

## Cornish Constitutional Convention : The First Decade (Part I)

The Cornish Constitutional Convention first met in July 2000. Somebody from the Campaign for English Regions (based in Newcastle) made a speech in Launceston. He told the audience that Cornwall would be included in the proposed South West, and a democratically elected regional assembly would be set up. He said we had no choice and asked us to join him in bringing this great project to fruition.

The reaction was mixed. Many people very much liked the idea of regional devolution. It chimed with what they had been working towards for many years. I recall Paul (now Lord) Tyler rushing home and dusting off a pamphlet he'd written in about 1962. Some didn't like the idea but assumed it would happen because the new Government was all-powerful and driven by radical reforming zeal. One thing bonded us – that, if there was to be regions, then the only region for Cornwall was Cornwall.

With the Assembly came the Regional Development Agency. Cornwall had invested much energy in promoting the Cornish Development Agency. We had extricated ourselves from our uncomfortable, counter-productive 'marriage' with Devon in 1997, and had won Objective 1 as a result. As we were embarking on that Programme we were clear in our ambition, confident in our ability and, of course, driven by our innate knowledge and intuition that Cornwall is different and needs to be positively recognised as being such.

Within a year a campaign had really got moving. Teams of young people were gathering signatures on a petition originally launched by Mebyon Kernow and taken on, in partnership, by the Convention. By Christmas 2001 we were standing on the doorstep of 10 Downing Street to deliver an audited petition of 50,000 names. This remains by far the biggest expression of public support for regional devolution from anywhere in Britain.

The Convention had become a partnership of all shades of political opinion, and was influencing public opinion to such an extent that by 2003 a MORI poll undertaken for Cornwall County Council indicated that 55% of the Cornish population favoured devolution to the Cornish Assembly. The Minister of State, Nick Raynsford, came to Cornwall and met the Convention's leaders. The atmosphere was most cordial.

Andrew George MP was (and remains) Vice Chairman. The campaign was conducted on two 'fronts' – in Cornwall, winning support, developing the proposal, creating the groundswell, and in Westminster and Whitehall, intervening in Parliamentary debates, asking ministerial questions, increasing awareness of the opportunity for the Government that, in devolving to a small but well-defined and tenacious region, Cornwall could lead the way and also repay the investment. Andrew George has played a well-crafted, sophisticated and effective role in Parliament and has achieved two things – firstly, a broad awareness of the Cornish case, and secondly, a question in the heart of Government that has led to the possibility of a Cornish Assembly never having been dismissed or crushed.

Eventually, the North East referendum ended the Prescott project. It was a hard-fought battle and Mr Prescott was a strong, pugnacious leader of his cause. The Cornish question muddied his water and affected the outcome of his venture by raising important questions about what makes a good region. We challenged the idea that, to be effective, a region had to be '*of a certain size*'. At all times, although robust and often, in a parliamentary sense, quite rude, Mr Prescott was always fair, courteous and committed to his line. He is not, as some claim, a mortal enemy of Cornwall and does not sit on the sidelines orchestrating vengeful denigrations of Cornish identity and integrity, as he is sometimes accused of doing. Mr Raynsford was consistently and quietly helpful, as were others both in Parliament and elsewhere.

There have been many highlights, and many people have contributed selflessly to achieve Cornwall's objective. There is still a strong, enduring sense that we will achieve the Cornish Assembly because, in the world in which we now live, with quickly developing technologies, major global environmental challenges, new social structures and values, and a stronger than ever recognition of the intrinsic value of minority cultures, identities and 'national' geographies, Cornwall's case makes more, not less, sense.

In 2004 Mr Prescott was replaced by David Miliband. At Cornwall County Council the Liberal Democrats won an overall majority. The Convention, rekindling the debate about regional devolution, published a pamphlet, 'Devolution's Future'. The foreword was by Tim Williams, Mr Miliband's adviser. Within weeks David Miliband was in Cornwall talking to leading Cornish councillors and officers. He said: *'When I offer the opportunity to restructure local governance then don't be afraid to ask for what you really want!'* Everybody in the room thought: *'The Cornish Assembly – it's a goer!'*

David Whalley was, by then, leader of the Council. When the new initiative materialised, as Miliband said it would, Mr Whalley decided to not work in partnership with the district councils. Secondly, he did not heed Miliband's words but instead asked for a unitary authority. His bid very clearly said that it would provide the first definite step *towards* the Cornish Regional Assembly. At no time has anybody in the Government or Civil Service gainsayed that assertion, and it is enshrined within the Cornwall (Changes) Order 2008. The Convention played a central role in the early stages of putting together the Cornish case.

Another pamphlet was published after the new Council was established. This describes how the new electoral arrangements and institutional structures can be quickly and easily translated into those necessary for the Assembly. The new Council is moving forward in its development with vigour. It is not universally popular but is winning respect and confidence as it develops. It is making mistakes, but it is also getting many of the new opportunities and challenges right.

The unitary council is a key institutional development towards the Cornish Assembly. It aspires seriously to gathering powers from national and regional centres, of taking responsibility for Cornwall's economic, social, cultural and environmental destiny, of making business-rooted, persuasive cases for incorporating Cornwall's health service institutions and structures, and of making new arrangements regarding policing, emergency services and other public services.

As we enter our second decade the Cornish Constitutional Convention can look back and reflect that we have stuck to our cause, we have moved national discussion forward, we have stamped our case into the minds of those who shape and deliver national policy, and we have maintained a positive, cheerful personality. The campaign is not a nationalist or politically biased campaign. It is inclusive, serious about improving conditions and prospects for all those living in and doing business with Cornwall. It is convinced of the justice and the common sense of its objective, and is in it for the long haul.

Onwards! Kernow bys vykken.