

Referendum 2022: George Ferguson in conversation with Andrew Kelly

Andrew Kelly: George Ferguson was the first elected mayor for Bristol and is a passionate advocate of cities and for Bristol. Thank you for joining us, George.

George Ferguson: A pleasure, Andrew.

Andrew: George, your views on the referendum are already well known and we want to explore those a little bit, but I want to just take you back to when you were on the council in the 1970s. Could you tell us a bit about that period, and particularly the system that was in operation then on the council?

George: Well at that point I'd only recently come out of university. I finished my course in 1970, I went to work for the city council in the planning department for 18 months, which was an amazing grounding in what happens in the city following spending six years here at the university. And then I came out and started my architectural practice. But even before I went to work for the council, I was getting very agitated about some of the planning that was going on at the time, and there were towers proposed everywhere... you've got to bear in mind that architecture is where I was coming from at that time.

I wasn't a member of any political party deliberately. I think it must have been in the autumn of 1972, it was at a time when Idi Amin had kicked Asians out of Uganda and we took a family in and it was a brilliant experience. A neighbour two doors down who was a Liberal candidate – 'Liberal' in those days rather than 'Liberal Democrat' – knocked on my door and said, 'You seem to be very active locally, would you be interested in standing for the council?' And I remember saying, 'Well, give me something to read, I want to know what you stand for.' And I read it overnight and thought that sounds good. And so I decided to stand for the council on the basis that maybe that was the way to stop the urban highways and the things that were going on.

You've got to bear in mind that it was a very, very philistine city at that point, and Bristol was notably philistine, it was trying to be Birmingham, as I've often said. So I saw it as an opportunity to really get down and dirty dealing with some of those issues about what happens to the harbour after its closure to commercial traffic, what happens to the skyline of the city. I remember at the same time Edinburgh was devising a skyline policy and doesn't it show when you see Edinburgh today, how beautiful it is, and how they've kept the best of what it is. And also I'd been studying play in the city in my last year at university, so I was very interested in creating a good city for children, and I remember putting down a motion about that.

But it was primitive times. I remember I had to take a motion to the city council allowing gays and lesbians to use council property. They were prevented from doing so. It's difficult to imagine really. I remember having to take a proposal to city council that we stop a business mission to South Africa during apartheid times. Which sort of shocked the council really. So a bit primitive, a bit philistine, lovely people on the council, it was totally Labour/Conservative dominated. The Conservative Party had been called the Citizen Party and pretended it was independent, which of course it wasn't. And there was almost a pact between those two big parties against us three little Liberals who were the first non-Labour or Conservative councillors for nearly 50 years or something, over a century ago.

So it was really interesting times, and we weren't allowed on committees. And the system was a committee system. Eventually, after we'd done one term and got re-elected, they decided they had to let us on committees. And I remember I went on the airport committee and the first thing I said was, 'The airport's in the wrong place, we should move it north of Bristol to Filton' and their answer

to that was to sack me off the airport committee! But we operated very effectively through the media. We decided that if we can't do things officially, we'll do them unofficially. And it's amazing, we were like terrorists with machine guns on the city council. We could make a lot of noise and be heard, so thank God for the media in those days.

Andrew: So it was a committee system, which is what we're currently debating compared to the mayoral model now. Did you feel you could get things done in that system? You talked about taking motions for example to the council.

George: Yes, well, I think we got quite a lot changed in time, it took a bit of time to change some things, you didn't get immediate change because of party politics. But every councillor felt involved, even us, even not on the committees we felt really involved. We were a proper voice on the council, we weren't being dragooned and even though we were a tiny minority on the council... I think every councillor felt they had a proper role to play beyond their ward. I think when you've got a mayor, a mayoral system, and I think there's a balance between whether you have a cabinet or a committee system, but when you've got a mayoral system, councillors definitely feel inadequate. And I got more and more conscious of that when I was mayor, and probably even more conscious of it now I'm not mayor. That it was unfair to just say that councillors should keep to ward and local matters when they're generally people who are passionate about the whole city as well.

So while I think I've got absolutely no regrets in having campaigned to have a mayor in 2012, leading up to the March or May referendum, I can't remember when it was, and then to the November election, I think things have changed so much now. I have to say that if the metro mayor role had existed at that time, I wouldn't have then promoted the idea of a Bristol mayor. Because I would have seen I think what we now see happening, which is there's a tendency for them to undermine or weaken each other's positions and Westminster in particular don't really know who to look to. When you hear about the effectiveness of mayors, there was an article in the *Guardian* by Simon Jenkins on the effectiveness of mayors in this country through the pandemic and the way they have risen in importance through the pandemic, Bristol and the West of England never gets mentioned.

It's all about the metro mayors and the metro regions, and that is the way things have changed because it was a flop, the city mayor thing was a flop. We only got one by referendum and that was Bristol. The others were a bit of opportunism by the ruling parties deciding they would take the mayoral role. And so it was an embarrassment to Cameron really.

I think it makes much more sense when cities have expanded beyond their old boundaries, which Bristol has done to a huge degree to the north, to put that big role in the hands of the metro mayor, whose cabinet is a cabinet of leaders and therefore cannot be autocratic but can represent all those in this area, all our four districts when North Somerset comes back into the fold, which they will do, which is a much more grown-up form of government than we've got at the moment.

Andrew: Just to step back a little bit, I'll come back to the West of England combined authority mayor in a moment. But when you campaigned for the mayor, then stood for the mayor and won the election, you were reacting against issues in the city like indecision – in the council, the council had run a committee system, it had run a cabinet and leader system. Are you worried that we may go back to that period of indecision under a new committee system for example?

George: I think what people don't understand about the committee system is it still produces a leader, it still produces a representative, a person to sit on the metro mayor's cabinet, a person to represent the city politically. There was a certain amount, and I was part of it, a certain amount of mischievous exaggeration about the shambles that preceded the mayoral system and some good

things happened that I was very glad to be able to put into practice, like the starting off the building of council homes after 30 years of not building one in this city, that, because the process had started, I was then able to deliver the first council homes for over 30 years.

So there were some good things happening, and actually there weren't so many bad things happening. I won't get on to what I think is bad at the moment, but with strong mayors, we're not really strong mayors in the European sense, with strong decision-making can come some bad decisions as well. I think the committee system is more investigative. It is more of a jury that is looking at the rights and wrongs, and yes, some things may take more time. So there is a balance there, but I do think that you'll get better quality of councillors when the job of being a councillor is an attractive one and does come with some real influence. And I've noticed that some of the very good councillors have left because they felt that they're not able to have the influence that they expected. So I'm not saying any of those systems is ideal, but I think the committee system with a leader, elected by the council in effect, especially if you've not got a majority party, you might have the largest group, then I think it has as good a chance of producing good governance as any mayoral system does.

Andrew: When you became mayor, things were quite different, weren't they? One of the big changes that was made was the election by thirds on the council, and of course since then we've had the combined authority mayor as well.

George: I introduced the idea, I campaigned on the basis that we should have all-out four-year elections, which was probably my undoing because I don't actually think that I was defeated by policy, I think I was defeated by the fact that an all-out election is much more difficult for an independent who doesn't have the money, the resources, the people, the information. I didn't know where my votes came from. I didn't have canvassing returns like the parties have got. I didn't have 70 council candidates. In fact, I had 340 council candidates all standing against me in a way. So I wasn't just standing against a single mayor.

I always realised that was a real challenge, but I do think that's been a huge improvement and that the combination of a committee system with a third, a third, a third, everybody always looking over their shoulders to the next election, was not a good one. But I think the committee system is much stronger when you've got people knowing that they're going to be there for those four years, like members of parliament are likely to be there for four years, we don't quite know what's going to happen now. I'm pleased with that change. It wasn't agreeable to the minority parties on the council. It was agreeable to Labour. Helen Holland, who was the leader and who I've got a lot of respect for, she saw that it was not a bad thing for them, as it proved to be.

Andrew: One of the things that a mayor is often said to provide is strong visibility to people externally to the city, but also within the city itself. You've talked about the committee system still having a leader in place, so I guess that wouldn't be a particular problem for you under any new committee system.

George: I've always said that Bristol's a great city because of the individuals in it that take initiatives, like you. I think Bristol is noticed because of all those... Your Ideas Festival has just been absolutely brilliant. And there are other things that have happened in this city, and I think maybe the mayoral role has helped promote those a bit more, and getting European Green Capital was an absolutely brilliant thing that I know was assisted by the fact that there was a mayor there who was passionate about it. I've had that feedback from the European Commissions that that is what got it over the line, even though my predecessors had put us in a position that enabled us to get there. So yes, of course, a very visible mayor does bring visibility to the city, but you could list so many great things

that bring visibility to this city like Sustrans and cycling and food, which, they don't happen because of the mayor, they don't happen in spite of the mayor, but they'd happen just as well without the mayor. That is why I'm still and have become even more passionate having been relatively silent about promoting the city and its character and its culture, and doing everything we can do reinforce that rather than to destroy it which sometimes I think we're in danger of doing.

Andrew: One of the things we're interested in in this debate is about some of the big issues facing, not just a city like Bristol, but cities and places and countries and the world generally, and what best system is best for meeting these challenges and grasping these opportunities? If you take an issue which I know has been very close to you and the work you've been doing, climate change and the ecological emergency and so on, do you think a committee system will be able to grasp this problem and to begin to take this city forward?

George: I mean, I do think so, especially with the politics of Bristol and the way it's going. And I think that's got momentum now, and I think that momentum probably started with our ambition to become the European Green Capital, becoming European Green Capital. But I think that is such a good role for the metro mayor as well. You can't deal with the environment within an artificial urban boundary. And I would like the West of England, or what I call Bristol and Bath city region, to have been the European Green Capital. And I think you can deal with an area that has got a balance between town and country, where the food comes from the land that surrounds it, the waste goes back to the land that surrounds it in order to feed the food. And you can deal with those circular economy issues that are so important to the whole question of environment and climate much better on a city region level than you can on an artificially tight, bounded urban area which is the engine for the bigger area, we're the biggest engine for the bigger area.

Andrew: One issue we're also interested in exploring is about democracy and about what's the best democratic system for cities particularly and city regions as you've said. Are you confident that a committee system would have the confidence of people? At the moment, there's a number of reports out, there's a Citizens' Assembly Report, and there's been the recent IPPR report on trust about the decline in trust, the decline in politicians, the fears about the future, particularly for liberal democracy. What would a committee system do to help turn this round and help move places forward?

George: Well, I think everybody can feel connected to a committee system because everybody will know, well, not everybody, but most people will have a route through to the decision making via their councillor in a way that they often don't have now. So I think our democracy would be greatly improved if we had some form of proportional representation, but actually by chance we do have reasonably proportionate representation on the city council to the amount of votes were cast for which party, but that is almost by chance. So I would overlay a committee system with a proportional system, and I think that's the way proportional representation is going to come in in this country, when and if it ever comes in, via local government which is much closer to the people it represents. So I think people will feel more connected than they do.

I did everything I could to try and connect to people but there were half a million people to connect to, I'm not going to be easily available, accessible to everybody in that city. But when you divide me by 70, which is all the councillors, then everybody has a much easier route into the decision making. And I think having citizens involved in that decision making directly is also a very good thing. It doesn't eliminate the idea of having a citizens' assembly just because you've got a committee system, I think the two could work really well together.

The other thing is that I think there's more likely to be better scrutiny via the committee system. Sometimes I joked about scrutiny but I do think it's vitally important and I think that anybody who thinks that they're above scrutiny, which we sometimes see in central government, is making a huge mistake. So I think there is more natural scrutiny when you don't have one single strong leader. What's important is that you have good officers under a committee system and we do have a committee system with development control, with planning, that operates. It's a very good example of a committee system where the councillors are informed by the professional reports of the planning officers, who are giving their professional opinion as to the suitability of a particular development. And the executive are not supposed to interfere with that process, and I never interfered with that process.

Unfortunately, I think we have that happening now which is corrupting the committee system and so what matters is that you've got good independent professionals, employed by the council, that are enabled to examine and report on any planning application. That's a vitally, vitally important role. It can define the character of the city. And that you have councillors on those committees who are respecting the independence of their vote, rather than being whipped by their party, which you see happening now. It may not be a very visible whip but there is an invisible whip that means that you're often getting party group voting, herd voting by the groups on the committees. So I think for the committee system to work you need officers who are giving good, independent information that is not interfered with by a higher executive.

Andrew: If we talk about other issues about trust, also it's the trust that the electorate have in elected politicians, and certainly the Quality of Life survey that's done annually in Bristol suggested that there was dissatisfaction with the mayoral leadership in the city, both mayors, and you look at the latest figures and it's about 35% satisfaction level in the most recent survey, which was similar to what it was in 2015. How can people feel more trust in their politicians to help us get over this democratic deficit?

George: You've got to have trustworthy politicians who come across as trustworthy! I think that we've been done a great disservice by what's happened in central government and, I'm talking not about just recent times but the expenses scandal and all that sort of thing which is absolutely outrageous. The lobbying... It's unbelievable really that we've allowed all that lobbying to go on. I was very conscious if a developer came into my office, they only got ten minutes and sometimes I'd just tell them go away and get a better design or something. But I wasn't going to promote their scheme. You've got to be really above all that as a politician. I mean, I've got the good fortune of not being a career politician. I came in to do a project and went slightly earlier than I meant to. I think the only answer is to have people who are transparently trustworthy. I have a slight issue with the surveys that were done by Robin Hambleton and his team in that I think they moved the goalposts a bit and so I'm ready to have a slight up and downer with them because...I think there's a bit of rewriting going on about the relative popularity of the mayors, but I'll leave it at that for now.

Andrew: Perhaps we can get, as part of this work, some debate going on that subject, George, at some point.

George: I think they've done a great job in looking at what is effective government. But I think they got too wedded to the particular system we've got without looking at what's happened outside. And you've got to have a system that fits what's going on around you rather than just battering on with the same system just because that's what you're used to.

Andrew: And by outside, do you mean the West of England, the combined authority mayor?

George: Principally, yes.

Andrew: And in this debate that is leading up to the referendum, what do you hope we'll achieve by it? What would you like to see happen as part of this discussion and debate?

George: Well, I hope it's a calm debate. The danger is that you get people... I don't want it to be a debate about the current mayor. It would be so wrong if people make their judgment based on whether they like or dislike the current mayor or his policies. I think it should be based on what we think is right for the next 20 years in Bristol. I thought... see, I agreed and supported the idea of a review after ten years and I think that was the right thing to do. I didn't for a minute think I'd be taking the line I'm now taking because I didn't think then that there'd be metro mayors. But I'm pleased that I took the decision to support the idea of a ten-year review, because that's the democratic thing to do and things change. So I hope that the metro mayor system works, I think it's working really well in Manchester, West Midlands and some other places. But we've got a long way to go to catch up with them now. And I hope that the boundaries are reviewed because why do we have police, health, housing, education, skills, with different boundaries? We need to have a look at what's happened to Greater Manchester where all these things come together within the same Greater Manchester boundary and give Andy Burnham some real authority, and he's in effect become the prime minister of the north.

Andrew: Isn't that one of the problems you faced, as a directly elected mayor and the problems that some combined authority mayors face, is that the powers aren't as strong as some of those other places? And indeed all powers still need to be strengthened as well.

George: Yes. And the fiscal powers need to be strengthened. We have such little local power really. We're begging to central government all the time. The transport schemes that we introduced into Bristol that are a bit half-hearted, but nevertheless they've made improvements, there was virtually ten years of negotiation with government between asking for the money and delivering. By which time things have changed. So we need a much more streamlined system to be able to deal with the transport within the city. You take French governments, where the local government has some real power over transport decisions, over public transport decisions, and delivered some wonderful systems as a result. So I don't accept that we just say that it's a different system in charge of the same budget. It's got to be a different system in charge of a much bigger local budget that is less dependent on central government. Central government loved cutting local government funding because then they can blame them for everything that goes wrong. And the general electorate don't see that, but both Marvin and I have suffered a hell of a lot of cuts and have had to be pretty inventive to save basic things, like parks and public toilets and things that people really mind about.

Andrew: If the referendum chooses in favour of sticking with the mayoral model, what changes should take place do you think? There are the big changes like more powers, greater fiscal responsibility and so on, but what about issues like scrutiny and what about the role of a councillor under a future mayoral system?

George: I don't understand how the current mayor has avoided as much scrutiny as he has avoided, but that is a constant refrain from the councillors, that they're not able to scrutinise the mayor's office and so yes, that's important.

I think – I would, wouldn't I – that single party cabinets are dangerous, and that's what really excludes all the other councillors. So I would, whether it would be statutory or it might be something dependent on the balance in the council, I think that mayors should have to offer places to other parties on the cabinet. And I think that's not just politically right, it was just so refreshing to me to

bring four different parties into the room, plus me as an independent, so five different parties in effect, to reach agreement, which on nearly every issue we found agreement, or we certainly found majority agreement. So I wasn't, although I had the power to take decisions over and above the cabinet, I can't think of a case where I took a decision against the majority of the cabinet. I think that relationship between the mayor and the cabinet needs reviewing and that the cabinet should be able to hold a bit more sway than they do under the current system.

Andrew: And, George, one of the critical things I think is that we try and promote this debate widely and encourage as many people as possible to be involved, but also to vote as well. The turnout in the original referendum was less than 25%. You'd encourage everyone to vote in the city, wouldn't you?

George: Of course I would. It's always difficult, local elections are difficult anyway to get people out to vote, when it's a single issue such as this it's even more difficult. When there's nobody standing for council so there's nobody for another reason knocking on doors, which is why I was for the every four-year all-out election because then everybody knows there's an election on, otherwise people didn't know. But I think the city as a broader term needs to make quite sure everybody knows there's a referendum on, so I think what you're doing, what any citizen groups can do, what civil societies, what pressure groups, beyond the parties, especially if the parties are taking a view as to which way to vote, I think it's really important that the media plays a really important role in getting people out to vote. So my plea will be to all the local media, TV, radio, printed media, social media, to do all they can to express to people that this is about the future governance of our city, which I think everybody recognises does matter, even if they don't quite know which way it matters.

Andrew: Thank you very much George, for joining us today.

George: Thank you, Andrew.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity. The full version of the interview is in the recording.