

Bosses beckon

The leaders of 12 major city councils are about to have greatness thrust upon them, in some cases very reluctantly. Mark Smulian spoke to some those in line for the hot seat.

Under the Localism Bill, the government intends to turn these dozen into 'shadow mayors' ahead of referendums planned for May 2012 to decide whether or not they should become actual mayors.

Those affected are the leaders of Birmingham, Bradford, Bristol, Coventry, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Sheffield and Wakefield.

In its explanation of the Bill, the government says: "Almost every major city in the world has a strong and powerful executive mayor. 'Mayors give local citizens a powerful local leader and figurehead for municipal government, better deliver local economic growth, boost local democratic engagement and enhance the prestige of a city.'"

These assertions are, though, contentious in all three main parties, none of which is solidly for or against elected mayors.

Nor is the public. Only 13 out of 37 mayoral referendums to date have produced a 'yes' vote and one of those, Stoke-on-Trent, has since scrapped the post.

Despite this round of mayors being an initiative from the Conservative wing of the government, only one Tory – Birmingham's Mike Whitby – would become a shadow mayor, and he leads a joint administration. The other 11 are all Labour or Liberal Democrat.

One prominent figure with his hat in the ring is Sir Peter Soulsby, who is seeking the Labour nomination for Leicester, one of very few places to have used the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 to create an elected mayor, and which consequently will have its election this May without a referendum.

Sir Peter was council leader from 1981-99 and MP for Leicester South since 2005. "I am very much in favour of elected mayors," he says. "It is a democratic option that gives power to the community to decide who is to lead it, rather than councillors deciding that after an election."

Although he had a long stint as leader, Sir Peter says: "The prospect of being elected by the people to pursue a vision for the city's future is something very exciting at a time when things will be very difficult because of the government's savage budget cuts.

"The difference is that a leader is just that, the leader of the council not of the whole community, and to be accountable to the community is the great advantage."

He says the issues he would particularly want to pursue are regeneration, elderly care and education, which he admits is "not as good as in some other major cities".

Ministers' intention to pass powers down to elected mayors "is one aspect of the government's localism that I find encouraging but we need to make it a reality," Sir Peter says.

"One issue is raising finance locally rather than just relying on council tax and grant which at an unusually high proportion of a council's income gives the government too much control."

Leicester is a very diverse city, around 36 per cent non-white according to the 2001 census,

“If the idea of having an elected mayor is such a good one, why has no party proposed that we govern the UK that way with an elected prime minister.”



Ian Greenwood

but Sir Peter insists it is possible for one person to represent the whole community.

"I think Leicester's people have gone beyond just looking at the ethnicity of a candidate and instead look to who is best for the job," he says.

It is this point though that worries Bradford's Labour leader Ian Greenwood. He says: "Bradford is a very diverse place geographically, socially, economically, ethnically and culturally and to move forward you have to recognise that diversity and that cannot be represented by local government being encapsulated in one person. People want to be involved, not have one person telling them what to do.

"We have yet to discuss it in the Labour party, but I would expect to be part of a campaign against a mayoralty in a referendum.

"In fairness to the other parties here, they have recognised that Bradford is a very diverse place and I have never heard them say they support a mayor."

for big cities

“Bristol is a city with 400,000 people and a budget of three quarters of a billion pounds, can someone off the television really run that when they have no experience?”

Councillor Greenwood also has more philosophical objections to elected mayoralities. “If the idea of having an elected mayor is such a good one, why has no party proposed that we govern the UK that way with an elected prime minister who would be all-powerful?” he asks.

“We live in a parliamentary democracy where power rests with elected representatives drawn from different parts of the community and you need everybody on board like that to move forward. My view is that people do not want a presidential style of local government.”

He thinks councillors would be left only with a “very frustrating” scrutiny role, and thinks having around 90 of them holding one mayor to account would be absurd.

Sion Simon stood down as Labour MP for Birmingham Erdington at the general election to seek nomination as elected mayor of Birmingham, a post which did not then exist.

He explains this move by saying: “I changed my mind about elected mayors during the course of the nine years I was a Birmingham MP, not because of some abstract belief in a new system, but from practical frustration that the city council doesn’t work.

“It is a dysfunctional institution, over-centralised, over-mighty, not efficient and not responsive, and all of that, more than anything, because of a lack of real accountability.”

Mr Simon believes real power in the council rests with senior officers who “may be good people working hard in public service, but they

are not responsible to the public; not at all democratically accountable, and even a good council leader is not directly accountable to a big city electorate in the way that an elected mayor will be”.

Elected mayoralities are, he says, “about where the buck stops, without a public sense of which you will never get the kind of cultural and organisation change that’s needed in Birmingham’s city government. For an elected mayor, when bad things happen, there’s nowhere to hide. And that’s what makes the difference”.

Newcastle’s Liberal Democrat leader David Faulkner does not relish becoming a shadow mayor. “I don’t think either us or the Labour party in Newcastle have any appetite for elected mayors and I would not be surprised if both parties campaign for a ‘no’ vote,” he says.

“There would be too much power in the hands of one person and it is just aping an American system for the sake of it.

“It might work there, but we have a different system where even leaders are ward councillors rooted in their communities.”

He adds: “I recently visited Groningen, one of our twin cities, where they were complaining that the mayors have no constituents and so are disconnected from communities.”

Three of the north east’s 12 unitary councils have elected mayors but Councillor Faulkner says he sees “no real evidence that those councils are better led or are better performing than the others”.



Barbara Janke

Barbara Janke, Liberal Democrat leader of Bristol, agrees. “I don’t feel that to give councils more powers you need to have an elected mayor, you could give them to the leader and cabinet. I just do not see the need for creating these authoritarian figures.”

She also fears that celebrities drawn from entertainment or sport might get elected on populist issues to a post they could not fill.

“Bristol is a city with 400,000 people and a budget of three quarters of a billion pounds, can someone off the television really run that when they have no experience?” she wonders.

Councillors Faulkner and Greenwood both say that the cabinet system creates discontent among backbench councillors, who feel excluded from power, and feel an elected mayor would make this problem worse.

Sir Peter though says scrutiny “can be effective if it is properly resourced and organised and my experience in parliament has shown how the select committees can be very effective and are taken seriously and we need to learn from that”.

Next year’s referendums are likely to produce some unusual political alignments as leaders are dragged, willingly or not, into mayoral status.