

England's Disappearing Regions

By Aidan Stradling*

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isting the members of the British royal family and aristocracy is a good way to discover England's regions. The likes of Wessex, Cornwall and York, Kent, Gloucester and Norfolk all sport their own Duke; and Durham is known as the Land of the Prince Bishops. From history, we know that relations between these areas were not always friendly, with stories of wars and battles littering England's ancient fields.

Yet as the governance of England developed over the centuries, its sub-national characteristics changed, and changed significantly. Today in 2011, we find ourselves at another watershed as the waves of regionalisation ebb and flow with one government's policy diluting that of its predecessor, or sweeping structures aside in a flood of fresh thought.

For the time being, England has eight official regions, plus London. The eight regions are North West, North East, Yorkshire and The Humber, West

Midlands, East Midlands, East of England, South West and South East.

Does size matter?

Luxembourg and Malta are small countries. Despite various vote weighting measures in the European Union, they still have an influence disproportionate to their size. But that is alright for countries, and no-one suggests that the smaller EU Member States should link up with other small countries to form groupings of an equal size. While that might please statisticians, particularly neat and tidy ones, it is not going to happen.

Yet at the sub-national level it is a different story. With perhaps the statisticians' hands deftly at work, EU Member States have been carved up into 'Euro' regions – ostensibly for funding purposes ironically termed NUTS. In their defence, existing sub-national structures were a primary consideration in drawing the lines on the map; but the urge to make



them all the same size was clearly irresistible. Many smaller entities – like the English counties of Northumberland and Lancashire that had an ‘identity’ – found themselves lumped together with scant attention paid to cultural, geographic or even economic considerations.

Artificial regions

It was, of course, easier to administer a group of similarly-sized regions. It made comparisons easier and possibly contributed to a fairer distribution of EU regional development funding. But in public relations terms, it did nothing for local identity and even enhanced people’s feelings of disenfranchisement: For someone in Middlesbrough, a policy decision taken in Newcastle is in local terms as far removed as a decision taken in London.

Artificial regions are easy to spot across Europe. Look for names such as North, South West or Central. Anything that has to rely solely on its compass points for its identity scarcely has one. Many EU countries have succumbed, though Germany is an honourable exception, having a well-established political and constitutional structure in its Länder (plural of Land) and city states. Statisticians will observe with discomfort that some of them are very big and others very small.

So could the German system have provided a model for England’s counties and cities? The question was not one that sat at the forefront of political thinking in the latter part of the twentieth century. Devolution was a more pressing issue, and in the end, the UK government recognised the advantages of according certain parts of the United Kingdom political and economic autonomy. Since then, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have all established – or re-established – an assembly or government, and taken far more control of their domestic affairs. This has left England out on a limb somewhat. It was never politically acceptable that English regions could receive more – or even as much – autonomy as the ‘home countries’, so they didn’t.

Tinkering with the system

Ignoring the point that the English regions, as they were defined, were artificial in the first place, it was not surprising that successive British governments failed to implement any credible policies on region-

al governance. The successive Labour Party-led governments from 1997 to 2010 pursued a policy of positive empowerment, seeking to delegate a limited range of decisions, policy development and economic responsibilities. Ministers were tacitly aware that such delegation would not necessarily invoke the ‘divide and rule’ principle, but would at least keep the regions busy arguing internally about what to do rather than challenge the centre. To some extent this worked.

A key Labour government policy was to be seen to regionalise by supporting regional assemblies and regional development agencies. These would allow for regional decision-making and a regional allocation of development funding. The regional assemblies also assumed responsibility for spatial planning, which allowed them to think big when it came

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to large infrastructure projects and business developments. Counties and conurbations therefore worked together for their mutual benefit – or that was the theory: It took no account of local rivalries (e.g. Liverpool v. Manchester) or where areas within a region had little in common (e.g. Kent and Oxfordshire). Separate arrangements were put in place for London, where control was vested in an elected mayor and assembly.

Rise of the city regions

During the 2000s, England saw a change in the regional landscape as larger cities moved to define and embed their positions as economic drivers. These focused on economic development, bringing together diverse and sometimes conflicting political

structures. As a result, some rural areas felt excluded from the additional funding and benefits that city regions were beginning to attract.

By the end of its tenure in office in 2010, the Labour government had already begun to dismantle the regional assemblies. Pushed hard in 2003-04 by the then Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, the idea of elected regional assemblies gained little public support, as they were seen as an unnecessary tier of government. It culminated in a disastrous referendum in North East England in 2004, with plans for referenda in other regions already abandoned as unlikely to succeed. Amongst all the navel-gazing that followed, few asked if it was the regions themselves that were wrongly defined, rather than just the government's policy.

A new structure was established called The Northern Way. This brought together the three northern English regional development agencies to achieve economic growth and rebalance the economy. It proved to be a fruitful means of expression for the developing city regions like Merseyside, Greater Manchester, Leeds and Tyne & Wear.

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government formed in 2010 brought an uneasy marriage of policies on regions. The Conservative view was to accelerate the dismantling of regional structures with the abolition of the regional development agencies and the winding down of the government offices for the regions. It was made clear that power would go instead to local authorities, or be returned to the centre. The Liberal Democrats had been seen as champions of local and regional power, and the coalition realised some of those aims too.

The local authorities outside London suddenly found themselves the unexpected recipients of extra responsibilities, albeit with little, if any, extra cash. However, there was a cautious welcome for the new arrangements that gave local councils more control over how money was spent locally. The catch was that they were not able to act alone; they had to form themselves into groupings or consortia known as Local Enterprise Partnerships. Several of these are now established, and others are in



David
Cameron

Nick
Clegg

the pipeline; but some areas remain uncovered, and their future and direction unclear.

New wave

So, to all intents and purposes, what remains of English regions exists primarily for NUTS purposes. Will the regions be missed? Will the statisticians have to swallow hard and find new ways of comparing city regions with undefined boundaries? Perhaps the latest wave of regionalism will bring about a renaissance of some of the ancient dukedoms and kingdoms of England's past, like Wessex and Mercia. It is more likely that the current focus on getting the country out of recession will be much more on everyone's mind than the governance structures in place at sub-national level. Yet it is perhaps those structures that in the longer term will have a tangible effect on the success or otherwise of economic development they will engender across England's green and pleasant land. **PR**

Note:

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