

The 'English Question', what we can learn from the Cornish Assembly Campaign, and why an English tier is not enough

By Democratic Audit

*Cornish calls for devolved Government have been heard consistently since the 1960, with campaigners even managing to amass the signatures of 10% of the county's population just over a decade ago. **Dr Joanie Willett** argues that the debate around the future of England as a political entity must consider the creation of regional governance structures which take account of local identities and specificities such as those of Cornwall.*

Devolved government has been a key feature of the political agenda since at least 1997, and with the forthcoming referendum in Scotland over Scottish Independence, it looks set to remain an on-going topical debate. Moreover, it is typically characterised as a re-democratisation, whereby institutions and services that are managed and



St Ives, Cornwall (Credit: Lawrie Cate, CC by 2.0)

delivered at the most local level possible are able to be more responsive to local needs and wants. For this reason, it has frequently been very reasonably pointed out that devolution in Scotland and Wales leaves England at a disadvantage, and to this end we have seen recent proposals for some form of English [tier of government](#).

But an English tier is an insufficient measure given persistent regional inequality, as was recognised in New Labour's attempt to deepen English regional governance through a series of English Regional Assemblies. In the event, the North East – the region deemed most likely to have a strong enough sense of coherent local identity to support an Assembly, rejected the proposal in a referendum in 2004, which effectively killed off English regionalism. However, the national debate completely neglected the only part of the English administrative area to have actively asked for an Assembly, and this neglect tells us some important things about English devolution.

Although not as vocal as Scotland, or Wales, campaigners in Cornwall have called for an Assembly since at least the 1960's. And when devolution again made it back to the political table in the late 1990's, incorporating discussion not just around Scotland and Wales, but also raising the topic of English regionalism, Cornish campaigners were keen to be a part of the debate. A Cornish Constitutional Convention was convened in 2000, and a petition launched asking for a Cornish Assembly. This petition was so successful that by the following year, in a pre-social media age, signatures were raised from 10% of the population (50,000 people), a figure that campaigners had been assured would be enough to take the petition seriously. A survey by Mori undertaken at the time put support for Assembly to be [at around 55%](#).

The next question, is *why* people in Cornwall bought into the Assembly campaign so heavily? A partial explanation is that the region is well known for a strong sense of local identity. There remains a Cornish language, Cornwall has its own flag, and there is a well recognised sense that people have a very deep attachment to place, often constructed as a Celtic nation, just like its bigger sisters, Scotland and Wales. But these factors alone can't account entirely for the Assembly campaign. After all, Cornwall is by no means unique in having a strong and distinctive local identity. Instead, the then New Labour governments regionalism agenda caught the tail end of the Cornish campaign for Objective 1 European Structural funding, given to the poorest [parts of the EU](#). This campaign mobilised civil society and contributed to an engagement with social, economic and political issues.

This raises another issue about Cornwall that places it much more on a par with Wales; that it is one of the poorest (in economic terms) parts of the UK. But to get objective 1 monies in the first place, campaigners were able to emphasise that it is a unique region, with its own distinctive, even ethnic culture and history, which meant that Cornwall needed to count as a statistical region in its own right. Here, campaigners were drawing from their sense of identity and distinctiveness to claim a form of autonomy that they believed would help to sort out their economic problems. They also hoped that autonomous institutions would follow in order to administer the monies, which would help to counter the trend for Cornish institutions to be merged with neighbouring Devon, leading to a perceived neglect of specific Cornish issues. The point of this, is that the campaign for Cornish institutions, including the later high profile Assembly petition, was embedded in a narrative that believed that decision making autonomy and devolved governance, would allow for a policy focus on solutions to entrenched local problems. This was perceived as necessary, as there was a widespread feeling that central government neglected Cornish problems.

This is an argument that this is by no means confined to Cornwall but is reflected in the North/South divide, or the growing inequalities between the South East and the rest of the UK, and is embedded in a perception that central government neglects the needs of its peripheries. In order to counter this problem, people want far greater accountability from their representatives, on a much more localised scale. The Coalition government have responded to this through the localism agenda. But the emphasis is on private sector service provision of public goods by what often becomes spatial monopolies. Moreover, local authorities have had to get used to massive funding cuts, risking that local authorities have become less accountable, as more of their services become privatised in the move to become 'Commissioning Council's'. And here we come back to the problem of the central agenda. Central government is historically poor in tackling regional problems. An English layer of devolved governance will do nothing to solve this.

The problematic raised at the beginning of this piece, was that the North East region was granted a referendum on an Assembly (which they rejected), whilst Cornwall's petition was left, forgotten about by Westminster. The geographic borders of regional governance structures lay at the heart of the issue. These were based on somewhat arbitrary administrative boundaries that date back to the 1940's at least, rather than in any kind of civil society led regional identification. The North East region fell within a specified geographical governance framework. Cornwall did not, but was merely a part of the much bigger, 7 county South West region. This meant that whilst English devolution was on the table, it was only on offer within clearly defined boundaries, which Cornwall did not fit.

So what can we learn from this? Firstly, that democratisation is not necessarily about 'what the people want', but about 'what the people want within the boundaries of the current political agenda'. Within these current boundaries, regional inequality remains a persistent problem and an English layer of governance is unlikely to tackle regional issues. The English question needs to find a way of providing a regional governance structure that can take account of local identities and specificities. This is may be a little messier than New Labour's rationalised regions, but will be in a better position to deliver more meaningful devolved governance.

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