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Collaborative Regional Governance: Lessons from Greater Manchester

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By

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Abstract
This paper describes how a primarily “bottom-up” form of metropolitan or city-regional governance in Greater Manchester, United Kingdom, developed over more than three decades. It begins with an assessment of three recent contributions to the literature on the development and governance of complex urban areas, each of which takes a different approach to explaining the place of metropolitan governance in shaping urban change. Their authors’ concerns with the broader economic and policy climate in which reforms of governance take shape, the importance of constitutional arrangements and practices for institutional change, and the role of leadership guide this account of change in Greater Manchester. It identifies five characteristics of the governance regime that have been critical to sustaining its momentum: its primarily economic orientation; the practice of proceeding at the pace of the fastest, not the slowest; pragmatism in developing intergovernmental and public-private coalitions for change; the commitment to evidence-based policy; and continuity in political and executive leadership. In the end, each of the accounts with which the paper started proves useful, but partial, in explaining change in Greater Manchester. Generic considerations abstracted from the Greater Manchester experience concern the importance of choosing the “right” geography of governance, but being prepared to be flexible about it; working consistently on a narrative that binds different stakeholders together; proceeding through coalitions of the willing rather than grand abstract designs; and developing leaders able to give coalitions a clear sense of direction.

Keywords: Greater Manchester, metropolitan government, metropolitan governance, city-region.

JEL codes: H77, H11

Perspectives on Regional Governance: Global, National, Local
This is the first paper in the IMFG series, “Perspectives on Regional Governance: Global, National, and Local.” The series examines how different jurisdictions in Canada and around the world have implemented regional governance models to help cities tackle longstanding challenges that cross municipal boundaries. It also looks at how regional governance could be implemented locally. Papers by global experts will analyze international and national case studies, and propose how city-regions such as the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area could engage in voluntary regional governance.
1. Introduction


In some respects, the resurgence of concern with the governance of extended urban territories – variously described as metropolitan areas, city-regions, regions, urban mega-regions, or megalopolises – is unsurprising. Our planet, after all, is experiencing the biggest surge in urbanization ever witnessed. As a result, large parts of the newly developed and developing worlds find themselves having to address the acute challenges that rapid and extensive urban economic and population growth brings.

Even in parts of the older developed world that have long experience grappling with growth-management challenges, there are signs that some of the ostensible institutional solutions introduced in earlier times are becoming unfit for purpose. Climate change, extreme weather events, the spread of infectious diseases, chronic over-dependence on the private car for personal mobility, inter-generational disparities arising from spiralling housing costs, and the effects of labour market polarization on urban inequalities are among the “wicked issues” that are both widely shared and difficult to address.

The authors of these three recent volumes offer interpretations of how and why regimes of urban governance have been recast in response to the challenges generated by historical and contemporary patterns of urban change. And they do so, usefully for current purposes, on the basis of alternative perspectives drawn from very different points on the spectrum of analytical approaches currently employed by urban academics and commentators.

The three books are of interest for two further reasons. First, two of them were written by current residents of Ontario (Berridge and Taylor) suggesting, at the very least, that the desire to learn by comparison is well represented within Canadian urban studies. Second, they all implicitly point to a key dilemma that is rarely given prominence in the literature on urban governance: that the variegated, real-world messiness that can result from the search for governance reform at the extra-municipal but sub-national (or sub-provincial/state/regional) scale often proves partial and unstable, confounding the aspirations of those who inspired, designed, or delivered the reform.

This paper introduces one recent set of experiences in wrestling with messiness – the development of metropolitan or city-regional governance arrangements for Greater Manchester in the United Kingdom – to a primarily Canadian audience. It is hoped that the paper will encourage discussion of the extent to which
barriers to effective governance reforms for complex urban areas can be overcome. My immersion in urban policy debates in Ontario suggested there is no lack of willingness to do so, but no strong consensus on how and where to start.

The paper makes no special claims for the transferability or superiority of the “Greater Manchester model.” In large part, the reforms are the result of place-specific factors played out within a distinctive national context that has some similarities to, but also many differences from, the Canadian situation. While they have evolved over more than 30 years, the reforms can also be seen, at least in their latest guise, as still being at an early stage in their evolution. There is, nonetheless, significant international interest in understanding the Greater Manchester story, not least because the area’s recovery from a protracted period of industrial decline has occurred in parallel with the building of more inclusive and collaborative forms of governance, mainly from the bottom up.

The second section of this paper uses insights derived from the volumes by Gross et al., Taylor, and Berridge as windows onto current debates about the extent to which the search for collaborative forms of governance for complex urban areas matter and why they have taken the form they have. The third section describes the development of governance arrangements for Greater Manchester, highlighting the factors generally recognized as having enabled these arrangements to become better established there than in other U.K. cities. A concluding section reflects on the extent to which the insights of the three books are useful in accounting for change in Greater Manchester and draws out some broader, generic lessons that could be relevant to future institutional reforms and challenges.

2. Three windows onto the challenge of governing complex urban areas

The most striking feature of the three books considered here is the contrasting perspectives their authors take on governance arrangements for complex urban areas. The authors of the three volumes inhabit different conceptual worlds when it comes to interpreting how and why public policies and institutions shape complex urban development patterns and the degree of importance accorded to metropolitan governance reforms.

Gross et al. (2019: xv) take as their starting point the advent of what they call “globalized neo-liberalization” in the mid-1970s. They see this trend as associated with a decisive shift in approach to the management and development of complex urban areas away from a concern with public policy delivery for citizens and towards a competitive approach to economic development. They hypothesize that this shift has driven, among other things, processes of “rescaling” at the metropolitan level.

The authors of the book’s individual case study chapters, drawn from Europe, Asia, and North and Latin America, test this hypothesis by assessing the extent to which “metropolitan rescaling” has occurred in and for the complex urban areas they examine.

The evidence they unearth is decidedly mixed. While they find numerous examples of the concept of the metropolitan area (or an equivalent) being used,
discursively, as a “frame of reference” (Gross and Gualini 2019: 218), they can identify no clear pattern in the institutional reforms to which metropolitan thinking has given rise. In some cases, no significant metropolitan reforms are found to have been attempted. In others, the creation of metropolitan institutions predates the period the co-editors consider most important.

Elsewhere, the case study authors identify the creation of weak forms of metropolitan coordination, but describe how they have been trumped by direct dealings between national governments, city authorities, and private investors on city-centric development programs. Or they see irreconcilable differences between elected leaders at different scales of government and the inconsistencies of approach that arise from changes in party political control as reasons for inconclusive policy drift.

The co-editors’ conclusion that “politics trumps economics” (Gross and Gualini 2019: 216) in metropolitan institution-building is effectively an admission that theirs was a null hypothesis. In reaching it, they cast doubt on the idea that real-world reforms are a response to any one overarching, generic “driver,” particularly one as vague and under-elaborated as their notion of globalized neo-liberalization.

Taylor is less preoccupied with processes of institution-building at the metropolitan scale per se, but he nonetheless sees differences in approaches to the development of governance arrangement for complex urban areas as emblematic of contrasts between Canada and the United States. His search is for evidence that an appropriate division of labour between tiers of government, together with productive relationships between those tiers, can, in the right circumstances, work to the benefit of complex urban areas.

He demonstrates how, in five broad periods between 1830 and the present, the actions of intermediate levels of government – provinces in Canada, states in the U.S. – played decisive roles in the sharply divergent approaches to the management of complex urban areas that have become ever more important to North America’s economy and society. In his account, the Westminster-style governmental systems of Canada’s provinces have proven more decisive and resolute, particularly in coping with common economic crises, than those based on the separated-powers systems of U.S. states. This difference, he argues, has enabled provinces to develop more programmatic and less particularistic responses to patterns of urban change.

Taylor illustrates his case by comparing two celebrated instances of “regionalism” – effectively metropolitanization – in the United States (Minneapolis–St. Paul, Minnesota, and Portland, Oregon) to two in Canada (Toronto, Ontario, and Vancouver, British Columbia). In essence, his argument is that even in the “best” examples of metropolitan coordination found in the United States, it is extraordinarily difficult to sustain long-term, consensual, collaborative relations between municipalities that are accorded high levels of “home rule” within a political system that is more open to, and can be captured by, external interests. What works in favour of strong regionalist movements, in this context, can also work for their opponents.
He argues that the stronger guiding hand accorded to provincial governments in Canada has, by contrast, enabled a more directive approach to metropolitan governance reforms that can become more firmly embedded. The sting in the tail of Taylor’s analysis is that provincial oversight of metropolitan governance reform worked effectively, if differently, when there was a high level of societal deference to “experts” and the political class and consistent patterns of party political control. When these conditions do not hold, as Taylor argues is currently the case, the legitimacy and adaptability of governance arrangements inherited from earlier times is more difficult to sustain.

Berridge’s cross-national analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of modern urban development regimes puts far less emphasis on systems of governance. His is a much more freewheeling account, related in everyday language and drawing on his personal experiences in a variety of large-scale urban development projects in Asia, North America, Europe, and Australia. His focus is on the people who inspired and realized those projects, not on how they, or the institutions they (for the most part) led, fit within the broader complex of decision-making, within and outside government.

Berridge’s main subjects are the people who oil the wheels of the urban “machine” and ensure that it can consistently take advantage of new opportunities and add to the stock of place-specific assets. His subjects are successful when they overcome “the blob” – the forces of bureaucratic inertia and delay that sap the energy behind ambitious development proposals. They are the exceptional people who wake up in the middle of the night worrying about how decisions on the next addition to urban skylines and neighbourhoods will get over the line.

**Perfect City**’s readers learn as much about where to get a decent pasta del giorno in Monopoly-board London as they do about where Transport for London fits within the governmental machinery overseen by London’s mayor. Nonetheless it is Berridge who distils, from his particular experiences, the clearest set of normative guidelines about “what works” in the governance of complex urban areas. His principal concern is with the levels of autonomy and resources available to urban leaders in making bold decisions about future development. Singapore, Hong Kong, and (more questionably) Shanghai are therefore mentioned favourably as modern variants of “city states” in which there is close correspondence between the principal decision-making “unit” and the relevant urbanized territory.

Berridge recognizes, however, that what works for these three places is more difficult to achieve in multi-centred liberal democracies. This leads him to make a strong case for two-tier systems of urban government: a metropolitan tier, based on a travel-to-work area and led by a directly elected mayor who assumes primary responsibility for developmental functions (infrastructure, planning, and land use) and a series of lower-tier authorities with primary responsibilities for delivery of services that respond to citizens’ demands for liveability.

In the next section, I follow Taylor and Gross et al. in presenting an account of the development of governance arrangements for the complex urban area centred on Manchester, England, drawing on scholarly literatures and some of the primary
research I undertook as an academic observer. The gaps are filled with the Berridge-style knowledge I have gained as a more recent participant in the evolving dynamics of governance for Greater Manchester. The account touches upon the concerns of all three sets of authors considered here: (1) broad patterns of economic change, their impacts upon national policies, and approaches to institutional reform, (2) trends in intergovernmental relations and politics, and (3) the role of local leadership in institution-building.

3. Redesigning the governance of Greater Manchester: a brief history

3.1 The rapid rise and fall of metropolitan government, U.K.-style

The story of the recent reinvention of metropolitan/city-regional governance for Greater Manchester began in 1986. In that year, the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher abolished the Greater Manchester County Council, along with the equivalent upper-tier local authorities of the five other largest provincial English cities and London.

Although our primary interest here is in the post-1986 period, the way in which the case for elected authorities for complex urban areas was mobilized, partly enacted, and then promptly put into reverse in the previous two decades is essential to an understanding of later events.

The Greater Manchester County Council had been created in 1974 as a result of the biggest reorganization of local government in the United Kingdom for nearly a century. Before the mid-1970s, the U.K. system of local authorities – with the exception of London, whose governance was reorganized in 1965 – had been based on a longstanding but increasingly anachronistic distinction between urban and rural areas. The first half of the 20th century witnessed a slow, incremental, and ultimately faltering process that superimposed “urban” authorities onto an administrative map whose geography owed more to pre-industrial settlement patterns than to the transformative impact of industrialization on urban and suburban expansion (Barlow 1995: 383).

As was common elsewhere in the industrialized world (Canada included), ad hoc modifications to the map of local government were made, through annexations and amalgamations, in an attempt to reflect the spread of urban areas beyond administratively defined towns and cities. A complex, often fractious process also enabled some local authorities in urban areas that grew quickly to attain the status of all-purpose (unitary) “county boroughs,” the main administrative form developed for the largest and densest urban centres in the United Kingdom (Barlow 1995: 383).

At the time of reorganization, however, just 30 percent of the United Kingdom’s highly urbanized population resided in county borough areas. Elsewhere, the country was covered by two tiers of local government: traditional counties and lower-tier authorities designated according to their degree of “urban-ness.” The area
that became Greater Manchester, for example, contained eight county boroughs and 60 additional lower-tier authorities, spread across four counties, covering a population of 2.5 million people. This fragmented system was beset with problems related to poor economies of scale, overly tight urban boundaries, confusion about responsibilities for service delivery, voter apathy, and high levels of dependence upon external funding (Redcliffe-Maud and Wood 1974: 23–24).

Responsibility for generating reform options was entrusted to a Royal Commission charged with finding a better accommodation between two perceived pillars of effective and responsive local government: efficiency and democracy. Specifically, the Commission sought a workable trade-off between:

- The *functional effectiveness* of local authorities, where discussion focused on achieving economies of scale through mergers of local authority areas, and a move to population sizes above a minimum threshold that was seen as necessary for technical viability, and

- Their *democratic viability*, where debate focused upon the optimal population size for local authorities in terms of accountability to their electorates and on identifying population ceilings above which areas would effectively become ungovernable.

In hindsight, the Commission's work (HMSO 1969) represented the high-water mark for evidence-based, “official” debate about geography, urbanization, and governance in the United Kingdom, but it did not produce consensus. Rather, it generated two sets of proposals.¹ The main report favoured a primarily single-tier system with 58 new unitary authorities, together with a two-tier “metropolitan” solution, similar to the one already operating in London, for the complex urban areas centred upon Birmingham, Liverpool, and Manchester. A dissenting memorandum, by contrast, advocated a country-wide two-tier solution, based upon the principle of city-regions, that would be characterized by highly variable population sizes and geometries.

The reforms introduced in 1974 did not follow either set of Commission recommendations wholesale. They created a standardized two-tier model of local government in England and Wales – similar reforms were introduced in Scotland in 1975 – that integrated urban and rural areas more effectively. Only in the cases of the areas focused on England’s six largest provincial cities,² though, was change even remotely based on the notion of metropolitan areas or city-regions. Even so, the Conservative government’s fear of handing local power to the Labour opposition, in a local government system dominated by political party caucusing, led to the boundaries of new metropolitan county councils’ being drawn much more tightly than either set of proposals advocated.

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¹. The Commission’s work focused on England, but the model that emerged was also applied in Wales and Scotland.
². Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, Leeds, Sheffield, and Newcastle.
The reforms acknowledged that “environmental” and “personal” services should be provided at different scales, but applied this principle unevenly. All counties assumed responsibility for police and fire services. However, the metropolitan county councils, more likely to be Labour-controlled, were given responsibilities only for environmental services such as transport, planning, and waste management. The other upper-tier county councils – modified versions of the pre-existing, pre-industrial shire counties, more likely to be Conservative-dominated – were given additional responsibilities for personal services such as education and social services.

The re-organization of 1974 formed part of a technocratic,\(^3\) top-down, international movement that saw modernized two-tier local government systems adopted, or at least considered, in a variety of countries, including Canada, particularly where (a) car-dependent suburbs had dominated post-war patterns of urban growth, and (b) local authorities lacked constitutional status or protection.

In the United Kingdom, the reforms created some of the largest local authority units, by population size, in the world. In Greater Manchester, 10 new lower-tier districts\(^4\) were fashioned from the previous 68 administrative units, mainly by expanding those areas formerly covered by county boroughs (Barlow 1995: 383–84). The decision to broadly respect and build upon pre-existing administrative histories in Greater Manchester gave the new metropolitan area a distinctive internal geography that set it apart from other large metropolitan counties.

In the “mets” centred on Birmingham and Leeds, for example, the opportunity was taken to expand the main city’s administrative area (and hence population size), thereby ensuring that its leaders became first among equals in new metropolitan arrangements (Leach and Game 1991: 156–59). In Greater Manchester, however, and against the recommendations of the reform Commissioners for a significantly larger core city, only the small, formerly rural parish that accommodated the city’s airport was added to the City of Manchester. The dense, functionally inter-related central employment core that had grown together over the preceding century remained sub-divided across three districts: Manchester, the City of Salford (historically home to the city’s inland port), and Trafford (home to the huge Trafford Park industrial estate). While some of the suburbs in which commuters to that

3. The Commission’s preferred name for the Manchester metro area – “Selnec,” standing for South-East Lancashire–North-East Cheshire – is one indication of technocratic influence. The decision to name the met county after its largest city in Greater Manchester’s case was taken by the government that oversaw preparations for the reforms but “local opinion also favoured this” (Clark 1973: 101). Elsewhere, local suspicions and rivalries meant that the other met counties were given names that made no reference to their largest city and instead reflected either the county they were carved from (West and South Yorkshire rather than Leeds and Sheffield, respectively), the broad, non-institutionalized region in which they sat (West Midlands rather than Birmingham), or the principal rivers their urbanized areas had grown around (Merseyside for Liverpool, Tyne & Wear for Newcastle).

4. “District” is the generic term, used here, for lower-tier authorities in the United Kingdom. In Greater Manchester, most districts are known as “boroughs,” the title they assumed in 1974. The exceptions are the cities of Manchester and Salford.
central core lived were incorporated into those three districts, many others were distributed across other Greater Manchester districts. Still others, particularly those to the south, became part of districts beyond the Greater Manchester boundary that successfully resisted being incorporated into the new metropolitan county.

The 1974 reforms created the geographical unit that still defines Greater Manchester nearly half a century later, but left both the City of Manchester and the metropolitan area as a whole “under-bounded,” as shown in Figure 1. The map superimposes local authority boundaries on Greater Manchester’s main urbanized areas (shaded in grey) and its principal communication routes. It indicates how Greater Manchester has essentially come to be organized around radial connections converging on Manchester city centre, but also how the City of Manchester itself incorporates only some of the dense, employment-rich conurbation core (the “Regional Centre”) and relatively few of the outlying suburban areas and smaller towns to which it is connected.

The peculiar geography of the City of Manchester is clearer still in Figure 2, which shows how the 10 districts were arranged in relation to the broader area most connected to it in terms of labour flows. It illustrates how the radial pattern of connectivity to Manchester’s city centre was broadly mirrored in the geographies adopted for Greater Manchester’s other districts. Seven of the districts share a boundary with the City of Manchester from which they fan out, without any breaks in the built environment, to the north, east, and south. The two exceptions, Bolton and Wigan, extend west from the City of Salford.

The red line in Figure 2 represents a snapshot of one version of the travel-to-work area. It maps the areas within Greater Manchester and beyond that exported at least 15 percent of their workforce into the Regional Centre at the turn of the current century, demonstrating how substantial volumes of commuters were (and continue to be) drawn from outside Greater Manchester, particularly from the south. This wider area, paradoxically, is much closer to the metropolitan area/city-region identified by the local government reform commissioners.

Figure 2 also demonstrates that not all of the peripheral areas of Greater Manchester – especially parts of Wigan, at the western fringe – were (or are) as closely connected to the conurbation core as others beyond Greater Manchester’s administrative boundary. In short, the administrative area defined for the 1974 reforms continues to represent a reasonable, district-based fit to the continuously built-up metropolitan area focused on the Regional Centre and a rougher, slightly under-bounded proxy for the broader city-region.

The complex set of cross-district economic and labour market interdependencies designed into Greater Manchester’s new administrative geographies in 1974 eventually became one of the driving forces behind the search for more collaborative forms of city-regional governance. That not much progress in this respect occurred during the short life of the metropolitan county can be attributed mainly to two factors.

The first is the stark difference between the context in which the mets operated and the one that was predicted at the time they were designed. The 1974 reforms,
Figure 1. Greater Manchester districts and urban form
Figure 2. Greater Manchester travel-to-work area, 2001
and the creation of the metropolitan authorities in particular, were predicated on predicted levels of growth in employment and population that failed to materialize. Instead, the early years of the metropolitan authorities’ existence coincided with a period of national economic crisis, accelerated de-industrialization, sharp rises in urban unemployment, public spending constraints, and static or declining metropolitan populations (Barlow 1995: 390–91).

The mets, all of which were centred on older industrial areas, tried to respond to the challenges of economic downturn, but the growth management–focused toolkits they had were ill-suited to the task. Their attempts to fashion more ambitious programs of regeneration and economic development that went beyond government-sanctioned urban policies and programs ended up contributing to their demise (Barlow 1995: 392–93).

The second reason the impact of the reforms was muted is that the reforms were simply not given time to succeed. They were abolished by the post-1983 Conservative government, ostensibly to “streamline” governance, reduce costs, and remove an “unnecessary” tier of government that had appropriated functions beyond its remit (DoE 1983), but largely because they had provided a platform for substantive and symbolic political opposition (O’Leary 1987).

The abolition of the Greater London Council and the mets in 1986 appeared, for a long time, to have brought an abrupt end to the United Kingdom’s experiment with elected metropolitan government. For the next 25 years, with one notable exception, there was a slow, piecemeal retreat from the two-tier local government settlement introduced by the comprehensive reforms of 1974. Neither abolition nor its aftermath, however, entirely extinguished the idea of metropolitan areas or city-regions as units of analysis or as scales of public service design and delivery. Indeed, particularly in the case of Greater Manchester, the geographies defined for the metropolitan counties provided a future template for the administrative “patches” used or adopted by a range of statutory and non-statutory agencies.

The relationship between the functioning of complex urban areas and institutional design reappeared on the national political agenda only in the first decade of the current century. By then, the key concern was less with local government reform and more with the failure of successive governments to deliver on their pledges to reduce sub-national disparities in prosperity and well-being. The experience of Greater Manchester in the interim period played a significant role in this rediscovery and the way it was acted upon.

3.2 The road from 1986

The legislation that abolished the mets provided for the creation of separate, statutory, indirectly elected joint bodies in the fields of passenger transport, policing, fire services, and waste disposal, as the government conceded the need for continuity in metropolitan service delivery. In Greater Manchester, ownership of the city’s international airport – always, unusually, local government-owned – reverted to the districts, with the City of Manchester taking the majority stake and
the other districts equal shares of the remainder. The government also encouraged, but did not mandate, the newly unitary metropolitan district authorities that took over the other functions of the mets to develop further metropolitan county-wide collaborations where they could agree on the need to do so.

The Greater Manchester districts were unusually proactive in establishing metropolitan initiatives that preserved and extended certain functions formerly undertaken by the Greater Manchester County Council, adopting a model whereby a lead district assumed administrative responsibility for each individual sphere of activity (Leach and Game 1991: 148–50). They also moved quickly to create a voluntary, standing body for metropolitan collaboration and coordination – the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) – that outlasted the post-abolition coordinating committees established elsewhere.

Within months of the abolition of Greater Manchester metropolitan government, therefore, significant metropolitan governance arrangements had been re-established in air and surface transport, policing, fire services, waste disposal, and the management of the local authorities’ pension fund. Greater Manchester-wide units for research and intelligence, transport modelling, traffic control, archaeology, ecology, geology, air and water pollution, consumer protection, and administrative records were also created (Hebbert and Deas 2000: 83–84).

The Greater Manchester districts continued, uniquely, to build upon these initial metropolitan governance arrangements over the next two and a half decades. For most of that time, there was little government requirement or encouragement to do so. Indeed, the period that predated the formation of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority in 2011 was mainly characterized by further, incremental dismantling of the upper-tier authorities created in the mid-1970s. This happened systematically in Scotland and Wales, where upper-tier authorities were abolished, simultaneously, in favour of unitary systems in 1996. In England, a small number of the non-metropolitan counties created in 1974 were abolished as part of an ad hoc move towards “unitarization,” sometimes accompanied by mergers of smaller, lower-tier districts. Partial unitarization in England also saw some of the larger urban authorities, many of them former county boroughs, effectively declare independence from “their” counties and become all-purpose single-tier authorities.

The one countervailing example of upper-tier local government structures being recreated, rather than abolished, was the new Greater London Authority that came into being in 1999, accompanied by the United Kingdom’s first-ever, direct, at-large election of a mayor. This move followed positive support expressed

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5. Because the Labour party has been in control of at least half the district councils since abolition, the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities was always chaired by one of the Labour council leaders until 2017, when the directly elected mayor assumed the role.

6. In the case of Cheshire County Council, for example – much of whose area would have been subsumed into Greater Manchester had the 1970s reformers had their way – Warrington, the largest urban centre in the east of the county, became a unitary authority in 1998. The upper-tier county was then abolished in 2009 and replaced by two new unitary authorities, created from mergers of its six lower-tier districts.
by Londoners in a referendum that paralleled those held on the much stronger devolutionary arrangements introduced in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland at the end of the millennium. No comparable innovations were introduced for any other extended urban area of England. If Greater Manchester escaped the effects of tinkering with local government structures during this period, however, its districts were nonetheless engulfed by the tidal wave of changes in local government powers, finances, and functions that followed.

During the 30-year period after the abolition of the mets, two interlinked trends in the treatment of local by national government that had begun under the Thatcher administrations of the 1980s continued: centralization and marketization.

Stricter central controls over local tax raising began as an attempt to cap overall levels of public spending, consistent with national expenditure planning. First, statutory “rate-capping” was introduced in 1984 to limit rises in taxes levied by local authorities on residential properties. Business rates, the other main local tax levied on industrial and commercial property-owners, were nationalized in 1990. Thereafter, and despite some marginal relaxations introduced by later governments, high levels of national control over local tax-raising remained. As a result, the proportion of national expenditure raised from local taxes has remained very low in the United Kingdom, at about 10 percent (Bartolini, Stossberg, and Blöchliger 2016), compared with federal countries such as Canada. Local authorities generally, and those operating in more public service–dependent urban areas in particular, have therefore become increasingly reliant on government grants to support their activities. This reliance has exacerbated the long-run trend whereby local government functions more as a delivery arm for national policies and programs than as a source of independent choice and experimentation.

National fiscal control went hand-in-hand with changes in the modes of delivery of what had been local government–dominated services. Many were marketized as local authorities were encouraged or forced to dispose of assets, contract the delivery of services out to non-statutory bodies, or surrender their roles as funders to national government departments and agencies. As a result, local authorities lost their dominant positions in key policy areas, including:

- social housing, which was either sold to tenants at heavily discounted prices or transferred to independent housing associations and registered social landlords;

7. A small number of the lowest-tier districts in England opted for the directly elected mayoral models enabled by legislation, introduced in 2000, subject to local referendums. Most of these referendums, including one forced upon the City of Manchester in 2012, rejected the mayoral option. The City of Salford was an exception, however, and has had a directly elected mayor since 2012. Salford’s mayor has the same status as the other nine council leaders within Greater Manchester’s governance.

8. The idea of creating a single “super city” based on Manchester through the amalgamation of Greater Manchester districts was floated by a locally based academic in 2005 (Stoker 2005). However, this potential reform, a version of the model implemented in Toronto in 1998, attracted no significant local or national political support.
elements of higher (postsecondary), further (vocational), and primary and secondary education, as direct national funding of schools, multi-school trusts, colleges, and former polytechnics came to dominate a policy field in which, in contrast to Canada, municipal government had previously held sway;

• local passenger transport, as bus services (except in London) were deregulated and decisions over routes, prices, and schedules passed to private companies;

• various other professional and front-line services (including adults’ and children’s social care), as local authorities increasingly became regulators and contractors of private services rather than direct providers.

Local government’s inability to compensate for national funding constraints had a particularly adverse effect after the post-2010 coalition government introduced large-scale spending cuts in all but a small core of protected policy areas (essentially health and education) as part of its response to the global financial crisis. Because of the continued squeeze on public spending applied by subsequent governments, overall local authority (municipal) employment fell 32 percent between 2006 and 2019, a period in which employment by the national government and its agencies grew by 14 percent (ONS 2019). England’s older metropolitan areas, particularly those in northern England, experienced the largest budget falls. Spending in real terms by Greater Manchester districts fell, on average, by 17 percent between 2009–10 and 2017–18 (Centre for Cities 2019: appendix). Within Greater Manchester, the City of Manchester’s spending power declined by 29 percent in the decade after 2010 (Manchester City Council 2019).

A summary of the way Greater Manchester’s metropolitan/city-regional governance arrangements developed within this broader context is shown in Figure 3. The story it tells is of the incremental development of institutional and analytical capacities, based on a consensus between districts that has strengthened over time. These capacities were gradually consolidated and formed the basis of the institutional machinery that underpinned the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) after 2011. The creation of this body required national legislation, but for much of the preceding period, Greater Manchester forged its own path, drawing on support from higher levels of government without ever fitting entirely comfortably within national policy frameworks.

3.3 Five key characteristics of the Greater Manchester “regime”
Each of the institutional innovations highlighted in Figure 3 has its own, often complex, history, but a number of common characteristics link them together.

A primarily economic orientation
It can easily be overlooked, given the expansion of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority’s policy agenda since its first directly elected mayor assumed office in 2017, but the driving force behind most of Greater Manchester’s institutional innovations was a concern with economic development and employment. There are a number of reasons for this orientation.
Figure 3. Development of Greater Manchester city regional governance, 1986–2020
Figure 3. Continued.
Economic development was a policy area into which metropolitan counties had begun to move before abolition and hence one in which there was both an obvious gap in policy development capacity as well as space for innovations that did not threaten the sovereignty of the districts.

Economic development, along with closely related initiatives in area-based regeneration, was also a field in which discretionary resources, from both national government and the European Union, were available to build up local capacity. They were political priorities for a Labour-dominated group of councils during a period initially marked by further national economic recession and the continued, dramatic shrinkage of jobs in manufacturing. And they remained so during the long economic upturn that followed until the financial crisis, not least because it was in the fields of economic development and regeneration that Greater Manchester acquired a national reputation for successful project design and delivery, particularly (but not exclusively) in the repurposing of the Regional Centre.

Proceeding at the pace of the fastest, not the slowest

While Greater Manchester’s districts have steadily acquired a reputation for acting in concert, building support for innovations did not always require immediate “buy-in” from all of them. The creation of Greater Manchester’s inward investment agency, MIDAS (Manchester Investment & Development Agency Service), for example, initially involved only the three districts encompassing the Regional Centre, plus Tameside, before being expanded to cover all 10, once it had demonstrated its utility.

Similarly, Manchester’s 1994 “City Pride” initiative – a City Council-led response to a selective government invitation to bind initiatives in economic development and regeneration together into a more coherent framework – involved an initial partnership between Manchester, Salford, and Trafford, whereas a refreshed version in 1998 engaged other neighbouring districts (Hebbert and Deas 2000: 85–86).

By contrast, Greater Manchester’s visitor development bureau, Marketing Manchester, was one example that all of the districts (and, crucially, the airport, in which they jointly own a majority stake) supported from its inception.

9. Greater Manchester is a “NUTS 2” area, the administrative scale used by the European Union to designate and form the basis of delivery of its Structural Funds. NUTS 2 areas are typically larger than single municipalities, but smaller than regions or provinces.

10. Many of these projects were championed and coordinated at the district level, but some key initiatives – such as the expansion of the airport, the completion of the inner-ring motorway network (the M60), and the development of Metrolink, the United Kingdom’s first modern tram system – necessitated collaboration between districts, Greater Manchester–wide bodies, government, and private-sector partners. The Regional Centre has long been the city-region’s principal business services, higher education, retail, entertainment, and arts and culture hub, but has developed further specializations in media and tech industries, science, and health innovation in the last 25 years. The Regional Centre has also experienced a boom in downtown living, which accounts for the bulk of Greater Manchester’s recent population growth.
Pragmatism in coalition-building

The political and executive leadership of Greater Manchester has long adopted a pragmatic approach in encouraging coalitions of the willing to come together in pursuit of collective aims. This applies, in particular, to relations between local and central government and between public and private sectors (Harding, Harloe, and Rees 2010).

Since 1986, the Greater Manchester authorities have worked, individually and collectively, with eight different national governments, three of them Labour-dominated and five Conservative-led (including one in coalition). While Greater Manchester leaders have become increasingly enthusiastic proponents of devolution over that time, their approach to central-local government relations has remained essentially the same: that better outcomes can be achieved on shared aspirations using a collaborative, place-based approach. That progress in strengthening Greater Manchester governance proceeded fastest under a Conservative chancellor (finance minister), George Osborne, who was also the architect of public spending cuts, is evidence of the ability of Greater Manchester's Labour-dominated leadership to set aside political and ideological differences in the name of progress for those aspects of Greater Manchester's development on which it and government could agree.

In adopting its pragmatic, collective approach, Greater Manchester followed the example of Manchester City Council (MCC), which departed decisively from the conflict that characterized relations between national government and many urban authorities during much of the 1980s. In economic development and regeneration fields, in particular, Manchester City Council pursued a strategy of collaboration rather than conflict with government-funded initiatives designed to bypass local government after the Labour party's third successive national election defeat in 1987 (King and Nott 2006).

For example, Manchester City Council and regional business leaders collaborated with the Central Manchester Development Corporation (CMDC), the government-appointed agency that took over planning and investment responsibility for Manchester's city-centre fringe area, on the residential repopulation of the city centre and on the City's bid to stage the 1996 Olympic Games. The creation of MIDAS and Marketing Manchester represented, at least in part, local recognition of the need to retain the visitor and inward investment marketing capacities of the Central Manchester Development Corporation and the Trafford Park Development Corporation when they were wound down by government in the late 1990s.

11. The bid, like an earlier, more speculative one for the 1992 Games, was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the investment in sporting infrastructure it triggered formed the basis of the city's successful bid to stage the 2002 Commonwealth Games. This achievement, in turn, helped expedite the development of the thriving “Sports City” on former industrial land in east Manchester and the transformation of one of the city's struggling football clubs (Manchester City) into one of the world's richest and most successful. The link to sovereign wealth from the United Arab Emirates that underpinned the revival of the club's fortunes led to further spin-offs in housing investment and direct flights to Abu Dhabi, which extended the global reach of Manchester International Airport. This example typifies the focus on asset development, rather than economic sectors, that has characterized the approach taken at the City and Greater Manchester level.
Pragmatism also extended into cross-boundary relationships outside Greater Manchester. For example, when government approached Greater Manchester to produce the first of a series of place-specific “Science and Innovation Audits” in 2015 as an input into regional R&D investment policy, local institutions teamed up with others in neighbouring Cheshire just to the south of the city, which has complementary scientific facilities and strengths (University of Manchester 2016). Similarly, when Greater Manchester was offered the opportunity to retain all funding raised from its districts’ business rates rather than have the funds collected and redistributed by national government in 2017, it did so in partnership with Cheshire East council, since the gain to the wider area would be greater than that for Greater Manchester alone. Both examples indicate the recognition that a better-drawn city-region boundary for Greater Manchester – as the Local Government Reform commissioners argued – would include eastern Cheshire.

Political pragmatism has been enabled, even required, by the pattern of party control across the 10 Greater Manchester districts. While at least half of the districts at any one point have been Labour-controlled since 1986, there has never been a time when other parties have not controlled or held the balance of power in one or more districts. This political plurality has, on occasion, been critical in keeping open the lines of communication between Greater Manchester and national government, irrespective of which party was in power. Greater Manchester’s leadership has also been careful to ensure that the city-regional business community has been engaged in strategy deliberation and is willing to champion Greater Manchester priorities through private-sector and political networks.12

Evidence-based policy

Greater Manchester’s commitment to policy development strongly rooted in evidence (Holden and Harding 2016) has two, interlinked dimensions. On one hand, the diversity of circumstances and experiences across its districts and communities has given rise to a genuine commitment to understanding how the parts can and do benefit from belonging to a greater whole. There is also a pragmatic side to Greater Manchester’s investment in analytical capacity – the determination to speak with authority to national government and its component departments, in a language familiar to them, within what remains a highly centralized system of resource distribution. This ability has proven especially important at two critical junctures.

First, towards the end of the boom period that predated the global financial crisis, the Greater Manchester leadership secured support for the Manchester Independent Economic Review (MIER), a set of interlinked research studies

12. A clear indication of the growing resonance of “Greater Manchester” for the business community was the 2004 merger of a number of separate chambers of commerce into a single Greater Manchester Chamber, the United Kingdom’s largest.
designed to take a long-term view of the factors affecting city-regional development and provide recommendations on how Greater Manchester might better realize its potential. The review was the brainchild of New Economy, a think tank-cum-policy development resource that split off from the more operational activities of Greater Manchester institutions in 2008 in a move designed to encourage more strategic thinking, less tied to program delivery. The Reviewers’ Report (MIER 2009), overseen by nationally and internationally prominent economists, helped strengthen the case for building city-regional governing capacity. It underlaid the first comprehensive Greater Manchester strategy in 2009 and the formation of several thematic commissions, drawn from Greater Manchester-wide institutions and the 10 districts, charged with supporting its implementation.

A similar approach was adopted in undertaking the Independent Prosperity Review (IPR) in 2018–19 (GMCA 2019). The ostensible trigger, on this occasion, was the opportunity extended by the government to be a trailblazer in the production of new, local industrial strategies. This review, again overseen by prominent economists, duly provided the independent evidence on which Greater Manchester’s local industrial strategy, jointly signed off with government in 2019, was based. But it was also seen within Greater Manchester as an opportunity to reflect on the experience of 10 years’ worth of change that contrasted starkly with the more benign period that led up to the earlier review and to adjust its broader strategic thinking accordingly. The critical shifts in thinking it encouraged were a stronger focus on low-productivity, low-wage economic activities which had provided much of Greater Manchester’s employment growth in the post-crisis period and a greater concern with the links between population health and productivity.

Continuity in local political and executive leadership

This fifth and final characteristic is more a matter of chance than design. Local elections in Greater Manchester since 1986 have consistently returned strong and secure Labour party majorities in a core of the districts, thereby according their leaderships a degree of comfort in thinking and planning well beyond five-year electoral cycles. One-party control in local government is not always a recipe for strategic farsightedness, of course, but in two instances in particular, remarkable continuity of key personnel proved critical to building city-regional profile and credibility.

First, Manchester City Council has had just two leaders since 1984 (Graham Stringer and Sir Richard Leese) and a single chief executive, Sir Howard Bernstein (who was also GMCA’s first Head of Paid Services, effectively its shadow chief executive), between 1998 and 2017. All three played central roles in the evolution of GM’s approach to city-regional development and capacity building.

Second, the other solidly Labour-voting district – Wigan, the most geographically and functionally peripheral of Greater Manchester’s local authority areas – had a single council leader, Lord Peter Smith, between 1991 and 2018.
Wigan’s leader also chaired the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) between 2000 and 2017, ensuring that the voice of the periphery was well represented in the Greater Manchester agenda.

3.4 *Events, dear boy, events*\(^{13}\)

These characteristics, together with the legacy of the 1974 local government reforms, were critical to the development of a customized, non-statutory brand of “bottom-up” city-regionalism in Greater Manchester during the two decades that followed the abolition of the Greater Manchester County Council. The impetus to recreate statutory Greater Manchester–wide governmental structures would have been much weaker, however, but for two pivotal events, both of which involved popular referenda.

In the first, in 2004, voters in northeast England decisively rejected the option of elected regional\(^{14}\) government, thereby destabilizing the Labour government’s pursuit of its two, difficult-to-reconcile, sub-national development aspirations in England using regional structures. It had hoped to encourage the maximum feasible level of sustainable development in every region while in the longer term helping reduce the growing disparities between the three southern English regions and the rest of the country.

To achieve this goal, at least in theory, eight government-appointed Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) were established in 1999. In an implicit admission that additional activity across northern England was needed to reduce north-south growth differentials, the Northern Way, a partnership between the three northern English Regional Development Agencies, was established in 2004.

The referendum came about as a result of pressure on the government to extend to areas of England outside London the same level of democratic accountability in the oversight of economic development policy it had accorded Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland through devolution and to the capital region through London’s new metropolitan governance arrangements. Its spectacular failure (Sandford 2007) prompted the immediate cancellation of further referenda planned for the other two northern English regions and a formal admission by government that the sub-regional dimension of sub-national development programs needed strengthening, potentially by putting sub-regions on a statutory footing (HMT et al. 2007).

Greater Manchester was a somewhat sceptical ally to the government’s regional initiatives. Manchester Enterprises, the city-regional umbrella body created in

\(^{13}\) Quotation popularly attributed to Harold Macmillan, former British Prime Minister, who used it in response to a question from a journalist about what blew governments off course.

\(^{14}\) Unlike in North America, the term “regional” in England does not equate to “metropolitan” or “city-regional.” London’s administrative “region” is identical to its metropolitan area, but the other eight standard English regions are different mixes of large and small urban centres and rural areas. The two southern regions that border London are strongly influenced by their relationship to the capital, while the other five contain one or more large provincial urban centres. None are functionally interconnected territories in any straightforward sense. Nor, with the exception of London, do they have any cultural resonance for their residents.
1999 for delivering business development, training, and economic development programs, for example, became the sub-regional delivery partner for the Greater Manchester elements of the Northwest Development Agency’s strategy.

It was also centrally involved, in 2006, in the production of a Greater Manchester variant of the City Region Development programs that the Northern Way promoted and coordinated. The crisis of English regionalism triggered by the referendum defeat, however, encouraged Greater Manchester leaders and others, including the Core Cities group of local authorities and various think-tanks and academics, to lobby harder for a stronger urban-regional approach to addressing sub-national disparities.

In Greater Manchester's case, it resulted in greater confidence in engaging with national departments on potentially transformational projects that could exemplify the merits of an inter-governmental, city-regional approach. Greater Manchester's 2007 Transport Innovation Fund bid was a prominent example. This £9.5-billion ($16.5-billion) “challenge fund,” originally intended to run between 2008 and 2015, operated outside the established government mechanisms for supporting local transport schemes. Greater Manchester’s bid, led by its transport authority and the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities, was for a package of public transport improvements amounting to about 15 percent of the total fund value in the form of a grant plus permission to borrow a similar amount, repayable over 30 years through income from fares and a new congestion charge for road-users.

The government approved Greater Manchester’s bid in 2008, subject to consultation with businesses and residents. Inconclusive results from opinion polls, plus a vigorous “no” campaign led by elements of the business community, however, led to continued opposition to the bid from leaders in two of the 10 districts. To save face, the final decision was put in the hands of Greater Manchester residents. The result, later that year, was another crushing referendum defeat and the abandonment of a scheme that would have triggered £3 billion ($5.25 billion) in investment into Greater Manchester’s transport infrastructure.

The fallout from the second referendum defeat was felt not so much in program terms – alternative sources of the £1.3 billion ($2.25 billion) were found for the planned transport improvements – but as a shock to the system of governance and decision-making. On the back of the tougher, more parsimonious approach necessary to rescuing key elements of the bid, Greater Manchester accepted the introduction of a more stringent system of investment appraisal. It also began to search for ways to strengthen its governance to avoid a repeat of the referendum

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15. Core Cities is an advocacy group, established in 1995 by local authorities covering the largest administratively defined cities in the United Kingdom outside London. Initially limited to eight English cities (including Manchester, which hosts Core Cities’ offices), it has since been extended to include the capitals of Wales and Northern Ireland (Cardiff and Belfast) and Glasgow in Scotland.

16. The United Kingdom’s only other congestion charge referendum, in Edinburgh in 2005, produced a similarly emphatic rejection. London’s scheme, the only one operating in the United Kingdom to date, was introduced by the city’s first directly elected mayor, who made it clear in his election campaign that a vote for him was a vote for its introduction.
embarrassment that had come close to breaking up the cross-district partnership so assiduously built up over the previous two decades.

3.5 Metropolitan government is dead: long live statutory city-regional governance

Shortly before the 2010 election, the Labour government took an initial step towards a city-regional approach to addressing spatial economic disparities when it passed the 2009 Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act. This Act enabled the formation of Combined Authorities in England. The government also announced plans to create the first two statutory “city-region pilots” for the urban areas centred on northern England’s two largest cities – Manchester and Leeds.17

After the 2010 general election, the incoming coalition government moved quickly, as part of its crash program of expenditure reduction, to abolish the Regional Development Agencies18 and discontinue the vast bulk of special, area-based urban programs established by its predecessors. This left virtually no sub-national institutional architecture or resources in place with which the coalition could pursue its stated aspiration to “rebalance” the English economy, geographically and sectorally.

The coalition filled the gap it had created in two ways, both based on the assumption that England was divisible into a number of “natural economic areas” – essentially sub-regions or city-regions by another name. By way of partial, low-cost replacement of the Regional Development Agencies, it encouraged the formation of business-led Local Enterprise Partnerships, charged with helping determine local economic priorities and leading the process of local growth and job creation by supporting company bids into a new Regional Growth Fund. Government had no blueprint for the natural economic areas that the partnerships were expected to cover; it simply responded to proposals submitted by coalitions formed by local business and public-sector partners.19

At the same time, rather than repeal its predecessor’s legislation, the coalition government continued with the plan to create statutory Combined Authorities, stressing the role of provincial cities and city-regions in leading the process of “rebalancing.” Its preferred modus operandum was to invite proposals for Combined Authorities, to create them effectively as empty shells – much like the regional municipalities created by Canadian provinces in the late 1960s – and populate them with powers and resources agreed on through individual, bi-lateral intergovernmental deals. The government offered no indication which urban areas

17. The West Yorkshire Combined Authority, covering Leeds and based, like the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, on the same geography as the former metropolitan county, was not created until 2014. Its councils have resisted having a directly elected mayor, which has remained the threshold requirement for receiving significant additional powers and resources.

18. The Northern Way, a creature of the northern Regional Development Agencies, was discontinued at the same time.

19. Eventually, 39 Local Enterprise Partnerships, later reduced to 38 by the merger of two of them, were created. That number is remarkably close to the 35 city-regions advocated by the dissenting memorandum prepared for the local government reform Commission 40 years earlier.
would be favoured in this process. The one proviso was that Combined Authorities should be prepared to adopt governance arrangements that included the direct, at-large election of a mayor, as in London, if they were to be granted a significant level of devolution.

Greater Manchester had first-mover advantages in this emerging policy environment. While other areas struggled to define appropriate geographies for Combined Authorities and/or Local Enterprise Partnerships, far fewer provided them with capacity and a consensual sense of direction. Hence the Greater Manchester Combined Authority was created, albeit in a limited, skeletal form, in 2011, three years in advance of four other areas which followed suit.29

Greater Manchester’s leaders’ good working relationships with local business communities also made it comparatively easy to encourage the formation of a Local Enterprise Partnership on the same geographical footprint and to service it using existing executive machinery. Greater Manchester was therefore able to move quickly to a series of deals with government and begin designing a constitution for a Combined Authority that the districts could support.

There followed an intensive period of horse trading with government departments, choreographed, at the national level, by George Osborne, a powerful chancellor, and at the Greater Manchester level by Sir Howard Bernstein, Manchester City Council’s chief executive, acting as chief officer-designate of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and subsequently, once it existed in shadow form, as its first Head of Paid Service. As a result, six agreements were signed between Greater Manchester and government between 2014 and 2017.

While they are often referred to as “devolution deals,” these agreements, taken together, cannot be compared to the constitutional changes that were introduced in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland at the end of the millennium. Neither is the Greater Manchester Combined Authority model of governance comparable to the one introduced for Greater London.

Substantively, the 2014–17 deals redefined relationships between government departments and Greater Manchester across a range of activities, mainly related to transport, economic development, the labour market, and the built environment. In some cases (such as transport and housing investment), agreements allow for greater certainty in the future flow of government resources. In others, they offered Greater Manchester greater commissioning power over services previously procured by national agencies (such as education and employment services) or more consolidated regulatory power (over planning and land use).

The one outlier among the deals concluded in this period produced an agreement in 2015 to assign all health and social care spending (£6 billion, or $10.5 billion per year) to a new body: the Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership (GMHSCP). This organization brings together all the National Health

20. There are currently 10 Combined Authorities in existence, two of which do not have elected mayors. Recent designations have been made using powers contained in the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act of 2016.
Service–funded clinical services in Greater Manchester with those of its districts, and is responsible for public health and social care (Lupton et al. 2018). This innovation opened the door to a broadening of the Combined Authority agenda into public-service reform and the linkages between social and economic policy.

In terms of governance, the deals established the framework for the current Greater Manchester Combined Authority, when the 10 district leaders agreed in 2014 to create the position of a directly elected mayor for the city-region. Over the following three years, a constitution for the Greater Manchester Combined Authority was drawn up that clarified the division of powers and responsibilities assumed by the incoming mayor as its chair, the 10 district council leaders who form the mayor's cabinet, and the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities.

Unlike London, where a new set of directly elected politicians, together with the mayor, effectively form a second tier of government distinct from London's boroughs, the mayor in Greater Manchester occupies the only new political leadership role created for the Combined Authority. Each of the 10 district council leaders has portfolio responsibilities for an element of Greater Manchester Combined Authority strategy delivery, on which they are supported by district chief executives and other institutional machinery.

Organizationally, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority's executive structures were created through a “lift-and-drop” process whereby the less operational elements of existing institutional activity were transferred into the Combined Authority in 2017, just ahead of the first mayoral election. The rest remained with the Manchester Growth Company, created in 2013 as an umbrella company for Greater Manchester's training, business support, and inward investment and tourism marketing activities.

An early decision was made, in the third devolution deal, that the fire service would also be part of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. The waste authority was also absorbed during the mayor's first term of office. Other important parts of the delivery structures for the Greater Manchester policy, including the police service, GMHSCP, and the transport authority, remain separate in organizational terms but are linked to the Greater Manchester strategy through portfolio management arrangements that are central to its governance.

One important effect of the election of the first mayor in May 2017 was to link Greater Manchester's work more closely than previously to a distinct set of manifesto promises. While some of these related to work that was ongoing, others – a promise to end rough sleeping on the streets by 2020 being a key example – were new, and not necessarily things that the Greater Manchester Combined Authority's resources and powers were set up to achieve.

Mayoral campaign promises were formally integrated into programs through a process conducted during the first year of the mayor's term of office. The result, Our People, Our Place (2017) was a strategy for Greater Manchester, not just for the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. It relies for its implementation on the coordination of a wide range of institutional resources and the use of the mayor's “soft powers” to mobilize activity.
4. Reconciling theory and practice: learning the lessons

Each of the three perspectives examined earlier is useful in analysing elements of the recent reinvention of city-regional governance for Greater Manchester. Berridge’s focus on leadership, and specifically the case he makes in Perfect City about Manchester in this respect, reminds us of the importance of individuals. His Manchester narrative, while it devotes just two lines to the creation of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, will ring true to anyone ever caught up in the spider’s web of connections – linking government, districts, other public-service providers, business leaders, and opinion-formers – a web at the centre of which could be found Manchester City Council’s long-term chief executive and first Combined Authority Head of Paid Service. Without Sir Howard Bernstein’s legendary ability to cajole and persuade a multitude of interests that their self-interest lay, at least in part, in supporting the development of the city and Greater Manchester, it is unlikely that Combined Authorities would now be an accepted part of the landscape of English governance.

Taylor’s account confirms the central importance of constitutional settlements and the way they shape intergovernmental relations and hence forms of urban governance. Such settlements have been key to the recent development of Combined Authorities in general and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority in particular, in two respects.

First, even though the United Kingdom has no written constitution, the levels of autonomy granted to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland continue to throw the absence of any comparable settlement for areas of England into sharp relief. This contrast continues to animate the politics of sub-national claims for greater decision-making powers and resources. Second, Taylor’s observation about the constitutional supremacy of the provinces in Canada has clear parallels in the United Kingdom, where local authorities stand in relation to national government much as Canada’s do in relation to the provinces.

In Greater Manchester’s case, the constitutional inferiority of local government is something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the power of national government to unilaterally change the map and form of local government enabled the comprehensive reforms that created Greater Manchester in the first place, in a way that would never have occurred from the bottom up. On the other hand, and linked in some respects to Gross et al.’s observations, long-run, government-induced changes to the functions and financing of local authorities, paradoxically, has provided some of the impetus for the districts to band together to strengthen Greater Manchester’s collective voice and influence.

Seen in this light, bottom-up mobilization for stronger city-regional governance in Greater Manchester can be interpreted as a reaction to centralization and marketization – as politics trumping economics, Greater Manchester–style – rather than an overt push, by national government, to foist greater levels of responsibility upon lower levels of governance. Gross et al. are nonetheless right to warn that that “devolution as dumping” (Maclennan and O’Sullivan 2013) is an ever-present danger and that those who pursue it need to be careful what they wish for.
As well as helping interpret the past, the three accounts considered here identify some of the key factors that will determine whether the Greater Manchester Combined Authority can continue building on the momentum created through Greater Manchester’s unique approach to collaborative governance over the last three decades. While crystal ball–gazing is not the primary purpose of this paper, a number of imponderables will inevitably affect the medium-term future of Greater Manchester governance arrangements.

At the national level, these depend on the extent to which U.K. governments continue to pursue an asymmetrical approach to devolution that goes further and faster in those places that combine the appetite and capacity to take on additional powers and responsibilities. Key to this outcome will be whether such an approach is seen as a means to tackle chronic spatial disparities in economic performance and life chances rather than an opportunity to pass difficult issues, but not the means to address them, further down the governmental system. Linked to this trend, therefore, is the challenge of combining fiscal reform and the strengthening of sub-national autonomy with an approach to fiscal redistribution that does not reward the strong and fortunate at the expense of the weaker and disadvantaged.

At the Greater Manchester scale, a number of open questions remain, mainly concerning the extent to which collaborative governance arrangements maintain the confidence of their many stakeholders and command broader and deeper support among Greater Manchester residents and users. The prerequisite will be that Greater Manchester is seen to deliver on aspirations in a context in which social and spatial disparities within Greater Manchester are becoming increasingly politicized.

The second mayoral election, due in May 2021, will give an initial indication as to how the first four years of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority in its current form have been viewed. The result will set the scene for the next stage of development in Greater Manchester’s governance. Critical, here, will be Greater Manchester’s ability to attract and develop leaders who can take the work of the last 30 years forward, continue to integrate the institutional capacities that the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the Greater Manchester Strategy have started to bring together, and influence national approaches to economic and social policy delivery in ways that enhance a very English form of devolution.

However the medium-term future pans out, a small number of lessons can be taken from the Greater Manchester experiment with the development of governance arrangements for complex urban areas.

- First, geography matters, but only up to a point. While the Greater Manchester area defined as a result of the 1974 local government reforms has proven durable, it has done so only because significant effort has been put into making it relevant to a range of interests that, in other places, have not cohered around a definition of “place” they found useful.

- Second, and directly related, narrative matters. What has united the broad set of stakeholders who have supported the development of Greater Manchester governance is the belief that they are all in this together, that they can achieve
common benefit from a common set of purposes, and that they gain strength from acting together.

- Third, change is best driven by coalitions of the willing, not by grand designs. Many of the small steps taken towards the self-organization of Greater Manchester were made by a subset of interests, not as a result of wide-ranging consensus, but the gains they made improved the prospects for broader support later.

- Fourth, leadership matters. Coalitions of the willing have to be galvanized into existence and persuaded to take risks if they are to realize mutual gains.

The experience of Greater Manchester is that these four essential features are mutually reinforcing and produce cumulative effects over time that were not anticipated when the first steps were taken.

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