



A Stronger, Fairer Britain

National Policy Forum Submission 2020

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Introduction

Our current devolution settlement is broken, and Britain knows it. Faced with a crisis of regional inequality, the governments of the last decade have only made the problem worse. Now, the Union itself is at threat, with the resentment sown by an unbalanced country emboldening nationalism in both England and Scotland. The ties that bind us together are under threat. Only Labour can solve the crisis.

Large parts of our land have no faith in London-based answers to the problems they face. Centralisation has bred an anti-politics which has fed the populist surge behind our last two general election defeats. The vote for Brexit, too, was a choice made by millions who feel cut off from their fair share of Britain's power and resources. The need to devolve governance from Westminster is great, and growing greater by the day.

At the same time, we are faced by a crisis of nationalism. As nationalists use their platform to drive our country apart, resentment at the power and resources available in other parts of Britain is breeding an ugly reaction in England. That strife now risks ending the Union itself. We in Labour are duty-bound to foster unity rather than conflict, and develop a devolution policy that leaves no part of Britain behind.

We need no less than a ground-up revolution in how our country is run. One fair system can unite the nation, providing the springboard for a dramatic redistribution of Britain's wealth and a real decentralisation of power. In place of discord, we can create harmony, with no part of the country feeling left behind or excluded from power and opportunity.

We in Labour can shape this future for Britain. By taking power from Westminster and replacing Whitehall bureaucracy with local democracy, we can reclaim those voters whose distrust of the status quo has led them to abandon our party as of late. Radical reform is needed, and the time is now.

From Cornwall to Caithness, everyone in Britain deserves the same level of control over their lives. It is time to leave behind devolution by desperation, with powers begrudgingly doled out to certain parts of the country but not others. Now we can set out devolution by design, with a fair and balanced settlement for the whole of the United Kingdom. Labour is about equality – and this is our contribution to that mission.

Labour for Devolution

What lessons can be learnt from the success of the Welsh Labour Government, and from the devolution of powers to Metro Mayors and combined authorities?

The introduction of the Welsh and Scottish Parliaments by the last Labour governments have been qualified successes. As the party that founded the London Assembly, the Welsh Parliament and now controls most of Britain's directly elected mayoralities, we can be proud of our record.

The Welsh Labour government has led the way on bus passes for pensioners, opt-out organ donation, the smoking ban, carrier bag charges, free prescriptions and free breakfasts in primary schools. It has abolished the NHS internal market, diminishing the role of the private sector in healthcare. Its recycling agenda has Wales on course to be the world's first zero-waste nation.

Similarly, the metro-mayor agenda has created several mostly-Labour advocates for local areas and local causes. This has provided the responsibilities and mandate for local policy initiatives such as Andy Burnham's drive to eradicate homelessness in Greater Manchester.

Such successes demonstrate the considerable value of local decision-making, but these successes have been limited because the funding and powers of local government in this country are so insubstantial.

The devolution of some powers to metro-mayors and combined authorities is small fry alongside scorched-earth austerity falling on local government more than any central government department. Metro-mayors have received a fraction of what councils have had taken away.

We need democratically-elected regional parliaments, funded by a fair formula for all that would free local government from Westminster's whims. These would have powers equal to the Scottish Parliament and ensure local control over health and social care, education, housing, training and transport.

A majority of the public agrees that decisions about public services should be made as locally as possible to reflect the needs and priorities of local people. Once powerful campaigns to abolish our devolved bodies have withered into irrelevance. Devolution of some kind is accepted in a way many never thought possible.

When devolved bodies are set up to engage with strong civic or regional identities and have significant powers and secure funding, the public responds positively. Support grows as those bodies act and deliver change for those who previously felt under-represented.

How can the principles of federalism help to reshape the devolution settlement in order to maximise the opportunity it presents?

Federalism in Britain can create an inbuilt, structural commitment to share prosperity fairly around the nation. In place of the mishmash of unbalanced and unequal structures that currently define how our country is governed, we need a fair federal system that can make the most of this chance to rebuild Britain.

At the top tier, this means giving each of the present NUTS-1 nations and regions their own devolved assemblies, with equal powers to the Scottish Parliament. This would solve the West Lothian problem once and for all, with a Union Parliament in Westminster continuing to make laws on reserved matters.

Labour can become the party that champions regional identity. With Wessex and Yorkshire spawning their own regionalist parties, and with widespread pride in local identities that often matches patriotism in Britain as a whole, this a powerful force that our party can harness to create a more equal country.



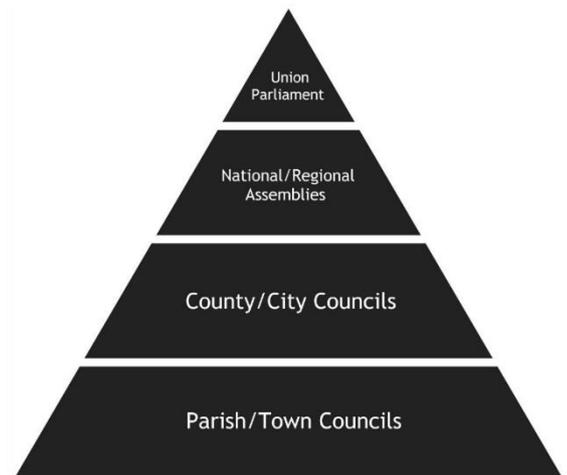
Currently the battered infrastructure of our everyday life works to the priorities of Whitehall, not those of the places it serves. In such a system there can be no local autonomy, no local differences recognised and addressed. The regions of England have very varied political and economic needs. What works for London with its high deprivation but plentiful access to jobs does not necessarily work for high-unemployment, ageing regions such as North-East England or Wales.

By adopting the principles of federalism, we can dramatically change how our country works. Every part of Britain can enjoy equal powers, with a fair federal structure forming the systems needed to redistribute prosperity across the country. Not only would this solve the West Lothian problem once and for all, this would also let our party harness regional pride and reconnect with millions more voters.

In addition, a commitment to wholesale reform of how Westminster and the regions interact would also serve as a chance to establish one consistent and fair system of local government across Britain. Not only can powers be taken from the centre and handed to the regions, but also passed further down still. With real resources and power held as close to ordinary people as possible, more people than ever before will be able to participate in the running of our country.

Truly radical decentralisation brings power and funds as close as possible to ordinary folk. This too is informed by the ideas of federalism: equal powers to each area, clearly defined and following the traditional boundaries of local and civic identity.

By adopting the principles of federalism, we can draw from a rich vein of experiences and lessons from around the world. Our party can bring that learning home, to reform our country on a more equal basis.



The German federal system has ensured that the country's economic success can be shared around the whole nation, forming a basis to ensure equality between the *Länder*. France's strong tradition of mayors – even in the smallest recognised municipalities – gives local government a set of diverse voices, and voters a figure who they can identify with on a day to day basis. These, and other lessons from around the world, could serve Britain well.

Adopting a fair federal system would be an ideal opportunity to establish one consistent system of local government across the entire United Kingdom. With powers brought as close to ordinary people as possible, faith in our democracy can be restored, and the gross over-bureaucratisation of our centralised state can be cured.

What role could a constitutional convention play in helping to forge a new long term consensus about how our country is run?

A radical devolution programme is the perfect opportunity to draw in those disillusioned by our over-centralised politics. Through a constitutional convention, we can talk directly to ordinary people – and most importantly of all, listen. To make reform last, we need to foster broad agreement both within and without our party.

The same areas that voted for Brexit out of disgust from decades of disempowerment are the same areas that have turned away from our party since 2015. A constitutional convention would be the ideal opportunity to hold Citizen's Assemblies up and down the country, spreading our goal of dramatic decentralisation with the very people who are tired of out of touch, London-centric politics.

Equally, a new devolution settlement could serve as the springboard for further reform to our democracy. Regional assemblies – copying both the Scottish Parliament's powers and elections by the additional member system – could prove the benefits of electoral reform. At the same time, House of Lords reform would become far simpler, with the upper house in Westminster made up of delegations from Cardiff, Stormont, Holyrood and the regional authorities (in the manner of the German *Bundesrat*).

Broad agreement between different parties and groups is needed to ensure that a fair, consistent system of devolved government can both be established, and then endure beyond the length of a parliamentary term. In some areas, governance reforms will help one party; in others, weaken their chances in the short term.

But across the whole country, all will gain from greater devolution. The upheaval from abolishing district councils, rolling police and crime commissioner responsibilities into regional governments and clearing out Whitehall will be considerable. A constitutional convention is therefore an excellent way of generating the kind of broad-based support needed to make reform last.
