

RJF Briefing Paper 2

Elected Mayor – A Numbers Game

The figures that will drive May's referendum, candidate selection, and any mayoral vote in November

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RJF Public Affairs was founded in Birmingham in 2011 by Marc Reeves, Kevin Johnson and Martin Field. It is the only consultancy of its kind to focus on the West Midlands, and it specialises in helping businesses improve their understanding of and relationships with the changing political structures in the region. We monitor activities within council chambers and other corridors of power, and help clients develop approaches to contribute to the positive development of policies which impact on the region.

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Introduction

- Fewer than 5,000 Labour Party members will have crucial say on who becomes elected Mayor of Birmingham
- Labour's candidate may need 'second preference' votes of Lib Dem supporters to win
- Sion Simon clear front runner, with support from Ed Balls
- Conservative and Liberal Democrat candidates yet to declare
- One credible independent candidate emerges

Referendum: Yes or no?

This is an impossible question to answer, but there are a number of pointers that suggest a 'yes' vote is more likely than a 'no' vote. Birmingham has, in fact, already expressed an opinion in favour of a mayor. In 2001, the then Labour-led city council held a consultative ballot to gauge opinion. Three types of governance were put to voters – the existing council leader and cabinet system, an elected mayor and an elected mayor working with a council manager.

Just over half of those taking part in the poll - 53 per cent - opted for the two types of elected mayor on offer, while 46 per cent backed the

existing system. The city council, then overwhelmingly opposed to a mayor, voted to retain the leader and cabinet system, and the decision was upheld by the Local Government Minister Nick Raynsford, his mind quite possibly swayed by the fact that Labour had just lost mayoral elections to Independents in Middlesbrough and Hartlepool.

City mayors remained a relatively novel concept in England 11 years ago, having only just been made possible by the Local Government Act 2000. London had recently elected Ken Livingstone, but most people outside of the capital would not have been familiar with the idea of a mayor running a city. The political climate has changed since then; more cities have mayors, while the Boris Johnson verses Ken Livingstone epic in London will grab the headlines during the run-up to Birmingham's referendum. Greater familiarity with mayors could of course be a double-edged sword, but

it is at least arguable that if the people of Birmingham were prepared to gamble with a mayor in 2001, they will equally be willing to do so in 2012.

It should not be forgotten, either, that members of Birmingham City Council ran a virulent anti-mayor campaign in 2001. Senior figures from the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties combined to urge people to reject an "elected dictator", and were successful in gaining extensive media coverage.

The 'yes' campaign, on the other hand, barely existed in 2001. On this occasion, the opposite appears to be the case, with a lively 'yes' campaign being conducted through social media, while the 'no' campaign led by Birmingham MPs John Hemming (Yardley Lib Dem) and MP Roger Godsiff (LabHall Green), has failed to gain momentum since being launched with a plea to "vote no to a power freak".

The referendum question

The greatest influence on voting patterns this time will inevitably be the content of the question asked of voters. Opponents of a mayor [reacted angrily](#), possibly with some justification, when the question for the referendum was published at the end of last year:

"How would you like Birmingham to be run?"

"By a leader who is an elected councillor chosen by a vote of the other elected councillors. This is how the council is run now.

"Or by a mayor who is elected by voters. This would be a change from how the council is run now."

Subliminally, it would appear, the question is inviting electors to vote for a mayor if they wish the council to change the way it is run. Of course, if Birmingham's Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition is correct to claim that it is

performing well and has improved public services since 2004, then voters may not have any appetite for change. On the other hand, were there to be a reaction against the coalition at the May 3 local elections, then that could also be expressed in a significant vote for change with a decisive 'yes' vote at the referendum.

Who is most likely to become Birmingham's first elected mayor?

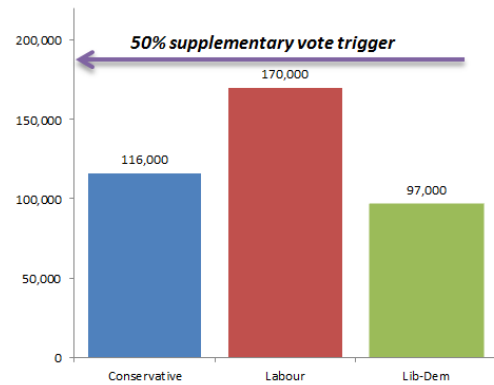
The Labour Party is confident that, whoever does land the top job, the winner will be the Labour candidate.

Based on the 2010 General Election results in Birmingham, this confidence would appear to be well founded since Labour candidates polled almost 170,000 votes against 116,000 for Conservative and 97,000 for Liberal Democrat candidates.

However, the voting method chosen by the Government for the mayoral elections is the **Supplementary Vote** system. There are two columns on the ballot paper, one for voters to mark their first choice and one in which to mark a second choice, although there is no compulsion to make a second choice. All of the first choices are counted and, if a candidate has polled more than 50 per cent of votes cast, they are declared the winner.

If no candidate gets a majority, the top two candidates continue to a

second round and all other candidates are eliminated. The second choice votes of all eliminated candidates are then counted, and any second votes cast for the remaining two candidates are added to their first round totals. Whichever candidate has the most votes after the second preferences have been allocated is declared the winner.



Total votes cast for the main parties in Birmingham in the 2010 General Election

Therefore, if the Labour candidate fails to win an outright majority of the first preferences, the chances of becoming mayor will rest on gaining sufficient second preferences. If the 2010 General Election results in Birmingham were replicated in a mayoral vote, the Labour candidate would fall just short of obtaining an overall majority (by about 22,000 votes). In that case, the Liberal Democrat candidate (and all other minor party candidates) would be eliminated and their second preference votes redistributed to the Labour and Conservative candidates.

It is difficult to imagine, although not impossible, that there would not be sufficient second preference votes

by Liberal Democrats to carry the Labour candidate over the winning line. In any case, even a small increase in the Labour vote in Birmingham since the 2010 General Election would be enough to give the party outright victory in the mayoral poll.

All of this could, of course, be upset by a strong independent candidate running on a populist ticket, but their success would be severely handicapped without the campaigning resources of a party machine. We discuss potential independent candidates later in this paper.

The likely Labour candidates

Three Labour contenders have announced their intention to seek the party nomination.

They are:

- **Sion Simon**, a former MP for Erdington who stood down at the 2010 General Election to concentrate on the mayoral campaign
- **Gisela Stuart**, the MP for Edgbaston
- **Sir Albert Bore**, leader of Birmingham City Council 1999-2004, now leader of the council opposition Labour group

Rumours have been circulating recently that Hodge Hill MP and shadow cabinet member Liam Byrne may throw his hat in the ring, since his parliamentary seat is

disappearing at the next General Election. However, Mr Byrne has refused to comment publicly on an article in the *New Statesman* magazine suggesting that he is testing the water for a mayoral bid. Labour sources in Birmingham say they doubt that Mr Byrne would be able to garner enough support at this stage in the race.

Mr Simon's decision to enter the race at a very early stage, combined with his dramatic announcement that he would stand down as an MP and Government Minister, led many political commentators to conclude that some kind of backroom deal had been hatched to gift Mr Simon the mayoralty. This line of argument was strengthened by the parachuting of former union leader Jack Dromey, the husband of deputy labour leader Harriet Harman, into Mr Simon's Erdington seat. Why, it was asked, would Mr Simon give up a promising career at Westminster in favour of gambling on becoming Birmingham's Labour mayoral candidate unless there was a degree of certainty that he would win the nomination?

Counter-rumours circulating last summer quoted "a very senior" Labour source with close links to Ed Miliband's office, suggesting that Mr Simon was not a sufficiently heavyweight candidate for mayor of Britain's second largest city and that a far bigger name would eventually emerge.

However, that claim would appear to have been shot down by Mr Simon's close relationship to Labour Party

luminaries such as Tom Watson and Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls. Indeed, Mr Balls took pride of place recently at a [mayoral campaigning lunch](#) given by Mr Simon in the lavish surroundings of Marco Pierre White's new restaurant at The Cube in Birmingham city centre.

Labour's official line locally and nationally is that the contest for selection will not begin until the referendum result is known. It is possible, therefore, that further plausible candidates may emerge after May 3, with Labour's nomination decision timed for late summer.

The party is likely to have a shortlist of three or four candidates. It would seem unthinkable that the Labour Party will not include an Asian or African-Caribbean candidate in the shortlist, given that Birmingham will become a majority ethnic city within about 15 years. Possible contenders could include Ladywood MP Shabana Mahmood and Nechells councillor Yvonne Mosquito. Ansar Ali Khan, a Washwood Heath councillor, is ambitious and was disappointed not to be selected as the Hodge Hill parliamentary candidate when the seat went to Liam Byrne.

Fewer than 5,000 people will select Labour's mayoral candidate

Labour's membership in Birmingham isn't what it once was.

The party does not release official figures, but reliable sources have confirmed that there are just under 5,000 Labour members in Birmingham, who will participate in a one-person one-vote process to choose the mayoral candidate. There will be no trade union block vote.

Sion Simon, seen by most people as the leading contender, has spent a year attending local party and community organisation meetings, shaking hands and talking to as many Labour members as possible. He has also put much effort into attracting the Asian vote through the efforts of Khalid Mahmood, the MP for Perry Barr, and Waseem Zaffar, a city councillor for Lozells and East Handsworth.

Mr Simon recently published a detailed response to a Government consultation on mayors, setting out the powers he would wish to have. These included a seat on national government cabinet committees, direct control over government budgets for Birmingham and the chairmanship of important West Midlands committees for transport, skills and the Birmingham-Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership. He also wants the right to close failing schools, set up Enterprise Zones and to raise funding for public projects by issuing bonds.

Sir Albert Bore's campaign has made little public impact since it was launched at the end of last summer. He is stressing Labour party rules that he says prevent individual campaigning until a candidate is

selected. He has not made a personal response to the Government consultation, but is backing the Birmingham Labour Party response, drawn up by senior figures including Sir Albert and overseen by Hodge Hill MP Liam Byrne.

Mrs Stuart's campaign has been almost as low-key as Sir Albert's, although she did venture into the policy field by proclaiming that the former Central Television studios in Broad Street should be refurbished and used as a base to grow Birmingham's creative industries. The proposal was viewed with some scepticism, since planning permission already exists to flatten the former studios for the £500 million Arena Central regeneration scheme.

However, her campaigning skills should not be under-estimated. Ms Stuart has held Edgbaston since winning it from the Tories in 1997 and has surprised both political allies and opponents by hanging on to the marginal seat even when Labour's national vote was down, including in the 2005 and 2010 elections. She is highly regarded for her campaigning style, and like Mr Simon has pledged to abandon tribal party politics and support community organisations.

What about other political parties?

Both Birmingham's Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties appear

to be adopting a head-in-the-sand approach to the mayoral debate.

While it is fair to state that most Tory and Lib Dem city councillors remain opposed to a city mayor, the willingness of national Government to run with the idea has prevented a repeat of the corrosive anti-mayor campaigning of 2001.

Officially, both parties are waiting for the referendum result before deciding what to do. Unofficially, most members of the city council's Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition are praying for a decisive 'no' vote on May 3, since they fear that a mayor directly elected by all the people of Birmingham will gift the city's governance to Labour on an almost permanent basis.

The two parties hardly seem brimming with potential candidates, if a mayoral election does take place in November. Tory council leader Mike Whitby, an outspoken opponent of the mayoral system in 2001, has been careful in recent months not to rule himself out. He will expect to get the Tory candidacy, if he agrees to run, Coun Whitby could face opposition from within his own council group in the shape of Sutton Coldfield councillor Philip Parkin, who is one of a very few Birmingham Tories to campaign for a mayor. Other possibles include the younger generation in the shape of Erdington Tory councillor Robert Alden, although his priorities may be fixed on attempting to win a re-drawn Erdington constituency at the 2015 General Election.

The Liberal Democrats may not be short of opportunists prepared to put themselves forward as mayoral candidates, even though the party probably has little chance of winning. Birmingham Yardley MP John Hemming, a former deputy council leader, has said he would stand for the Lib Dem candidacy, even though he is leading the anti-mayor campaign in Birmingham. Current deputy council leader Paul Tilsley may also fancy his chances.

Independent candidates

The names of Digby, Lord Jones of Birmingham, and local historian and media personality Carl Chinn are frequently cited by those playing the 'elected mayor parlour game'. Certainly, Lord Jones recently [said he was 'very interested'](#) in running for mayor – but only if the post had a pan-West Midlands remit. As the only option on the table at the moment is a mayor for the city of Birmingham, it must be assumed that he will not therefore stand.

Mr Chinn, who enjoys a popular following, was a major part of the campaign to save MG Rover in 2005, which is when talk of his possible candidature started. However, he has said little in recent years, and it is thought he is soon to declare support for another candidate.

Veteran Central TV presenter Bob Warman went on record in 2011 to say he wanted to stand, and is believed to have been encouraged by supporters within the business community. However, he has said

nothing publicly since, and has been notably absent from the increasingly frequent public debates on the mayoralty.

In late January 2012, a name regarded as far more credible emerged – that of [Dr Mirza Ahmad](#), who until the middle of 2011 was Birmingham City Council's Corporate Director of Governance. A major figure in legal circles, and regarded as a role model for black and Asian professionals, Dr Ahmad is believed to be testing the water for support for him to campaign as an independent candidate.

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