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Adam Evans

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'Inevitably the package will be dismissed [...] as inadequate and grudging': regionalism, ambivalence and the road to the North East of England referendum defeat in 2004

Adam Evans 

Wales Governance Centre, Cardiff University, Cardiff, Wales, UK

ABSTRACT

The New Labour Government of 1997 to 2010 oversaw considerable constitutional reforms, particularly in relation to the United Kingdom's territorial constitution. While devolution to Scotland and Wales, and the peace process that saw the re-establishment of devolved institutions to Northern Ireland (notwithstanding their subsequent instability), will be familiar to any student of British politics since 1997, there was also an English dimension to this reform agenda. Labour's 1997 election manifesto included a commitment to, at an appropriate time and in areas where there was sufficient demand, legislate for referendums for regional government. This commitment would play out in the 2004 referendum held in the North East of England when an overwhelming majority of those voting rejected the proposed local assembly. This article looks at the years leading up to that referendum, drawing on the latest government papers from that period which have been released, as well as contemporaneous analyses. While the ambivalence felt by many within the UK Government towards regional devolution has been discussed before, this article sheds new light on the extent, and scale, of those sentiments, as well as on the wariness and scepticism felt by those at the very heart of Downing Street regarding the Government's devolution agenda.



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Introduction

The election of the New Labour government in 1997 ushered in a period of significant constitutional reform. This was particularly true of the territorial constitution, with Labour delivering a devolution programme that saw the creation of a Scottish Parliament, a National Assembly for Wales and the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland. Labour's 1997 manifesto commitments also included extended to regional policy in England. Their manifesto pledged to establish 'regional chambers' to provide a more 'coordinated regional voice' in a number of policy areas (for example, transport and planning), as well as 'regional development agencies' as a means of coordinating

CONTACT Adam Evans  evansab1@cf.ac.uk  Wales Governance Centre, Cardiff University, Cardiff, Wales, UK

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regional economic development. The manifesto also suggested, however, that ‘in time’ a Labour government would ‘introduce legislation to allow people, region by region, to decide in a referendum, whether they want directly elected regional government.’¹

This article focuses on the internal discussions and debates that took place after 1997 on regional devolution in England.² While the story of English regional devolution’s ultimate failure, following an ignominious electoral rejection of the policy in the 2004 North East of England referendum is a familiar one, this article draws upon extensive, and recently released, archival material to add new depth to our understanding of the debates that went on within the Blair administration. These cabinet papers demonstrate the breadth and length of Number Ten’s wariness and scepticism about the regional devolution agenda, as well as of the levels of distrust and suspicion that existed between the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, (and his aides) and his Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, on the topic. As this article demonstrates, Number Ten’s ambivalence towards regional devolution was such that senior aides expressly queried whether the Prime Minister would even publicly support the policy at any referendum. After a context setting section which outlines the development of regional policy in the 1990s, this article will breakdown the development of New Labour’s regional governance policy into two distinct phases. Phase one during occurred the first term of the Government between 1997 and 2001 where attention was focussed on the creation of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and a fierce defensive effort was made by senior aides in Number Ten to prevent RDAs being used by the Deputy Prime Minister as a platform for regional government. While Number Ten was able kick the issue into longer grass during the first phase, the second phase (the Government’s second term in office, 2001–2005) saw the Government grudgingly accept that it would need to put forward a detailed policy offer on regional assemblies. During this phase, regional assemblies went from being a manifesto item to an offer put to the voters of the North East of England at a referendum, but only after a long process of negotiations which extracted a weak and minimalistic model of devolution from an ambivalent and wary Government.

Context

As was noted by the academics John Mawson and Ken Spencer in a 1997 article, interest in regional administration and decentralization in England has fluctuated over the decades in the period after the Second World War.³ By the late 1980s, a proliferation of government agencies and programmes, alongside a drive at the European level for more strategic planning in the distribution of European Regional Development Fund spending, had resulted in increasing attention to the question of how greater

¹New Labour because Britain deserves better (London, 1997), <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/general-election-manifestos-1997-labour-party/>

²While there are obvious linkages between the two, the regional devolution agenda was distinct from New Labour’s manifesto commitment to, and delivery of, ‘elected city government’ for London (New Labour because Britain deserves better (London, 1997), <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/general-election-manifestos-1997-labour-party/>). For more on the establishment of the Greater London Authority (consisting of the Mayor of London and the London Assembly), see: D. Sweeting, Leadership in Urban Governance: The Mayor of London, *Local Government Studies* 28, (2002), pp. 3–20; J. Brown, T. Travers and R. Brown (eds), *London’s Mayor at 20: Governing a global city in the 21st century* (London, 2020).

³J. Mawson and K. Spencer, The Government Offices for the English Regions: towards regional governance?, *Policy and Politics* 25, (1997), pp. 72–3.

coordination and coherence could be brought to how central government policies were delivered at the regional level in England.⁴ This would eventually result in the creation in 1994 of the Government Offices for the Regions (GORs). There were ten English GORs, with civil servants from parts of the Departments for Employment, Environment, Transport and Trade and Industry and who were based within the regions all made accountable to their local Regional Director (each GOR was headed by a Regional Director). The Regional Directors were ‘responsible for all staff and expenditure routed through their offices and for ensuring that the necessary coordination and links are established between main programmes and other public monies’. The establishment of GORs took place at the same time that the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), drawing together twenty different programmes from five departments, was set up and made available within each region – GORs were responsible for nominating a proportion of the funds allocated by the SRB.⁵

In the 1970s, while Harold Wilson’s and Jim Callaghan’s Labour governments struggled to navigate devolution for Scotland and Wales through the UK Parliament,⁶ the Labour Party produced two papers looking at regional governance in England. The first, in 1976, was a Green Paper, *Devolution: the English Dimension*, a consultation exercise which noted the potential implications for England of devolution to Scotland and Wales, and set out some proposals for an English devolution agenda.⁷ A year later, in 1977, the Labour Party’s National Executive published a paper entitled *Regional Authorities and Local Government Reform* which included a discussion of regional government in England. The paper resulted in proposals being put forward for elected regional authorities for the North of England and Yorkshire and Humberside to the Party’s National Executive Committee (NEC). The NEC rejected these proposals.⁸

During Labour’s eighteen years in opposition after the 1979 General Election, devolution to Scotland and Wales eventually returned onto the political agenda. By the time of the 1992 election, Labour was committed to the establishment of a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly. In the 1992 manifesto, Labour also committed to establish Regional Development Agencies for the English regions. By 1995, Labour’s thinking on the English regions had deepened further. That year, the party published its policy paper, *A Choice for England*. *A Choice for England* proposed the establishment of indirectly elected regional chambers of local authority representatives to provide for ‘strategic coordination and democratic oversight’ of public bodies in their respective regions.⁹ Where public demand existed (and a unitary system of local government was ready to be put in place), the party proposed that the indirectly elected regional chambers could eventually be replaced by regional assemblies. These proposals formed the basis of

⁴Mawson and Spencer, ‘The Government Offices for the English Regions’, pp. 73–5; G.J. Pearce, J. Mawson and S. Ayres, ‘Regional Governance in England: a Changing Role for the Government’s Regional Offices’, *Public Administration* 86, (2008), pp. 445–6.

⁵Mawson and Spencer, *The Government Offices for the English Regions*, p. 75.

⁶For more on the background to, and struggles that occurred during, the Wilson and Callaghan governments’ commitment to Scottish and Welsh devolution, see: A. Evans, ‘Far reaching and perhaps destructive? The 1974–79 Labour Government, devolution and the emergence, and failure, of the Scotland and Wales Bill’, *Parliaments, Estates and Representation* 41, (2021), pp. 42–61; A. Evans, ‘Devolution and Parliamentary Representation: The Case of the Scotland and Wales Bill, 1976–7’, *Parliamentary History* 37, (2018), pp. 274–92.

⁷E. Wood, (13 January 1998), *Regional Government in England*, House of Commons Library: Research Paper 98/9, p. 7.

⁸Wood, *Regional Government in England*, p. 7–8.

⁹Wood, *Regional Government in England*, p. 9.

Labour's 1996 paper, *A New Voice for England's Regions* and the party's 1997 General Election manifesto, both of which made clear that assemblies would only follow successful referendums in their respective regions.¹⁰

The first term 1997–2001

Regional development agencies and the 'first step': regional chambers

At the 1997 General Election, Labour secured a historic landslide majority of 179 seats, winning 418 MPs in the House of Commons. Number Ten's concerns about, and conservative attitude, towards directly elected regional assemblies would manifest themselves shortly after Labour took office following the Election. The new Government's Queen's Speech, delivered on 14 May 1997 made clear legislation to establish Regional Development Agencies in England would be a priority for that first session of parliament.¹¹

Attention therefore turned to the drafting of the Government's White Paper (in which its specific proposals would be made public). From the outset it became clear that the question regional devolution would loom ominously over this process. On 22 May 1997, the Prime Minister met with the Ministerial team from the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, an unusually wide-ranging (some might say unwieldy) 'super Department' created for the Deputy Prime Minister.¹² During a discussion of regional policy, attention briefly turned to regional devolved assemblies, prompting the Prime Minister to state that that they were realistically not likely to happen during that parliament, before warning that 'in this area it was [...] essential to proceed with immense care'.¹³

The Prime Minister's remarks did little to dampen the Deputy Prime Minister's focus on the larger question of how England should be governed. As his department's preparations of the White Paper on RDAs progressed, there arose the question of which Cabinet Committee should be responsible for considering it. For those Ministers, such as Margaret Beckett and Alistair Darling, who saw RDAs as simply economic agencies, the obvious answer was the Economic Affairs (EA) Cabinet Committee.¹⁴ For others, it was clear that the paper should be discussed by the Devolution to Scotland Wales and the Regions (DSWR) Committee. In making the case for his committee, the Lord Chancellor and DSWR Chair, Lord Derry Irvine, for example, noted that the Deputy Prime Minister had 'from the outset been concerned to emphasize the links between the establishment of the agencies (RDAs) and our policies on regional government'.¹⁵ Lord Irvine also noted that when it was published the White Paper would 'have a good deal to say about regional government', indeed he was told by the Deputy Prime Minister in correspondence the previous day that the White Paper 'will need to explain in some detail our position on regional governance issues'.¹⁶

¹⁰Wood, *Regional Government in England*, p. 10.

¹¹House of Lords Debates [hereafter HL Deb], (Hansard) 14 May 1997, vol. 580, c.7.

¹²E. Lowther, The John Prescott story, *BBC News* [online] (16 November 2012), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-20346012>

¹³The National Archives [hereafter TNA], Richmond, England, PREM 49/157. Summary of Prime Minister's Ministerial Team meeting: Environment, Regions and Transport, dated 22 May 1997.

¹⁴TNA. PREM 49/157. Letter from A. Darling to M. Beckett, dated 8 July 1997.

¹⁵TNA. PREM 49/157. Letter from D. Irvine to J. Prescott, dated 22 July 1997.

¹⁶TNA. PREM 49/157. Letter from J. Prescott to D. Irvine, dated 21 July 1997; Letter from D. Irvine to J. Prescott, dated 22 July 1997.

Unsurprisingly, the Deputy Prime Minister agreed strongly with Lord Irvine's claim. In a meeting with the Chancellor to settle the issue, the Deputy Prime Minister argued that it was 'important that the constitutional aspects of the Government's regional policy should be considered by the constitutional committee of the Cabinet – DSWR' and that RDAs were 'properly part of the regional agenda'. Noting the work that was ongoing to deliver devolution to Scotland and Wales, the Deputy Prime Minister went on to stress that 'it was very important not to lose momentum on the English regions'. In the end, the two men agreed that DSWR and EA should meet jointly to consider the paper, with Lord Irvine chairing the DSWR part of the discussion and the Chancellor chairing the 'discussion of the economic implications of RDAs'.¹⁷

While the Prime Minister had previously approved letting DSWR take the lead, the proposed arrangement whereby both DSWR and EA would lead on the White paper received from a scornful response from his senior aides. Writing to the Prime Minister, Pat McFadden and Geoffrey Norris, described the policy as 'entirely economic' and warned that the only case for giving it to DSWR would be 'to associate RDAs with devolution'. As a result, there would be a 'pretty awkward' joint DSWR-EA meeting, beginning with Lord Irvine in the chair to 'discuss the constitutional implications – of which there are none other than a possible future association with regional Chambers and regional assemblies', to be followed by the Chancellor chairing the second part of the meeting which will 'discuss the detailed contents of the paper'.¹⁸

The tensions underneath the government's consideration of RDAs were brought to the surface in the handling briefs prepared for Lord Irvine and Gordon Brown. In the brief prepared for the Lord Chancellor, it was suggested that the main 'constitutional' question posed by the paper was 'how far do Ministers wish to present the RDAs as the first step in their proposals for strengthening English Regional Governance'. While the brief noted that the Committee would be 'unlikely' to 'want to reach firm conclusions' at that stage, it was suggested that Lord Irvine might wish to 'bear in mind the Government's manifesto commitments on the one hand [i.e. regional assembly referendums in due course] and the Prime Minister's views – insofar as we know what they are – on the other'. If that wasn't clear enough, the brief went on to warn the Lord Chancellor that 'the Prime Minister is likely to be cautious about going too far or too fast down the road towards regional chambers or assemblies' and as a result would want to avoid RDAs having 'too wide a range of functions at the outset'.¹⁹ The brief for the Chancellor was much more explicit in terms of Number Ten's views of the policy. Prepared by the Economic and Domestic Secretariat serving the Cabinet Office and Number Ten, the Chancellor was warned that the more important the package of powers for RDAs 'the stronger the case for elected assemblies' and that he should therefore call Alistair Darling, Margaret Beckett and David Blunkett to speak 'in favour of small strategic bodies'. The Chancellor was advised that RDAs 'should not add to the pressures for regional assemblies in England' and just in case absolute clarity was needed, he was told that 'this is also the Prime Minister's view'.²⁰

¹⁷TNA. PREM 49/157. Letter from R. Mortimer to P. Reilly, dated 25 July 1997.

¹⁸TNA. PREM 49/157. Letter from P. McFadden and G. Norris to T. Blair, dated 25 July 1997.

¹⁹TNA. PREM 49/157. P. Britton to D. Irvine: DSWR Tuesday 29 July, Chairman's Brief, dated 28 July 1997.

²⁰TNA. PREM 49/157. J. M. Durning to G. Brown: Chairman's Brief for Joint Meeting of EA and DSWR – Tuesday 29 July, dated 28 July 1997.

In a remarkably blunt memorandum to the Prime Minister, to which the two handling briefs were attached, Jonathan Powell warned that by letting DSWR get involved there was now a danger 'we will end up with widely drawn RDAs'. Accusing the Deputy Prime Minister of being 'disingenuous', Powell warned that if DSWR-EA did not 'turn over his ideas tomorrow you will be faced with a widely drawn bill and white paper', unless the Prime Minister made his case to the Chancellor.²¹ In the end, the Prime Minister discussed the issue with the Chancellor and, as a result, the EA committee was able to agree that further scrutiny of RDA functions was necessary. The outcome was celebrated in Number Ten as a means of keeping the RDA proposals 'under control'.²²

As the year dragged on, there remained distinct uneasiness within Number Ten about their Deputy Prime Minister's approach to RDAs and, in particular, how he might choose to use what they considered to be an economic policy to progress the broader, and thornier, constitutional issue of regional governance in England. On 15 September 1997, Geoffrey Norris, a Special Adviser in Number Ten wrote to the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell to warn that the Deputy Prime Minister's draft RDA White Paper's proposed chapter headings suggested that the paper's 'scope goes beyond RDAs and includes Chambers and Assemblies'.²³

While the Deputy Prime Minister and his Department continued to develop their plans for the RDAs, they faced scrutiny from colleagues other than those in Number Ten. The Deputy Prime Minister, according to Norris in a memo to the Prime Minister, was on the back foot having tried to 'mount a smash and grab raid on Whitehall', with Ministers resisting handing over powers and money to the Deputy Prime Minister's Department and RDAs.²⁴ In one example and in the face of some scepticism from Margaret Beckett at the Department for Trade and Industry, the Deputy Prime Minister was forced to write to her confirming that RDAs would not 'takeover existing policy responsibilities from Whitehall Departments' but would 'ensure better coordination of our current effort, with the flexibility to take account of regional needs'.²⁵ In reply, Beckett welcomed the Deputy Prime Minister's assurances and, for good measure, made clear her position that there was 'no need for RDAs to be dependent on the establishment of either elected assemblies or regional chambers'.²⁶

The idea of regional chambers would become soon attract considerable attention within Government, and it would become a proxy for the wider division between the pro-regional government sympathies of the Deputy Prime Minister and the much more sceptical and small c conservative approach adopted by the Prime Minister, a number of senior Cabinet ministers and aides in Number Ten. By way of definition, regional chambers were bodies consisting of local representatives which could 'provide a regional voice'.²⁷ In November 1997, the Deputy Prime Minister wrote to the Lord Chancellor to seek Ministerial sign-off for his department's proposals for RDA accountability. While seeking to reassure colleagues that RDAs would be accountable to UK Government Ministers, he sought to provide for RDAs to 'work in ways that take account of

²¹TNA. PREM 49/157, Memorandum from J. Powell to T. Blair, dated 28 July 1997.

²²TNA. PREM 49/157. Memorandum from G. Norris to T. Blair, dated 30 July 1997.

²³TNA. PREM 49/158. Memorandum from G. Norris to J. Powell, dated 15 September 1997.

²⁴TNA. PREM 49/158. Memorandum from G. Norris to T. Blair, dated 26 September 1997.

²⁵TNA. PREM 49/158. Letter from J. Prescott to M. Beckett, dated 22 September 1997.

²⁶TNA. PREM 49/158. Letter from M. Beckett to J. Prescott, dated 13 October 1997.

²⁷TNA. PREM 49/158. Letter from J. Prescott to D. Irvine, dated 4 November 1997.

regional views and opinions’ and should consult what he described as ‘the emerging regional groupings of local authorities and their private sector partners where such groupings meet set criteria’. For the sake of convenience, the Deputy Prime Minister banded these groupings under the label of ‘voluntary regional chambers’. According to the Deputy Prime Minister, these chambers would ‘include representatives of the main regional stakeholders’, and they would play an important role in developing a regional framework and economic strategy for the RDAs to operate within.

The Deputy Prime Minister’s proposal triggered an agitated response from those in Number Ten who feared that regional chambers in any guise would become a slippery slope to directly elected bodies. In an annotated note left on a copy of the Deputy Prime Minister’s letter, Rob Read, a Private Secretary in Number Ten, commented that he was ‘not sure I like this at all’ before querying whether Number Ten needed to ‘quash’ the policy.²⁸ Quashing, however, seemed out of the equation. In an email to Geoffrey Norris a few days later, David Miliband, the-then Head of the Number Ten Policy Unit, summed up the bind that the Prime Minister and other devo-cautious members of the Government had been put into by the Deputy Prime Minister’s proposal. The Prime Minister, Miliband was certain, ‘would get the shivers’ about regional chambers. However, Miliband acknowledged that chambers had been a manifesto commitment and by proposing them as voluntary and non-statutory entities the Deputy Prime Minister had been ‘tricky and clever.’ Miliband judged that it ‘would be odd to argue that RDAs should not take account of the views of regional stakeholders.’²⁹

A few days after this email from David Miliband, Geoffrey Norris wrote to the Prime Minister on the Deputy Prime Minister’s proposals. Norris suggested that the Deputy Prime Minister’s suggestion of voluntary regional chambers, ‘puts us on the spot.’ While, Norris recalled, they had been able to successfully resist a statutory network of regional chambers, this new proposal was a ‘different proposition’. Summing up the general apprehension of the Prime Minister’s aides to this policy agenda, Norris noted that ‘on the one hand they (voluntary regional chambers) are potentially, and in the Deputy Prime Minister’s mind certainly, the first smallish step to statutory regional chambers and regional government’. However, Norris conceded that similar bodies to those floated by the Deputy Prime Minister ‘already exist in some areas and a consultative body being able to give “regional views” to the RDAs is hard to object to in itself.’³⁰ It was this latter perspective which seemed to win the day with Norris informing the Prime Minister that the consensus within the Policy Unit was that it was ‘hard to say no to the Deputy Prime Minister’s proposals’, indeed Norris counselled that if the Prime Minister wished to reject them he would need to ‘say so direct to the Deputy Prime Minister’ as aside from the Treasury ‘the rest of Whitehall is giving the Deputy Prime Minister the nod on this.’³¹

While Margaret Beckett continued to fight against the DETR proposals (she suggested that shareholder style meetings with the public be adopted as an alternative to regional chambers),³² the Deputy Prime Minister would prevail on this occasion and voluntary

²⁸TNA. PREM 49/158. (Comment left by R. Read) Letter from J. Prescott to D. Irvine, dated 4 November 1997.

²⁹TNA. PREM 49/158. Email from D. Miliband to G. Norris, dated 6 November 1997.

³⁰TNA. PREM 49/158. Memorandum from G. Norris to T. Blair, dated 12 November 1997.

³¹TNA. PREM 49/158. Memorandum from G. Norris to T. Blair, dated 12 November 1997.

³²TNA. PREM 49/158. Letter from M. Beckett to J. Prescott, dated 13 November 1997.

non-statutory Regional Chambers would form an important part of the RDA accountability structure envisaged by the Government in its White Paper, *Building Partnerships for Prosperity*.³³

As feared by those in Number Ten, the White Paper situated the Regional Chambers as ‘a first step’ towards a stronger, and directly elected, system of regional government, although it also noted that demand for such a system was variable across England and that ‘it would be wrong to impose a uniform system or timetable.’³⁴ The Regional Chambers would provide a mechanism ‘through which RDAs can take account of regional views and give an account of themselves for their activities’. While it was intended, and indeed expected, that RDAs would need to consult a full range of local stakeholders in the course of its activities, the White Paper made clear that there would be a specific set of requirements in relation to Regional Chambers (where they existed).³⁵ Accordingly, RDAs would be required to ‘have regard to the regional viewpoint of the chamber in preparing its own economic strategy’, consult the chamber on its corporate plan and ‘be open to scrutiny by the chamber; perhaps in the form of an annual hearing to discuss its corporate plan’.³⁶ Legislation to implement the Government’s RDA proposals was brought before parliament that same month and the following year passed through parliament and entered the statute book as the *Regional Development Agencies Act 1998*.

1999: Lords reform as a ‘catalyst’ for regional government?

As 1998 rolled into 1999, the Deputy Prime Minister would resume his regional devolution campaign within Government. His efforts would occur in the context of broader constitutional reform discussions, particularly in relation to reform of the House of Lords. The Labour Party’s 1997 election manifesto had pledged that ‘the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords will be ended by statute’ and that this would ‘be the first stage in a process of reform to make the House of Lords more democratic and representative’. The Labour Party also pledged that a ‘committee of both Houses of Parliament will be appointed to undertake a wide-ranging review of possible further change and then to bring forward proposals for reform’.³⁷

On 14 October 1998, the Government announced that it would establish a Royal Commission to consider options for longer-term reform of the House of Lords. At a bilateral meeting between the Deputy Prime Minister and the Prime Minister on 14 October 1998, this was discussed alongside the recently reported Independent Commission on the Voting System (otherwise known as the Jenkins Commission). Talk of constitutional commissions prompted the Deputy Prime Minister to suggest that he ‘was considering suggesting a Royal Commission to look at regional government.’ He then, according

³³HM Government, *Building Partnerships for Prosperity* (December 1997), Cm 3814, pp. 52–3.

³⁴HM Government, *Building Partnerships for Prosperity*, p. 52.

³⁵As a concession to Margaret Beckett’s shareholder style meeting proposal, the White Paper also specified that RDAs should ‘also be directly answerable to the people of their region’ and that the Government therefore intended to ‘require each RDA to hold an annual public meeting, open to all, with the chair and chief executive giving an account of their annual performance’ (HM Government, *Building Partnerships for Prosperity*, p. 54).

³⁶HM Government, *Building Partnerships for Prosperity*, p. 53.

³⁷New Labour because Britain deserves better (London, 1997), <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/general-election-manifestos-1997-labour-party/>

to a write-up of the bilateral, linked the regional governance agenda to reform of the House of Lords and ‘enthusiastically ran into a description of how new tiers of elected regional government could provide a basis for a representative second chamber’. The Prime Minister ‘was neither encouraging nor discouraging about all of this.’³⁸

Having, crucially, not been explicitly dissuaded from connecting the two issues, the Deputy Prime Minister would continue to emphasize the regional dimension to Lords reform during discussions on the topic in January 1999. Ahead of the introduction of the House of Lords Bill to the House of Commons later that month, the Deputy Prime Minister wrote to the Prime Minister on the topic of a Lords Reform White Paper that was due to accompany the Government’s legislation.

The Deputy Prime Minister welcomed the draft White Paper and the inclusion of a discussion on how a reformed Lords could include indirect election by regional bodies, an option that he felt could allow peers to be appointed ‘who had some legitimacy but without creating an undue threat to the primary of the House of Commons.’ Further, he suggested, such an approach could ‘help in binding the parts of the UK together’ and ‘could help to head off any backlash’ in England arising from devolution to Scotland and Wales. However, the Deputy Prime Minister argued that indirect elections should be from ‘the right type of body.’ Crucially, in his opinion, local government in England was currently ‘not fit for that purpose’, while RDAs and the voluntary regional chambers were also inappropriate.³⁹ True to form, the Deputy Prime Minister instead suggested that Regional Assemblies would be an appropriate means of indirectly electing the Lords and ‘would be entirely consistent with – and indeed would help – our manifesto commitment to legislate to establish elected regional assemblies.’

While the Deputy Prime Minister conceded that ‘realistically, legislation on this issue is for the next Parliament’, he had asked his officials to start preparing some options and wanted their work to feed into the work of the Royal Commission on the reform of the House of Lords. At the very least, the Deputy Prime Minister wanted to give a firm steer that, subject to popular support, ‘there will be elected regional government and the Royal Commission’s proposals should be based on that assumption.’⁴⁰

The Deputy Prime Minister’s missive prompted a wary response within Number Ten. In a memorandum to the Prime Minister summarizing recent developments on English regional policy, Pat McFadden noted that the Deputy Prime Minister was keen to announce something on regional government at a forthcoming local government conference. He also warned the Prime Minister that the Deputy Prime Minister had told his departmental ministers that he was ‘attracted to the idea of reorganising local government to help facilitate regional assemblies.’ This sentence attracted an annotated comment from Robert Hill, cautioning the Prime Minister that any such reorganization ‘would be very costly, divert councils from concentrating on delivery and be very, very divisive.’⁴¹

McFadden told the Prime Minister that it ‘would be useful to have a view from you on how we handle all this’. While McFadden noted that that it would be fair for the Deputy

³⁸TNA. PREM 49/1018. Memorandum from R. Read to J. Powell, dated 15 October 1998.

³⁹TNA. PREM 49/1018. Letter from J. Prescott to T. Blair, dated 15 January 1999.

⁴⁰TNA. PREM 49/1018. Letter from J. Prescott to T. Blair, dated 15 January 1999.

⁴¹TNA. PREM 49/1018. Memorandum from P. McFadden to T. Blair (including annotated comments from R. Hill), dated 22 January 1999.

Prime Minister to say that a question of how England was represented in the Lords might arise if there was some form of appointment or indirect election from the devolved nations, he argued that it seemed a 'very odd logic to propose regional assemblies in England in order to make Lords reform plans stack up properly.' Or, as he put it more bluntly, 'how could we explain to someone in Yorkshire that the reason they were getting an elected Assembly was so it in turn could elect people to the House of Lords?'⁴²

While that particular line of argument lacked credibility for McFadden, he nonetheless warned that the broader question of regional assemblies 'could easily develop momentum in the party' if it were pushed by the Deputy Prime Minister at the local government conference and in the official Labour submission to the Royal Commission on the Lords. Noting the Prime Minister's longstanding scepticism on this topic, McFadden recalled that 'in the past you have been very cautious about all this'. However, he warned that the Deputy Prime Minister clearly 'believes he has a mandate for some kind of announcement' at the conference, and asked if the Prime Minister wanted to let the Deputy Prime Minister 'run with this'? The Prime Minister, in a scrawled annotated message left on the memo responded that while he did not 'mind signalling greater support for Regional Ass[semblies]' he 'did mind actually doing something that gets the ball rolling irrevocably.' Reiterating his longstanding position that this was not a matter for the current parliament, the Prime Minister concluded by stating that while 'in the longer-term I am not opposed' he just did not think it was a 'present priority and meantime think there are more pressing things'.⁴³ The Prime Minister's comments were clearly insufficiently direct for the comfort of his aides. On 25 January, Rob Read wrote to Pat McFadden. After recalling that they had both spoken and 'agreed that we needed a clearer position than this from the PM if we are to send the right signals to the DPM', Read informed McFadden that they would try to arrange an internal meeting to secure such clarity from the Prime Minister before his next meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister.⁴⁴

Their attempts to hold a private meeting with the Prime Minister on this topic, however, proved fruitless. On 28 January, ahead of a bilateral later that day with the Deputy Prime Minister, the Prime Minister was sent a briefing memorandum from Rob Read. Noting that they had wanted to meet with the Prime Minister beforehand to discuss the topic of regional government, Read stressed that it was important that the Prime Minister made a clear intervention to arrest any premature momentum for regionalism. Read urged the Prime Minister to 'make clear to DPM that you do not want things now being set up which move irrevocably towards regional government, and that there are much more important priorities to focus on'. 'If nothing else', the Prime Minister, Read suggested, should 'insist that you see the terms in which he proposes to say anything on this at the Local Government conference'. In an attempt to extract a more committed response and attitude on this topic from the Prime Minister, Read challenged him as to whether he was prepared for the Deputy Prime Minister's 'speech to be a big boost towards regional government'.⁴⁵

As one might expect, the approach taken by the Prime Minister at that day's bilateral with the Deputy Prime Minister appears to have been more emollient in nature. Yet the

⁴²TNA. PREM 49/1018. Memorandum from P. McFadden to T. Blair, dated 22 January 1999.

⁴³TNA. PREM 49/1018. Memorandum from P. McFadden to T. Blair, dated 22 January 1999.

⁴⁴TNA. PREM 49/1018. Memorandum from R. Read to P. McFadden, dated 25 January 1999.

⁴⁵TNA. PREM 49/1018. Memorandum from R. Read to T. Blair, dated 28 January 1999.

meeting nonetheless made clear that regionalism would not be happening in the short term. The Prime Minister told the Deputy Prime Minister that they would both need ‘to think through now where they wanted to end up on this in the next couple of years’ and that such planning and consideration was important to do ‘before we set things in motion.’ This approach seemed to do the necessary trick, with the Deputy Prime Minister agreeing to provide the Prime Minister’s office the work his Department had been doing on scoping out regional government ahead of his forthcoming local government speech.⁴⁶

Far-reaching House of Lords reform, beyond the removal of all but ninety-two of the hereditary peers, never materialized. Nor, during the remainder of the 1997–2001 Parliament, did regionalism make any further progress. As a report from the UCL Constitution Unit noted in 2001, while the Labour Government had delivered RDAs, John Prescott, the architect of the regionalism agenda, ‘received no support from his colleagues to go further’.⁴⁷ While, the party reiterated its commitment to regional government in 2000 and at the 2001 General Election, there was, according to the 2001 Constitution Unit report noted, ‘considerable ambivalence’ within Government and the wider Labour Party, although crucially the 2001 election campaign saw the Deputy Prime Minister publicly commit a second term Labour Government to the publication of a White Paper on regional government.⁴⁸

A genuinely second term issue: the 2001–05 parliament and the road to the North East referendum

With a second term secured, and again with a landslide majority of MPs, Number Ten’s ability to play the long game with regards to regional government had run out of road. Over the next couple of years, regional devolution would become a recurring agenda item for the Government and manifest itself as a firm policy programme.

2002: developing the White Paper

At the beginning of 2002, preparations were firmly underway for the long awaited White Paper on Regional Government in England. On 28 February, Alasdair McGowan, a Special Policy Adviser to the Prime Minister, wrote to Jeremy Heywood, the Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, advising that he had received a full first draft of the White Paper. At first glance, the draft White Paper appeared to contain ‘no major surprises’ and the ‘functions that are proposed are pretty minimal.’⁴⁹ Indeed, McGowan pondered whether the White Paper was at risk of overselling the proposals, arguing ‘that language about an “historic turning point in British politics”, the “new constitutional settlement for England”, and regions “taking control of their destiny” [...] needs to be toned down’. McGowan also worried that the Paper did not fully reflect

⁴⁶TNA. PREM 49/1018. Letter from R. Read to P. Unwin: Prime Minister Bilateral With the Deputy Prime Minister: 28 January, dated 28 January 1999.

⁴⁷M. Sandford and P. McQuail, *Unexplored Territory: Elected Regional Assemblies in England*, (UCL Constitution Unit: London, 2001), p. 12.

⁴⁸Sandford and McQuail, *Unexplored Territory: Elected Regional Assemblies in England*, pp. 12–13.

⁴⁹TNA. PREM 49/2789. Memorandum from A. McGowan to J. Heywood, dated 28 February 2002.

the ‘choice’ aspect of the government’s regional devolution proposals, claiming that ‘too often the drafting implies that regional assemblies will definitely happen when in reality they are simply on offer.’⁵⁰

As one might expect, the fact that regional assemblies were further up the institutional agenda did not mean they attracted any less scepticism within Government. On 28 March 2002, for example, the then Trade and Industry Secretary, Patricia Hewitt wrote to the Deputy Prime Minister warning him of the business sector’s lack of enthusiasm for regional government. According to Hewitt, the CBI (a prominent business representative body) was opposed to Regional Assemblies, while even in the North East, which was among the forerunners for a referendum on regional government to be held, opinion was ‘distinctly mixed.’ Hewitt offered Prescott a blunt assessment of the challenges he would face going forward in making the case for regionalism, warning that it was ‘going to be extremely difficult to secure positive responses to the White Paper from business.’⁵¹

A few days later, on 4 April 2002, Alasdair McGowan wrote to the Prime Minister with his thoughts on the draft White Paper. As trailed in his exchange with Jeremy Heywood, McGowan argued that the White Paper was ‘a fairly minimalist package’ that ‘we can live with’. According to McGowan, this minimalistic offering would include a ‘pretty small’ amount of funding under the control of regional assemblies. However, while on the one hand acknowledging that the proposed assemblies functions were in some areas (for example, transport), ‘very weak’, McGowan nonetheless pushed for a clawback of certain proposed powers. In particular, he expressed his, and Jeremy Heywood’s, opposition to the Assembly having a scrutiny role in relation to health services in their respective regions, arguing that such a function would increase red tape and force health providers to spend their time dealing with ‘a body that has no power in relation to health policy anyway.’⁵²

McGowan was keenly aware of the criticisms that the Government might take for adopting such a limited devolution policy, advising the Prime Minister that the package will be inevitably ‘dismissed by the constitutional reform lobby and sections of the Parliamentary Labour Party as inadequate and grudging in terms of the powers offered’. This did not, however, translate into any acceptance of a stronger package. Indeed, McGowan seemed to question the bona fides of the plan’s likely critics within the Labour Party at Westminster, suggesting that much of the PLP was ‘ambivalent about regional government (even the Northern Group’ and questioned whether the policy would have any popular appeal. In what might be seen in retrospect as an almost prophetic comment, McGowan said it remained to be seen ‘whether there is real support in the North East for an Assembly – once people focus on the downsides (principally costs and the reorganisation of local government).’⁵³

McGowan then asked a question which offers a striking window into the ambivalence (bordering on outright devo-scepticism) that pervaded Number Ten’s thinking on this issue. Despite this being a government policy, contained originally in a General Election manifesto pledge, McGowan nonetheless felt compelled to float the ‘key crunch question’

⁵⁰TNA. PREM 49/2789. Memorandum from A. McGowan to J. Heywood, dated 28 February 2002.

⁵¹TNA. PREM 49/2789. Letter from P. Hewitt to J. Prescott, dated 28 March 2002.

⁵²TNA. PREM 49/2789. Memorandum from A. McGowan to T. Blair, dated 4 April 2002.

⁵³TNA. PREM 49/2789. Memorandum from A. McGowan to T. Blair, dated 4 April 2002.

of ‘whether you personally will campaign for a “Yes” vote in the North East’ and whether the Labour Party would similarly declare, and work for, a Yes vote. Indeed, he pointedly reminded the Prime Minister that Labour had ‘never said it supports regional assemblies’, just ‘giving people the choice’.⁵⁴

As remarkable as the questions might seem, they were clearly grounded in McGowan’s experiences of advising the Prime Minister. For example, in his concluding thoughts on the draft White Paper, McGowan specifically recalls that the Prime Minister continues ‘to have serious doubts about the wisdom of regional assemblies’. Nonetheless, these doubts appeared to be counterbalanced by the acceptance ‘that we have to make progress on our manifesto commitment’. When viewed against that objective, McGowan advised that the White Paper was ‘about as good a deal as we will get with John Prescott an one we can live with.’ The Prime Minister’s lack of enthusiasm was evident in his comments scrawled on a copy of this memo, ‘if they [the North East] go for it [a referendum], I will have to support.’⁵⁵

The Prime Minister wrote to the Deputy Prime Minister on 12 April to offer his response to the draft White Paper. The Prime Minister welcomed the ‘right balance’ that the White Paper struck between those functions that should be retained at a national level and those which would be ‘better situated at a regional level or below’ and said that overall it was a ‘credible package’. Even then, the Prime Minister’s lack of enthusiasm for the policy was apparent, with him urging the Deputy Prime Minister to stress the choice aspect of the policy offering and to make it as clearly as possible in the White Paper ‘that we expect interest in regional government to be confined, initially at least, to the North East and to a lesser extent to the other Northern regions.’⁵⁶

The following week, on 19 April, McGowan wrote again to the Prime Minister on the question of what support the Prime Minister might give to his own government’s regional governance policy. In particular, McGowan wanted to clarify the comments the Prime Minister had left on McGowan’s earlier memo and find out whether he meant that if the Deputy Prime Minister went ahead with the White Paper’s proposals he would find himself bound to support a Yes vote in any subsequent referendums ‘even if you don’t actively campaign’, or whether if people voted Yes in a North East referendum he would accept the result. That these questions needed to be asked at all are a testament to the levels of ambivalence that pervaded Number Ten on this issue.⁵⁷ As indeed was the response the Prime Minister left in an annotated comment on McGowan’s letter, the Prime Minister wrote that he would say ‘I can support Regional Assemblies, but only if [there is] local government reorganisation. Otherwise another tier of government’.⁵⁸ Hardly a ringing endorsement of the policy.

The next month, in May 2002, the UK Government published its Regional Government White Paper, *Your Region, Your Choice: Revitalising the English Regions*.⁵⁹

⁵⁴TNA. PREM 49/2789. Memorandum from A. McGowan to T. Blair, dated 4 April 2002.

⁵⁵TNA. PREM 49/2789. Memorandum from A. McGowan to T. Blair (including annotated comments from T. Blair in response), dated 4 April 2002.

⁵⁶TNA. PREM 49/2790. Letter from T. Blair to J. Prescott, dated 12 April 2002.

⁵⁷TNA. PREM 49/2790. Memorandum from A. McGowan to T. Blair (including annotated comments from T. Blair in response), dated 19 April 2002.

⁵⁸TNA. PREM 49/2790. Memorandum from A. McGowan to T. Blair (including annotated comments from T. Blair in response), dated 19 April 2002.

⁵⁹HM Government, *Your Region, Your Choice: Revitalising the English Regions* (May 2002), Cm5511.

Unsurprisingly, there was little danger of the Prime Minister failing to emphasize the ‘choice aspect’ of the policy in his foreword to the White Paper. The Prime Minister used his foreword to repeatedly stress that point, indeed he wrote that the entire White Paper was ‘about choice’, emphasizing that ‘no region will be forced to have an elected assembly’ but that where was ‘public support for one’ the Government believed that voters should have the chance ‘to demonstrate this in a referendum.’ Indeed, even when he briefly referred to his Government’s belief that devolution could offer potential benefits to the English regions, he swiftly returned to his central theme that ‘in the end, it is down to the people in each region to decide’ on the way forward.⁶⁰

The White Paper confirmed the Government’s intention to facilitate referendums on regional assemblies in England where ‘the Government believes there to be sufficient interest in the region concerned to warrant it’. Such assemblies would not, the Government insisted, be allowed to represent an additional tier of government, therefore where a region had been identified as suitable for a referendum there would first be a ‘review of local government structures which will deliver proposals for a wholly unitary local government structure for the region.’ On polling day, voters would therefore ‘be aware of the implications for local government when deciding to have an elected regional assembly’.⁶¹ The Government set out its expectation that there would be an opportunity for regions with sufficient interest to hold a referendum on an assembly during the lifetime of the current parliament (2001–05) and that if there was a Yes vote in any such referendum then that Assembly ‘could be up and running early in the next Parliament’.⁶²

The White Paper proposed that Assemblies would be based on the eight non-London regions used as standard statistical regions by the Office of National Statistics, as the boundaries of the Government Offices for the regions and as the boundaries for the Regional Development Agencies. Assemblies would have between 25 and 35 members and each Assembly would be elected using the Additional Member System (a mixture of first past the post constituencies and top-up list seats) that was in use in Scotland and Wales. Two thirds of members would be elected via first-past-the-post and the remainder would be elected from a top-up constituency that covered each region.⁶³ Each Assembly would adopt the leader and cabinet model of governance. There would be a cap of six members in any given Assembly’s cabinet. The leader and cabinet model would, according to the Government, provide a split between the executive and scrutiny functions which would be ‘straightforward for people to understand and promotes accountability’. The Government noted that this was in line with the model of parliamentary government seen at Westminster and in the Scottish Parliament and, despite the *de jure* body corporate model which Welsh devolution had been established with, ‘the way the system in Wales has worked in practice’.⁶⁴

Assemblies would be given the power to set regional strategies in a number of policy areas, including economic development, housing, transport, skills and employment, waste, culture and health improvement.⁶⁵ They would also have a number of executive

⁶⁰HM Government, *Your Region, Your Choice*, p. 4.

⁶¹HM Government, *Your Region, Your Choice*, p. 11.

⁶²HM Government, *Your Region, Your Choice*, p. 12.

⁶³HM Government, *Your Region, Your Choice*, p. 48, 52.

⁶⁴HM Government, *Your Region, Your Choice*, p. 52.

⁶⁵HM Government, *Your Region, Your Choice*, p. 36.

functions to assist with implementing those strategies, including having responsibility for that region's Regional Development Agency, having financial resources for functions such as housing and regeneration, as well as having an 'influencing' role in relation to subjects such as having a role in scrutinising the impact of higher education on economic development, advising the Government on the allocation of local transport funding and being consulted by external bodies such as the Learning and Skills Council, and delivering rural regeneration programmes.⁶⁶ Assemblies would be mostly funded via a block grant from the Treasury and would have some limited borrowing powers, while their fiscal powers would be restricted to charging a precept on council tax bills.⁶⁷

The model of devolution on offer to regional assemblies was, thus, tepid at best. In one contemporaneous analysis of the White Paper, the local government expert Mark Sandford (then at University College London and now at the House of Commons Library) described the White Paper as a 'cautious document' whose 'limited' proposals prompted 'doubt whether electors will be willing to vote for such assemblies in regional referendums, or to turn out for regional elections'. Although he felt that the Government and the Deputy Prime Minister should be congratulated for persevering with the production of a White Paper, not least given 'the degree to which the concept of regional government remains alien to Whitehall mandarins and Labour Party traditionalists', Sandford nonetheless noted that the White Paper was replete with 'reassurance to sceptical Ministers and departments', with little effort made instead 'to build a rationale for the particular basket of powers offered to elected regional assemblies.'⁶⁸ Sandford also highlighted the Government's insistence on unitarisation in affected regions, describing this as a 'foolhardy' obligation and 'inflexibility' that was likely 'at best, to restrict interest to the three northern regions, and at worst obstruct the whole regional agenda'.⁶⁹

For the authors of another assessment of the White Paper, published in May 2002, 'the publication of the White Paper was significant if only because it demonstrated that previous reports of the death of the devolution project had been greatly exaggerated'. In what was clearly a common theme for analysts of the regional governance agenda, the small conservatism of the heart of government towards regional assemblies featured prominently. According to Tomaney and Hetherington (an academic and journalist respectively who both specialized in English regional affairs), the White Paper had been the fruits of a 'subtle and patient campaign' by the Deputy Prime Minister in a government which had been 'lukewarm' and 'reluctant' on the issue and had clearly needed 'convincing.' Notwithstanding the Deputy Prime Minister's hard work, what this had managed 'to extract' from Whitehall was a 'mixed bag of powers and responsibilities.'⁷⁰ Both the Sandford and Tomaney and Hetherington analyses drew attention to the proposals contained in the White Paper for Regional Assemblies to achieve a number of centrally set targets as running against 'the spirit of devolution.'⁷¹

⁶⁶HM Government, *Your Region, Your Choice*, p. 37, 42.

⁶⁷HM Government, *Your Region, Your Choice*, p. 44.

⁶⁸M. Sandford, *A commentary on the Regional Government White Paper, Your Region, Your Choice: Revitalising the English Regions Cm 5511, May 2002* (UCL Constitution Unit: London, June 2002), pp. 3–4.

⁶⁹Sandford, *A Commentary on the Regional Government White Paper*, pp. 4–5.

⁷⁰J. Tomaney and P. Hetherington, *Nations and Regions: The Dynamics of Devolution, Quarterly Monitoring Programme, The English Regions, Quarterly Report* (UCL Constitution Unit: London, May 2002), pp. 1–2, 10–11.

⁷¹Sandford, *A Commentary on the Regional Government White Paper*, p. 3; Tomaney and Hetherington, *Nations and Regions: The Dynamics of Devolution, Quarterly Monitoring Programme, The English Regions*, p. 16.

2002–03: road to the referendum

With the White Paper published, so attention turned to the next steps: preparing the necessary legislation to facilitate referendums and laying the ground for at least one referendum in the remainder of the Parliament. In July 2002, Nick Raynsford, the junior Minister leading on the Government's regional devolution programme, wrote to the Deputy Prime Minister advising him that he would be making a speech later that month outlining how the process for identifying the first region to hold a referendum would be conducted. Raynsford confirmed that, unsurprisingly, the level of interest in having a referendum would 'be the primary factor'. However, as a result of the political requirement that assemblies avoid creating an extra tier of government and would be linked to unitarisation of that region's existing local government structures, Raynsford suggested that 'an important secondary factor' would be the level of disruption for local government. On both counts, Raynsford confirmed that the odds looked 'highest in the three Northern regions, especially the North East'.⁷²

In November 2002, Raynsford wrote to the Deputy Prime Minister (and other ministerial colleagues) advising that the forthcoming Queen's Speech would include a Regional Assembly (Preparations) Bill. The Bill, Raynsford advised, would be introduced on 14 November and after the Bill's Second Reading stage, the Government would 'start taking soundings' from regions regarding potential interest in taking forward a referendum.⁷³ On 13 November, the Queen delivered the Speech from the Throne at the State Opening of Parliament, the Government's Queen's Speech included a commitment that legislation would 'be introduced to provide for the holding of referendums on the issue of regional governance in England'.⁷⁴

By the spring of 2003, the Bill had cleared its Commons stages and was navigating its way, albeit facing a number of potential obstacles, through the Lords.⁷⁵ With the Government still hoping to secure Royal Assent by May 2003, attention had turned towards the referendum(s) that might be forthcoming. It was within this wider context that, on 14 April 2003, Martin Hurst, an official within Number Ten, wrote to the Prime Minister. Acknowledging the Prime Minister's 'scepticism', Hurst noted that 'for better or worse, we are getting close to the final choice of regions in which to hold referenda on whether to proceed to elected regional assemblies.' According to Hurst, a decision on which region(s) would go ahead would be needed by late May 2003 in order for a referendum to be held in the autumn of 2004 and Assembly elections (assuming the referendum was successful) to take place in May 2006. Hurst suggested that this was 'predominantly a political judgement' and noted that the 'choice seems to be between referenda in two regions – the North East and probably Yorkshire and Humber – and one region – the North East' and claimed that the Deputy Prime Minister would push for the first of these options.⁷⁶

Hurst's memo to the Prime Minister was accompanied by preliminary polling which had been undertaken on regional assemblies by the Government. Summarizing the

⁷²TNA. PREM 49/2791. Letter from N. Raynsford to J. Prescott, dated 26 July 2002.

⁷³TNA. PREM 49.2792. Letter from N. Raynsford to J. Prescott, dated 11 November 2002.

⁷⁴HL Deb (Hansard) 13 November 2002, vol. 394, c. 4.

⁷⁵TNA. PREM 49/3294. Letter from N. Raynsford to J. Prescott, dated 31 March 2003.

⁷⁶TNA. PREM 49/3294. Letter from M. Hurst to T. Blair, dated 14 April 2003.

findings, Hurst said that the poll did not ‘tell us anything we couldn’t have guessed.’ In particular, the turnout in any referendum ‘seems likely to be low.’ Only in the North East, Hurst argued, where there was strong media backing was there even a modest level of understanding about regional assemblies (27 per cent compared to an England-wide average of 18 per cent). As a result, Hurst warned that a Yes vote, albeit on a small minority of the total electorate would seem to be ‘the most likely outcome.’ According to Hurst, getting turnout to ‘respectable levels and a meaningful Yes vote’ would require a ‘big party effort’, however he noted that Pat McFadden and Alistair Campbell had questioned whether the party had the ‘will or resources to do this in more than one area.’⁷⁷

Hurst briefly mentioned a possibility that had been mentioned before – that the Government was not obligated to deliver on a Yes vote, although he conceded that ‘it could be hard to avoid.’ However, his attention was more closely focussed on the ‘greater concern’ of the far right winning Assembly seats in a low turnout election, and on the Government’s polling which should have rung some warning bells for Ministers. Discussing the polling undertaken by ICM, Hurst claimed that ‘a key picture was emerging’, namely that ‘the more people understand what is involved, the greater their concern about the proposals’ and argued that, on the basis of the polling, ‘the opponents of local government reform are likely to benefit more from any sustained campaign on the matter.’ These concerns would prove highly prophetic.⁷⁸

In the end, the Bill received Royal Assent in May 2003 and became the Regional Assembly (Preparations) Act. This prompted renewed focus on the potential next steps. On 16 May 2003, McGowan wrote to the Prime Minister. McGowan’s memo was full of warnings for the Prime Minister. According to McGowan, the turnout for any referendum was likely to be low, ‘we will seriously struggle to break 30 per cent’, and given the issues of who might be better at getting out the vote, he ‘could not guarantee winning any of them [the referendums]’. According to McGowan, even the North East campaign lacked ‘real penetration, is narrowly based and currently lacks charismatic leadership.’ However, he suggested that with the right media coverage and a stronger campaign, ‘the North East is winnable’.⁷⁹

Certainly, the Deputy Prime Minister, McGowan warned was likely to argue that there was ‘no way we can politically exclude the North East’, although he was also likely to push for two or three referendums and argue that multiple referendums would heighten interest and boost turnout. However, McGowan suggested that the Prime Minister could ‘quite reasonably argue that with only limited resources it makes sense to concentrate them on the region which are most likely to win’.⁸⁰ This discussion about winnability led McGowan to return to a familiar question among the Prime Minister’s aides, namely how closely would he wish to be involved with any referendum. McGowan suggested the Prime Minister might ‘wish to consider how far you will wish to associate yourself with the campaign.’ Before even a region or regions had been selected and referendum campaign(s) under way, there was clearly considerable concern about No votes and what that might mean for the Prime Minister.⁸¹

⁷⁷TNA. PREM 49/3294. Letter from M. Hurst to T. Blair, dated 14 April 2003.

⁷⁸TNA. PREM 49/3294. Letter from M. Hurst to T. Blair, dated 14 April 2003.

⁷⁹TNA. PREM 49/3295. Memorandum from A. McGowan to T. Blair, dated 16 May 2003.

⁸⁰TNA. PREM 49/3295. Memorandum from A. McGowan to T. Blair, dated 16 May 2003.

⁸¹TNA. PREM 49/3295. Memorandum from A. McGowan to T. Blair, dated 16 May 2003.

A week later, on 23 May 2003, McGowan wrote once more to the Prime Minister and reported that the Deputy Prime Minister believed that the Prime Minister was ‘resigned to the need for three referenda’. McGowan urgently asked for confirmation from the Prime Minister.⁸² Scribbling on the memorandum from McGowan, the Prime Minister wrote that he was ‘very unhappy about this’ but in a rather resigned tone asked, ‘what can we do?’⁸³ In an almost synchronized twist of fate, the same day, Nick Raynsford wrote to the Deputy Prime Minister and told him that he was minded to recommend that local government reviews be directed for the North East, North West and Yorkshire and Humberside. Raynsford recalled that the Government had made a ‘public commitment to hold the first referendums this Parliament’ and that the Government had said it wished such referendums to be held in the autumn of 2004.⁸⁴ With quite long lead times to deal with (as a result of the boundary review requirement for local government in the region), Raynsford argued that the Government needed to ‘move very quickly to decide and announce which region or regions should have local government reviews.’ Referring to the requirement that evidence of interest in a referendum was needed for each region, Raynsford noted that the Government’s sounding board consultation exercise had ‘clearly shown that there is strong support for a referendum in only three regions’: the North East, the North West and Yorkshire and Humberside.⁸⁵ Raynsford indicated that he was minded to make clear that the Government proceeded with referendums in each of those three regions, but at the same time he argued that the Government should make clear that ‘we will not look again at levels of interest [in regional government] until after the first referendums.’ Raynsford hoped that such an approach would ‘provide some comfort to Local Authorities in the other five regions.’⁸⁶

On 3 June 2003, Alasdair McGowan wrote once again on this subject to the Prime Minister. McGowan summarized a recent bilateral with the Deputy Prime Minister at which the Prime Minister had ‘promised to reflect [...] on which regions should have referenda for regional assemblies.’ Referring to this commitment, McGowan sought to push the Prime Minister to give a clearer steer. McGowan reported that the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister’s sounding board ‘showed majority support in the three Northern regions’ and warned that since the Deputy Prime Minister felt that ‘politically he can’t say not the North East [...] he has to say yes to all three’ while Ian McCartney (the Party Chairman, Minister without Portfolio and a Greater Manchester MP) was also pushing for all three northern regions to have referendums. Against this pressure, McGowan noted that David Triesman (the Party’s General Secretary) was warning that Labour, only two years after fighting a full UK General Election campaign, did not have ‘any money to fight even one referendum.’ Noting that ‘realistically, no referendum is not an option’, McGowan told the Prime Minister that the real choice was between one referendum or fighting three.

Interestingly, McGowan highlighted that of the three regions, the sounding board exercise had shown Yorkshire and Humber to have some of the highest support for a referendum and that region would also, due to its local government make-up, represent

⁸²TNA. PREM 49/3295. Letter from A. McGowan to T. Blair, dated 23 May 2003.

⁸³TNA. PREM 49/3295. Letter from A. McGowan to T. Blair, dated 23 May 2003.

⁸⁴TNA. PREM 49/3295. Letter from N. Raynsford to J. Prescott, dated 23 May 2003.

⁸⁵TNA. PREM 49/3295. Letter from N. Raynsford to J. Prescott, dated 23 May 2003.

⁸⁶TNA. PREM 49/3295. Letter from N. Raynsford to J. Prescott, dated 23 May 2003.

the ‘least possible disruption.’ However, and despite the fact that this was the Deputy Prime Minister’s home region, McGowan warned that picking Yorkshire and Humber would only make the Deputy Prime Minister ‘push even harder for all three’ as he did not want to say no to the North East. The alternative, according to McGowan would be to ‘push for the North East only and dismiss the soundings exercise’. After all, he reasoned, the exercise was ‘far from scientific’, lacked ‘the legal status of a formal consultation’ and, more fundamentally, the decision to go ahead with a referendum should be guided not just by a region’s support for *holding a referendum*, but by the region’s demand for *having a regional assembly* – in short, winnability should be the decisive criteria. And here, for McGowan, the road led back to the North East of England. ‘Virtually everyone’, he argued, agreed that the North East was ‘the most winnable’ region. Although he once again cautioned that ‘even here this would be hard to win given inevitably low turnout.’ What was more certain, he claimed, was that the Government risked ‘losing all three if we try and spread resources too thinly.’ Moving forward, his instincts were that ‘the path of least resistance would be to argue for the North East only.’⁸⁷

While there appeared to be much that commended a single referendum option, the Government continued to progress plans for three referendums. That this should be the case, despite the Prime Minister’s clear unhappiness at that prospect, suggests that, facing bigger challenges at home and abroad, he had become largely disengaged from a policy with which he had never been enthusiastic about, and was resigned to letting the Deputy Prime Minister make the running on this agenda. On 13 June 2003, the Deputy Prime Minister wrote to Raynsford and told his junior Minister that they now had clearance to proceed with local government reviews for the North East, North West and Yorkshire and Humberside.⁸⁸ This was officially announced by the Deputy Prime Minister on 16 June 2003.⁸⁹

By the autumn of 2003, the Government was taking steps to raise public awareness of their devolution proposals across all three northern regions. On 16 September 2003, Nick Raynsford wrote to colleagues on the Ministerial Committee on English Regional Policy (ERP), advising that the Government was ‘considering what more can be done to raise awareness of proposals for elected regional assemblies.’ Noting that the Government had made a commitment to parliament to publish a draft Regional Assemblies Bill in the summer of 2004 ahead of autumn referendums, he urged his colleagues to ‘do their utmost to publicise the “Yes” campaign and to strongly advocate the benefits of Assemblies when visiting the Northern regions.’⁹⁰ The next month, Raynsford wrote again to ERP members to inform them that an information campaign would be launched in the regions on 3 and 4 November. The aim of this campaign, Raynsford explained, would be ‘to help raise awareness of the referendums, and of the powers and responsibilities which would be conferred [to the regional assemblies].’⁹¹

⁸⁷TNA PREM 49/3295. Memorandum from A. McGowan to T. Blair, dated 3 June 2003.

⁸⁸TNA. PREM 49/3295. Letter from J. Prescott to N. Raynsford, dated 13 June 2003.

⁸⁹House of Commons Debates [hereafter HC Deb], (Hansard) 16 June 2003 vol. 407, cc.21-3.

⁹⁰TNA. PREM 49/3296. Memorandum from N. Raynsford to Members of the Ministerial Committee on English Regional Policy, dated 16 September 2003.

⁹¹TNA. PREM 49/3296. Memorandum from N. Raynsford to Members of the Ministerial Committee on English Regional Policy, dated 17 October 2003.

Defeat: the 2004 referendum

On 21 July 2004, the House of Commons approved secondary legislation providing for referendums in the three northern regions on 4 November 2004, and for those referendums to be all-postal ballots.⁹² However, a day later, to howls of derision from the Opposition benches, Nick Raynsford announced that due to concerns about postal voting in the North West and Yorkshire and Humberside, the Government would not be proceeding, at that time, with those referendums. Instead, the North East, where the Minister argued that there was a ‘clear expectation’ of a referendum and where previous postal ballot trials had been ‘consistently positive’, would be the only region where a referendum would occur on 4 November.⁹³ Alongside this announcement, Raynsford announced that the Government was that day publishing a draft Regional Assemblies Bill⁹⁴ to ‘help people in the north-east make their decision.’⁹⁵

The decision to postpone the planned referendums in the North West and Yorkshire and Humberside was described by the BBC in 2004 as a ‘rather humiliating climbdown’ with suggestions that aside from concerns about postal ballots, the decision was taken for fear that those ‘votes could not be won.’⁹⁶ In contrast, according to the BBC, ‘the referendum in the North East was allowed to go ahead simply because planning was so far forward, there appeared to be a local demand for it and, some believe, as a face saver.’⁹⁷ Unfortunately, for those supporting regional governance, there would be no question of faces being saved.

On 4 November 2004, voters went to the polls for the North East devolution referendum. In what John Prescott would later describe as his ‘biggest disappointment’ during his tenure in Government⁹⁸, voters would reject a regional assembly by a 78 per cent to 22 per cent margin. More than seven years after New Labour had pledged to give voters a choice over regional governance, that choice had been made and with it came the end of New Labour’s regionalism agenda. Why the North voted No has been explored elsewhere.⁹⁹ However, it seems fair to conclude that the minimalist nature of the package on offer to voters did little to help the Yes campaign. According to Peter Hain, the then Secretary of State for Wales, the devolution offer to the English regions ‘was a “Mickey Mouse” one: regional government with very few powers.’ As a result, he suggests, the Yes campaign was ‘very vulnerable to the No campaigns’ relentless attack on ‘more politicians, costing you more and more bureaucracy’.¹⁰⁰ This suggestion was echoed in one of the major academic analyses of the 2004 referendum, with Sanford suggesting that the modest range of powers on offer ‘left the policy exposed to accusations by opponents that assemblies would be mere talking shops.’¹⁰¹

⁹²HC Deb 22 July 2004, vol. 424 c.501.

⁹³HC Deb 22 July 2004, vol.424, cc.501-14.

⁹⁴HM Government, Draft Regional Assemblies Bill, July 2004, Cm 6285.

⁹⁵HC Deb 22 July 2004, vol. 424, c.502.

⁹⁶N. Assinder, Is this the end for regional devolution?, BBC News [online] (5 November 2004), http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3979549.stm; M. Sanford, Introduction, in, M. Sanford (ed.), *The Northern Veto*, (Manchester, 2009), p. 11.

⁹⁷Assinder, Is this the end for regional devolution?

⁹⁸J. Prescott, *Prezza – My Story: Pulling no punches*, (London, 2008), p. 331

⁹⁹For a dedicated study of the 2004 referendum result, see: M. Sanford (ed.), *The Northern Veto* (Manchester, 2009).

¹⁰⁰P. Hain, *The Hain Diaries 1998-2007*, (London, 2015), p. 155.

¹⁰¹M. Sanford, Conclusion, in, Sanford (ed.), *The Northern Veto*, p. 187.

In their January 2005 report on the Draft Regional Assemblies Bill, the House of Commons ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee offered a detailed critique of the proposals which were put to voters in the North East. According to the Committee, the ‘scope of the powers and responsibilities which the Government was prepared to give to Assemblies was disappointing and would limit their effectiveness’. A fundamental handicap highlighted by the Committee, and a theme throughout this article, was the ambivalence, verging often towards outright scepticism, towards devolution within the centre of Government. Noting that the Deputy Prime Minister’s own department and ‘to a lesser extent’ the Department of Trade and Industry, ‘were the only Government departments prepared to devolve power to the assemblies’, the Committee suggested that if any future attempt at regionalization was to be successful, it would have ‘to have the commitment of all government departments.’ Overall, the Committee concluded that:

A clearer case is needed for elected regional assemblies in terms of value for money for the electorate. Voters in the North East were not convinced about the ‘cost-benefit’ calculation in regard to elected assemblies. They were unable to see in the modest powers of assemblies sufficient prospects of concrete improvements in their daily lives to vote for their introduction.¹⁰²

Conclusion

The wariness and small c conservatism that defined Number Ten and much of the rest of Whitehall’s response to regional devolution was therefore widely commented at the time of the 2004 referendum defeat.¹⁰³ Using an extensive array of recently released Government papers from that period, this article has shone further light on these perspectives and added to our understanding of the Blair Government’s approach to constitutional reform. These papers demonstrate the extensive hyper vigilance, at times some might suggest almost bordering on paranoia, that defined many of the Prime Minister’s closest aides on the question of regional governance, as well as highlighting the full extent of the patient ‘war of attrition’ that the Deputy Prime Minister had to play in keeping regional devolution alive within Whitehall. These papers fit with an image of a Prime Minister who was unenthusiastic at the prospect of regional devolution within England, and treated the whole question with a strong dollop of wariness and caution. The Prime Minister’s approach might be best summed up as wary indifference, and certainly the papers discussed in this paper often seem to depict a Prime Minister struggling to summon the same depth of hostility and scepticism that defined many of his closest aides in their handling of the topic.

Overall, this was a story of ambivalence and conservatism, with strenuous efforts made by Number Ten and throughout government to kick any hint of regional government into the long grass during the first term of the Blair administration, followed by similarly

¹⁰²House of Commons ODPM: Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee, *The Draft Regional Assemblies Bill*, First Report of Session 2004–05 (5 January 2005), HC62-I, p. 3.

¹⁰³This attitude was not confined to regional government in England, but also defined the Government’s handling of Welsh devolution, see: A. Evans, There will be no shortage of Cabinet ministers taking part in the Scottish referendum campaign. The same is not true in Wales: New Labour, Old Struggles, and the Advent of Welsh Devolution, *Parliamentary History* 42, (2023), pp. 255–73.

committed attempts to minimise the scale and scope of regional government when it became clear that the Government would have to make a clear offer to the public during its second term. The result was a devolution package that senior figures in government themselves admitted was ‘minimalistic’ and ‘weak’, but crucially was, as a result of these limitations, a package that they could ‘live with’.¹⁰⁴ While the commitment of the Deputy Prime Minister to regionalism is evident throughout, we are left with a picture of a centre of government whose ambivalence to the devolution agenda was also fairly evident, whether seen in the constant references to the choice element of the policy, but most clearly seen in the number of times the Prime Minister’s aides felt the need to question whether he would even publicly endorse his government’s own policy (or use the ‘we’re just giving voters a choice’ argument as a means to distance himself). In his memoirs, discussing his government’s devolution programme for Scotland and Wales, Tony Blair acknowledged that he ‘was never a passionate devolutionist’.¹⁰⁵ This absence of passion could be seen no more clearly than in relation to his government’s largely reluctant and ultimately doomed approach to regional devolution in England.¹⁰⁶

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Notes on contributor

Adam Evans is an Honorary Research Fellow at the Wales Governance Centre at Cardiff University, Wales. He has published widely on British constitutional history and aspects of devolution in the United Kingdom.

ORCID

Adam Evans  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4150-1517>

¹⁰⁴TNA. PREM 49/2789. Memorandum from A. McGowan to T. Blair, dated 4 April 2002.

¹⁰⁵T. Blair, *A Journey*, (London, 2010), p. 251.

¹⁰⁶It is particularly fitting that his memoirs do not mention this chapter in his government at all.