

JONATHAN BRAY



Devolution is where the action is

This month's elections demonstrated how society and politics are changing as Westminster cedes more powers to more places

▶ Not so long ago when the national media covered local elections, the only possibly interesting thing about it they could think of was to extrapolate the results into what it might mean for the next general election. There was a bit of this in the May elections this time too. But when it did crop up it looked increasingly besides the point. The election of Sadiq Khan in London, the onward march of the SNP in Scotland, and the election of Marvin Rees in Bristol were interesting in their own right. They said something profound about the way society and politics are changing.

In fact it began to dawn upon the London-based elites that they were experiencing a strange sensation. The feeling that perhaps not everything revolved around Westminster and them after all. A slew of eureka moment articles following to that effect. When Andy Burnham threw his hat into the ring for the Greater Manchester Combined Authority mayoral race, this big movement in the centre of gravity was confirmed.

Indeed as power shifts within the United Kingdom, Westminster is starting to look more like an ersatz public school debating society complete with all its unnecessarily impenetrable processes that only the most insider of insiders can understand. Which I suspect was the point of retaining all the clubby anachronisms at which Westminster excels. However with the fresher feel of devolved politics - from Holyrood to City Hall - all those Westminster rituals are starting to

look stale as politicians can arguably achieve far more in devolved politics than they ever could as lobby fodder in Westminster.

This trend towards the sub-national being where the action is is not however unique just to the United Kingdom. It's a trend that's happening everywhere. Superstar academic Bruce Katz of the Brookings Institute gave a lecture in Hamburg recently where he summarised what's happening in the US. He said: "In the aftermath of the Great Recession, the leaders of US cities and metros recognise that with our federal government mired in partisan gridlock and most states adrift, they are essentially on their own to grapple with super-sized economic, social, and environmental challenges. The cavalry is not coming. The aging of our societies are compelling national

governments to shift enormous resources to care for our elderly populations. The federal government in the United States, for example, dedicates three fourths of its budget to safety net programs and the military - it is essentially a health insurance company with an army."

He went on to say that cities are stepping up to fill the gap, "doing the hard work to grow jobs and restructure the economy for the long haul. And they are doing this in a way that leverages their distinct assets and advantages in the global economy". And he says that something similar is happening in Europe too where urban leaders are "creating new patterns of innovation, new norms of governance, and new forms of finance that will be applied, adapted, and tailored across the world".

Coming down from these giddy heights to what all of this means for the UK, I would say that it means that after the EU referendum is out of the way (assuming a 'stay' vote as if it's a 'no' vote anything could happen) attention will shift to the CA mayoral races in England. What London has (and what Manchester aspires to as the frontrunner outside London) is likely to provide the benchmark for other city region mayoral hopefuls. The level of ambition for transport is likely to go up a notch. More widely it also means that institutions and sectors need to press the reset button on how they work. Having a singular approach to what you do - as in seeking to impose a single national approach - won't work anymore. And this is a good thing for national bodies too as innovation will come from the cities and spread out from there - as it has from devolved London, from Oyster to the expansion of cycling, and from electric buses to the London Overground.



London's new mayor, Sadiq Khan

“The level of ambition for transport is likely to go up a notch”

A different kind of Buses Bill debate?

It's here at last and at first sight contains something for everyone - from improved arrangements for those who want to continue to seek to get the best from the existing deregulated system, to a better way to get to franchising for those that want a fully integrated public transport network. If the details are got right then it should help to underpin a much more nuanced and locally appropriate mixed economy of bus provision from partnership by handshake through to partnership underwritten by more formal agreements through to partnership through franchising of networks.

The only people who won't like the principle of the bill will be those who continue to argue that, in effect, there are no circumstances, in which franchising should be introduced anywhere outside London. We shall see how the debate unfolds but it's interesting how many operators are now coming out in welcoming the need for the full range of options in the bill - which suggests a very different kind of debate to the way it has been characterised hitherto.

Bus manufacturing to find its voice?

Earlier in the month I had the pleasure of visiting the Alexander Dennis factory at Scarborough for a tour and also to talk about how we can make better connections between the Urban Transport Group and the industry. One thing that stands out is that the bus industry has a great story to tell - as a successful British export industry, about the jobs and skills it supports and how the bus is arguably the most technologically advanced vehicle on the road these days.

Indeed the bus manufacturers are in danger of showing up the rail industry because as UK bus builders are turning out vehicles with Wi-Fi, USB chargers, big windows, state of the art carbon emission-reducing engines as well as plenty of leg room and comfortable seats, these features (in working order) are not shall we say exactly ubiquitous on rail. In some ways the rail sector is going into reverse with shrinking leg room and harder, less comfortable seats (and no this doesn't represent the victory of the deregulation model over the franchising model as I was also on one of the world's first electric double deckers last week - in London - and the new commuter trains in Scotland get it right).

The challenge for the UK's bus



Alexander Dennis's Enviro400 City bus

“The bus manufacturing industry should find a way to tell its story”

manufacturing sector is that it is a small player in larger trade and business groups (SMMT, CBI and so on) but not so big in its own right to go its own way. But however it's done the bus manufacturing industry should find a way to tell its story in a way that gets the hearing it deserves.

Whose data is it anyway?

A few weeks back (with the Future Cities Catapult) we held a fascinating 'getting smarter on data event' for our members. The aim of the day was looking at how to get the best from the tsunami of data now available to transport authorities in order that they can plan better transport systems and so that travellers can best use those systems. As you might expect a lot came out of it but one theme stuck out for me which was whether or not we will get to a position where users have more control over the data they generate?

At present we all fill out lots of online forms (often suspiciously and reluctantly) so that

different companies can use that data to improve our 'customer experience' and in the process make money. The end result means our data is sprayed about in a way that both commercialises it and provides us with useful services - but in a somewhat chaotic and unsatisfactory way. But is a new paradigm on its way whereby we fill out a form once with a single trusted data manager service which holds our core data and to whom we give our permissions once for what kind of data it should pass on to what kind of company and for what purpose? It sounds good to me - and to the EU too it seems. If there is a shift from customer-focused data to person-centric data then the transport sector (as with every other sector) is going to have to work harder to earn the right of access to peoples' data through in return providing more trusted, comprehensive (but targeted) information and benefits. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.