

## REGENERATION



Public  
Service  
Futures



With Robin Hambleton

Deputy prime minister John Prescott's speech to our conference on City Futures held in Chicago earlier this month captivated the international audience of more than 250 urban scholars and policy-makers from 36 different countries.

My conversations with conference participants have suggested that his *Sustainable communities in the 21st century* contribution was well received for two main reasons.

First, and this is less easy to see from a UK vantage point than from afar, the Labour Government is clearly pursuing an innovative urban strategy when compared with many other nations.

It is not perfect, but the UK Sustainable Communities Plan, published in early 2003 – which is only part of the overall urban strategy – is backed with substantial resources. Moreover, the emphasis on public/private collaboration, strong community involvement, and improvements in urban regeneration skills (a la Egan Review on *Skills for sustainable communities* at [www.odpm.gov.uk/eganreview](http://www.odpm.gov.uk/eganreview)) are all significant steps in the right direction.

Second, it is clear that Mr Prescott is passionate about cities. This comes through, not just in the anecdotes drawn from conversations with local residents, but also from his infectious enthusiasm for urban projects with the 'wow' factor. He advocated more urban projects which startle and challenge along the lines of, for example, the stunning Millennium Park which has just opened by the lakefront in Chicago.

The conference set out to bring together some of the best urban researchers in the world, to draw them into a forward-looking conversation about where cities in different continents appear to be going, and to encourage them to offer advice to leaders, managers and activists concerned with policy and practice in cities.

And the response to our call for papers was exceptional. More than 160 were presented by leading scholars from all continents. A large number of the papers compare and contrast experiences in different countries, and it became abundantly clear that cross-national comparison can spur fresh thinking and innovation in different con-



Melbourne, Australia, has been voted the best city in the world to live in. Can other cities match up to the quality of life it offers in the future?

# Beyond city limits

What can be learned from cities around the world? In the latest of his 'public service futures' series, Robin Hambleton reports on a recent conference which brought together leading urban experts



John Prescott impressed delegates

texts. The forces of globalisation pay no respect to national frontiers. And the way different cities are reshaping practice in local governance to respond to these new challenges is stimulating and encouraging.

Three themes were used to structure the international dialogue: Comparative urban analysis – looking at how cities are changing in different countries; Comparative urban planning – examining how different countries are approaching the planning of cities and city regions; and Comparative city governance – reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of alternative

approaches to city politics, urban leadership and community involvement.

Three gaps presented themselves. One is the gap between countries. Effective cross-national approaches to the improvement of public policy are still in their infancy.

Certainly, good progress has been made in the last 10 years or so in some parts of the world. The European Union, for example, can claim great credit for fostering practical dialogue and exchange between cities and regions in different countries.

But sophisticated cross-national policy exchange remains rare. Universities can – and should – be much more energetic in working with local authorities to enhance cross-national lesson drawing.

The second gap is the global north/south divide.

The imbalance in economic and political power in the world is mirrored by an unhelpful division between two 'worlds' of urban scholarship and practice.

Research carried out on urban conditions and approaches to city governance in the 'developing countries' of the 'south' are disconnected from urban research and practice taking place in the relatively prosperous nations of the

'north'. This gap needs to be bridged as both sides have much to gain.

The third gap appears to exist in most, if not all countries. This is the division between those concerned with the improvement of local governance and city and regional planning, and those in the academic world who carry out research in the field of urban and public affairs.

This gap lays down major challenges for those in universities. Traditional definitions of what counts as good scholarship need to be questioned. Academics who make a useful contribution to policy and practice should be encouraged and given more recognition.

On the other side of the divide, policy-makers should consider afresh whether their local university represents a neglected resource.

If we can create new settings for dialogue and guide that dialogue in a constructive way, both sides can improve their effectiveness. Our City Futures conference set out to start a process of bridging all three gaps – an ambitious aim, but one that is clearly worthwhile. Over 100 of the scholars giving papers agreed to make their documents available on our conference website at

[www.uic.edu/cuppa/cityfutures](http://www.uic.edu/cuppa/cityfutures)

Finally, let me pose a question for leaders and senior managers. Have you considered what researchers in universities near you might be able to offer your locality? And how often do you get to meet and interact with those professors and lecturers?

For chief executives, I assume the local vice-chancellors are in your Rolodex, but how often do you get to have lunch with them? And what plans do you have in place for accessing higher education talent?

How many professors have been seconded into your office in the last couple of years? And how many of your officers are contributing to the education programmes provided by your local university?

Yes, it's a two-way street. How often has the vice-chancellor phoned you in the last few weeks is a fair question.

But, come on, good leaders don't wait for the phone to ring.

Robin Hambleton is dean of the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His latest book – edited with Hank Savitch and Murray Stewart – is *Globalism And Local Democracy*, published by Palgrave in paperback, 2003