



Election Unplugged II:

Northern reflections on the coalition's programme for government

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About ippr north

ippr north, the Newcastle-based office of the Institute for Public Policy Research, produces far-reaching policy ideas, stimulating solutions that work nationally as well as locally. These are shaped from our research, which spans economic development, regeneration, public services and devolution as well as a strong democratic engagement strand which involves a wide range of audiences in political debates.

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Introduction

Ed Cox

Shortly before the general election, ippr north published *Election Unplugged: Reflections from a northern perspective on the party manifestos*.¹ In follow-up, this short pamphlet, Election Unplugged II, draws together some early reflections on the implications of the election result and the coalition government it has produced. Like the previous publication, it considers a number of key themes but this time we have invited contributions from colleagues working across the North of England.

- Section 1 explores the election result itself and the possible implications of the coalition government's 'new politics' for the North. **Katie Schmuecker**, senior research fellow at ippr north, shows how, despite significant swings to the Conservatives, the political North–South divide has never been more pronounced.
- In Section 2, **Professor Alan Harding**, director of the Institute of Political and Economic Governance (ipeg) at the University of Manchester, weighs up the balance sheet of threats and opportunities for economic development and regeneration for the regions. With big cuts to budgets at the Departments for Communities and Local Government and Business, Innovation and Skills, the outlook looks bleak. However, with much talk of a 'rebalanced economy' the coalition government may yet bring benefits for the North.
- **Ed Cox**, director of ippr north, considers in Section 3 the prospects of local government and local public services, where again messages are somewhat mixed. Ed considers whether the huge spending cuts and their impact on local services are a price worth paying for long overdue decentralisation.
- In Section 4, **Rob Williamson**, Director of the Community Foundation for Tyne and Wear, takes up a similar theme in his analysis of 'the Big Society'. Rob argues that there is no shortage of 'big society' in the North of England but questions whether it can survive the '3/11' funding cliff-edge.
- The compilation is concluded with a suitably polemical piece from **Peter Hetherington**, *Guardian* columnist and vice president of the Town and Country Planning Association. Taking the North East as his frame of reference, he makes a compelling case for a national planning framework in which city-regional and local economies can thrive.

This pamphlet raises some concerning issues for the North of England: the recession has hit northern regions hard, and the prospect of large cuts to public spending is causing ripples of fear in those parts of England where the public sector constitutes a relatively large proportion of the economy. And that is before we even consider the implications of slashing capital spending and reducing the support available for economic development and regeneration.

But herein also lies opportunity: a new economic era provides a chance to recreate regional and sub-regional economies less dependent on both subsidy and standardised approaches to welfare-to-work; public service cuts will create new freedoms and incentives to innovate; political marginality creates the space for a strengthening of allegiances and shared agendas; and with the right support, the Big Society plays to northern regional strengths.

But to secure such opportunities the nettle must be grasped, and quickly. This is a time for leading not pleading. Messrs Pickles, Cable or Maude will not take kindly to delegations

1. www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=747

asking for special treatment or dispensations. (And politically they will see little to be gained in granting such wishes.) Instead, we must carve out our own futures: define our own regional economic identities, transform our own public services, build our own Big Societies. Of course, this needs to be done in conversation with the new coalition government, but not at their mercy. This will take leadership, collaboration and clear vision as well as a healthy dose of compromise and pragmatism – qualities which have characterised the new coalition to date! Across the North of England we must also work together. While we have not always demonstrated a strong propensity for cross-regional or sub-regional collaboration, with growing autonomy and well-being our prize, dare we shirk the challenge?

1. The election results and new politics

Katie Schmuecker

Throughout the late 1990s and 2000s the northern regions dominated the cabinets of the Blair and Brown governments: from Blair, Milburn, Mandelson and David Miliband in the North East, to Straw, Blears, Burnham and Purnell in the North West, and Balls, Cooper, Prescott, Blunkett and Ed Miliband in Yorkshire – and many more besides – the representatives of northern constituencies shaped the governments of the Labour years. The current context could not be more different. Certainly northern MPs retain some powerful positions in cabinet, with George Osborne, William Hague and Nick Clegg all representing northern constituencies and others including Eric Pickles and Baroness Warsi offering strong northern connections. But the days of northern domination have waned and the North's influence around the cabinet table is at a low ebb.

More than any other recent election, the 2010 general election starkly demonstrated how diverse England is politically. Broadly speaking, the North of England remains predominantly a Labour heartland, while the rest of England has turned to blue or yellow. A glance at a political map of England shows a sharp divide: only 10 of Labour's 191 seats in England can be found in the East, South East or South West regions, and only 42 of the Conservatives' 277 and 11 of the Liberal Democrats' 43 English seats can be found in the North of England.

In the run-up to the election and its aftermath, there was some discussion about what constitutes a mandate to govern, and in this context geography matters. The UK coalition government has difficult decisions to take in the coming months and years about how to cut the deficit and how to share out the inevitable pain that will result from cuts. With few seats in the North of England it will have to work hard to ensure decisions over what is cut are seen to be fair. This is particularly critical given the size of the public sector economy in the North. Much is potentially at stake.

The coalition government has been quick to acknowledge its lack of support in Scotland and Wales, and to talk about developing a relationship based on 'respect'. Negotiated agreements will form the bedrock of this relationship, and already the new government has offered the devolved administrations the option of deferring budget cuts to 2011/12. A similarly open and respectful relationship with the North of England should be the goal.

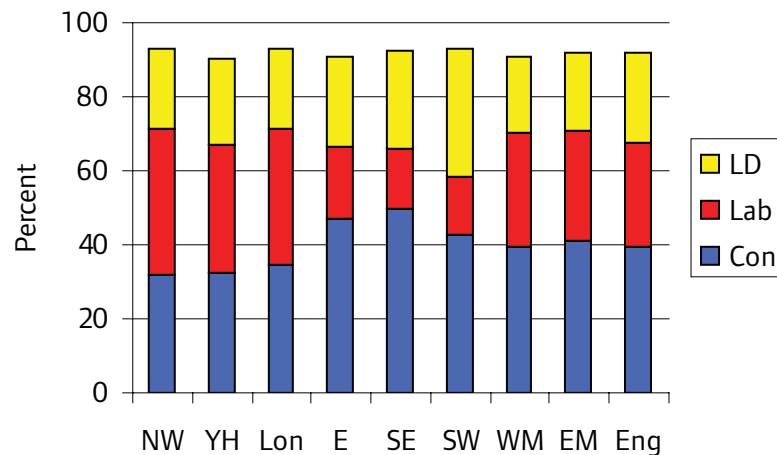
Electoral reform is high on the coalition government's agenda, which may offer an important opportunity to the North of England. Under the current electoral system, the formula for winning elections is to win the key marginals, which are generally found in the South and Midlands. As a result, political parties pouring their scarce resources into those areas, making them the target for the campaigns' key messages. This has a distorting effect on the texture of election campaigns. With electoral reform every seat will be fought for.

Figures 1 and 2 below show the exaggerating effect the current voting system has on election outcomes. Currently, voters living in very safe seats that do not support the dominant party effectively 'waste' their vote as the party they back can never win. But this feature of first-past-the-post also has the effect of locking some regions out of the corridors of power on some occasions, as is currently the case for the North East of England. The promised referendum on proportional representation could change that, although it is not clear that the alternative vote is the right system to choose. The Additional Member System with a regional top-up vote – as is used in the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly elections – would be a better choice for ensuring the distribution of seats is more in line with the distribution of votes, better reflecting the diversity within England, and securing some influence for all regions in the corridors of power.²

2. ippr recently put forward the case for the Additional Member System (AMS) in a paper by Phil McCarvill: www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=750

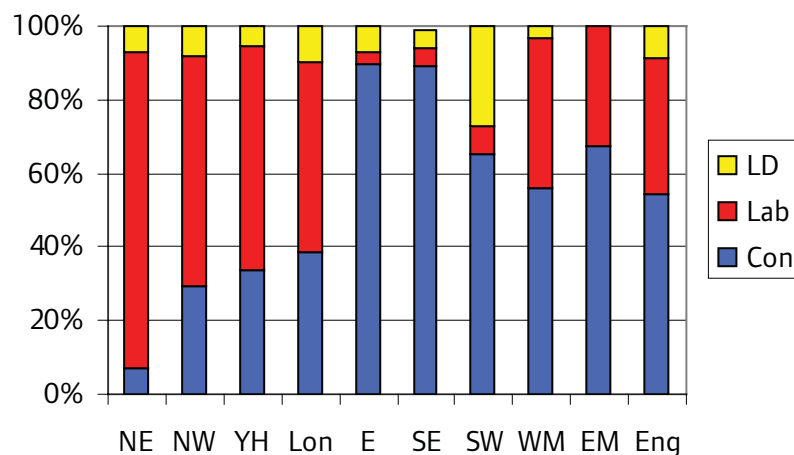
Party share of the vote, by English region

Source: author's calculations



Party share of seats, by English region

Source: author's calculations



But electoral reform has been tied to a reduction in the number of constituencies and an equalisation of their size. Putting the question of the optimum number of MPs aside, the question of securing evenly sized constituencies is a vexed one. It is already in the remit of the Boundary Commission for England to maintain relatively evenly sized constituencies – hence the new boundaries for a number of northern constituencies for the 2010 election. Population change, particularly in recent years, has been volatile and difficult to predict, and by fetishising this particular aspect of the electoral system we risk pursuing a phantom. In reality the North may be better served by focusing attention on the important underlying issues, such as why it is that the population of the North has been in decline and what we can do to reverse the trend.

There are also opportunities for the North in the coalition government's programme of political reform and renewal. Nick Clegg's first speech as Deputy Prime Minister set out his plan for the new politics, boldly claiming to have 'the most significant programme of empowerment by a British government since the great reforms of the 19th century'.³ The

3. Clegg N (2010) Speech given in London on 19 May: www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/409014/new-politics-final1.pdf

North of England had the lowest turnout in the 2010 election, so any agenda that seeks to revitalise people's engagement with the political system must be positive. And the agenda Clegg set out includes some real opportunities for the North, most important of which is the decentralisation of power.

There has been a lot of soaring rhetoric around the mass decentralisation of power to local government and communities, but it remains to be seen what this means in practice. Strong and empowered local government, with communities and individuals supported to get involved in decision-making, could be an opportunity for communities and councils to push forward with shaping their areas, making the most of their strengths and taking steps to tackle their weaknesses. But to be implemented in a fair way, support must be targeted at those councils and communities where capacity needs to be built to ensure they are able to take up the opportunity offered.

On a more concrete footing, the coalition government is offering councils more control over how they spend their money, and reducing the number of ring-fenced budgets. However, if councils are simply given the freedom to spend a diminishing amount of money, with council tax frozen and no other serious means of raising additional income, it will be a hollow offer. To make the most of the freedom on offer, local authorities in the North – and elsewhere – need workable and useable fiscal powers that do not unfairly disadvantage areas with a weak tax base.

2. Economic development and regeneration: an early reading of coalition government runes

Professor Alan Harding

The crystal ball that might help us identify the new government's economic development and regeneration (EDR) priorities and the impact its broader agenda might have on patterns of economic, social and environmental change in the North of England, is still a little murky. But it is not too early to start tracing in the broad contours of future change, given what we already know from the election campaign, the Queen's Speech and the emergency programme of public expenditure cuts. As was the case with the last government, it is useful to think of these in both formal and informal terms, since what governments tell us they are doing in these policy areas, which have always been politically marginal irrespective of which party holds a majority in Parliament, rarely paints the whole picture.

The emerging story with respect to programme funding is as sobering as expected and accelerates the decline in EDR-related public investment that had already gathered significant momentum under the previous administration. The comparatively heavy hits suffered by the Departments for Communities and Local Government and Business, Innovation and Skills are having an immediate impact on the money available to Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA). They are also likely to have a similar, if more indirect, effect on discretionary EDR-related expenditure by local authorities keen to preserve frontline services. The Government's proposal to merge the variety of programmes that have aimed to tackle worklessness suggests the supply side of government-sanctioned EDR business will meet with the same fate that is unfolding on the demand side.

In terms of institutional change, although there has been no formal announcement as yet, the new administration's desire to organise a bonfire of the quangos will surely see RDAs and the HCA trained firmly in the medium term sights of the firestarters. It is as yet unclear quite what sweeping away most, if not all, of the dedicated EDR institutions created under Labour might mean in terms of future organisational arrangements. Both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats spoke warmly, pre-election, of the need to decentralise EDR responsibilities to groupings of local authorities organised on the basis of 'natural economic areas'. The coalition partners will quickly find, however, that there is a world of difference between encouraging the patchwork quilt of coalitions, of varying seriousness and capacity, that have emerged for the purposes of initiatives like Multi-Area Agreements, and organising an orderly transition to a comprehensive and effective tier of sub-regions and city-regions. It is distinctly possible, too, that delivery on the intention of finding ways of rewarding local authorities for new commercial and residential development could put severe strains on the forms of bottom-up collaboration that a top-down move to sub-regional EDR delivery ideally requires.

Beyond the formalities, the picture is more confused. The previous government, by re-orientating policies in areas like transport, land-use planning/housing and skills and through the programme of infrastructure investment that accompanied the last comprehensive spending review, effectively set in train a growth management strategy that focused almost exclusively on London and the 'super-region' that surrounds it. By contrast, the mood music of the new administration is interestingly discordant.

On one hand, a certain amount of stress has been placed on the need for a sectoral 'rebalancing' of the national economy and the development of new green infrastructure and alternative energy supplies. These nascent policy objectives, along with the decision to cancel Heathrow's third runway and to consider prioritising domestic high speed rail

connectivity instead, give a flavour of the coalition government's anxiety to avoid a future growth model that is overly dependent on the London super-region. Paradoxically, the pressure that the new administration will face to 'play' to its core, middle England constituency may encourage greater sensitivity to concerns about quality of life and environmental amenity in the Greater South East than tends to be felt by a Labour government.

At the same time, though, it is clear that the emergency cuts programme is only the start of a much more fundamental scaling back of public expenditure that is likely to be pursued with particular vigour in the first three years of the current Parliament. The higher share of employment that is accounted for in the North by the public sector means that the three northern regions, and especially the areas within it that have struggled to make the transition to a more knowledge-based economy, are especially vulnerable to the effects of public expenditure retrenchment. In this context, simplistic pre-election messages about the need to reduce 'dependency' on public spending by regions like the North East need to be tempered and informed by a more serious analysis of the extent to which private sector success and innovation in regions that are still undergoing structural economic change is linked to public spending of one sort or another.

The interaction of the various elements on this balance sheet will not be comfortable for northern England. The end of an approach to EDR policy that relied heavily on government-created institutions and the redistribution of central funding is now quite clearly in sight. Successful adjustment to the policy environment that is beginning to emerge is likely to put much greater emphasis on a more innovative approach to the development of the North's assets at the sub- and city-regional level and a sharpening of the arguments, at the pan-northern scale, about the role the North can play within a greener and more balanced national economy.

3. Local government and public services

Ed Cox

With the coalition government promising protection for the international aid, health and schools budgets it came as little surprise that the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) would be one of the biggest losers in George Osborne's £6.25 billion cuts package announced shortly after the election. But for CLG to shoulder nearly one fifth of the overall government savings plan for 2010/2011 strikes a colossal blow to the department, and in turn has huge implications for the North of England.

A large proportion of this year's cuts are coming from the Area Based Grant, which represents a significant source of funds for northern councils and props up a wide range of services, not least to the most deprived neighbourhoods. Councils will be relieved that the general formula grant has been protected but the Area Based Grant counts for as much as 15 per cent of council budgets. Leeds City Council is just one example that has already indicated staff reductions in its regeneration department, in Leeds' case of up to 60 per cent. And there is no relief on the horizon. The Revenue Support Grant is almost certain to take a significant hit, if not in the Emergency Budget later this month then surely in the Comprehensive Spending Review; add to this the prospect of a council tax freeze (without the previously promised £625m sweetener) and prospects for local services look increasingly bleak.

Town Hall staff will feel individually at risk but the service areas that look most vulnerable are the discretionary elements of welfare-to-work and social care. The Future Jobs Fund has already been stopped (although existing contracts will be honoured) and the future for the Working Neighbourhoods Funds seems uncertain. Add to this the commitment to move to a single welfare-to-work programme and we could be looking at a rationalisation that will have far-reaching impacts both for those who administer these programmes and those who receive benefits.

In the North of England joblessness has grown faster during the recession than elsewhere in the country, there is a substantial 'stock' of people in receipt of incapacity benefit or employment support allowance, and in some areas there are not enough jobs available for the number of people out of work. If rationalisation results in fewer resources to tackle welfare-to-work it will have a disproportionate effect on the North. Ditto in social care where despite the promise of long-term reviews and a roll-out of personal budgets there is no protection given to public spending as there is in primary and acute healthcare. Whether it is our ageing population, growth in demand on mental health services or child and family services, frontline services will no doubt have to be directed into the most acute cases, leaving a gaping hole in preventative work. Smart local service providers might forego short-term efficiencies to reap the benefits of more preventative measures.

It would appear that the coalition government is also storing up some accountability headaches which look set to be played out most vocally in northern councils. A growing proportion of Labour-run councils might find themselves increasingly at odds with a Conservative–Liberal Democrat national government.

In primary healthcare the role given to councils looks positive, with places on Primary Care Trust (PCT) boards and powers to challenge Accident & Emergency and other service closures. However, when it comes to schools and local police chiefs the direction of travel would appear to be cutting out the role of the council. While the pupil premium might benefit most local education authorities (LEAs) in the North of England, the threat of schools 'opting out' and new providers coming in, effectively top-slicing education budgets, surely spells a significant reduction of LEA control, strategy and planning. While the Coalition Agreement seems to water down Conservative proposals for locally-elected police chiefs by

making them subject to strict checks and balances by local councillors, this again looks likely to be a battleground where northern councils will need to fight their corner. Add to this community powers to instigate local referendums, veto council tax rises and demand to run local services and you sense some storms brewing.

So is there a silver lining to the localist cloud? Very definitely yes. In its title alone, the Devolution and Localism Bill heralds a wealth of opportunities for the North of England and the Government has wasted no time in removing ring-fencing from some council grants and announcing the abolition of the Comprehensive Area Assessment (though we should beware now a growing divergence in council performance). One wonders whether the proposed general power of competence will provide the kick-start for local power-grabbing that the Power of Well-being and Sustainable Communities Act have yet to deliver. Again, though, with spending cuts dominating the agenda and a sense of an impending 'Year Zero', it is possible that the time has finally come for such freedoms to be properly used.

Cynics will decry 'yet another' review of local government finance but if the system is not yet completely broken we can be sure that it will take a stroke of genius for it to survive another comprehensive spending round without a major crash. Some northern councils might fear a review that changes the funding formula through which the North makes net gains, but the potential for a system that enables revaluation and rewards business growth – as a very minimum – must surely be grasped.

Indeed, retaining the rewards from business growth as a source of local revenue-raising in the years to come is a significant prize worth chasing – and a demand that the coalition government could barely resist. With the apparent appetite for the city-region and Local Enterprise Boards, and the clear role expected of councils to shape the local high street and drive the planning system, a business-led approach to sustaining northern urban renaissance is probably the most likely way for the North to retain and improve public services.

4. A big society in the North?

Rob Williamson

We want society – the families, networks, neighbourhoods and communities that form the fabric of so much of our everyday lives – to be bigger and stronger than ever before. Only when people and communities are given more power and take more responsibility can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all.

'Building the Big Society', Cabinet Office, May 2010

So the big idea of 'Big Society' is here to stay. Communities will have more powers and rights to manage local assets and services; a generation of community organisers will be trained; philanthropy will be supported; and the third sector will expand.

There is no shortage of community organising and informal activism in the North, much of it already outside the scope of the public purse. Evidence also tells us that the North East, as an example, has higher than average bonding social capital: people there see family and neighbours more regularly than those in the South. The differential is weaker for the North West and Yorkshire and Humber regions, but still apparent. Couple that with our strong local and regional identities, and perhaps there is powerfully fertile ground across the North for the Big Society's kind of citizenship.

But it is not all good news. In the North East, we mix less frequently with people from different backgrounds and, across the northern regions, communities continue to experience great disparity with the South on measures of social and economic well-being. These factors can only hamper the Big Society agenda. Insufficient bonding and linking social capital could leave our communities unchanged, despite the valiant efforts of local activists and organisations. So in seeking to harness the voluntary capacity of people to do good for themselves and others, we will need strong third sector bodies that go beyond the neighbourhood and that can run transformational services.

Do we know how the coalition Government conceptualises the sector? Joining the Prime Minister on the day of the Government's launch of the Big Society was an intriguing group of sector faces. Not the familiar figures from the sector's umbrella bodies; instead what the Cabinet Office described as 'civil society activists and leaders': the likes of Camila Batmanghelidjh of Kids Company and Rob Owen of St Giles Trust. These are not small organisations: they have multi-million pound turnovers and receive significant levels of public money. But they are not household-name charities either.

The third sector in the North stands comparison: here, a vast range of work is carried out by SME-type third sector organisations. Like the organisations at the Big Society launch, these northern third sector SMEs employ staff, run services and work with many of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people in our communities. And they have made excellent use of regeneration funds, lottery money and, increasingly, public sector contracts.

But there is already talk among these organisations in the North about '3/11': March 2011, when many existing grants, service agreements and contracts will expire. The public sector recession will hit the sector in the North hard. Household name non-governmental organisations will, like big businesses, morph to suit their circumstances; the micro-groups will continue their remarkable alchemy, transforming tiny gifts and grants into myriad grassroots activities. But if the Big Society is to do more than provide further bonding social capital in the North, SME sector organisations will need new resources to oil the wheels of change.

Along way from enough has been said about how an expansion of the sector's role will be financed. The Big Society Bank, set up from dormant bank accounts, will provide some new money (but only with private contributions in the mix). There is also talk of revenue from the Futurebuilders Fund being used for a new community grant programme in the poorest areas. But more small grants are not the answer. Meanwhile, the new Culture Minister, Jeremy Hunt, has announced that all the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) money will now go to the third sector, but BLF's overall allocation of lottery good cause money will reduce from 50 to 40 per cent. These moves too are unlikely to be sufficient to maintain, let alone expand, the sector's capacity in the light of public funding cuts.

So to succeed, private investment will have to be the Big Society's catalyst. Here we may have a head start: philanthropy in the North has a proud history and vital presence. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and its Charitable Trust lead the field of charitable bodies committed to tackling the causes of poverty and exclusion. Northern Rock Foundation remains, outside London, the country's largest independent grant-making body with a regional focus. Countless smaller trusts provide bread-and-butter support for activities across civil society. And it is surely more than mere happenstance that the largest UK community foundation serves Tyne & Wear and Northumberland. Giving – and giving on a grand scale – appears to run through the lifeblood of northern society.

Philanthropy in the North has been built on wealth derived from industry paired with passionate regional allegiances and a fair degree of serendipity. But in regions likely to be slower to benefit from economic recovery, will wealthy individuals and businesses be willing to finance the Big Society's planned transfer of power and responsibility from the state to civil society?

There are ways to strengthen our hand. More devolved funding streams will help. The Fairshare Trust, established with lottery money but delivered through community foundations, and which gives neighbourhoods control over a guaranteed income for grant-making, could be rolled out on a grand scale. A renewed focus on community philanthropy in the North could channel much needed voluntary income into third sector SMEs. To make that happen, from Whitehall we need practical, in-your-face, incentives to give. Schemes that match private generosity with a public contribution work, and could be extended to encourage donors to support more transformative local projects.

If it prevails, the Big Society agenda will be about more than community or third sector policy. It will encompass planning and local decision-making and access to government information. And perhaps this is where the Big Society faces its biggest challenge. What is it for? We all want to live in strong communities, but strong communities can have walls around them; one person's cohesion becomes another's exclusion. There is, in fact, a powerful theory of change at the heart of this agenda – that greater fairness and opportunity will result from citizens doing more to help each other. What we now need are proposals to make this happen that go beyond rhetoric. Because if the Big Society is not socially transforming, it will have limited impact in the North.

5. Where to from here? A view from the North East

Peter Hetherington

In his first major speech as Prime Minister, David Cameron came north to deliver a welcome critique on the unbalanced structure of Britain. He chose West Yorkshire, on May 28, to rail against an economy he termed over-reliant on a few industries and regions, 'particularly London and the South East'.

Rattling off potential regional growth areas – Humberside for carbon capture and storage, Bristol for marine energy, and Merseyside for recreating a global trading centre – Cameron observed that an economy with a narrow foundation for growth, based on one part of Britain, was unstable and wasteful... 'because we're not making use of the talent out there in all parts of our UK'.

Accompanied by the Business Secretary, Vince Cable, he talked of developing a plan to breathe new life into towns and cities outside the M25, with an early task centred on refocusing regional support and the RDAs. Yorkshire would be a priority. And the North East? Not a mention!

Should we be worried? Concerned, certainly. In any debate about the North East economy and the role of the public sector – around housing, planning and public transport, for instance – it's tempting to dwell on what might have been. Those of us who supported an elected regional assembly, still haunted by that disastrous referendum 'no' vote in November 2004, tried in vain to argue that the primary role of a new representative body would be strategic coordination and advocacy (something the London mayoralty, for instance, has in abundance) rather than simply delivering the extremely limited functions on offer.

Today, we have precious few advocates with any clout, although the elevation of the Liberal Democrat Newcastle City Council leader, John Shipley, to the Lords (along with former Labour council leader Sir Jeremy Beecham) should help to redress that balance.

Viewing the new political landscape, with Labour consolidating its hold on the region in the general election, it is doubtless tempting for old party grandees to either retreat into a bunker, awaiting whatever fate a coalition government has in store for the North East – an afterthought, if we're not careful – or to make a predictable call for a delegation to plead the region's case in Whitehall. Neither is a good idea.

A new approach is needed, beginning with a positive analysis – difficult, I know, given the dire economic circumstances of UK plc – of how the region might embrace the Government's sketchy regional and local agenda. Cameron needs help. He's not immune to guidance. If the coalition cannot fill in the gaps then perhaps it is time that the region itself started painting a broader canvas. The PM is up for fresh thinking, and those regions showing collective initiative will be first in the queue for what limited help is on offer.

We know what turns off Conservatives, notably a visceral dislike of all things 'regional'. Sure, the Government is determined to ditch regional spatial and housing strategies, with the full support – surprising, this one! – of its junior Liberal Democrat partners. There is a danger of getting too hung-up on this; language is all important.

The North East is the only region with full unitary local government. With fewer councils than elsewhere, it should not be a task beyond local authorities to produce strategic alliances, across municipal boundaries, addressing issues from housing supply to planning and public transport. Other regions, notably the East, South East and South West, might be geographical absurdities, but the North East remains a tidy, cohesive unit with a strong identity.

But how to make an impact? Try this for a job-description:

Regional myth-buster and instant rebuttal specialist. Task: 1: challenging the over-simplified assumption that the economy of North East England is dominated by the public sector and, consequently, over-reliant on state support; 2: portraying a positive image of a region, diverse in geography and – increasingly – culture, blessed with high-value universities and, crucially, excellent transport links internally and externally.

It should not be difficult to find people with both clout and decent connections to the centre of power nationally. Not someone, mark you, whose only ability is pulling together one of those dreaded delegations to 'demand' from ministers a fair case for the region; we've had enough of them! No, we need skilful operators, advocates for North East England with the political nous, and diplomacy, to remind those myth-pedlars that – yes – the region does have a large public sector, partly because sizeable chunks of Whitehall's back-office functions have long been decentralised to, say, Newcastle (much of the pensions service for instance), Washington (child benefit) and Durham (National Savings and Investments). Oh yes, there's a sizeable health service in Newcastle, too, and some leading-edge research, partly on the back of a university school of medicine. And why not! London, please remember, has tens of thousands of civil servants; exclude the industrial scale of financial services in the City and you could just as easily argue that our capital is over-reliant on the public sector.

But pointless carping will not help the region. It can – should – embrace enterprise from the private, public and third sectors, exploiting the huge potential of five universities. The old cliché, coined by John F Kennedy and, subsequently adapted endlessly, comes to mind: 'Ask not what your country can do for you...'

As a starting point, could I suggest a joint report produced recently by the Town and Country Planning Association and the Local Government Association, 'Connecting Local Economies'⁴, which I coordinated. It argued forcefully that a national planning framework for England – which the coalition government, significantly, fully endorses – goes hand in glove with a commitment to strong city-regional and local economies, to which the new administration is similarly committed. Let me quote the introduction: 'City-regions, counties and communities need the certainty that their strategies, plans and aspirations are reflected in – and underpinned by – a wider framework for England that is based on the needs of regional, sub-regional and local economies' (p.7).

The Government, to its credit, has bought into this strategy. Those with the foresight to help it turn this vision into reality will not only be doing Cameron a favour: they will be serving the North East well.

4. www.tcpa.org.uk/data/files/connecting_local_economies_final.pdf