

Address to Cornish Constitutional Convention AGM

John Pollard, Leader Cornwall Council

30th November 2013

Good morning to you all.

When I was asked to speak to the Convention – incidentally by two Cabinet colleagues (how could I say no?!) – I was delighted to accept as I saw this as an opportunity to share my views on Cornwall and how I believe it should be governed.

When I have finished you may not actually agree with me, but Julian has promised me safe passage!

Let me first explain a bit of context; I am Cornish born and bred and very proud to be so.

I was educated in Hayle and Penzance and in 1968 left the security of Hayle to go to Coventry for what would be described today as higher education. Well, I grew up in a day!

I saw a city. I experienced a multi-racial community. I learned in the same room as girls (liked that bit). I found something called the Locarno ballroom where you could drink and dance until 2 am and, most importantly, I experienced the fact that I could get drunk, stay out all night and have what could be described as a 'good time' and (unlike in Hayle) there was no one around who would tell my mother next day!

The other thing I learned was an enormous appreciation of my homeland; a pride that we Cornish were different and, although I remained in exile for over 10 years, a determination to come home!

Eventually I did in 1980, bringing my Liverpudlian-born wife, my Midlands-born infant and a determination that my family would experience all the joys of living in Cornwall.

Since my homecoming I have tried to put something back into the community in many ways.

Based on what I saw as the needs of my own family I have tried to create a better Cornwall. I want our youngsters to have high aspirations; high levels of achievement. I want the economy of Cornwall to grow and thrive and at the same time I want all that is distinctive about Cornwall to be preserved and cherished for future generations; our landscape, our culture and our history and heritage.

So now, John Pollard – teacher, historian, proud Bard of the Cornish Gorsedth, parent, husband, last one of my generation of Pollards left living in Cornwall – is the leader of Cornwall Council. Pinch yourself, Pollard. The Leader of Cornwall Council!

It is a chance I never expected, it is an honour that I could not refuse and most importantly it is an opportunity that I am determined not to waste. I am a lucky man. And frankly my background, my Cornishness, my love of the place and my understanding of the people, whether Cornish or not, will of course inform everything I do.

I must at this point confess – I am and always have been a 'unitary authority' man. Although asked to many times, I never stood for the District Council and although Penwith did some good things – and indeed some good things for Hayle – it was never an entity with any real cohesion.

It may well have been based on the old Hundreds, but there was no affinity or affection between a lad from Hayle and one from St Just, or between a maid from Penzance to one from St Ives. If there is no interconnection there will be no empathy. Where there is little like-mindedness then there is either indifference or enmity. If there is no loyalty then there is usually little understanding.

The value of one unitary authority has always been clear to me. It may be a hundred miles from one end to the other; the needs of the east may well vary from that of the west, the demands of living in Bodmin compared to those of living in the middle of Bodmin Moor may be very different, but it is all Cornwall.

Not everyone will believe in our Nationhood – but I do. Whether born in Camborne or Castleford all who live here can adopt a distinctive Cornishness.

So for me the Unitary Authority provides an enormous opportunity; One Council, One Country, One County, One Community. In terms of Geography, in terms of Culture, in terms of Language and in terms of a sense of place, we are One – and only a Unitary Authority can truly fulfil our motto of Onen hag Oll – One and All.

So having been elected to Cornwall Council in 2009 I was very disappointed that the prospect of a 'new start' was not appreciated by all. It really was a missed opportunity. We did not manage to exploit the fact that we are different from England, we did not capitalize on the new structure and most importantly we failed to bring a sense of freshness and new opportunity – an understanding that this was different and could be better – to the new Council.

Well, as far as I am concerned we have now spent 4 years establishing the Unitary Council. The elections of last May created a younger and more vital council; the Cabinet's average age is under 50 and we have some bright, alert and very aware Councillors. We must now move on, secure in the fact that the unitary authority is well established and 'One Cornwall', although a phrase that has some negativity around it, really does exist, so now let's make it everything it should be!

Cornwall Council (how annoyed I get when people still refer to us as the County Council) must continue to do things differently. One of the great differences is that we are now working with a number of partners. This co-operation and joined up thinking on behalf of all the people of Cornwall provides huge opportunities.

The Council is working with the Business Community to develop our Economy through the Local Enterprise Partnership. There is also the Local Nature Partnership, again bringing interested parties together, to promote our Countryside and defend our environment.

We are also working with the Health and Well Being Board, a combination of Health interests from the whole of Cornwall, to protect the young, support the vulnerable and ensure that those delivering health – and Cornwall Council – work closely together.

The vital element in all three of these partnerships is that they deal with Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. Other Local Enterprise Partnerships have to work with numerous councils crossing county and city borders, but here in Cornwall it is us and the Isle of Scilly; a distinct geographical area again sharing the same heritage and sense of community. One Cornwall, One Council, One Local Enterprise Partnership.

This makes a huge difference. What a difference it would make if in the National Health Service, instead of two main hospitals in Truro and Plymouth serving the population and instead of two different NHS commissioning groups, it was all one.

The division of our health Services just makes serving the people more difficult, more divided, more expensive and more divisive.

We have one Fire Service, and we must protect it: One Cornwall, One Community, One Fire Service; why not one Police Force?

One Cornwall, One Community, One Police Force: it works for me!!

May I say a word about Localism. I do not believe that most politicians and bureaucrats actually understand what Localism means. It was a great disappointment that Cornwall Council failed to deliver the Localism Agenda for the people of the Duchy. The administration I lead is still determined to achieve a better deal for all areas, but we are suffering from a negative attitude that has been built up as Cornwall Council has failed to serve the communities of Cornwall by not empowering them to take control of their own affairs. It is as much about attitude as about process. This Council is determined to be 'Can Do' whereas the experience of many of you involved at Parish level is that CC is a 'Cannot Do' Council.

Equally we are working hard to get more responsibility devolved from Central and European Government.

I know that our MPs, members of the House of Lords, Business Leaders and colleagues across the public sector are doing much to lobby government for greater powers, influence, control and budgetary management for Cornwall.

I must say that I regret how difficult it often is to bring together all our MPs to fight as one for Cornwall as they should be – they are all part of the Government.

I know that individually they all love Cornwall and have Cornish interests at heart, but trying to get them all in the same room to discuss Cornish issues is so far a feat that had alluded me – but I will keep trying! We must create a Cornwall Council / Cornwall MP Liaison that delivers for Cornwall.

We are lobbying, and I am determined to create a more inclusive and collaborative approach, but we must campaign hard to bring more functions under Cornish control. There have been major achievements, of which I am sure many will be aware:

After much negotiation with the Department of Transport we have won the right to take control of the dualling of the A30 at Temple.

The Government has agreed to subsidise the air link between London and Newquay. I am always a little dubious about mentioning the Airport, but there is no doubt in my mind that an air link is essential and in this way the Government will help subsidise it for us.

We have gained Government funding to develop the collaborate working between the 'blue light' services in Hayle, based at the new Fire Station, that Hayle has sought and I have personally campaigned for over the last 30 years.

We have also been awarded funds to create a project to integrate Health and Social Care provision, based on a very successful pilot undertaken in Newquay – co-operation, partnership, economy and efficiency and a better service!

However there is a down side.

Government funding for Local Government continues to be slashed and we face the prospect of saving over £170 million over the next 4 years. The need for these savings is none of our doing, but it does mean that local control – Cornish management of Cornish funding and new and inventive ideas particular to Cornwall – are all essential.

We must also point out to Government in the strongest of terms that there are enormous inequalities in public funding for Cornwall at the moment. I am told that Cornwall has 50% less per head of population to spend on Council services than the average urban council. Is that fair?

Per person, per year, Cornish people get £78 less grant funding, pay £73 more council tax and earn on average £6,300 less than city dwellers!

Officers at Lys Kernow estimate that closing the gap between rural and urban funding would provide Cornwall with an extra £16 million after 5 years.

I have to tell you that I believe that it is by further empowering Cornwall Council that Cornwall can take control of its own destiny. Cornwall Council is now the one representational body that Cornwall has and that's the way it should be. We do not need any further tiers of government and we must share our power and responsibility with the Towns and Parishes.

Finally, may I say that above all else my whole political career (and I believe my support from the electors of Hayle) has been based on service, trust and respect. Oh how I wish that at the end of my term of office, Cornwall Council is in a similar position; trusted because it delivers what it promises, reliable in the way it provides services to the people, dependable because it listens to the community and works with them for the improvement of all, and most importantly that everyone has the confidence that we always do our utmost to make Cornwall the best it can be.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Council, Assembly, Convention; the name does not matter, but the intent, the determination, the ambition should all be the same.