

DEVOLUTION IN ENGLAND: A NORTH-EAST PERSPECTIVE

Joyce Quin

A widespread belief - which is all too common both north and south of the border - is that there is no demand or enthusiasm in England for regional devolution. Yet another entrenched idea - arising out of the devolution debates in the House of Commons in the late 1970s - is that North-East Labour MPs are amongst the strongest opponents of giving Scotland its own parliament with real powers. Both these views, in my opinion, are false.

SUPPORT FOR DEVOLUTION IN NORTH-EAST ENGLAND

The first view is particularly prevalent amongst many London-based political commentators who, on disembarking at Glasgow or Edinburgh airports, quickly discover that 'Scotland is different' but who remain blissfully unaware that in reaching their destination they have flown over several distinct English regions. Indeed, the frustration for many of the northern English lies in the fact that their south-eastern counterparts have usually not the foggiest idea of the size or nature of the North of England, and if asked to give the relevant distances between Doncaster, Newcastle, Manchester or Carlisle would probably think that they were within a 3-mile radius!

Obviously the sense of regional identity in England varies considerably from one part of the country to another, but it is particularly strong in the North East and exists also in the South West, Yorkshire, Lancashire and - to a lesser extent probably - in the Midlands and East Anglia. For many Geordies like myself, the regional identity is probably even stronger than the 'national' identity, and our regional culture (particularly the rich folksong tradition and

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our regional instrument, the Northumbrian bagpipes) makes us as akin to Scotland as to England.

A sense of regional identity is of course not the same thing as a demand for devolution or for a regional tier of government. However, a largely unrecognised phenomenon in recent years has been an increased movement in favour of regional devolution in England, and nowhere more so than in the Northern Region consisting of the five counties of Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, Durham, Cleveland and Cumbria.

This phenomenon has manifested itself in various interesting ways. One of the most significant was the creation in 1986 of the Northern Development Company (NDC). This was set up to act as a Northern Regional Development Agency (following the Scottish example) by the Northern Region itself, and because the requests to central government to create such a regional agency had met with refusal. The NDC was a partnership between the regional trade unions, regional businesses and the regional CBI, and the region's local authorities. It enjoyed and continues to enjoy cross-party support even from northern Tories, and its successes were subsequently recognised by Whitehall which now gives financial support on a modest scale. The agency earned the title of European Economic Development Agency of the Year last year from the European Commission.

More recently the local authorities in the northern region have come together to create the North of England Assembly of Local Authorities. This has its base on Newcastle Quayside, and sees itself as a voice for the region particularly in Brussels. It also sees itself as an embryo which could develop into a fully fledged Northern Assembly under a system of English regional government. Even more recently a grass roots Campaign for a Northern Assembly has got underway launched by political activists, academics, trade unionists and Church sympathisers along with others previously uninvolved in this kind of activity. This campaign - which partly derives from the Scottish experience - operates on a cross-party basis and hopes to build significant support for regional government between now and the next general election.

Why has there been this increasing interest in devolution? The reasons will not surprise. Firstly there has been an understandable reaction to what has been seen as the increasing centralisation of political power in the UK since 1979 and which was such a notable feature of 'Thatcherism'. Again not surprisingly this reaction was particularly marked in areas like the North East which was least sympathetic to the new political ethos. Such reactions

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became increasingly channelled into the wider movement for constitutional reform which the opposition parties, Charter 88, and other movements gave impetus to. A strong belief emerged that the British constitution has become fossilized and needed to become more open, accountable and democratic, at central, regional and local levels.

Secondly, increasing involvement in the European Community also promoted an awareness of the benefits of a regionalised approach. In areas like the North East the European Community was often seen to be the ally of regional aspirations, with the existence of the EC's Regional Funds designed to help regions in economic difficulty and because of the regional dimension given to many of the EC's programmes and policies. A distinct regional input into the Brussels process directly from the regions themselves became to be seen as ever more desirable. Importantly too, other EC countries with developed regionalised systems seemed not only to have a better quality of democracy but were also more successful economically than us.

What of the future? Politically, the Northern Region is strongly Labour and it was indeed the only region or nation of the UK to record over 50% of the popular vote for Labour at the last general election. Assuming a continued commitment by Labour to establishing a regional tier of government in England, the Northern Region would hope to be in the forefront of implementing this policy. However, a Labour government would need to choose between different ways of introducing regional government in England and how best to make it acceptable in areas where enthusiasm for it will be less marked. In my view the choice will be between a German-style federal system where all regions are created at once, and have similar powers, or the Spanish model where regions have different degrees of autonomy depending on their wishes and on how developed their distinct sense of identity is. If the latter course of action is chosen for Britain, then the Northern Region would be a good place to start the process in England.

NORTH-EAST MPS' ATTITUDES TO DEVOLUTION

In any future Labour government's consideration of regional devolution, the attitude of North East Labour MPs will of course be very important. This brings me to the second view, mentioned at the outset of this article, which was that North Easterners are believed by many still to be the strongest opponents of devolution as many of them were in the late 1970s.

However, it is important to realise just how much the context of today's discussions on these matters differs from that of the 1970s. The negative

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effects, both on democracy and economic development, of over-centralised Britain have been clearly seen since then. Furthermore the Northern Group of Labour MPs has shown itself to be sensitive to these changed circumstances. For example, shortly after the 1987 election, a Bill was presented by Giles Radice, MP for Durham North, on behalf of the Northern Group of Labour MPs calling for the establishment of a Northern Assembly with specific regional powers particularly in the field of economic development and also with competences in other significant areas. (interestingly a similar Bill has been introduced by MPs in other areas including the North West and, of course, London where some form of city-wide or regional government is widely felt to be necessary.) The Northern Group of Labour MPs has sponsored meetings on regional government at Labour Party Conference, and has members who have been active in a Parliamentary Labour Party Regional Grouping which has been set up in this past year.

I believe that it is true to say that North East Labour MPs - far from being hostile to Scottish devolution - are anxious to support it as part and parcel of the general move towards de-centralised government everywhere in the UK. The North is also, like Scotland, keen to see that we do not have to move along at the speed of the slowest, and that there may be a very good case for allowing those areas which are keenest to make progress to be able to do so. It is certainly true, though, that a lot more flesh needs to be put on the bones of regional government in England, and a much more precise agreement on powers, competences and responsibilities in a regionalised system needs to be reached. Now would be an excellent time to undertake this detailed work. In the Northern Region the political parties, the campaign for a Northern Assembly and the various regional institutions which already exist need to be involved in formulating such details.

Regional government for the North is not going to be handed over on a plate, and Whitehall in particular will need some convincing of its urgency. However, working alongside, and receiving support from, our Scottish neighbours would be very helpful if these goals were to be realised. Making common cause in order to achieve constitutional reform and a thriving de-centralised UK political system is, I believe, in the interests of us all.

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