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Taking Forward Democratic Renewal in the English Regions: Some Lessons from the Post-Referendum North East

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ABSTRACT
In a referendum in November 2004, the people of the North East decisively rejected the proposal to create a directly elected Regional Assembly. This result effectively put an end to proposals for Regional Assemblies elsewhere as plans for referenda in other regions were consequently abandoned. Drawing upon detailed interviews with a wide range of stakeholders in the North East, this article assesses why the North East voted 'No' and argues that despite the subsequent emergence of city-regions as an alternative framework for governance, what is still needed is a serious commitment to *democratic renewal.* Democratic connections between citizens and the state, between the taxpayer and public services, need to be rebuilt. Only a reinvigorated democracy can begin to dispel the cynicism and alienation that characterises the contemporary political process – and which, was a main factor behind the 'No' vote in the referendum. Given the failure of political devolution at the regional level, genuine democratic renewal must now being taken forward at the local level.

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New Labour and the Devolution Agenda

'The debate about the reform of the governance of the English regions has tended to hinge on two related assumptions. The first of these is that an extensive tier of government exists within the English regions in the form of a plethora of government departments, quangos and other bodies. To a greater or lesser degree the policies and actions of these agencies are assumed to provide the framework for regional development. The second assumption is that the fragmented structure of bodies at the regional level contributes to a failure of governance which produces poor public policy outcomes. The fragmented character of the policy-making process – together with arguments about the democratic deficit – are the lynchpin of the case for the reform of regional governance in England' (Tomaney, 2002 p 226).

Regional devolution seems to be an eminently sensible idea. The United Kingdom has been viewed as possessing a very centralised system of government, with an enormous concentration of power in Westminster and Whitehall (Leach and Percy-Smith, 2001) There is a strong case for decentralisation, for 'subsidiarity', devolving decision-making down to the regional, sub-regional or local level. This would enable much greater sensitivity and responsiveness to specific needs and circumstances, as well as strengthening connections between individuals, communities and the multi-layered state.

New Labour has been reasonably keen on devolution or, at the very least, willing to respond to devolutionary pressures. Following referenda, the new Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly were established in 1999 and, following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the Northern Ireland Assembly was set up. In England, the Greater London Assembly was established and, elsewhere, regional structures were developed or strengthened. Regional Development Agencies have been created in all the English regions, together

with Regional Chambers to oversee them and provide a 'voice' for each region (Sandford, 2001).

Of course, not all of this has gone smoothly. One need only think of the controversy over the cost of the new Scottish Parliament building, unresolved constitutional issues such as the role of Scottish MPs (the 'West Lothian Question'), and continuing difficulties in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the Labour Government has continued to pursue their devolution 'project' (O'Neill *et al*, 2004).

The North East of England has been caught up in these processes of institutional restructuring and has played a particularly prominent (if uneven) role in initially *promoting*, and then eventually *resisting* devolution. In 2002, the Government set out plans for regional referenda to test proposals for creating directly elected Regional Assemblies (Cabinet Office/DTLR, 2002). These would replace the existing Regional Chambers which comprised local authority nominees and representatives of regional economic and social interests. The North East was to have the first such referendum. If successful, it would be followed by others, in the North West and in the Yorkshire and Humber region. What was then envisaged was the gradual emergence of a regional elected tier of government across the country.

The choice of the North East as the 'pilot' region reflected the fact that for several years prior to the referendum, pressure groups in the region were busy arguing the case for an elected assembly, claiming that there was wide-

ranging support and demanding a referendum to put the issue to the people of the region (NECC, 2000). It was also notable that the North East's Regional Chamber (set up in 1999) very soon renamed itself the 'North East Assembly' – a move which clearly anticipated the possibility of elected government in the region.

In the North East, a range of arguments were developed that underpinned the case for an elected regional assembly. Firstly, there were (often rather romanticised) sentiments about regional identity in the North East,

> "North East England is our community and a place to be proud of. The people of the North East have a shared culture which comes from their history. They have a strong sense of community, born out of the industries of the past. These industries made sure people had to work hard, together, to succeed. Around its three major rivers the people of the region share some of the best landscapes in Britain, including England's last wilderness, its finest castles and its greatest cathedral. People are proud to be from this region and many expatriates want to return. Of all the English regions, the North East has the strongest sense of identity. We share a proud history and great potential for the future." ('4 reasons 4 yes,' quoted in Tickell *et al*, 2005, p 491)

Secondly, there were also more solid administrative arguments for devolution, namely: reducing fragmentation, enhancing strategic co-ordination and improving public policy outcomes (Tomaney, 2002).   Moreover, having experienced deindustrialisation and mass unemployment during the Thatcher years, it is not surprising that the view also developed in the North East that there should be some regional 'counterbalance' to the powers of the centre (NECC, 2000).

Thirdly, there was also a strong political rationale for creating elected regional assemblies. According to the Campaign for the English Regions, elected regional government

'..should provide new opportunities for consultation and participation, bringing an enhancement of democracy with direct control over services and decisions at a regional level' (CFER/LGIU, 2004 p 1)

This emphasis on 'democratic renewal' in the regions was partly influenced by the premise that elected regional assemblies offered new opportunities to ensure at least some political accountability within the appointed (or quango) state (Humphrey and Tomaney, 2001). This view is also reinforced by wider national and international experiences, where decentralised governance is viewed as allowing access to a greater degree of civic engagement than supra-national or national levels because they are intrinsically closer to the citizen (Lindsay, 2000). In this sense, devolved 'sites of governance' are seen as being ideal territory for the development of forms of 'empowered deliberative democracy' (Fung and Olin Wright, 2001). Implicit throughout this literature is the assumption that the more local and participatory, the more inclusive and democratic.

The emphasis on inclusivity has been further developed within the literature on civic (or stakeholder) engagement (McCall and Williamson, 2001; Federal Trust, 2003). Thus, the Labour Government's wider devolution agenda (in London, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) has seen the introduction of a range of civic fora - or economic and social partnership bodies - which aimed

to facilitate the involvement of traditionally marginalised groups into governance. In Scotland, the aim of the Civic Forum was to

'..help break the mould of old fashioned politics....increase participation, find new ways to open up dialogue, raise awareness and stimulate debate on the many challenges facing Scotland. It will have a vital role in creating a more open and broadly based political culture' (Scottish Civic Forum, 2000)

Within the North East, it was argued that the creation of an elected regional assembly (and a parallel regional civic forum) provided an opportunity to 'deepen' democracy through the

'creation of new and innovative forms of civic or stakeholder involvement - a new political "space" in which a wide range of citizens could be more fully involved in the running of their region' (Humphrey and Shaw, 2004, p 2186)

The Referendum Campaign: Why the North East Voted 'No'

The North East referendum was held in November 2004. The electorate of the North East was asked to vote for or against an elected Regional Assembly and also to vote on proposals for local government reform in the 'Shire' Counties (Northumberland and Durham) which have a two tier system of local government (County and District Councils). If an elected Regional Assembly was created, local government would be rationalised into a single tier of 'Unitary Authorities' in order to avoid having excessive layers of government.

In the run-up to the referendum, 'Yes' and 'No' campaigns were developed by regional groups who presented their cases to the public. Both of the officially recognised campaign groups were funded by Government to do that and throughout the summer and autumn of 2004, they sought to inform and

influence the voters. The Yes Campaign emphasised regional identity and garnered the support of 'major' public figures in the North East, such as Sir John Hall, the creator of the MetroCentre and former chairman of Newcastle United, and the former Olympic athlete turned business man, Brendan Foster. The No Campaign said an Assembly would be a talking shop, it would mean more politicians and was somehow a European plot. The memorable motif of their campaign (and arguably of the campaign as a whole) was an inflatable white elephant, which appeared in various places across the region (Knock, 2006, p 690)

In the event, the people of the North East voted 'No' to an elected Regional Assembly. That rejection was decisive (a massive 78% voted 'No') and all parts of the region and all groups (including a majority of Labour voters) were against the proposals (see Figure 1). The result couldn't be dismissed on the grounds of voter apathy: turnout for this postal ballot was a respectable 47%. It was especially a blow for the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, a long term advocate of regional devolution.   And the North East electorate also effectively scuppered proposals for Regional Assemblies elsewhere – plans for referenda in other regions were consequently abandoned. So why did the North East vote 'No' and what has happened since the referendum?

Figure 1: The North East Referendum outcome

Electorate	Votes Returned	Unadjusted turnout	Valid votes	Adjusted turnout
1,899,742	906,367	47.7%	893,829	47.1%

Maximum turnout: Alnwick 57.4%

Minimum turnout: Middlesbrough 42.1%

'Yes' votes	%	(as % of electorate)	'No' votes	%	(as % of electorate)
197,310	22.1	(10.4)	696,519	77.9	(36.7)

Maximum 'Yes': Derwentside 29.8%

Minimum 'Yes': Darlington 12.9%

Local government options for new Unitary Authorities

Durham	Northumberland
Option A (Single council) 50.6%	Option A (Single council) 43.8%
Option B (Three councils) 49.4%	Option B (Two councils) 56.2%

Source: (Rallings and Thrasher, 2005 p 3)

A year after that vote, we had the opportunity to explore these issues through a series of in-depth interviews with 30 people who are involved in running the North East region and its institutions. This sample of 'key stakeholders' covered the main regional governance institutions, together with local government, other public sector bodies, the private sector, the voluntary and community sector and other civic organisations (Shaw *et al*, 2006). An important part of the research was to ask these people to reflect on the referendum and talk about its aftermath.

Many of these interviewees had been supportive of regional devolution, some more enthusiastic than others. Most had initially assumed that there was a good chance of a 'Yes' vote. But they had been well aware of declining support for the Regional Assembly proposals as the campaign progressed. As one said, 'every person you spoke to was voting no'. By the time of the referendum, they had become ready for a No vote – but many of our interviewees were shocked at the *scale* of the rejection.

Reflecting on the referendum, our sample of stakeholders cited three main reasons for the outcome:

- Public antipathy and suspicion of politics and politicians
- The proposed Assembly wouldn't have much power, at least initially– so it might be just a 'costly talking shop'.
- The Yes Campaign was weak. It failed to say how an Assembly would really make a difference, it seemed to be aimed at people who were already knowledgeable and supportive of the idea, and for most of the general public it simply wasn't convincing. The No Campaign was direct and effective – and it connected with the people's scepticism.

There were other reasons mentioned too. The timing of the referendum, late in the last Parliament, suggested the Government was not fully committed to it (and, indeed, some parts of Government were not). It also gave people an opportunity to register a protest vote tied into many other concerns – a chance to give the Government (and Tony Blair) 'a bloody nose' (66% of 'no' voters

were unhappy with the prime minister. There were also geographical tensions within the region: Teesside, for instance, was not keen on what some thought would be a 'Geordie Parliament' dominated by Tyneside (even though it was said that the Assembly would be neutrally based in Durham). That in itself raises interesting questions about the strength of a North East regional identity, as compared with the sub-regional tribalisms displayed so powerfully through loyalty to football teams.

These points are generally confirmed by the findings of other commentators (Rallings and Thrasher, 2005; Tickell *et al*, 2005). Drawing on a MORI survey of public opinion in the region soon after the referendum, Rallings and Thrasher noted that there had been scepticism and very limited understanding of the issues. Tickell *et al* pointed also to the tone of media coverage, which had gradually become more negative.

We ourselves were particularly struck by the comment of one of our interviewees who said:

> 'People didn't really understand the issues – indeed, they weren't in a mood to understand'

In the months leading up to the referendum, it became very evident that people just couldn't bring themselves to believe what they were being told. For example, the establishment of a Regional Assembly would have meant *fewer* politicians as a result of local government reorganisation cutting out a tier in the Shire Counties. But people would not believe that. More than that,

most had little patience to listen to the arguments and decide how best to vote. That was not because the issues were particularly complex. - it was more that 'they weren't in a mood to understand'.

Perhaps that refusal goes to the heart of the matter. The referendum result is illustrative of the condition of politics and the political process in the North East. Many people just have no time for conventional politics. Politicians are regarded as self-serving; as one councillor said to us:

> '… the public hate the lot of us – they think we're all crooks and they can't be bothered to vote …'

Local government is seen as lacklustre, it doesn't make much of a difference and Councils always seem to want to raise Council Tax. Central government is far away and the region's MPs don't seem to deliver for the North East – which is still the poorest region despite the fact that the Prime Minister and other senior members of the Government represent constituencies in the region.

Voting 'No' in the referendum is consistent with this disaffected viewpoint – after all, voting 'Yes' would only serve to encourage 'them'. Democracy is at a low ebb in the North East:

> 'Decades of domination by one party (the Labour Party) has not served the region well. Debate has been stifled and local politics is sterile, lacking imagination and vision. Local government, run by a male gerontocracy, looks and sounds out of date and paternalistic. There is a widespread dissatisfaction with politics and politicians in the region and an apathy – or more correctly, a sense that nothing can ever

change – which leads to low turn-out in local elections' (Robinson, 2002, p 327).

Generally, people don't engage with the local political process, don't know who their local councillor is and a great many don't go out to vote. Furthermore, many public services are in fact not even subject to democratic control except – perhaps – through a convoluted process of accountability, ultimately, to Parliament. The NHS, Police, Further and Higher Education, Learning and Skills Councils, the Regional Development Agency – these, and other functions, are run by quangos or quango-esque bodies which can't be voted out, however badly they perform (Robinson and Shaw, 2003).

This combination, of a weak democracy which generates little interest and commands little respect, together with a complex quango state, was not fertile ground for an experiment in regional devolution. The Assembly proposal was limited and flawed but it did arguably offer some additional power to the region. However, a sceptical public couldn't be convinced.

Post- Referendum Governance

Prior to the referendum, the region's institutions and the government had been preparing for the advent of an elected Regional Assembly. Then, as support ebbed away, came the eventual decisive 'No' vote. That led to a good deal of confusion about how best to respond. The problem, as several of our interviewees put it, was that there was 'No Plan B'. Since then, the region's institutions have had to re-position themselves and things have

settled down, but there has not been quite the return to 'business as usual' that some might well have wanted.

At the regional level, there are three main institutions: One NorthEast (the Regional Development Agency); Government Office for the North East; and the (unelected) Regional Assembly. All three have had to adapt to something that was expected, planned for, and hasn't happened. The Assembly has had a particularly tough time since the referendum.

The North East Assembly is one of the Regional Chambers created by the Government in 1999. About two-thirds of its members are councillors, nominated by Councils across the region, and the rest represent various sectors or interests. Soon after it was established, its members decided to call it the 'Regional Assembly', so anticipating the development of an elected Assembly. It has a small officer team and is funded by Government to fulfil such roles as scrutinising the work of One NorthEast and producing regional planning and housing strategies (ODPM, 2005).

Most people did not even know there was such an Assembly when they voted in the referendum. Now, there is serious confusion which continues to damage the Assembly; those people who hear about it want to know why there is an Assembly when they supposedly voted against it. Almost every week there is a letter in the local press, often from members of the former No Campaign, where that point is made. It still does have a role, but the referendum result undermined its legitimacy. One interviewee said that the

referendum result had left behind 'embarrassing features of the landscape, principally the Assembly'. The Assembly evidently had no Plan B, it has 'struggled to re-assert its role and will have to work hard to gain credibility'.

By contrast, the RDA, One NorthEast has generally benefited from the referendum result – not least, it has not had to cope with the more complex accountability that would have been created. With the Assembly seriously weakened, there is a void in regional governance and One NorthEast has taken on something of a leadership role. Some of our interviewees welcome that, while others feel that it cannot be legitimate. One NorthEast is, after all, a quango whose Board is appointed by, and is accountable to, Government ministers. It is not answerable to 'the region'.

The third component institution of what Pearce (2005) has called the regional 'Troika' is Government Office North East (GONE), a generally respected outpost of the civil service. GONE represents Government in the region - it was described to us as 'the glorified mouthpiece of ministers'. While it may articulate the region's concerns, its business is to serve the Government. Some interviewees see the region as being like a colony, with GONE as the colonial administration. One went further than that:

> 'The region is like a colony – but it's not producing the wealth anymore so it's not a lot of use – a bit of a waste of space really'.

Undoubtedly, there is a void, left behind as a consequence of the No vote, and none of these three institutions is able to fill that void. There is no proper

place for effective regional-level debate, policy-making or, more particularly, a base for regional leadership. The ground was made ready for a regional tier of government – and many other institutions, beyond the 'Troika', got ready for that. After the referendum, they all had to pick up the pieces – some, like the existing Assembly, damaged; some, like One NorthEast, 'emboldened', as one interviewee said; and some just wondering what they are for and what they should do.

'Scrabbling around for ideas'

At the time of our interviews in late 2005, there were developing (and often confusing) debates about city regions, Local Area Agreements, elected mayors, the 'Northern Way' initiative, and so on.

Following the referendum, attempts have been made to find other routes to reform. As one interviewee put it, 'people have been scrabbling around for ideas'. At a pan-regional level, Government set up the 'Northern Way' initiative, which brings together the three regions of Northern England to support and undertake economic development projects (Goodchild and Hickman, 2006). At the regional level, there has been what some see as 'creeping regionalisation' or regionalisation by stealth, creating, for instance, new regional structures for the Learning and Skills Council and proposed mergers of the sub-regional Police Forces and also of the Fire Services. The 'big idea' at the moment is, however, at the sub-regional level. David Milliband, Communities and Local Government Minister, has been promoting

the concept of 'city regions', conurbation-wide governance arrangements (ODPM, 2006).

In the North East, that would mean Tyne/Wear and the Tees Valley as city regions, perhaps loosely formed and probably not (as some suggest) with their own elected mayors. Below that level, there is talk again of reforming two-tier local government. Also at that local level, an important ongoing reform is the re-framing of relationships between central and local government through the new mechanism of 'Local Area Agreements' (Sorabji, 2005). There is also a good deal of rhetoric - and some reality – about 'empowering' neighbourhoods. Milliband envisages what he calls 'double devolution'--to local authorities, then down to the neighbourhood level.

This Government has a certain enthusiasm for restructuring governance and public institutions. That enthusiasm has been evident since New Labour came to power in 1997.   Since then, there has been a tremendous amount of change, creating a bewildering array of new institutions and partnership arrangements. A Regional Elected Assembly *might* have helped to give some coherence to at least some of this by, for example, drawing together the strategies of different agencies. Since that was ruled out when the region voted 'No', we have seen, instead, yet more structural change at many levels, with no apparent coherence.

Today, the structure of governance in the North East (and in other areas) is so complex that few people really understand it and it is very difficult to keep

track of interminable changes. Our interviewees – people who are involved in running the region's institutions – admitted that even they struggle. As one said:

> 'You'd need to be a real anorak to fully understand what all these organisations are doing and how they interface with each other'.

Indeed, the problem of what Skelcher (2003) has referred to as 'congested governance' has actually worsened under New Labour, with over 40 new governance structures being launched over the past five years alone (Shaw *et al*, 2006 p 22). As one of our interviewees said, 'it's difficult to get your head around it'.

A new agenda for reform?

Whatever the merits or demerits of the proposals for an elected Regional Assembly, the referendum did highlight attitudes to politics and politicians. It is actually remarkable that the North East, despite its relatively strong sense of identity and, more to the point, sense of being ignored by London, so decisively rejected the promise of greater power to the region. It is interesting, too, that the turnout was quite high – a good deal higher than for local council elections. People could be bothered to vote against politicians and particularly vote against – as many saw it – more politicians, more 'jobs for the boys'.

Having found that this formulation of regionalisation led, ultimately, down a blind alley, the Government has been trying out other ideas. But that tinkering

with structures, while understandable, doesn't tackle the political problem made manifest by the referendum result. Tinkering with structures may help patch things up and get things done but represents timid, unambitious reform. It often seems to look like change for the sake of change, without strategic direction and without tackling the real problems.

We would argue that what is really needed is a serious commitment to what the Government has in fact said it wants to promote: *democratic renewal*. Democratic connections between citizens and the state, between the taxpayer and public services, need to be rebuilt. Only a reinvigorated democracy could begin to dispel the cynicism and alienation that characterises the contemporary political process – and which, we contend, was a main factor behind the 'No' vote in the referendum.

That reinvigoration must start with local government. Over many years, local government has been marginalised, deprived of powers by central government, maligned by Government and the public. Councils have been pushed to the margins by the growth of all kinds of other, unelected, public bodies and by the development of parallel forms of local governance (Skelcher, 2003). Given the limited power of local government and its dreary image, it is hardly surprising that turnouts are low. As Tony Wright argues:

> 'Everyone knows that we're absurdly centralised in this country. I do have a sense that we need to repair our local democratic system quite urgently and that on any comparative test, this is a huge deficit in our system, and that's going to require some political courage and the will to do that, and some real culture change. I do think that would be an area where you would get some real gains if people felt there actually was someone accountable, locally, for a range of things, and that in turn would have

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good pay-offs for civic engagement' (Dr Tony Wright MP, Chair, Public Administration Select Committee, quoted in JRCT, 2006, p 157).

Of course, Governments are very inclined to control local Councils and so weaken and marginalise them. Governments – perhaps particularly Labour Governments – don't rate local councils and don't trust them. But democratic renewal must be about giving Councils clout and power – making it worth voting for them and re-establishing them at the centre of debate and decision-making at local level. Central government has to act to help revive local government. In addition, local government has to become more relevant, more communicative and more representative.

The issue of representativeness is especially important. In the North East, nearly three-quarters of Councillors are men and the average age of Councillors is now 58 (Shaw *et al,* 2006). Councils are clearly not representative of their electorates, and that is both a cause and consequence of the image of local government. Few women under the age of 40, for example, would be tempted to join this male gerontocracy.

The call to reinvigorate local Councils is at the heart of the recent Power to the People Report, produced jointly by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable and Reform Trusts. In order to recreate a political system which allows citizens a 'more direct and focused influence on the political decisions that concern them', the report argues for a 'rebalancing' of power between the constituent elements of the political system, in particular a shift of power away from the

Executive to Parliament and from central to local government (JRCT, 2006, pp 20-21). In relation to the latter, the report recommends that:

- There should be an unambiguous process of decentralisation of powers from central to local government

- A Concordat should be drawn up between central and local government setting out their respective powers

- Local government should have enhanced powers to raise taxes and administer its own finances

- The Government should commission an independent mapping of quangos and other public bodies to clarify and renew lines of accountability between elected and unelected authority

- A responsive electoral system – which offers voters a greater choice and diversity of parties and candidates – should be introduced for elections to the House of Commons, House of Lords and local councils in England and Wales to replace the first-past-the-post system

- The Electoral Commission should take a more active role in promoting candidacy so that more women, people from black and minority ethnic communities, people on lower incomes, young people and independents are encouraged to stand

- The voting and candidacy age should be reduced to sixteen

(JRCT, 2006 pp 22-23)

Put simply, there is no substitute for local democratic control of public services. And it is possible to imagine that once the public have become accustomed, again, to local political debate and decision making through their Councils, they would recognise the merits of extending that – perhaps even to the point of wanting an elected Regional Assembly. Our hope would be that many other public services would become democratically controlled. Is it so fanciful to imagine the public voting for people to sit on the boards of local

Health Trusts, Police Authorities or the governing bodies of Colleges and Universities?

Conclusion

This account has sought to examine the North East referendum and its aftermath, leading on to a broader discussion about reform and democratic renewal. Some might well wonder whether any of this really matters. As one of our interviewees said:

> 'A lot of people are less concerned about governance than about the quality of service provision and delivery'.

But most of our interviewees did feel that governance in the North East doesn't work particularly well because it is too complex, uncoordinated, is insufficiently accountable and it lacks vision. Add to that the turmoil of continual reform creating turbulence, uncertainty and drift across most of the public sector. It is not a structure well geared to delivering progressive and effective regional development—it may be that this is one of the reasons why the North East remains at the bottom of so many social and economic league tables.

An elected Regional Assembly might have made a difference. Now, instead of bemoaning what might have been, we should focus on the more fundamental issues that we need to put right – and which the referendum highlighted. For us, that has to be about reviving public involvement in the region's governance, beginning with local government.

Back in 2000, long before the referendum, we argued that:

> 'Without a revival of local government it will be hard to push for an extension of democratic local governance – or, for that matter, make a sufficiently strong case for directly-elected regional government' (Robinson, Shaw *et al*, 2000, p. 159).

That is still our view. Considerable effort will be needed to re-establish old habits of local democracy – but it will be worth it. It can serve as the basis for wider democratisation. Perhaps, one day, it might even lead to another referendum about a Regional Assembly, with a different result.

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