

DevoMix: Localism and the Devolution Debate

Abstract:

For this special edition of Localism Watch Resources, I've reviewed a wide range of media reports and commentaries on the UK's ongoing devolution debate. I conclude by asking whether the solutions politicians seem to be offering genuinely address the issues as seen by local people.

Where we're at today

In recent weeks, the media has been awash with articles and reports about proposed new ways of governing different parts of the UK. Clearly, the Scottish referendum has awoken a sleeping giant – something that our national political class should ignore at its peril. Because devolution goes to the heart of the localism debate, we've put together a representative cross-section of what's out there.

The centre cannot hold: councils across the UK hit back at Hague

[The local government associations from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have written to William Hague](#), who chairs the cabinet committee looking at devolved powers. Their letter accuses the government of trying to 'second guess what is best for localities' and calls for a bold approach to a new system of governance. It also states: 'Any new settlement which ignores the re-awakening of local identity in the UK is likely to be unsustainable.' *LocalGov* 06-11-14

Post-referendum Scotland

[Glasgow City Council's Labour Leader Gordon Matheson](#) claims that Scotland's incoming First Minister Nicola Sturgeon is 'stifling revolution', arguing that unlike England's City Deals, the SNP is in effect seeking to centralise power in Holyrood. *The Herald* 06-11-14

[Labour's leader in the House of Lords, Baroness Royall of Blaisdon, says that more localism in Scotland can help 'thwart the threat of nationalism'](#). Commenting on her party's boycott of William Hague's committee, she said that a "convention, driven by the people - indeed, for the people - with views and voices from communities across our country, would mean that change could be part of addressing feelings of powerlessness in the face of globalisation and its impacts." *The Herald* 29-10-14

How do people in England feel?

[Some 80% of people in England support having more powers devolved to local areas](#), a BBC poll on devolution has suggested. This also showed that 66% support the idea of allowing only MPs from England to vote on laws in the Westminster Parliament that affect only England.

Which one's the True North?

Is it George Osborne's '[Powerhouse](#)'? Or Nick Clegg's '[Futures](#)'? Or, as we're suggesting in Localism Watch, something that's far more nuanced? Judge for yourselves, and let us know!

DevoManc and Combined Authorities:

On 3 November, Greater Manchester's 10 metropolitan councils and the government [reached a 'trailblazing agreement'](#) to devolve powers to a combined city region authority, shortly to be headed by an elected mayor. The Council Leader, Sir Richard Leese, describes it in glowing detail [here](#).

[The Manchester Evening News headlines the current bookies' odds](#) on who will be the city region's first elected mayor. (Sir Richard Leese is the runaway front-runner, with ex-Man Utd manager David Moyes trailing at 200/1.) But George Osborne's piece on the agreement comes much further down the page. An indication, perhaps, that not everyone in Greater Manchester is a party to this top-down deal?

[Elsewhere in Our Kingdom](#), Michael Dawson addresses that very point: only two years ago, Mancunians rejected an elected mayoralty at a referendum. And yet, Dawson suggests, 'one extremely out-of-touch politician (Osborne) can overturn an electorate in less than two weeks of scheming', with the collusion of a 'cabal of jumped up' council leaders whose main loyalty is not to Manchester but Whitehall. In a similar vein, [John Fenwick argues that the lack of due democratic diligence](#) in imposing the new structure may have undermined its legitimacy. In Fenwick's opinion, a Combined Authority simply merges two policy failures of current and previous governments: regional policy and directly-elected mayors.

Not to be outdone, the Labour opposition has presented its own slant on 'city regions'. The Shadow Business Secretary, [Chuka Umunna, has recently set out the case](#) for regional mayors in a 'more federal' UK

[Birmingham City Council's Labour Leader, Sir Albert Bore](#), has long promoted an elected metro-mayor for the West Midlands. The Chancellor, for his part, [cannot but agree](#). Days after the Greater Manchester accord was announced, Birmingham and the four Black Country authorities unveiled their own ['Super Council' plan](#).

Unlike their Mancunian counterparts, attempts to broker governance agreements across the West Midlands have always been fraught with difficulties. But the momentum of events in Manchester – plus the lure of extra government funding in these austere times – have concentrated neighbouring council leaders' minds wonderfully. Hot on the heels of the Birmingham announcement, [Coventry and Solihull said they, too, would be joining the Combined Authority](#)

Not everyone agrees. [Bill Ethridge, one of the region's three UKIP MEPs](#), notes that Birmingham also rejected an elected mayor in a 2012 referendum, and argues that a combined authority would be 'undemocratic'. In his view, the West Midlands agreement is "typical of the Labour party seeking to concentrate power over the people by moving the centre of power further away from people."

[Merseyside's six councils do not want to be left behind](#) in the devolution rush. Joe Anderson has been Liverpool's Elected Mayor since 2012, but has no jurisdiction over his neighbours. Anderson is campaigning for an area-wide deal, as it would be "a success for the government if they include the Greater Liverpool region in their move for devolvement and decentralisation of powers." Of course, he'd like to be its metro-mayor. George Osborne is happy for such an arrangement in principle, but only if every Merseyside council assents.

Bristol has its own elected mayor – the architect, George Ferguson. [Local opinion about his performance, and the added value of the role, is divided](#). However, research by Bristol's two

universities has concluded that the elected mayor has improved their city's visibility, and that council decisions are now more responsive to community needs. As with Liverpool, the mayor cannot govern beyond his city limits, but Communities Secretary [Eric Pickles would be happy to devolve powers](#) to a Bristol 'city region', if neighbouring councils so wish.

[Similar views on Combined Authorities prevail in the East Midlands](#). Jon Collins, Leader of Nottingham City Council, told the BBC: "This isn't about power for power's sake. It's about ensuring that those closest to the people have the necessary freedom, flexibility and accountability to plan and deliver local services."

What about London?

One reason why many people support devolution to English localities is as a counterbalance to 'overweening' central control. But as Tim Donovan observes, this raises dilemmas. Londoners, like their provincial counterparts, widely believe that central government holds the purse strings over too many key services. The most perceptive commentators point to a growing behind-the-scenes power struggle between two-thirds of England's ruling 'Bullington Triumvirate' – [George Osborne and Boris Johnson](#). [James Ashton sees calls for devolution as a backlash against the capital](#) and argues that 'now is the time for London to grab more powers'

But it's not just the big cities: doesn't everyone need to be heard?

A trawl of local newspapers shows that the momentum for devolution has intensified across Britain. A primary focus, however, has been about council mergers to save services in the face of cuts, rather than promoting local identity.

This is certainly true in East Lancashire, where a recent meeting of local politicians convened by [Labour grandee Jack Straw](#) resolved to examine the feasibility of creating a single cost-saving authority. Two equally vulnerable areas in the North are also progressing Combined Authority status. [Darlington Council leader Bill Dixon](#) said the plan for the Tees Valley was to develop a body for adding "great value but at very little cost". [Lord Haskins, who chairs Humberside's Local Enterprise Partnership](#), believes that a devolved body there should be "a combined economic development authority with a very specific job to do." But he warns: "The local authorities have got to come together willingly - and that is something for them, not me. If you force people into something, it will not work."

Not every community, though, is urban, or identifies with a wider 'city region'. In a further attempt to ingratiate himself with electors in Labour's target constituencies, [Ed Miliband recently convened a 'Shadow English Regional Cabinet Committee'](#). At its inaugural meeting, he announced a package of measures that an incoming Labour government would adopt. An English Devolution Act would devolve powers such as letting 100% of additional business rates revenue to be retained and allow councils and the NHS to join forces locally to end the 'care divide'. A guaranteed £30 bn funding transfer to the regions, through five-year 'county deals', would support transport, housing and skills. Additionally, the regions would have responsibility for transport in a way already enjoyed by London.

But as a BBC report reveals, rural village dwellers have a very different take on localism, and governance in general, to Westminster village dwellers. A [Shropshire County Councillor, who owns a hardware shop and a poultry business](#), puts it well: "City people don't understand rural areas." He is

troubled by their idea of the countryside “as a theme park where you go for the weekend to breathe deeply and go cycling”.

What are we to make of this?

Wherever we live and whatever our position on the political spectrum, it's clear that the UK's current governance structures - and indeed, the parties and individuals who personify those structures – no longer relate to most people's daily lives, needs or expectations. As [Jane Merrick](#) says, 'It's the buses, stupid,' – in other words, folk are more likely to care about the number 508 from Leeds to Halifax today than HS2 a couple of decades hence. She argues that the 2015 General Election could well be decided by local issues, seat by seat, candidate by candidate.

That, basically, is why *Localism Watch* exists. We want to see free-range localism, not the caged version that the Westminster village keeps serving us.

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