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Nations and Regions: The Dynamics of Devolution

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Monitoring the English Regions

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Key issues

On June 16th the Deputy Prime Minister announced that referendums on regional assemblies are to be held in three regions, the North East, Yorkshire and the North West. It is expected the referendums will be held in October 2004, all things being equal. The announcement followed the results of a 'soundings exercise', which tested the degree of support for the holding of a referendum in each region of England. David Davies, the Conservative spokesperson on the regions, predicted defeat for the proposition and that the government would be 'deeply embarrassed'. The national media gave the announcement scant attention but, where it did, it greeted the proposals with almost universal hostility.

Simultaneously, Mr Prescott announced that the Boundary Committee for England would begin reviewing the structure of local government in the three nominated regions in order to make two recommendations for unitary local authorities in each area currently governed by a county council. Voters in areas currently governed by county councils (but not elsewhere) will then choose which option they prefer when they vote in the referendum. The Boundary Committee's initial consultation process was officially concluded on July 31st. The Committee's draft recommendations are due by the end of November.

In the week following the announcement, campaigners in the North East of England announced the launch of a 'Yes' campaign — 'Yes4thenortheast' — to be based in Durham, with initial funding from trade unions and reform trusts. Similar announcements are expected in Yorkshire and the North West. In Yorkshire and the North West the 'No' campaigns announced themselves. In the North West the No campaign is to be co-chaired by a Labour MP.

The soundings exercise presented the range of evidence that had been gathered on the state of public opinion in the regions. An analysis of the results by Birmingham University suggested that affirmative votes were likely in the three northern regions, but with turnouts of about 30 per cent. It looks likely that consideration will be given to postal voting as a means of boosting turnout.

In parliament and Whitehall attention will now turn to preparation of the draft bill outlining the potential shape of elected assemblies, with the Liberal Democrats determined to boost the powers of the proposed assemblies. In the regions battle is about to commence.

1. Introduction

Thirteen months after publication of a White Paper putting the case for elected regional assemblies in parts of England and beefed-up non-elected assemblies elsewhere, John Prescott has selected three regions for referendums on regional devolution.

As we report later, it briefly held the attention of a largely critical Fleet Street before disappearing off the political radar screens. The political class remains consumed by the prospect of another more distant referendum on whether or not the UK should join the Euro zone. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that a more immediate test of public opinion on English devolution should have attracted so relatively little publicity.

The Deputy Prime Minister announced on June 16th that three regions (Yorkshire and the Humber, the north east and the north west) are on course to hold referendums in October, 2004. The Boundary Committee for England has now started work reviewing the structure of local government in these regions (see Section 8). Pro and anti devolution campaigners have begun marshalling their forces, with some dissident Labour MPs preparing to join Conservatives by campaigning against the plans. And parliamentary counsel in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has begun production of a draft bill, outlining the powers and the limits of future assemblies, around autumn next year, although it is not yet certain whether such a Bill will be published.

This is an emerging constitutional story of some significance, albeit confined for the moment to the north. But for how much longer? As local elections loom next May, it is a safe bet that the Conservatives will campaign on the theme of English devolution threatening established local authority structures. Before then, the Boundary Committee of England could fuel the debate when it publishes draft recommendations in early December outlining at least two options for a single, or unitary tier of local government in existing counties in the north.

While a 'yes' campaign has been launched in the north east – another is forthcoming in Yorkshire and the Humber - dissident Labour MPs and councillors in the north west have joined Conservative MPs and activists to lay the foundations for a 'no' campaign, with a Tory and Labour MP acting as interim co-chairmen.

In short, battle lines are being drawn. Significantly, John Prescott has acknowledged the likelihood of cross-party 'no' campaigns, embracing Labour dissidents and the Tories — although the prospect of these dissidents portraying an image of disunity will hardly appeal to Downing Street in the run up to referendums. For the time being, however, John Prescott can take comfort in his grand design for a devolved England (which he has been championing for around 20 years) slowly taking shape. A 'yes' vote in any of the regions next year – far from a foregone conclusion — will pave the way for more legislation to

set up elected assemblies, although elections for them will probably have to wait until after the next election.

John Prescott's announcement in the Commons on June 16th on the selection of the three regions did briefly cause a flutter in parts of Fleet Street and on radio and television. Most national newspapers, as we report later, were either sceptical or hostile. In truth, the implications for the governance of England — from the more distant prospect of three elected assemblies to the more immediate likelihood of all eight existing non-elected assemblies (including East and West Midlands, Eastern, South East, South West) having both strategic planning, housing powers and, it seems, responsibility for regional fire services — has yet to sink in at Westminster and beyond.

But it is exercising town and county halls, particularly in the three northern regions, where the prospect of single-tier local government — the Prime Minister's price for endorsing the Prescott package — is setting district council against county council. The Local Government Association, representing the big councils, is certainly exercised, taking soundings from Scotland and Wales to determine how to respond. Its chief executive, Sir Brian Briscoe, summed up the dilemma at the LGA's annual conference in Harrogate on July 2nd:

It is important that local government is placed at the centre of a devolution settlement and we guard against the possibility and predilection to suck powers from local government into a more centralising position (source: authors' notes).

The government, up to now, has been stressing that elected assemblies will draw powers from Whitehall and from regional quangos rather than from local government. But a survey by the LGA of 388 English councils has found that 72 per cent of them expected to lose powers under elected assemblies, with only 35 per cent believing that new powers will be devolved from central government. But significantly, most authorities support the concept of elected assemblies, with 62 per cent believing assemblies will give the regions a stronger voice at Westminster¹. After making his Commons statement Mr Prescott was equivocal on this front. He told one Labour MP (Stephen Hepburn, Jarrow) that while some housing powers would be transferred, members should wait until a draft bill is published before rushing to judgement. That compounds the nervousness in local government.

Mr Prescott told MPs that over half the respondents in the north east and north west in a Government 'soundings exercise' favoured a referendum, while in Yorkshire and the Humber three quarters said 'yes'. Moreover, there was "significant and widespread interest" from the business community, trade unions, councils and the voluntary sector. He added:

If the people vote 'yes' in the referendums, we could have the first elected assemblies up and running early in the next

¹ LGA (2003) *Regional Assemblies: A Survey of Local Authorities*
<http://www.lga.gov.uk/Publication.asp?lsection=59&id= SX8772-A7818489&ccat=230>.

parliament. This will be another significant step on the road to regional government for England. It will take forward the Government's commitment to develop a strong regional voice for all the regions...we are offering the people of the three northern regions an historic opportunity we have offered the people of Scotland, Wales and London before them...this is an opportunity to strengthen democracy and reduce bureaucracy...an opportunity for those regions that have the desire for change to determine their own future (*HC Debates*, 16th June 2003, Col. 23).

But in a foretaste of battles ahead David Davis, the shadow deputy prime minister, claimed the result of the referendums would "deeply embarrass" the government. Labelling the plan an "expensive white elephant", Mr Davis – who represents Haltemprice and Howden in Yorkshire - said that in the 'soundings exercise' in his region only 833 people out of a population of five million supported a referendum, while in the north east more were against than for, and in the north west all the county councils (Cumbria, Lancashire, Cheshire) opposed the exercise (see Section 5.1 below).

A key argument of the Opposition is also the likely cost to council taxpayers – a theme certain to emerge during referendum campaigning – with Mr Davis claiming the mayor of London Ken Livingstone was hitting council taxpayers with bills "five times larger than the Government estimated" (like the GLA, elected assemblies will be able to precept local councils to supplement a government block grant; Prescott's department has estimated this could be around £25 annually for the average household).

But while Mr Prescott can dismiss Tory criticism as "predictable", he might have to take rumblings inside his own party more seriously. While the debate following his Commons statement revealed strong support from Labour backbenchers given a chance to speak, a question from the former Home Office minister George Howarth (Knowsley North and Sefton East) betrayed wider discontent. Calling for consideration of a greater Merseyside council rather than a north west assembly, he claimed that any close analysis of the soundings, or consultation exercise, would reveal that regional government is a "preoccupation of the nomenclatura rather than the people" (*HC Debates*, 16th June 2003: Col. 30).

George Howarth is an ally of the Foreign Secretary Jack Straw (MP for Blackburn) who is reported to feel less than enthusiastic towards regional government, although clearly in no position to campaign overtly against. But several other north west backbench MPs, such as Graham Stringer (Manchester Blackley) have already spoken out, while others could be preparing to do so. As in Yorkshire, a cross-party campaign (recently labelled 'no to a north west assembly', or 'Not Now') has emerged after an inaugural meeting, with Labour MPs joining forces with Tories. Co-chairmen are George Howarth and George Osborne, Conservative MP for Tatton.

East of the Pennines a ‘Yorkshire Says No’ campaign has been launched by the former Conservative MP for Skipton and Ripon, John Watson. He told the *Yorkshire Post*, a regional daily which is opposed to an elected assembly:

It is tempting to believe that what is on offer is a sort of Yorkshire parliament, like they have in Scotland. But that is not the case at all. No real power would be devolved from Westminster. The new assembly would be responsible for just two per cent of expenditure in this region – certainly not enough to justify a whole new apparatus of politicians and bureaucracy (‘opponents set to fight regional assembly’ *Yorkshire Post*, 23rd July 2003).

While most MPs in Yorkshire and the Humber back an assembly, like the north west there are several notable sceptics. For instance Hugh Bayley, MP for York, has raised fears about the “Balkanisation of the north of England.” Several parliamentary colleagues in the region are equally sceptical. But their concern could be overshadowed by the forthcoming launch of a ‘Yes 4 Yorkshire’ campaign — a reference to the four ridings of the historical region — chaired by the Labour peer Lord Haskins (the north west Yes campaign has been particularly successful in mobilising a string of personalities from the Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson to the comedian Steve Coogan). But it is clear, as we have said, that a ‘yes’ vote should not be regarded as a foregone conclusion; with realistic ‘yes’ campaigners insist that they *can* win the arguments – an acknowledgement that the case for devolution has yet to be made to the wider electorate - while conceding there is no room for complacency. On this front, the north east has probably taken a lead by launching a ‘yes’ campaign in Durham on June 20th at the city’s Gala theatre². This put the emphasis on people as well as politicians; indeed a sixth former, aged 17, proved a most effective speaker and appeared as the Campaign’s spokesperson that evening on regional TV news bulletins. In this region, the ‘no’ campaign so far is in the hands of Neil Herron, the self-styled “metric martyr” from Sunderland. He told *The Guardian* (June 16th) that he had raised big money from unspecified sources, but declined to elaborate. The Electoral Commission is expected to make an announcement in early November about the public funds that will be available to designated Yes and No campaigns.

² John Tomaney will chair the North East Yes campaign

2. Regional Structures

2.1 Government Offices

Government Offices are facing two new tasks: that of developing a new policy role (see previous reports) and potentially a key role in disseminating to the public the Government's plans for regional assemblies. In the former category Government Office North East published a report (jointly with the Regional Studies Association and the Economic and Social Research Council) which explored the public policy challenges in the North East that might be addressed using the new powers and responsibilities recently allocated to them³. In addition the Government is expected to announce its plans in early November for a major initiative to provide information for voters in the three referendum regions about the Government's proposals. Government Offices are already playing an important role in preparing this strategy.

2.2 Regional Development Agencies

RDAs spent the summer preparing a response to the review on Public Sector Relocation, led by Sir Michael Lyons. whose consultation was due to conclude on September 12th.

The terms of reference for the Lyons Review are:

“In the light of the need to improve:

- the delivery and efficiency of public services; and
- the regional balance of economic activity;

and, taking account of departmental pay and workforce strategies, updated to reflect relocation plans, Sir Michael will make recommendations to the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chancellor for the relocation of civil service and other public sector workers, by November, to inform the next spending review.”

The Lyons Review forms part of the agendas for modernising Government and reforming public services and an opportunity for Government departments to consider the balance of their staff as between the centre and the regions for effective policy design and implementation as set out in paragraph 2.34 of ‘Your region, your choice’, published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in May 2002.

³ John Tomaney (2003) *Regional Governance and the Challenge of Public Policy in the North East*. Newcastle: Government Office North East/Regional Studies Association/ESRC

The rationale for the review is that London and the South East have a high concentration of public sector jobs, which do not directly relate to the delivery of local public services in those regions. Many of these jobs relate to the delivery of national or United Kingdom-wide functions, which, in theory, could be carried out just as or more effectively and efficiently somewhere else in the United Kingdom, particularly, in light of advances in information and communications technology in recent years. Some jobs may relate to areas outside London and the South East and might have an improved impact if located closer to these areas. There is also a read across to the strategy that all public service pay systems should include a stronger local and regional dimension and are more responsive to local recruitment and retention needs.

RDAs clearly have an important interest in these issues from the viewpoint of employment creation, but in the northern regions especially there is a concern among some senior RDA to establish links between job relocation initiatives and the broader regional governance agenda. RDAs have apparently urged Sir Michael to press departments to investigate which elements of existing activities could be decentralised in ways which would bolster the governance capacity at the regional level. These developments appear to be at an early stage, but are potentially highly significant in the longer run.

2.3 Regional Chambers/Assemblies

We have noted in previous reports that the South East England Regional Assembly (SEERA) is among the most active of the existing appointed assemblies now overseeing strategic planning and shortly housing (through emerging regional housing boards) and, most likely, the fire service. John Prescott announced on July 1st that a renamed fire and rescue service will be based on nine regional fire authorities and boards, rather than the present 52 brigades (see below).

SEERA has to balance the clamour for more housing, in new communities, to meet demand in one of the country's most prosperous regions with the fears of more congestion and further erosion of the countryside. On the one hand it argued (June 20th) that the economic performance of the whole country will be undermined if the Government "fails to invest in the south east"⁴. On the other hand, a month earlier (May 22nd) it argued the case for regional airports to get more capacity to take the slack from the south east⁵.

⁴ South East Regional Assembly, News Release, 'South East Warning on Regional Disparities Target', 20th June (http://www.southeast-ra.gov.uk/reference_library/news_releases/2003/20june03.html).

⁵ South East Regional Assembly, News Release, 'Don't follow BAA like sheep says southern region', 22nd May (http://www.southeast-ra.gov.uk/reference_library/news_releases/2003/22may03.html).

SEERA is concerned that ministers will “shift investment and resources away from London and the south east in order to bring about a reduction of the gap in regional growth rates.” It also fears that the Lyons task force examining the case for civil service re-location will further undermine the south east economy. “This is despite the fact that the south east has, per capita, a lower share of civil servants than many other regions,” it said in a statement (while this might be technically true, it omits the fact that thousands of civil servants live in the south east and travel to work in London!). Nick Skellett, chair of SEERA, and leader of Surrey County Council, said (June 20th): “The assembly recognises the importance of improving the economic well-being of all the English regions. However, we feel strongly this must not be achieved at the expense of the south east. Investment cannot simply be taken away from region and given to another in the hope that it will narrow the gap.”

But significantly, in a joint press statement (May 22nd) SEERA joined the East of England Regional Assembly and the Greater London Authority in opposing an expansion of airport capacity in the south east. The three organisations said that although additional runway development is necessary, “the Government needs to take a more sustainable approach to air travel growth and should also be placing greater emphasis on regional airports, taking more traffic originating from their regions.”

2.4 Regionalisation of the Fire Service

The Government’s proposals for reform of the Fire Service have proved controversial with the Fire Brigade’s Union, but a relatively unremarked aspect of the proposals has been the decision to regionalise the service, in ways which give regional assemblies potentially additional functions. The rationale for regionalisation is set out the White Paper⁶:

4.14 The National Framework will only be effective to the extent that fire and rescue authorities are able to translate its requirements into efficient and effective local action. As the Independent Review of the Fire Service suggested, improved collaboration across areas larger than the current area of fire authorities is needed to unlock the benefits of modernisation in terms of lives saved and more efficient operation. Equally though, it is not appropriate to run a service with predominantly regional and local functions from the centre. We are satisfied, therefore, that larger units are required to run the new fire and rescue service. The regional level is acknowledged to be the right operational level for many functions, in particular securing the safety of the community in the event of terrorist attack or other major emergencies. Regional operations will yield management efficiency savings

⁶ See: ODPM (2003) *Fire and Rescue Services White Paper*. CM 5808. (http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_fire/documents/pdf/odpm_fire_pdf_022968.pdf)

and will ensure management at the right level and of the right quality to deliver the outcomes we seek in terms of lives saved, and less property and environmental damage.

4.15 Our decision to establish a regional framework for the fire and rescue service is set against the background of the Government's White Paper on the Regions, which announced the progressive establishment of elected regional assemblies where people want them. We envisage that, eventually, where there are elected regional assemblies, fire and rescue authorities will be regional bodies constituted on similar lines to the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA), which has a majority of members from the Greater London Assembly.

4.16 But this is some time away. Even in the North East, North West and Yorkshire and Humberside regions, which could be holding referendums in the autumn of 2004, elected assemblies would not be established before the middle of 2006, at the earliest. We need to press ahead quickly with the modernisation and change programme on the ground in all areas. Therefore, we have concluded that, in those regions which choose to elect a regional assembly, regional fire authorities, like LFEPA, should be the right, longer term, model. But in the interim period, and in those areas that do not choose to have an elected regional assembly, another model is needed now to manage a range of regional functions.

[...]

4.23 Democratic and public accountability is paramount. We will ensure that accountability is protected. Regional fire authorities will be accountable to the electorate through the elected regional assembly. In addition, regional authorities will have a power to delegate appropriate functions to the principal local authorities in their regions, for example, community fire safety functions.

4.24 Subject to future decisions by Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland on the organisation of their services, and once the process of regionalisation in England has been completed, the structure of fire authorities in the United Kingdom will look like this:

- nine regional fire authorities or regional management boards in England;
- eight fire authorities in Scotland;
- three fire authorities in Wales;
- one fire authority in Northern Ireland; and

- 21 in total (of which 12 would be in England and Wales), compared to 59 in the United Kingdom as a whole at present.

The White Paper also draws attention to views of the Independent Review of the Fire Service which argued: 'If new, directly elected, regional assemblies are created, it would make sense for regional fire authorities to be responsible to them.'

3 Regional Politics and Policies

Since the announcement that the three northern regions are to hold referendums on regional government, the debate has expanded at a striking pace. As well as continued local government action in support and opposition to regional government, there has been a step-up in campaigning for the 'yes' and 'no' campaigns coupled with a flurry of media reporting on the matter (upon which we draw in this section). There are a number of issues playing out in all three regions to hold referendums, the North West, North East and Yorkshire and the Humber, based largely around the potential shake-up of local government, local government opposition, the formation of 'yes' campaign groups and shifts in opinion within political parties.

Media reporting in the **North West** has so far suggested that there is a mix of opinion as to whether a directly elected assembly should be established in the North West. Whilst well known devolution supporters such as Louise Ellman MP continue to back the case for an elected North West assembly, some fear Merseyside could lose out to Greater Manchester and become little more than a 'junior partner' in an assembly covering such a large area⁷. Based on this argument, there have been proposals that Merseyside should be granted similar powers to London with, for example, George Howarth MP (Knowsley North & Sefton East) calling for a Greater Merseyside Authority rather than a North West assembly⁸. There is expected to be a battle between Manchester and Liverpool as to where an assembly's headquarters should be but some believe it should be on neutral territory such as Warrington or Preston. The main opposition in the North West is based around the notion that an assembly is simply neither needed or desired, with worries that it will merely become another tier of bureaucracy bringing with it an increase in household taxes. North West media reporting has focussed on the potential "carve-up" of local government, which could include for

⁷ 'Regions' self-rule plan is on the way', Liverpool Echo, 16th June 2003. <http://icliverpool.icnetwork.co.uk/0100news/0100regionalnews/page.cfm?objectid=13076136&method=full&siteid=50061>

⁸ '£100 tax fear over self-rule', Liverpool Echo, 17th June 2003. <http://icliverpool.icnetwork.co.uk/0100news/0100regionalnews/page.cfm?objectid=13079534&method=full&siteid=50061>

example, Rossendale, Cheshire and Lancashire councils⁹. Another angle on the debate emerged with the appointment of Councillor Tony McDermott as the new chair of the existing voluntary North West Regional Assembly in mid-July. Cllr McDermott went on record to state that the main obstacle to creating an elected assembly is voter apathy¹⁰ with fewer people being actively opposed than those who think the issue is important enough to vote in favour. The region saw the formation of the *Now* Campaign for an Elected Regional Assembly for the North West. The group's acting chair is Azhar Ali¹¹, but has the endorsement of celebrities such as Sir Alex Ferguson, manager of Manchester United and the actor Steve Coogan.

Opinion on an elected assembly in **Yorkshire and the Humber** appears to be divided along urban-rural and party political lines. Aside from this, an emerging body of opinion is that the public desperately need more information as to the form and function of an elected regional assembly and what it would mean. Steve Galloway, Liberal Democrat leader of York City Council for example, a supporter of a regional assembly, has stressed that there needs to be more information available to the electorate¹². The economic argument that an assembly would help close the North/South divide has won some business backing such as from David Andrews, Chief Executive of the Yorkshire Tourist Board who has argued that a regional assembly will be good for tourism¹³. However proponents of an assembly, generally acknowledge that work remains to be done to engage the public and raise interest if they are to vote 'yes' in the referendum. Media reporting also suggests there is an appetite for an assembly to be 'beefed up' in terms of devolved powers and responsibilities, in order to increase voter interest and support¹⁴.

Opposition within Yorkshire and Humberside comes largely from certain district and borough councils, which could be subsumed by a single unitary authority depending on a referendum vote. Councillor Eileen Bosomworth, leader of Scarborough Borough Council, for example, has suggested that the government has failed to provide justification for

⁹ 'Neighbours prepare for council carve-up', *Manchester Evening News*, 3rd July 2003. http://www.manchesteronline.co.uk/news/stories/Detail_LinkStory=62019.html

¹⁰ 'Battle for hearts and minds over assembly', *Liverpool Echo*, 14th July 2003. <http://icliverpool.icnetwork.co.uk/0100news/0100regionalnews/page.cfm?objectid=13175727&method=full&siteid=50061>

¹¹ 'Referendum decision sparks launch of 'Yes' campaign', *Liverpool Echo*, 17th June 2003. <http://icliverpool.icnetwork.co.uk/0100news/0100regionalnews/page.cfm?objectid=13078320&method=full&siteid=50061>

¹² 'Yorkshire regional assembly will go to a vote', *York Evening Post*, 16th June 2003. http://www.thisisyork.co.uk/york/archive/2003/06/16/york_news_local18ZM.html

¹³ 'Time to assemble', *York Evening Press*, 24th June 2003. http://www.thisisyork.co.uk/york/archive/2003/06/24/york_business_pink11ZM.html

¹⁴ 'Devolution needs votes', *York Evening Press*, 16th June 2003. http://www.thisisyork.co.uk/york/archive/2003/06/16/york_news_comment1248ZM.html

having a referendum and has expressed worries that rural North Yorkshire may become overshadowed by the region's major conurbations. Hambleton District Council leader, Arthur Baker has argued that people need to be sure that reorganising local government and creating an assembly will actually improve public services. North Yorkshire County Council leaders attacked the idea of establishing an assembly on the grounds that it will only serve to add more bureaucracy and take powers away not from central government but from local government.

A further emerging aspect is the debate as to where the headquarters should be located, echoed by similar discussion in the North West and North East. In Yorkshire and Humberside, the main candidates appear to be the large metropolitan centres of Leeds-Bradford, Sheffield and Wakefield for example, but some suggest York might be the best location. York MP Hugh Bayley has argued for York to become an assembly HQ based on its historic prestige, geographical location between the region's major cities and the fact that it would escape potential rivalry between these cities¹⁵.

In the **North East** opposition to an elected Assembly continues around the two main issues of local government reorganisation and the perceived dominance of Newcastle in a potential assembly. There also remains a certain level of caution over the exact powers and functions of an assembly. The Darlington-based *Northern Echo* for example, supported the referendum announcement but stressed that there are outstanding questions that need to be answered before the public are likely to get behind the idea and vote 'yes'¹⁶. *The Journal*, based in Newcastle, has argued despite polling evidence that suggests people in the region would support an assembly, certain obstacles that need to be cleared if there is to be a majority 'yes' vote. These are identified mainly as a current lack of information, inter-regional rivalry and fears of cost. There is also a sense that proposals in the White Paper need to be beefed up so that an assembly does not become merely a talking shop and that the electorate can become better engaged with a new political structure¹⁷.

Intra-regional tension, especially between Tyneside and Teesside, may emerge as an issue. Fears have been expressed by some on Teesside that Tyneside will dominate any future assembly and because its larger population, more politicians and a greater voice¹⁸. Middlesbrough MP Stuart Bell has emerged as opponent, predicting a derisory turnout in the

¹⁵ 'York 'ideal home for new assembly'', *York Evening Press*, 17th June 2003. http://www.thisisyork.co.uk/york/archive/2003/06/17/york_news_local28ZM.html

¹⁶ 'Caution over referendums', *Northern Echo*, 16th June 2003. http://www.thisisthenortheast.co.uk/the_north_east/archive/2003/06/16/A8diae.feet.html

¹⁷ Insert reference to Journal article

¹⁸ 'Boss fears Geordies will dominate region's voice', *Northern Echo*, 24th June 2003. http://www.thisisthenortheast.co.uk/the_north_east/archive/2003/06/24/A8ejjq.news.htm
1

referendum as the issue is “a great turn-off on Teesside”¹⁹. Elsewhere on Teesside Stockton North MP Frank Cook argued that an assembly would push the North East’s case in Europe²⁰. The Chairman of the Tees Valley Partnership, Alistair Arkley, called for the Tees Valley to unite to create a strong voice so that they are not overshadowed by a potential “Geordie Parliament”²¹.

Finally, the region’s county councils, Northumberland and Durham respectively have both put their support behind the creation of a single unitary local government structure under an elected assembly, but the issues are playing out differently in each area (see section 9 below)²².

4 Media

Few national newspapers had kind words for John Prescott’s referendum announcement, with most concluding that it was a waste of time, money, and a threat to local government. Aside from *The Guardian*, the general view was that the assemblies on offer would have so few powers that they would be worthless. Tabloids gave the issue little space. *The Sun*, in a 17-line editorial – headlined What a Waste – quoted Thomas Paine, ‘government is best which governs least’, while managing (like others) to draw a link with a European Union it so despises. “A waste of time, effort and public money,” it said. “The last thing the country needs is more pen pushers and politicians. How odd that the government believes people should have a referendum on trivial assemblies...yet it won’t hold a referendum on the new European constitution.”²³

The *Daily Mirror* devoted a quarter of a page to the issue, placing the story at the top of page 14 under the headline ‘Referendumb’²⁴. It continued: “Self rule for three regions of northern England was proposed by Deputy PM John Prescott – amid claims that hardly anyone was interested.” It noted that only 8,000 people, “0.01 per cent of the nation” responded to John Prescott’s ‘soundings exercise’, before quoting David

¹⁹ ‘Vote on ‘home rule’ is blasted by Bell’, *Northern Echo*, 16th June 2003. <http://icteesside.icnetwork.co.uk/0100news/0001head/northeastassembly/page.cfm?objectid=13075586&method=full&siteid=50080>

²⁰ See previous reference

²¹ ‘Boss fears Geordies will dominate region’s voice’, *Northern Echo*, 24th June 2003. http://www.thisisthenortheast.co.uk/the_north_east/archive/2003/06/24/A8ejjq.news.html

²² ‘County hits back in ‘carve-up’ row’, *The Journal*, 19th July 2003. <http://icnewcastle.icnetwork.co.uk/0100news/thejournal/page.cfm?objectid=13194729&method=full&siteid=50081>

²³ ‘What a Waste’, *The Sun*, 17th June.

²⁴ ‘Referendumb’. *The Daily Mirror*, 17th June 2003. <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/allnews/page.cfm?objectid=13077551&method=full&siteid=50143>

Davis parodying John Prescott's much-publicised 'V sign' to photographers in Downing Street. "We are confident the north of England will give the government the very same hand gesture we have come to expect of you," Davis told Prescott in the Commons. The Mirror noted that the proposed assemblies would have less powers than the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. "They would not be able to freeze prescriptions, as in Wales, or ban tuition fees, as in Scotland." Below the news story, the Mirror's political commentator Paul Routledge (a Yorkshireman) waxed lyrical: "Well, who'd a thowt it! T' government is gee'in 'Ome Rule to Yorkshire."

The Guardian largely welcomed John Prescott's announcement. "Yesterday the UK took another step down the devolution road that leads away from the current over-centralised state." But it questioned Prescott's assertion that elected assemblies would bring "greater democracy, less bureaucracy, and a new political voice." An editorial continued: "The reality, alas, is considerably more modest. The new assemblies would have considerably fewer powers than the Greater London authority with no say on transport, police or fire (two weeks' later Prescott announced plans for regional fire services). England is not about to transform itself into a powerful federal state, a la Germany...the Yorkshire assembly will have a smaller budget than Leeds city council." But it concluded that a "modest step is better than no step at all."²⁵

For *The Daily Telegraph*, it was one step too far. It said that Prescott's much-vaunted "dream" was turning into a nightmare – and it smelled a Euro plot somewhere along the line. "This is an idea that has long commanded support from the European Union as it represents a progressive weakening of the nation state. The government has been quite open in its view that the assemblies would fit into an EU model superstate better than the current borough, metropolitan or county council arrangements." The *Telegraph* warned that far from leaching power downwards from central government, assemblies would "usurp the existing powers of local government. "The three regions, and ultimately, all of England, will receive a referendum on this issue when there is no desire for one – but not on the EU constitution, where one is desperately needed." Philip Johnston, the paper's Home Affairs Editor, asked in an analysis article: "Apart from John Prescott and the local politicians who see another job opportunity, who is clamouring for elected assemblies? Who are they for and why are they needed?"²⁶

The Times was more circumspect, concluding in an editorial that assemblies should not be created unless there is overwhelming local enthusiasm..."the government should have courage to put a figure on the percentage of the population it requires in favour." It labelled the proposed assemblies a "personal project" of John Prescott. "He wants

²⁵ 'England Expects', *The Guardian*. 17th June. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/leaders/story/0,3604,978829,00.html>

²⁶ 'Prescott dream of devolution could become huge nightmare' *Daily Telegraph*, 17th June 2003.

them as a concrete monument of his period in office. It is an expensive retirement gift from the prime minister. Too expensive.”²⁷

5 Public attitudes and identity

5.1 Summary of referendums soundings and opinion polls

John Prescott’s decision to hold referendums in the North West, North East and Yorkshire and Humberside was made following a five-month ‘soundings’ exercise which sought evidence of interest for holding referendums for Elected Regional Assemblies (ERAs) in the English regions. Results from the soundings exercise showed that interest levels were high enough to justify holding referendums in the three northern regions only. There have since been questions asked however, over Mr. Prescott’s decision being based on a seemingly low number of overall responses (around 8000). Also, opinion polls (commissioned for the soundings) suggest high levels of interest in all eight regions but also suggest that awareness of government policy concerning the English regions is low²⁸. Polls also suggested that referendum turnouts are likely to be low but that there would be a ‘yes’ majority in all eight regions²⁹.

The soundings process was launched on 3rd December 2002 with the deadline for submissions initially being 3rd March 2003, later extended to 16th May 2003. This extension followed a major amendment to the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill to allow for an extra referendum question concerning unitary government, in areas with a two-tier council structure, to judge the preferred option for local government. The soundings process was to aid John Prescott in making his decision on which regions would have a referendum based on the level of interest; if interest was high enough, a region would have a referendum; if it was low they would not. Summaries of responses from the soundings, along with results from commissioned opinion polls, were then published in an ODPM document *Your Region, Your Say* in June 2003³⁰. Responses came largely from individuals with further submissions from existing regional assemblies, local authorities, business groups, campaign groups, MPs, MEPs and political parties and varied in number across the regions – in the North West for example there were almost 4000 responses whilst the West Midlands submitted just 356³¹.

²⁷ ‘Assemblies in North will lead to local infighting’, *The Times*, 16th June 2003; ‘Regional bodies will cost £165m to set up and run’, *The Times*, 17th June 2003.

²⁸ Jeffery, C (2003) *The English Regions Debate: What do the English Want?* ESRC Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme (www.devolution.ac.uk).

²⁹ See previous reference

³⁰ ODPM (2003) *Your Region, Your Say* (http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_regions/documents/page/odpm_regions_023485.hcsp)

³¹ See footnote 28.

From the soundings responses, the average 'yes' response to the question '*Do you want a Referendum in your region?*' was 43.5%. In Yorkshire and Humberside the 'yes' response was 72% with 56% and 53% in the North West and North East respectively. However, in the West Midlands for example, the 'yes' response gained just 16%³². The 'strength of interest' in having referendums also varied with the North East showing 56% with a very strong/strong interest and the West Midlands showing a weak/very weak response of 72%. The ODPM document however also publishes results of opinion polls including those commissioned by the County Councils Network (CCN) and surveys at district council level. Although each had different sample sizes, geographical scopes and variations in methodology, "ODPM apparently felt the rest were broadly reliable tests of public opinion; many were conducted by well-respected polling companies."³³

The opinion poll summaries show very different results than those displayed from the soundings exercise, particularly the CCN England-wide findings. This poll was conducted by ICM (commissioned by the CCN) in January 2003 and used a statistically credible sample size of 500 respondents in each region³⁴. In contrast with the previously quoted responses, the CCN poll tells of a largely uniform set of responses across all regions. In answer to the question '*Do you Want a Referendum to be Held in Your Region?*' the average was 60% 'yes', 19% 'no' and 21% 'don't know'. The North West and North East responded with 65% and 60% respectively, in favour with the lowest 'yes' response being the East of England yet this was only slightly below average at 58%. Supplementary findings from the poll also show that awareness of government policy for the English regions across England was very low and that support for having a referendum was more associated with liking the idea of having one rather than knowing fully about the issues involved. Taking further surveys and the CCN poll together, the broad picture is that the public in all regions would like the opportunity to have a referendum, the next issue then, is how they would vote.

The ODPM omitted this from the soundings exercise but the CCN poll included the question '*Would You Vote in Favour or Against Having Regional Government?*', to which the average 'yes' response was 44% with 21% of responses stating 'no' and 35% 'don't know/wouldn't vote' (see figure 1)³⁵.

³² See footnote 28

³³ See footnote 28

³⁴ County Councils Network (2003) *Regional Assemblies Research*. http://www.lga.gov.uk/ccn/pressreleases/reg_assembly.pdf

³⁵ See footnote 28

Figure 1: Support for regional assemblies

Region	Yes	No	Don't Know/Wouldn't Vote
North East	51	19	32
North West	50	21	29
Yorkshire and the Humber	49	18	34
West Midlands	43	21	35
East Midlands	43	16	41
South West	41	22	37
South East	40	25	35
East of England	36	25	39
Total	44	21	35

Source: County Councils Network, reported in Jeffery, C (2003). *The English Regions Debate: What do the English Want?* ESRC. ESRC Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme

The two main points to be drawn from this is that the three northern regions clearly have a higher tendency to support referendums and secondly that the high level of 'don't knows' and non-voters reflects the continuing problem of low awareness of this policy. It remains however, that the CCN poll suggested that potential 'yes' voters outnumbered those who would potentially vote 'no', for example, by 3:1 in the North East and Yorkshire and Humberside and even in the South East by 3:2³⁶. If public opinion remains as it is then, according to this evidence, there would be majorities for the establishment of regional assemblies in all eight regions.

Certain polls also included open-ended questions concerning individuals' reasons for supporting/opposing the idea of an elected regional assembly. Reasons in support were largely based around the idea that regional assemblies would better relate to the specific needs of the region whilst opposing views included the notion of not wanting more bureaucracy and the perceived weakening of local government. Positive attitudes however outweighed negative attitudes.

The opinion poll evidence presented is more representative and reliable than the soundings responses and seems to suggest an equal demand for ERAs throughout all regions. It appears that there needs to be more focus on positive issues for the 'yes' campaign, presently based largely upon the negative of dissatisfaction with central government, if the opposing arguments of increased bureaucracy and council tax are to be overcome.

³⁶ Jeffery, C./ESRC Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme. (2003). *The English Regions Debate: What do the English Want?* ESRC.

6 Relations with Westminster and Whitehall

6.1 Westminster

6.1.1 Referendum debate

On June 16th, **the Deputy Prime Minister** announced that the North East, North West and Yorkshire and Humberside would hold referendums on elected regional assemblies. Underscoring the Labour government's commitment to devolution and the case for regional democracy, **John Prescott** explained:

In 1997, this Government inherited one of the most centralised systems of government in the western world, and the House knows that we have reversed that legacy. During the past six years, we have carried out a far-reaching and radical programme of constitutional change. . . we are going to introduce regional accountability and greater democracy (*HC Debates*, 16th June 2003, Col: 22-3).

John Prescott continued to announce that the decision to hold referendums was based upon the soundings exercise conducted by the ODPM, stating:

. . . it is clear to me that there are some regions where voters want that opportunity, and I intend to give them that choice (*HC Debates*, 16th June 2003, Col: 22-3).

Summarising the soundings responses, he continued:

In total, we estimate that at least 50,000 people were involved in the soundings exercise—a lot more than in the typical opinion poll often quoted in the House. More than 7,000 direct responses were from individuals. The rest came from organisations or individuals responding in a representative capacity—for example, through surveys or petitions. Although those responses represented the views of many hundreds of individuals, they were each recorded as a single response (*HC Debates*, 16th June 2003, Col: 22-3).

Details of the number of responses and figures from each region followed with **Mr. Prescott** stating that there was a higher positive response in the three northern regions in comparison with the others, with over 50% of respondents wanting a referendum. Therefore, he concluded:

I am satisfied that interest in a referendum is high in all three regions. I am therefore pleased to announce to the House that it is my intention to hold referendums at the first opportunity in the north-east, the north-west and Yorkshire and the Humber. I expect that opportunity to come in the autumn of 2004 (*HC Debates*, 16th June 2003, Col:22-3).

Mr. Prescott hailed the occasion as an historic and democratic opportunity:

We are offering the people of the three northern regions a historic opportunity: an opportunity that we offered to the people of Scotland, Wales and London before them; an opportunity for the northern regions to choose how they are governed, to strengthen democracy and to reduce bureaucracy; an opportunity to gain a new political voice and to secure greater prosperity, for more growth, more jobs and more investment; and an opportunity for those regions that have the desire for change to determine their own future. Today's announcement is good for democracy, good for the English regions and good for the whole of the UK (*HC Debates*, 16th June 2003, Col: 22-3).

Mr. Prescott's Conservative counterpart **David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) kicked off the debate by suggesting that the decision to hold referendums was made regardless of public interest and support:

the Deputy Prime Minister has instigated referendums in the north-east, north-west and Yorkshire and Humberside that will deeply embarrass him and the Government. Such a measure will do little more than pour millions of pounds of taxpayers' cash down the drain as the Deputy Prime Minister blindly chases his obsession with what will undoubtedly become an expensive white elephant (*HC Debates*, 16th June 2003, Col: 24).

Focussing on the soundings exercise, **Mr. Davis** attacked the government for making a decision based on a low response to the consultation:

The Government received a dismal total of 8,000 replies nationally to their consultation on whether referendums were needed—surely even the Deputy Prime Minister could take the hint. . . Is it now Government policy to leave the polls open until they receive a result that they like? Eight thousand replies after three attempts from a population of 42 million is a pathetic figure (*HC Debates*, 16th June 2003, Col: 24).

Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton), entered the debate expressing his support of the announcement and the Deputy PMs decision that the three northern regions should hold referendums:

I welcome the news that the three English regions can now choose between regional democracy and a regional quango state. This is a good day for democracy (*HC Debates*, 16th June 2003, Col: 28) .

Mr. Davey however maintained that the government could have galvanised the 'yes' campaign had he proposed a 'richer' devolution than that in the White Paper by for example, holding existing quangos such as the Highways Agency, Environment Agency and LSCs to account:

Today's statement marks an important if modest start on the road to regional devolution. While Liberal Democrats would

drive a faster, more well-built model, we are glad that the Deputy Prime Minister has, on this occasion, overcome the obstacles placed in the way by the Prime Minister (*HC Debates*, 16th June 2003, Col: 28) .

To which **Mr. Prescott** replied:

I present the Bill knowing full well that those in the regions may expect more than it contains, but they will have a framework within which to negotiate and make their case. Although I readily accept that there is a legitimate argument in favour of much of what the hon. Gentleman has said, he should not underestimate the assemblies' ability to conduct hearings and hold regional bodies to account—including the Highways Agency and the Environment Agency (*HC Debates*, 16th June 2003, Col: 29).

When questioned **Michael Jack** (Fylde) over whether or not there would be a minimum threshold regarding voter turnout, the Deputy PM explained that there was:

. . .we have no intention to introduce any at this stage(*HC Debates*, 16th June 2003, Col: 30) .

6.1.2 *Regions at Westminster*

The regional question continued to get an airing in debates and questions in both the Commons and the Lords (see Table 1).

Table 1: the regions in parliament

Source	Date	Column number	Subject	Raised by
Written Answers	19 th May	628W	Regional Government Proposals	George Howarth (Knowsley North & Sefton East)
Written Answers	21 st May	767W	Regional Development Agencies (Budgets)	Christopher Chope (Christchurch)
Written Answers	21 st May	878W	Regional Assemblies	Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold)
Written Answers	21 st May	878W	Regional Government	Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold)
Written Answers	21 st May	878W	Regional Government (North West)	Eric Martlew (Carlisle)
Written Answers	22 nd May	900W	Regional Arts Councils	Mark Oaten
Written Answers	22 nd May	983W	Regional Assemblies/ Government	Philip Hammond (Runnymede & Weybridge)
Written Ministerial Statements	5 th June	29WS	Review of Area Based Initiatives	Barbara Roche (Hornsey & Wood Green)
Written Answers	9 th June	601W	Regional Pay	Archie Norman (Tunbridge Wells)
Written Answers	12 th June	1046W	Referendum	Philip Hammond (Runnymede & Weybridge)
Commons Debates	16 th June	21	Regional Assemblies	John Prescott (Kingston upon Hull East)
Lords Debates	16 th June	542	Regional Assemblies: Referendums	Lord Rooker
Commons Debates	18 th June	342	Regional Government	John Grogan (Selby)
Westminster Hall	18 th June	99WH	Regional Pay (Public Sector)	Adam Price (East Camarthen & Dinefwr)
Written Answers	18 th June	213W	Regional Government	Michael Jack (Fylde)
Written Answers	18 th June	216W	Regional Assemblies	Anne McIntosh (Vale of York)
Written Answers	23 rd June	646W	Regional Funding	Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold)
Written Answers	23 rd June	646W	Regional Grants	Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold)
Written Answers	23 rd June	647W	Regional Planning Bodies	Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold)
Written Answers	25 th June	852W	Regional Assemblies	Andrew George (St Ives)
Written Answers	26 th June	900W	Regional Government	Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold)
Written Answers	26 th June	901W	South West Regional Assembly	Christopher Chope (Christchurch)
Written Answers	30 th June	31W	Regional Anthems	Gordon Prentice (Pendle)
Written Answers	30 th June	116W	Referendums	Eric Pickles (Brentwood & Ongar)
Written Answers	30 th June	116W	Regional Assemblies	John Redwood (Wokingham)
Written Answers	30 th June	120W	Regional Assemblies	John Redwood

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Written Answers	1 st July	264W	Regional Assemblies	John Redwood (Wokingham)
Written Answers	1 st July	265W	Regional Government	Geraldine Smith (Morecambe & Lunesdale)
Lords Written Answers	1 st July	WA91	Regional Chambers	Lord Greaves
Lords Written Answers	1 st July	WA91	Regional Assemblies	Lord Greaves
Lords Written Answers	1 st July	WA92	Government Offices for the Regions	Lord Greaves
Written Answers	2 nd July	359W	Government Offices for the Regions	Dr. Alan (Southampton, Test)
Written Answers	2 nd July	362W	Regional Assemblies	David Davis (Haltemprice & Howden)
Written Answers	3 rd July	462W	Regional Assemblies	David Davis (Haltemprice & Howden)
Written Ministerial Statements	7 th July	42WS	Regional Development Agencies	Jacqui Smith (Redditch)
Written Answers	7 th July	575W	Regional Selective Assistance	Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham)
Written Answers	7 th July	619W	Regional Assemblies	David Davis (Haltemprice & Howden)
Written Answers	8 th July	754W	Regional Assemblies	David Davis (Haltemprice & Howden)
Written Answers	8 th July	755W	Regional Planning Guidance	Phil Sawford (Kettering)
Lords Written Answers	8 th July	WA26	Regional Assemblies: Referendums	Lord Greaves
Written Answers	9 th July	797W	Regional Assistance Schemes	Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South & East Cleveland)
Written Answers	9 th July	797W	Regional Science Councils	Claire Curtis-Thomas (Crosby)
Written Answers	9 th July	822W	Regional Sports Budgets	Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne Central)
Written Answers	9 th July	834W	Regional Assemblies	Philip Hammond (Runnymede & Weybridge)
Lords Debates	15 th July	755	Regional Assemblies: Referendums	Lord Renton of Mount Harry
Written Answers	16 th July	356W	Transport (Regional Assemblies)	Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside)

Source: Hansard.

6.2 Whitehall

The preparation of the Draft Bill on the powers and functions of regional assemblies, will be overseen by the Ministerial Committee on English regional Policy, which has the remit to "To develop policy on the English regions." Table X shows the committee's membership.

Composition of Ministerial Committee on English Regional Policy (ERP)

Deputy Prime Minister and First Secretary of State (Chair)

Secretary of State for Home Department

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Secretary of State for Transport and Secretary of State for Scotland

Secretary of State for Health

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

Leader of the House of Lords and The Lord President of the Council

Secretary of State for Trade and Industry

Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

Secretary of State for Education and Skills

Parliamentary Secretary and Treasury Chief Whip

Leader of the House of Commons and Secretary of State for Wales

Chief Secretary, Treasury

Minister without Portfolio

Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs

Attorney General

Minister of State, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (Nick Raynsford)

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and the Secretary of State for Defence receive papers.

Source: cabinet Office

7 EU issues

Nothing to report

8 Local government

The Boundary Committee for England has begun its review of the structure of local government in two tier areas (Northumberland, Durham, North Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cumbria, Cheshire) in those regions slated for referendums. The Boundary Committee for England, chaired by Pamela Gordon, former local authority chief executive, says diplomatically it faces a “challenging task” in producing recommendations by a deadline of May 2004. In an exercise costing £6 millions – it has taken on an additional 15 staff — the committee has to produce at least two options to present to the electorate of two-tier areas in a second referendum question. Broadly the options will generally range from retention of counties on the one hand and an amalgamation of districts on the other. But in areas such as Cumbria (itself an amalgamation of two old counties, Cumberland and Westmorland) a complete break-up of the existing county might be recommended in both options.

The Boundary Committee officially began work on June 17 with a 12-week public consultation (see timetable). September 8 marks the last day for the submission of proposals from interested parties. By the end of December, the committee will have produced draft recommendations and will invite representations. Two months’ later it will have reached conclusions and made final recommendations to John Prescott’s department.

But during the process, it will commission and study extensive opinion polling from MORI (both quantitative and qualitative ‘focus groups’) in the two-tier areas. It will interview council leaders and chief executives. It will study the financial position of councils, assess their corporate structures and capacity for good governance and – crucially – it will take into account the Audit Commission’s comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) inspections, the first of which was published last December for unitary and county councils (districts are now undergoing the process).

In a briefing with one of the authors Pamela Gordon, stressed that size — in other words, economies of scale — did matter, although she cautioned that “it is not definitive.” But “financial information and management costs” were important to them in reaching a decision about options. Archie Gall, the committee’s director, was also at pains to stress that opinion polling was important to determine local identity — “we are trying to discover where people belong.” Asked about the capacity of the committee to deliver in such a relatively short timescale, he replied revealingly: “This is a challenge — we admit that.” Significantly, both stressed terms of reference set by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) enabled the committee to “look across” county boundaries: in other words, they could recommend the option of new districts across transcending existing county boundaries.

Not surprisingly, the whole process is both consuming and – in some cases – alarming local government. In both Durham and Northumberland, county councils have put forward firm proposals for transforming

themselves into unitary authorities, while devolving some powers, such as responsibility for street cleaning and park maintenance, to beefed-up town and parish councils. The districts have responded by employing consultants to argue the case for scrapping the county councils creating enlarged, or amalgamated districts. By early December, when the Boundary Committee produces its draft recommendations, the issue could be back on the political radar screens.

Boundary Committee timetable

Stage One:

(June 17 – July 31) – start review and study submission of proposals from councils and other interested parties. Starts opinion polling. July 31 marks last day for councils to submit completed financial returns to committee.

Stage Two:

(September 9 – December 1) – Committee considers proposals, determines draft recommendations report and (Dec 2) publishes report and invites representations.

Stage Three:

(December 3 – February 23) – After publishing draft report, committee asks for views of local councils and the public. Undertakes further opinion polling to determine views on various options.

Stage Four:

(February 24 – May 25) – Committee considers responses, reaches conclusions, and submits final report to the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott.

9 Finance

Nothing to report

10 The political parties

10.1 Labour

The Labour Party is gearing up to mobilise its membership and organisation for the forthcoming referendums in the three northern regions. The Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, and the Party chairman, Ian McCartney visited all three regions over the summer and met with the nascent independent Yes campaigns. Mr McCartney told Party members in the North East that he planned to visit the region every six weeks until the election. The Party has also employed a 'Referendum Co-ordinator', based at the Party's headquarters in Old Queen Street, London, to lead for the Party. In the North East, Labour North has established a Taskforce, to co-ordinate the Party's activities in relation to the referendum. The prospect of referendum raises two challenges for Labour. First, in the three northern regions resources will spread thin in 2004 as the Party contests European and local elections in May. Second, the Party will need to work cross party Yes coalitions, a particular challenge in regions like the North East where the Party has traditionally dominated local government and Parliamentary representation. Finally, in some parts of the North, notably the North West, differences within the Party are likely to become an important part of the story of the campaign.

10.2 Liberal Democrats

The role of the Liberal Democrats is likely to be important in Yes campaign, especially in the North West and Yorkshire. The Liberal Democrats contain their own internal divisions on the subject, especially in the North West. Here, the well-known activist (Lord) Tony Greaves opposes the compromise on local government reform which the Party leadership struck with the government on the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Act. The Party's approach will be to press for further powers for regional assemblies, while engaging Party members in support of a Yes vote. The first step in this latter respect is likely to come in the form of a communication from the Party's regions' spokesperson Ed Davey, to all Party members in the referendum regions.