

Greater Manchester Tier 3 rules: what the stand-off tells us about England's centralisation



While the performative stand-off between the government and Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham has provoked a new debate about England's centralisation, every aspect of the crisis has been seen before, writes [John Denham](#).

With the Manchester lockdown having been announced without an 'agreement' with mayor Andy Burnham, and with First Minister Mark Drakeford having confirmed a 'fire-break' lockdown in Wales, the contrasting powers of the devolved nations, England's localities, and the union government could not have been made more obvious. Every English lockdown measure is imposed by the union government. Local leaders have no legal powers to veto or amend proposals. Any ability to extract extra cash reflects the government's desire to see them share responsibility or blame, not a rational assessment of need.

The performative stand-off has provoked a new debate about England's centralisation under the union government; yet every aspect of the current crisis has been seen many times before. For decades, England's governance has been defined by management of the relationship between the centre and the local, the distribution of funding within England, the structures by which local areas are represented, the autonomous powers that they hold (or lack), and the inability of the union's political culture to reflect the reality of multiple centres of power.

Local leaders resisting the proposed lockdown on Manchester didn't want to accept a pre-determined set of actions decided in Whitehall, and certainly not without adequate funding. That Whitehall-defined relationship has dominated the thirty-year history of English devolution. Whether through nominated regional assemblies, government offices, or city regions and combined authorities, union policy under all three parties has been '[elite co-option](#)': finding ways of engaging local stakeholders, including councils and business leaders, in delivering Westminster priorities. It has allowed little autonomy in setting different priorities to the centre and little significant control over resources.

Just as the union government has been slow to allow local public health to take the lead on test, track and trace, so it has long refused the powers needed to reshape local economies. Capital investment is tightly held by union ministers and [regional transport](#) never gets the consistent political and financial support given to HS1, HS2 and Cross-Rail. Metro-leaders have had little choice but to pursue city centre-focussed regeneration based in property and higher education, often to the detriment of surrounding towns.

Under the union, England is the most centralised nation in Europe (measured by the proportion of funds raised and dispersed locally). While the Barnett formula provides some relative protection to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, there is no mechanism to ensure that England's localities [receive fair, needs-based funding](#). The union government has imposed the harshest austerity on [England's poorest areas](#), now including many with the highest Covid-19 infections and worst health status.

Conservative ministers representing constituencies with high infection rates are [claimed](#) to have avoided local lockdowns imposed in areas with lower infection rates. The varied outcomes of tier three negotiations appear to reflect whether the Conservatives have a strong electoral interests and loud local voices in the areas. Ministers [were accused](#) of intervening to divert regeneration funding towards Conservative marginal seats ahead of those with greater need. But union governments have always had a more or less unrestrained ability to act arbitrarily towards England's localities.

Not only is the pandemic hitting the most deprived regions of England hardest – partly because of a London-centric decision to raise the lockdown when much of the North was still in wave one – but Conservative gains in 'Red Wall' seats give both major parties a strong interest in 'speaking' for the north. It is likely that a pan-northern identity and politics will grow. But the 'north-south' characterisation of England is much harder to sustain. [More of England](#) is outside the 'north' and 'greater London' than inside either and this England needs better government too. The 'politics of the north' can simply become special pleading for a better deal from the union government that implicitly accepts that real power will remain in London. To date, 'levelling up' is a Whitehall-led process, handing out dribs and drabs in finance to favoured projects in favourite constituencies. Nothing about it will change the pattern of de-industrialisation, financialisation and globalisation that has so tilted the economy towards the south-east.

It was significant that resistance was described by Health Secretary Matt Hancock as 'party politics' even though Burnham was supported by Conservative MPs and council leaders. Despite twenty years of devolved administrations and rhetoric about English devolution, union politics still lacks the mature political culture that can accept someone of a different political party as the legitimate elected representative of their nation or locality. This cloth-eared insensitivity to the needs of a multi-centred democracy is the biggest single threat to the union

All these problems stem, at root, from the embedded culture of British nationalist unionism. It has obstructed change in the past, and is what makes change now challenging. [For London-centric think-tanks](#) and those deeply immersed in [Whitehall's ways](#) favour a revived regional agenda that, for all their real ambition, are likely to be no more successful than in the past. The English public remain deeply sceptical about regional assemblies, which always get far less support than any of the status quo, English Laws made only by English MPs, or an English Parliament.

The same public strongly [prefer](#) England being treated as one unit to regionalisation. This is quite compatible with seeing one's own area as unfairly treated. So, while there is [some support](#) for further devolution to combined authorities, it suggests more explicit devolution of powers will have to go hand in hand with a commitment to transparent and fair funding across England. This real levelling up would be far easier in a booming economy with large tax surpluses – an unlikely scenario in the foreseeable future – and would require a union wide approach that would likely signal the end of the Barnett formula.

All would require a profound change in the way England itself is governed. Labour did not pursue real English devolution. The current government, the most aggressively British nationalist for decades, is attempting to overturn key elements of devolution through the Internal Market Bill. It is unlikely to let go of any central power over England. England remains the only part of the union to have had no consultation, let alone referendum, on how it is governed in the past twenty years.

Note: For further reading see relevant chapters [here](#).

About the Author



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