Local political leadership in transition: lessons from the new Auckland Council

Christine Cheyne
Massey University

Abstract

The creation of a unitary council in Auckland, New Zealand, in November 2010 represented a major shift in local governance in Australasia. Together, the directly elected mayor, Len Brown, and Auckland Council govern a third of New Zealand's population, the largest population of any unit of local government in Australasia. As a result, the mayor of Auckland is potentially a very powerful political figure. In addition, Len Brown has a track record of political leadership that saw him garner strong support from Auckland's Polynesian population and from voters in lower socio-economic areas. This, together with strong expectations from Auckland's indigenous Maori population, has resulted in significant new initiatives to ensure more inclusive decision-making and to foster civic leadership that potentially have wider application internationally.

For New Zealand local government, the question of the 'Auckland effect' is now of pressing importance, with many councils considering governance reforms in the wake of the structural and other changes in Auckland. The government's announcement in early 2011 of a major review of local government is a further signal of continuing change for the local government sector. Titled *Smarter Government, Stronger Communities: Towards Better Local Governance and Public Services*, the review aims to explore the structure, functions and funding of local government, including the usefulness of unitary authorities for metropolitan areas and the relationship between central and local government.

This paper examines the changing nature of local political leadership and local governance with the emergence of the Auckland Council, by reviewing the first year of Len Brown's leadership. A particular focus is on central-local relations recognising the critical importance of the interaction between central and local government in Auckland, and on the exercise of leadership through the new statutory requirement to prepare a spatial plan. The aim of the paper is to identify principles to guide the reviews of local government such as that occurring currently in New Zealand, drawing on recent domestic and international experience of metropolitan and community governance reforms.

Introduction

On 1 November 2010 the Auckland Council was established replacing the former Auckland Regional Council and seven territorial authorities (Rodney District, North Shore City, Waitakere City, Auckland City, Manukau City, Papakura District and Franklin District Councils). The new Auckland Council is New Zealand's first unitary council in a large urban area and, as such, represents a major shift in local governance in Australasia. Together, the directly elected mayor, Len Brown, and Auckland Council govern a third of New Zealand's population, just under 1.5 million residents (compared with the 2009 estimated residential population of 1,052,458 for the City of Brisbane Local Government Area (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010). The creation of a unitary council with distinctive governance arrangements comprising the governing body (directly elected mayor and 20 councillors)

is complemented by 21 local boards with members elected by residents of the local board area. As well, there is a statutory provision for an independent Maori advisory board and the Council has several advisory panels to provide advice regarding key constituencies and key areas of decision-making (Business, Disability, Ethnic Peoples, Youth, Heritage, Pacific Peoples and Rural). The intention is that the governing body and the local boards will share the decision-making responsibilities of Auckland Council with the former focusing on region-wide strategic decision and local boards representing their local communities and making decisions about local issues, facilities and activities. The independent Maori statutory board was the centre-right National government's response to Maori aspirations for a role in governance. The board must appoint up to 2 people to sit on each of Auckland Council's committees that deal with the management and stewardship of natural and physical resources. In addition, the legislation setting up the Auckland Council provided for several council-controlled organisations (CCOs). Figure 1 below shows the council's structure.
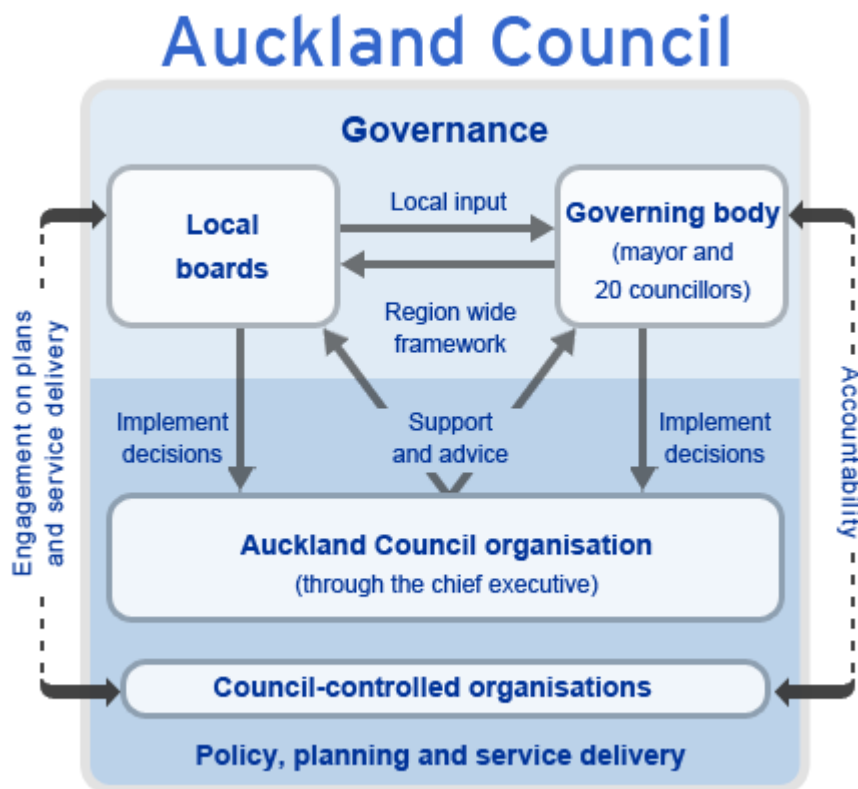

Figure 1: Auckland Council structure (Source: http://www.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/EN/AboutCouncil/HowCouncilWorks/auckland_council_explained/Pages/Home.aspx)

Being directly elected by the region's population, the mayor is a very powerful political figure. In other regions of New Zealand, regional councils are led by a chairperson who is elected by the regional councillors (who in turn are elected by voters in ward/constituency based elections). So, for example, the chair of the Wellington Regional Council is a councillor who is one of five elected members who represent the Wellington Constituency (one of thirteen councillors representing a total of six constituencies). The current chair, Fran Wilde, who was the highest polling candidate in the Wellington Constituency, received just under 30,000 votes in the October 2010 elections whereas Len Brown, the Auckland mayor, received 237,487 votes compared with 171,542 votes gained by his nearest rival John Banks.

The mayoral election was arguably a left-right contest, with Len Brown clearly aligned with voters typically on the left of the political spectrum and John Banks a Cabinet Minister in the right-wing National government that was in office in the 1990s, prior to becoming the Mayor of Auckland[1]. Despite lacking a wealthy support base and the personal wealth of John Banks, Len Brown had a decisive victory which can, to a significant degree, be attributed to his track record as mayor of Manukau City in which he forged strong connections with the lower socio-economic Polynesian population of south Auckland. This, together with strong expectations from Auckland's indigenous Maori population, has resulted in significant new initiatives to ensure more inclusive decision-making and to foster civic leadership that potentially have wider application internationally.

The next section discusses the emerging style of local political leadership that is associated with the creation of the new Auckland Council drawing on some aspects of the to the first year of Len Brown's leadership of the new Auckland Council. The paper then discusses the current review of local government and seeks to identify some principles that might guide this and similar reviews elsewhere.

The emergent style of local political leadership in Auckland
There is a significant body of literature on models of political leadership (see, for example, (Berg & Rao 2005; Bochel & Bochel 2010; Borraz & John 2004; Haus et al. 2004; Kjaer et al. 2010; Leach & Wilson 2000; Lindstrom 2010; Lowndes & Leach 2004; Martins & Rodríguez Álvarez 2007; Morrell & Hartley 2006; Saltzstein Alan L et al. 2008; Stone 2006). Much of this has focused on what Greasley and Stoker (2008) refer to as "personality, capabilities, or contingency" (Greasley & Stoker 2008, p. 722). In this analysis of the emergent style of local political leadership in New Zealand following the creation of a unique (at least for New Zealand) unit of local government, it is possible to see the competing influence of two quite distinctive leadership styles: the presidential/celebrity style and also the facilitative style.

It is widely recognised that elections for the top political leadership role in contemporary parliamentary and local elections in many western democracies are increasingly characterised by a "presidential style" campaign reflecting the influence of the media which demands a high profile, preferably telegenic and media-savvy candidate. In New Zealand parliamentary and local elections, former television (and sometimes radio) personalities are increasingly entering politics and in local elections former parliamentary representatives are now seeking local government leadership roles. These trends underscore the growing importance of 'celebrity' status in politics internationally (Marsh et al. 2010; Weiskel 2005). While direct election of mayors has been mandatory in territorial authority elections since 1989 in New Zealand, the creation of a unitary council and the amalgamation of so many cities and districts into a much larger unit of government in 2010 hastened the trend. Although there was a wide field of candidates in the first Auckland Council elections, with 22 candidates standing for the mayoralty, as noted above, the contest was essentially a two-horse race with the next highest polling candidate a distant third gaining just over 42,000 votes compared with nearly 200,000 fewer than Brown and well over 100,000 fewer than Banks .

Brown and Banks represented distinct socio-economic interests, and advocated social, economic and environmental policies that reflected the values and aspirations of the constituencies from which they drew much of their support. The growing expectation that the mayoralty campaign was a contest between two arch-opponents was reinforced by the fact that Banks was very well-known nationally having been a controversial political figure when in national politics and when previously

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[1] Just recently, at the 26 November General Election, John Banks stood for ACT, a political party to the right of National and was the only member of that party to gain office. It is expected that he will enter into a confidence and supply agreement with the newly formed National government.

mayor of Auckland City.[2] Being an election for the political leader of an entirely new and much larger unit of local government, the mayoralty campaign received substantial coverage by local print and television media. The Auckland-based *NZ Herald* is the daily newspaper that has the country's largest circulation and the two main television channels are both Auckland-based. This kind of media coverage is rarely seen in local government election campaigns, thus reinforcing the trend towards a presidential-style campaign and leadership.

Despite the fact that in New Zealand local government the mayor is a weak mayor (Cheyne 2004; Leach & Wilson 2000), the influence of the trend towards a presidential-style campaign and celebrity politics arguably has resulted in the mayor becoming a significant local political leader. Other contemporary public management trends such as the focus on strategic planning and cross-sectoral policy have also reinforced the importance of the mayor. In Auckland, the creation of the unitary council has amplified the role of the mayor. The legislation setting up the council introduced a new requirement to produce a spatial plan – in addition to the requirement to produce a unitary land-use plan to replace the former regional and district resource management plans of the seven territorial authorities and the Auckland Regional Council. The process of developing the spatial plan is well advanced with a discussion document having been released for public comment, followed by a draft plan which had a deadline of 31 October 2011 for public submissions. The spatial planning process is a key mechanism for the new mayor to promote his vision for the region and to implement key policies. The spatial plan will have a 30-year horizon (in contrast with the 10-year horizon of the land-use and long-term plans already in existence). It is intended to indicate investment priorities which will require central government support. It is intended that the Auckland Plan will be adopted by the end of 2011 in order to guide the development of the 2012-22 Long Term Plan that all councils are required to adopt by 30 June 2012. In developing the spatial plan, significant efforts need to be made to secure support from central government which is a key stakeholder. Thus, the ability of the mayor to exercise *facilitative leadership* becomes critically important and a necessary complement to the presidential-style leadership discussed above.

While local authority strategic planning is well-established in New Zealand, and the notion of community governance is widely recognised as being at the heart of contemporary local government, the Auckland mayor faces a particularly daunting challenge given the tensions between the mayor's policy priorities and those of central government especially in the area of transport. It is well-known, not just in New Zealand, that Auckland has significant problems with severe congestion due to inadequate infrastructure and a growing population. The lack of regional strategic planning and lack of co-ordination of transport and other key regional infrastructure (including sporting facilities[3]) was a major influence on the initial decision to review Auckland's governance. In his role as mayor of Manukau City, Brown had established a strong record as a facilitative leader especially through his initiatives to support the large Pasifika population of Manukau. It was this background that underpinned his electoral success in 2010 which is widely attributed to the strong community networks he developed as well as his personal charisma which fitted with the requirement for a celebrity/presidential style of leadership.

A study of the new models of local political leadership in England following legislative change to the constitutions of local government has shown that the directly elected mayor model, although adopted by only a small number of councils, appears to foster a more facilitative leadership style

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[2] Banks was a National member of Parliament between 1981 and 1999 serving as a Cabinet Minister from 1990 to 1996. He was Auckland City mayor for two terms (2001-2004, 2007-2010).

[3] The 2003 Rugby World cup was originally scheduled to be held in New Zealand and Australia and when NZ was unable to guarantee suitable stadia because of lack of agreement among Auckland councils, NZ lost the right to host the tournament.

compared to the more widespread council leader model (Greasley & Stoker 2008). Greasley and Stoker build on the work of Svara (1994) who identified the emergence of a type of elected urban political leader who is "a facilitator who promotes positive interaction and a high level of communication among officials in city government and with the public and who also provides guidance in goal setting and policy making" (Svara 2003 p158). While Svara argued that this kind of leadership was exhibited by mayors in city manager councils in the United States, Greasley and Stoker argue that it is a form of leadership that is becoming more common across all urban settings. It would appear that the directly elected mayor model in New Zealand reflects what Greasley and Stoker found in the English councils that adopted this model. They concluded:

> Mayors in England, with their greater decision-making authority and fewer veto constraints, have provided more visible and high-profile leadership. There is also evidence that mayors are turning outward to the electorate rather than focusing on maintaining political support within the council, given the structural nature of the leader-follower model that the mayoral authorities have in place compared to those in leader-cabinet authorities. The authority of the mayor and the nature of his or her relationship with followers encourages the development of a less partisan and more open leadership style (Greasley & Stoker 2008, p. 728) .

As well as being an essential complement to a participative democracy and network governance, facilitative leadership is vital for achievement of vision – an attribute that is widely associated with political leadership. Vision, even if unwavering and strong, cannot on its own ensure successful or effective leadership. In the case of Len Brown, his vision of delivering public transport, public ownership of the region's public assets, environmental protection, economic and social development requires skilful negotiation of opponents and critics especially in Cabinet and some parts of the national and regional business sector.

The changing face of central-local relations
Len Brown was elected to a very powerful role in New Zealand being the directly elected mayor of the city that has a third of the country's population and a significant amount of New Zealand's economic activity. This election took place during the first term of office of a centre right government led by John Key, just recently returned for a second term in the November 26 general election. The very existence of the Auckland Council is the culmination of a policy contest between the left and right. The centre-left Labour government led by Helen Clark in 2005-2008 set up a Royal Commission on Auckland Governance to explore options for improved governance in what was historically a politically fragmented region. The Royal Commission was still conducting its inquiry (scheduled to report by the end of March 2009), when Labour lost the November 2008 election. Whilst favouring rationalisation and a single council for Auckland as recommended by the Royal Commission, the incoming centre-right government had little enthusiasm for the Royal Commission's recommendations for shared governance (which included a second tier, and dedicated seats for Maori) and instead introduced legislation to set up the Auckland Council as a unitary authority. Like the Labour-led government, National also wished to see better co-ordination between local and central government in Auckland, and hoped that reform would enhance Auckland's economic competitiveness internationally.

The establishment of a unitary council in the Auckland region has fundamentally altered the balance of power between local government in that region and central government. It has also altered the relationship between central government and local government in other parts of New Zealand. The very strong connections between central government agencies and the Auckland Council have prompted local government in other parts of the country to seek to engage more directly with central government to advance the interests and needs of their regions. In early October 2011, a group of local authorities in the northern half of the North Island (Northland, Waikato and Bay of Plenty regional councils, the Auckland, Hamilton and Tauranga city councils and Whangarei District

Council) formed the Upper North Island Strategic Alliance. The combined population of these councils is around 2.3 million. More recently, a Central Alliance has been formed by local authorities in the southern half of the North Island.[4] It is increasingly recognised that in order to engage with central government to advocate subnational interests, councils need to have critical mass and a common voice. With the numerical, electoral and economic dominance of the Auckland region and adjacent regions in the upper North Island, it is recognised that there may be an 'engagement deficit' for other regions resulting in a lack of responsiveness on the part of central government to the specific needs and concerns of those regions.

Ironically perhaps, for a policy that has ostensibly strengthened local democracy through creating such a powerful unit of local government, the legislation that created the Auckland Council nevertheless is part of a growing trend towards centralisation in New Zealand (McNeill 2011). Indeed, in the United Kingdom the introduction of directly elected mayors has not proceeded smoothly and opponents and sceptics of direct election have suggested that it is anti-democratic because it is centrally imposed.

Reviewing local governance: some principles for making decisions about local political leadership
Internationally, recent and current reforms of local governance offer insights for policy design and practice in relation to local political leadership. The New Zealand experience with the reform of Auckland's governance has important insights. First, the decision to use an independent and high-calibre panel to review Auckland's governance is noteworthy. The Royal Commission model offered a very robust and respected mechanism for conducting a review. The Commission delivered a substantial and extremely comprehensive report following the commissioning of expert analysis from New Zealand and beyond, an international study tour, and a public engagement process (Royal Commission on Auckland Governance 2009). While the change of government means that it is not possible to know what the response of the previous government if re-elected would have been, it is clear that a different administration from that which established an independent inquiry is likely to seek to distance itself from its predecessor. Therefore, it is important to note that even independent review processes are inevitably mediated by partisan politics. However, *appointing high-calibre reviewers* and *ensuring that the review process is public* can assist with public debate about the subsequent recommendations.

A change to governance arrangements in one part of the country, especially the dominant economic and/or political region, will have impacts on other parts of the country. Change, therefore, should be *approached in a holistic and integrated manner*. In the New Zealand experience, there has been some concern and even anxiety about the implications of the potential and actual influence of the new Auckland Council on other regions' ability to engage central government in addressing their issues. At the same time, there is clearly an interest throughout local government in the developments in central government-Auckland Council relations as improvements in the ability of central government to engage with local government and its communities have benefits for the wider local government sector.

The relationship between central and local government is being tested in the new governance arrangements in Auckland which have established a new leader who has a substantial electoral base from which to command resources and influence policies of central government. However, in countries such as New Zealand where there is no constitutional protection for local government, the apparent power of the mayor may be illusory. It is yet to be seen (when the final Auckland Plan is adopted) to what extent the mayor is able to garner support from central government for his vision. The policy and legislative review process that resulted in the creation of the Auckland Council

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[4] As reported on Radio New Zealand National, viewed 19 November 2011, http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/regional/91289/central-authorities-agree-on-super-city-alliance

demonstrate the power of central government to impose its will on local government and local communities. In light of this, and especially in places where central government does not trust or have a commitment to a strong local government sector, the need for constitutional protection for local government becomes particularly important.   For New Zealand, it is vital that the current review of local government result in *a much clearer and positive articulation by central government of local government's role and function within a democratic society*.

The contemporary phenomenon (reinforced by technological developments in the media) of celebrity/presidential-style mayoralty campaigns suggests the *need for regulation of elections such as, for example, restraints on campaign spending,* but the growing use of social networking also means that influence of traditional media may be displaced to some extent. Therefore, aspirant mayors (as indeed all politicians in national and local politics) will need to be skilled and confident in using social networking media.

The jury is still out on whether direct election of mayors enhances voter turnout and increases the accountability and legitimacy of local government as advocates of new council constitutions in the United Kingdom have argued. However, it is clear from the Auckland experience that having a local government unit of a significant size, with a directly elected mayor, can generate enhanced media coverage of elections which may be even more important in a digital age for elections.

Conclusion

The 'Auckland effect' is now of pressing importance to the wider population and local government sector in New Zealand. Many councils are now contemplating new governance arrangements in the wake of the structural and other changes in Auckland. It is timely, therefore, to develop some principles to guide reviews of local government such as that occurring currently in New Zealand. Len Brown's leadership has been associated with significant new initiatives to ensure more inclusive decision-making and to foster civic leadership that potentially have wider application internationally. Having successfully contested a presidential-style election and now an incumbent mayor in a new set of governance arrangements which require a presidential style, the mayor also has to exercise a facilitative style of leadership in implementing his vision through the statutory planning. A facilitative role is seen as vital for local government leaders who must increasingly co-ordinate action with other stakeholders to achieve their vision.

This facilitative style has been recognised as of contemporary significance internationally and, arguably, should be embedded in further reforms of local government. It is of particular salience in countries like New Zealand where local government is constitutionally weak and where there are tensions between central and local government. It is also highly valuable for societies and communities that are increasingly diverse socio-economically and culturally.   Without a facilitative style, a presidential-style leader's vision is at risk of being overturned by a successor. The power wielded by a directly elected mayor of such a comparatively large authority as Auckland, is undoubtedly substantial but can be exercised in a way that enhances democratic action as well as social inclusion if used in a facilitative manner.

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