



The Constitution Unit



# Nations and Regions: The Dynamics of Devolution

Quarterly Monitoring Programme

## The English Regions

Quarterly Report  
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# Monitoring the English Regions

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## **Key issues**

The intense discussion that surrounded the subject and which we discussed in our previous report largely abated in early 2005.

The prospects for constitutional reform in England hinged to large extent on the outcome of the General Election expected to be held on May 5<sup>th</sup> 2005.

The future evolution of the regional agenda, which hitherto has dominated discussion of the governance of England, is unclear.

Since our last report (no. 17, December 2004), there have been growing questions concerning the justification and legitimacy of the eight unelected regional chambers in England.

At the same time In December, the East of England Regional Assembly decided to suspend its endorsement of the East of England Regional Plan in a dispute with the government about the levels of proposed infrastructure funding for the region.

The ODPM Select Committee published the results of investigations in the Government's (now withdrawn) Regional Assemblies Bill. It concluded:

- Any future assemblies should be given real powers if and when on the political agenda
- Any future legislation to set up elected regional assemblies in England needs to be more ambitious than the draft Bill
- The scope of the powers and responsibilities which the Government was prepared to give assemblies was disappointing and would limit their effectiveness
- Any further initiative to promote assemblies must be backed, and commitments made, by all Government departments, not just the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM)
- The role of local government, once an assembly was up and running in a region, had to be clarified.
- A clearer case is needed for elected regional assemblies in terms of value for money for the electorate

## 1. Introduction

As a general election approaches, the case for regionalism and the structure, indeed the future, of existing institutions has been thrown into the melting pot. The Conservatives say they will not only scrap the eight non-elected regional assemblies, and hand some of their powers to local councils, but also slim down and ‘de-regionalise’ eight regional development agencies (RDAs) while reducing the powers of Government Offices in the Regions.

Officially, as we reported after the resounding ‘no’ vote in the North East devolution referendum (report no. 17, December 2004), the government is committed to maintaining both unelected regional assemblies and the RDAs. Indeed, John Prescott insisted last month (11<sup>th</sup> February) that the government’s commitment to ‘greater regionalism’ – by which we mean the combined structure of government offices in the regions, regional assemblies with new planning and housing functions, and RDAs – had not wavered, while indulging in a degree of self-parody about his role in the ill-fated referendum three months’ earlier:

Talking about campaigning...I was up in the North East for the referendum for an elected regional assembly. Say no more. But I would emphasise that there is still a regional dimension to all we do. The existing North East regional assembly will still lead on housing, planning, spatial strategy and economic development, creating jobs and opportunities...making sure every region performs as well as the best regions.

But while regional structures, such as regional assemblies, RDAs and, to a lesser extent, Government Offices, cannot be easily dismantled, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) is clearly casting around for other initiatives while, privately, MPs and some ministers away from the ODPM acknowledge that the North East referendum has thrown up big questions about Prescott’s regional project. The ODPM has not only commissioned studies on the development of city regions – regarded by some observers as the coming agenda – but has also published a stream of new policy papers on local governance (*People, Places, Prosperity*, January 31<sup>1</sup>) and stronger local leadership.

While John Prescott was never a fan of elected, US-style mayors (of which 12 are in place) his department – probably nudged by Downing Street – is campaigning for more of them, although, for the moment, no new powers are likely to push the cause. Local government minister Nick Raynsford (*Public Finance*, 4<sup>th</sup> February), who was at the forefront of the ODPM’s campaign for a ‘yes’ vote in the North East referendum, said in

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<sup>1</sup> ODPM. (2005. *People, Places and Prosperity*. London: ODPM.  
[http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm\\_about/documents/page/odpm\\_about\\_035312.hcsp](http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_about/documents/page/odpm_about_035312.hcsp)

Manchester (31<sup>st</sup> January) that mayors helped to “build effective partnerships that galvanise a city’s performance.”<sup>2</sup>

With some mayors, notably the mayor of Hartlepool Stuart Drummond (aka the monkey mascot of Hartlepool FC), up for election on 5<sup>th</sup> May, senior sources in the ODPM have told one of the authors that “conversations” will be taking place with some major cities to persuade council leaders they should embrace the mayoral agenda – perhaps in the form of a mayor for a conurbation, such as Greater Manchester (apart from Stoke on Trent, no big city electorate has been given the chance of opting for an elected first citizen).

Rather pointedly, the Labour leadership of Manchester – where John Prescott held a sustainable communities summit (31<sup>st</sup> January – 3<sup>rd</sup> February) – has rejected the mayoral idea out of hand, indicating the scale of the task facing the government. Interestingly, some leading Tories, while rejecting greater regionalism out of hand, are also pushing the case for elected mayors (a concept pioneered by Lord Heseltine in the early 90s). In Downing Street, some are now suggesting that stronger measures might be needed beyond the current powers, which stipulate that a council must hold a mayoral referendum if it is presented with a petition by five per cent of the electorate.

But the North East referendum has clearly thrown up wider philosophical questions within the government, providing a spur to those who have argued that local democracy, right down to the neighbourhood levels, has to be rebuilt before wider structures are adopted at the regional level. At least one specialist journal (*Public Finance*, 4<sup>th</sup> February) has said the government’s approach represents a “radical plan to devolve control of services to neighbourhoods and reshape the landscape of local government.”<sup>3</sup> The policy paper, *People, Places and Prosperity*, floated the idea of devolving power to neighbourhoods with a new charter which could involve devolving budgets and “triggering action when service standards fall below a minimum; ownership of assets and revenue raising powers”.<sup>4</sup>

These have the potential to be substantial powers, representing a radical re-shaping of councils and raising questions about the future role of local government. ODPM ministers are extremely sensitive to any suggestion that the paper represents an attempt to by-pass councils (as some Downing Street advisers and other ministers would like); rather, they say, ward councillors would play a full role in any neighbourhood devolution. Briefings after the launch of the policy paper subsequently uncovered that councillors would be given seats on new bodies, or neighbourhood

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<sup>2</sup> Neighbourhood bodies to run local services. *Public Finance*. 4<sup>th</sup> February 2005.

<sup>3</sup> See above.

<sup>4</sup> ODPM. (2005). *People, Places and Prosperity*. London: ODPM.  
[http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm\\_about/documents/page/odpm\\_about\\_035312.hcsp](http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_about/documents/page/odpm_about_035312.hcsp)

councils, which might run street cleaning, parks, community centres, and neighbourhood wardens. But according to some ODPM sources, “the remaining members (of neighbourhood councils) will be local people chosen by direct elections.”

Nick Raynsford claims that the new neighbourhood governance would also improve efficiency and lead to savings. “Public services are likely to be better delivered if they are shaped around the needs of others,” he added after a press conference (31<sup>st</sup> January) to unveil the policy paper.

In truth, there is considerable uncertainty in the government about the course local government should take, with the ODPM holding the line that councils should be the ultimate representative bodies for communities and others arguing for a more radical “re-calibration” of councils. Against this background, it is clear that wider reforms of local government are being considered, with increasing pressure on smaller districts to merge (two, Adur and Worthing in West Sussex, have already begun merger negotiations) and the Audit Commission gearing up for a revised inspection regime which will see authorities ‘marked down’ if they fail to engage with the public.

Significantly, Conservatives see re-invigorated local government as an alternative to the current array of regional structures. Eric Pickles, the party’s local government spokesman, told one of the authors that regional assemblies would be the first to face the axe under a Tory government. “The message will be ‘goodbye, we won’t miss you’,” he said. Conservatives, added Pickles, would also “take the ‘r’ our of RDAs”, giving some of their powers to councils and others to newly formed development corporations, similar to the bodies in London Docklands and Liverpool originally established by Lord Heseltine when he was Environment Secretary during the 1980s. At the same time, Pickles revealed that the Shadow Cabinet planned to “scale down” the Government Offices in the Regions. At present, he said they represented a “Trojan horse to impose the government’s will.” Of the current regional agenda, Pickles said: “In many ways it seems to be ‘planet Prescott’ and the rest and he doesn’t seem to have grasped that the North East (referendum) vote there is no moral authority and manifest destiny in this policy area.”

In some of the assemblies themselves there is clearly uncertainty. The North East assembly, for instance, is re-organising its functions and management structures, including a formal separation from the regional Local Authority body the Association of North East Councils (ANEC), while, intriguingly, the North West assembly decided (11<sup>th</sup> March) to authorise an independent review of its “functions and structure as soon as practicable” after the general election. It has to be completed by the autumn. “We took the opportunity to discuss how the assembly should go forward following the North East referendum which we accept has radically changed the political environment in which we operate for the foreseeable future,” said the leader of the assembly, Derek Boden. “We concluded that we needed to review what we do and how we can be best organised in a cost-effective way.”

Significantly, the assembly has raised questions about a “particularly tight timetable” for preparation of a regional spatial strategy, asking whether it has time to consult councils and other stakeholders in the region. This echoes other concern in the South East, where the Conservative-controlled regional assembly sometimes appears in revolt with its full-time officials over house-building projections. Some Tories would like to pull out of the organisation altogether.

While it is clearly premature to sound the death-knell of the assemblies, questions about their function and direction, and the role of other regional bodies, are likely to be asked in the run up to an election. But with spatial planning, housing strategy and fire and rescue services under (or about to be) under their wing, the organisations could be around for some time, in some form, if Labour is returned to power. If it is not, then everything is up for grabs. But it is clear that on the back of the Tories’ review, by the City trouble-shooter David James, into the size of Whitehall, and its many offshoots in the regions, a government led by Michael Howard would wield the knife. Those who imagined that bodies, such as RDAs and Government Offices in the Regions, had become part of the regional landscape should think again!

## **2. Regional Structures**

### **2.1 Government Offices**

Nothing to report.

### **2.2 Regional Development Agencies**

#### **2.2.1 Boost to Northern Way**

In February, there was a further boost to the Northern Way initiative with the unveiling of *Moving Forward: The Northern Way*. This report details that up to £10 million is to be invested in pilot schemes to

help get thousands of long-term unemployed people back into work and finance other innovative projects to boost the North’s economy<sup>5</sup>

The focus on the long-term unemployed is in conjunction with the nine ‘Pathways to Work’ pilot programmes announced by the Chancellor, Gordon Brown, in the pre-Budget report launched in December, aiming to help reach the goal of bringing 100, 000 people in the North back into work by 2014. Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, also announced that

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<sup>5</sup> ODPM. Northern Way on course to deliver jobs and prosperity. *Press release*. 1<sup>st</sup> February 2005. [http://www.odpm.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn\\_id=2005\\_0024](http://www.odpm.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2005_0024)

the new Academy for Sustainable Skills is to be based in Leeds, as part of the northern growth strategy, and launched *Realising the Potential of All Our Regions*. Aiming to improve the economic performance of England's regions, it sets out how

the Government and Regional Development Agencies will accelerate growth across England through devolving decision making powers, increasing employment, improving skills, and encouraging entrepreneurship and innovation.<sup>6</sup>

John Prescott said

We are determined to increase prosperity in all regions both for the benefit and sustainability of communities and for the success of the country as a whole. There is a huge untapped potential for jobs and growth across the regions, which we need to harness by making the most of our people, infrastructure, and resources.

Today's Northern Way Action Plan is major milestone in our efforts to close the prosperity gap between the Northern regions and the rest of the country. It is an ambitious and exciting plan for creating thriving and sustainable communities, building on the record investment the Government is putting into the North.

There is still a long way to go, but this report shows there is real commitment from the Government, RDAs, and other stakeholders to deliver more jobs and prosperity through the Northern Way.<sup>7</sup>

### 2.3 Regional Chambers/Assemblies

Since our last report (no. 17, December 2004), there have been growing tensions concerning the justification and legitimacy of the eight unelected regional chambers in England. As outline in the 'Introduction', due to a series of (largely unlinked) events around the regions, regional chambers appear to be on shaky ground.

In December, the East of England Regional Assembly decided to suspend its endorsement of the East of England Regional Plan (formerly known as the Regional Spatial Strategy 14), launched the same week, due to "lack of central Government funding for essential infrastructure for the region."<sup>8</sup> Public consultation of the plan was still to go ahead but the Assembly explained

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<sup>6</sup> See above.

<sup>7</sup> See above.

<sup>8</sup> East of England Regional Assembly. East of England Regional Assembly Suspends its Endorsement of the East of England Plan due to Lack of Central Government Funding. *Press release*. 10<sup>th</sup> December 2004.  
<http://www.eera.gov.uk/PressRelease.asp?id=SXA4E4-A77F82F1&cat=409>



The East of England Regional Assembly deplores the Government's grossly inadequate funding of the transport infrastructure costs associated with the additional 478,000 houses planned for this region between 2001-2021.

Bearing in mind that the Assembly's acceptance of this massive growth was conditional upon adequate government provision of the necessary infrastructure; and mindful of Lord Rooker's repeated written assurances that growth will not be imposed without the associated infrastructure. This Assembly wishes to make clear that it now regards its endorsement of the draft East of England Plan as suspended, pending a re-examination of the Government's willingness to support its own aspirations adequately in financial terms.<sup>9</sup>

In the North East, the Regional Plan also raised questions over the legitimacy of the regional chamber, and sparked intra-regional rows. The plan proposed new housing growth for the region, yet, County Durham would only see 5 per cent of this growth, leaving it, as some have termed, "the region's poor relation"<sup>10</sup> Leader of Durham County Council, Ken Manton, said

In seeking to promote and support a level of economic growth that will reduce disparity between the North-East and other regions, it concentrates too heavily and in too many respects on promoting growth, development and jobs provision within the major conurbations, like Tyne and Wear and the Tees Valley, at the expense of other parts. And County Durham is particularly badly hit.

The planned distribution of new housing would not even meet the needs of the county's existing population and would lead to us being the only sub-region of the North-East to experience population decline.<sup>11</sup>

Although the North East Assembly made moves to reassure the County that the plans were not yet set in stone, in February, Independent representative, John Shuttleworth, proposed that Durham should cease its subscription, stating

This year we sent a 'subscription' to the unelected North-East Assembly of £84,800. This chamber can decide not to pay this money to the quango which, if it is allowed, will destroy the county of Durham and concentrate growth in Tyneside and Teesside.<sup>12</sup>

Despite continuing anger over the regional plan, Cllr Shuttleworth's proposals were almost unanimously opposed.

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<sup>9</sup> See above.

<sup>10</sup> We will not be the poor relations! *The Journal*. 27<sup>th</sup> January 2004.

<sup>11</sup> See above.

<sup>12</sup> See above.

### 3 Regional Politics and Policies

#### 3.1 ODPM Select Committee report – message is ‘give assemblies real powers next time’

In January, the ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee published its report on the Draft Regional Assemblies Bill. The main message emerging from committee members being that any future assemblies should be given real powers if and when on the political agenda. In particular, that:

Any future legislation to set up elected regional assemblies in England needs to be more ambitious than the draft Bill proposed last summer so that regional bodies would be created that can make a real difference<sup>13</sup>

Although the report was initially intended to make improvements to the draft Assemblies Bill (which will now not pass through Parliament), its focus has changed to how the Government might approach this issue if it is again raised, although it is almost certain that this will not be in the near future. Committee Chair Andrew Bennett said:

The scope of the powers and responsibilities which the Government was prepared to give assemblies was disappointing and would limit their effectiveness. Any initiative to promote effective elected regional assemblies has to have the commitment of all Government departments which was clearly not the case.<sup>14</sup>

The report suggests that the general powers which were proposed for elected regional assemblies needed to be made more explicit, including more specificity of the functions. Aside from providing greater clarity, this, the report said, could

fire the imagination of the general public and potential assembly candidates.<sup>15</sup>

Highlighting a recognised weakness in departmental support for previous assembly proposals, the Committee made clear that any further initiative to promote assemblies must be backed, and commitments made, by all Government departments, not just the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) and the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI).

Likewise, the role of local government, once an assembly was up and running in a region, had to be clarified. Whilst those ministers backing assemblies had promised that the additional powers handed to assemblies

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<sup>13</sup> ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee. Give assemblies real powers and resources next time devolution is considered, urge MPs: Report summary. *Press release*. 5<sup>th</sup> January 2005.

<sup>14</sup> See above.

<sup>15</sup> See above.

would come from central and not local government, many remained concerned that an assembly might come to supersede local authorities. Add to this the stipulated reorganisation of local government (in two-tier areas) that would have occurred alongside the establishment of an assembly in the event of a ‘yes’ vote, and it was clear to see why the local government issue had become one of the most contentious of the campaign. Drawing attention to this, the report agreed that

The general power proposed for regional assemblies could overlap with local authorities’ duty to promote economic, social and environmental wellbeing.

It advised therefore that

The role of local authorities in helping to steer the operation of elected regional assemblies needed to be clarified.<sup>16</sup>

The Committee also picked out salient policy areas of the draft Bill which it considered weak. Firstly, on the promotion of economic development and skills, stating that assemblies

should be able to develop and implement their own regional training and skills development policies and programmes.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, the Committee agreed that, as is the case in London, elected assemblies’ powers should be given authority over transport, to decide on the distribution of funding for local transport plans, allocated at present by Whitehall. The report also states that the Committee

Was not convinced of the Government’s proposal to establish regional fire and rescue services as functional bodies of elected regional assemblies because of concerns that they would lose their community focus.<sup>18</sup>

On the voting mechanism proposed for assemblies, the Committee stated that a simple system would be required, commenting that the additional member system originally proposed by the Government would

not be easily understood and create two types of member – constituency and regional members.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, on the subject of the costs of an assembly, a major concern in the North East referendum and viewed as one of the main reasons for the ‘no’ vote, the Committee elucidated

A clearer case is needed for elected regional assemblies in terms of value for money for the electorate. Voters in the North East were not convinced about the ‘cost-benefit’ calculation in regard to elected assemblies. They were unable to see in the modest powers of assemblies sufficient prospects

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<sup>16</sup> See above.

<sup>17</sup> See above.

<sup>18</sup> See above.

<sup>19</sup> See above.

of concrete improvements in their daily lives to vote for their introduction.<sup>20</sup>

## **5 Public attitudes and identity**

Nothing to report.

## **6 Relations with Westminster and Whitehall**

### **6.1 Regional agencies under the spotlight in the Lords**

Although this debate was perhaps given little credence by the fact that no Labour backbench peers became involved and by the fact that many of the questions submitted were in relation to the ‘no’ vote in the referendum, some important points were raised regarding the future of England’s regional tier of governance as currently organised. The call for Papers to be moved was by **Lord Hanningfield**, who began:

I am pleased to have this opportunity to raise an important and significant issue that goes right to the heart of how we in this country are governed. It is clear that both by stealth and by more transparent means the Government have systematically stripped away powers from our democratically elected local government and placed it in the hands of an unaccountable, unelected, regional quangocracy. This is a regrettable and unsustainable development. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 512-3).

Claiming that the ‘no’ vote in the North East referendum for an elected regional assembly was

a rejection of the Government's entire regional agenda (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 513),

**Lord Hanningfield** continued

I am keen to provide the Minister with an opportunity to set out where the Government go from here on the whole approach on regional issues.

Do the Government intend to carry on introducing more and more regional bodies and agencies against the seeming will of the people; or do they now recognise the strength of local government and the fact that people would rather have local people, who are accountable and democratically elected, representing them and taking decisions on their behalf? (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 513).

**Lord Hanningfield** added

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<sup>20</sup> See above.

We are now left with no chance of regional assemblies, certainly not for the foreseeable future, and yet with a multitude of agencies and bodies intended to be controlled and scrutinised by those assemblies but now free and unhindered to go their merry way with virtually no checks or balances. As I have mentioned several times, the areas of the so-called regions are not really in keeping with the facts on the ground, especially in England. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 514).

Drawing attention to recent debates in the South East and East of England, **Lord Hanningfield** also claimed

I am especially concerned about the regional ideas that the Government have about procurement. My county, Essex, is supposed to co-operate with Norfolk, when all our procurement issues are relevant to London boroughs or Kent. That is a costly exercise as well as an undemocratic one. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 514).

**Lord Hannigfield** further pointed to the continued existence of unelected regional chambers, of which he said

rather bizarrely, after the events in the north-east, some of them are called regional assemblies. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 514).

Before making claims that certain local authorities are considering withdrawing from the regional chambers, the peer claimed that whilst community stakeholders vote on issues in the regional chambers, democratically unaccountable decisions continue to be made and that

Something must therefore be done to redress that democratic deficit and make certain that decisions are taken by democratically elected people. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 515).

Focusing once more on local government, **Lord Hanningfield** went on to claim that

There is no evidence that the regional government that the Government proposed would have delivered any services better than democratically elected local government—county councils, district councils, London boroughs or unitaries. There was no reason to create artificial areas rather than our existing natural areas. Genuine decentralisation should be to local councils, not regional quangos and so on. Regional government is distant from local communities. In my county of Essex, we have 11 district councils and about 30 communities. It would be much better if more decisions could be taken in each community, so that people could judge what they wanted for themselves. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 516).

**Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank** was first to add to the debate, with a tale of how he had a hand in the current regional structure existent in England today, whilst in his post as junior Minister in the Department of Economic Affairs in Harold Wilson's government. The peer continued however, that

Even before the end of the first Wilson government, regional planning lost momentum. Ministers began to worry about urban decay in London and major cities, and serious pockets of economic, industrial and social deprivation, even in prosperous areas. There was no real enthusiasm among most Cabinet members. In 1970, there was a change of government. Regionalism persisted but the possibility of regional government drifted away. It was almost a whole generation before the Labour Party began to take the regions seriously again. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 517).

**Lord Rodgers** discussed the 'no' vote in the North East referendum, commenting that there are lessons to be learnt, particularly when he highlighted voter scepticism over the assembly representing more politicians and more money:

Voters in the north-east referendum do not appear to have been enthusiastic about local councillors or anticipated regional councillors. That may be unfair, as most work hard and well, but voters did not want more of the same, with councillors seen to be going from one committee to another, collecting their expenses. There was scepticism about costs, including capital costs, given the building costs of the new Scottish Parliament—although it may be a fine building—and other recent capital projects. Taxpayers did not believe that the running costs of the assembly would be transferred from Westminster to the north-east with a zero net outcome. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 518).

**Lord Rodgers** continued with his analysis, claiming

the central question was: what was the assembly for? The voters had not been convinced by an adequate reply. The people of Tyne, Wear, Tees and adjacent areas came together in the 1960s and 1970s because they shared in longstanding economic and social problems. But that political imperative is perceived to have declined. Among 100 constituencies with the worst unemployment, there are only six in the north-east. There is serious unemployment and deprivation—for example, in South Shields, Middlesbrough and Tyne Bridge—but, broadly, the north-east feels that it shares in Britain's current impressive prosperity. There is confidence and optimism, and the cloth cap has gone. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 518).

Rather optimistically perhaps, the peer finished by advising that

It is not surprising, even in the north-east, that there was no enthusiasm for change, in the absence of any new political imperative. Next time—a time will eventually come—there must be a real agenda of substance, demonstrating that cost-effective powers can be transferred from Westminster to the regions to meet the relevant needs of the regions. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 518).

Next to contribute was **Baroness Byford**, who highlighted some concerns over regional development agencies (RDAs) and Government Offices, claiming that

People in places that I visit in Lincolnshire are still concerned that, within the RDA area, they are the losers. The big conurbations tend to command more of the money because that is where more of the electorate lives. The role of the RDAs ought to be re-examined. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 519).

**Baroness Byford** called for a re-examination of the role of both RDAs and Government Offices for the regions, suggesting that responsibilities for planning might be handed to the latter, after conceding that planning issues often reach beyond the county level. **Lord Greaves** followed **Lady Byford**, commenting that

It is interesting that not very long ago regions were at the top of the political agenda and many noble Lords attended debates in this House. Such debates have obviously dropped to the very bottom of the agenda now judging by the number of people who wish to speak today. However, for some of us the regions will remain an important political issue, which we will keep on the agenda. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 521).

He added

I do not think that regions will go away. It is true that there is a proliferation of bodies in the regions; some of which perhaps could be rationalised, some of which could be done away with . . . a whole plethora of new Labour “quangocracy” is taking over this country at regional, local and every level.

But there is no doubt whatever that regions exist in those areas. There is a legitimate level of decision making at that regional level which is greater than the locality. If it is not exercised at regional level, it will be exercised here in London. I believe that even if they are unelected and even if it is a matter of bureaucracies, the people making decisions in the north-west will make better decisions if they live and work in the north-west than if they live and work in the south-east and in London. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 523).

**Lord Greaves** continued, proposing a number of suggestions as to what should happen next in terms of regional governance, making clear that

whatever form it is to take, a top-down approach will not work, referring to the Northern Way as an illustration;

We have an initiative in the north of England called the Northern Way which the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, is pursuing and which is typical of the way the Government now deal with regional policy. It is all top down. The only way in which local authorities, for example, are involved is by being called to occasional conferences to be told what is happening. There is no consultation, no involvement and absolutely no democracy. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 524).

**Lord Greaves** added that the current regional chambers are also without democratic mandate, stating

In order to try to give regional assemblies more democratic credibility, I would reorganise them and put all the MPs for each region on to the assembly and give local government an equal number of places and votes to those held by the MPs. If we want to make regional government and regional assemblies genuinely important—and regarded as such by local people and properly reported by the local media—the main tier of elected officials ought to be represented on them.

Moreover, once we do that, given that MPs are elected to Westminster, if they go back to their regions and take part in decision-making there, we shall see a sort of organic devolution implicit in that. I think that that proposal ought to be taken very seriously indeed. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 524).

However likely this may be, explanations and suggestions for the future status of regional governance continued to be proposed by peers. **Lord Brooke of Sutton Mandeville** realigned the debate to the issue of regional disparity, stating

there is the question of regional disparity with regard to housing costs, labour markets, transport links, health outcomes, poverty and so forth and his remarks demonstrate how many years of the centralising policies that characterised successive governments in this country have created this situation. We passionately believe that devolving decisions down to the regions in question would help to break this vicious circle. In some areas, policy-making, which can work with the grain of regional diversity instead of trying to create a national one-size-fits-all policy would be hugely helpful. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 528).

He added

The second element is to determine whether there are particular services that are currently delivered nationally that would be more effective and efficient if they were delivered regionally. In certain areas we believe that the answer is an



emphatic "yes"—they would be better delivered regionally. To use transport as an example, there is a growing feeling among many providers and academics in the transport field that we would be better served if transport were looked at regionally in terms of major projects and investments with councils dealing with smaller-scale items. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 528).

Thirdly, a need for regionalism arises because there are areas in which it makes sense for regions or sub-regions to act as strategic co-ordinators of local policy. In the case of inward investment, for example, does it really make sense for a lot of local councils individually to be spending money on poaching business from the council next door when by co-ordinating their efforts genuinely new investment could be created? A lot of valuable work is going on at regional level in developing links with foreign investors. It helps to break down the tendency that investors have to look no further than London and the south-east. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 528).

He finished

As it is, the prospect of directly elected regional government has now faded into the far distant future, leaving behind a morass of regional arrangements that fail the basic tests of accountability and transparency.

I notice, with regret, that there is not a single Labour Back-Bench speaker present at this debate. The Government must resolve their own internal dilemma on this question. Surrendering the levers of power once they have their hands on them is a difficult thing for any government to do, but partial reforms in that direction, hedged with caveats, apologetically put to the public, have resulted in the mess that we have now. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 530).

**Baroness Hanham**, the final peer to speak before the Minister of State, **Lord Rooker**, highlighted the role of local government over the regional tier and suggested that only the former should be strengthened, restoring regional responsibilities to elected local government.

**Lord Rooker** stated from the outset that his response would not deal with the questions raised as to 'what next' for regional governance, only that it would

answer the issue on the Order Paper, that is, to draw attention to the current status of the regional agencies and bodies, and to the case for returning their responsibilities to elected local government. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 533).

He continued

I think that it has been accepted that everything cannot be done by local government. That was touched on in a few

speeches but I do not want to make points about individual speeches. People live, work and learn across local government boundaries and there are some issues that transcend local government boundaries as we know them at district council and county council level. We need to make sure that things are joined up. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 534).

**Lord Rooker** went on to justify the role of both the Government Offices for the regions and the RDAs, stating that the former

raise issues; they are all briefed and know exactly what is going on. It is very useful for central government to have this body out in the regions. So there is a regional knowledge that comes back to the centre to inform the development of policy at the centre. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 535).

Whilst the RDAs have

over the past couple of years, created, saved or enhanced some 160,000 jobs and are playing a major role in reshaping the regional economies. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 535-6).

**Lord Rooker** made clear that the joining up of governance at the regional level is essential, notably in reducing regional disparities, housing, skills and employment, adding

There has been a lot of criticism in your Lordships' House of the voluntary regional assemblies. To be effective, regional approaches need to be co-ordinated, and different regional bodies need to be scrutinised. That is one of the reasons why we offered elected scrutiny, but that is on the back burner now. There are other ways of scrutinising. To do this, we have recognised the voluntary regional assemblies in each region. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 537).

Perhaps in an attempt to respond to calls for a strengthening of local government, the Minister further stated that

we are committed to continuing the devolutionary agenda, as evidenced by the launch in July of our document, *Local:Vision*. It carries out an extensive consultation about the future of local government, looking at the options for enabling more decisions to be made in local communities.

Over the next six months, we will take that debate forward in a series of daughter documents.

We will continue local government reform and an active regional policy. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 538).

Finally, **Lord Rooker** reasserted

We will not have elected regional assemblies; the idea has been put on the back burner, probably for many years to come. We have no plans to resurrect it. We need to have a look at the effect on local government, get more decisions made

locally, and enhance the role, where necessary, of regional agencies so that they can perform better. Then we can encourage the voluntary regional assemblies, in particular, to carry out roles of scrutiny. They are fully able and equipped, intellectually and financially, with the capacity to do that. I see no problem with that. Simply because they are not directly elected does not mean that they cannot have a role.

To involve the wider community beyond local government is very important, whether it is through local strategic partnerships or regional assemblies, so that people can bring something positive to the table. We get better decisions, a better framework, and better delivery of services to our fellow citizens. After all, that is what it is all about. (*Lords debates*, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2004, Col 539).

## 6.2 The regions in Parliament

Source	Date	Column number	Subject	Raised by
Written Ministerial Statements	30 <sup>th</sup> November 2004	20WS	Regional planning Guidance for the South-East (RPG9)	Keith Hill (Streatham)
Written Ministerial Statements	1 <sup>st</sup> December 2004	33WS	Regional Spatial Strategy	Keith Hill (Streatham)
Lords Debates	1 <sup>st</sup> December 2005	512	Regional Agencies and Bodies	Lord Hannigfield
Written Answers	2 <sup>nd</sup> December 2004	266W	Regional Assemblies	Hugo Swire (East Devon)
Written Ministerial Statements	6 <sup>th</sup> December 2004	73WS	Regional Spatial Strategy for the East of England	Keith Hill (Streatham)
Written Answers	6 <sup>th</sup> December 2004	293W	Regional Development Agencies	Malcolm Bruce (Gordon)
Written Answers	6 <sup>th</sup> December 2004	347W	Regional Assemblies	Bernard Jenkin (North Essex)
Written Answers	6 <sup>th</sup> December 2004	347W	Regional Government	Bernard Jenkin (North Essex)
Written Answers	6 <sup>th</sup> December 2004	347W	South West Regional Spatial Strategy	Bernard Jenkin (North Essex)
Written Ministerial Statements	7 <sup>th</sup> December 2004	79WS	Regional Housing Investment	Keith Hill (Streatham)
Lords Written Statements	8 <sup>th</sup> December 2004	WS56	Housing Investment in the Regions	Lord Rooker
Written Answers	13 <sup>th</sup> December 2004	824W	Regional Archive Councils	Caroline Spelman (Meriden)
Written Answers	13 <sup>th</sup> December 2004	825W	Regional Sports Boards	Caroline Spelman (Meriden)
Written Ministerial Statements	14 <sup>th</sup> December 2004	126WS	Regional Development Agencies' Output Levels	Jacqui Smith (Redditch)
Written Answers	14 <sup>th</sup> December 2004	1049W	North-east Referendum	John Hayes (South Holland & The Deepings)
Written Answers	15 <sup>th</sup> December 2004	1140W	Regional Government	Bernard Jenkin (North Essex)

Title

Commons Debates	16 <sup>th</sup> December 2004	1793	European Regional Aid	Andrew George (St. Ives)
Written Answers	20 <sup>th</sup> December 2004	1496W	Regional Spatial Strategies	Caroline Spelman (Meriden)
Written Answers	21 <sup>st</sup> December 2004	1565W	Regional Planning Guidance	Caroline Spelman (Meriden)
Written Answers	10 <sup>th</sup> January 2005	234W	Regional Government	Alan Williams (Swansea West)
Written Answers	10 <sup>th</sup> January 2005	234W	Regional Government (Publications)	Philip Hammond (Runnymede & Weybridge)
Written Answers	10 <sup>th</sup> January 2005	235W	Regional Housing/Regional Observatories (Funding)	Caroline Spelman (Meriden)
Lords Debates	10 <sup>th</sup> January 2005	4	Regional Assemblies: Standards Board for England	Baroness Scott
Commons Debates	12 <sup>th</sup> January 2005	281	Housing (South-East)	Mark Francois (Rayleigh)
Written Answers	17 <sup>th</sup> January 2005	762W	Regional Assemblies	Andrew Rosindell (Romford)
Written Answers	17 <sup>th</sup> January 2005	762W	Regional Government Referendum	John Cryer (Hornchurch)
Written Answers	17 <sup>th</sup> January 2005	763W	Regional Spacial ( <i>sic</i> ) Strategy	Caroline Spelman (Meriden)
Written Ministerial Statements	25 <sup>th</sup> January 2005	11WS	Regional State Aid Reform	Douglas Alexander (Paisley South)
Written Answers	25 <sup>th</sup> January 2005	213W	Regional Government (North-west)	David Maclean (Penrith & The Border)
Written Ministerial Statements	31 <sup>st</sup> January 2005	41WS	Five Year Plan (People, Places and Prosperity)	John Prescott (Kingston upon Hull East)
Written Answers	31 <sup>st</sup> January 2005	653W	Regional Government	Caroline Spelman (Meriden)
Lords Written Answers	3 <sup>rd</sup> February 2005	WA61	Regional Planning System: Northern Way	Lord Greaves
Written Answers	9 <sup>th</sup> February 2005	1573W	Regional Spatial Strategy (North-East)	Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed)
Written Answers	9 <sup>th</sup> February 2005	1585W	Regional Assemblies	Anthony Steen (Totnes)
Lords Written Answers	23 <sup>rd</sup> February 2005	WA207	Devolution and Regional Assemblies: Electors in England	Lord Patten
Written Answers	24 <sup>th</sup> February 2005	798W	Regional Development Agencies	Caroline Spelman (Meriden)
Written Answers	10 <sup>th</sup> March 2005	1937W	Regional Bodies	Caroline Spelman (Meriden)
Written Answers	10 <sup>th</sup> March 2005	1937W	Regional Offices	Caroline Spelman (Meriden)
Written Answers	15 <sup>th</sup> March 2005	157W	Regional Offices	Caroline Spelman (Meriden)
Written Answers	17 <sup>th</sup> March 2005	368W	Regional Government	Adrian Flook (Taunton)
Written Answers	22 <sup>nd</sup> March 2005	677W	Regional Development Agencies	James Arbuthnot (North East Hampshire)
Written Answers	22 <sup>nd</sup> March 2005	787W	Regional Offices	Caroline Spelman

				(Meriden)
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*Source: Hansard*

**7 EU issues**

Nothing to report.

**8 Local government**

See items raised on local government throughout this report.

**9 Finance**

Nothing to report.

**10 The political parties**

Nothing to report.