

As Scotland pushes for change, regional English devolution may become unavoidable

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*With the vote looming in September's Scotland independence referendum, attention has finally shifted towards what the implications of independence might be for what is left of the United Kingdom. Here, **Ellie Geddes** of IPPR argues that the north of England should take the opportunity to make the case for a degree of devolution and range of powers, whatever the outcome at the referendum.*



the Angel of the North (Credit: John H, CC BY SA NC ND 2.0)

Last week the leaders of the eight English Core Cities met in Glasgow and put out [a joint call](#) for greater devolution to cities outside London, advocating this as a better alternative to independence. In an open letter to the Herald, they claimed that giving local areas more powers would be, “a more radical constitutional agenda than establishing a border at Carlisle”.

As the debate around Scottish independence picks up the pace, the issue of devolution to the English regions is certainly becoming more and more relevant. It is of particular concern for the north of England, which is stuck in a power vacuum between the dominance of London and an increasingly powerful Scotland. In Scotland, both the ‘yes’ campaign and the opposing ‘better together’ campaign, whilst disagreeing on whether independence or devolution is the best method, do agree that decisions about Scotland are best made in Scotland. If this is true for Scotland, can the same argument also be true for the north of England?

The north of England is already taking an [avid interest](#) in what is happening to its even more northern neighbour. There are growing concerns that an independent Scotland could have a negative effect on the region, attracting business and investment north of the border. These fears are founded by [Amazon's](#) decision in 2011 to locate in

Dunfermline, instead of Tyneside, creating 1,800 new jobs in Scotland. New research from the [North East Chamber of Commerce](#) also shows that the current uncertainty is holding back some investors now, as they wait for the outcome of September's vote before making any investment decisions.

In their letter, the Core Cities pointed to the “centralising tendencies” of Westminster. This centralisation has a knock-on effect on public spending and investment. The north of England continually loses out on Westminster based spending decisions, which are consistently skewed towards London and the devolved nations, entrenching the age old North /South divide. [Research](#) by IPPR North shows that £1,082 per head is spent on economic affairs and skills in London, £1,281 is spent per head in Scotland, whilst only £652 per head is spent in the north of England.

If Alex Salmond speaks for Scotland and Boris Johnson for London, who speaks for the north? The region needs a voice which can be heard and fight its corner in the corridors of Whitehall. It also needs a voice to speak out internationally if it is ever to successfully compete on a global scale.

Policy-makers are beginning to [realise](#) that devolution could unlock the potential of regions outside London, and help rebalance the economy. However, if the north and other English regions are to receive more powers, then they must show that they have the leadership and institutions needed to drive it. The Core Cities and their city-regions are a good place to start, but perhaps the more promising vehicles are the newly established combined authorities. Yet, whilst combined authorities and Local Enterprise Partnerships are a good basis for local decision-making, there needs to be more collaboration between them if the north is to make its voice heard.

Whatever the outcome of September's referendum, it is likely that Scotland will get further powers through some form of greater devolution. There is no doubt that the United Kingdom is evolving and the devolution agenda is coming to the forefront. If the north of England is ever to get its voice heard and gain control over its own affairs, ensuring it is not left behind, now is the time for it to speak up and be noticed.

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