

We don't like regional assemblies but need something to help; Columnist.

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INEVER thought I'd write another Journal column about an elected assembly for the North East. It was all supposed to have been conclusively decided in 2004.

The referendum that year saw the idea rejected by 80% of voters on a turnout of just under half the electorate.

Campaigners were utterly humiliated, supporters disappointed, and the North East, well, the North East remained totally indifferent to the idea.

If victory has a thousand parents, then failure is an orphan. The referendum result was so embarrassing for all associated with the 'Yes' campaign that they had no option but to distance themselves from the whole scheme.

And nothing has changed since then. A recent IPPR report highlighted that fewer than 10% in all regions supported the idea of an elected regional assembly. So what makes me revisit the topic? A group of Our interests East are not Westminster's power Northern MPs recently published an open letter in a leading Sunday newspaper, launching a new think-tank, the Hannah Mitchell Foundation. Their idea is to breathe new life into long-standing debates about Northern politics and devolution for the North.

This launch reflects a deeper dissatisfaction between the reality of the contemporary United Kingdom and the political organisations we have to represent our interests. The IPPR report also asks which region of the country people think is best looked after by the Government. In the North, 89% feel that region is London, and 76% the South East: only 1% reported the North East.

This in turn reflects the way our main political parties set their priorities.

Our current party system emerged in the early 20th Century, when the hot political debates were around female emancipation, workers' collective rights, collective welfare provision and Irish Home Rule. These were issues with nationwide implications: all three main parties emerged supporting union, developing collective political platforms and campaigning nationally on the basis of these platforms. Many of today's key political issues have a strongly regional character. There are such strong economic and social differences between regions that any single national policy inevitably benefits some regions while penalising others.

Take the case of deficit reduction. The South East and London, with high private-sector employment, will benefit from the reduced tax burden. Everywhere else, with high public-sector employment, is penalised through fewer jobs and increasing unemployment.

The same is true for the current NHS reforms. In a city of 10 million people with hundreds of hospitals, clinics and health providers, increased competition could conceivably improve the efficiency of provision.

For everywhere outside London, the current Bill is likely to destroy a health system that is arguably the best in the world.

the North being heard in In the North East, people feel that their region corridors of is not well looked after, but still do not see a regional assembly as the solution. The current system is clearly broken, and our interests in the North East are not being heard in Westminster's corridors of power.

What is needed is something that recognises this reality of a divided Kingdom. The reason Scotland and Wales have their own elected parliament and assembly is that their electorates became frustrated at national parties' failure to tailor their platforms to distinctively Scottish and Welsh needs.

Single issue and regional parties have never thrived in England, because we have a strong emotional attachment to the parties of union and the first-past-the-post electoral system.

But if we feel let down by established parties and mistrustful of an elected assembly, the question remains of what can we change to address this gap. It is a good answer to that question which is needed before we can usefully reopen the elected regional assembly debate.

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