



Marvin Rees. Credit: Office of the Bristol Mayor.

**Marvin Rees** was born in Bristol, U.K., and grew up in the city's public housing. From there, he went on to study economic history and politics at Swansea University, then global development at Eastern University in Pennsylvania and the Yale World Fellows global leadership program. Rees worked in public health, promoting racial equality in mental health care, and as a broadcast journalist for the BBC before seeking office in his hometown. When he was elected in May 2016, he became the first mayor of Black African-Caribbean descent to lead a European city. He has pledged to make Bristol—a former manufacturing hub that lies about 100 miles west of London and is home to more than 450,000 people—"a fairer city for all," with a focus on affordable housing, improved transit, health care, and social mobility through access to education. Rees, 47, has also worked to improve communications and collaboration with constituents and civic groups. He lives in East Bristol with his wife and their three children. In this interview with Senior Fellow Anthony Flint, Rees reflects on equity, growth, and immigration, amid a tumultuous political climate in the United Kingdom.

## On Leading a Post-Industrial City in a Post-National World

**ANTHONY FLINT:** One of your campaign billboards indicated you would build 2,000 homes per year once elected. What was behind that promise, and how has it played out?

**MARVIN REES:** The reason affordable housing became our top priority is because it is one of the single most important policy tools we have for delivering population health, a strong economy, a stable society, and good educational outcomes. We have a housing crisis as many American cities do. We haven't built enough, and the private market alone hasn't provided the opportunity to own a stable home. It's been a challenge, in part because we didn't have the organizational machinery in place to bring land forward and get it developed. But it looks like we are on track to meet that target, which is 2,000 homes a year by 2020, 800 [of them] affordable. There's a whole mix: council houses where we own the land; a social housing association with rents below market rates; we've got volume builders who, within their schemes, are also required to provide affordable homes; and we are supporting self-build schemes, where communities come together [to build cohousing on underutilized land]. We've had the Bristol Housing Festival exhibition, which showcased modern methods of construction such as off-site manufacture. We place an emphasis on quality and community. What we don't want to do is just put boxes up and slot people into them.

**AF:** As you think about sustainable growth and affordable housing, what in your view is the role of land policy, including the taxation of land? Where do you stand on land value capture and a land value tax?

**MR:** I'm from a public health and journalism background, so I had to have a crash course about how various parts of a city work. Land value is a massive challenge because land has become a commodity, passing through the hands of several owners, not to be built on but just to make money. We need powers at the local government level, and the national government needs to take action to change how land is used. Personally, I think there's a huge conversation to be had. In the U.K., we think education is a public good. We think the same about health, and hence we have a National Health Service. And I think for social justice and the strength of our economy we need to reframe how we think about land and housing. If we fail on this, we'll end up with what we've seen across the world—the middle class disappears, and you end up with a bifurcated population and fragile state. This is a crisis.

**AF:** You have embraced the concept of reinvention for post-industrial cities, which is a big theme of the U.K. 2070 Commission, a research initiative that counts the Lincoln Institute as a partner. But how do you encourage growth in your city and others like it in the context of Brexit?

**MR:** Brexit is the wrong answer to the right problem. People have been left behind; they've lost hope. [People feel that] politics has become increasingly distant from them. The other problem Brexit has identified is that people have lost touch with their national story and narrative, and who they are. Just like in the United States, many want to go back to the 1950s. These are legitimate grievances, but Brexit is not going to solve the problem. Globalization has integrated our communities so we use the same products—there's nothing British about Pizza Hut, right? In many ways we're in a post-national world and we can't leave our futures in the hands of national government. The city level of government is best placed to deliver, with cities forming international networks to work together on shared issues like climate change, immigration, and equity.

A jumble of housing adorns the hillside above Bristol Harbour. Rees has identified increasing the city's affordable housing stock as a top priority. Credit: theasis/iStock.





In the summer of 2019, 435 local councils approved a motion brought by Rees and a fellow mayor to declare a climate emergency and adopt the UN Sustainable Development goals. Credit: Office of the Bristol Mayor.

**AF: Take a moment to explain Bristol's One City Plan, which lays out a vision for where the city will be in 2050 and is shortlisted for the EU's Capital of Innovation prize. How do you balance myriad ideas from constituents and pushing the agenda you have determined is needed?**

**MR:** The One City Plan comes from an understanding that what people receive is not by government alone—that people sit at the intersection of [decisions made by] the city, universities, the private sector . . . And if we want to shape the future, we have to grab ahold of that collective impact and get some alignment. It's also based on the sense that we can't wait to see what comes down the railroad tracks. We need to see where we need to be in 2050, and if we want to be there in 2050, what needs to be delivered by 2048 or 2025, and work our way back. It's a living document with shared priorities and real agreement. Anyone in Bristol can

pick up a copy of the plan and say, 'Right, I see you are doing X by 2050, but I think it should be done by 2025.' Carbon neutrality, for example. The One City Plan gives us the raw materials and shows how we can get to common ground.

The plan is based on six stories [Health and Wellbeing; Economy; Homes and Communities; Environment; Learning and Skills; Connectivity]. Each of those stories has a board [made up of community members], and they are responsible for updates every year. Every six months we also have something called the City Gathering. The first one we had 70 or so people come together . . . and I said to them, between us we spend £6 billion [\$7.4 billion] and employ 70,000 people in the economy. If we align ourselves on a small number of shared priorities, what could we not do? We have incredible power. We're trying to create space for people to [connect and] come up with answers.

**AF: As you've been going about your work, you've been the target of extremist and anti-immigration rhetoric. How do you manage being chief executive with a progressive agenda in that kind of climate?**

**MR:** I manage it because I think the whole argument about immigration is, to put it charitably, a mistake, and less charitably, a big lie. Immigration is not the cause of people's problems. I grew up poor and among those often preyed upon. To have members of the British elite running around, and you see something similar in the United States, blaming migrants for the state of the country that they have had all-encompassing power over for centuries—it's a little bit rich. They have created a situation

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A mural in Bristol, known for its vibrant street art scene, offers a commentary on Brexit depicting British comedian Benny Hill. Rees describes Brexit as “the wrong answer to the right problem.” Credit: Heatheronhertravels.com/Flickr CC BY 2.0.



where relatively poor and powerless people are blaming other poor and powerless people for the state we are in. It's also not difficult for me because I want to be in a place where I can say what I really think. I'm a mixed-race man. My dad came from Jamaica; my mum's English heritage goes back in Bristol for a very long time. My granddad was from South Wales and before that Ireland. I'm a physical embodiment of migration, so I think it's disingenuous to say migration is the cause of the world's ills.

Another problem is that the migration discussion is being shaped by national governments. That's the wrong way around. What we need are national governments to start talking to cities and asking what cities need. [Cities are] more inclined to look at migration as an asset in terms of our connectivity to world markets. Following our Asian, African, or Eastern European populations—they connect us to international opportunities. National governments are using abstract numbers and talking about how many more people to let in. And it's completely different from the conversation we need to have.

**AF:** Last but certainly not least, what is your vision for how cities like Bristol can contribute to combating climate change, while also preparing for its inevitable impacts?

**MR:** We absolutely recognize it as a crisis with very real consequences. Increased flood risk, more extreme temperatures, desertification—we'll end up with more rural-urban migration, and a source of conflict leading to more crises. For cities, the climate emergency will be inseparable from the global migration emergency. Cities have to be in the driving seat for a number of reasons. One is about political will. Certainly in the United States, your federal government seems to have no political will, but we've seen American mayors stepping up to lead when the federal government withdraws. Cities are more inclined to look in terms of interdependencies, whereas the national government is more occupied with boundaries. Cities are equipped with the political machinery to lead the way. □

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