

# **FOR A PROGRESSIVE REGIONALISM**

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**About the author:**

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### **About Compass and this project**

Compass is platform for a good society, a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We build networks of ideas, parties and organisations to help make systemic change happen. Our strategic focus is to understand, build, support and accelerate new forms of democratic practice and collaborative action that are taking place in civil society and the economy, and to link that up with state reforms and policy. The meeting point of emerging horizontal participation and vertical resources and policy we call [45° Change](#). The question we are trying to help solve, as we endeavour to #BuildBackBetter, is not just what sort of society we want, but, increasingly, how to make it happen?

*Covid-19 has highlighted how centralised we are. It's bizarre that someone in London can stop me from going out for a pint in Bolton. There are suggestions that a white paper on devolution will be published soon. Now is the time for some radical thinking on how England can be democratised. This paper argues for 'progressive regionalism' as a solution to the 'English Problem' – what to do with a highly centralised, outdated and undemocratic model of political governance which has presided over an increasing gulf between London and the South with the rest of England which is only likely to get worse with the economic effects of Covid-19 (as well as Brexit) starting to make themselves felt.*

## **A disunited Kingdom**

The United Kingdom is less united than it has ever been. Scotland is moving increasingly towards independence, whilst Wales is showing growing interest in taking devolution much further, with support for independence also going up. Prospects for a united Ireland are becoming ever more pronounced, stimulated by Brexit and changed attitudes and life styles. The 'Britain' that we have known for generations is slipping away and unless we splinter into (at least) three parts, it needs to be re-imagined, based on a federation of equals.

The English left is completely at sea with issues around identity. There is a view that being 'internationalist' means that loyalties to nation, region and even perhaps locality are dangerous. So we have left the door open to the right to seize on identity and propel it in a reactionary direction, with English nationalism being its outcome, now shared by many Conservatives as well as the far right fringe. Starmer appears to be making a pitch for it – but it's a really dangerous road to tread and a 'patriotic' English Labour will always be outbid by the right.

With the devolved nations increasingly moving apart, where does that leave England? Calls for an 'English Parliament' continue to be raised by politicians on both the left and right of the political spectrum, though 'English nationalism' remains the preserve of the right, despite occasional opportunist attempts by sections of the left to capture it for a more progressive political trajectory. It will struggle, and the reality is that an English parliament would be dominated by the South and London - with the regions, particularly the North, more neglected and isolated than ever.

## **Progressive regionalism for England**

The alternative to an increasingly right-wing English nationalism which is the antithesis of the progressive nationalisms of Scotland, Wales and

Ireland is, in England, progressive regionalism. It is showing some signs of life, particularly in the North. It is the truest form of patriotism, recognising and celebrating the diversity of the English nation and not accepting regions being subservient to the centre (London). Neither is it antagonistic to other nations within the UK, recognising that we have much in common and share a similar sense of neglect by a traditionally over-centralised state.

What does 'progressive regionalism' actually mean? It's partly about taking power out of the centre – in the case of the UK, Westminster – and devolving functions to sufficiently large entities. In a way, what Scotland and Wales have is 'regional devolution' that would be recognisable to a continental politician. Certain powers, for example defence, etc. are 'reserved' for the central body. In the case of Scotland, the Scottish Parliament has devolved power over a wide range of areas including transport, health and education. The same could work for the English regions. Scotland – a majority, if polls are to be believed – wants to go further to full independence which is only a decision that the Scots (i.e. those living in Scotland) can make.

An English regionalism would want to see powers over all 'domestic' areas devolved to regional bodies, with tax-raising powers. To this, size is important. You wouldn't devolve powers over transport policy to a local authority, neither would you do that for strategic aspects of health, education and planning. British political thinking has been very slow to understand there is a 'middle tier' of government that could do what the central state currently does but which too local focus would be inappropriate.

A further differentiator between civic regionalism and English nationalism is that it is inclusive: it embraces all who live and work in the region: it isn't about 'birthrights' and blood loyalties. Leave that for the far right.

## **Not local, not national. The importance of the *regional***

The importance of regional government lies in providing a strong 'middle tier' of government between the national and local. Within England, an aversion to 'regional' government has often led to either an over-centralised approach with central government taking on inappropriate powers, or to an expectation that local government can take on functions which are really too strategic for them. This can lead to a dog's dinner of 'combined authorities' which are very poor substitutes for democratically elected and well resourced regions, working with local government.

## A democratic deficit

There are suggestions that a white paper on devolution will be published soon. Now is the time for some radical thinking on how England can be democratised. The ‘combined authority’ model, pushed through by George Osborne, is not real devolution and needs to be scrapped. It’s astonishing that this apology for devolution, with an elected mayor but without elected members, has been accepted so meekly. Once the mayor is elected they have virtually no accountability.

We are seeing combined authorities such as Greater Manchester and Merseyside take on increasing powers, often at the expense of local authorities who are fobbed off by being members of various combined authority committees. At least when we had the metropolitan county councils (abolished by Thatcher) they were accountable to directly-elected politicians. Democracy in the ‘combined authorities’ hardly exists. The chain of accountability if you have concerns over transport, planning, the environment and health are very long and tortuous, with no obvious way of influencing policy. The alternative is very clear, using the model that works for Scotland and Wales: directly-elected assemblies, using a fair voting system. The London model of an elected mayor overseen by an elected assembly (based on PR) works up to a point but the assembly members need more power.

## The North of England

Over the last 30 years the growth of regionalist politics in the North of England has been slow and hesitant. The Scottish nationalist and socialist Chris Harvie called it “the dog that never barked”. Since then, we’ve seen the emergence of regionalist parties in Yorkshire, the North-East and Cumbria. None have yet to make a significant breakthrough, but give them time. The Hannah Mitchell Foundation was set up in 2010 to provide a non-party ‘think tank’ on Northern issues and the need for ‘democratic devolution’. More recently, ‘[Same Skies West Yorkshire](#)’ has emerged as a lively outlier which takes the need to be fully inclusive of Yorkshire’s diverse communities seriously.

Currently, the Hannah Mitchell Foundation is considering its future role, with a suggestion to re-name it ‘Campaign for Northern Democracy’ (CfND). [Civic Revival](#) is developing a niche as an informal network of local civic activists with a base in the North.

# One super-region, or several Northern regions working together?

Should Northern regionalism aim for a pan-Northern governing body?

There are arguments for and against, but the reality is that a 'Northern' political body – a 'super region' – would be very large, covering a population of over 15 million. This is larger than any of the existing German lander (states). Arguably, it would be simply too big for a viable regional body. At the same time, it would rub up against current campaigns, admittedly still at embryonic stages, for regional government in Yorkshire and the North-East.

'Identity' is an important thing and as things stand, regional identities for some parts of the North, e.g. Yorkshire and to some degree Lancashire and the North-East, are stronger than an overarching 'Northerness'. In fact, the two could easily co-exist.

Going for 'historic' regional identities, suitably configured to represent modern day realities, makes more sense. This could combine with close working across the North on a range of sectors. Already, Transport for the North is an example of this, though it needs more power and resources, as well as greater accountability.

Historic 'reconfigured' regional identities could include:

- Yorkshire, covering North, West and South Yorkshire, plus unitaries north of the Humber
- 'Northumbria' – Co. Durham and Northumberland (i.e. 'The North-East')
- Lancashire – Existing Lancashire plus Greater Manchester and Merseyside
- Cumbria – the existing county
- Cheshire – the existing two 'Cheshires' plus Warrington and Halton.

These are just suggestions – there's a need for a debate. It wouldn't suit everyone – some Lancashire campaigners want to see Lancashire 'North of the Sands' return to Lancashire. Yet the existing 'Cumbria' makes a lot of sense and there is nothing to stop the people of Ulverston, Barrow and Grange from celebrating their historic cultural identities as Lancastrians. The county of Cheshire, before it was split into two (or more) parts makes sense as one small region. There would be an argument for Merseyside (population 1.4m) being a separate regional authority. This would still leave 'Lancashire' as a sizeable region, with Greater Manchester absorbed into it.

A key point is that regions do not have to be the same or similar size. They certainly need to be big enough, both in population and geographical size,

to do things that a local authority would struggle to do. Cumbria for example has a population about half a million but covers a geographical area of 6,768 square miles. Compare that with Greater Manchester which covers 493 square miles but has a population of 2.8 million. The final outcome should depend on what people want, rather than having something imposed (as in 1974) which nobody is really happy with.

There would be much scope for pan-Northern collaboration. Transport is an obvious sector, with east-west links traditionally having low priority. The existing Transport for the North forms a starting point to address that problem, with five or six regions collaborating rather than the current twenty-plus authorities which make up TfN. A 'Council of the North' could be formed to bring together regional assemblies to share and debate issues of common interest and when appropriate speak with a common voice.

## **A comparison with Germany**

The position in Germany gives food for thought. It has a strong, well-established system of regional government. The 16 lander vary in size a great deal. Nordrhein-Westfalen has a population of nearly 18 million covering a land mass of 13,565 square miles. However, only five states have a population between 18 and 6 million. The remaining eleven have populations of between 4m and the smallest, Bremen, with just 683,000. Equally important in considering English regionalism is what the German lander actually do, and don't.

The jurisdiction of the federal government includes defence, foreign affairs, immigration, citizenship, communications, and currency standards. The states have powers over police (excluding federal police), most of education, transport, housing, health, among others. The states often choose to work together on specific issues. The current devolved powers for Scotland are similar in many respects, though in Germany the states have stronger embedded powers under the 'Basic Law'.

## **A Federal Britain**

The logic of the UK's current direction (or at least, 'one kind of logic') is for a Federal Britain, an idea that has been advocated by a few thoughtful politicians. It wouldn't satisfy all the aspirations of Scots and Welsh nationalists, but may well be seen by many as a good compromise, providing it is a genuine federation of equals, not the current Westminster-centric approach. But if Scotland does decide to go for independence, there should still be scope for collaboration on the huge range of issues where

there are common interests.

The federation should comprise the devolved nations and, within England, regional assemblies (i.e. not an English parliament). England itself could have a national forum based on the English regions, agreeing to co-operate on relevant issues, but the power should lie in the regions.

The federation should have a degree of flexibility, with some nations (and regions) having perhaps more powers than others. There should, however, be an agreed number of 'reserved powers' for the Federal Government, which could include defence, foreign affairs, immigration and citizenship. The position of Ireland is an interesting and challenging one, and even a future united independent Ireland should have a special, close relationship with this new Britain.

The question of where the location of a British federal government should be located is a minor issue. Given London's historic role as the capital of the UK, there are sound reasons for keeping it there and avoiding the tokenism of putting it somewhere 'in the middle'. In any case, the political centre of gravity will have changed fundamentally, making Manchester, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Belfast, Cardiff and other great cities infinitely more important than now - and London less so.

There would be a much smaller civil service, given that most of their functions would be devolved. The number of MPs should be much less, elected on the basis of a fair voting system. The Lords should be re-structured as an elected body reflecting the national and regional diversity of the UK, again through a proportional voting system.

## **Local and hyper-local**

The debate around regionalisation and federalism should not neglect the importance of local government, which has suffered a serious loss of power, status and resources over the last 30 years. Regional government must go with well-resourced local government with strong powers. As a principle, regional government shouldn't take powers from the local but from the centre.

The current trend towards ever-larger local authorities should be reversed. Local government should mean what it says it is, not an under-resourced sub-regional set of councils without any deep-rooted identities and no support from the community. Local government needs fundamental reform, with a move back towards smaller authorities which have the powers to co-operate with neighbouring authorities and do whatever they want to do that is legal (e.g. running their own buses, housing provision, commercial activities as well as the traditional core responsibilities including schools, local health and social care).

The last few years have seen the growth of ‘hyper-local’ political parties and groups of radical-minded ‘independents’, who are coming together under the ‘Flatpack Democracy’ banner, first unveiled in Frome, Somerset. This is a very positive development and again highlights the need for grass-roots democracy. If we are to bring local democracy back to the people, we need more town and parish councils which would work positively with reformed district councils to revitalise their communities. In many cases, this needs the establishment of new parish/town councils, particularly in areas that are more urban and have seen their identities lost through centralisation. Within my own area, places that stand out include Farnworth, Radcliffe, Colne Valley, Nelson and Darwen.

## Making it happen

No-one would say that any of this is going to be easy. The big questions are “would it be an improvement? Would it help revive struggling communities? Would it help safeguard the best of what we have created in the UK these last 200 years?”

If the answer is ‘yes’ to at least some of these questions, there is a need for networks that can push the agenda for radical reform. In some cases it may be about political parties promoting change (including at the ‘hyper-local’ levels) but it is important that thinking within all the existing mainstream political parties is influenced.

As the main opposition party in Westminster, Labour is well placed to promote civic regionalism, but it would need to shed decades of centralist and sectarian thinking. Starmer should avoid the siren calls of English nationalism and look at the progressive alternative that is regionalism. Greens, Lib Dems and even some Tories should be open to ideas that run counter to English nationalism.

The problem is England and we, the English. We are not prepared to think through creative ways forward that ‘threaten the union’. But the biggest threat to the union is to sit back and do nothing. The union that has existed for centuries, based on a centralised state in London, is no longer fit for purpose and we must not repeat the mistakes that were made with Ireland in the 1920s which – after a lot of bloodshed and bitterness – led to complete separation. We need constructive engagement with people in Scotland, Wales and Ireland – not to try and persuade them that we live in the best of all possible worlds, but that we should all be partners in helping to create one, at least one that is better than we’ve got. That means a big change within England.

“The dog that never barked” – English regionalism – needs to wake up and start yapping. It has enough to yap about, and there are growing opportu-

nities to intervene. Probably the most immediate support will come from the Northern regions but there may be similar rumblings in other parts of England. The forthcoming white paper is the obvious immediate issue. Step forward Campaign for Northern Democracy!

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