If Mayors Ruled the World

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Academiegebouw, Utrecht
On the 18th of December House of Commons, a new Utrecht-based debate and knowledge platform organized If Mayors Ruled the World, a debate with the internationally acknowledged sociologist (and former advisor of Bill Clinton) Benjamin Barber. Other participants were Herman Wijffels (professor Sustainability and Societal Change, Utrecht University), Tine de Moor (professor Institutions for Collective Action in Historical Perspective, Utrecht University) and the mayors Paul Depla (Heerlen) and Aleid Wolfsen (Utrecht). Journalist Patrick van der Hijden moderated the evening.

The debate kicks off with a creative game developed by House of Commons and media collective SET UP. The audience is seated at round tables. Per table it is invited to play a game in which it should collectively come up with solutions for the energy crisis or for the problems public health organizations are facing because of the greying society. Each table’s results serve as input in the forum discussion.

Unfortunately Wolfsen, mayor of Utrecht had to cancel last minute, deputy mayor of Utrecht Frits Lintmeijer attended on his behalf. Lintmeijer kicks off with a short introduction in which he stresses the need for long-term city planning in order for a mayor to make the best out of his term. Furthermore he marks a mayor’s capacity to connect to the citizens.

“Problems are getting bigger and I want to get smaller”

(Benjamin Barber)

Hereafter Benjamin Barber takes the stage. Barber published numerous influential books including Jihad versus McWorld. His latest title If Mayors Ruled the World is to be published early 2013. In this book he outlines his conviction that mayors should be given more power to arrange policy matters on a local level in order to tackle big societal problems: ‘I want to change the subject in politics. We have been talking about nation states, sovereign entities. When we should be talking about relations primarily between cities. 400 Years ago people thought up nations and they have been very useful, but they’re fantasies. States aren’t capable anymore to solve the 21st century problems. Global problems are problems without borders. People ask: the problems are getting bigger and you want to go smaller? Yes, I do! From international to intercity: cities are open, not closed, they are multicultural, not mono-cultural, naturally diversified and pluralistic.’
“We should let mayors rule the world because they already do”
(Benjamin Barber)

Barber continues his warm plea for a stronger local policy. ‘We should let mayors rule the world because they already do. Take global warming: states do not do anything because their sovereignty doesn’t allow them. But the mayor of Los Angeles has drastically cut the emission of LA’s port when he found that 40% of Los Angeles’ pollution came from it. Originally, transport companies didn’t wish to cooperate, but the scheme has since been copied by many cities.’

Barber goes on to highlight certain personality traits that are specific to mayors, which makes them the perfect people to tackle big societal problems. Barber highlights three:

1. Mayors are pragmatists, not ideologists. Whatever their political color, they have to get snow off the streets, educate kids and cure the sick.
2. Mayors are homeboys. They’re your neighbors and you can talk to them: you don’t talk to the prime minister. Furthermore, mayors are trusted by the citizens: the congress gets 18%, Obama 40%, mayor and local authorities get up to 70% trust in a good period. Mayors empower that trust to get things done.
3. Mayors rarely step up to higher office. They’re often not ideologist enough, and if they are, they are pragmatic people and therefore do not want to rule the party.

In The Netherlands and Germany mayors are appointed and not elected, therefore one could suggest these characteristics do not apply to them, but Barber notes that most often they do.

Benjamin Barber finishes with a manifesto-like anthem for a different politics:

“We should make the city’s social, cultural and political networks the voice, not of countries, not of Europe, but of the world!”

Herman Wijffels is asked to give a comprehensive reaction: ‘I mainly agree on what Barber said. There are global issues. Nation states should cooperate to solve them, but they don’t. A growing number of families and societies refuse to wait for nations to make changes: they start collaborations and create realities that fit the 21st century society.

If mayors should become more important, they should be given more democratic capabilities in The Netherlands. But, mayors running the world might be somewhat far-fetched...’.
The moderator announces the panel discussion and introduces the speakers: next to Benjamin Barber there are mayors Frits Lintmeijer (deputy mayor of Utrecht) and Paul Depla (mayor of Heerlen). From Utrecht University: Herman Wijffels, professor of Sustainability and Societal Change and Tine de Moor, professor Institutions for Collective Action in Historical Perspective.

Do you agree that cities will be the drivers of the future?
Tine de Moor: ‘During an economic crisis city’s young, progressive inhabitants are the perfect consumers, making cities the perfect conditions for markets to thrive. On the countryside citizens collaborate to tackle the lack of services themselves.

How can mayors / cities stimulate small-scale energies ideas?
Frits Lintmeijer suggests: ‘Give money to citizens that work together. Apply the same to regions that don’t have a public transport system, as with energy.’

Paul Depla: ‘Heerlen has helped the start-up of a cold water company. Barber notes: ‘private-public partnerships are very common. Cities should help the start-up, but often cities don’t receive their investments back.’

Herman Wijffels: ‘Governments have to play a role in creating an environment in which citizen initiatives are able to flourish and to emancipate. The welfare state is obsolete; people want to be the maker of their own destiny. They are connecting to the major problems and are able to contribute to solving them.’

“The role of arts and culture is absolute key… they bring imagination which is crucial to cities and democracy”
(Benjamin Barber)

In a last round of tips Barber opens a whole new discussion: ‘The role of arts and culture is absolute key: artists are not marginal citizens. They bring imagination, which is crucial to cities and democracy.’

On to a new book… and probably a new debate at House of Commons.

The evening concluded with drinks and feisty discussions between members of the audience.

Further reading / links
www.houseofcommons.nl
www.sg.uu.nl/programma/najaar-2012/if-mayors-ruled-the-world
www.benjaminbarber.org

graphic design www.lijnontwerp.nl
photography www.renatebeense.nl

Many thanks to