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CLÉS Bulletin is a topical summary of articles which have appeared in the professional press. Its aim is to provide a pithy précis of a subject area, drawing out the specific and common issues raised in the individual articles.

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Directly Elected Mayors

The issue of directly elected mayors (DEMs) raises important questions about local democratic accountability, leadership and local service provision, all of which lie at the heart of local democracy in England. CLÉS recently published a Local Work - *Local Democracy and Directly-Elected Mayors*¹ - in which two leading protagonists debated the compelling arguments for and against mayors. This has been just one of the showcases for one of the most heated discussions in local government. This Bulletin delves into the debate by looking at recent press coverage on the topic of directly elected mayors.

*Municipal Journal (MJ)*² featured an article presenting the arguments against DEMs. It points out that opponents can already argue with some force that their scepticism has been borne out by both the numerical lack of executive mayors and the low turnouts that accompanied their elections.

MJ considers the opinions of some key political parties. The Conservative Party have argued against the imposition of the mayoral ballot on councils by Whitehall, suggesting strongly that, "*there will be little enthusiasm for mayors unless councils are subject to*

less interference from regional and central government."

The Green Party have consistently argued against the creation of directly elected mayors due to concerns about the concentration of decision making powers in the hands of one person.

MJ goes on to look at the opinions of the Labour Campaign for Local Government, whose secretary, Dr Peter Latham argued that US-style managers with cabinets were "*the optimum internal management arrangement for privatised local state services, nullifying the role of elected councillors in pursuit of post-Fordist and post-modernist theories of local governance.*" He also points out that no major UK city had yet endorsed the idea of executive mayors with the concept being rejected in 19 of the 30 referenda held to date.

MJ concludes with what it claims to be the "*most concisely argued reasons against the concept*", from Professor George Jones. He argues that the executive mayor approach weakened local democracy by promoting celebrity and the enthusiastic personality at the expense of politics, policy and programmes and states that, "*A single person cannot reflect the complex social, ethnic, economic, cultural and political diversity of our localities, especially of our cities*".

*MJ*³ also featured a piece written by Lewisham mayor, Steve Bullock, who responded to the arguments against DEMs. He has campaigned for the direct election of mayors since he was a council leader more than ten years ago and states that increasing transparency has been the critical argument and the one that can make a real difference.

He points out that the difference between being a mayor rather than a leader is that he doesn't have to spend time trying to get re-elected and can focus on what really matters.

The *Local Government Chronicle (LGC)*⁴ looks at the mayoral referendums and what lessons can be learned from the results. It reports that there have been 30 separate referendums, in which 19 mayors were rejected and 11 approved.

LGC says that advocates of DEMs expected far more success and that they based this view on surveys that showed over two-thirds of those questioned were in favour of directly elected mayors. It suggests the lesson here is to be wary in assuming opinions polls provide guidance on issues the public has not previously thought about. *LGC* looks at the public's

¹ Randle, Anna and Latham, Peter *Local Democracy and Directly-Elected Mayors* Local Work No 51 July 2003, CLÉS

² Cooper, Phil *A rotten core for the Big Apple* *Municipal Journal* 15 May 2003 p.20

³ Bullock, Steve *Why I'm not just a man in a suit* *Municipal Journal* 27 Mar 2003 p.11

⁴ Jones, George and Stewart, John *Unelected mayors* *Local Government Chronicle* 24 Jan 2003 p.19

views, identifying the key concern to have been the concentration of power in one person.

*Housing Today*⁵ profiles Middlesbrough mayor, Ray Mallon, who stood as an independent last year and became Middlesbrough's first elected mayor in a landslide victory with more than 60% of the vote, outpolling his nearest rival by almost 10,000 votes.

Housing Today looks at Mallon's plans for Middlesbrough, which include the "Raising Hope, Alleviating Fear" initiative, aimed at tackling crime. Mallon's background as a police officer and his robust approach to crime prevention and reduction is helping cut crime rates drastically in Middlesbrough.

It looks at critics of his approach who claim that he is obsessed with cutting crime to the exclusion of all else. Mallon acknowledges the regeneration role of housing and social services, but admits that crime and disorder is his primary concern, but defends this approach arguing that he sees beyond crime statistics and has set himself that aim of focusing on the environment in the widest sense, then regeneration, business and transport.

The *Guardian*⁶ provides a general overview of how DEMs have fared so far. It reports that when the Government first unveiled its plans for mayors, the vast majority of councillors were opposed, as critics believed that mayors would yield too much power.

However, the *Guardian* tells us that councillors have the power to block a mayor's budget with a two-thirds majority, and highlights examples in Stoke, Hartlepool and North Tyneside where this has caused problems.

It looks back on the initial enthusiasm for DEMs and the hopes that they would somehow transform the local political landscape. It argues that this view now seems rather naïve, given that the notion of a mayor has been rejected in almost two-thirds of the 30 places that have put it to a vote, that public enthusiasm for the mayors in place is low, and that their impact on the quality of services cannot be quantified yet.

The *Guardian* concludes that interest in mayors in both the press and the public is growing and that their performance over the next few years will be crucial to their future.

It is only possible to speculate at this point as to whether or not directly elected mayors are an effective model for local government, given the short amount of time the elected mayors have been in place. What is certain, however, is that the controversy surrounding them is likely to continue - as opinions on both sides

are potent - and presenting those views through the medium of the press helps ensure the debate about local democracy remains active.

For more information on this topic or copies of the Local Work Debate, *Local Democracy and Directly-Elected Mayors*, please contact:

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⁵ Hansen, Marius W *Mallon on a mission* Housing Today 1 Aug 2003 p.20-21

⁶ Parker, Simon *Chains of office* Guardian 12 March 2003 p.10