

### ... and effective negative campaigning ...

At the outset of the campaign, opposition to an elected assembly was hampered by significant, and occasionally publicly fractious, splits. Two credible applications for the designation (and government funding) as the official No campaign were made. One was led by Neil Heron, a former market trader who hit national prominence over his refusal to sell goods using metric weights and measures and who now led the Metric Martyr's campaign, whilst the other had a business dominated board with closer — but downplayed — links to the Conservative Party.

When the Electoral Commission designated the latter, Neil Herron cried foul, criticised the designated group and continued his own campaign. Although this received relatively little coverage and the media focussed on the official No campaign, ultimately there were two No campaigns. This helped undermine the message that the elected assembly was an aspiration with broad support.

The official No campaign group fought consistently on a simple message: that the elected assembly would be expensive and have little power. This message was very effectively underwritten with a sophisticated use of images: first, burning £1 million in fake £50 notes for the television and newspapers, and second with an inflatable white elephant that toured the towns and cities of the region and was memorably photographed next to the Angel of the North. The white elephant came to be the iconic image of the campaign and was so effective because it chimed with the key negative theme that the No campaign fought on.

During the course of the autumn, the No campaign also began to emphasise an anti-politics rhetoric: not only would an elected assembly be expensive, they argued, but it would create an additional cadre of politicians who were, it implied, out for

themselves. In doing so they were helped by the Conservatives: whilst Tony Blair, John Prescott and Charles Kennedy all campaigned for a yes vote, national Conservative politicians — who were strongly opposed to the proposal — were notable for their absence from the region. Over the course of the campaign this anti-politician and anti-tax message increasingly chimed with an electorate whose historical support for the Labour Party were already weakening.

### ... contributed to a change in the tone of media coverage

*"We will lose because we have failed to get across a coherent message"*

*(Alan Milburn 8 November 2004)<sup>1</sup>*

The weaknesses of the Yes campaign, and the concomitant success of the No campaign, led to a transformation in the tone of the coverage in the print media. Between January 2003 and the date of the referendum there were 1,628 significant features in the regional and national print media on the issues. In the six months up to the vote the balance of opinion in media articles on the referendum was generally negative, and in the immediate run-up to the referendum especially so. The North East has a vibrant set of newspapers and the relationships between regional political journalists and the individuals in the Yes camp, and their supporters, were personally close. Furthermore, the [Newcastle] *Journal* had long supported the principle of regional elected government but during the campaign declared itself to be against the proposals and whilst the *Northern Echo* (based in Darlington and with a wide circulation in County Durham) supported the elected assembly, its coverage was balanced and reflected the news agenda that was being set by the campaign groups.

## Conclusions

The defeat of the government's proposals on inaugurating an elected assembly in North East England was not only a personal blow to the Deputy Prime Minister but it has derailed the policy of elected regional government proposed for England for a decade at least. Furthermore, there are important lessons for protagonists in future referendums in the UK. First, the timing and mode of the election matters: a postal vote at a low point in the electoral cycle gives disgruntled government supporters the opportunity to inflict an *apparently* painless blow. Second, it is easier to campaign to maintain the status quo unless there are compelling reasons for change. Third, effective use of the media and symbols which chime with the core message are vital.



<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Hansard, 8 November 2004, 426 (151) col 589

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**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.**

## Further Information

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. Tel 0131 650 8489, Fax 0131 650 6546, Email [charlie.jeffery@ed.ac.uk](mailto:charlie.jeffery@ed.ac.uk)



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

# Devolution Briefings

## The Referendum Campaign: Issues and Turning Points in the North East

Briefing No. 20, February 2005

### Key Points

- Governments are normally well-placed to win support for their proposals in referendums; in 2004 the Labour government had remained convinced that a Yes-vote in the North East was a safe bet. The outcome - 80:20 against an elected assembly - was therefore especially striking.
- The Yes campaign was hampered by the weakness of the powers available to the proposed elected assembly. It had to develop a mixed message that an assembly would change things now, but was also part of a longer-term process in which regional powers would grow
- The Yes campaign mobilised a coalition of prominent regional figures amid an evocation of the distinctive identity of the North East but seemed not to connect effectively with voters 'on the ground'
- The long voting period with postal ballots opened up campaigning choices; the Yes campaign focused on the early part of the period, the No campaign – apparently with more effect – on the later part
- The No campaign focused on a simple, creatively delivered anti-politics message: an elected assembly would be a 'white elephant' with self-serving politicians and unnecessary costs (and taxes)
- Coverage of the campaign in the regional media shifted notably in tone from a more positive to a more negative assessment as the date of the referendum approached.

## Introduction

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"Our policy of devolution set out in our manifesto means giving power to people in our nations and regions - so that they can set their own priorities and make more decisions which affect their lives. London now has city wide government and a Mayor powerful enough to run a global city. The Scottish Parliament enables the people of Scotland to make key decisions without recourse to Westminster for the first time in hundreds of years. The Welsh Assembly has given the Welsh people a powerful new voice to create jobs, prosperity, and social justice. Each of these new bodies was voted for by the people and has since proved to be very popular."

(John Prescott, 8 November 2004)

On 5 November 2004, the returning officer for the North East reported the results of the referendum on whether there should be an elected assembly for the region. His report was a shock for the government and a personal blow to the Deputy Prime Minister's long-standing dream of devolving power to the English regions: not only was the government's proposal rejected by almost four times as many voters as supported it, but it was resoundingly rejected in even the staunchest of government strongholds.

Although governments have lost referendums before, and whilst even their victories have sometimes been very close, the scale of the defeat on the North East Elected Assembly ranked with that of the 80:20 No-vote in the Welsh devolution referendum in 1979. Unlike other polities, in the UK referendums are rarely used and only then *both* when there is a proposed amendment to the constitutional settlement *and* where the ruling party is not entirely certain of its political support on an issue. In this way, major policy changes can be — to a limited degree — depoliticised and the collateral damage offset.

Nevertheless, there are good general reasons for expecting governments to win referendums. First, the very decision to hold a vote is in their hands. Second, research evidence from elsewhere suggests governments win because they are able to tilt the broader public agenda in their favour. Here, the North East referendum should have been a text-book case. As a result of informal soundings, the government initially planned to hold three simultaneous referendums in each of the three northern regions, only to postpone indefinitely (and subsequently cancel) those in the North West and Yorkshire & the Humber as it became increasingly clear that these would be lost.

But the government remained convinced that a vote in the North East vote was a safe bet, not least because a BBC North opinion poll in 2002 had suggested that 72% of the electorate would support an elected assembly. In addition the government and the Labour Party put its considerable weight behind a yes vote. And the North East has — from the outside — long appeared to have a relatively coherent and articulate regional elite, where the public and private sectors joined together in support of the regional agenda.

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It was therefore reasonable for Westminster politicians to have believed that the regional elite had sown up the local agenda. Moreover evidence from elsewhere suggests that where there are divisions the public take its cues from the side it is most aligned with, which in the case of the North East, was the Labourist establishment. The loss of the referendum in such apparently propitious circumstances makes it all the more pressing — not least in the light of future referendums in the UK — to understand why the electorate in the North East voted as it did.

## Explaining the result

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"I do not know why the referendum was lost—there is a range of reasons. I have probably spent more time than anyone else defending the proposal and listening to people's views in markets, streets and in debates. I gave some of the reasons, which included worries about too many politicians and cost. Europe was mentioned from time to time, as if the proposal were a Euro-plot. All those factors played a part. I do not think that there was one major reason. I cannot therefore really give an answer to the question 'Why?' All I need to know now is that I did not convince people and that I was emphatically defeated."

(John Prescott, 8 November 2004)

### Limited devolution ...

Although England has 85% of the UK population, devolution since 1997 has focussed on Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and, somewhat anomalously, London. For the remainder of the English regions, devolution has enhanced the regional Government Offices and created new business-led Regional Development Agencies and unelected Regional Assemblies. To its supporters, the referendum in the North East was seen as the first stage of a process whereby the imbalance of power would begin to shift away from Whitehall and Westminster and towards a region that has consistently lagged the rest of England according to most economic and social indicators.

However, the powers of the proposed elected assembly fell far short of the powers granted to the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly. The new elected assembly would be responsible for appointing the Chair and Board to One North East (the regional development agency), setting the regional economic strategy and a limited input into other strategic economic matters in the region (such as transport planning and support for small businesses).

Whilst most of those campaigning for a Yes vote privately admitted that these powers were limited and in themselves would not let them deliver on their aims of: shifting the balance of power in England; delivering full employment in the region; and giving the region a strong voice within the UK akin to that of the London mayor. Instead, the Yes camp were enthusiastic about the prospect of an elected assembly and told our researchers that they saw it as part of a longer-term process whereby support for greater regional powers would grow as the idea and legitimacy of regional institutions grew in the popular imagination.

### ... stifled the Yes camp

Translating this enthusiasm into popular appeal, however, was no easy task and it relied upon being able to sell a sophisticated reading of the imperatives of political change and simultaneously to maintain that the limited powers that the elected assembly could make a significant difference to the region. On one level, the campaign tended to over-emphasise the degree to which the region would be changed on 5 November if it voted yes. In one press release, for example, the Yes4theNorthEast campaign claimed that a North East Regional Assembly will be able to reverse this trend [towards regional economic divergence]. It would be able to focus spending on local priorities and directly tackle the causes of slow economic growth that are currently hampering the region.

Mitigating the weakness of the case on powers, however, were the exceptionally strong levels of support the Yes campaign won from prominent regional figures, ranging from iconic business figures (such as Sir John Hall, the founder of the Metro Centre and former chairman of Newcastle United FC and Sir John Bridge, the former chief executive of the regional development agency), the regional political establishment (including the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats and figures such as Ray Mallon, the Mayor of Middlesbrough and populist former police chief), the trade unions, and figures from sport and the arts (such as Brendan Foster and opera singer Suzannah Clarke).

The Yes campaign was largely based around this broad regional coalition. There was a strong logic to this decision in a region understood to have a distinctive regional identity, with a culture that unified elites and masses. The Yes campaign was quite explicit — not only did they date the historical impetus for regional government back to the economic crisis of the 1920s, but one of four main reasons they gave for voting for the assembly was that:

*"North East England is our community and a place to be proud of ... The people of the North East have a shared culture which comes from their history. They have a strong sense of community, born out of the industries of the past. These industries made sure people had to work hard, together, to succeed. Around its three major rivers the people of the region share some of the best landscapes in Britain, including England's last wilderness, its finest castles and its greatest cathedral. People are proud to be from this region and many expatriates want to return ... Of all the English regions, the North East has the strongest sense of identity. We share a proud history and great potential for the future." (4 reasons 4 yes)*

However, our research suggests that the Yes campaign failed to under-pin their evocation of a sense of history and community with a street level campaign that involved the people of the region. This was a contentious issue within the Yes campaign before they received official designation, with one faction arguing that there was a need to mobilize and enthuse the electorate, whilst the ultimately successful faction supported a more elite-orientated and media-delivered campaign that reflected the tendency of politicians in the UK as a whole to deliver their messages via the media.

As it became clear during the autumn that opposition was growing, particularly after an opinion poll in the Northern Echo in the middle of October suggested that it was trailing by 7%, the Yes campaign shifted its focus to attacking the official No campaign. First, it drew attention to the less savoury groups opposing the assembly, such as the BNP and UKIP. Second, it attempted to elide the No campaign with the Conservative Party, notably through the use of a pantomime rat (Rather Arrogant Toff Southerners) that doorstepped the No campaign offices for the media. This message was echoed by the Deputy Prime Minister who consistently drew attention to the Conservative Party connections of members of the No campaign board and team.

In a region with a strong Labourist tradition, and continued antipathy to the Conservative Party, the Yes campaign may have expected voters to be receptive to this message. However both insiders and external observers now believe it to have been a tactical error because it trivialised the campaign issues as they were understood by the electorate and failed to provide a convincing defence to the claims being made by the No campaign.



The timing of the vote ...

The timing of the vote was critical for the outcome of the referendum in three senses:

- First, advocates of devolution felt that it had been hard work even to get to the stage of a referendum and compared this unfavourably with the situation in the other nations of the UK and, particularly, London. For them, this gave a negative signal to the electorate about the government's real — rather than rhetorical — commitment to devolution, a signal that was compounded by the cancellation of the votes in the two other regions.
- Second, the referendum took place towards the end of the political cycle and had, at times, the feel of a by-election as national politicians descended to urge a yes vote and the Deputy Prime Minister spent a week on the campaign trail. Perversely, this context meant that traditional Labour Party supporters felt that they could vote against the proposals as a relatively low cost means of punishing the government for unrelated dissatisfactions.
- Finally, most of the electorate had their ballot papers for two or three weeks before sending them in: Yes For the North East had timed their campaign to peak at the start of this period whilst North East Says No was most effective at the end. The use of the postal ballot, and the campaign groups' understanding of the effect of this, made a difference to the scale of the proposal's defeat.