

Devolution in England

England remains the odd one out in the devolution settlement. There have been no plans for an English Parliament equivalent to the devolved institutions in the other UK nations. And the UK Government's commitment to regional devolution in England was killed off by the November 2004 referendum in the North East. The only devolved institution introduced in England has been the Greater London Authority (GLA).

Support for Devolution

The absence of devolution across England may not seem too surprising if we consider public opinion. Table 1 shows English constitutional preferences from 1999-2003. Clearly and consistently the main preference has been for the status quo of government by the UK parliament in Westminster, with regional assemblies edging ahead of an England-wide Parliament as the next best – but still far less popular – alternative. In 2003 even the peripheral regions of the north – for which plans for regional assemblies were crafted – favoured the status quo over regional assemblies by a margin of 2:1.

Table 1 Constitutional Preferences in England (1999-2003)

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003			
	All-England	All-England	All-England	All-England	All-England	North East	North West	Yorkshire & Humber
Status quo	62	54	59	56	55	58	54	58
Regional Assembly	15	18	21	20	24	29	28	25
English Parliament	18	19	13	17	16	10	13	12

Source: British Social Attitudes

The English clearly feel that the status quo of government from Westminster suits them well. Far more of the English trust Westminster to work in their 'best long-term interests' than people in the other UK nations, and far more of the English believe that the UK government ought to have most influence on the way their part of the UK is run than people in the other nations (Table 2).

Table 2 Ought the UK government have most influence on the way the nations are run?

	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
	% answering 'yes'			
2001	54	14	25	17
2003	50	21	29	20

Source: British Social Attitudes

Introducing Regional Institutions

Despite public opinion the Labour Government pursued a twin-track plan for regionalisation in England after 1997. The first track built on earlier Conservative policies of establishing stronger mechanisms of central government in the regions in order to implement Westminster policy more effectively. The Government Offices for the Regions (GOs) introduced by the Conservatives have been steadily strengthened and their reach extended across more central government departments. Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) with a remit for regional economic development were introduced in 1999. And Regional Chambers of 'stakeholders'

were set up to provide a measure of regional accountability for the work of the RDAs, and have since taken on a wider range of functions.

The second track of policy, associated closely with Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, was to democratise this decentralised apparatus of central government by establishing elected regional assemblies (ERAs) which would take over the work of the RDAs and the Regional Chambers. Though first announced in the 1997 Labour manifesto policy on that second track was clarified only in May 2002, when a White Paper set out what ERAs would do.

There followed a cosmetic consultation exercise in the regions on ‘levels of interest’ in holding a referendum which led Prescott in June 2003 to announce that the three northern English regions (North East, North West and Yorkshire and the Humber) would be the first to have a referendum. It was later announced that these referendums would take place in October, then November 2004, and in July 2004 the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber were struck off the referendum list, ostensibly for technical electoral process reasons, but in reality because the Government knew they were unwinnable.

Box 1: Proposals for Elected Regional Assemblies in England

- 25-35 members, elected by the additional member system, led by a small ‘cabinet’
- ‘Strategic’ role in setting policy objectives and coordinating regional policy actors, but with policy implementation dependent on arm’s length assembly ‘functional bodies’, including RDAs, and on local authorities and other regional ‘stakeholders’
- Strategic role in: economic development; planning; housing; transport; culture, tourism and sport; public health; rural policy; environment; crime reduction; and fire and rescue
- Funding by block grant from central government plus limited power to ‘precept’ (surcharge) local council tax

Also in July 2004 the Draft Regional Assemblies Bill was published in order to inform the referendum debate. With very minor changes it reaffirmed what the earlier White Paper had set out (Box 1). The powers planned for ERAs were very modest, reflecting the success of central government departments in resisting any transfers of their functions. The modesty of ERA powers also underlined John Prescott’s isolation as the only UK cabinet member committed to elected assemblies.

The referendum held in the North East in November 2004 emphatically rejected Prescott’s ERAs. The 78-22 ‘No’-vote was strikingly uniform. No significant group – whether demarcated by age, gender, social class, political affiliation or local authority area – voted in favour of an ERA in the North East. This was an overwhelming rejection. There were a number of reasons, and some had nothing to do with the ERA issue itself. The referendum was held at the back end of a second term government embroiled in an unpopular conflict in Iraq, and amid a general sense of disillusionment about politics and politicians. Our referendum survey suggested that anti-government and anti-politics protest was a significant factor in the ‘No’-vote (Table 3).

Table 3 North East referendum vote and feelings of satisfaction and trust

	Yes voters	No voters	Did not vote
% dissatisfied with government	42	59	45
% dissatisfied with Prime Minister	33	60	46
% ‘almost never’ trust politicians to tell the truth	31	51	48
% attack on Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein ‘unjustified’	34	50	42

Source: ESRC Referendum Study

But there was also a clear sense from our survey among north-easteners that the region was ignored by central government in London, did not get its fair share of the nation’s resources, and was economically disadvantaged. There was in other words at least some fertile ground for establishing an institution to give voice to the North East and to pursue a vigorous economic development agenda. But voters evidently felt that the institution proposed would make no difference.

The ‘No’-campaign in the referendum was highly effective in cementing that view, presenting the proposed assembly as a toothless talking shop. Even the ‘Yes’-campaign admitted much the same by presenting the ERA as a ‘starting point’ which would lead to further powers being granted at some unspecified point in the future. Voters drew the conclusion that the ERA would make no significant difference in addressing the needs of the North East (Table 4).

Table 4 Referendum vote and perceived impact of an ERA in the North East

% believing	Yes voters	No voters	Did not vote
Taxes would be ‘a lot’/‘a little’ higher	48	80	52
Region’s economy would be ‘a lot’/ ‘a little’ better	62	10	20
Region’s voice in Europe would be ‘a lot’/ ‘a little’ stronger	54	16	22
Ppride in the region would be ‘a lot’/ ‘a little’ stronger	39	11	13
Ordinary people will have more say in how region is governed	63	29	30
Regional assembly would be a ‘waste of money’	15	80	45

Source: ESRC Referendum Study

The GLA

One reason for thinking that conclusion may have been misplaced is the GLA. The GLA has a directly elected figurehead and a different mix of policy responsibilities, but essentially the same model of ‘strategic’ powers dependent on others for implementation. Yet it was approved by an overwhelming 72-28% in the 1998 referendum. It is now well-established. As our survey after the 2004 GLA election showed, people do think it has made a difference, especially in using congestion charging to boost public transport, and on crime. Some of this may be down to having a Mayor as an unequivocal leadership voice, especially one as vigorous as Ken Livingstone (who was re-elected in 2004).

Rather more is due to the agreement among Londoners that ‘London’ is a coherent community with a general interest which needs to be addressed through its own institutions of government, as it had been before the (unpopular) abolition of the Greater London Council in 1985. It is that sense of general interest that the North East (and even more so the other English regions) lack. There was no underpinning of regional identity and region-focused civic understanding to support ERAs. Against that background, and no matter how much northerners feel disadvantaged by Westminster centralism, regional government was not judged to be a credible alternative.

Outlook

What that leaves us with, London aside, are the various forms of administrative regionalization – Government Offices, RDAs, Regional Chambers – that have been strengthened steadily since 1997 and yet further since the failed referendum in 2004. Some views see this system of regional ‘governance’ as a useful, semi-institutionalised and more or less permanent consultation mechanism which has the potential to tailor Whitehall policies better to different needs across the regions.

Our research – and even that sponsored by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister – paints a different picture: of a complex and intransparent set of governance mechanisms which lack democratic accountability; and of confusion, duplication and inefficiency as new regional-level bodies cut across long established relationships in policy delivery linking Whitehall and local government. The recent revival of the city-regions debate seems set only to add further complexity while also running the danger of marginalizing rural concerns. An overall assessment would be one of a policy agenda scuppered by the voters of the North East and now, in the absence of a coherent Plan B, beset by a restless, and ultimately directionless ‘initiativitis’.