

Book review

Cities and communities beyond COVID-19: how local leadership can change our future for the better

Robin Hambleton, Bristol University Press 2020, ISBN:
978-1-5292-1585-4, 180 pages

As communities continue to grapple with the devastating impacts of COVID-19 and adapt to the new challenges this global pandemic has given rise to—not least in terms of economic depression, public health pressures and social isolation—the work of Prof. Robin Hambleton continues to remind us of the vital role played by place-based leaders and local activists in building resilience and developing inclusive places. A central claim of *Cities and Communities Beyond COVID-19: How Local Leadership Can Change Our Future for the Better* is that the COVID-19 pandemic provides us with opportunities to engage in a radical rethink of the kind of future we want for ourselves and future generations. Since the first lockdown in both the United Kingdom and Ireland was activated in March 2020, there has been a growing recognition that we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to not just recover from this pandemic but to ‘build forward better’—to engage in a programme of just transition that seeks to address the stark inequities that have been exposed, to harness the sense of community that has (re) emerged, and to rebuild the economy so that it benefits everyone while also considering the health of the planet. As policymakers and communities alike consider how they build resilient and sustainable places, Hambleton rightly asserts that there can be ‘no going back’ (p.20), that the future of society and the planet will not only be determined by national governments and international bodies, but also by local government and strong place-based leadership.

The book’s early chapters consider scenarios for a post COVID-19 society, and the need to begin to think differently—transformatively even! COVID-19 is a classic example of a ‘wicked problem’ (p.42), the effective response to which is framed by, but goes way beyond, science. It has fundamentally changed our relationship with place, both in terms of how we live and work.

Whether this change is permanent or temporary has yet to be determined. Penned over a ten-week period, the book is a snapshot in time, raising 'issues around governance that are just as profound as health, poverty and economic prosperity' (p.20) and highlighting the pressures the pandemic placed on already weakened systems of health-care and local government as a result of central government austerity measures. These early chapters clearly articulate how place-less power and a national government's failings to address the many signals that a new disease was spiralling out of control across the globe, severely delayed and negatively impacted on the United Kingdom's response to COVID-19. At a local level, however, a more action-oriented agenda has been evident; with the pandemic having 'stimulated a remarkable upswing in mutual aid, community activism and caring behaviours' (p.79) in response to both old and new challenges facing cities and communities.

Across Ireland, for example, local authorities over a single weekend in March 2020 established a Community Response Forum that involved community, voluntary and other relevant groups to coordinate community supports and services to meet the needs of those restricted to their homes. This included all local authorities establishing and managing a Community Call helpline.

In this book, Hambleton primarily uses the lens of Bristol City and its governance journey over the past decade, and in particular the Bristol One City Approach that has been evolving since 2016, to introduce the reader to a collaborative governance infrastructure that operates to the principle of adaptability. In a time of heightened austerity and sustained attacks on local democracy and local public service, Hambleton argues that the Bristol One City Approach 'provides an excellent platform for post COVID-19 recovery' (p.128). Building on a decade of research on place-based leadership in action, this book offers new ways of thinking for civic leaders, local government, community bodies and other key stakeholders on how we can co-create a more inclusive post COVID-19 future for everyone.

Central to this is combining a community development sensitivity with Hambleton's conceptual framework of New Civic Leadership, as detailed in his 2015 book *Leading the Inclusive City: Place-based Innovation for a Bounded Planet*. New Civic Leadership, drawing on participatory democracy, citizen engagement, new public governance and the co-production of public services, is a significant advancement from the rise and fall of New Public Management (NPM) in the 1980s and 1990s. Turning its back on privatization and marketization, New Civic Leadership starts 'from a political understanding of power relations and recognizes that place represents a source of power' (p. 91). Unlike NPM, New Civic Leadership can result in the co-creation of new solutions to public problems by drawing on the complementary strengths

and knowledge of civil society, the state and the market. Hambleton's *New Civic Leadership* asserts that there are likely to be five overlapping realms of place-based leadership—political leadership, public managerial/professional leadership, community leadership, business leadership and trade union leadership. These realms, with the right overall civic leadership (like a directly elected mayor with greater autonomy to do what is right for their communities), can become 'powerful innovation zones or spaces within which a range of actors can come together to co-create new solutions to 'glocal' challenges. To make this happen, *New Civic Leadership* has four key foundation stones:

- The need to recognize and expand the power of place;
- The importance of activists and policymakers moving beyond 'public' to embrace 'civic' as a way of thinking;
- The urgency of switching attention from 'management' to 'leadership'; and
- The essential task of co-creating far more innovative approaches to citizen participation and public problem solving (p.91).

Hambleton argues that by meaningfully empowering place leadership, local authorities can play a central part in developing the collective intelligence of the city and giving hope to communities, offering them the levers to level up inequalities and shape their future post COVID-19. The 'how', 'who', 'why', 'where' and 'when' of this is explored, in detail, through the case of Bristol. This is supplemented by shorter 'innovation cameos' from cities across the world that have adopted *New Civic Leadership* in their response to COVID-19. In considering the importance of place and the adoption of place-based approaches to sustainable development, the book acknowledges from its initial pages that challenges remain around 'the structure, machinery and tradition' (p.vii) of 'government' and the value (or not) placed by higher levels of government on local democracy. Not all forms of leadership are regarded equally. This book provides critical insights into the impact of place-less power on local development issues, and leaves us in no doubt that the 'movement from government to governance is unfolding in different ways in different countries and contexts' (p.56), and it is not always delivering. In his Foreword to this book, Bristol's current directly elected mayor, Mayor Marvin Rees, highlights the immense frustration experienced in trying to 'deliver for the people of Bristol' when 'many of the powers and resources I need being controlled by distant offices and people' (p.vii).

As the central case study of this book, and like many cities across the United Kingdom and increasingly in Ireland, Bristol exhibits, to all intents and purposes, a 'tale of two cities'; on the one hand a prosperous and connected city while, on the other hand, suffering from significant social,

economic and racial divisions. The emergence of the city's collaborative governance infrastructure did not happen overnight. It has been more than a decade in the making; with the impacts of a number of initiatives over this time leading to the 'right conditions' for adopting the New Civic Leadership model. Key milestones have included the move to a directly elected mayor in 2012, the success of the city in being named European Green Capital in 2015, its selection to participate in the global 100 Resilient Cities programme operated by Rockefeller Centre in 2014 and associated publication of its Resilience Strategy in 2016 and, during this period, its global recognition as a smart city with a strong commitment to open data. Together, these initiatives have nurtured a strong commitment to civic engagement—involving government, community, businesses and academia. It is hard to envisage how New Civic Leadership, as a framework through which significant improvements were made to 'the quality and effectiveness of local collaborative leadership' (p.163), could have been so successfully adopted in Bristol without this groundwork and associated capacity building. This, together with a mayor open to scholarly engagement and whose pre-election manifesto committed to the creation of a Bristol City Office that was removed from the council chamber and which would unite the various realms of civic leadership, has resulted in 'a radical shift towards a much more collaborative approach to urban governance in Bristol' (p.108).

In the book's concluding chapter, Hambleton sets out a number of ideas—rather than spelling out any fixed solutions—on how we can strengthen place-based power and enable different realms of leadership to come together to be more influential in driving social change and addressing complex inter-related challenges. Places are, after all, unique, requiring a bespoke approach sensitively tuned to the different needs of different areas. Two ideas are of particular relevance for Ireland. Firstly, spatial plans and strategies, while already inculcating the principle of the common good, will need to be increasingly holistic in nature, accelerating 'progress towards a zero-carbon economy as well as helping to tackle social inequality, reshape transport priorities and promote an expansion of green industry jobs' (p.161). As we continue to grapple with the many challenges of COVID-19 at both community level and across society as a whole, future strategies and approaches will need to be linked to, and give effect to, the globally agreed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), climate adaptation and the reversal of nature's decline, and deliver an enhanced model of multilevel governance. The Bristol One City Approach, and associated One City Plan, provides a well-balanced approach to holistic place-making, addressing what Bristol city has previously noted as being a 'chaos of plans and strategies'.

Secondly, expanding place-based power requires a significant rebalancing between local and central government. While globally there has been a progressive trend towards decentralization, the United Kingdom and Ireland remain very centralized states. Despite this, there is a recognized growing role for local and regional governments—and community-based organizations—in the promotion of place-based approaches to balanced sustainable and effective development. COVID-19 responses, on the ground, have resulted in a soaring of positive public opinion in respect of local government, and a strengthening of local community identity. The emerging multi-actor, multilevel governance model increasingly values the role of local knowledge, social capital and strong place-based leadership. Later this year, Limerick City and County Council will become the first local authority in Ireland to elect a Directly Elected Mayor (DEM). As to what this means in reality in terms of degree of autonomy, mandate and budget, insights from Bristol and the learnings and innovations it in turn has adapted from cities such as New York (United States) and Freiburg (Germany) indicate we still have a long road to travel!

Caroline Creamer

Maynooth University Social Sciences Institute, Maynooth University

email: Caroline.creamer@mu.ie

doi:10.1093/cdj/bsab034