

Cornish Constitutional Convention : The First Decade (Part II)

By 2000 Cornwall was awaking from a long voyage. The triumphs and degradations of its industrial and inventive past lay silent. The elastoplast of a tourism founded on a myth of tranquil decline was peeling away to reveal unhealed wounds, and poverty, chronic depression and decay. The emotive but forceful outcry of Cornish Solidarity, a popular movement that began by uttering an anguished cry at the closure of our last tin mine, was transformed into a purposeful demand, supported by the WMN, for recognition, change and a new approach to the Cornish future. Amidst the pain, shackles fell away. A revival was under way.

Cornwall's Gross Domestic Product was the lowest in Britain, only 62% of the UK average. Constant applications of European regeneration funding since the mid-1980s, with forced 'regional marriages' imposed by centrally blinkered Governments, had achieved nothing. Skills were sparse, incomes extremely low, aspiration ebbing away. Health and Social Care expenditure was exploding as the economic conditions inflicted their toll. Tourism was declining as air travel increased the competitive edge of sunnier and more exotic climes. The murder rate in Bodmin was one of the highest in the UK. Even the Wilsonian injection of 'overspill' was festering, while Mr Heath's local government 'reforms' were proving the foundations for endemic failure. Farming and fishing, key elements of resilience, were in the doldrums, beset by hostile regulation and seemingly endless outbreaks of disease.

The campaign to persuade the Government to recognise Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly as a region led to the assignation of NUTS2 status, and this enabled us to qualify for the highest level of targeted European intervention – Objective 1. Even as the programme was being put together, including the ground-breaking notion (you heard it in Cornwall first) of 'regional distinctiveness', so the thinking about governance was turning to devolution. In the application of Objective 1, with the higher level of focus accorded by NUTS2, Cornwall has shown over the past decade or so how, given the freedom to develop its own particular strategies and projects, it is capable of recapturing its dynamism, inventiveness, industriousness and acumen.

Cornish GDP is now at a respectable, but still unacceptable 75+% of UK average. We will no longer qualify for Structural Funds, and after the completion of the Convergence Programme, will need to form our own regeneration programme, building on the tenuous, hard-won and exciting platform of success. Cornwall has built a university with world-class academics already inserting Cornwall's brand into the global knowledge economy. University College, Falmouth is setting out to become the first university of the arts in Europe. We are equipped with the infrastructure to participate in the virtual world of internet commerce, and we have creative and manufacturing industries that stand out in a competitive world where design, style and environmental skill give us an edge. Investors are cautiously excited by Cornwall. Our workforce is increasingly competitively skilled; incomes are rising (although still out of sight of prices). What do investors need to commit?

Having been a key player in the industrial age Cornwall can now be one of the leaders in the great clean-up. There is real energy, real brain-power and a renewed focus from investors in what is happening in Cornwall. As we understand more about climate change so our ability to optimise our potential as a food producer and value-adder is emerging. We remain a globally competitive destination for visitors seeking stimulation, high standards of service, environmental awareness and

action, excellent products and a desire to be brand-loyal where consistency, depth and quality prevail.

To succeed beyond the point of being discharged from the Structural Funds clinic, Cornwall needs to take itself in-hand – to invest in influencing the next generation of policy (now actively forming, especially in Brussels), to build new, success-oriented relationships, especially with new partners (learning from the experience being gained by the ‘Region of Culture project’). We need to assert our regional identity, and to underpin this with the realities of clear, focused and robust regional governance – the Cornish Assembly – and with a vision and programme of development that respects our environment, enables us to play an incisive role in global action, and which builds on the platform of success we have created.

Cornwall needs to formulate its own spatial strategy, to calculate its needs for housing, employment space, infrastructure and investment. Most importantly, we need to redraw the balance between the value of our land as our key agricultural and destination resource, and the use of land for development – the accepted formula is changing quickly. We need the toolkit to safeguard our land – it is in the UK national interest to do so.

Cornwall needs to be arguing its corner, bidding, achieving and regenerating itself. Only then, in the emerging world of flexibility, excellence, pursuit and transfer of knowledge, exploration of creativity and environmental responsibility, will Cornwall be able to raise GDP, to be productive in sustainable and fulfilling ways. The devolution campaigned for by the Cornish Constitutional Convention – itself a ground-breaking political, sectoral and social partnership – is an essential part of the toolkit for the future which we need to build on our success.

Part of our success – like it, or not – is to have radically shaken up our local government, and to be moving towards a successful single council and a governance model that genuinely practises the principles of devolution. We wish Cornwall to be offered local empowerment and devolved services. To move forward we need to gather powers – spatial strategy making, for instance. We also need to be able to manage all public services so we can usefully and efficiently bring them together. We need the clout to bid for international resources and to deliver to the high standards we have become known for over the past decade. We are not seeking to cut ourselves off, but rather, in the words of Convention vice-Chair, Andrew George MP, to ‘*cut ourselves in*’ to the future of Britain and British life.

The Cornish Assembly - genuinely effective devolution - in a State critically needing to raise productivity, to radically improve efficiency and cut wasteful cost, and to reinforce a global reputation for creativity, brains and intelligent leadership – is now at the heart of the Cornish agenda, and is our key message to the new Government – devolution to the natural region of Cornwall (and, if it wishes to participate, the Isles of Scilly) is simply good for business! It is the most important investment that the new Government must make if Cornwall is to contribute to recovery and future prosperity as it is now so capable of doing.