for attracting investment. All the towns who voted in favour of elected mayors on “democracy day” had strong support from the local media and are included in this competition.

The Blair government’s urban policy states that England’s regions require regional capitals or groups of regional capitals that are strong economic and cultural centres. Urban regeneration is promoted as providing the basis for increasing urban competitiveness. Strong local government is necessary to promote further devolution and regionalism. Elected mayors to run cities fit these criteria.

The realisation that regional economies are no longer intrinsically linked through the production process to other regions in the same nation-state has acted as a spur for cities to establish their own relations with international capital and to lobby independently for European Union financial assistance. By offering their regions as competitive labour platforms, they hope to tap into international investment flows. This intensifies inter-regional competition to attract capital and the battle for investment and jobs forces cities in a war of each against all.

All British cities are currently building the same type of “quality of life” projects deemed necessary to raise their international profiles and attract the cosmopolitan global investor. With British cities becoming Xeroxed copies of each other, with identikit facilities like museums, sporting facilities, airports, hotels, exhibition halls, etc., the competition becomes ever tighter. One criterion where the city can undercut the competition, however temporarily, is by retrenching and privatising social services and facilities. Who better to carry out this task than an autonomous and unaccountable political opportunist with no obligations to working people? Step forward Mr. Mayor!



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**