

Decline of the Invisible City

New Birmingham City Council leader John Clancy faces a daunting and unenviable task to avoid the danger of direct rule from Whitehall, reverse unprecedented civic decline and overcome the city's low level (and still largely unflattering) national profile. A lack of foresight, poor political leadership, spurned opportunities and rank bad luck all helped the city reach this point but there were other markers along the way. All this week, Steve Beauchampé considers some key - and some more obscure - reasons why Birmingham might be in this mess.

Part 1

No more the world's best governed city

Had the Second World War not intervened, Birmingham could have had a neo-classical civic centre where today stands Centenary Square and the Library of Birmingham. Colossal in scale and ambition, the only element to be realised was Baskerville House but a scale model of the proposals in the Museum and Art Gallery shows that had the entire complex been built, and then survived Hitler's bombs and Herbert Manzoni's wrecking ball, it would now be Grade 1 listed and probably the most loved, photographed and iconic part of the city.

It was not to be but by the late 1990s the area roughly bounded by Victoria Square, Chamberlain Square, south and central Paradise Circus and Centenary Square made up Birmingham's civic centre, where nearly all of its principal public buildings were located. The Council House, Museum and Art Gallery, Town Hall, Central Library, Library Theatre, Adrian Boult Hall, Birmingham Conservatoire, Baskerville House, the International Convention Centre and Symphony Hall, the Registry Office and Birmingham Repertory Theatre complex, along with the three aforementioned public squares were all here, whilst the National Indoor Arena was a mere few hundred yards away. By 2015 the ICC, Symphony Hall and the NIA have all been sold (ditto the National Exhibition Centre), the Registry Office demolished, with the Adrian Boult Hall and Conservatoire soon to disappear along with the Central Library as part of a multi-decade re-build which will see a purely commercial development, with privately managed streets and squares, occupying what was formerly a swathe of public land. In theory the new Library of Birmingham development in Centenary Square should mitigate some of these effects but with areas of the building now rented to outside organisations, it too is feeling increasingly like a commercial enterprise.

Factor in the sale or closure of numerous other Council owned properties throughout the city, brought about in part by the seismic and often ideologically driven cuts in government funding that followed the financial and banking sector led recession of 2008 (such cuts estimated to be around £850m between 2010-2017), but also by the obsession with outsourcing and privatisation of public

services, and it becomes clear that the civic footprint however defined has shrunk alarmingly. As 2015 ends, the council's reach and remit, its staffing levels and ability to provide traditional and necessary public services have been diminished as never before (just this week 1,200 additional job losses have been announced), with yet further cuts still to come.

The notion of outsourcing public services to the private sector and engaging consultants are constructs of the New Labour governments of 1997-2010 but outsourcing has been enthusiastically embraced and taken further by the Conservatives. The result, not only in Birmingham but throughout much of the UK, has been the drawing up of agreements and contracts considerably more favourable to the private sector, as local authorities, lacking expertise in such matters, found themselves outmanoeuvred and outwitted to the detriment of council tax payers, and tied into long-term deals that were decidedly not to the public's advantage. The situation has been particularly acute in Birmingham, most notably regarding the council's Service Birmingham contract with Capita, the company at one point enjoying £58m per annum profit from the deal, as well as a second contentious contract with Amey covering street repairs and maintenance.

It is in the nature of such agreements that key elements are routinely redacted, unable to be publicly disclosed under secretive 'commercial confidentiality' clauses. With transparency and accountability in retreat and local authorities strongly encouraged by Whitehall to devolve many of their remaining operations to third sector organisations or volunteers, whilst further depleting their property portfolios, and all under a culture of 'light touch regulation', the last thing needed was for the traditional local authority cross-party rôle of scrutiny, oversight and expertise to be downgraded or abolished.

But it was. The culprit was again the Blair government, the Local Government Act 2000 forcing local authorities to replace the long established committee system (which gave all parties committee seats proportional to their share of the popular vote) with a Leader and Cabinet. At a stroke this removed opposition councillors from the decision-making process, changing a generally consensual form of local governance into an adversarial one. In Birmingham the expertise and sage minds of numerous councillors was squandered as the ruling party alone voted on policy whilst overview and scrutiny became reactive where it had previously been proactive. Furthermore the change placed additional powers of patronage in the hands of already emboldened council leaders.

Part 2

A Surfeit of Leadership

In 1999 the ruling Labour group on Birmingham City Council elected Albert Bore as its leader, and therefore leader of the council. Bore became the first Birmingham City Council leader to enjoy the advantages afforded him by the Cabinet system, but his tenure of office has often been criticised as autocratic, secretive and exclusionist, particularly towards those within his own party who opposed his policies or challenged his rule. A prime recent example is that despite fundamental criticism by the government appointed Kerslake Inquiry that the council was poor at working with partners, Bore still failed to share draft plans for the nascent West Midlands Combined Authority with the leader of the council's Conservative opposition group, and even his own deputy!

After more than sixteen years, during which time he was knighted, Sir Albert Bore has finally stepped down, forced from office in large part by pressure from central government. There's nothing wrong per se with such longevity in leadership (Sir Richard Leese has led Manchester City Council since 1996, Chief Executive Sir Howard Bernstein has been in post since 1998, having joined the authority as a junior clerk) but for some time debate and discussion had been predicated more on whether Bore could command sufficient support to survive his chief rival John Clancy's incessant leadership challenges than on whether his vision for Birmingham was the correct one.

Bore was known as the great survivor and not without reason, for it was on his watch that the 2004 Birmingham postal votes scandal occurred, following which six Labour councillors were convicted of carrying out: "massive, systematic and organised postal voting fraud", which presiding special election court judge Richard Mawrey said would: "disgrace a banana republic." Although Bore was not implicated in the fraud, less skilled political fighters, or perhaps those operating in the kind of dynamic and vibrant political system one might have expected to find in a city of Birmingham's size and importance, would surely have succumbed. Yet Bore remained in charge of his party for more than a decade.

It is perhaps an indictment of his leadership qualities that not one of the city's large and purportedly influential group of Asian councillors, several of whom Bore had appointed to senior cabinet and scrutiny committee posts, stood in the ensuing contest to choose his successor. But then, fifteen years after the Cabinet system superseded the Committee model it would be hard to argue that the calibre of councillor across any part of Birmingham's political spectrum is higher now than it was in 2000.

The Library of Birmingham fiasco

In a few short years Birmingham has gone from having the largest public library in Europe (with a claimed 32 miles of shelving), located on an easily expandable site in Paradise Circus, to something that is, shall we say, more compact. Actually, what we should say is that in terms of publicly accessible space it is small and getting smaller, increasingly compromised in its core function of city library and chief store of Birmingham's archives - and with much reduced opening hours and staffing levels, particularly as regards a critical loss of experienced personnel. Staff shortages are now so acute that there is no prospect of digitising the archives or cataloguing the enormous trove of items in storage in the foreseeable future, whilst there is officially no budget for purchasing new books and only in special circumstances can additional archive material be accepted. And it only cost the city £189m with £3m per annum operating costs and £20m per annum in debt repayments!

Planned in the first years of the current millennium, the new library was to replace John Madin's contentious 1974 brutalist design with a signature building that would raise the city's international profile, just as the Guggenheim Museum had done for Bilbao. The option of a £20m-£30m refurbishment and makeover of the existing library, an approach Manchester would successfully take with its Grade II* 1930s central library, refurbished in 2014 at a cost of £40m, was ruled out as Madin's building stood on land which the council viewed as having considerable regeneration potential (initial design ideas for the Paradise Circus redevelopment featured office blocks rising to sixty storeys) and thus commercial value. Star architect Richard Rogers was enlisted with the agreement of Sir Albert Bore to design a £160m replacement library in Eastside. When Bore was first succeeded as council leader in 2004 by Conservative Mike Whitby the Rogers plan was scrapped and an alternative site in Centenary Square identified.

Despite the banking crisis and subsequent recession resulting in swingeing cuts to local government grants from Whitehall, despite the failure of the Council to raise a penny from the sale of land at Paradise Circus towards the build cost, despite the collapse of several large-scale redevelopment schemes in the city centre (including Arena Central, Martineau Galleries, 3 and 4 Snow Hill) calling in to question the demand for the planned Paradise Circus scheme, despite repeated calls for the still affordable refurbishment option to be taken up, Whitby, supported by Clive Dutton, Director of Regeneration and Planning, forged on with building a replacement library, raising the money via prudential borrowing. Pointedly, Sir Albert Bore failed to attend the Library of Birmingham's official opening in September 2013, but with sizeable sections of the building being outsourced for non-library purposes and the running costs and debt repayments further crippling already emaciated council finances, the entire Library of Birmingham fiasco stands as a testimony to the folly of two, or perhaps, three men.

Part 3

Birmingham Not For People

I think that we delude ourselves: a glitzy building, a new shopping centre, that show pony of a library, disingenuous visitor statistics; Birmingham is rarely all that its movers and shakers would have us believe.

In the late 1990s Birmingham City Council was anxious to proceed with redeveloping the Bull Ring Shopping Centre. Little more than thirty years after it had opened to great acclaim, by common consensus the Bull Ring was out of time. So desperate were the Council to see it replaced that they ignored explicit warnings that the plans before them would severely limit future expansion of New Street Station by placing the shopping centre's foundations precisely where additional track and platforms would need to go.

Furthermore, rather than accepting the design principles of the widely praised *Birmingham for People* Bull Ring scheme, which proposed a mix of small and medium building footprints and a prominent central location for the city's markets, they agreed that the new centre be comprised of two enormous blocks with the markets moved to the development's southern periphery. This effectively cut Digbeth off from the city centre whilst ruining the potential for exciting west to east street patterns and leaving what looks like an unfinished Selfridges building jutting awkwardly and unsatisfactorily from the remainder of the Bull Ring shopping centre. What could have become Birmingham for people had become Birmingham for developers.

It is a scenario repeated many times. In all of the city centre's substantial rebirth and expansion since late last millennium, virtually no family housing has been constructed nor green space laid, whilst thousands of modestly proportioned and aesthetically challenged apartments for rent or buy to let have been erected and acres of tarmac put down. It is not that contemporary Birmingham buildings - whether residential, business, retail or service sector - are necessarily hideous or ugly, more that the vast majority are insipid, bland, with the tallest not particularly tall, the most memorable not especially memorable, just an array of ordinary architecture, buildings one could stare at for an hour and yet remember nothing about.

Our architectural heritage has fared no better. Hockley and the Jewellery Quarter, with their distinct legacy of workshops and small manufactories, has been compromised by numerous plain and unambitious residential or office developments (accentuating mistakes made during the 1960s and '70s). At Colmore Circus John Madin's glorious mid-1960s Post and Mail tower was raised (a fate that has befallen much of the work of this, arguably Birmingham's most famous and stimulating architect) primarily because the developer wanted larger floorplates. Meanwhile, Victorian and Edwardian edifices such as the Grade II*

Moseley Road Baths in Balsall Heath have been left to decay whilst several popular and serviceable pre-World War II swimming pools are being demolished for no better reason than the private sector who now operate the city's leisure centres consider them commercially unattractive.

HS2 and the Midland Metro

Good news or further delusion? The recent announcement that the Birmingham - Crewe section of High Speed 2 (named HS 2a) is planned to open in 2027, six years earlier than previously announced, will result in better rail connections from Birmingham to the north. But the move is chiefly concerned with improving linkages between Manchester and Leeds with London via a railway line whose primary route circumvents Birmingham as it traverses north to south, with the city centre reached only by a spur from the main line.

Thus many HS 2 trains will bypass central Birmingham although the area surrounding the HS 2 station near the NEC and Birmingham International Airport, where the UK Central commercial and retail development is planned, will likely be more amply served.

The station's planned location alongside Moor Street takes it into the heart of the city (covering the spot where the Richard Rogers designed city library would have been) although it would arguably have been better to build a larger mainline station here, incorporating HS 2 but with links to existing north-south east-west rail routes. Undoubtedly there will be numerous construction opportunities in the Eastside, Deritend and Digbeth area but the ability of these areas to fully benefit from the station will in no small measure be dependent upon the permeability of the design of what will be Birmingham's largest building as regards it not creating a barrier to and from the city centre's core.

However Birmingham is already attempting to maximise whatever opportunities HS 2 might bring with developers being wooed both by the council and the Local Enterprise Partnership. The Beorma office scheme and the proposed redevelopment of the former wholesale markets plot indicates the kind of transformation the area is set to undergo but instead of the same old same old, how much more refreshing if a large park, vast square, waterscape or wide boulevard - all amenities that the city centre lacks - were to be the centrepiece of the regeneration. How much better if this were an area whose streets, public realm, activities and borders were not dictated and restricted by property developers as has increasingly happened in other parts of the city centre, but instead by the residents of Birmingham and their imagination.

Whether spending over £50bn on a high speed, north-south rail link is a good investment remains debatable, but even with a competitive fare structure the need for HS 2 to meet projected passenger numbers and financial targets may require a subtly imposed scaling back of services on existing routes between

Birmingham and London, freeing capacity which might then benefit local or regional services.

And it is questionable in any case whether HS 2 will primarily benefit London at Birmingham's expense by making the capital more accessible from a trade and tourism perspective. Logic and instinct suggest that the majority of journeys will be London-Birmingham return rather than the other way around, although the possibility of HS 2 turning Birmingham into a de facto satellite of London would seem a dispiriting outcome.

Sadly, Birmingham citizens have seen no benefits from the £60m lavished on the Midland Metro extension between Snow Hill and New Street railway stations (with a further £42.4m allocated for the few hundred yards stretch to Centenary Square now under construction). Placing Metro on the streets has forced numerous bus services from the spine of the city centre to its margins, left New Street Station and the Grand Central shopping centre almost bereft of easily accessible bus services whilst meaning that many cross-city bus journeys involve substantial walks between stops. Further planned extensions will almost certainly exacerbate the situation. Turning city centre streets into railway lines is a policy that the public never asked for, one forced upon Birmingham residents and which impacts most adversely upon those least able to cope with its many negative aspects. How much more insightful to have spent such sums of money on re-opening rail stations at locations including Rubery, Kings Heath, Moseley, Balsall Heath, Highgate and Sutton Park, on a fifth platform at Moor Street and new stations in the east of the city.

Part 4

Manchester, the BBC and beyond

In terms of population and various other statistical indicators, Birmingham is the UK's second largest city. But it is no longer the second most important. Since the turn of the millennium, and likely even beforehand, Birmingham has been falling behind Manchester, and arguably several other British cities, as regards national and international profile, relevance, large-scale infrastructure projects, culture and sport. It has taken time for some to fully realise both what has happened and the implications it produces, but even the city's most ardent cheerleaders must face the uncomfortable truth that in so many key areas, Birmingham now lags behind Manchester (or more accurately Manchester/Salford) just as the West Midlands trails behind the North West - and the gulf is widening rapidly as the trajectories of the two cities and regions move at very different speeds.

Decisions made, opportunities missed: out of Birmingham's failed bid to host the 1992 Olympic Games came funding for the National Indoor Arena for Sport, A decent prize for what was never anything more than a statement of intent by Britain that it wished to host a future Olympics, a trial run for what eventually

became London 2012. Birmingham also wanted to bid for the 1996 Games, but the British Olympic Association decided that Manchester should have a turn. Inevitably they failed but performed well enough to be Britain's candidate for the Games of 2000. Where Birmingham had received a solitary supporting letter from Margaret Thatcher, Manchester now enjoyed the full backing of John Major's government. Sydney got the decision but Britain's credentials as potential hosts were established and so were Manchester's the city securing funding towards a 21,000 capacity indoor arena as a thank you from central government. When the chance to stage the 2002 Commonwealth Games arose Birmingham City Council decided by a single vote against bidding. Manchester had no such qualms and won the Games.

Bolstered by substantial regeneration monies (£83m of public investment, £500m of private) following an IRA bomb in 1996 which mercifully killed no one but decimated part of its' city centre, Manchester's renaissance was underway. It's doubtful if any city has benefited so much from hosting the Commonwealth Games but Manchester gained a raft of new sports venues, several under the moniker of Sportcity (public sector grants totalled £135m), including the National Cycling Centre velodrome, aquatics centre, national squash centre and the City of Manchester stadium complex, in addition to wide-scale regeneration in the east of the city, whilst Birmingham merely looked on.

Since 2002 the Manchester Regional Tennis Centre has been added to Manchester's sporting inventory and the National Cycling Centre expanded to include extensive BMX facilities, In 2016 the National Speedway Stadium and National Basketball Centre will also open in the city. But it was the stadium, now renamed the Etihad and home to Manchester City, which has provided an almost incalculable long-term benefit. Without this, it seems unlikely that Sheikh Mansour, a member of the Royal Family of Abu Dhabi (estimated worth, £1 trillion) would have purchased City in 2008, transformed the club into a giant of the modern game, developed a 5,000 capacity athletics and football stadium (home to Manchester City Ladies) adjacent to the main ground and invested £200m in a state of the art training complex, It doesn't stop there though, with the Mansour family also now investing in educational facilities and homes in east Manchester as part of a joint £1bn, decade-long plan in conjunction with the local authority.

Yet that wasn't even the half of it. In the early 2000s local BBC management committed to leaving the expansive Pebble Mill site for a smaller city centre location at the Mailbox development, rented at a reported £2m per annum. The previous decade Central Television had relocated most of its production facilities from Birmingham to Nottingham. Local media and politicians cheered the BBC's decision to move into the heart of Birmingham, away from the tired facilities at Pebble Mill, apparently oblivious to the fact that downsizing - rather than rebuilding - would consign large-scale BBC television production in the city to history. When the BBC began a major programme of devolution from London to

the regions shortly afterwards, Birmingham was ignored and Manchester/Salford, where an enormous complex named MediaCity was planned, with full local authority support, became the corporation's second home. By the time Birmingham realised the implications of what had taken place, the national airwaves were filling with northern voices, northern stories and northern culture. The outpourings of complaint now emanating from this region's politicians and print media over Birmingham's near invisible national profile are thus at least a decade too late. For Birmingham the implications of the BBC's move could not have been worse had Parliament and the Royal Family relocated to the north-west!

To compound matters, Birmingham's bid to become European City of Culture 2008 failed when the government chose Liverpool; it entered the race to become British Capital of Culture 2013 and Derry won the bid. The city fares no better in terms of the arts. Birmingham lacks a museum or art gallery of national significance whilst Liverpool (the Tate, the Bluecoat and Museum of Liverpool Life), Newcastle/Gateshead (the Baltic and the Sage), Leeds (Royal Armouries Museum). Manchester (The Lowry, Imperial War Museum of the North, National Football Museum, Whitworth Art Gallery), Leicester (National Space Centre), even Margate (Turner Contemporary) and St. Ives (another Tate) have opened major spaces during the past fifteen years. For sure there is much happening at a local level, but lacking the exposure a mainstream national broadcaster (or even newspaper) could bring, it remains largely undiscovered and below the radar (the city no longer even has a tourist information centre!). Birmingham has no equivalent of the Manchester International Festival, the Liverpool Biennale or the Edinburgh Festival or Fringe. It has produced few if any major nationally or internationally acclaimed popular musical artists in over thirty years and no visual artists in far longer, whilst it is a desert where long-form filmmaking and publishing are concerned. Though on the plus side we're fine for city centre bachelor apartments, hotels and shopping centres.

Birmingham even squandered the chance to become an Olympic city, It was designated to host men's and women's football at the 2012 Games until Aston Villa refused to guarantee the availability of their ground (for a possible redevelopment that there is still no sign of five years later!); so Coventry stepped in, got the kudos and enjoyed the party! Once dubbed Britain's city of sport, Birmingham's sporting facilities are fast becoming outmoded and overtaken by those elsewhere. Despite notable recent improvements at Edgbaston and the Priory Tennis Club the city has no competition standard 50m pool (the soon to open facility at the University of Birmingham will not fit those requirements), no velodrome, no major hockey facilities, no major rugby ground, indeed no major outdoor sports stadium at all. The recent rugby World Cup stayed longer in Milton Keynes than it did in Birmingham and if England were to stage a football World Cup or European Championship finals (the latter is quite possible in 2020) it is unlikely that anything more prestigious than Group matches would be played here.

Contrast again with Manchester, home to two of the world's richest and most successful football clubs (along with two international standard football stadiums), paying astronomical fees and salaries to attract the world's finest players. Birmingham's two clubs can barely hold down a top division place between them, collectively winning but a solitary major trophy since 1996, Birmingham City's 2011 League Cup triumph. It is to say the least all very disappointing.

The Northern Powerhouse

It helps when the most powerful man in British politics represents a local constituency, but Chancellor George Osborne's plans to create an economic hub across northern England centred around Manchester, Liverpool and Leeds would likely have been on the agenda irrespective of his being the MP for Tatton in Cheshire. Although still to deliver much that is tangible, should Osborne invest the political commitment, will, energy and finance to match his vision of such a mega city region then the potential exists for Manchester and the north to flourish as strongly as it did in the 19th century 'Cottonopolis' era. And having reaffirmed in his recent spending review an investment of £13bn on northern transport schemes during the current Parliament (much of it on HS 2, much else directed via the recently formed Transport in the North) Osborne's promises may soon become deeds.

It's not that Osborne specifically dislikes Birmingham and the West Midlands, more that being outside the geographical scope of his masterplan, the region is most likely some way down his priorities. Naturally the Treasury and Business departments make occasional encouraging noises and have even offered the Combined Authority the decidedly miserable sum of £30m per annum in devolution monies, but when Osborne discouraged Chinese President Xi Jinping from visiting Birmingham in October it was not due to some sleight, but because in future the action will be in the north, Birmingham has been bypassed.

Part 5

The Kerslake Review

In 2012, assessing the scale of central government cuts both already implemented and to come, Sir Albert Bore spoke of the end of local government as we know it; he was not exaggerating. Assailed on all sides, Birmingham, a model for municipal government in the Victorian and Edwardian era, was struggling even to deliver basic services, whilst recurrent failures in the city's children's services department, the mysterious Trojan Horse affair and the single status equal pay ruling (whereby around £1bn in back pay was owed to certain categories of current and former council employees) had raised concerns in central government. In response a commission chaired by Sir Robert Kerslake

was set up to investigate by the then Communities and Local Government Secretary Eric Pickles.

Bore's micro management style, the relationship between leader and chief executive and that between councillors and officers, how the council works with partner organisations and its wider corporate culture, all were subjected to intense scrutiny and received much criticism in the ensuing report. Yet Kerslake went further, suggesting councillor numbers be reduced (perhaps from 120 to 100, subject to a review of boundaries by the Local Government Boundary Commission) and recommending replacement of the present electoral cycle, whereby a third of council seats are contested in three years out of four (with no elections in the fourth year) to a system of all out elections staged every four years, the change to take effect from 2018. Thus, despite a rising population, the size of Birmingham's wards (averaging around 10,000 people each, roughly twice the size of wards in Coventry) is set to increase. Most remaining councillors will be redefined as community leaders with their power to influence and affect citywide decisions and to hold Cabinet members to account considerably reduced, as they are expected to concentrate on issues relating to their wards. Yet reducing the input of councillors as regards the wider city risks fracturing a crucial line of accountability between voters and senior councillors, potentially threatening a democratic deficit of critical proportions.

Implementation of Kerslake's recommendations is being overseen by an 'Independent Birmingham Improvement Panel', with the threat that should insufficient progress be made by spring 2016 Whitehall-appointed Commissioners could be brought in to run the city, with the democratically elected Leader and Cabinet ousted by central government.

However Kerslake's recommendations are stifled by their need to follow the Conservative government's agenda as regards local authorities. Thus reference to working better with partner organisations essentially means the business community, rather than those in the voluntary or third sector. Yet reducing the number of ward councillors along with their influence lessens the likelihood that they will be capable of holding Birmingham's civic leaders to account. A real overhaul of Birmingham's moribund political system might ask why the Green Party, UKIP or even independent candidates are never elected when such results are regular occurrences in other parts of the West Midlands, and how more stimulating and radical political agendas might be encompassed in a democratic local framework. Sadly, the notion of encouraging a refreshing political activism is likely anathema to a government who seem to fear, rather than embrace, an enlivened political landscape.

Ultimately, there remains a strong argument that if central government loosened its often suffocating grip on local authorities, swept away a great many of the rules and regulations under which councils are forced to operate, trusted them more and micro managed less, local democracy might flourish.

West Midlands Combined Authority and Metro Mayor

Even when George Osborne giveth, read the small print and you'll notice that he also taketh away. As the Chancellor approves a devolution deal for the region, so the lines of democratic accountability of the newly forming West Midlands Combined Authority and Metro Mayor are either far from clear in the case of the former, or troubling as regards the latter. Meanwhile, some powers currently residing with local councils will be subsumed into the new body, with extensive new powers allocated to the business focussed and non-elected Local Enterprise Partnerships.

So by 2018, the framework of local democracy in Birmingham will have been decided not by the electorate it is meant to serve, but by central government. The size of our council and its wards, the frequency of elections, the rôle of councillors, the make up and powers of the regional wide authority, all will have been determined by Westminster, with the most powerful post of all, that of Metro Mayor, imposed specifically against the wishes of many of the region's electorate as expressed in mayoral referendums as recently as 2012. It will be a post lacking even the basic democratic safeguards, curbs and accountability that the Mayor of London must accept.

However, this is to misinterpret the intentions behind a form of devolution that is primarily designed to ensure decision taking is swift, business orientated and Whitehall compliant, George Osborne's rubber stamp man as it were. There will be no room for complex, messy debate or for the input and influence of public opinion other than at the most superficial level. Public engagement, once channelled through the West Midlands County Council, will in future be expressed via a four yearly beauty contest or by the lobbying of council leaders. Expect those individuals and organisations with status and power to be listened to more avidly than those without. Compare that with Scotland, a region with a similar sized population to that of the West Midlands Combined Authority, where an assembly determined by proportional representation has reinvigorated politics, and which confers power to every rung on the ladder of society.

But not here. Birmingham, still a place where things are done to us, rather than one where we consent to their being done.

© Steve Beauchampé/The Birmingham Press

December 2015

www.thebirminghampress.com