

**The Dark Side of Devolution
Top Down vs. Bottom Up Regionalism in England
Cornwall and the North East Compared**

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The Dark Side of Devolution

The regionalism project in the UK, having been begun by New Labour in 1997, has now effectively been killed off with the Coalition Government planning to dismantle not only the Regional Development Agencies, but also the Government Offices of the Regions. But it all could have been so different if the first referendum for an elected level of regional government had passed successfully. Instead, in 2004, the people of the North East region of England rejected the option of having a democratically elected regional assembly, and in so doing, initiated the chain of events that would see the demise of this latest round in the programme of English regional devolution. However, in 2001, some three years earlier, the people of Cornwall in the far south west of the UK had launched a popular petition *asking* Westminster to grant an assembly to an area that was administratively a county of England. In spite of this, the desire for regionalism in Cornwall has been widely overlooked both by policy makers and academic literature. In this paper we will compare and contrast the Assembly campaigns in the North East and Cornwall to try to understand why emphasis was placed on a region that would come to reject the option, meaning that further devolved governance in Britain would leave the agenda for the foreseeable future.

In the first part, we find that most of the literature providing analysis of English devolution focuses on the North East, overlooking the strong movement for greater local governance in Cornwall. This raises questions as to why such neglect takes place, which we explore in the remainder of the paper. From a resume of these regions two key issues become apparent. The first relates to the sites from which the campaigns were pursued. The North East Assembly campaign was by and large led by an elite-group that proved unable to develop a strong relationship with the regional public, whereas the Cornish campaign was its opposite, a grass root movement of civil society and political actors. The second difference is that the Cornish campaign utilised ethnicity both as a mobilising force and as a legitimating mechanism for an assembly. The North East, whilst it *could* have used regional identity in a similar way, chose not to, preferring rational, economic and high-political mechanisms. In the latter parts of this paper we explore the paradox of why New Labour, which was aware of the Cornish campaign, chose to ignore this popular movement in favour of 'regional' government in general, and the North East in particular.

We conclude that there were two factors in these decisions. On the one hand, New Labour was keener on regionalism in rhetoric rather than practice, and the aim of the programme was never about regional devolution per se, but about extending central government deeper into regional policy. As a result, a process of top-down regionalisation was preferred over bottom up regionalism. This desire to have control over the process meant that assembly campaigns led by regional elites had greater resonance with central government than the relative unpredictability of popular movements. Moreover, the devolution of powers to regions was never on New Labour's political agenda, and to allow an ethno-regionalist movement to gain ground in this way may have opened up further fissures in the United Kingdom which New Labour was not prepared to grant, and also would have been unpopular with Eurosceptics.

Regionalism in the UK

There have, over the past couple of decades, been a number of shifts in how government is conceived in Britain and the rest of Europe. Firstly, we have seen a move from centralised government to a system of governance. Secondly, this has brought with it altered locations of power, from the supranational, to the local, which raises questions regarding the efficiency and justifiability of older forms of institutional structures, and the extent to which they can be adapted or transformed. This section will deal with debates over the rationale for devolved or decentralised governance structures, and will then look at the treatment that they are given in the UK. From here we will be able to get some understanding of the shape that regional discourse had come to take in Britain under the New Labour era.

The idea of devolved power and regional structures are not new in British politics. Wales and Scotland have had some forms of regional based institutions, whether as a dedicated Secretary of State, which was a position created for Wales in 1964 (Tomaney, 2000), Scotland had its own regional government office, and both had their own development agencies (Tomaney, 2000). Both gained forms of elected regional government following a referendum in 1997. However this left the English administrative area with no forms of regional governance structures which was seen as undesirable from a number of different perspectives. On the one hand, England has an awkward history as the dominant nation in the United Kingdom, and on the other it meant that whilst Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all had their own structures of democratically elected regional government, England did not.

A further consideration to these constitutional issues around the due process of democracy, was that of economic development. Campaigns for devolved government had long made the link between economic development and a stronger regional voice in political decision-making. From the economic structuralism of Marxist based approaches through to their later 'internal colonialism' based variant (see Hechter, 1975) regional economic inequality was seen as a catalyst for political movements calling for greater decision making autonomy (see also Nairn, 1977; Agnew, 2001; Keating, 2008a). The context here is that many state-less nations have seen recent success in gaining forms of autonomy (Bond and McCrone, 2004), although as the English context illustrates, ethnicity does not necessarily play a role. These types of perspectives hold that the political and economic 'core' neglects, overlooks and exploits peripheral regions, causing them to fall behind. In simplistic terms, the answer to this problem is to cede democratic institutions to the regional level, with the expectation that greater accountability, attention to, and understanding of regional social and economic problems will lead to greater equality between regions (Keating, 1998; Harrison, 2006; Tomaney and Pike, 2006; Rodriguez-Pose and Gill, 2005). More recent ethno-nationalist scholarship sees autonomist movements as a response to the homogenisation of identity within contemporary late capitalism, and campaigns for regional governance as a means of asserting 'difference' (Bond, McCrone and Brown, 2003).

On the opposite side of the coin, regionalism is an offshoot of public choice fragmentation (as opposed to municipal consolidation), and replacing government with multi-level governance (Keating, 2008a). The emphasis here is not on what

central government can do for regions, but on what regions can do for themselves. As a by product of this process, inter-regional competition is fostered, combined with an emphasis on the upskilling of the local workforce and developing innovative knowledge economies (Keating, 2008; Rodriguez-Pose and Gill, 2005; Jones and Macleod, 1999). Identity is used as a part of this process, but unlike its use in the core/periphery and democratic deficit models, identity is predominantly a tool for asserting regional distinctiveness to gain comparative advantage.

The European Union plays a part in this, either as a centralising bogey-man, signalling the end of the Westphalian British State by bypassing some of the State's structures and ceding power to a local level (Harrison, 2008; Keating, 2008), or as a benign facilitator of more helpful institutions (Burch and Gomez, 2002; Elcock, 2008; Keating, 2008). In this latter narrative, the EU has structural funding commitments to deliver, and the strategic function of regions is to have enough closeness to local issues to be sympathetic to problems and opportunities, but enough distance not to get caught up in 'parish-type' problems (Elcock, 2008). The response of the former, is that whilst regionalism might appear to be about more localised accountability, in practice, from a local perspective accountability feels like it is becoming centralised to a regional level (Morgan, 2002).

Evidence suggests that the motivations of New Labour's regional project fell into the governance and economic development bracket (Jones and Macleod, 1999; Harrison, 2008). Janet Mather argues on this that New Labour did not see devolution as a good in itself, but its attraction lay in the teleological end of fostering greater equality of opportunity (Mather, 2000). The problem here is that as a party, New Labour had a tendency towards centralisation, rather than devolution. Moreover, although many commentators *wanted* English regionalism to be about devolution (Bond and McCrone, 2004), in practice it was actually a *rescaling* of government, and through regional institutions, actually facilitating closer central control over the regions and regional policy (Jones and Macleod, 1999).

Regardless of the motivations behind regionalism, in order to function effectively the construct of the region needed to be embedded in the identity of local population (Tomaney 2000a, Rodriguez-Pose and Gill, 2005, DeFrantz, 2008). This provides a point of convergence with ethno-nationalist campaigns for regional autonomy which have been and continue to be very vocal within Europe. The issue of regional identity is seen to be somewhat problematic in the case of English regionalism. On the one hand, as signifying some kind of administrative boundary, the division of England into some form of 'regions' has been in use since the 1940's, and more recently, formed the 1994 boundaries for the Government Offices for the Regions, and later, the Regional Development Agencies. On the other, the drawing of these boundaries are considered to be rather rationalistic and arbitrary, with only the North East having some kind of pre-existing identity (Elcock, 2008; Harrison, 2008; Fenwick, McMillian and Elcock, 2009).

Perhaps as a function of the fact that the North East began a campaign for a regional assembly since 1992 (Fenwick, McMillian and Elcock; 2009), it has been the focus of most of the literature around a layer of regional democracy in England. It is discussed as the *home* of English regional identity with potential high levels of both identity and civic engagement (Harrison, 2008) and as being influenced by peripherality and

economic underdevelopment (Bond and McCrone, 2004). Ostensibly, this is why the North East was considered by central government as the region most likely to begin elected regional government (Bond and McCrone, 2004).

However, and overlooked by most of the literature, three years prior to the 2004 referendum on a North East assembly, a popular movement in Cornwall submitted a petition to Downing Street with 50,000 signatures, calling for an assembly (Sandford, 2006; Deacon, 2004). The number was a symbolic 10% of the population of the region, which campaigners had been assured would be more than sufficient to make a strong enough claim to be taken seriously by central government. Despite such a significant achievement, most of the literature, if it mentions Cornwall at all, writes it off as having a weak, or conflicting identity (Fenwick, McMillan and Elcock, 2009; Elcock, 2008). Mark Sandford (2006) provides the only study that takes the Cornish case seriously, contrasting it with the North East. In our view however, in arguing that the Cornish campaign did not make the economic links which drove New Labour's regional policy, he does not go quite far enough. Instead, we will claim that the devolution process was purportedly about extending the power of the centre further into the regions. A grass roots campaign which did not fit into either the rational regional boundaries provided, was unpredictable and hard to control in its form as a popular movement, and was founded on ethno-nationalist sentiments, was the antithesis of what New Labour wanted from its regional policy. The next section will detail the campaigns in the two areas, exploring the nature and form of territorial mobilisation.

The Campaign for a Cornish Assembly

The campaign for a Cornish Assembly has to be understood as a process, rather than an event. Ostensibly, the petition for an Assembly was launched in 2000, making this a relative latecomer in the context of New Labour's round of regionalism. But this is a simplification that overlooks the dynamics of grass roots campaigning, often, but not exclusively, centred around ethno-nationalist discourse. In this section we explore the historical origins of the 2000 campaign, from its early calls in the 1950's for devolved government, through to a focus in the 1990's on maintaining Cornish integrity as a governance entity. It is only much later that this takes the shape of direct calls for a 'Cornish Assembly' that remain within Cornish politics to the present day. What we see from this is that the Cornish campaign was underpinned by a broad political will, generated and mobilised by grass roots activity.

The myths and memories of Cornish ethnicity incorporate factors such as the six violent conflicts that took place between Cornwall and the establishment between 1497 and 1648 (Stoyle, 2002), all involving more than 3000 men. This left the Cornish crushed and defeated and opened the way for English expansionism which began to see the end of a widespread use of the Cornish language (Stoyle, 2002; see also Carew 1969 [1602]). And yet difference persisted, typified in a rejection of establishment religion and the widespread adoption of Wesleyan Methodism amongst the (working class) population (Rowse, 1975), and a strong tradition as a liberal heartland which survived the collapse of the Liberal party in the 20th century (Tregidga, 2000). This is underpinned by a re-imagining of a Celtic ethnicity, although early revivalists were keen to keep this on a cultural rather than a political

basis, distancing themselves from early 20th century Irish campaigns for home rule (Lowenna, 2004; Hale, 1997, Tregidga, 1997). The organised fusion of cultural with political nationalism began with the inception of Mebyon Kernow (children of Cornwall), which, included amongst its core aims, 'a right to self government in domestic affairs in a Federated United Kingdom (Deacon et al. 2003: 32). Mebyon Kernow became a registered political party ten years later, and self-government and a level of decision making autonomy has been a central theme of its campaign activities ever since (Deacon et al. 2003).

What we start to see here is that pressure for some form of regional devolution in Cornwall is much older than debates around English democratic deficit, multi-level governance, or changes in EU structural funding. Instead they are more akin to uneven development models (Nairn, 1977; Agnew, 2001; Keating, 2008a), at times explicitly using the language of internal colonialism (Hechter, 1975), but not necessarily based in ethnicity. Consequently, we see the Cornwall Industrial Development Association, a body made up of business leaders and academics, calling for devolution on social and economic grounds rather than nationalistic (CIDA, 1975). Equally, the Cornish Social and Economic Research Group, constituted of political activists and academics, also prescribed more decision making power to Cornwall, (by now severely economically underperforming), and with it decentralization of authority from central government (COSERG, 1988). Payton, too, draws attention to the fact that by 1991 there was considerable and growing academic acceptance of Cornwall as a region of difference within the context of the British multinational state. But that this was not mirrored in a public policy discourse which saw Cornwall as either a part of a larger South West region, or as sharing institutions and development of strategic ties with the neighbouring county of Devon (Payton, 1991).

This raises two points of interest. Firstly, that campaigners in Cornwall were frequently doing battle with what was termed as 'Devonwall', and secondly, the growing tendency, by the 1990's, to utilise 'south west' governance bodies. The most important here is the Devonwall campaign, especially when it became clear at the beginning of the decade that this was costing Cornwall a lot of money.

Cornwall came out of the 1980's very badly in economic terms, much worse than Devon. However, the combination of the two meant that Cornwall was unable to receive Objective 1 EU structural funds, and had to settle instead for Objective 5b. Significantly, Cornwall would have qualified for this on its own (REF). Unsurprisingly, this was seen as problematic, and a campaign for Cornwall to become a NUTS 2 region (and therefore able to claim structural funds on its own), was initiated in the early part of the 1990's (REF). This campaign, although beginning at the grass roots level, extended through civil society, and was able to gather broad based support, including individuals and organisations from a range of levels, from County Council Officers to the Cornish MEP (Willett, 2010). What is also interesting in the light of the later campaign for a Cornish Assembly, is that part of the motivations for the grass roots activism was based on the hope that this would be a way to gain the Cornish based institutions which would pave the way to devolution (Willett, 2010).

In the event, this did not happen. Cornwall was able to have the statistical separation required from Devon, but subsequent structural funds were implemented by Government Office South West with no presence in Cornwall, and complemented by the South West Regional Development Agency, rather than the Cornwall DA which some campaigners had hoped for. But what this campaign also did was to provide a successful model of networked activism across civil society, together with important inter-organisational links which could be built on.

The Cornish Assembly campaign, and the Cornish Constitutional Convention were launched in 2000. Initially, Mebyon Kernow was a driving force behind both, but it is important to note that they were broad campaigns involving a range of organisations (Deacon et al. 2003). Based on the understanding that support from 10% of the population would be enough to be taken seriously by central government, 50,000 signatures calling for a Cornish Assembly were gathered in less than a year (Ibid). This was a considerable organisational feature in a time before internet communications were as widespread as they have become. This indicates that the campaign for a Cornish Assembly had a deep and lateral level of support amongst the broader population of Cornwall. It was something that resonated with civil society with foundations in a long running desire for greater decision making autonomy, founded in economic, but also ethnic rationale. As a postscript, the 2008 decision to make Cornwall County Council a Unitary Authority was justified in terms of that it would be a stepping-stone to an eventual Assembly, and in 2009 an MP from Cornwall introduced a Parliamentary Bill for a Cornish Assembly (House of Commons, 2010). Moreover, in their election campaigns, the Conservative Party pledged to create a Cornwall Minister (West Briton, 17th March 2010), a role reserved for the Celtic nations in the UK. Although they have since reneged on this promise this does indicate that the activism around the Assembly, in combination with wider Cornish politics, is recognised to be something more than a desire for another layer of multi-level governance. It also calls into question arguments that other regions were the logical choice as starting points for regional governance programmes (Harrison, 2008). What remains to consider is *why* Cornwall was so comprehensively overlooked in favour of the North East in terms of English¹ regionalism. To tackle this question, we will first analyse also the case of the North East, in order to draw a comparison and evaluate how the two areas fitted (or not) into New Labour's regional plan.

The Campaigns for a North East Regional Assembly²

On a rainy day, the 4th of November 2004, the fate of English regional devolution was sealed by the overwhelming no vote of the North East electorate. In this section we explore the roots of the Campaigns that supported the creation of a directly elected assembly and why, despite the presence of an ostensible regional identity, they proved unable to engage the wider North East public. What emerges is the presence of an elite-group led movement for regionalism which, by targeting political action instead of grassroots support, ended up being caught in the dominant and centripetal discourse of Westminster, failing substantially to channel the voice of the region.

Within the English context, the North East is one of the few regions with a long history of grassroots movements in favour of regionalism (Tomaney, 2006). The

Campaign for a Northern Assembly³ (CNA), set up in the early 1990s, represents the first consistent attempt to convey the voice of the region over issues of governance and regional identity. The CNA was in essence a non-political organisation, primarily aimed at counterbalancing the negative effects of the centripetal drive endured during the 1980s by building a strong regional movement able to impact on Westminster's decision making. Economic and democratic renewal (and an overall harsh critique of Thatcherism) were at the core of the discourse endorsed by the CNA. Within this narrative, the campaign maintained a strong focus on the critical link between regionalism and regional identity, enhancing the distinctive social culture of the North East. By drawing on such aspects as the industrial history of the region, its traditional left-wing political affiliation, the distinctive dialects and accent (almost a surrogate for a regional language) and the geographic, economic and cultural distance from London, the CNA attempted to restyle the otherwise administrative nature of the NE into an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) able to gather and strengthen a regional sense of social and political place 'in becoming'. Therefore, the language of identity was key to the CNA approach and the Campaign put a lot of effort into exploiting and bracing regionalist feelings in order to legitimise its claims over 'good governance'. In this sense, the CNA represented the first grassroots movement aimed at redressing the over-centripetal attitude towards territorial government that had long dominated Westminster. Even though the Campaign did not manage to impact directly on the Conservative government during the 1990s, its commitment to engender consensus around governance and regionalisation gathered momentum in the region, and caught the attention (although with no direct commitment) of many northern Labour and Liberal Democratic MPs and local politicians.

However, the boost to a strong bottom-up approach to regionalism instilled by the CNA was halted soon after the 1997 general election, as a sister movement gained predominance in the North East. The landslide victory of the New Labour Party was accompanied by the widespread perception that change towards democratic and accountable territorial government was within reach not only for the Celtic fringes, but also for the English regions. In the wake of such thrust for change, and following New Labour's ostensible endorsement for political devolution, a number of Constitutional Conventions were set up in the English regions, with the North East as the forerunner. The nascent North East Constitutional Convention (NECC) took inspiration from its Scottish counterpart, whose action was key in pushing devolution to Scotland on top of New Labour's political agenda in 1997. Between 1998 and 2000, the NECC was extremely active in the North East, taking onboard and to some extent expanding on the precepts inherited by the CNA. In this period, the Convention produced a detailed proposal for a North East assembly, involving all the regional stakeholders in the debate. In short, "the aim [of NECC] was to give a stronger voice to the North East in London, to influence decision making, (...) to make regional institutions accountable to the region, and not to the centre" (interview data). Such intent was epitomised in the document *Time for A Change*, produced by NECC in November 1999, and aimed at making the case for a regional assembly and outlining the powers, size and responsibilities this should have had⁴ (Tomaney, 2000). However, a closer look to the *modus operandi* of the NECC reveals the presence of an intrinsically technical and scholarly approach to regionalism, largely informed by the Convention's membership, marking a clear differentiation with the initial bottom up line adopted by the CNA. From the very beginning, the NECC was concerned with issues of economic renewal and governance and made this its rationale. Despite the

civic nature of the Convention, early links with the Labour Party were developed to give political resonance to its message. However, this was done at the expenses of a stronger relationship with the public.

This alienation from the initial commitment to the grassroots grew in parallel with a political atmosphere characterised by an incremental focus on regionalisation and rescaling on the part of New Labour. While the Constitutional Convention was trying to organise a movement in support of a North East Assembly, the government did not show any urge to democratise the existing regional tier of government. Instead of pushing the case for directly elected Regional Assemblies (ERAs), New Labour kept delaying it, and prioritised the setting up of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), adding more flesh to the quango-state structure initiated in the 1990s by the Conservatives. In practice, over time, New Labour's attitude became tantamount to a political will for "extending the tentacles of Whitehall onto the regions" (interview data) as opposed to the creation of democratic assemblies conveying their voices.

Crucially, such swing to centrally orchestrated regionalisation had a direct influence on the activity of the NECC, and ended up compromising it. Interestingly, "by 2001 it was clear that manifestos' promises on regional assemblies had not been maintained (...); as a consequence lobbying the government became the main concern of NECC" (interview data). In this sense, 2001 marked a watershed in the NECC approach to regionalism. The Convention stopped campaigning actively in the region and concentrated on finding channels to influence central government decision-making. In doing so, the NECC set the language of regional identity aside, almost taking it for granted – generating a self-imposed gap with its own public, which proved crucial in the final stages of the campaign for a North East assembly. By prioritising lobbying, the NECC left its regional electorate behind, breaking its initial vow to provide a voice for the North East. At this stage much of the work of NECC was carried out by a group of highly committed intellectuals, academics and regional stakeholders. If on the one hand this cohort managed to gather high quality and academically informed proposals for a regional assembly, in the long run the NECC became, in practice, an elite-group, led by talented intellectuals, but with no real contact with the public interest and opinion. "With the benefit of the hindsight now (...) I see that we hold meetings, we kept the debate alive and we took the regional assembly issue so seriously (...) but...it all took place among ourselves, and it was aimed at making a break-through in London. (...)Yes, it became a sort of closed circle. And we failed to keep the people with us" (interview data). The main by-product of such an approach was the delivery of a sophisticated, rational and highly technical message, which, in the end, proved unable to persuade both the regional public and the Cabinet.

Between 2002 and 2004, three key documents were produced by the government: the White Paper *Your Region, Your Choice* (ODPM, 2002) outlining the asymmetrical model of regional devolution for England and its basic principles; *Your Region, Your Say* (ODPM, 2003) summarising the rationale for choosing the three northern regions as the forerunners of English devolution; and the *Draft Regional Assemblies Bill* (ODPM, 2004) to provide a blueprint for the referendary campaign in the North East. None of these referred to nor included any of the recommendations advanced by the NECC. Overall, the government put forward a proposal for regional assemblies dooming them to be weak and modest bodies, with very limited resources and a marked lack of political clout. By focussing on the centre rather than on creating a

bottom-up movement for a regional assembly, the NECC failed to translate its genuine commitment to democratic governance into an effective campaign. In doing so, the Constitutional Convention first, and the Yes Campaign later, found themselves indirectly, yet substantially, subscribing to the top-down logic dominating Westminster's approach to regional devolution.

In June 2003, following the publication of *Your Region, Your Say*, it became clear that the North East was going to have a referendum for the setting up of its regional assembly by the end of 2004, and the NECC officially launched the *Yes for North East Campaign* (Y4NE). Although public engagement should have been the main focus of Y4NE, the campaign maintained the same line as the NECC. With a weak and tentative proposal on offer, Y4NE concentrated its messages on promoting the long-term economic and social benefits of having an assembly, leaving questions of regional identity completely out of its narrative. "Once the campaign was launched, we had to face the reality of what we could offer, which was very little. And yet we thought it was important...we thought that in the long term things could have changed, that a weak assembly was anyway an assembly...a first step in the right direction. But then, how do you translate this to the public?" (interview data). This obstinate focus on what was offered from the centre ultimately doomed the fate of the regional project. In practice, no real attempt was made to brace the nascent (yet potentially strong) regional identity of the North East as a means to sustain democratic claims. The campaign ostensibly underestimated the potential and, indeed, the need to get the public engaged by exploiting and strengthening regional feelings. In fact, such an approach was never seriously taken onboard: the campaign kept being led by the same elite-group which had championed the NECC, and held sporadic public debates. In the end, it produced a highly technical, complex and distant message, unable to offer any consistent immediate benefit to the region, and failing, consequently, to appeal by any means to the public opinion. As an interviewee caustically summarised:

"manifestos have to be able to translate the principles into tangibles – the 'what's in it for me' argument. In the final analysis, on a doorstep, the philosophy of democracy turns into a simple question which is a variant upon 'so will I pay less tax?' or 'will I be able to get the services that I want rather than the ones that are dictated on me?'. If a candidate can't articulate a simple answer and cannot gather the people around a message that speaks for who they are, then the game is up. So, although manifestos talk the talk, they won't survive first engagement on the doorstep unless they also walk the walk. That's what the campaign got wrong" (interview data).

Overall, by accepting the proposal imposed from the centre on the region the campaign implicitly pledged the top-down approach of Westminster. This generated a critical gap, and prevented Y4NE from creating the deep and lateral support from the population of the North East that was needed to win the referendum. New Labour played a key role in this process, as the silent orchestrator of the failure of regionalism in the North East and in England. Hence, after having analysed the process and the logics of the Campaigns for a regional assembly, it can be argued that the North East became the 'logical' choice of the government as the forerunner of English devolution because it inherently subscribed to its *modus pensandi* – and approach to devolution with a strong top-down imprint and, therefore, easily manoeuvrable from the centre. In the next section, we compare the cases of the North East and Cornwall, in order to

assess why the latter has been largely overlooked in favour of the former within the regional devolution debate.

Cornwall and the North East compared

Within the English context Cornwall is certainly the ‘odd man out’: a small Celtic nation, with its own distinctive history of cultural, economic and social identity, enfolded within the artificial boundaries of an administrative region (the South West) with which it has little to share. In this sense, Cornwall’s territorial identity has no counterpart in any of the English regions. In fact, this is mainly based on the cultural roots previously analysed and on a strongly perceived sense of difference *from* and *within* England (Willett, 2008; Sanford, 2006). Such traits have allowed for the development of an equally distinctive political consciousness in Cornwall, which has found both cultural and political expression within civil society.

The North East is another idiosyncratic case, although for very different reasons. Firstly, it represents one of the few regions in England where the administrative boundaries match to some extent a sense of regional identity rooted in the specific historical, cultural and economic characteristics of the area. Moreover, the industrial working-class heritage reflected in the persisting identification with traits such as independence, dignity of labour and a strong sense of community and solidarity (Rawnsley, 2000) has provided the basis for a *nascent* North East cultural identity. However, this has found political expression in a mainstream party (Labour). As a consequence, unlike Cornwall, the North East has never developed a distinctive political consciousness, detached from the centre, and conveyed by a regionally based and territorially rooted Party.

Thus, the main difference between the Cornish and North East identities is that the first has strengthened over time and has thrived onto the territory and its people. On the other hand, the latter has remained at an embryonic stage and has been further weakened by the blow to the heavy industries (and their communities) struck by the Conservative governments in the 1980s and 1990s. The Campaigns that supported the creation of Regional Assemblies in the two areas have largely reflected such attributes, in a direct challenge to the literature which argues that the sense of Cornish identity was weak (see Fenwick, Mcmillan and Elcock, 2009; Elcock, 2008). In Cornwall, the rationale of the CCC was deeply linked to the ‘tradition of difference’ described above. As a consequence, Cornwall’s territorial identity has shaped and addressed the work of the Campaign, together with issues of economic development which have gained salience over time. Hence, the movement for an Assembly was deeply rooted in the social fabric of Cornwall. This was clearly illustrated by the support of the 50.000 signatories who put their names on the petition sent to Westminster in 2001. On the other hand, the Campaigns in the North East have sought to brace and exploit the embryonic identity of the region only at the initial stages of their activity. Over time, the NECC made economic development and good governance the rationale for its claims, and ended up attuning more to the mainstream vision of Whitehall than to the one of North East people.

Overall, the Cornish Assembly Campaign had an evident bottom-up approach and the issue of territory was at the core of its action, whilst the North East Campaign

increasingly became led by an elite-group which, by focussing on lobbying the Cabinet, was more in touch with the centre than with the region. It is precisely for these reasons that the former was largely overlooked by the government, while the latter was considered more congenial to the logic of regionalisation endorsed by New Labour. In the next section, we will explore in details the attitude of the party, and its role as the silent orchestrator of regional devolution's demise.

New Labour and the regional agenda: your region, *our* choice?

The arguments developed so far point to the presence of different, and to some extent diverging, movements for Regional Assemblies in Cornwall and the North East. Those two areas, in fact, appear to be at polar ends not only of the geographical spectrum of England, but also of the political one. To some extent, they can be defined as 'peripheries', especially due to their cultural, social and economic remoteness from the centre. However, their peripherality and distinctiveness have been interpreted in divergent ways by New Labour. Moreover, the Party holds different political relationships with the territories, as the North East is a traditional Labour stronghold, whilst Cornwall is predominantly Liberal Democrat and Labour holds only one (very marginal) seat there.

When elected in 1997, devolution was certainly among New Labour's flagship policies, and aimed at redressing the democratic gap in the territorial government of the 'far peripheries' (i.e. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). Within this narrative of constitutional innovation, the English Question has always been a conundrum, and New Labour found it difficult to develop a coherent policy line to accommodate England within the devolution settlement. In the mid 1990s the consultation document *A Choice for England* set an initial proposal on Elected Regional Assemblies (ERAs) as means to guarantee greater democratic accountability in the territorial governance of the largest UK nation (Tomaney, 2000). This outline plan became then part of New Labour's manifesto in 1997. However, once in government, the Party started procrastinating on ERAs and gave priority to the setting up of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) instead, exposing in this way the purely economic and managerial rationale of its approach. By the end of New Labour's first mandate ERAs had slipped off the political agenda, and it was only in 2002, with the publication of the White Paper *Your Region, Your Choice* (ODPM, 2002) that some substance was added to the policy.

However, from the very beginning New Labour attached a *sui generis* meaning to the term regionalism, interpreting this primarily as a means to achieve administrative efficiency (Sanford, 2006), mainly through rescaling. Borrowing Leslie Budd's neologism, 'new regional management' increasingly emerged as the dominant logic within the Party. In this sense, what New Labour advertised as regionalism was a *de facto* top-down process of regionalisation, where little space was to be given to the voice of the regions. For example, the 2001 manifesto made only passing references to regional identity, disregarding, for the most part, the lesson of Scottish and Welsh devolution⁵. In fact, the idea that devolved governments may *require* some degree of regional/territorial identity in order to be 'accepted' by and to appeal to the regional people was largely overlooked in the case of England. On the whole, identity was never conceived as a potential driving force to strengthen ERAs credibility and

legitimacy. Rather, it was understood by New Labour merely as a latent (and minor) by-product of the process.

A closer look at *Your Region, Your Choice* reveals how the specific needs of the individual regions were never openly linked to the primary functions for ERAs as these were designed to be part of a *national* (rather than territorially tailored) government policy (Sanford, 2006). The White Paper proposed the creation of Assemblies with very weak powers, mainly economic (and centrally driven) functions, risible funding, and no political clout.

Throughout the 115 pages of the document, the word *identity* is used only four times with direct reference to the English regions. *Your Region Your Choice* underlines at various stages that “the English regions are all different [and] their rich diversity – which includes substantial disparities between and within the regions – demands a diversity of responses at local, regional, and national levels” (ODPM 2002, p.13). However, such appreciation of the importance of diversity was limited by its linkages with local decision-making and had no recognition of the meanings that territorial identity may hold for people in their everyday practices (Hutchinson, 2005; Anderson, 1983). The sense is given that diversity was endorsed more in theory than in practice and was more coherent with the ‘governance and economic development’ rationale for regionalism (see Jones and Macleod, 1999; Harrison 2008) within a multilevel governance framework (Keating, 2008a). This indicates an arbitrary understanding of diversity that needs to fit in with the New Labour narrative, and explains why the Party was instinctively more inclined to accept the centre-focussed approach of the North East Campaign rather than the bottom-up regionalism of the Cornish Assembly Campaign based on identity and ethnicity.

The mixed messages within the White Paper underlined this issue of *centralised decentralisation*. On the one hand it foregrounds choice and “giving people in the regions a chance to decide on their future” (ODPM 2002, p. 11). This purported to allow regions, through referendums, to make their own decisions regarding elected assemblies, and appeared to be consistent with the rhetoric of a radical agenda against centralisation. On this point, YRYC claims in the forewords that “it is the people within our regions who know what is best for the region” (ODPM 2002, p. 6). On the other hand, though, central orchestration of regional agendas was retained through the ultimate control of the government over the terms of the debate, including which regions may initiate referendums. The statement that “we will decide when regions should hold a referendum primarily by assessing the level of public interest in each region” clearly illustrates this point (ODPM 2002, p. 63). Ironically, it meant that whilst using the rhetoric of decentralisation, the government was able to retain a greater level of control over regional governance.

This idea of ‘centralised regionalism’ helps to explain why the North East was allowed to have a referendum, whereas Cornwall, which neither fitted the allocated regionalism boundaries, nor had an elite level campaign focussing on the centre, did not. Both the Cornish petition and the CCC could be ignored because they did not fit the centrally orchestrated framework that New Labour had developed for *regionalisation*. Moreover, an elite group of practitioners and intellectuals willing to face towards central government rather than the general public was a more attractive proposition for a party that was unwilling to relinquish real control, even if ultimately

it affected their ability to engage with the public. In contrast, the self-sustaining nature of activism in the Cornish campaign, appealing to popular versions of identity and personal meaning was far less predictable and safe. In addition, the North East had the added advantage of being a traditional labour stronghold; a confluence of values with central government which the Liberal Democrat Cornwall did not have.

Conclusion

An analysis of the Cornwall and North East campaigns for regional assemblies seems to indicate that decentralised governance in the English regions failed because of the inconsistencies inbuilt within New Labour's regionalism project. It all hinged on the success or failure of the North East referendum, which was flawed by an evident lack of popular engagement in the region. Given the reluctance of New Labour to cede real power within devolved governance systems, there is no way of being certain that appeals to popular identity would have led to a referendum in the first place. If the North East had managed to engage local civil society to the levels achieved in Cornwall, the question remains as to whether central government would have been comfortable enough to press forward with its regionalisation agenda.

As to the ultimate failure of recent attempts at regional governance, underpinned by the Coalition government's withdrawal of the Government Offices and the Regional Development Agencies, the problem seems to be that of the model adopted. The regionalisation agenda, as opposed to the bottom-up regionalism that the campaigners in Cornwall thought they were asking for, intrinsically presupposed centrally led regional governance. Despite rhetoric, this was not designed to have a popular resonance, which has made it easier for such institutions to be disposed of (during the Labour era) or dismantled (as under the new Coalition government).

But the question at the heart of this paper is that of why the literature on regional governance in England disregards at best, and often overlooks, the significant and popular campaign for Cornish devolution. This was not just a movement designed for the conditions at the turn of the Millennium, but calls for some degree of regional autonomy and purpose built institutions have been ongoing for a long period of time. This question is especially pertinent given that this was a region considerably more likely to have won a referendum for devolution than elsewhere, and might have paved the way for further decentralisation. However, the neglect or otherwise of the academic literature is related to the degree that it links to government policy at the time, rather than to devolved governance per se, as a good in itself. We can posit then, that the campaign for a Cornish assembly is overlooked because it was disregarded by central government, for the reasons outlined above, of being intrinsically contrary to the *centralised decentralisation* of the New Labour project.

As a final remark, it is interesting to notice how by acting in this way the Party found itself in a situation very similar to that experienced by its predecessors in 1979, when devolution was harshly rejected in Scotland mainly because the public perceived it as an alien policy. Similarly, by imposing on the North East only a policy largely conceived and orchestrated by the centre, New Labour sealed the fate of English regionalism. Looking at the lesson of Scotland, it is apparent that political devolution certainly requires the commitment of the centre to pass powers down – however, in

order to function, it also necessitates of some degree of endorsement from the bottom. Regional identity may not be indispensable, but its acceptance (from the centre) and enhancement (from the bottom) can certainly facilitate the unfolding of consistent devolution measures, especially when these are linked to referendum approval.

Overall, English regionalism emerged as and still remains the dark side of devolution because it epitomises the democratic vacuum which is pending on England, and all the political, social and economic imbalances ensuing from this. Considering the extent to which Cornwall has been neglected by New Labour seems to suggest that in the early 2000s some territories were mature enough to undertake the devolution challenge in full – whilst the government was much less so.

Notes

¹ It should be noted that in Cornwall the contextualization as a part of England is considered to be deeply problematic.

² This section has been compiled by Arianna Giovannini and draws on the primary data collected in the North East as part of the fieldwork carried out for her doctoral thesis. A special thanks goes to all the political actors, campaigners and stakeholders who have accepted to be interviewed, for their invaluable help, guidance and support.

³ Back then, the region was called ‘Northern’ and included also Cumbria. In the late 1990s, following government decisions, this latter became part of the North West region, and the Northern region was renamed North East. Subsequently, the CNA renamed itself *Campaign for a North East Assembly*.

⁴ Namely, NECC proposed the creation of an assembly made of 54 members, directly elected with the AV system, and with secondary legislation powers.

⁵ In 1979 the referendums held in the two nations largely failed due to the lack of any concrete link between a devolution proposal elaborated from the centre (and imposed on the territories), and the actual will for distinctiveness of the Scottish and Welsh people.

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