Devolution, evolution, revolution . . . democracy? What's really happening to English local governance?

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Abstract
The Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill 2015–2016[HL] was introduced into the House of Lords as Bill No. 1 in the 2015–2016 parliamentary session. The Bill forms a critical element of the government's high-profile policy of devolving powers and responsibilities to local areas within England. The transition from first-generation 'city deals' to second-generation 'devolution deals' within five years provides a sense of the pace and development of the reform agenda but there is also a strong sense that something is missing. 'Missing' in the sense of an understanding of the specific type of devolution on offer, 'missing' in the sense of how an explosion of bilateral new 'deals' will be offset against the obvious risks of fragmentation and complexity, and 'missing'—most importantly—in relation to the democratic roots that might be put in place to counterbalance the economic thrust and make the reform agenda sustainable. It is in exactly this context that this article argues that the full potential of the current devolution agenda will only be realised when the Conservative government fulfils its September 2014 commitment to wider civic engagement about how England is governed.

Keywords: Devolution, democracy, local governance, England, civic engagement

Introduction

THERE is something understandably romantic about a new industrial revolution in Orgreave on the outskirts of Sheffield. What was once the site of violent clashes between striking miners and police is now the site of a world-class Advanced Manufacturing Park that employs many of the sons and daughters of those miners who once fought on the land. For example, partnerships such as that between local universities and a number of global businesses (Boeing, Rolls Royce, etc.) which underpins the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre are a testament to George Osborne's belief that the Sheffield region is 'the manufacturing cradle of the future'. Hence, it is not over-stating the case to suggest that a new industrial revolution is taking place, which will present new opportunities and challenges for our political leaders. In this context, the question that dominates recent political debate in the north of England is not so much about fostering innovation, but how to allow the buds of innovation to flower in full.

The Sheffield city-region (and its 'devolution deal') is an indicator of a new policy trajectory for the current Conservative government (see Table 1). However, what we are seeing in Sheffield is by no means a unique case. Although the government's plan to let every rose bloom emerged within a 'Northern Powerhouse' narrative of devolving power to city-regions under the control of elected mayors, this deal-making process has swiftly spread across the length and breadth of England. While each proposed deal is different, there is one thing that they all have in common—a lack of public consultation prior to being announced—which may present a real threat to this new policy trajectory taking root.

So far, despite the undoubted innovative activity in city-regions and a great deal of ministerial rhetoric, the debate on devolution deals has arguably generated more heat than light. Many matters remain in the shadows. Most critically, what role do democratic

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Table 1: Proposals in devolution deals agreed by September 2015

	Greater Manchester	West Yorks	Sheffield	Cornwall
Further education and skills	New FE system	New FE system	New FE system	New FE system
	Apprenticeship Grant for Employers	Apprenticeship Grant for Employers	Apprenticeship Grant for Employers Adult Skills funding	
Transport	Funding Bus franchising Smart ticketing	Funding options Links with Network Rail and Highways England	Funding Bus franchising Links with Network Rail and Highways England	Funding + buses Smart ticketing
Business support	Trade support funding Funding from 2017	Integrated services Funding from 2017	Integrated services Funding from 2017	Integrated services Funding from 2017
Work Programme	Possible joint commissioning in 2017	Possible joint commissioning in 2017	Harder to help claimants joint commissioning in 2017	
Public land commission	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Health & social care	Integration	–	–	Integration business plan
Policing	Mayor to become Police and Crime Commissioner	–	–	–
Housing	Some funding	–	Under discussion	–
Fire service	Mayor to take over	–	–	[Cornwall Council]
Spatial planning	Yes	–	Yes	[Cornwall Council]
Economic planning	Mayoral Development Corporations; compulsory purchase	–	Mayoral Development Corporations; planning call-in powers	–
EU structural funds	Intermediate body	–	Under discussion	Intermediate body

discourse, engagement, legitimacy and accountability have in the shift towards devolution? And, equally importantly, although the government's devolution agenda may well offer significant opportunities in terms of economic growth, employment and market innovation, how will the 'revolution in devolution' develop democratic roots so that it can take hold and be sustained? It is in response to exactly such questions that this article argues the current focus on devolution represents a large opportunity for the governance of England, but it is unlikely to fulfil this potential unless *the demos* is also engaged in a meaningful manner.

This is a point reinforced in the public statements of our political leaders. In the wake of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, Prime Minister Cameron recognised that irrespective of the result there was a need for a

new territorial settlement in the UK, and one that devolved power not just to the constituent nations but also to the English regions. 'It is absolutely right that a new and fair settlement for Scotland should be accompanied by a new and fair settlement that applies to all parts of our United Kingdom', the Prime Minister stated. 'It is also important we have wider civic engagement about how to improve governance in our United Kingdom, including how to empower our great cities. And we will say more about this in the coming days.' But the days (and weeks, and months) passed and no clear plans for wider civic engagement about how to empower English regional governance were forthcoming from the government. It is our contention that, when viewed in the context of the past fifty years of British politics, this gap between rhetoric and reality should come as no surprise. Despite the statements of our political leaders, it could be argued that the recent devolution and 'localism' agenda represents more continuity than change, in the sense that it reflects a preference for elite, top-down policy-making with limited (if any) public engagement.

The opening section of this article explores this argument through a brief consideration of governance and local government since the 1970s. The second section then develops this argument through an analysis of the contemporary reform agenda to propose that, if anything, 'the revolution in devolution' might—in its current format—be best described as a 'new central–local partnership'. The third and final section examines the implications for this argument and how the debate concerning city-regions can be viewed as one between those who hanker after a more meaningful devolution of power, and those who see the current 'devo deals' as an opportunity that should not be rejected. In doing so, we argue that a 'devolution revolution' is unlikely to occur or be sustained unless the government accepts the merits of thorough and democratic public engagement throughout the reform process.

Evolution

In order to understand the proposed 'revolution in devolution' it needs to be viewed in the light of both its international and British precedents. In many Western nations, decentralisation has been embraced as a political solution to the emerging challenges of a shift from 'governing' to 'governance'. As scholars such as Rod Rhodes have observed, there has been a 'hollowing out' of the nation-state (with more services being delivered according to market principles by non-government networks), while others note a growing centralisation (where international bodies, arm's-length agencies and merging media) further consolidate accountability at the national level. Operating in a range of political systems, this has led scholars to describe the primary role of national governments as 'steering' rather than 'rowing' policy. However, this evolution has also resulted in a tension between ongoing central accountability and peripheral delivery arrangements (over which central government does not have direct control). It is amid such changing governance conditions that some Western governments have pursued decentralisation as a means to shift decision-making closer to the level of those innovating, delivering or receiving public services or goods. England is one such Western nation and in this article we use it as an example of the different decentralisation responses by different governments. In particular, we argue that the typically British and ironically centralist approach to decentralisation through its English 'devolution deals' agenda presents a fascinating insight into the interface of changing political and governance arrangements.

If one is to understand the British precedents of this evolving agenda, then a history of central, local and regional government in England is necessary to understand those principles, values and constitutional moralities that make certain processes and relationships more likely. David Easton refers to the dominant political tradition as the 'legitimising ideology'—'the ethical principles that justify the way power is organised, used, and limited and that defines the broad responsibilities expected of participants or particular relationships'.[1] A short-cut description might label this 'the rules of the game' and, in relation to the UK, the work of William Greenleaf on the British political tradition provides arguably the most detailed analysis. It is therefore possible to draw upon the

work of Greenleaf (and a range of later scholars) to identify five core elements of the 'rules of the game' as they have traditionally existed in the UK. The first is a belief in the value of an unwritten, organic, 'small-c' constitution. The second element concerns an emphasis on pragmatic adaptation and flexibility. Third, the 'good chaps' theory of government, and fourth, the development of a political constitution, both play roles. The fifth element emerges from power-hoarding majoritarianism.

In the UK's unitary system, power rests in Westminster (and by association Whitehall). Hence, local government has no constitutional identity of its own or delegated powers. The British political tradition is therefore one, as Antony Birch argued, that favours *responsible* over *representative* government and is a quasi-elite model of governing in which rules are written and deals are brokered between rival elites. While we note that the British political tradition emerged as a descriptive tool for a set of UK constitutional arrangements that are evolving and reforming, we contend that it is still a valuable lens through which to view the underpinning values and the political culture of national politicians and their senior civil servants. Indeed, we argue that it is the resilience and inertia of the British political tradition that is most revealed through an analysis of the contemporary case of English devolution.

Against this backdrop, the modern political history of local government (note local and *not regional*) can be understood in terms of a narrative of executive dominance and local decline. Central governments of all political persuasions have generally viewed local governments with a degree of suspicion and concern and have sought to exert greater control while supporting governance arrangements that also reduce their powers. A common theme has also been structural in the sense that the labyrinthine patchwork of British local governments, which emerged from the nineteenth century, was widely viewed as too granular to deliver efficiencies of scale. Some forty-five years ago, for example, a substantial debate took place in England (there were separate inquiries in Scotland and Wales) into the shape and form of local government. One report related to management structures (the Bains Report of 1972) and the other (the Redcliffe-Maud Commission) focused on the structure, method of consent and functions of local government itself. The outcome was a consolidation of small local authorities (the urban and rural district councils), the creation of Metropolitan City and district councils and the emergence in the urban conurbations of urban sub-regional Metropolitan County Councils (a development from the old London County Council and the Greater London Council). In the mainly rural areas, the former County Council structure, consolidated with district councils beneath them, continued with somewhat different distribution of functions and in some cases with reconstructed boundaries. Historic large-scale councils such as the West Riding of Yorkshire disappeared, with the new Metropolitan County Councils taking on some of the wider macroeconomic role of the larger of such councils and the new Metropolitan District or City Councils picking up the service delivery areas such as education and social services. In these new metropolitan areas, there was clearly an emphasis on infrastructure (such as transport policy), but also on jobs and economic development. Local Enterprise Boards were established in some parts of the country (and in London an extremely well-funded equivalent), and these bigger authorities took on a political identity and standing in their own right.

In Margaret Thatcher's second term as Prime Minister, the political irritation of having these larger (Labour-controlled) local authorities challenge the top-down determination of Westminster (not only on policy but even at the right to raise and spend) led to the abolition of the Metropolitan Counties and the Greater London Council. As we know, fiscal dependence shapes policy capacity and there was an increase in what became known as 'rate capping', which involved central government refusing local authorities the right to raise and spend money beyond a centrally approved limit placed on them. In addition, the levy on local businesses (the Business Rate) was pooled centrally in the hands of national government before being redistributed to local authorities through a formula grant. Elsewhere a range of local services were

removed from local control and placed in the hands of centrally appointed 'local public spending bodies' (to use Lord Nolan's phrase for what Professor John Stewart famously labelled 'the new magistracy'). The principles and values underpinning local government also shifted as market-based forms of accountability replaced traditional models of democratic accountability. The specific tools of this evisceration altered from government to government. One of the first acts of the Conservative government in 1979 was to create Urban Development Corporations, while one of the first acts of the New Labour government after the 1997 election was to create a new network of centrally appointed Regional Development Agencies. However, the direction of trajectory was relatively constant. The exception was—and to some extent remains—London. But, then again, London is an exceptional city in all sorts of ways: a massive population centre, a cultural capital, a global financial hub, an international travel gateway, arguably the world's most cosmopolitan city and—the rise of the Scottish National Party apart—the enduring political focus of the nation. This 'difference' explains why the governance of London has diverged from the governance of cities, towns and communities beyond the South East. In 1998 Londoners voted in favour of a directly elected mayor, while the Greater London Authority Act 1999 established not only a new mayor for the capital, but also an elected Greater London Authority to oversee and scrutinise the new role. London boroughs would continue to function beneath this macro structure, but with more working across traditional boundaries being a key element of this new configuration. Local politics after the millennium was heavily influenced by the European and US model of city mayors, as was reflected in the Local Government Act 2000 and a central government shift towards nudging, pushing or shoving local authorities towards an executive-led (rather than committee-based) model. The outcome of these developments was that powers were centralised into the hands of local mayors and cabinets and the role of the majority of local councillors was diminished to something resembling a weaker version of a backbencher at Westminster. Hence, the seed of a new approach to local politics was sown in London (in the form of an elected mayor and elected regional assembly), but this approach remained very much the exception rather than the rule.

This situation was challenged during the second term of the Blair Labour government when the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott (a long-time advocate of some form of elected regional government), persuaded the Cabinet that there should be an indicative referendum in the North East of England. It was thought that geographical distance, regional identity and evidence of a public commitment to greater independence was sufficient to carry a 'yes vote' and, through this, deliver elected regional government beyond London. However, there was a lack of clarity about the proposals on offer. Many observers at the time thought that the model offered little more than an additional layer of bureaucracy (not a flourishing new model of democracy). Hence, it came as no surprise when, in November 2004, the people of Darlington, Durham and Derwentside rejected the government's proposal. With 78 per cent of the million or so people voting against the model, consensus emerged among the political elite that the idea of elected regional government in England had been 'blown out of the water' for decades ahead. This result undoubtedly set back any genuine review of the way in which (an arguably over-centralised) England could be satisfactorily decentralised (at a time when Scotland, Northern Ireland and, to a degree, Wales were moving towards ever more significant forms of devolution).

Revolution or evolution?

As can be seen by the above history, the contours of the British political tradition were central in terms of explaining and legitimating the 'hollowing out' of local government. Since the 1970s, this shift at the local level has been meticulously documented and analysed in the work of leading scholars,[2] but two elements of the central–local relationship are noteworthy in the context of the contemporary reform agenda. First, the historical evolution of local government throughout the second half of the twentieth century can be described by *a gradual reduction in capacity*

and power. Second, it would be hard to depict the traditional central–local relationship as being one of *partnership*; rather, it would be more accurate to define the foundations of the current reform agenda as built on mutual suspicion. Together, these two elements provide useful marker-points through which to consider narratives of 'revolution', on the one hand, and 'evolution', on the other. In our view, 'revolution' would by definition have to involve a *sudden and far-reaching increase in the capacity and power of local government as part of a broader shift in the balance of power between the centre and the periphery.* While the political rhetoric surrounding the 'devo deals' is certainly impressive in the sense that 'a revolution in devolution' is being promoted, we would argue that what we are seeing is closer to an evolution along the lines of those identified above. Further, we would argue that the degree to which a 'rhetoric–reality gap' is discernible is to some extent blurred due to the British political tradition's predilection for elite-elite modes of policy development (which has been particularly obvious in the city-regions devolution proposals). As such, the core argument of this section is that the government's vaunted 'revolution in devolution' reveals all the hallmarks of the British political tradition. In the first place, the current plans for devolution to city-regions with elected mayors is rolling forward with great speed but with little sense of the desired endpoint of this agenda or the unintended consequences for other parts of the constitution. Second, the pragmatic approach to deal formation around greater regional diversity has not addressed how this will be accommodated within national frameworks to guarantee certain levels of equality in terms of service provision. Third, the current 'devo deals' rely on the perpetuation of the 'good chaps' theory of government. Fourth, the political risk of these new arrangements is 'the devolution of austerity' and the transfer of responsibilities without the necessary powers. Finally, and linked to this, the reforms open the political space for complex 'blame games' between local, regional and national actors at a time when public apathy and frustration with political institutions, major party power-hoarding and politicians is already high.

With these points in mind, we will argue that the current 'devolution' offer is not 'decentralisation' in the sense of both power and accountability-shifting, but should more accurately be labelled 'a new partnership' between central and local government (with power still firmly vested in the former, not the latter). Further, the sum total of this argument not only aids understanding in relation to what is currently happening to local government in England, but also leads to an important debate for the future of any potential 'devolution revolution'. This is the discussion around *the democratisation of devolution* as part of a consideration regarding social roots, non-economic values and sustainability. This debate will be examined in the concluding section, while the aim of the remainder of this section is to put a little flesh on the bones of the points made above.

A useful starting point for this consideration is David Marquand's 1998 Mishcon Lecture in which he discussed New Labour's approach to constitutional and democratic reform under the title 'Populism or Pluralism'. With the benefit of hindsight it can be argued that a weakness of the Blair governments was, as Marquand argued, its inability to understand how reform in one area of the constitution would inevitably have unintended consequences for other elements of the system. This is reinforced by the fact that the 'devo deals' agreed so far are highly specific in the sense that they establish central government's desired outcomes, but are far less clear about any freedom or powers for local authorities. This is justified as leaving open that potential for flexible local arrangements. The Conservative government frames this very much as 'letting a thousand flowers bloom', or, as Baroness Williams of Trafford told the House of Lords when introducing the Bill:

> Any one-size-fits-all model is destined for failure. Every city and council is different. Through the decentralisation that the Bill will enable, each city will be empowered to forge its own path, to play to its own strengths and to find creative solutions to the particular challenges that they face.[3]

And yet at the same time the government's commitment to the mayoral model

where significant powers are devolved suggests that there *is* some sense of a 'one-size-fits-all' model. It is open to question why local leaders were not given opportunity to consult extensively within and outside of local government before proposed deals were announced, as well as how much potential there is for negotiation when one side's outcomes are set and publicly announced. It is for exactly these reasons that Lord Heseltine used his July 2015 speech to the Local Government Association to dampen expectations around the current reform agenda.

> When one talks of devolution it's not realistic to talk about freedom. This is a partnership concept. Central government are elected and they are entitled to have their manifestos implemented and it cannot be contemplated there is a sense of freedom at a local level which can actually frustrate the clear mandates upon which governments are elected... I am sympathetic to the word 'partnership' rather than 'freedom' or 'devolution'.[4]

Our point here is that the notion of 'partnership' implies a very different situation to the 'revolution in devolution' promised by members of the government.

To continue our application of the British political tradition as an interpretive tool, it soon becomes apparent that the *ad hoc* arrangements that form a central element of this tradition are also evident in tensions within the devolution reforms. For instance, there is a clear tension between the government's vaunted position that they are not imposing elected mayors and a reality that if 'devo deals' are to cover significant issues then in reality only an application that includes a mayoral model will be successful. As Table 1 illustrates, this is a point borne out in the exception to the rule. When the Cornwall Devolution Deal was announced in July 2015, it did not require the county to adopt a mayoral mode, but this deal devolves limited powers; where more substantial powers have been devolved, then an elected mayor *has* been adopted. This suggests that an elected mayor forms part of the deal when sufficiently extensive powers are devolved, although this requirement has not been clearly defined. This tension between a government rhetoric based around the notions of local freedom and choice, on the one hand, and the strong and directing shadow of central government, on the other, was made obvious by the Chancellor of the Exchequer's statement that 'with these new powers for cities must come new city-wide elected mayors who work with local councils. *I will not impose this model on anyone. But nor will I settle for less*' [emphasis added].[5] The tension between 'will not impose' while at the same time 'not settling for anything less' contains an obvious contradiction that reveals both the traditional 'muddling through' approach and the raw balance of power at work between the centre and periphery.

A second tension made evident by considering the British political tradition is the simple fact that city-regions will inevitably have to operate *within* a number of national policy frameworks. And yet even here the specific boundaries of the reform process and the extent of local discretion remain opaque. The management of health services, for example, within 'devo deals' is contested. Will devolved health services, such as those included in the Greater Manchester deal, no longer be subject to national standards? Baroness Williams, speaking for the government, has stated that 'whatever the devolution arrangements', health and social care services must remain firmly part of the NHS and social care system and 'all existing accountabilities and national standards for health services, social care and public health services will still apply'. This suggests not only significant limits on any notion of local or regionalised healthcare but also that a significant chunk of the Greater Manchester 'devo deal' is actually more of a new partnership, rather than a transfer of powers. The former Health Minister, Lord Warner, noted the potential conflict arising from devolving power *within* centrally defined national frameworks:

> The Minster has said that all decisions about Greater Manchester will be taken 'with' Greater Manchester—in other words, not 'by' Greater Manchester. [Baroness Williams] makes it clear that the Secretary of State is responsible for decisions about health in Greater Manchester. What I am struggling

> with is this: what is the purpose of devolving some of these health responsibilities to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority if the Secretary of State reserves a right to overrule or vet those decisions?[6]

In her reply for the government, Baroness Williams did little to assuage those who fear the residual shadow of central government control.

> Greater Manchester will have the powers necessary to participate in a collaborative partnership… if within that partnership the Secretary of State feels that all of them collectively were making the wrong decision, I am sure that he would have something to say about it.[7]

A related dimension of this debate concerns the influence of elected politicians on professionals and experts. For instance, to continue the focus on health, the former Coalition government created NHS England in 2013 as an arm's-length body that would be independent of ministerial influence in day-to-day decisions about healthcare choices and priorities. And yet, the Greater Manchester devolution deal will have the effect of enabling locally elected councillors to have far greater influence in the running of health and care services. The rationale for depoliticising healthcare at the national level, but then implementing reforms that will inevitably politicise healthcare decisions at the local level, remains unclear. As the Chief Executive of the Kings Fund has argued, 'This is one of the many important issues that will need to be worked through in 2015–2016, which will be the build-up year'.[8] Thus, it seems that what we are seeing is a 'new partnership' emerging where the centralised power-hoarding traditions of the British political tradition are thinly veiled beneath the rhetoric of 'revolution'.

Another important issue brought to light by looking through the lens of the British political tradition is the one-sided nature of the 'new partnership', in the sense of the lack of power of local authorities to compel Whitehall to honour its commitments. To paraphrase Peter Hennessy, the 'devo deals' are themselves established upon 'a good chaps theory of government' that states that central government can be trusted to deliver on its commitments. As the previous section explained, British political history reveals that these relations are founded less on trust and more on mutual resentment, which provides a weak foundation for any 'new partnership'. Further, the constitutional position of local government is weak in terms of forcing central government to make good on its commitments, especially where they may have been made by a government that is no longer in power. Already, the Conservative government has been accused of reneging on core agreements. The 'Northern Powerhouse', for example, was intended to embrace both sides of the Pennines and provide a conduit for driving large infrastructure programmes and an east–west improvement to rail and road communication. But after the 2015 general election the promised improvements and electrification were put on hold, while substantial investment in infrastructure in London and the South East continued. This is not to say that significant resources will not be released to city-regions in the future or that major rail and other infrastructure projects will not be launched, but it is to highlight that the balance of power remains firmly located within Whitehall and not the town hall. Or, to put the same point slightly differently, devolution to city-regions could involve the delegation of responsibilities without the allocation of resources necessary to meet those requirements.

Those favouring a pragmatic approach to the deals on offer may well agree that the 'new partnerships' are based on incrementalism, central government dictate and a weak local government position. And yet, they might argue that to not engage may be a significant opportunity missed—both in terms of lost future income and the potential for further negotiation over powers in the years to come. Indeed, the argument that both partners in the new settlements are involved in calculation and strategic negotiation is a valid one. However, what should also enter consideration is that the local leaders must at some point present their decisions and negotiations back to the citizenry. Immediately it is apparent that explaining the need for 'devo deals' to emerge in such a way that 'the deal-making process is currently almost

entirely secret'[9] will be difficult and could contribute to public cynicism. Furthermore, adding to these challenges is that negotiations have occurred between political and local elites. For instance, if we look at the deals that have been proposed so far, it is Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs) that have led the way, and while working with business is important, it will not supplant the need for public consultation in the eyes of the citizenry. In some cases, local councillors have been excluded from consideration. This can be seen in Sheffield, where a large number of councillors within the governing Labour Group were only made aware of 'the deal' when it was announced by Whitehall, as well as in the tensions in Manchester, where there have been reports of deep divisions between Labour members at national, local leader and backbench levels. Adding pressure around this are public perceptions that the partisan nature of local government means that local councillors will vote according to their central party's position, with any formal consultation merely a public display. The pace of reform has been almost breathtaking, with local authorities having to submit devolution plans within weeks (rather than months) so that they could be considered in time for the annual Spending Review. This is 'muddling through' at a pace and in a way that few countries in the world could replicate due to the existence of more rigorous constitutional safeguards. But what is equally important is the apparent willingness of devolution advocates to compete in this frenzy without the actual specifics of what they might gain, how any new partnership might work or what the long-term implications of the new devolution deals might be. Scared of being viewed as too slow to react in a process that might deliver increased powers or financial capacities, a sense of 'me-too-ism' has gripped large swathes of local government. Although political pragmatists leading the debate on 'devo deals' may see this view as naïve or idealistic, they should not easily overlook the 'real politics' of the need to manage perception and gain public support if they want to see their plan flourish in the long term.

And yet, to focus on the internal dynamics of central–local relationships risks perpetuating what has already become a somewhat technocratic overemphasis on devolving power to spur economic growth at the expense of democratic discourse. The possibly more important questions that need to be discussed concern not *homo economicus* but *homo politicus* and the democratic and social implications of the devolution debate. We live in an age of 'disaffected democrats' where questions around the future of representative democracy rotate around the analysis of 'new' and 'old' politics, but what is striking is the absence of any civic dialogue around the devolution plans in England. Given that the other British nations were allowed a say over devolution, what is most stark is that this profound change in structure and form of English regional politics has proceeded without its citizens being given a similar opportunity for debate. This, in itself, reflects a long-standing antipathy to public engagement, but it also leads to a broader discussion about what might be termed 'devo demo' or the democratisation of English devolution.

'Devo demo'

At a time when changing governance conditions in Western nations suggest a need for shifting resources, responsibilities and accountability closer to a level where decisions are made and policy is delivered, the British response—when viewed in the light of inertia from its political tradition—suggests the somewhat contradictory situation of political elites seeking to maintain control in the centre but shifting accountability to the city-regions in England (all under the guise of new local freedoms). That said, the government's English devolution agenda may well offer huge opportunities in terms of regional economic growth, employment and market innovation, but its true potential will only be fulfilled if the new city-regions develop democratic roots—they have to take *the people* with them. Yet, recent polling indicates that although people are supportive of the idea of devolution, they are unaware of developments around city-regions and feel that they have been left out of the process.[10]

The central argument of this article is therefore that the current plans for English devolution cannot be taken forward on the basis of economic or pragmatic logics alone.

Moreover, the economic potential of these plans will only be realised if the new city-regions possess a democratic legitimacy that is currently not present. There is a role for the public in the *decision to implement* or at the very least *a meaningful debate* about a new model of governance at the English regional level (that is, the primary question), as opposed to a *role in the selection* of the first city-region mayors (a secondary question arising from a decision already being made about the primary question). One logically comes before the other and the current risk is that the failure to engage with the first may undermine public support for the latter. There is also the real chance that (as has occurred with previous mayoral elections, the Police and Crime Commissioners and elections to NHS Foundation Trusts) the turnout for the first mayoral elections in 2017 could be so low that the incumbents are effectively undermined by the lack of a democratic mandate. This could in turn undermine the whole English devolution agenda. Such an argument could be criticised for adopting an idealistic position that fails to acknowledge the inevitably messy, disorganised and ramshackle nature of politics in the 'real world'. But at this point we would note that it has been the political advocates of devolution, such as the Prime Minister, who have invoked the language of empowerment and greater civic engagement and, in doing so, highlighted what a recent New Economics Foundation report described as lack of democratic discourse in the devolution debate.[11]

Critics might also argue that the problem with a 'devo demo' is that there is an innate aversion among the public for changes to the status quo and, as a result, it may be far better to implement reforms (that is, take the primary decision) on the basis that public support will grow once the fruits of the initiative become more obvious. 'But', as Daniel Kenealy has argued, 'if we are truly interested in reinvigorating local governance and participatory democracy, that is putting things the wrong way around'.[12] Indeed, to adopt this position is arguably little more than a twenty-first century re-interpretation of the British political tradition's long-standing belief that democracy is over-rated and that the public do not know what is good for them. This might be defined as a preference for an *outcome-focused* rather than a *process-focused* model of democracy. That has certain merits in terms of expediency and side-stepping the well-known dysfunctions of democracy, but it is also an unashamedly elitist model of democracy. This takes us back to the need to offer a devolution narrative that is both social as well as economic, that is about collective value rather than market price and that understands the importance of regional and local identities, as well as industrial innovation. The specific proposals set out in the government's Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill look somewhat under-developed in a reform agenda that is at least rhetorically couched in the language of democratic empowerment. As demonstrated by the House of Commons Library's authoritative account of the draft legislation and the related concerns, it is possible to highlight the main features of the current 'accountability gap' as follows:

1 The current plans for 'public consultation' regarding the introduction of city-region mayors are unclear.
2 The relationship between the proposed mayor and the combined authority is opaque.
3 The combined authority is expected to fulfil both an executive role (*with the mayor*) and a scrutiny function (*over the mayor*).
4 How combined authority members will be held to account for their specific roles in the absence of a regional assembly is unclear.
5 The council leaders who sit on the combined authority will have significant responsibilities in their 'home' councils and may not for this reason be able to adequately control or oversee the elected mayor.
6 The resources and capacity of the proposed Scrutiny Committees, consisting of backbench councillors from member authorities, appear under-developed.
7 There is a likelihood that the city-region mayors would have to delegate significant roles and responsibilities to their staff, but how these staff will be accountable is unclear.[13]

To the devolution advocates these are exactly the 'loose ends' that should not be allowed to get in the way of the 'devo deals' on offer, but to the more cautious observers these look like fairly major issues. The government is very clear that it sees strong city mayors as a driver of economic growth and urban renewal, but at the same time the dominant city-mayor model is also being reconsidered in many countries due to concerns regarding the rise of personality politics and vanity projects. This, in turn, brings us back to the issue of London exceptionalism; David Cameron expressed the belief that 'every city needs a Boris', but if the devolution agenda is to be a genuine example of decentralising power and responsibility, then every region must be given a say over if they want a Boris. As the Chancellor draws on notions of collaboration between city-regions as a pathway to economic success, it remains unclear why the introduction of a new elected regional champion would invariably result in cooperation rather than competition. Furthermore, locales within and across English city-regions contain strong historic rivalries that may make collaborative working difficult and may make the creation of an elected mayor much more problematic than in London. How, for example, would a single mayoral figure relate to a region like Leeds and West Yorkshire, an economic area that is not simply dominated by one city but actually contains three cities and a large number of proudly independent towns and communities?[14] As another example, historic tensions between Birmingham and neighbouring councils have already meant that it has been extremely difficult to negotiate even the membership, governance and arrangements and the name of the combined authority.[15] As can be seen, the geographical scope of the regions is a significant issue in terms of democratic relationships, questions of identity and securing accountability.

However, there are potential avenues to close this 'accountability gap'. These could include the requirement for local 'Accountability Systems Statements' (that draw upon recent developments in central government) that highlight the different levers and processes that act together to ensure an effective and multi-dimensional accountability framework.[16] Alternatively, Local Governance Frameworks might be more prescriptive documents that contained clear statements on (inter alia) public engagement, partnership arrangements, review processes, etc., but overall provided a simple map of the governing landscape. Meanwhile, a more radical approach might include some requirement to ensure 'deep' engagement through mechanisms such as citizens' juries, mini-publics, focus groups or even local constitutional conventions.[17] Recent evidence from the pilot citizens' assemblies held on English regional devolution in Sheffield and Southampton showed that members of the public (while not opposed to devolution in theory) were not aware of its progress, felt that they have been left out of the process and supported city-regions pushing for better partnerships. Notably, these assemblies also revealed the public's appetite for engagement in dialogue, as well as assembly members' capacity for rigorous understanding of the complexities and nuances of the devolution debate.[18]

In answer to the core question, 'What's really happening to English local government?', we suggest that what we are seeing is a 'new partnership' around *a centrist and market-focused agenda under the banner of more devolution*. While this *may* deliver some significant benefits for the villages, towns and cities of England, the full potential of this reform process is unlikely to be realised without more public engagement and deeper democratic processes.

Notes

1 D. Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, New York, Wiley, 1965, p. 292.
2 See, for example, J. Chandler, *Explaining Local Government*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2013; H. Atkinson and S. Wilks-Heeg, *Local Government from Thatcher to Blair*, Cambridge, Polity, 2000.
3 HL Debs. 8 June 2015, c.652.
4 HL Debs. 8 June 2015, c.652.
5 HM Treasury, *Chancellor on Building a Northern Powerhouse*, 14 May 2015. See also HL Debs. 8 June 2015, c.653.
6 HL Debs. 24 June 2015, c.1674.
7 Ibid., c.1675.
8 C. Ham, *What Devo Manc Could Mean for Health, Social Care and Wellbeing in Greater Manchester*, London, Kings Fund, 2015.

9 See Centre for Public Scrutiny, *Devo Why?*, *Devo How?* London, CPS, 2015, p. 8, http://www.cfps.org.uk/domains/cfps.org.uk/local/media/downloads/CfPS_DEVO_WHY_RGB.pdf (accessed 13 July 2016).

10 See https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3645/Public-knows-little-about-the-devolution-revolution-but-supports-local-decisionmaking.aspx (accessed 13 July 2016).

11 S. Lyall, M. Wood and D. Bailey, 'Democracy: the missing link—the devolution debate', New Economics Foundation, 3 December 2015, http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/democracy-the-missing-link-in-the-devolution-debate (accessed 13 July 2016).

12 D. Kenealy, 'Is Devo Manc a good model for devolution? Almost. . .', *The Conversation*, 12 May 2015, http://theconversation.com/is-devo-manc-a-good-model-for-english-devolution-almost-41643 (accessed 13 July 2016).

13 'The range of powers is potentially so vast that I doubt one person can do it all, which means in practice that much will be delegated. We need to think very carefully about running policing, social care and health, strategic planning, housing, skills, transport, economic development and regeneration through one person.' Lord Shipley, HL Debs. 8 June 2015, c.659.

14 See J. Cronshaw, 'Elected mayors may be unwanted, but necessary, step towards devolution', *Wakefield Express*, 25 May 2015, http://www.newslocker.com/en-uk/region/wakefield/elected-mayors-may-be-unwanted-but-necessary-step-toward-devolution-wakefield-express/view/ (accessed 13 July 2016).

15 See M. Lempriere, *The Emergence and Implications of Combined Authorities—A Research Report*, Birmingham: INLOGOV, 2015.

16 See DCLG, *Accountability: Adapting to Decentralisation*, London, HMSO, 2011, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6263/1994187.pdf (accessed 13 July 2016).

17 Federal Trust, *Devolution in England: A New Approach,* London, Federal Trust, 2014.

18 See http://citizensassembly.co.uk (accessed 13 July 2016).

