

Greater Manchester's Elected Mayor – A Step Forward for Devolution?

By [Ciarán Morrissey](#), Comment Editor (2015/16)
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Image: [Pablo Fernández](#)

Two weeks ago, the Chancellor, George Osborne, announced that Greater Manchester was to get a directly elected mayor in the same vein as the Mayor of London. The rationale behind this decision was that it is easier to govern efficiently when power is devolved and local people are given more direct influence.

It is understandable that devolution in England should follow a different course than that of the UK. Over 80% of the UK's population lives in England, meaning that any English Parliament would absolutely dominate the other three regional assemblies. It therefore makes sense that devolution ought to occur within England, rather than simply devolving England as a whole.

It also makes sense that the deprived northern cities, such as Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool and Newcastle ought to have their own mayoralties, as this would turn the cities into singular economic and political entities that could shift the balance of power and opportunity further away from London.

But it seems that the people of the North do not want this to happen, and it is instead being forced upon them. In 2012, ten cities were given the opportunity to vote on whether they would like to have a directly elected mayor (an eleventh, Doncaster, also had a referendum, but this was on retaining their mayor, not introducing a new one). Of these, nine voted to keep their current system of cabinet-style government. The city that did vote for a new mayor – Bristol – is not in the North of England. Bradford, Leeds, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield and Wakefield all voted against the mayoral plans, instead opting to keep the status quo. Manchester, the city which is now being given a mayoralty, voted on a margin of 46.8% to 53.2%. This is a slim margin, but it is still rather decisive. It is not much less than the margin of the Scottish Referendum, an issue that the Coalition seems eager to leave dead and buried.

Furthermore, while it seems like a good idea for England to be split up so that its largest economic areas are covered by directly elected mayoralties, there's no reason why this shouldn't be extended to the other nations in the United Kingdom. Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Cardiff, Swansea, Belfast and Derry are all significantly larger than Wakefield, and are all governed by Cabinet-style city councils. If we are going to offer the English cities directly-elected executive government, it seems only fair that we offer the

Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish cities of comparable size the same opportunity.

Finally, though the Greater London mayoralty has existed from 2000, its mayors were of the same party as the Prime Minister every year other than 2008-2010. The diverse political landscape of London means that mayoral elections are difficult to predict from afar, and results are far from set in stone. This is not the case in Manchester. Like many places in the North, it would take nothing short of a miracle to avoid a Labour majority. This means that whenever the Tories are in power, Manchester will be ruled by an extremely powerful and adversarial executive. We cannot deny Manchester a mayor on account of the party they vote for. That is the antithesis of equal representation. We must, however, be careful when we are doling out these devolved areas. Britain is still, for the most part, locked into a two party system. We must bear this in mind when considering any handover of powers. Perhaps a change in our voting system is necessary before we go down the path of federalism.

September's referendum opened the door for a real discussion on federalisation in the UK, and it's a discussion in which we must all take part. But we must avoid, for everyone's sake, rushing into ill-formed ideas with far-reaching consequences and no popular mandate.



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