

People's views about what kind of region they want to live in will inform their views on local and regional devolution

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The Northern Powerhouse project has picked up steam, with the Chancellor George Osborne using the policy to give Greater Manchester greater heft. This, and events in Scotland, have put regional and local devolution firmly on the agenda. Here, **Ian Martin** promotes an event which aims to bring people together in the Yorkshire area to think about what kind of region – and by extension what kind of regional devolution – local people, campaigners, and thinkers would want to see.*



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When you look around you, what do you think? What makes you feel proud of where you live? What makes you think, “that needs sorting out”? When I think about all the things that have impressed me in the places that I have been and when I think about the place that I call home, East Leeds, I think of the people who made things happen and wonder who is doing something good for everyone here. Something to make newcomers feel welcome, something to make sure there are places for young people to live, something to make sure people can get to jobs and fun stuff cheaply and quickly without destroying our environment. I wonder why people with far more power and influence than me don't seem to have to do it.

And then I think: This is my home, this is our home, maybe we can do it, maybe we should do it... or at least try. Waiting for Westminster, Whitehall and the City and those in politics, business and media who enjoy its intertwined maze of power doesn't seem to have worked for my home (though to be fair our new local MP Richard Burgon does seem to be doing everything he can to remain closer to East Leeds than Westminster). What about your home? Maybe it's not up to them anymore, maybe it's not about them telling us who we are and how we should live our lives, maybe it's about self-determination? Maybe it's about self-determination for individuals and for communities of individuals who choose to act together for the common good?

Luckily I am far from alone in thinking this way. Self-determination seems to be at the heart of the most positive visions of the future identified by [Pat Kane and Paul Mason](#) and the impulse for 'people to refuse to do what they're

told' seems to be a recurring theme of John Harris' cracking 'Anywhere but Westminster' series, [such as in Frome](#).

To me self-determination means: Starting from where we stand, taking responsibility for making it better, looking around positively and seeking opportunities for working together with and learning from others, welcoming inspiration from outside and trying to be a beacon for all the good things that we want to see in our society. In that sense, many people are already doing self-determination, people like [Good Stuff Armley](#) and [Hannah Directory](#), and it is in building up from the good stuff in these self-determining streets, neighbourhoods, villages, towns, cities, districts, counties and regions that we meet something else: 'devolution'. Are you bored of 'devolution' yet? I know many people who are. But what happens if we meet the 'devolution' agenda on our own terms. Could 'devolution' from above start to mean 'self-determination' from below?

But what would that look like? Is any of it possible in the near future? Devolution has become such a tarnished word, a way in which a Tory chancellor tempts those who have held nominal power in the North for a long time (generally Labour) into accepting responsibility for austerity by setting northern cities up to compete with each other to create the conditions for international businesses to make the biggest profits. Ultimately devolution is about somebody above you with more power deciding to give you some of that power on their terms. However the success of Scottish devolution and the democratic, decentralising, pluralist vision of the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties of the time show that devolution doesn't have to be Osbornian. Devolution can lead to genuine self-determination.

As Tom Forth has consistently argued, the UK government has [regularly decided](#) to invest national resources for the benefit of London and the South-East. This is especially true when it comes to transport infrastructure such as Heathrow Airport which is less important for Northern travellers than [Schiphol in Amsterdam](#). Despite this, many people in London remain disenfranchised and the quality of life for those on average wages is relatively poor compared to many places outside the South-East even if successful devolution led to impressive improvements in school attainment for vulnerable groups through the Schools Challenge which saw significant investment in staffing and professional development.

As Tom has shown, this national infrastructural bias towards London and the South East means taxes paid elsewhere have helped London and the South East to become wealthier. It has been entirely consistent with dominant political thought for as long as I remember which says that London's financial sector will save us all and we just need to make sure all legislation and policy meets their demands. A political, media and financial class fixated on the needs of one part of the country has inevitably led to policy, economics, governance and media scrutiny that has not reflected the needs of the rest of the UK. We are proud of who we are and we don't want to be dependent on taxes from profits made in London but our centralised state has created this scenario.

As [Craig Berry](#) and [Neil McInroy](#) have expertly argued, for any devolution to really lead to liberating self-determination for individuals it must therefore take into account political economy – a history that has led to concentrated wealth in the South East must not be consolidated by a form of devolution which stops transfers from areas of wealth to areas of need. Social justice requires that those who have benefited most from national investment in London and the South East continue to pay their fair share in meeting needs of those most left out by our centralised state.

To me self-determination is not, and therefore devolution shouldn't be, about concentrating power in one person's hands (as [Phil Kirby noted here](#)) but the practical reality is that the most powerful politicians on this island want a mayor and the dominant politicians here in West Yorkshire and the wider Yorkshire and Northern regions are taking it seriously as an option, given that it may be the only way to get a DevoManc style deal here. This means that whatever you or I say or do right now, a mayor for West Yorkshire (maybe 'Leeds City Region') or for Yorkshire may happen and so the question is whether there is any hope for real self determination to follow?

Scotland's political renewal was undoubtedly facilitated by elections under a proportional representation system and a referendum on devolution itself (as well as last year's independence referendum), together these engaged and promoted the wider range of voices that followed. Given that the London Mayor is considered a successful example

of devolution by this government and that this mayor is held accountable by a scrutiny assembly directly elected by proportional representation, shouldn't we at least demand this here too? Surely any change in how we are governed should be put to a referendum? Perhaps any successful mayoral candidate will be the one that promises to implement such an assembly model?

In my view, such a model would at least be a slightly more appropriate response to the hope and interest generated by the range of new voices engaged in Scotland's debate about the kind of place it wants to be. Devolution is primarily seen by those who hold power nationally and locally as a process of transferring some authority from one to another. Here in Leeds, our council leader Judith Blake launched a 27 point plan of powers (prior to the government imposed September deadline) that she and other council leaders would like to see decentralised from central government and delivered by the West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA), but possibly if demanded by Osborne, a mayor who can be outvoted by [2/3rds of WYCA](#). Is this really an appropriate response to the hopes of democratic renewal inspired by Scotland? A mayor reporting to an indirect body, a combined authority of leaders drawn from local authorities elected under First Past The Post on small turnouts?

But even if that is what we are lumbered with, is all hope for change lost? Even within those 27 points that ask for primarily administrative changes rather than the ability to pass laws different to those imposed by Westminster, there are possibilities. There is at least some hope that things could be done differently from what Owen Jones identified from US politics as the '[Overton Window](#)', the Westminster consensus of a narrow range of possibilities that make a candidate 'electable' (with all due respect to the impressive energy and engagement generated by Jeremy Corbyn's campaign). Could we for example aim to build bridges between all in our communities by using skills funding to ensure English language classes are widely available, enabling migrants to make the contribution they want to make, to help make their new [shared home even better](#)? Will Devo Manc be a beacon for a new [urban approach to asylum](#)? Will 'devolution' be an evolving process that over time enables us to give newcomers a [real Yorkshire welcome](#)? Will Wales use devolved powers to prove the value of allowing asylum seekers [the right to work](#)?

Something called 'devolution' is happening to us from above. If we are to make 'self-determination' happen from below, I believe that we need to engage, to find the opportunities for hope in the small steps whilst keeping hold of and promoting our ambitions for a better society based on self-determination. Creating a new democracy has enabled people in Scotland (plus Wales and London to an extent) to think again about what kind of society they want to live in. Old assumptions and cynicism about positive change have been put to one side and ways of building an inclusive and engaged democracy have been developed, including open and family friendly routines in Holyrood that promote finding common ground as well as newfound confidence amongst a wide variety of individuals from different backgrounds that politics can bring about positive change and therefore it is worth engaging with elections and more.

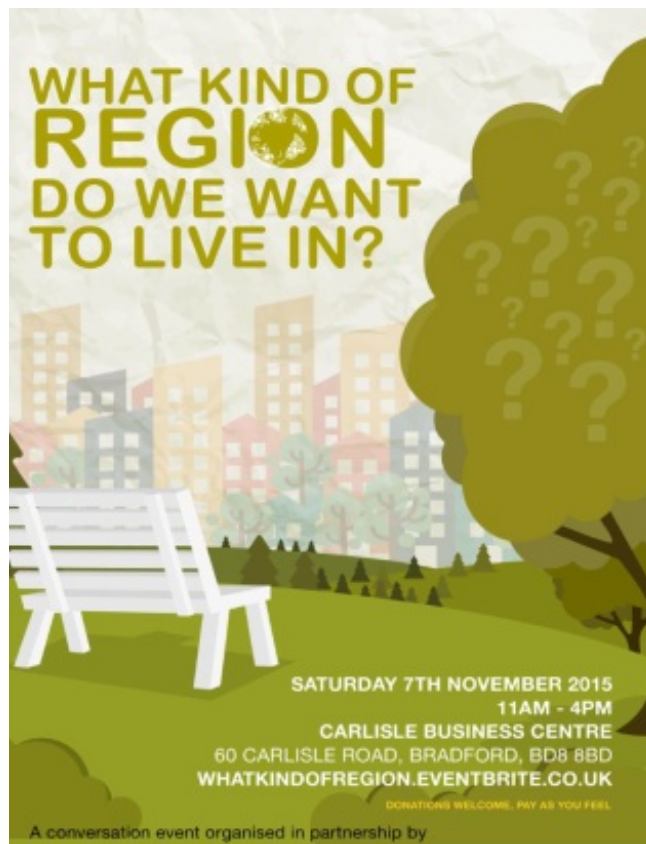
In all devolved scenarios, there are voices saying that what they have is not enough – In London progressives argue that the assembly should have legislative power, Lesley Riddoch said at the first Northern Citizens' Convention meeting in Huddersfield that it's not enough for Scotland's new 'friskiness' to make the nation a little bit better than England – but from where we stand, both those options are steps into a devolved democratic future that we crave.

But who is talking about it? People who already hold power and those already used to talking to and about power. Given the nature of politics, this means overwhelmingly white, middle aged, middle class men. Given the nature of our society and communities, this is a disaster. What is the point in devolution if it doesn't really change anything? Devolution changed Scotland and its bottom up political renewal is led by many more young, female, BME and working class voices than south of the border. If we want that, and I for one really do, we must find ways to understand and break down barriers to participation, those of us in privileged positions must actively try to engage those most left out by our centralised state to ensure that any new, hopeful democracy here is truly based on the experiences of those who need change the most. Not as recipients of Do Gooder beneficence but as empowered citizens in control of their own destiny. Devolution must be about self determination and self determination starts with the good stuff around us that we all do, whoever we are.

For some people, the 'whoever we are' is their motivation for 'self determination'. For many in Scotland, identity and nationhood mattered and it drove them to create a positive vision of 'civic nationalism' that led to the new and unusual scenario of self-proclaimed 'nationalists' promoting positive hopes for migration and integration whilst those who claimed 'nationalism' as a dirty word chased each other into designing the most mean spirited policies towards migrants they could imagine.

I love where I live, I am proud of what we have achieved together over thousands of years of migration, settlement and its legacy. To me it seems entirely legitimate in self determination for any individual or group of individuals to express an identity, whether that be European, British, English, Northerner, Yorkshire, Loiner or something else. For most people the evidence seems to suggest it is a combination with different emphases for [each individual](#). Equally there are many who argue that just as an English parliament would do nothing for the North by simply keeping power in the hands of those who have already let us down, I agree with those frustrated that non-South Eastern identities and experiences are not acknowledged but simply subsumed into 'Englishness', especially by those in power. Personally my heart sank when England and Scotland were drawn together in football's World Cup 2018 qualifiers, I knew that it would mean yet more of being told that I 'should' support England despite feeling more kinship with southern Scotland and the industrial towns of the Central Belt than southern England and the market towns of Wessex. Like Paul Mason, [I believe my identity is my choice and nobody can decide for me that I am 'English'](#).

Social media is full of English parliament campaigners telling Yorkshire parliament campaigners that they must feel English and so accept an English Parliament whilst others tell us that we must feel Yorkshire and accept a parliament based on historic boundaries. I respect those views and personally am very sympathetic to a Yorkshire 'Althing' but all these man-made boundaries have no more or less legitimacy for many people than a West



Yorkshire/Elmet or Northern assembly or identity. Each border is a record from a point in time when that border suited the most powerful people at that moment. Over time, that border then became something to which people felt an attachment. Each individual has a right to determine their own identity and not be told they should feel something and that 'something' means only certain boundaries are legitimate. If the best option for devolution is Yorkshire (and that is the argument that really differentiates it from English parliament campaigners), the argument must also be made on merits beyond identity and respectful links must be built with those who respect Yorkshire identity but see it as no more relevant than English, Northern, Elmet, Loiner or whatever else. We must create a big, welcoming space within devolved democracies for those who feel various identities.

Campaigners for a Yorkshire Althing (or parliament or assembly), whether motivated by identity or not, must make the case for what can be better achieved by an assembly representing 5 million than by a mayor or by a mayor or assembly representing West Yorkshire's 2.5 million or the North's 15m. What specific meaningful changes to the lives of those most in need would be more likely with a Yorkshire Althing? Could Yorkshire have more power to change lives than West Yorkshire alone? Could Yorkshire remain close enough to the needs of the population to have more sustainable democratic legitimacy than the North as a whole? Is the Yorkshire Post right that the needs of the business community are what really matter and all we need [is a mayor to be their ambassador](#)?

Equally, lessons from Scotland reveal to us that political renewal towards progressive change is helped by political parties with long standing commitment to self-determination (like the SNP, Scottish Greens, Yorkshire First and Green Party), individual politicians in more established political parties (like Labour's Donald Dewar and John Trickett and the Lib Dems' Jim Wallace and Greg Mulholland), non-party movements concerned with constitutional change (like Yorkshire Devolution Movement and National Collective), non-party movements concerned with bottom up progressive change (like Common Weal and Hannah Mitchell Foundation) and a questioning bottom up media (like Bella Caledonia and Leeds Citizen). In all these examples, Scotland is a few steps ahead but could give us inspiration to do it our way, right here, right now.

So a few of us residents who don't hold any power but who genuinely want the best for all our fellow citizens, residents with more questions than answers and certainly not all with the same answers or agreeing with every opinion expressed here, have organised an event and we're going to see what happens. We want to ask the question: "What kind of region do we want to live in?". [It'd be great to see you there.](#)

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Ian Martin is a campaigner and primary school teacher from Leeds and occasional volunteer presenter on community station East Leeds FM. He often tweets about radical regionalism, refugees and rugby league under [@ianeastleeds](#)