

The Cornish Unitary – A reflection on new challenges

It would be churlish to not congratulate David Whalley, Leader of Cornwall Council, and his team of officers, who have bid for and gained approval to set up a new unitary authority for Cornwall. In pursuing the objective the Council was undoubtedly going after a new venture that, on the face of it, will appear to fulfil a long-held ambition of Cornish people. It does not, however, enjoy much support.

The Devil has a way with detail which means that, whilst the objective is sound, the scheme is likely to be incapable of maintaining the standard of services offered the public. Change done reluctantly breeds resentment and disaffection. The public sector is the largest economic force in Cornwall, and to have about half of it locked in an internal struggle to make sense of hastily formed plans for change will have an impact on our economy and upon the confidence of individuals, families and communities.

This, coupled with a separate but related policy to move towards a Cornish Development Agency, creates the risk that, as well as reducing the positive impact of local government upon the economy, we will also see the Council constrained in being able to support other, entrepreneurial and developmental aspects of our changing economic circumstances while changes are bedded in.

With the second tranche of European funding requiring urgent delivery (if you miss the first target you'll not catch up), the great risk is that Cornwall will fail to live up to its potential, and its reputation as a place motivated by 'can do', by creativity and by outward-looking confidence will be marred. If you know what the risks are you can do your best to guard against them. That is the great political challenge, and we must pray that the leadership in both the outgoing and incoming authorities are up to the challenges and the scale of the tasks they have created for themselves.

The second and most important point is that the unitary authority is only a small piece of what we must seek to achieve. Other key parts are there for the taking if we have the vision, confidence and resources to get them.

The Cornish Constitutional Convention has argued that, rather than producing a scheme constrained by the rules of a Government competition, Cornwall should heed the intentions of the White Paper and propose a new way forward. The Cornish Governance Proposition calls for a single organisation including health, education, local government, police and other services, which, separating strategy from delivery, has a two-tier, democratic structure. Such a change would be backed by a consensus.

Government policy is moving in this direction, and quickly! Cornish leaders, including Mr Whalley, must consider, with Further Education funding to be devolved, health management to be devolved, the Police seeking local accountability for the Council Tax it levies, and a crucial emphasis upon raising productivity in local economies (amongst other factors), if the way forward does not inevitably lead to that single organisation.

Lastly, and most importantly, the Treasury Review of Economic Development will lead to 'City Regions' – key economic hubs with strongly devolved powers to develop sustainable and productive economic performance and keen efficiency in public services. The Convention has already written to Mr Whalley describing its campaign to encourage the Government that there is a good case for enabling Cornwall & the Isles of Scilly, under the terms of a new Multi-Area Agreement, to become

the peripheral equivalent of a city region. The Economic Review enables us to launch this initiative. The Convention believes that an approach would be gladly welcomed. The Government won't suggest it, but it will respond favourably, if it is asked. This is the real opportunity. Mr Whalley needs to move quickly, confidently and backed by the consensus which is so clearly missing from the unitary authority bid. Seen in isolation by colleagues, citizens, businesses, voluntary organisations and informed observers, the unitary looks somewhat beleaguered. Seen as part of a bigger ambition it could be a good start.

The Liberal Democrats promised to deliver a Cornish Assembly. This will be done by persuasion with an excellent and compelling case. Posturing gets nowhere in the real world. So, away with the elderflower champagne! Let's get the collective brain in gear – it's time to step across the unitary stone and head for the Assembly on the other bank, via the Cornish dispersed city region. The ball is firmly in Cornwall's and Mr Whalley's court.

Bert Biscoe

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