Published on *Adam Smith Institute* (http://www.adamsmith.org)

The race for Mayor of London [1]

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> "Why has the London election, which seemed a few weeks ago to be on the point of capturing the public imagination, degenerated into a dull Punch and Judy show that even London's local papers can scarcely bring themselves to report?"

That's how Anatole Kaletsky began an excellent article [3] in Thursday's *Times*. It's a good question to ask. Is it down to the cynicism of the media, who are only interested in "the personalities of the candidates and their gaffes?" Well, perhaps. The Newsnight 'debate' *was* appallingly handled by Jeremy Paxman, who seemed entirely uninterested in getting the candidates to set out their stall, preferring to provoke constant interruptions and arguments. The same criticism can be levelled at much of the coverage.

But there's more to it than that. As Kaletsky points out, the London Mayor's areas of responsibility ? transport and congestion; crime and policing; pollution, housing and urban planning ? are things voters really care about. So you would expect a lot more interest in the election than there is. Kaletsky diagnoses the cause of this apathy correctly: Britain'se endemic over-centralization.

The London Mayor is really only an agent of central government. His job basically comes down to spending a big budget, and nothing more. It doesn?t matter who wins ? they will still be dependent on the national government for any major policy shifts. That's why so many people just don't seem to care.

I'd like to see a radical decentralization of political power. London and the English counties could have the same responsibilities as the Scottish Parliament, and raise all the money they spend themselves. Greater accountability to voters would be one advantage. Competition between local government areas would be another: there would be more experimentation in public policy and the 'exit option' (people could move if they didn't like their area's services or tax rates) would serve to drive standards up and taxes down.

It's a win-win, in my opinion. But it will take a brave national politician to give up that much control.

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