Directly elected mayors in the UK and Italy

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This post examines the emergence of directly elected mayors in UK and Italian local government, focusing, in particular, on the democratic value in imposing term limits on holders of the office.

Directly elected mayors have been a feature of UK local government since the year 2000. The newly established Greater London Authority (GLA) was created at that time to provide upper-tier local governance for the Greater London area following the abolition of its predecessor, the Greater London Council, 15 years previously. The executive arrangements chosen for the GLA was one in which executive power rested with a directly elected mayor, with a 25-strong London Assembly serving primarily to hold the mayor to account. Shortly after the creation of the GLA, the Local Government Act 2000 was passed, this, *inter alia*, making provision for English councils to have the option to adopt the directly elected mayoral 'model as part of their executive arrangements' (Stanton, 2023: 121). Any council seeking to adopt this model would need the approval of local people in a referendum. Despite the ostensible enthusiasm of UK central government to establish wide adoption of the mayoral model, however, 'in the first five years of the [2000] Act's operation, [only] 34 referendums were held, these giving rise to just 12 mayors' (Stanton, 2023: 122, citing Sandford, 2022: 19). Lack of appetite at the local level motivated adjustment to the 2000 Act's provisions. Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 did away with the referendum requirement, empowering local authorities to adopt the mayoral model by council resolution. Only two mayors were established on this basis. The Localism Act 2011 then reinstated the referendum requirement but empowered the Secretary of State to require one to be held. Only one mayor was created under this Act. 'Between June 2001 and October 2021, 55 referendums were held on the question of whether a directly elected mayor should be established, these giving rise to just 16 mayors, three of which have since been abolished' (Stanton, 2023: 124). A third strand in which elected mayors have emerged in the UK is in the context of combined authorities overseen by metro mayor. Combined authorities, established under the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009, are created when two or more local councils come together to pool their resources and provide broad strategic governance over a larger area (the individual councils remain in operation as normal). Under the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016, these combined authorities can be overseen by a metro mayor. In this way, and not entirely dissimilar from London, the mayor serves as a figurehead for a region, providing broad strategic leadership at a level above local councils. In terms of the way in which the mayoral model works in the UK, where mayors operate within individual local councils (rather than at the strategic level in London or in combined authorities), the position comes with relatively limited power and can, in reality, do nothing that indirectly elected council leaders in other parts of the country are already permitted to do. Even at the strategic level, the London mayor and the metro mayors wield limited power. Their responsibilities generally involve oversight of services that cover a large geographical area – for example, transport – with more of the genuine power still be exercised by the individual councils in London and combined authority areas respectively. The story of directly elected mayors in England, therefore, is one that speaks of central enthusiasm for the model with lukewarm local willingness for its adoption. This is hardly surprising in view of the limited power that the mayoral model attracts, particularly at the local authority level.

Directly elected mayors have been a feature of Italian local government since 1993 and, unlike experiences in the UK, it is a model that 'is generally considered successful' (Baldini, 2002: 374). This success stems from the increased 'stability and improved decision-making' that the model permits; the potential for '[g]reater accountability' it affords; and a stronger 'personalization of power' that it provides (Sancino and Castellani, 2016: 2). In Italy, directly elected mayors can be found in the governments of the communes. In this way, 'the mayor represents the municipality both politically and legally and acts as the main government official in the functions delegated by the state to the municipality' (Sancino and Castellani, 2016: 1). A key distinction between the English and Italian mayoral model is the level of power and responsibility afforded to the latter. Copus (2006: 91), for instance, observes that unlike the British counterpart, an Italian mayor 'has the power to select and dismiss heads of offices and services and managers of the council as well as any representative on external agencies'. Moreover,

the tiers of Italian local government 'which have a directly elected political head are responsible between them for a wide range of vital public services … [against this backdrop] the Italian elected mayor … acts as a powerful focal point of political decision-making and is able to speak in all tiers of Italian government as a legitimate political leader and ambassador for the area' (Copus, 2006: 145).

Another distinction between the UK and Italian models of directly elected mayors concerns the length of holders' terms. Whilst in both countries, and similar to other political positions, elected mayors are subjected to frequent and regular votes, in Italy, mayors are permitted to serve a maximum of two terms. There is no such restriction in the UK, where mayors are potentially free to serve for as long as they win the elections. This said, it is notable that, with regard to the most established mayoral position in the UK – that of London Mayor – the first two holders of the office, Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson, both served two terms. Johnson stood for a third term in 2016, though lost that year's mayoral election to Sadiq Khan. Khan is himself standing for election again in May 2024; victory would give him an unprecedented third term. The notion of limiting elected leaders to a maximum two terms in office is a prominent one across the world. George Washington, for example, was famously encouraged to seek re-election after having served for 8 years as the USA's first president. He declined, though, observing that long rule by a single individual was precisely what the American Revolutionary War had sought to overthrow. Subsequent presidents (with the exception of Franklin D Roosevelt) followed Washington's conventional lead until the 1950s, when the US Constitution was amended to impose on presidents a maximum two terms in the White House. Term limits are seen as a central element in preserving a free and stable democracy. They restrict the power of individual leaders, preventing them from holding office for too long a period of time, during when the consistent rule of the same leader / party might entrench a particular ideology at the heart of government, and they encourage a healthy level of political debate and, in some cases, party alternation (see Maltz, 2007). The benefits that term limits bring are emphasised when we identify those countries where central leaders are not subject to such restriction. In both Russia and Belarus, for example, Putin and Lukashenko have abolished the limits on their terms, the consequence being decades of the same ruler and an undermining of democratic ideals as a result. Lukashenko has been President of Belarus since 1994, whilst Putin could remain in office until 2036. The detrimental effects of such longevity can be seen by a simple examination of the state of democracy in the two countries (see Freedom House, 2024).

Term limits are not so common at the local government level, but their benefits are the same. Requiring regular change in the holders of local political office is key in ensuring constantly fresh local rule, encouraging lively debate and competition, and laying the foundation for local people to engage with differing parties and changeable policies. It is interesting, therefore, that abolition – and extension – of mayors' term limits in Italy has recently been introduced (see Law No. 7 of 2024). In this Blog, Tubertini explains how mayors in localities with populations between 5,000 and 15,000 are now permitted to serve for three terms, whilst mayors in localities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants are no longer subject to term limits (see Tubertini, 2024). Tubertini criticises the reform as not being compatible with democratic principle. Whilst the issue is not prevalent in UK political discourse, this is a conclusion with which this post agrees. Term limits, whilst not common at the local level, ensure a valuable check on the use of power and permit local governance to be frequently refreshed by new individuals, different parties, and novel policies. In the UK, where no public office is subject to term limits, localities are often represented by the same councillors and mayors for many years. Indeed, the London Borough of Newham was, until 2018, represented by the same mayor for 23 years. Whilst no judgment is made of that particular instance, in general terms, permitting local leaders to remain in office indefinitely (subject only to winning an election) risks diminishing the representative nature of local leadership, hindering lively political debate, and potentially obstructing the satisfaction of appetites for change. Other factors are relevant. In the UK, for instance, public engagement with local politics is typically very low and there can be a paucity of potential candidates when positions such as magistrates, councillors, police authority membership arise. Imposition of term limits in this context, therefore, would potentially present difficulties in the availability of candidates. Tubertini postulates that a difficulty in finding candidates might be said to motivate the introduction of Law No. 7 of 2024, however, local government reform should not be inspired by a lack of public engagement but should, instead, aim to improve it.

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