

## **Labour's Devolutionary Road**

With the excitement of the general election campaign still abating and the full realities of governing yet to sink in, now would be as good a time as any to take a good look down the likely direction of the Labour government's devolutionary road.

Let's take it that the telos or ultimate goal of devolution is to both advance locally led economic development and socially improve the lives of communities and localities in a manner that is both inclusive and sustainable. And with the parliamentary benches filled to overflowing with Labour Party MP's there is the mandate to deliver a reconfiguration of political economy along fixed constitutional lines.

Every post-war government has tried and failed to solve the vampiric issue of low and uneven regional productivity. The Levelling Up experiment wasn't our first national rodeo and it won't be our last.

As secretary of state, Angela Rayner with overall responsibility for local government will be powering up the take back control agenda – for which we should avert our eyes to the contents of the King's Speech for direction. What's for sure is that there will be an updated political lexicon. From a pure localist perspective, and given the sizable mandate, there is no reason why the government should not finish the job of giving all areas of England a strong devolution deal by the end of the parliament, fill in the gaps in the map and harvest the harder to reach high-hanging fruit.

Where we have strategic devolution, please let us make the trailblazer settlements in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands deliver concrete results in efficiently allocating and dispensing funds from central government departments to maximum local impact. And while learning from the current approach of regional devolution, let's extend the trailblazer deals across the established mayoral combined authorities and deepen these existing devolution deals.

Combined Authorities were singled out in the Labour manifestos as agents of change for buses, railways, strategic housing and planning, net zero and welfare. The manifesto promise to reform combined authority governance arrangements so as to unblock decision-making will assume great importance, once we know what this fully entails and the economic ends to which it is orientated. The proposed constitutional recalibration, in which combined authority mayors will join the prime minister and devolved administrations in the Councils of the Nations and Regions portends a real deal 'devolution revolution' compared to what has been on offer previously.

If we are talking about a 'velvet revolution' in which mayoral combined authorities work in lock step with the constituent local authorities, one could look to abroad, in how the Japanese layers of government choose to work in the spirit of unified harmony or the federal German 'lander' system delivered good growth in the post war period.

Given the limited capacity of the parliamentary opposition to scrutinise arrangements and hold ministerial feet to fire, the onus may even have to be on the government itself to constantly review the devolution settlement in England to ensure it is working for the whole country.

And if it's going to be tricky at the national level, how is it supposed to be made to stick or be scrutinised sub-regionally or locally. Notably missing from the party manifestos, and in Labour's power play on combined authorities as the chosen vessels of devolution, was much by mention of the role of local government in providing the connective tissue to these devolutionary aims.

This role in binding this agenda at the level of place must be recognised at some point down the line. Unless, unless, unless the plan is to enact more than five decades on the recommendations of the Redcliffe Maude commission and rationalise English local governance to 50 or so all-purpose agents of local public services and economic development.

But if it's not the case, successful devolution will depend on restoring the stability of local government as a sector and rebuilding the atrophied capacity of the local state. This isn't glamorous. But doing the basics of neighbourhood services brilliantly and reinvigorating placemaking will provide the necessary platform for any later 'moonshots' of radical whole place transformation.

And as guardrails for sustainable high quality local public service delivery, the new government should overhaul how we independently evaluate council performance to focus on long-term outcomes and support councils to continuously improve.

Success or failure in driving down devolutionary road and overhauling our political economy in the next parliament will depend upon the firm platform of an empowered and stable local state. Like a Russian doll, this will fit new statutory local growth plans within regional combined authority ambitions within overarching national missions set by government and industrial strategy. For this to have any chance of success, every player will be needed on the pitch, and to play their part.

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