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Key issues

With referendums in the three northern regions eight months away, there are signs that the public debate might be coming to life. January saw the Deputy Prime Minister tour the northern regions, attending large meetings in Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle. The Manchester event saw over 400 people attend, with others being turned away.

At the same time, the Deputy Prime Minister made the first tentative moves to promote a new economic agenda for the three northern regions, focused on the creation of a northern growth corridor ('the Northern way') linking the major cities and designed to provide a counter-balance to recently announced growth plans in the South. This is likely to prefigure special treatment for the North in the Chancellor's forthcoming Spending Review.

The Government announced a series of hearings would be held in each of the northern regions designed to elicit views about the proposed powers of any future elected regional assembly, with ministers hinting that a stronger package than that outlined in its White Paper, *Your Region, Your Choice*, will be unveiled in draft bill later this year.

As the debate ensued, a poll in *The Journal* newspaper in Newcastle showed that only a minority of people in the North East (just under 40 per cent) were aware that a referendum was taking place in October 2004.

The 'Yes' and 'No' campaigns continued to shape up in different ways in the northern regions. The 'No' campaign in the North West continued to attract some Labour MPs. One such MP, Graham Stringer, found himself in heated public debate with the Deputy Prime Minister in the Manchester meeting mentioned above. In Yorkshire Lord Haskins was announced as chair of the 'Yes' campaign.

In the North East the media reported tensions between Neil Herron, self-styled 'metric martyr' and an opponent of regional government, and leading local Conservatives, who have yet to agree on a common campaign. The North East 'Yes' campaign meanwhile attracted unexpected support from Sir John Hall, president of Newcastle United FC, and other well known business figures.

1. Introduction

With referendums on regional government in England's three northern regions eight months away, John Prescott raised the tempo of the devolution debate on two fronts. Firstly, he fired the first shots in the campaign by arguing that northern assemblies are necessary to re-balance England and challenge the might of London and the greater South East. Secondly, he set in train potentially far-reaching structural changes for a new northern growth corridor, to rival four big growth areas in the greater South East. This will be done by giving the three northern Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) the key role in pulling together what is billed as a "high level steering group" to take forward a project - the Northern Way - aimed at improving the economy of the wider North, with a population of 15 million. The aim is to have a report prepared to coincide with the Chancellor's next, three year, comprehensive spending review this July in which the regional dimension will figure prominently.

Prescott's move, in concert with the Treasury, is significant in that it brings together the two tracks of the broader regional dimension: the constitutional, in the form of limited political devolution to three northern regions (subject to approval in referendums this autumn), and the economic, tied to the work of Regional Development Agencies and their links with the Treasury and Prescott's Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) (confusingly, the Department of Trade and Industry has been the RDA's sponsoring department since 2001, with funds largely channelled from the ODPM spending silo).

The Deputy Prime Minister effectively welded these tracks together on a three stop northern tour between January 22-23. Invited audiences of regional stakeholders, from the business lobby to charities, unions and local politicians, heard arguments for and against the case to devolve limited powers to the North West, Yorkshire and the Humber and the North East.

With the ODPM desperate to be even handed, after taking legal advice to avoid claims of being partisan, both supporters and opponents were given equal time at the debates, although Prescott took the lead with a rousing defence of his proposals and some blunt-speaking which led to one bitter argument with a Labour MP in the 'no' camp. As *The Guardian* reported¹, the debates, well attended in Newcastle and Manchester, with standing room only for some - Leeds proved a disappointment for Prescott, perhaps reflecting more disinterest and hostility in Yorkshire - saw the Deputy Prime Minister throw "political caution to the wind"², a world away from carefully-choreographed New Labour rallies. Announcing a firm timetable

¹ Peter Hetherington. 'Prescott plans to beef up regional assemblies'. *The Guardian*. 26th January 2004.

² See above.

to create regional assemblies, broadly similar to the Greater London Authority (GLA) minus, so far, powers over transport and policing, he said Whitehall would only sit up and take notice if there is a strong regional voice in the North. "You have got to have political pressure," he told a questioner. "The decision-making power of government does recognise political clout."³

At one stage, he raised the stakes in what amounts to a dual-minister campaign for devolution, with only Prescott, and his deputy Nick Raynsford actively making the case so far. Bearing in mind the Prime Minister's notably non-committal hinting that, ideally, elected assemblies should get extra powers over policing, adult education and training - and maybe over transport and health - Prescott announced a series of regional hearings throughout the North over the next few months at which individuals can put the case for more powers before a draft bill is published this summer.

As the Deputy Prime Minister, along with Raynsford, launched the 'northern tour', travelling by train from Manchester to Leeds and Newcastle with appropriate 'Your Say' referendum campaign stickers plastered on the window of one coach, Tony Blair appeared at St James' Park, home of Newcastle United, for the latest of New Labour's 'big conversation' exercises. He did not mention regional government once in a wind-up speech, and barely responded when one teenager from Teesside raised the issue. As one of the authors noted (*Public Finance*, 5th March⁴), Blair made abundantly clear that Prescott's broadening regional agenda is not on Downing Street's radar screen. Regionalism is rarely in Blair's vocabulary.

Compare and contrast, then, with the Deputy Prime Minister. In the run-up to referendums this autumn in the three northern regions and, for Prescott, that timetable now seems written in stone, he effectively called for a new political settlement to counter the power of the South and the civil service machine. While publicly loyal to Blair, the policy divergence between the Deputy Prime Minister and Downing Street is increasingly apparent. While Number 10 is clearly exercised by new forms of 'localism' and devolving power to communities, with new forms of democracy and engagement, the broader regional agenda does not figure in its priorities.

Prescott's decision to hold three northern debates underlines that divide. As *The Guardian* reported (26th January)⁵, they gave a foretaste of a bruising campaign over the coming months with the Deputy Prime Minister rounding on a dissident Labour MP, Graham Stringer (Manchester Blackley), prominent in the 'no' camp. A former leader of Manchester city council, Stringer has joined several other Labour colleagues and Tory MPs in a cross-party campaign. He bluntly told the

³ See above.

⁴ Peter Hetherington. 'Northern Light'. *Public Finance*. 5th March 2004.

⁵ See above.

Deputy Prime Minister that the North West was being ignored in favour of the South East in a "£22 billion housing package" announced by Prescott last year in his 'Sustainable Communities for England'. Prescott railed at "Stringer's lies" before arguing that billions were being poured into the North West. Clearly rattled, the Manchester MP, sitting alongside the former Tory minister Sir David Trippier, told the audience that his opponent was "unable to restrain himself." The Deputy Prime Minister later accused Stringer of being "quite wrong and mischievous." Prescott's supporters said it hardly helped that the Deputy Prime Minister was preparing to visit Manchester a few days later to unveil an update on that communities plan - 'Making it happen: the northern way'. Perhaps stung by earlier criticism that this plan took an extremely partial view of England - the outline of four large growth areas in the greater South East with an initial down payment of £610 million to kick-start development, and the vague promise of more - it is now clear that several key officials in the ODPM have been pressing for a reappraisal.

As a result, it seems that Prescott decided to change course last December, although a draft update of the communities plan had already been prepared. A key mover is David Lunts, head of urban policy in the ODPM, who, unlike most in the department, is not a career civil servant but was a senior councillor in Manchester before becoming an urban regeneration professional and subsequently moving to the ODPM. The result of this re-focussing was an amended 'Northern Way' document, outlining a series of growth corridors in the North, principally along the trans-Pennine M62. While short of the detail which surrounded the southern growth areas a month ago, reflecting the late amendments, Prescott was adamant in the introduction that the corridors would "provide a framework for growth that can match the growth corridors of the Thames Gateway and the wider South East...we need a long-term vision that can fully exploit the economic and transport corridors that connect the North."⁶

While officials close to the exercise acknowledge that complaints about the document "willing the ends while not providing the means" (see chapter 6.1 of this report) have some validity, there is a wider recognition that a significant shift in thinking is taking place. "For the first time, a geography of the North is emerging," said one. "The challenge now is to convert it to hard-edged policy."

That task has been given principally to the three northern RDAs, serviced partly by the ODPM and the Treasury, where a special group is now examining the regional dimension in preparation for the next spending review. On 26th February, the three northern RDAs announced that a "high level steering group", to be led by an as yet unnamed independent chair, would oversee a period of "sustained work" to develop a new framework for the three northern regions, linking economic development, education,

⁶ See ODPM. (2004). *Making it Happen – The Northern Way*.
http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_communities/documents/page/odpm_comm_027362-01.hcsp#P22_438

skills, housing and transport⁷. The idea is to build on the foundations of the 'Northern Way' with a report which Prescott hopes will act as a counterweight to the southern growth areas. With little money around to match even the limited resources going to the southern growth areas, the report, effectively the makings of a spatial plan for the North, is seen as a way of developing the collective lobbying clout of the northern regions, perhaps underpinned by elected regional assemblies.

Prescott pulled no punches in his speeches in Manchester, Leeds and Liverpool (22nd-23rd January):

On any economic measure the North lags behind the South. Under the existing system - the status quo - the North has fallen behind the South decade after decade. And decade after decade the gap has widened. Business registration rates are up to 50 per cent higher in the South than in the North. Unemployment rates...in the North East are still 1.8 times higher than in the South East and over the last decade - although employment rates have risen everywhere - they have consistently been 8-9 per cent better in the South East than in the North. Maintaining the status quo will mean that the South East will continue to run ahead - and the North will continue to play catch-up. Of course, we cannot reverse years of neglect overnight. And we cannot just top-slice growth from the South and move it North. But we can achieve real economic progress in the North. And that means doing more regionally...

Significantly, the debates offered an early opportunity for 'yes' and 'no' campaigners to put their cases. Prescott judged them to be a success with scores of businessmen, initially deeply sceptical about the cost of the devolution package on offer, prepared at least to consider the wider merits of English devolution. While many have yet to be won over to Prescott's case, his criticism of Whitehall clearly struck a sympathetic chord: "It is the people in the regions, not the civil servants in London, who know what's best for them," he roared at one stage.

Battle lines are now being drawn, however. Several other Labour MPs are supporting Graham Stringer in the 'no' campaign - particularly in the North West - and party divisions will be exposed in the coming months. Prescott is biding his time. But he has insisted: "This is party policy."

2. Regional Structures

2.1 Government Offices

Nothing to report.

⁷ See One NorthEast. *Door opens to Northern growth corridor*. Press release, 26th February 2004. <http://www.onenortheast.co.uk/page/newscentre/index.cfm#694>

2.2 Regional Development Agencies

RDAs and Tourist Boards

In April 2003, the government announced that Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) were to take over the strategic responsibility for tourism, with the regional tourist boards being the key delivery partners for the RDAs. Throughout December 2003 and January 2004, there have been clashes between One NorthEast and Northumbria Tourist Board (NTB), and, to a lesser extent, between the North West Development Agency (NWDA) and the North West Tourist Board (NWTB).

On 9th December, One NorthEast issued a statement from Chief Executive Alan Clarke which stated:

Concerted efforts have been made, before and since One NorthEast assumed strategic responsibility for regional tourism, to work with NTB on a shared vision for North East tourism. These efforts proved very challenging with NTB's vision for the future of being an independent commercial, membership organisation becoming increasingly inconsistent with our vision and the needs of a new, comprehensive regional tourism infrastructure.⁸

The government's decision was resisted by NTB. As NTB executive member, Hugh Becker, said:

The industry is in uproar about this uninformed approach from an unaccountable body with no experience in tourism and no relationship with the industry.⁹

Resistance was stronger in the rural fringe of the region. Berwick MP, Alan Beith, was quoted as saying:

I am particularly concerned that the small businesses who provide most of the tourist facilities have not been consulted and will feel that they have no involvement in how decisions are made if One North East takes over.¹⁰

Lack of consultation was a common criticism. Derek Smibert, chairman of the North Northumberland Tourism Association, claimed:

I was absolutely flabbergasted when I heard that One NorthEast announced this without any consultation with members of the association. . . [NTB] have 34 years experience but it will take One NorthEast another 20 years to

⁸ One NorthEast. *Statement from Alan Clarke Re: Review of Regional Tourism Structures and Delivery*. Press release. 9th December 2003.

<http://www.onenortheast.co.uk/page/newscentre/archive.cfm#644>

⁹ As above.

¹⁰ 'Board fights for its life'. *Berwick Advertiser*. 23rd December 2003.

even get near what the Northumbria Tourist Board is doing now.¹¹

Following further meetings between senior representatives of ONE, the NTB and Durham County Council agreement was eventually achieved. Margaret Fay, chair of ONE stated:

I am delighted that we have identified a way forward for tourism in the region. We recognise that the impasse between the organisations has been unhelpful to all involved in the industry and that a resolution to the situation was needed in order to reassure both NTB staff and also tourism businesses. We have listened to NTB's concerns and they have listened to ours.¹²

NTB president, Jenny Robson, who also took part in the meeting added:

This is a very welcome development for everyone, but particularly the thousands of tourism businesses across the North East. There is a good deal of talking still to do, but we hope to ensure a continuity of service that is so important at this crucial time of year in tourism terms.¹³

A similar shake-up occurred in the North West, although the NWDA did not find themselves fighting as big a battle as their North East counterparts. On Merseyside, the move to scrap the North West Tourist Board (NWTB) was not unwelcome. Responsibility for marketing Merseyside will now fall to a partnership between the NWDA and The Merseyside Partnership from April 2004. Colin Doyle, North West Tourist Board's newly-appointed chairman, said "the changes would ensure greater support for small companies which make up the majority of the region's tourism businesses."¹⁴ Thomas O'Brien, Chief Executive of The Merseyside Partnership, added,

The North West Tourist Board have done some good work over the years but it's the right time now to move ahead with a new approach to tourism marketing that will allow us to make the most of the many new opportunities that are available to us.¹⁵

The NWDA has created the North West Tourism Forum "to act as a strategic monitoring body for the recently launched Regional Tourism Strategy. The Forum will also act as a voice for businesses and

¹¹ As above.

¹² One NorthEast. *Tourism Talks Move Forward*. 28th January 2004. <http://www.onenortheast.co.uk/page/newscentre/index.cfm#669>

¹³ As above.

¹⁴ Laura Davis. 'Tourism shake-up'. *The Daily Post*. 18th December 2003. <http://icliverpool.icnetwork.co.uk/0100news/0100regionalnews/page.cfm?objectid=13736700&method=full&siteid=50061>

¹⁵ As above.

organisations that make up the tourism sector in the Northwest.”¹⁶ Felicity Goodey, CBE, has been appointed as Chair of the Forum.

2.3 Regional Chambers/Assemblies

Regional chambers, or assemblies as they are now known, were established concurrently with the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) to provide strengthened regional accountability through scrutiny of the RDAs. Recent research by Warwick and Cardiff Universities set out to address the question of what makes for effective regional scrutiny, a critical or more collaborative approach. The authors have identified five factors “at the heart of effective external scrutiny” (See Dungey, 2004 for a summary). The broad findings are summarised here.

Legitimacy and clarity of role

The legitimacy of the role of regional assemblies has been questioned by some RDAs, which has made for a variegated pattern of interpretation across the regions. The research claims that

in one region the Assembly attempted to scrutinise the internal organisation of the RDA - this was contested. In another, the RDA decided the only legitimate focus for scrutiny was the Regional Economic Strategy (RES) and it proved difficult for the Assembly to scrutinise the Corporate Plan and RDA performance more generally. (Dungey, 2004).

Sanctions and powers

Despite the role of accountability, regional assemblies “lack powers to ensure their views are acted upon.” (Dungey, 2004). However, there is evidence in some regions, for example the East of England, of a willingness of RDAs to negotiate criticism. In the East of England:

the Assembly refused to endorse the first version of RES developed by the RDA. The RDA could have still continued with the Strategy but decided to work with the Assembly, revise the RES and receive Assembly endorsement. (Dungey, 2004).

Following this, “the relationship between the Assembly, RDA and Government Office in the East of England is one of the most integrated and productive.” (Dungey, 2004).

Single or multiple accountability regimes

Subject to a range of accountabilities, RDAs are prioritising the performance management regime of the Government Offices (GOs) in the regions. The research recognises that “neither the GOs or the RDAs are convinced the assembly scrutiny is 'adding value'.” (Dungey, 2004). However, most assemblies have distinguished their scrutiny work from that of the Government Office.

¹⁶ As above.

The Assemblies' scrutiny remit is to ensure that RDA activities, plans and strategies are responsive to the needs of their regions. . . We are seeing evidence of the influence of early scrutiny activity in the shaping of regional plans and strategies. However, the Assemblies need to find a way of demonstrating this scrutiny success without alienating the RDA.” (Dungey, 2004).

Degree of dependence

RDAs and assemblies now have many joint delivery responsibilities and so a positive partnership would be mutually beneficial. The authors identify that:

“Assemblies are not distanced from the RDA in the way Parliament might be distanced from the organisation it scrutinises. The scrutiny process is very collaborative in most regions.” (Dungey, 2004).

Availability of information

The research highlights a problem in that “The highly technical nature of RDA work may be proving a problem for scrutiny.” (Dungey, 2004). Currently, RDAs submit quarterly reports on performance against targets for the Government Office, who then appraise the RDA to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). Although assemblies have requested these reports, it “has been agreed in some regions and denied in others. However, only the RDA performance information is shared, not the appraisal section of the report written by Government Office.” (Dungey, 2004). Thus the research identifies there “is also a need for the Assemblies to have stronger access to information rights.” (Dungey, 2004).

In conclusion, one of the authors, Rachel Ashworth, stated that, whilst they felt the assemblies are making sound progress concerning regional scrutiny:

If they are intended to provide strong accountability to the region, and the Government wants to see effective regions, it should consider whether the assemblies need stronger powers. (Dungey, 2004).

3. Regional Politics and Policies

‘Yes’ and ‘No’ campaigns – Activities and new recruits

The ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ campaigns in the North East, North West and Yorkshire and the Humber have been gathering pace and attracting new recruits over the past three months. With each side now running their own campaign website, and regularly featuring in local and regional press, awareness of this year’s referendum is set to grow.

In the North East, major business figures have come out as firm and active supporters of the campaign for a regional assembly, notably Sir John Hall,

president of Newcastle United FC and the man behind the Gateshead MetroCentre, and Jaap Kroese, head of the shipbuilding firm Swan Hunter. The 6th January saw the London launch of the 'Yes4thenortheast' campaign at the Commonwealth Club in London. Hartlepool MP, Peter Mandelson, Berwick MP, and Lib Dem deputy leader, Alan Beith, and Sir John Hall lined up to speak about the campaign. Sir John said:

It is great we have finally got the opportunity to vote and control our own destiny and build the region we want to see for our children and grandchildren.

Mr. Mandelson added:

Devolving government to the English regions is not an optional add-on to other policies. It is a prior condition for achieving economic change and success in Britain.

Sir Stuart Bell, MP for Middlesbrough, who has in the past questioned proposals for regional government, emerged as being more positive. He did however call for increased debate on the benefits of a regional assembly. At a meeting held at St. James' Park (home of Newcastle United FC) on 6th February, organised by Yes4thenortheast, representatives of more than 40 "leading North-East firms"¹⁷ attended to hear how an elected assembly might be beneficial to business in the region. Jaap Kroese, head of Swan Hunter said:

I am delighted to back the Yes campaign. The referendum in October presents a once in a lifetime opportunity to the North-East to take its future into its own hands. We must vote Yes.¹⁸

Elsewhere in the North East, prominent 'No' campaigner, Neil Herron, claimed that he was gaining business backing from across the region¹⁹ and was quoted in *The Journal* as outlining plans to build up a 'fighting fund' of £540 000 (the limit set by the Electoral Commission):

Following the launch of the Yes campaign in London earlier in the week with Sir John Hall and Peter Mandelson, the offices of the No Campaign in Sunderland have been besieged with calls from prominent North-East businessmen wishing to

¹⁷ Paul Linfood. 'Shipyard chief backs assembly'. *The Journal* 6th February 2004. http://icnewcastle.icnetwork.co.uk/regionalassembly/news/content_objectid=13921329_method=full_siteid=50081_headline=-Shipyard%2Dchief%2Dbacks%2Dassembly-name_page.html

¹⁸ As above.

¹⁹ 'Businessmen join the fight against a regional assembly'. *The Journal*. 9th January 2004. http://icnewcastle.icnetwork.co.uk/regionalassembly/news/content_objectid=13797415_method=full_siteid=50081_headline=-Businessmen%2Djoin%2Dthe%2Dfight%2Dagainst%2Dregional%2Dassembly-name_page.html

throw their weight behind the campaign opposing the creation of an elected regional assembly.²⁰

Mr. Herron, however, reportedly refused to name his new supporters.

Yorkshire and the Humber recently witnessed the launch of the 'Yes4Yorkshire' campaign, spearheaded by Lord Haskins, former chairman of Northern Foods and life peer member of the House of Lords. Deputy Chairman is Julian Cummins, a churchman and former member of the CBI Regional Council (1995-2001) and Vice-President of the Yorkshire and Humber Liberal Democrats. Jane Thomas, Director of Campaign for Yorkshire and Vice Chair of Campaign for the English Regions (CFER), is Director of Yes4Yorkshire. In early February, the campaign group embarked on a whistle-stop tour of major towns and cities across the region to drum up support for a 'Yorkshire pledge'.

John Watson, a former Conservative MP and Vice Chairman of the Yorkshire Building Society, is Chair of 'Yorkshire Says No'. Martin Hathaway is Secretary, and also the Chief Executive of the Yorkshire and Humber Chambers of Commerce. Along with the Yes4Yorkshire group, Yorkshire Says No are taking part in regular yes/no debates across Yorkshire and the Humber.

'Yes for the North West' was also launched early this year and is chaired by North West business woman Felicity Goodey OBE, a former BBC broadcaster who has held positions at the North West Development Agency, the Cultural Consortium of the North West and was Director of Manchester 2002. The group includes people from "all political parties, trade unions, community groups and business"²¹ and includes such individuals as Richard Leese and Mike Storey (leaders of Manchester and Liverpool councils respectively), Alan Manning (Secretary of north west TUC), Anil Ruia, a director of Granada TV, Andy Burnham MP (Labour, Leigh), Andrew Stunell MP (Liberal Democrat, Hazel Grove), and former deputy leader of Liverpool council, Derek Hatton. The coalition group has visited locations across the North West, including Manchester and Liverpool, Lancashire and Cumbria, to promote the campaign.

The 'North West Says No' campaign is chaired by former Conservative minister Sir David Trippier. Vice Chairs are George Howarth MP (Labour, Knowsley north and Sefton east), George Osbourne MP (Conservative, Tatton) and former Lib Dem MP Sir Cyril Smith. Robin Wendt, former Chief Executive of Cheshire County Council, is Secretary²². This alliance represents the cross-party opposition to an elected assembly in the North West, and reflects the tensions within both the Labour and Lib Dem parties, both of which support regional

²⁰As above.

²¹'Group backs regional parliament'. *BBC News*. 13th February 2004. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/3481945.stm>

²² <http://www.northwestsaysno.org.uk/who.asp>

assemblies nationally. North West Says No claims the support of business figures, Councillors and other MPs, such as Graham Stringer (Labour, Manchester Blackley) and Frank Field (Labour, Birkenhead), and its leaders have taken part in debates across the region alongside their 'yes' counterparts. One such debate, on 22nd January 2004, proved very lively and prompted neither side to claim victory but both to be encouraged by the level of interest²³.

4. Media

Media coverage remains sporadic, although local government reform excites the small rural papers in some areas. The *Manchester Evening News* sponsored a major debate on 22nd January, which over 400 people attended, with others turned away. *The Journal* in Newcastle published a series of articles on the issues surrounding regional assemblies, with most available on a special page of the paper's website²⁴.

5. Public attitudes and identity

YouGov poll

In January, the results of a YouGov poll, commissioned by the Conservative group of the Local Government Association (LGA) were published, which aimed to present a picture of "attitudes towards Labour's proposals for elected regional assemblies."²⁵ Questions were put to a sample size of 3220 people in the eight regions, covering regional and local identification, local government changes, and arguments for and against creating a regional assembly. Participants were also asked whether they were likely to vote 'yes' or 'no' in the referendum on elected regional assemblies.

40% of people said that 'yes', there should be an elected assembly for their region, with 32% saying 'no' and 28% saying 'don't know'. In the three northern regions there appear to be some stark differences, with a clear majority of people stating 'yes' in the North East (48% compared with a 39% 'no' response). In the North West, however, the majority (42%) stated 'don't know' compared with 'yes' and 'no' responses of 32% and 27% respectively. In Yorkshire and the Humber, a slight majority of 39% believe there should not be an elected assembly, with a 35% 'yes' response:

²³ David Ottewell. 'Clash over north west 'parliament''. *Manchester Evening News*. 23rd January 2004. http://www.manchestersonline.co.uk/news/stories/Detail_LinkStory=79093.html

²⁴ <http://icnewcastle.icnetwork.co.uk/regionalassembly/>

²⁵ LGA. (2004). <http://www.lga.gov.uk/conservativegroup/Publication.asp?lsection=543&id=SXB286-A781E3E4&ccat=545>

	Total	North East	North West	Yorkshire and the Humber	East Midlands	West Midlands	East of England	South East	South West
Yes	40	48	32	35	34	44	34	43	51
No	32	39	27	39	35	33	37	30	24
Don't know	28	13	42	26	30	23	28	27	25

From YouGov survey results - see LGA. (2004).

<http://www.lga.gov.uk/conservativegroup/Publication.asp?lsection=543&id=SXB286-A781E3E4&ccat=545>

97%, 99% and 94% correctly identified their region in the North East, North West and Yorkshire and the Humber respectively. There were interesting figures elsewhere, for example, in the East of England where just 52% correctly identified their region and 34% thought they actually lived in the South East. Such figures may suggest something about the variations of strength of regional identity across England.

Given the options of identification with local neighbourhood, town/borough, city, county, region, England, UK and the EU, the majority of people identified most strongly with England. This was also true for the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber whereas a majority of respondents in the North West identified most strongly with the UK. Respondents identified least well on the whole with the EU.

The government has decided that the regional assemblies referendum shall be conducted by an all-postal vote. When confronted with the question “*How likely are you to vote in a referendum on whether to have a regional assembly, if you were sent a ballot paper by post?*”, 52% of respondents said they would be ‘certain to vote’, with only 2% stating they would be ‘certain NOT to vote’.

The issue of local government reorganisation, in the event of a ‘yes’ vote, has gathered momentum over recent months. In light of this participants were asked whether they would prefer to have their county or district council abolished with the creation of a regional assembly. An overwhelming 53% overall stated they would prefer abolition of the county level, with just 22% saying they would rather see the district level abolished. In Yorkshire and the Humber opinion was even more pronounced, with 66% in favour of removing the county level council whilst 16% would be ‘comfortable’ losing district level councils.

A series of arguments for and against creating regional assemblies was then put to participants who were asked to state how persuasive they found each statement. Participants were then asked to state which argument they found the most persuasive, both ‘for’ and ‘against’. Most people stated the following after the first round of ‘for’ statements:

Too many decisions about the region are taken by London based Ministers and civil servants who don't properly understand our issues.

This was also true for the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber but the North West believed the following statement to be the most persuasive:

My region is a place to be proud of and its future should be in the hands of its people.

Subsequently, participants were asked 'Having considered those arguments, should there be an elected assembly for your region?', with the following results:

	Total	North East	North West	Yorkshire and the Humber	East Midlands	West Midlands	East of England	South East	South West
Yes	47	55	65	36	33	49	29	48	50
No	29	29	20	40	29	28	39	29	25
Don't know	24	17	15	24	38	24	32	23	25

From YouGov survey results - see LGA. (2004).

<http://www.lga.gov.uk/conservativegroup/Publication.asp?lsection=543&id=SXB286-A781E3E4&ccat=545>

Clearly the North East and the North West are most in favour of an elected regional assembly at this stage but another frontrunner in the 'yes' category of responses seems to be the South West with a 50% yes response.

The survey then put forward a series of 'against' statements and respondents again had to state which they found most persuasive. The overwhelming response (including the three referendum regions) was:

Britain already has enough politicians. We do not need a new tier of paid, third-rate regional politicians and jobs for the boys. It will not mean a single extra nurse, doctor, police officer(sic) or teacher.

Subsequently, when asked *In light of these arguments, should there be an elected assembly for your region?* Responses appeared to shift:

	Total	North East	North West	Yorkshire and the Humber	East Midlands	West Midlands	East of England	South East	South West
Yes	24	35	35	16	21	21	13	16	30
No	48	41	33	55	52	52	59	50	44
Don't know	28	24	31	29	27	27	29	34	26

From YouGov survey results - see LGA. (2004).

<http://www.lga.gov.uk/conservativegroup/Publication.asp?lsection=543&id=SXB286-A781E3E4&ccat=545>

Continuing, the poll offered another set of arguments against and for respectively. Respondents were again asked to state whether they believed there should or should not be an elected regional assembly. The results were as follows:

After reading 8 statements *against*:

	Total	North East	North West	Yorkshire and the Humber	East Midlands	West Midlands	East of England	South East	South West
Yes	16	23	13	12	15	31	11	4	15

No	71	64	77	69	74	56	83	83	62
Don't know	13	13	9	20	11	13	6	13	23

From YouGov survey results - see LGA. (2004).

<http://www.lga.gov.uk/conservativegroup/Publication.asp?lsection=543&id=SXB286-A781E3E4&ccat=545>

After reading 9 statements for:

	Total	North East	North West	Yorkshire and the Humber	East Midlands	West Midlands	East of England	South East	South West
Yes	24	32	19	21	21	41	17	11	31
No	60	53	71	56	62	42	71	73	45
Don't know	16	15	10	23	17	17	12	16	24

From YouGov survey results - see LGA. (2004).

<http://www.lga.gov.uk/conservativegroup/Publication.asp?lsection=543&id=SXB286-A781E3E4&ccat=545>

According to the YouGov poll, it would appear that after considering certain arguments 'for' and 'against' elected regional assemblies, the majority of respondents would vote 'no' in the referendum.

6. Relations with Westminster and Whitehall

6.1 Making it Happen – The Northern Way

On 2nd February, the ODPM announced publication of its report 'Making it Happen – The Northern Way', the second in a series of updates on the 'Sustainable Communities – Building for the Future' document, launched in February 2003. The report focuses on the progress being made in the North and in the Midlands to transform communities and the quality of life within them. The Deputy Prime Minister announced that this would mean a comprehensive package of "measures to create jobs, sustainable communities, growth in the economy across the North, and to reduce regional disparities between the North and South"²⁶. To achieve this, plans were outlined for close working with regional planning bodies and Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). Mr. Prescott said:

There is new confidence and energy in many of our Northern towns and cities. After years of decline, people are moving back. But they face a different set of challenges from the south east of England especially the economy – therefore we need different solutions to different problems.

Highlighting the report's concept of developing a northern growth corridor, Mr.Prescott stated further that:

²⁶ ODPM. (2004).*Making it Happen – The Northern Way*. Press release 2nd February 2004.

http://www.odpm.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2004_0019

Making the most of the North's potential demands a new mindset – a transregional view – so that the sum of investment and regeneration is greater than the parts.

The Deputy Prime Minister finally underscored the importance of the measures detailed in the report, figures that will undoubtedly be referred to frequently in the coming months:

By raising the economic performance of the North to that of the English average, the three Northern regions would be around £30 billion per year better off, that's around £2,000 per person. Catching up with the average would also generate an extra 200,000 jobs.²⁷

The measures outlined in the report include:

- £69m over two years to revive the housing market in Newcastle and Gateshead
- £ 86m over two years to revive the housing market in Merseyside
- £ 89m for 27 local authorities for new and improved urban parks and green spaces
- Working with the three northern Regional Development Agencies to develop the idea of a Northern Way which exploits existing inter-regional economic and transport corridors in the North

In addition to this, the report stated there would be:

- £10m for the public-private Coalfields Enterprise Fund, to give growing small businesses located in former coalfield areas access to loans
- Intention to expand the London-Stansted-Cambridge growth area to include Peterborough and parts of north Cambridgeshire
- The creation of a sixteenth Urban Regeneration Company in Gloucester - designed to attract private sector investment into the area
- £1.5m to help develop regional centres of excellence, training regeneration professionals in each region
- Proposals for a second Delivering Sustainable Communities summit, to be held in Manchester in early 2005
- Comprehensive guidance for local authorities on housing demand²⁸

²⁷ ODPM. (2004). *Making it Happen – The Northern Way*. Press release 2nd February 2004.

http://www.odpm.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2004_0019

²⁸ ODPM. (2004). *Making it Happen – The Northern Way*. Press release 2nd February 2004.

The report was criticised by some, including the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA), whose Director, Gideon Amos, stated that although the TCPA welcomed the report, “willing the ends without willing the means will not work” adding,

a lack of economic measures such as strategic land acquisition to capture rising values; a failure to tackle the problem of each Regional Development Agency competing with its neighbour for the same investment; and the lack of national strategic transport development will only serve to undermine the latest announcement and make it no more than a paper commitment unless other Whitehall departments begin to pool their investment to make the plans work.²⁹

Although Mr. Amos agreed that emphasis particularly on a northern growth corridor would help to rebut criticism that the Sustainable Communities plan was all about the South East, he argued that the report did not go far enough and that there needs to be spatial planning at a national scale:

There are huge disparities between the different regions of England, in relation to their economies, infrastructure and housing needs. Only by planning for these at a national scale can we hope to create the sustainable communities we need”, said Mr Amos.³⁰

The report was welcomed by the North East, North West and Yorkshire and The Humber regional assemblies.

6.2 Opposition Day debate: Regional Assemblies

On 11th February, the Conservatives used their weekly allotted Opposition Day Debate in the House of Commons to challenge the Government’s plans for regional assemblies. The motion was concerned with the levels of powers proposed for assemblies, the Deputy Prime Minister’s statements indicating the scope for creating additional powers, and encouraged the Deputy Prime Minister to publish a draft bill by the end of June, before the summer recess.

Then Shadow Secretary of State for Local & Devolved Government Affairs, **David Curry (Skipton and Ripon)** initiated the debate³¹:

http://www.odpm.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2004_0019

²⁹ TCPA. ‘*The Northern Way – has some way to go according to TCPA*. Press release. 3rd February 2004. <http://www.tcpa.org.uk/>

³⁰ ³⁰ TCPA. ‘*The Northern Way – has some way to go according to TCPA*. Press release. 3rd February 2004. <http://www.tcpa.org.uk/>

³¹ Since this report was completed David Curry has resigned from the shadow cabinet for “entirely personal reasons”. Caroline Spelman has been appointed to this post. (See Conservative Party press release 15th March 2004 http://www.conservatives.com/news/article.cfm?obj_id=93056)

The motion sets out a simple proposition—when there is a decision to be made about the way in which we are governed, the debate ought to take place on the basis of a clear indication of what is at stake; the time scale; and the powers of the institution that we are debating. That will enable debate to be clear, above board, transparent and honest. The way to achieve that is to publish legislation as early as possible (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1475)

There were a number of shots fired from Labour MPs concerning the apparent confusion over **Mr. Curry's** position on elected regional assemblies, the first coming from **Hilton Dawson (Labour, Lancaster and Wyre)**:

Is the right hon. Gentleman saying that in certain circumstances, if he had the right information, he would be minded to support elected regional assemblies? (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1475)

To which **Mr. Curry** replied:

Until I have the right information it is premature even to ask such a question, because there is no basis on which I can come to a conclusion. (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1475-6).

With **Mr. Curry's** stance on regional devolution questioned further by **Joyce Quin (Labour, Gateshead, East and Washington, West)**, this remained a constant theme throughout the debate. **Mr. Curry** continued to divert the debate to issues of finance, proposing there would be a "further raid on council tax" (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1480) whilst the assemblies would in fact only have control over "2 per cent. of regional public spending." (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1480). The Barnett issue was also raised, with **Mr. Curry** claiming he could find no evidence that this would be reformed alongside elected regional assemblies. Comparisons were drawn between the powers of the Scottish and Welsh assemblies and those proposed for the English regions, with **Mr. Curry** claiming the latter would be insubstantial compared to the former. This foray prompted **Mr. Curry** to claim:

We all agree that the regions need better, more integrated economic development; we all agree that they need to catch up; but the idea that that will be delivered by regional assemblies is surely part of a fantasy world. (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1482).

At the core of the debate was the alleged lack of powers that are currently proposed for assemblies and the fear that, instead of being devolved down from central government, they will be taken up from local government, namely that:

We will end up with assembly members with no mandate, no definable constituency, no accountability and no role,

permanently packing their bags for a journey they never make. (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1483).

The Deputy Prime Minister **John Prescott (Kingston-upon-Hull, East)**, condemned attempts “both to deny people a say in how they want to be governed and to denigrate the value of that choice.” (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1484). **Mr. Prescott** was then careful to note the confusion over **Mr. Curry**’s approach to regional assemblies:

I am not surprised that the Conservatives are confused, because when it comes to devolution, the right hon. Gentleman does not know whether he is coming or going, as he made clear in his contribution. His approach is confusing not only for him but for his colleagues, as we discovered during interventions on his speech. It was not clear whether he was asking for more powers, or whether he supported the proposal. (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1485).

Mr. Prescott continued, suggesting that **Mr. Curry** should outline what powers he would like to see given to a regional assembly. The Deputy Prime Minister then queried:

If devolved government is good enough for the 15 million people who live in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London, it is surely good enough for the 2.5 million people who live in the north-east, the 5 million in Yorkshire and Humberside and the nearly 7 million in the north-west. The Conservative policy is confused and inconsistent. (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1487).

On the issue of the Barnett formula and funding mechanisms, **Graham Brady (Conservative, Altrincham and Sale, West)** queried:

If devolution for Scotland has removed the economic differential between Scotland and England, what is the argument for maintaining the Barnett formula? (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1488)

Mr. Prescott replied the Barnett formula is not “as unfair as people think.” (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1488) but,

The Government are constantly examining the situation and are obliged to distribute resources fairly between nations and regions. That approach is right and it will continue. (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1488).

Pointing towards the Government Offices for the Regions (established by the Conservative government in 1994), **Mr. Prescott** was keen to highlight the fact that there is already a regional tier of government in England but that this is unaccountable and fundamentally undemocratic:

The Government offices for the regions develop strategies to deal with economics, planning, transport, culture, housing, sustainable development, waste, rural action, skills,

employment and skills and the European programme. Those strategies are decided by civil servants in our regions without any democratic accountability. We will not set up talking shops to discuss strategies because they already exist. The problem is that people in the regions are not co-ordinating such strategies or getting them working. We have regional government; we do not have democratic accountability (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1489).

The Deputy Prime Minister called for the Conservatives to decide on their stance where regional assemblies are concerned stating that:

Those who do not want change have to answer for the status quo. If the north had the average growth of the English regions, it would have meant a difference of about £30 billion. Do those who defend the status quo want the regional disparities in our economy to continue to grow? They need to make that clear (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1492-3).

With regards to strengthening the proposed powers, the Deputy Prime Minister stated;

It is true that the powers have been taken further than in the White Paper, but we said in the White Paper that the assemblies would evolve over time. . . We will discuss with the people the powers that we have proposed for the elected assemblies, and we plan to publish a Bill before the House rises in July. (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1494-1495).

Next to take to the dispatch box was Lib Dem regions spokesperson **Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton)** who reminded **Mr. Prescott**;

The Deputy Prime Minister knows that Liberal Democrat Members support regional devolution, but want a much deeper, richer form of it. (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1496).

Mr. Davey emphasised his concerns that the powers proposed for elected assemblies need to be increased or “we will be in danger of losing the argument.” (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1496). Pointing to a further concern, **Mr. Davey** suggested;

even the powers that the elected regional assemblies will have are circumscribed by the targets that they must meet, the Secretary of State's ability to override decisions and the absence of any executive powers for the assemblies (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1496).

According to **Mr. Davey**, the Deputy Prime Minister's proposals are not “enthusing the pro-devolutionists” and “those people who are agnostic and non-doctrinaire about regional devolution are unconvinced.” (*HC*

Debates, 11th February 2004, Col 1497). At least to enthuse the Lib Dems then, it would seem the powers need to be strengthened, with **Mr. Davey** specifically pointing to those governing learning and skills;

If the Government, before they publish the draft Bill, and way before the referendums, were to get the agreement of Ministers at the Department for Education and Skills that the whole budget for the learning and skills councils would go to the regions, they would win huge plaudits (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1498).

Mr. Davey continued to outline what his party would like to see coming under control of any future regional assembly, pointing to the regional housing boards being made democratically accountable and also the Highways Agency, which he noted;

already operates and produces plans on a regional basis. It would therefore be relatively easy to reorganise the functions of its officials as part of the draft Bill. That would make sense, as the agency would then be able to link in with the regional planning boards and regional development agencies, and with the sustainable duties to be placed on the elected regional assemblies. (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1499).

Highlighting the recent report by Lord Haskins which pointed in the direction of regionalising certain Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) services, **Mr. Davey** also suggested that;

Aspects of the work of the Environment Agency, the Forestry Commission and the Countryside Agency must be prime targets for regionalisation, or even localisation. (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1501).

The backbench speeches were kicked off by **Austin Mitchell (Labour, Great Grimsby)** who confirmed his position in support of regional devolution, stating;

The politics of government of this country has been dominated for far too long by London, and local government has been transformed into a system of transporting begging bowls by train or plane up and down the country—begging for decisions that should be made locally to be made out of London. (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1503)

Peter Atkinson (Conservative, Hexham) made clear he believed that Whitehall would be reluctant to let go of any powers and devolve them to the regions suggesting:

The people of the north-east are being conned—the regional assembly will not help them, it will not help to solve the problems of the region, it will cost them a considerable amount of money, it will change the local government structure in a damaging way, taking local decisions away from

people, and it will provide no benefit in the long term to the economy of the region. (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1508-9).

Neil Turner (Labour, Wigan) followed, championing the case for the North West and welcoming the Deputy Prime Minister's proposals for an evolutionary approach to additional powers, suggesting that;

This country's constitution is an unwritten one. One of the great benefits of that is that incremental changes can be made to it on a basis that suits the changing needs and requirements of society (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1509).

Fellow North West MP **George Osbourne (Conservative, Tatton)** was next to speak, who confessed his opposition to regional assemblies on the grounds of representing a Cheshire seat and not wanting to see Cheshire abolished. Much of the remainder of **Mr. Osbourne's** speech was directed at the literature disseminated in the referendum regions by the Government Offices, a leaflet entitled 'A new opportunity for the North West' in this case, which he described as;

the most biased, one-sided piece of propaganda that has been produced by a Government Department in living memory. (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1512).

Graham Brady (Conservative, Altrincham and Sale, West) emphasised the call for a draft bill to be published in July with the proposed powers set out within and suggested that;

the Government cannot agree among themselves what the powers should be. There is a strong suspicion that the Prime Minister is not really interested in regional government and does not support it, but is merely humouring the Deputy Prime Minister. (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1517-8).

The Minister for Local and Regional Government, **Nick Raynsford (Greenwich and Woolwich)**, had the final word;

it is the Opposition who are confused about the powers and role of regional assemblies which, for their benefit, I shall spell out in simple terms. Elected regional assemblies mean more accountable regional government. They mean less say for the Whitehall machine and more power where it belongs—in the hands of the people in the regions. (*HC Debates*, 11th February 2004, Col 1527).

The regions at Westminster

Source	Date	Column number	Subject	Raised by
Written Answers	17 th November	533W	Elected Regional Assemblies	Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge)
Written Answers	17 th November	537W	Regional Assemblies	Gordon Prentice (Pendle)

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Written Answers	17 th November	538W	Regional Co-ordination unit	Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar)
Written Answers	18 th November	799W	Elected Regional Assemblies	Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge)
Written Answers	18 th November	808W	Regional Co-ordination Unit	Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar)
Written Answers	20 th November	1303W	Regional Co-ordination Unit	Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar)
Written Answers	20 th November	1303W	Regional Resilience Forums	Patrick Mercer (Newark)
Written Answers	3 rd December	99W	Regional Assemblies	Andrew Rosindell (Romford)
Written Answers	8 th December	337W	Regional Pay Flexibility	Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne Central)
Written Answers	8 th December	348W	Regional Assemblies	Andrew Rosindell (Romford)
Written Answers	9 th December	384W	Regional Waste Plans	David Drew (Stroud)
Written Answers	9 th December	394W	Regional Emphasis Documents	Linda Perham (Ilford North)
Written Answers	10 th December	479W	Regional Assemblies	Gordon Prentice (Pendle)
Lords Written Answers	15 th December	WA104	Regional Assemblies	Lord Stoddart of Swindon
Written Answers	16 th December	816W	North West Regional Development Agency	Graham Stringer (Manchester, Blackley)
Written Ministerial Statements	18 th December	147WS	Regional and Local Referendums	Nick Raynsford (Greenwich and Woolwich)
Written Answers	18 th December	1050W	Regional Development Agencies	Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey)
Written Answers	5 th January	121W	Regional Development Agencies	Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight)
Written Answers	5 th January	137W	Regional Tourist Boards	Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove)
Written Answers	5 th January	148W	Regional Assemblies	David Curry (Skipton and Ripon)
Westminster Hall	6 th January	34WH	West Lothian Question	Sir Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield)
Written Answers	6 th January	342W	Regional Assemblies	Andrew George (St Ives)
Written Answers	6 th January	346W	Regional Housing Boards	Mark Hoban (Fareham)
Written Answers	7 th January	373W	Regional Development Agencies	Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury)
Written Answers	7 th January	403W	Regional Assemblies	David Curry (Skipton and Ripon)
Written Answers	8 th January	442W	Regional Development Agencies	Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury)
Written Answers	12 th January	567W	EU Regional Funding	Ann Winterton (Congleton)
Written Answers	13 th January	639W	Regional Differences	Andrew Rosindell (Romford)
Written Answers	13 th January	725W	Regional Chambers and Local Authorities	Bernard Jenkin (North Essex)
Written Answers	19 th January	1040W	North West Regional	Lindsay Hoyle

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			Development Agency	(Chorley)
Written Answers	20 th January	1204W	Regional Government	Bernard Jenkin (North Essex)
Written Ministerial Statements	21 st January	64WS	Elections (Pilot Regions)	Christopher Leslie (Shipley)
Lords Written Statements	21 st January	WS44	European Parliamentary and Local Elections: Pilot Regions for 2004	Lord Filkin
Written Answers	26 th January	167W	Regional Assemblies	Philip Hammond (Runnymede & Weybridge)
Written Answers	26 th January	167W	Regional Economic Disparities	Bernard Jenkin (North Essex)
Written Answers	26 th January	168W	Regional Government	Bernard Jenkin (North Essex)
Written Answers	27 th January	302W	Regional Development Agencies	Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury)
Written Answers	27 th January	308W	Regional Assemblies	Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire)
Written Answers	28 th January	376W	Regional Development Agencies	Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury)
Written Answers	29 th January	508W	Regional Assemblies	Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge)
Written Answers	30 th January	608W	European Regional Funding	Ann Winterton (Congleton)
Written Answers	30 th January	612W	Regional Assemblies	Bernard Jenkin (North Essex)
Written Ministerial Statements	2 nd February	26WS	Making it Happen: The Northern Way	John Prescott (Kingston upon Hull East)
Commons Debates	11 th February	1475	Regional Assemblies	David Curry (Skipton and Ripon)
Written Answers	11 th February	1528W	Regional Government	Andrew Rosindell (Romford)
Written Ministerial Statements	12 th February	82WS	Regional Assemblies	Nick Raynsford (Greenwich and Woolwich)

Source: Hansard

7. EU issues

Nothing to report.

8. Local government

Boundary Committee draft options

On the 1st December 2003, the Government-appointed Boundary Committee³² published its draft recommendations for the reorganisation of local government for the 2-tier areas within the North East, North West and Yorkshire and the Humber. The electorate of Northumberland, Durham, Cumbria, Lancashire, Cheshire and North Yorkshire will have an extra question on their ballot papers in the referendum asking which form of local government reorganisation they would prefer. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) directed the Boundary Committee to carry out reviews earlier this year in the six counties with a view to presenting at least two options for unitary local government under the Government's concession for allowing regional referendums (see English Regions Report No 13, November 2003 report for further details). General options include retaining the county-wide structure, thus abolishing district councils, and other variations on the unitary theme, such as merging certain district councils into a total of two or three unitary authorities in each area. The Committee put the options out to public consultation from the 1st December 2003 to 23rd February 2004 and the final recommendations will then be made to John Prescott on 25th May, nine days before local and European elections.

The Conservatives have deemed the review and consultation unnecessary. David Curry, then shadow local government and regions secretary, claimed that "taxpayers would pay dearly for Mr Prescott's grand design for English devolution."³³ Interestingly, in the regions, local press coverage has grown compared to the typical level of coverage of issues relating to regional assemblies. This is indicative of a nation which has strong, historically rooted local government structures and reflects the fact that this issue is being perceived as closer to the hearts of the general public than the recent politics of regional devolution.

North East

Northumberland (2 options)

- A county-wide authority for Northumberland
- 2 unitary authorities for the urban south-east and rural north-west of the current county

Co. Durham (3 draft options)

- A county-wide unitary for Durham

³²<http://www.boundarycommittee.org.uk/>

³³ Peter Hetherington. 'County councils could be swept away by new review'. *The Guardian*. 2nd December 2003.

- 2 unitary authorities based on a north-east Durham and south Durham split
- unitary authorities, north Durham, east Durham and south Durham

In Northumberland, there are two likely options, the first being the retention of a county-wide authority where powers would effectively be handed up to the county, the second involving splitting the county into two authorities, one covering the rural and market towns and the other taking in the more urban south-east of the county. According to Newcastle's *The Journal* (1st December 2003), however, Northumberland's district councils had favoured a three-way split of the county into super-districts but are "still expected to back the proposals for two unitary authorities."³⁴

The *Evening Chronicle* (1st December 2003) reported that Northumberland County Council supports a county wide structure with leader Michael Davey claiming that "it would save money on red tape, leaving more money for schools, care of the elderly and other front line services."³⁵ However, the *Chronicle* also reported Blyth Valley Council leader, Councillor Dave Stephens, as saying: "It's good to see that a strong argument for a south east Northumberland authority has been accepted and if it is voted in we will be able to concentrate on the needs of people in that area."³⁶ Councillor John Taylor, leader of Alnwick Council, also supports a rural-urban unitary split: "Increasingly the Government has recognised the need for the rural voice to be heard. In the event of a 'yes' vote, the Boundary Committee is giving us the opportunity to have a rural council."³⁷ *The Hexham Courant* (5th December 2003) expressed local disappointment that a third option was not put forward, which would have involved a three-way split of Northumberland into an urban south-east authority, a rural north authority and a third for the south-west, which would have consisted of Tynedale and the rest of Castle Morpeth³⁸.

In County Durham, three options are proposed. Similar to proposals for Northumberland, there is a county-wide option as well as two versions of a 'super districts' structure. Durham County Council is in favour of retaining a county-wide unitary authority, proposing that a single authority would deliver better services. Another proposal is for three 'super councils', which would merge Chester-le-Street with Derwentside, Durham City with Easington and Wear Valley with Sedgefield and Easington. *The Northern Echo* (1st December 2003) quote Councillor Bob Fleming, leader of Sedgefield Borough Council: "The majority of the existing district councils oppose a single unitary authority because it

³⁴ David Higginson. 'Battle is on for the county halls'. *The Journal*. 1st December 2003.

³⁵ Peter Young. 'Shake-up unveiled'. *The Evening Chronicle*. 1st December 2003.

³⁶ See above.

³⁷ See above.

³⁸ 'Tynedale set to lose control'. *Hexham Courant*. 5th December 2003.

would be too large and would have difficulty identifying with the people it represents.”³⁹ Deputy leader of Easington, Robin Todd, suggested there should be a reorganisation into smaller councils⁴⁰. *The Northern Echo* (2nd December 2003) quoted John Docherty, head of management support at Wear Valley District Council, as claiming: “We are against a single unitary authority because we think it would be too big a population and too geographically widespread to become local government”⁴¹. *The Echo* also reported that Sue Pitts, leader of Durham City Council, was disappointed that a ‘Greater Durham’ option had not been included⁴².

North West

Lancashire (3 options)

- A county-wide authority for Lancashire
- 2 unitary authorities for central and northern Lancashire
- unitary authorities for central, eastern and northern Lancashire

Cumbria (2 draft options)

- A county-wide unitary for Cumbria
- 2 unitary authorities based roughly on a north/south split of the existing county

Cheshire (3 draft options)

- A county-wide unitary for Cheshire
- 2 unitary authorities based on an east/west division of the current county
- unitary authorities based on a pairing of existing district councils

³⁹ Andrew White. ‘Proposals for shake-up of local authorities due today’. *The Northern Echo*. 1st December 2003.

http://www.thisisthenortheast.co.uk/the_north_east/archive/2003/12/01/A94djs.newsby.html

⁴⁰ ‘Battle lines drawn for your council’. *The Journal*. 2nd December 2003.

⁴¹ Andrew White. ‘County could disappear under local authority shake-up plan’. *The Northern Echo*. 2nd December 2003.

http://www.thisisthenortheast.co.uk/the_north_east/archive/2003/12/02/A94j7u.newsby.html

⁴² See above.

The second and third draft options for Lancashire would involve Sefton taking control of Ormskirk and surrounding villages in the west of the district, whilst Wigan would take control of Skelmersdale. In the north of the county, Barrow-in-Furness and South Lakeland would be merged into Cumbria, Blackburn would be enlarged to include Darwen, and the remaining areas distributed between Blackpool and Rochdale⁴³. Liverpool's *Daily Post* (2nd December 2003) reported that in Sefton and West Lancashire, "Senior politicians and council management last night [1st December] reacted angrily to shock proposals to split West Lancashire's 108,400 population in two, and abolish the district council outright."⁴⁴ According to the *Daily Post*, "Sefton's Labour leader David Martin, Liberal Democrat group leader, Tony Robertson, and Tory group leader, Les Byrom, said they would resist any future proposals to remove Sefton from Merseyside as a result of expansion and pledged to launch a consultation with neighbouring authorities and the Boundary Committee."⁴⁵ *The Bury News* (2nd December 2003) focused on the omission of a Bury-Rossendale merger by the Boundary Committee stating both were too weak and so the option would be 'risky'.

The Committee proposes three options for Lancashire voters in the event of a 'yes' vote. Firstly the county-wide unitary option comprising 1 million people. Secondly, there would be a number of unitaries, one of which would be East Lancashire, comprising most of Rossendale and also Burnley, Hyndburn, Pendle, Ribble Valley and Blackburn with Darwen. The third option would see the creation of two councils, one for East Lancashire (Blackburn with Darwen, Hyndburn, Ribble Valley) and one for South East Lancashire (Burnley, Pendle and most of Rossendale)⁴⁶.

The second option for Cheshire would see the county split down the middle with two authorities effectively making up an East and West. The East Cheshire authority would comprise Congleton, Macclesfield, eastern parts of Crewe and Nantwich and some areas of Vale Royal. The western authority would cover Chester city, Ellesmere Port and Neston, the remaining western parts of Crewe and Nantwich and Vale Royal. The third option would involve an East Cheshire council of Congleton and Macclesfield, a Mid-Cheshire council covering Vale Royal and Crewe and Nantwich, and a Chester and West Chester council comprising Ellesmere Port and Neston and Chester.

The *Daily Post* (2nd December 2003) quoted Cheshire County Council leader Paul Findlow: "I am delighted that the Boundary Committee has

⁴³ Petra Mann and Deborah James. 'Boundaries to be shaken up'. *The Daily Post*. 2nd December 2003

⁴⁴ See above.

⁴⁵ See above.

⁴⁶ 'Council fury at merger decision'. *Bury News*. 2nd December.
<http://www.thisislancashire.co.uk/lancashire/archive/2003/12/02/BURYNEWS4ZM.html>

recognised the strength of our submission which we strongly believe is in the best interests of the people of Cheshire.”⁴⁷ The *Northwich Chronicle* (3rd December 2003) echoed Cheshire County Council’s desire to have a unitary authority based on the current county-level structure, based on figures suggesting that retaining a county-level authority would be the least costly and least disruptive to services. Anne Bingham-Holmes, Chief Executive of Vale Royal Borough Council, is reported to believe that three unitary authorities for Cheshire will “ensure continuity of local leadership, local control, local services and local choice”⁴⁸.

The *Crewe Chronicle* (3rd December 2003) focused on the ‘delight’ of local borough councillors as being a step closer to gaining their preferred structure of local government. Crewe & Nantwich and Congleton Borough Councils are backing the three-way split option with leader of the former, Peter Kent, claiming that new councils have the potential to take a new approach. Leader of Congleton, Roland Domleo, was quoted as saying: “Local democracy is best served by being kept close to the people and an East Cheshire unitary would be the only way of achieving that for the people of Congleton Borough.”⁴⁹ Peter Burns, leader of Macclesfield Borough Council, was reported as stating in the *Crewe Chronicle* that, whilst recognising that “the option for a unitary Cheshire council has to be part of the ongoing debate, we firmly believe it would threaten the diversity of local government.”⁵⁰

The *Ellesmere Port Pioneer* (3rd December 2003) put forward the arguments for both county-wide and district-level unitary authorities, but also reported that Fred Venables, leader of Ellesmere Port & Neston, had urged people to be sceptical about Cheshire County Council’s claims that expenditure would be reduced by opting for a county authority⁵¹. With all six councils in the county encouraging local people to make their views known to the Boundary Committee, there is undoubtedly an interesting battle ahead.

Yorkshire and the Humber

The Boundary Committee have submitted four proposals for Yorkshire and the Humber:

- A county-wide authority for the whole of North Yorkshire

⁴⁷ Petra Mann and Deborah James. ‘Boundaries to be shaken up’. *The Daily Post*. 2nd December 2003.

⁴⁸ Paul Brown. ‘The shape of things to come’. *Northwich Chronicle*. 3rd December 2003.

⁴⁹ Peter Morse. ‘We are heading in the right direction’. *Crewe Chronicle*. 3rd December 2003.

⁵⁰ See above.

⁵¹ Phil Robinson. ‘Future of council is in your hands’. *Ellesmere Port Pioneer*. 3rd December 2003.

- A two-way split merging Craven with Harrogate and then joining Ryedale, Hambleton, Richmondshire and Scarborough into a North Riding of Yorkshire authority
- A two-way split merging Craven, Harrogate and Richmondshire into a Yorkshire Dales authority and then Ryedale, Scarborough and Hambleton into a North York Moors council
- Three unitary authorities, pairing Ryedale with Scarborough, Craven and Harrogate and finally Richmondshire and Hambleton.

The City of York would remain intact and Selby would be incorporated into an East Riding of Yorkshire option.

Media coverage in Ryedale suggested that more information is required on the proposals and quoted Eileen Bosomworth, leader of Scarborough Borough Council, as saying: “One authority for North Yorkshire, 100 miles wide, is not the right local choice. The people of North Yorkshire deserve better than that. They need local representation and local services.”⁵² Scarborough, Ryedale, Hambleton, Craven, Harrogate and Richmondshire have all recommended the three-way split option to the Boundary Committee⁵³. Councillor Murray Naylor, deputy leader of North Yorkshire County Council, however, has suggested that the county option would be the “cheapest and be the least disruptive to local authority services.”⁵⁴ Councillor Naylor suggested identity may be an important factor; “North Yorkshire is a county of real heritage and history. Do people want to throw that away in favour of small unitary councils with new names?”⁵⁵

In the East Riding of Yorkshire, there were some grievances about the fact that voters there would not be allowed a say on the future of Selby, as residents of an existing unitary council⁵⁶. Also a unitary council, York City Council will not be affected by the reorganisation and media coverage was relatively neutral. The *York Evening Press* (1st December 2003) for example, reported that “The proposals have been ‘cautiously welcomed’ by City of York Council leaders.”⁵⁷ As in the North West, a tussle is likely to emerge in the coming months between the county council and district/borough councils over which option is the best. It

⁵² David Jeffels. ‘Vote on Yorkshire Parliament next year’. *Ryedale Gazette & Herald*. 1st December 2003.

http://www.thisisryedale.co.uk/ryedale/archive/2003/12/03/ryedale_news_local10ZM.html

⁵³ As above.

⁵⁴ As above.

⁵⁵ As above.

⁵⁶ ‘‘No vote’ on plans to merge regions’. *Hull Daily Mail*. 3rd December 2003. www.thisishull.co.uk

⁵⁷ Richard Edwards. ‘Options for council shake-up unveiled’. *York Evening Press*. 1st December 2003.

http://www.thisisyork.co.uk/york/archive/2003/12/01/york_news_local12ZM.html

remains to be seen to what lengths the councils involved will go to encourage voting either way.

9. Finance

Nothing to report.

10. The political parties

Tory re-awakening?

Since this section was composed, David Curry has resigned from his post as Shadow Local and Devolved Government Secretary for personal reasons. Caroline Spelman has been appointed to this post⁵⁸.

The Conservatives, meanwhile, are biding their time. The previous local government and regions spokesman, David Curry (MP for Skipton and Ripon), a former local government minister, was firmly on the left of the party, a pro-European who faced de-selection battles in his constituency as a result of his liberal views. Significantly, (in terms of the nature of his previous position) he is privately friendly with the local and regional government minister, Nick Raynsford. Unlike other senior Tories, he had never dismissed regional devolution out of hand, implying in the past that it might have merits in some form while maintaining - in a recent interview with one of the authors - that Britain now had a quasi-federal system "by default". In short, David Curry had been facing a difficult balancing act.

As shadow minister he was deeply critical of John Prescott, claiming that he is making "astonishing" new claims for stronger powers for the proposed assemblies and... "he has no authority to do that." He also thinks the ODPM miscalculated badly by opting for referendums in the three northern regions:

I think the government is barmy not to have started with (a referendum) in the north east - just a single one. If I'd wanted to pursue this agenda, that's what I would have done.

Predicting a 'no' vote in Yorkshire, with the North West "more equivocal", he added:

If you genuinely believed in regional government - if regional government with real responsibilities might work - then this (Prescott's package) is a piddling little insult. How much expenditure will be under the control (of proposed assemblies)? Two per cent. Now even 6p in the Pound. And all we're being offered is an apparatus being set up to control

⁵⁸ See Conservative Party press release (15th March 2004) http://www.conservatives.com/news/article.cfm?obj_id=93056

two per cent. He (Prescott) is now hinting that the Barnett formula (which distributes spending to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) will be reviewed. He hasn't got a shred of authority to talk about that.

Asked how a future Conservative government would respond in the event of a 'yes' vote in at least one region, Curry replied:

I don't know yet. We'll have to look at the turnout, how far down the road it was...we haven't got round to that yet.

He dismissed ideas of a new Tory regional policy, arguing instead that "new vigour" had to be injected into local government.

I rather like the idea of elected mayors. I think we should do all we can to trigger elections. We might not win them, but there is a pretty good chance that Labour will lose them.

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