

The Campaign for the English regions

**Memorandum to the House of Commons-ODPM Housing, Planning,
Local Government and Regions Committee Inquiry about Regional
Government**

January 2006

Introduction and Summary

1. The Campaign for the English Regions (CFER) was established in 2000 to campaign for the establishment of elected regional Government in England and to represent the views of affiliated regional organisations and other supporters across England. The Campaign has and continues to believe in the establishment of elected Regional Government as part of a comprehensive devolution settlement for England.

2. Regional Government cannot and should not be dealt with in isolation, as it has to date. It is an issue that goes much wider than the remit of ODPM and therefore really needs a holistic approach by Parliament. We need to learn from the recent vote in the North East about establishing an elected Regional Assembly based on the Government's proposals. We need to look at our system of Government, identify the issues that need to be addressed and the measures that can deal with them coherently and equitably. These matters are considered below.

Lessons from the North East

3. The vote in the North East was driven by intense public distrust of Government, and a sense of resignation that nothing could or would be changed. Regional issues were swamped by a pervasive mistrust of politicians¹. Voters had no confidence that an Elected Regional Assembly as proposed would lead to ordinary people having more say about it's Government.

4. Voters did not understand the changes that had and are shaping regionalisation, but they certainly took the view that what was on offer would not address their main concerns. They were not persuaded that the establishment of a purely strategic body with no real executive power would make any real difference to those areas of public policy, which were of most concern to them in particular health, education, and crime.²

5. Voters were uncertain about the consequences and benefits of the proposed change and those who voted were the older sections of the population who were most likely to distrust change.³ The vote, as often is the case in parliamentary by elections, was a punishment for the Government reflecting dissatisfaction with a host of issues not directly related to Regional Government.⁴

6. There was no real across the board commitment in Government and across Departments to let go real and substantive powers and responsibility for services. The exception was the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, which heroically attempted to carry the devolution project forward, but fought a losing battle in trying to pursue other Central Departments to give up their powers and service responsibilities.⁵ As one Minister said to us, "We are not in the business of devolving responsibility for services".

¹ ESRC Devolution and Constitutional Change Research Programme: Briefing Note 17, February 2005.

² ESRC Devolution and Constitutional Change Research Programme: Briefing Note 17, February 2005.

³ ESRC Devolution and Constitutional Change Research Programme: Briefing Note 19, February 2005.

⁴ ESRC Devolution and Constitutional Change Research Programme: Briefing Note 20, February 2005

⁵ ODPM, Housing, Planning, Local Government and Regions Committee, First Report of the Session 2004-5, on the draft Regional Assemblies Bill

7.As a result, what the Government offered the North East and the rest of England in 2004 did not address a whole range of issues of concern to the public and we advised Ministers that it would difficult if not impossible to get voters to support them.

8.Regional Government exists. The issues that existed prior to and pre-empted the referendum have not gone away and remain to be addressed.

Issues

Accountability and Representation

9.The existing electoral and appointments systems to public bodies and the sheer numbers of them who are locally unaccountable combine to give ordinary voters little influence over who represents and acts for them.⁶

10.There exists a plethora of sub national local authorities and quasi-governmental organisations all of which are ultimately controlled by London based Government. A number of studies have detailed the scale of this locally unaccountable government infrastructure in terms of the number of bodies and the expenditure involved.^{7, 8}

11.Accountability issues will not be resolved by the creation of further regional or sub-regional partnership structures such as city-regions. While these may be welcomed as giving formal institutional shape to existing co-operation, or possibly promoting additional voluntary joint working, they are unlikely to fill the democratic and governance vacuum at the regional level. The key questions remain the shift of power from the centre to the regions and from under-powered limited bodies like the current Regional Assemblies to empowered directly accountable regional bodies able to act in response to the regional needs.

12.The core regional issue remains one of democratic governance and the democratic deficit for the regions both at the centre and at the regional levels. Driven by the need to plan and deliver the provision of improvements to regional infrastructures and services it is not surprising that centrally driven administrative regionalisation continues apace. What the centre does not seem willing or able to do is to let go real power. In a democracy only ultimate accountability to the voter confers the legitimacy of representative government to tax and spend.

13.The English Regions are poorly represented at Westminster. Unlike Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there is no regional focus for scrutinising Government policy and practice. Further the membership of the House of Lords is dominated by members resident and, or with their main interests in London and the South East. The result is neglect of regional issues and one size fits all approaches to public policy and service delivery across England. Regional needs, as a consequence, fail to get

⁶ESRC Devolution and Constitutional Change Research Programme: Briefing Note 18, February 2005

⁷ Who Governs the West Midlands? An Audit of Government Institutions and Structures: Sarah Ayres and Graham Pearce, Aston University Business School for the West Midlands Governance Action Research Group, 2002

⁸The North East of England: Land of the 1000 Quango, s; Chris Foote Wood, October 2002

addressed, take an inordinate amount of time and inhibit innovation and regional learning.

14. The dominance of Westminster and Whitehall in the Government of England sucks scarce political and administrative talent from the regions. There is now evidence of a lack of political leadership in the regions, which needs to be addressed.

Devolution

15. Parliament and the Government continually look to restructure sub national government, without looking at themselves and what they can and should let go to the region and the local.

16. Regional Government exists and is growing, but it has no real executive power or policy discretion particular in those policy areas of most concern to the public such as health, education, crime and transport. It relies on informality, goodwill and personal relations between those on the inside. Unelected, anonymous networks, forums, institutions, experts and elites from which ordinary people and the public are excluded or which they chose not to connect, sustain it.

Management of Services

17. There are a whole range of vital and difficult public service and policy issues⁹, which do not map neatly with the mandates, competences and boundaries of existing public bodies. Issues such as the Regional and Local tax base, Economic Development, Spatial Planning, the provision of affordable housing, transport including rail franchising and trunk roads, Public Health, Education, Police, Fire and Emergency Services are too complex to be determined by Westminster or Whitehall or by even the largest local authorities.

18. Westminster and Whitehall are overloaded and frustrate more than they facilitate innovative regional and local responses to Regional and Local needs. The West Midlands has been waiting more than 30 years for central approval of the investment needed to put in place a modern rail transport system.

19. The existing Regional arrangements lack legitimacy, clout and high quality political leadership. Regional bodies are generally not held in high esteem by the few who know anything about them. They are seen by those who have contact with them as being expensive talking shops, providing mechanisms to legitimise and enforce central government policy rather than acting as a counterweight to Westminster and Whitehall and champions of the region and the local.

20. At the Local level the system of City/metropolitan and Shire Local Government created in the early 1970,s separates town, country, problems, and opportunities. It is further complicated by local quasi-governmental area initiatives including Local Strategic Partnerships, Pathfinders, New Deal and Neighbourhood Management, Regeneration Zones etc.

21. The greater share of Central Government expenditure and activity in the Regions remains tightly controlled from London and not by the Region or the local.

22. Meanwhile London, Wales and Scotland which have to varying degrees their own devolved democratically accountable governments are developing their own distinctive approaches to public policy to fit their needs and circumstances. Further devolution to Wales and London is proposed.

Proposals

23. The Government should now think laterally in terms of further constitutional reform to facilitate regional elected representation including fairer representation of the English Regions in Parliament and in the regions.¹⁰

24. The public needs to be able to more easily understand who and what acts for them. It needs simplifying at the national, regional and local levels. We need to clarify central and regional relations; provide for fairer regional representation at Westminster; A new more participative and representative politics;

Central/Regional Relations

25. There needs to be further decentralisation with greater autonomy for each region, elected Regional authorities and a strengthened, more local, single tier of elected local government. The strengthening of the Regional and Local needs to be balanced by a *downsizing of Westminster, Whitehall*. The transfer of power and the focus of representation from London to the Region and the Local should be broadly neutral over time

Fairer representation of the Regions in the Westminster Parliament

26. We need to root England – as the largest country in the Union - in a balanced devolutionary settlement addressing the unfinished business begun by devolution to London, Wales and Scotland.

27. This might be achieved by the vesting of regional powers in elected members of a reformed Second Chamber/House of Lords, given election by regional lists. Much of the existing voluntary Regional Assembly structure could be retained as a regional scrutiny and partnership system working with the Second Chamber Members constituted as an elected Regional Authority or Board.

¹⁰ Regions that Work: Campaign for the English Regions and the Local Government Information Unit, March 2004

Regional Capacities and Capabilities.

28. Each Region should have the ability and means to represent and act for their constituents within and beyond the UK; to identify and access the resources including taxation needed to modernise outdated infrastructure and services, promote equal opportunities, sustainable development. Each region needs the powers to mobilise and join up the resources which are at present in the hands of Government departments, executive agencies, quangos, local authorities, other public bodies and former, now privatised public utilities.

29. The Regional Level of Government has to be about promoting the local, the national and the international. The Region can provide the bridge that is needed between the local and international affairs. Regional and local Governments have a key role to play in promoting local economic self-sufficiency and local competitiveness in a global economy.¹¹

A New Politics

30. England needs a new more inclusive Politics and Governance.

31. Electoral Reform including Fairer votes are needed to ensure that the new Constitutional settlement and representative Government at all levels is as inclusive as possible providing all voters with more confidence that their views will be taken into account

32. There is a need to provide new opportunities for people to serve as elected representatives regionally rather than at Westminster. New ways need to be found for ordinary people to be consulted and participate in public affairs. There needs to be greater direct democratic control by the public over services and decisions at the regional level. Accountable, elected representatives would have a greater incentive to respond coherently to regional and local needs than Government appointees.

33. We need to link Town and Country and to break out of the divisive straightjackets of the local government structures imposed in 1974 rather than using them as the basis of some new quasi-governmental metropolitan joint committee. Such an approach is unlikely to bring real and substantive devolution of power, decision-making and accountability to the local or the regions in England. We do not need a further level of government based on arbitrary boundaries, based on outdated concepts and circumstances. We need to recognise the interdependence of Cities, Conurbations and rural England .

¹¹ Europe's Hi-Tech Future: The last Colonial Delusion: Caroline Lucas and Colin Hines December 2005

Regional Boundaries

34. The existing Government Office regions cover the whole of England. They are inclusive and embrace town and Country. These boundaries should provide the framework for local-to-local and region-to-region joint working. However these boundaries need to be open so that joint working can take place across them reflecting regional and sub regional needs, economic, social and environmental issues that need to be addressed. We should not be seeking to limit what alliances and partnerships any local or region enters into. Closer cooperation and joined up government between all elements of government both vertically and horizontally must be a good thing and work in the interests of the public.

35. The addition of to the existing Government Office regions of sub regionally based governance would further complicate and add to sub national Government in England. So called City-region proposals based on former metropolitan Counties would introduce a form of watered down metropolitan governance-but without the democratic legitimacy of the old Met Counties. This 'Metro County Lite' approach risks returning us to a "solution" appropriate to the early 70s, but since by-passed by regional demographic, spatial and transport evolution in most of the 8 English regions. All English regions bar London are diverse mixtures of urban and rural areas. 21st century solutions to regional regeneration and service delivery must recognise this fact.

The Process

36. We need a process of further constitutional reform to be agreed. However the changes we have outlined are too complex for a single approach to work. What may work within one region may not another.

37. The changes we have outlined need to be underpinned by the principle of subsidiarity. Westminster/Whitehall, the Regions and the Local have a part to play. Westminster and Whitehall should give a lead by enabling elected Regional Government to be established. Elected Regional Government could then lead on how it organises itself and what changes are needed to the way services and functions are delivered regionally and locally. Different approaches could then emerge in different regions to reflect the very different circumstances that exist across England.

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