



Findings from the Economic and Research Council's  
Research Programme on *Devolution and Constitutional Change*



### *Devolution Briefings*

## *Before the Referendum: Public Views on Elected Regional Assemblies in the North of England*

*Briefing No. 17, February 2005*

#### **Key Points**

- Respondents in the three northern English regions did display distinctive regional identities, though these were expressed most strongly in the contrast of 'northerners' with 'southerners'
- Decision-making in 'London' was perceived as remote and self-serving.
- Northern identity and alienation from 'London' did not translate into strong support for regional government. There were three main reasons:
  1. All politicians were mistrusted. A new set of regional politicians would be no different
  2. Respondents had close to no knowledge of the purposes and details of government policy on regions
  3. Once given basic information respondents were sceptical that Elected Regional Assemblies would work in the right policy fields and would have enough clout to make a difference; they did not understand the idea of 'strategic' assemblies

#### **The research**

Following the consultation exercise, *Your Region, Your Say*, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) announced in June 2003 that a first wave of referendums on the establishment of Elected Regional Assemblies (ERAs) would be held in the three regions of northern England: North East, North West, and Yorkshire and the Humber. It was subsequently announced that the referendums would be held on 4 November 2004. On 22 July 2004 ODPM announced that the referendums in the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber were being postponed; only the North East held a vote, which recorded a resounding majority against the introduction of ERAs. This briefing provides perspectives on why ERAs met with strong opposition.

It reports on focus groups held in nine different locations<sup>1</sup> across northern England between 22 June and 15 July 2004, as part of research commissioned by ODPM. The focus groups were held before the announcement on the postponement of two of the three referendums. The discussion guide was based on the assumption that all referendums would go ahead as then planned, and contained prompts for discussion on

- questions of regional identity
- attitudes to devolution in general
- government policies for the English regions
- referendum voting intentions (intentions were sought at the start and at the end of each group)

### **Identity and Belonging**

Respondents were prompted to reflect on identities that applied to them ranging from local-regional-English/other UK nations-British-European-other. The aim was to explore how far the region might be or become a frame of reference for thinking about politics. The most popular choices were local and English/British. Regional identity was weakest in the North West, and where a regional identity was claimed it had a more general north-south rather than specifically North Western meaning. Regional identity was strongest in Yorkshire, and understood both as a historic sense of Yorkshireness, but also – as in the North West - as a more general distinction between northerners and southerners. The north-south distinction was articulated in familiar stereotypes (Box One).

#### **Box One: The North and the South – as Viewed from the North**

- ‘northern’ = friendly, approachable, communitarian, unpretentious, welcoming, generous
- ‘southern’ = cold, aloof, class and status conscious, individualistic, flash, aggressively ambitious, etc.

Most respondents were comfortable in claiming multiple identities, often stating they would describe themselves differently depending whether they were in their home area, elsewhere in the UK, or abroad. There were some signs of a growing salience of different, ‘sub-British’ national identities in the UK, with some stressing their Englishness as a demarcation line vis-à-vis other UK nations and others stressing their Britishness out of concerns that ‘Englishness’ (or ‘Scottishness’ etc) was divisive. Most respondents displayed a high level of rootedness in their local area and, at times, an extremely vigorous and highly localised ‘patriotism’ (especially in the rural locations, but more generally in Yorkshire).

When pressed to identify those features that were especially characteristic of their region – our prompts included class, economy, heritage, food, sports, accents - respondents in the North West had particular difficulty. Accents and sporting affiliations were felt to demarcate different areas within the region (e.g. Warrington was a rugby league, not a football town that did not talk ‘Scouse’); there were few overarching commonalities for the region as a whole, except for being ‘not southern’.

In all three regions the more peripheral, rural locations felt little in common with the major urban centres, though in the North East and Yorkshire rural respondents nevertheless

<sup>1</sup> Newcastle, Manchester, Sheffield, Darlington, Warrington, Huddersfield, Alnwick, Keswick, Northallerton. Groups were recruited to reflect a balance of demographic, socio-economic and political backgrounds.

described typical regional characteristics in much the same way as the urban respondents. It was close to unanimous in the Yorkshire groups that ‘the Humber’ did not belong with Yorkshire. The characteristics of Yorkshire and Yorkshireness were the most clearly defined (Box Two). North Easterners claimed a similar set of attributes concerning landscape and culture, though with a stronger focus on sport, accent and a ‘slower pace’ of living (ie than ‘the south’).

#### **Box Two – Yorkshireness**

- ‘the county’/‘the rose’/‘not Lancashire’ – county history (and cricket?) provides a point of identification not available elsewhere
- the moors and dales/countryside/Heartbeat country/North Yorkshire (chosen also by Sheffield respondents in South Yorkshire)
- friendly/outspoken/hospitable/honest/sense of community (again, at times explicitly, in contrast with southerners)

What is surprising about these findings on identity is how modestly they were reflected in attitudes on political issues. Local patriotism was not matched by strong commitment to local politics or administrative boundaries; north-south distinctions were not consistently matched with a concern to give the north a stronger political voice; and the strongest sense of regional identity (Yorkshire) was matched with the least enthusiasm for regional government. There appear to be two broad explanations for this apparently apolitical regionalism/localism, which are developed at greater length below:

- an intensive distrust of all politicians, national, local and – incipiently – regional
- a strong perception that citizens had not been fully informed of the issues and initiatives that have reshaped English regional politics and governance since 1997

### **The Principle of Devolution**

Respondents were asked to discuss whether devolution in principle was a good idea, reflecting in particular on the reforms since 1997 in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There was no consensus view within or across the three regions, except perhaps that people did not know enough about devolution elsewhere in the UK to make an informed comment.

There were few clear conceptions of benefits brought by devolution elsewhere in the UK, except that some felt that allowing for the expression of different identities, needs and preferences was in principle a good thing. The most readily recalled devolution fact was the controversy over the costs of the Scottish Parliament building. Some articulated a crude version of the ‘West Lothian question’, asking why there were still ‘dozens’ of Scottish MPs at Westminster; ‘why aren’t they back up there ... there’s dozens of them ... [they should] send them all back home’.

Others presented a different sense of unease about devolution, fearing ‘competition’ (for resources?) from devolved bodies elsewhere (especially close to the Scottish border) or seeing devolution as divisive, risking the break-up of the UK. In some cases the latter claim was connected with Europe in the sense that national autonomy was being eroded from without, so should be protected from within.

Two other broad discussion points emerged. One was a strong feeling, present in several of the groups and across the whole North East, that central government (‘London’) was remote,

didn't know best, and was full of self-serving politicians. Only one group – in Sheffield – made a positive case for central government in the sense of ensuring equitable and fair outcomes for all, no matter where they lived. Otherwise distrust of 'London' was widespread, especially in the North East; but only rarely was it translated into support for a distinct, regional voice for the northern regions. Respondents who felt London's remoteness was a problem mostly seemed resigned to sub-optimal governance, and did not seem to think that regional devolution would make a difference.

This sense of resignation linked secondly to perceptions of politics and politicians. There were strong concerns within all groups about the trustworthiness and motivations of politicians, irrespective of the party they represented or the level of government at which they operated. Thus it was assumed that the people of the devolved territories were served just as badly, or at least no better, by their new 'regional' political elites as they were, previously, by UK-level and local politicians, and that the same would apply to ERAs.

The perceived waste and dishonesty surrounding the Scottish Parliament building was evoked as an example of politicians being 'all the same'. There were already 'too many' politicians, 'you only see them at election times', they 'do not do enough'. The twin ogres of 'cost' and 'bureaucracy' readily popped up in this discussion as the inevitable outcomes of 'politicians'. There was also some hint of the impact of recent national political controversies: 'I don't trust them ... more so now after the Iraq situation'.

There was a danger in these circumstances that the detailed issues at stake in regional government would be swamped by this pervasive sense of mistrust of politicians. Northern dissatisfaction with the current structure of government did not translate smoothly into support for change in the structure of government.

### **Policy on the English Regions**

The next discussion points concerned: awareness of the current institutions of regional governance; the policy issues that people felt were most important in their region; and the roles and powers of the ERAs people were (then) expected to vote on in November.

One or two people in most groups had heard of Regional Development Agencies and some of them had a rough idea what they do ('something to do with business promotion' or 'bringing employment into the area'). Across *all* groups just two or three people in total (out of close to 50) had heard of Government Offices and the current 'partnership' Regional Assemblies and *none at all* knew what either of them did. There were misgivings about this largely new information, including: concern that RDA boards were appointed by the (remote) Secretary of State (though again this did not translate into support for a devolved, regional appointment process); and annoyance that these institutions, plus a variety of quangos also introduced into the discussion, were operating without respondents knowing anything about them.

Most of the policy issues identified as priorities for the regions were often not *regional* policy issues, understood in terms of the roles of current or proposed regional governance institutions. Education and health were the most frequent responses. Law and order issues also figured prominently, in two ways: not enough was being done to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour; and the perceived use of speed cameras as a fund-raising device.

Also widely cited were employment, especially the absence of quality employment opportunities, and public transport. The following were also mentioned in at least two groups: immigration/asylum; the environment; and local property prices ('driving young people away' from rural locations). Group moderators noted that these policy concerns were expressed in a personalised, individualistic way; there was little sense of there being some kind of regional (or, indeed, national) 'general interest'.

It was also news to most people that referendums on introducing ERAs had (at the time) been announced. Respondents were prompted by a showcard listing proposed ERA functions to discuss the scope and effectiveness of what ERAs would be able to do. On balance respondents were not impressed. There was widespread criticism that the key issues of health and education were not on the list ('they're missing and they're the main concern').

Respondents could see the value of regional powers in some fields, including housing, environment, crime reduction, transport and public health, but further elaboration on the funding and 'strategic' powers in these fields tended to dampen any incipient enthusiasm. There was a strong view that ERAs would not have enough clout and would be too much subject to central government control. This had much to do with an inability to appreciate the idea of 'strategic' powers. In part the concept was simply unfamiliar, but even with explanation there remained general scepticism about the ability of an ERA to deliver real added value by 'joining up' policy-making in the region and cajoling policy actors into thinking regionally.

There were a number of other general themes:

- First, in most groups there was concern that ERAs would have too much overlap with the functions of local governments (though again this may have to do with the lack of understanding of the strategic role envisaged for ERAs).
- Second, in the North East concerns were expressed about the likely 'calibre' of politician elected to ERAs. There were views that, if an ERA were to happen, its members should have 'experience' (ie outside politics), and should be outside the 'party machines'.
- Finally, in all three regions, especially in the rural groups, there were worries that an ERA – given that it would have relatively few members in relatively big constituencies - would be remote: 'We'd never see them'; it would be 'Newcastle-centric'; 'Hull and Humberside ... it'll all be going on over there'.

We asked about two specific aspects of government policy on ERAs: the insistence on single tier local authorities in ERA regions; and ERAs' council tax precepting power. There was little opposition in all of the groups, including places currently with two tier local government, to moving to single tier local government. There was certainly no attachment to the idea of 'historic' counties. This is consistent with all recent public attitudes work; people seem unconcerned with particular boundaries for local government units, but concerned instead with the effectiveness of local government in providing services. In the focus groups the provision of information on the plan to move to single tier local government in ERA regions went some way to neutralising concerns about 'another tier of bureaucracy'.

There was a mix of predictable with more nuanced responses on the question of the precepting power of ERAs. There was a general consensus in the Yorkshire groups that there should be no increases in council tax, either for ERA running costs or for additional economic

development projects in the region. ‘London’ should pay. In the North West the proposed precept for running costs – at the stated average of 5p per week – was generally thought insignificant (‘that’s only a pint a year’). And in all three North East groups respondents would be willing to pay their 5p if it returned ‘value for money’.

There was however a widespread scepticism that the precept would remain at this level, or that value for money would, in the end, be delivered (‘I just can’t see any kind of benefit at a reasonable cost, because I think it’s going to cost us more money, employ more people with the same job descriptions’). There was no support anywhere for additional precepts for regional development or infrastructure projects.

### **How would people have voted?**

We asked respondents at the start and at the end of each group discussion how they would vote in a referendum: yes, no or don’t know. The results are given below as percentages across the three groups in each region. They should be read with caution and not in any way be taken as indicative of likely voting behaviour; the sample size is too small. They show that respondents in the North East, before and after discussion, were least opposed to the introduction of ERAs, and that Yorkshire respondents were most opposed, and in the end quite vehemently so.

**Table One: Voting Intentions**

	Before Discussion			After Discussion		
	Yes	Don’t know	No	Yes	Don’t Know	No
North East	35	54	12	15	69	15
North West	17	61	22	9	57	35
Yorkshire and Humber	25	61	14	0	52	48

As significant as the ‘headline’ results was that in all but one group opinion shifted away from the ‘yes’ option after discussion. here was a general drift from ‘Yes’ to ‘Don’t Know’ to ‘No’. The biggest group at start and finish were ‘Don’t Knows’.

Significantly many of the ‘Don’t Knows’ wanted more information before making an informed choice. A number of participants commented along the lines that ‘we have been privileged in hearing about what’s happening’ as a result of being invited to the focus group session. But, equipped with a little more information participants now had more questions than answers.

### **Conclusions**

The findings of the nine focus groups were in part paradoxical. Our respondents felt a) dissatisfied and, by and large, disadvantaged by government ‘from London’ and b) claimed notable levels of distinctive regional identity, in Yorkshire and the North East based on ‘positive’ attributes, and everywhere based on broader north-south distinctions. But they did not link a) and b) together as an argument for regional government.

Respondents were not convinced that ERAs would be effective or would deliver value for money. They felt that ERAs would not have sufficient clout, would not have powers to impact on core policy concerns on health and education, and would, inevitably, over time, tax them

too much. Respondents were confused by the idea of a strategic authority not directly responsible for delivering public services; they found it hard to see how strategic leadership could make any difference. But there was no significant support for retaining two-tier local government, even in two tier areas.

A recurrent, and deeply felt theme, which helps to explain scepticism about plans for ERAs is an abiding mistrust of politicians. This mistrust would appear to reflect wider political factors unconnected with regional issues, but which ‘swamped’ the regional debate.

Respondents felt badly informed about policy on regions, and felt annoyed about this. In the course of discussion, as they learned more about policy on regions, respondents became less likely to support the introduction of ERAs and more likely to oppose their introduction.

*This Devolution Briefing was compiled by Charlie Jeffery (University of Edinburgh) on the basis of reports and transcripts of focus groups moderated by Gordon Dabinett (University of Sheffield for Yorkshire and the Humber), Alan Harding (Salford University for the North West) and Lynne Humphrey (University of Newcastle for the North East). The research was carried out for the ODPM project on the Long Term Evaluation of Elected Regional Assemblies coordinated by the SURF Centre, Salford University.*

The Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme was set up by ESRC in 2000 to explore the series of devolution reforms which have established new political institutions in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, London and the other English regions since 1997. It has commissioned 35 projects around the UK to carry out top-class academic research and to contribute to the policy debates surrounding devolution.

For more information see the Programme website at [www.devolution.ac.uk](http://www.devolution.ac.uk) or contact the Programme Director, Professor Charlie Jeffery at ESRC Devolution Programme, School of Social and Political Studies, Adam Ferguson Building, George Square, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH8 9LL. Tel 0131 650 8489, fax 0131 650 6546, email [charlie.jeffery@ed.ac.uk](mailto:charlie.jeffery@ed.ac.uk)