

Regional government in the North could provide an answer to the ever widening social and economic divide in England

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*Calls for devolved powers for the North of England are rooted in the economic and political dominance of London and the South-East. **Paul Salveson** argues that an English Parliament would serve only to consolidate these existing inequalities and a diverse Council for the North may be needed.*



The political shape of the United Kingdom is changing rapidly. The debate over Scottish independence is only the most obvious sign of a major shift, together with last year's overwhelming vote for more powers to be given to the Welsh Government. In addition to Scotland and Wales, both Northern Ireland and London have **substantial devolved powers**. Which leaves the English regions. Some cities are having referenda on elected mayors, and police commissioners are to be voted for later this year. But it leaves some very big gaps and the continued dominance of centralised 'London' government.

As well as a democratic deficit, there is increasing evidence that the 'North-South Divide' is back with a vengeance. Research by IPPR North has shown a **widening social and economic divide** within England. The North is experiencing higher unemployment, more business failures, lower life expectancy and **less investment in basic infrastructure** such as transport.

A new organisation – the Hannah Mitchell Foundation – has been formed to campaign for elected regional government for the North. It has excited mixed views; some politicians who supported calls for regional devolution in the last Labour Government have yet to recover from the disastrous 2004 referendum in the North-East which sent a very clear 'No thanks' to Tony Blair and John Prescott. It was seen as another layer of bureaucracy with little power. Devolution in Wales and Scotland was still in its infancy and had yet to prove itself.

The Foundation intends to draw lessons from the 2004 experience. There are good arguments to look at 'the North' as a whole and include Yorkshire, the North-East and North-West in a 'super-region' which could have powers similar to those enjoyed by the Scots. This should emphatically not be about taking power away from the local level, but gaining a range of powers from Whitehall and Westminster. The slide into serious economic decline will not be reversed by under-resourced local authorities on their own, and there is a desperate need for strategic intervention at the regional level – on transport infrastructure, economic development and other areas, to develop a vibrant Northern economy. The regional development agencies have been abolished by the Coalition Government leaving regions like the North even more vulnerable.

Nobody would under-estimate the difficulty of moving towards regional government for the North, or for that matter other English regions. Yet the need to counter, on the one hand, the economic and political dominance of the South-East, and the increasingly confident and autonomous Scots and Welsh, is becoming increasingly clear. An 'English Parliament' is not the answer to the North's problems, since it would only reflect and consolidate existing inequalities. The North needs its own voice, as part of a more democratic England within the United Kingdom.

The Hannah Mitchell Foundation has been formed primarily to campaign within the Labour Movement for a new approach to regionalism which learns the lessons from past campaigns and moves forward. As the momentum for regional devolution gathers momentum, we recognise that a wider, cross-party and more widely representative organisation will be needed. Scotland had its 'Constitutional Convention' which brought politicians, business leaders, voluntary and faith organisations together. In due course the North will need something like this – perhaps 'A Council for the North'?

In the meantime, we see our role as gathering support within the centre-left. We are becoming a forum for the development of a distinctive democratic socialism in the North, rooted in our ethical socialist traditions of mutuality, co-operation, community and internationalism. Our focus will be to build the case for directly-elected regional government for the North of based on the principles of democracy and subsidiarity, social equity and justice, and sustainable development.

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About the author

Paul Salveson is the General Secretary of the [Hannah Mitchell Foundation](#) and a visiting professor in Transport and Logistics at the University of Huddersfield. He was awarded an MBE in 2008.

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