

Opinion

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# England’s metro mayors make a farce of local democracy. They must be scrapped

*Simon Jenkins*



They were meant to refresh local politics, not confuse it. Starmer must devolve proper powers to every city and town

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England’s 12 “metro mayors” should be abolished. Metro mayorships are artificial creations whose regional geography rarely reflects any civic identity or pride. Towns

**E** and cities should have properly elected mayors, as is common in other democracies. These regional entities were invented by Whitehall in the 2010s, supposedly to order transport and investment. Their boundaries were confused with those of near-meaningless police commissioners. As instruments of local democracy, they are a farce.

These individuals - distinct from mayors elected for single cities - have served largely as chairs of “combined authorities”. Thus, until 2023 Liverpool had its own local mayor and a second one for its surrounding region. The West of England metro mayor covers Bristol and Bath, but Bristol had its own mayor until the role was [abolished in May of this year](#). Cambridge shares a mayor with Peterborough. [According to the Institute for Government](#), the average turnout to vote in the 2021 metro mayor elections was only 35%. The results of any votes are invariably attributed to events in Downing Street rather than the state of trams or freeports. They are glorified opinion polls.

When elected mayors were proposed by the 1995 Commission for Local Democracy (which I chaired), they were intended to refresh local leadership and increase participation in elections and local democracy in general. Identifiable personalities would replace stale and anonymous party cabals. On coming to power in 1997, Tony Blair accepted the concept, but he botched its introduction. He left the question of introducing elected mayors down to local authorities, who were required to hold a referendum. The mayors were given no additional powers or resources. In most cases, political parties controlled them.

Initially London stole the show, with Ken Livingstone defying his own party to win strategic control of the capital in 2000. Some metro mayors succeeded at self-promotion. The [recently defeated Andy Street](#) managed to identify himself with the West Midlands rather than just Birmingham. Most people think of Andy Burnham as the mayor of the city of Manchester, though he is not. The one Tory metro mayor to survive last week was the controversial mayor of Tees Valley, [Ben Houchen](#).

So-called single-authority mayors, those fully responsible for local services, have often been effective. In the London boroughs of Newham, Hackney and Lewisham, they have undoubtedly galvanised their localities. Others have made their mark on cities such as Leicester, Liverpool, Middlesbrough, Bristol and even Hartlepool, with its former “monkey mayor”, Stuart Drummond, who held the position until it was abolished in 2013. (He first stood as [H’Angus the monkey](#), Hartlepool United’s official mascot, on a ticket that promised to give every school child a free banana.)

Every incoming British government swears it will reverse centralisation and restore power to local democracy. Apart from Blair’s hesitant innovation, none has done so. [Keir Starmer](#), in a parody of Brexit, has said he recognises “the desire of communities to [stand on their own feet](#) - it’s what ‘take back control’ meant.” He promises to devolve “new powers over employment support, transport, energy,



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