

## **Book Review: Filling in the ‘missing middle’?**

*Devolution in Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region: The first mayoral term* by Georgina Blakely and Brendan Evans, Manchester University Press, 2023.

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the topic of devolution in England, with research underlining discontent and anxiety among the English population with existing governance structures (Henderson and Wyn Jones 2020). Since the establishment of (mayoral) combined authorities under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, a nascent academic literature has emerged on the topic, examining the rationale and processes behind devolution deals (Kenealy 2016; Sandford 2020), the prevalence and experience of (placed-based) leadership (Fenwick and Johnston 2020; Roberts 2020), and more recently the experience of sub-national governance in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic (Diamond and Laffin 2022). The publication of Blakely and Evans’ book focused on the first terms of the mayoral combined authorities in Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region is a welcome addition to this growing literature, offering a detailed, in-depth comparative analysis of the ambitions, experiences, constraints and challenges of devolved governance in both city-regions.

The book is divided into three parts: setting the scene, policy areas and political analysis. Part I provides an authoritative discussion on the convoluted history of central-local relations in England, characterised by constant tension between centralisation-decentralisation dynamics. Drawing on New Institutionalism as a theoretical framework, the authors seek to underline the path dependent nature of sub-national governance in England. Chapter 3 thus discusses the historical evolution of governance in the two city-regions, details the main aspects of the devolution deals and briefly covers the first mayoral elections in 2017. Consisting of six chapters, Part II examines the activities of the metro-mayors in various policy areas (economic development, transport, skills, public service reform, housing and spatial strategies, and the environment) and analyses their impact in these policy fields. The thick description in these chapters, a significant strength of the book, provides a detailed discussion on the short and long-term ambitions of mayors Burnham and Rotherham, including areas of successful policy initiatives (e.g. in tackling rough-sleeping) as well as analysis of the constraints, conflicts and challenges to fulfilling their mayoral ambitions. Each chapter offers a robust discussion, underscoring the importance of context in the success or failure of policy initiatives. As the authors adroitly show, austerity, Brexit and Covid-19 left (and continue to leave) their mark on each policy area. The final part of the book offers comparative analysis on the experiences of the mayoral combined authorities in governance relations and the ambition to ‘do politics differently’. Drawing on the theoretical framework, in chapter 10 the authors discuss the prevalence of place-based politics and the complexity of governance relations both within the combined authorities (with local leaders in Greater Manchester and the Liverpool City Region) and with the various departments in central government. In Chapter 11 the authors focus on diversity, representation and participation as key themes in ‘doing politics differently’, noting only modest advances in boosting representation in both regions, but more notable initiatives in increasing the voices of women, young people and interest-specific groups in policy debates. The final chapter charts the development of devolution in both city-regions and sketches potential scenarios for their future evolution.

As both the Manchester and Liverpool city-regions continue their devolution journeys, this is a timely and insightful book. The analysis underlines the complexity of devolved governance in both cases (and across England more widely) and sheds light on how the metro-mayors have used both hard and soft powers to give voice to issues, convene stakeholder networks and ultimately deliver policy initiatives. One of the principal strengths of the book is its rich empirical analysis, derived from a combination of research methods: semi-structured interviews with more than 60 officials and stakeholders, focus groups, participant observation of official meetings and mayoral question times and document analysis. This rich data provides illuminating insights into the working of devolution between 2017 and 2021 and the opportunities and challenges for its future development. At various points in the book the authors highlight the lack of understanding of the role and powers of the metro-mayors among the general public, linked with the wider oft-cited observation that combined authorities are the product of elite-negotiated deals with little to no public consultation and engagement. While there are some interesting observations on public opinion, a welcome addition to Part III would be a more detailed discussion on how the residents of both city-regions understand and evaluate the metro-mayors' first terms in office.

Overall, this is an excellent book that makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of devolved governance in England. It is essential reading for those interested in the evolution of local governance and devolution in England, central-local relations and territorial politics more widely. The analysis underlines the validity of the much-quoted dictum, 'devolution is a process, not an event'. I very much look forward to volume two on the second mayoral terms.

## References

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