

Watch out for the scapegoating once we're all devolved

There's been a lot of enthusiasm in the Press recently for city-devolution in the North of England.

The Government are creating new Mayors to streamline local decision-making as a first step in driving towards 'the Northern Powerhouse'.

Across from Manchester to the North East, [George Osborne](#) was pictured everywhere in soft-focus photo-opportunities sitting alongside northern councillors.

Everyone was grinning broadly as they set their signatures on documents supposed to finally unleash the long-dormant power of the north. And a sea of ink has been spilled on just what the city-regional devolution plans will or not mean for the North East.

Much less thought has been given to whether these plans will even be given the time to really make a difference and start building an industrial renewal for us all.

Certainly, the Tories in office have a much stronger record in breaking up our political structures than they have in laying constructive foundations.

In the 2000s, our regional development agency One NorthEast built a solid reputation for negotiating between risk-taking and hubris. It had the power to bang heads together locally, and with a revitalised Government Office, managed to have the north east's voice and interests heard loudly in the corridors of Whitehall.

Post 2010, the Regional Development Agencies and Government Offices were one of the first victims of Eric Pickles' spitefulness as he played to the Tory blue-rinse crowd. What he proclaimed as tearing up red tape was in reality a recipe for inaction as investment in housing and infrastructure dried up to a trickle.

The Conservative model for government since the early 1980s has been driven by a fervent miserly centralism.

All spending that's not tightly controlled by the Tory government has to be suspect, and every other public body has to account for every last ha'penny till they're blue in the face. That betrays the Conservatives' fundamental pessimistic view of the world: left to their own devices, people are bad, lazy and wasteful with taxpayers' hard earned money.

In their view: if workers can join unions, then they'll strike to work less hard, not to be treated more fairly; if local authorities have spare cash, they'll waste it on politically-correct jamborees; and the only thing stopping poor people taking to a life on benefits is the harsh sanction of illness inducing welfare-sanctions.

The Tory model for local government and devolution is entirely consistent with that world-view: rate-capping, outsourcing and making the public pay more. Devolution is good as long as there's no new money and it's only spent on what the government wants. So the worst thing possible is spending money on anybody that might have a different view of what should be done. From the Tory perspective, dissent is not just difficult but

downright dangerous, the first step on a slippery slope towards their bogeyman world of 90% tax rates and a new 'winter of discontent'.

The Tories have trashed the longstanding idea of an honourable opposition that disagrees with the government of the day but that also has the country's best interests at heart. Anyone who fails to toe the party line will be defunded, attacked, closed down and gagged, whether a broadcaster, expert adviser or even other political parties.

But what happens when the government isn't the font of all wisdom? Where are the perceptive people who can point out the bear-traps in the way or even tell the Emperor that he is naked?

Margaret Thatcher found out the hard way just how painful it can be to step on a bear trap when she pushed through the poll tax in Scotland. Kicked out at the peak of her game by Conservative grandees frightened of electoral wipe-out and civil disorder for a mistake that anyone with a modicum of common sense saw coming a mile off. To the Tory government, the only thing that matters is cutting public spending but what we need in the north east is serious investment. If the new regional Mayor is to truly lead the region, then the Mayor will need to criticise the government and point out the blind spots in their world-view. They'll not be able to do their job without being truly independent from London, and speaking the truth of what we need to the power of the Tory panjandrums.

But once you rattle the government's cage, you're living on borrowed time. How long before the North East Mayor is smeared as dangerous to our economic and social security and blamed for all the problems under the sun?

I pity them: barely having time to take the chains of office before the Tory press pack are slavering down their neck, demanding blood, leaving them perpetually on the back foot.

Abolished after a single, exhausting term, to be replaced by whatever City-sponsored think-tank dreams up over canapes in a Palace of Westminster reception.

And this is the real problem with a devolved Mayor: it can never serve the region's best interests whilst it remains under the dead hand of Whitehall. Our future Mayor won't be able to point out the bear traps that government faces in seeking to turn the tide of 40 years of managed decline and try to build a dynamic and competitive knowledge economy in the North East of England.

We've become obsessed in the UK with continually reforming and changing our public sector organisations without realising the benefits that stability and experience brings.

We reduce local government to nothing more than short-lived projects, delivering central government fantasies irrespective of their relevance or value to the region.

So if we do ultimately choose for the North East to have city mayors, then we need to send a powerful message to London that we're giving the Mayor a mandate for a long-term change.

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