

## ***SUPER SIZE ME?***

Michael Heseltine may have grabbed the headlines in calling for 'Super Bosses' but the whole debate is somewhat skewed in looking at the issue of structures rather than the substance of leadership within local authorities.

Assuming that it is necessary to fiddle around with titles and roles of council chief executives and leaders acknowledges that the perception of local government, as a dynamic force for change, is still a concept that eludes all but those inside its own inner sanctum. As a public service Local Government is perceived as an anorak rather than a designer pashmina. So would dynamic 'Super Bosses' simply create a media sexy image for local government or do far more than that in allowing, as Michael Heseltine called for, great cities to "elect great leaders"?

Local Government leadership can manifest itself in many different ways. Marred by the often public breakdown of relationships, between those elected to serve the public and those paid a retainer to carry out the elected members wishes, we too often forget the success stories that ought to be celebrated as triumphs of visionary leadership.

The sometimes stilted pace of change within central government projects stands in stark contrast to the rapid transformation of our Victorian municipalities; tributes to the city regeneration created by the visionary leadership and shared commitment of council leaders and chief executives across the UK. Right across Europe the UK has led the way, not just in creating tourist markets from its city centres, as important as the tourist pound is to our economy, but in making city centres liveable outside of the 9 to 5 office trade. The regeneration of cities is not an accidental by-product of local government it is a core function that graces the manifesto commitments of all the major political parties and will feature heavily in the forthcoming local government elections.

Could the transformation of city centres such as Glasgow, Birmingham, Newcastle and Manchester have been better if only one person had been responsible? A 'Super Boss' with possibly greater powers than those currently available? Whilst it is doubtful if any council leader, or for that matter chief executive, would sniff at the chance for greater autonomy and more powers to boot, there is little evidence that structure alone will enhance leadership capacity. What we do have evidence of is a huge centralist snub from Government in failing to credit local councils with the leadership demonstrated through the political and civic structures.

Local Government leadership has already led to massive inward investment in our cities. It has created highly skilled jobs through stimulating the knowledge economy and seizing brown field site redevelopment opportunities. As major concerns move out of London and into our redeveloped cities, these communities are of course eager to meet and greet the new investment opportunities to bolster growing local economies. It would have been unthinkable, even just a decade ago, for the BBC to be involved in a

relocation 'beauty contest' with cities such as Salford, as issues of capacity and perceptions of poor infrastructure and localised support would have threatened the very idea of moving away from the capital. Ironically the relocations are away from London, a city with its own Elected Mayor, complete with powers that escape other council leaders.

It is not just on the domestic front that local government has demonstrated its leadership capacity. Manchester's 'China Gateway' project exploited the trade opportunities with the East before it had even featured on the radar of central government. Councils across the nations have grasped international investment opportunities and continue to market their wares well beyond the domestic boundaries.

So with all these successes are Michael Heseltine's comments to be dismissed as old wine in new bottles? Is this not just the Elected Mayors debate rehashed as news worthy topic in the run up to the local elections? On that one we shall have to wait and see what the fleshed out proposals bring as a result of David Cameron's Cities Taskforce. For now perhaps we should celebrate a little more on what has been achieved by Local Government .....even if we remain anoraks in the public eyes!

**Paul O'Brien is Chief Executive and Mo Baines, Principal Advisor with the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE)**

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