

CORNWALL: A NEW BEGINNING?

An essay by

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INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Three months from today we will discover if Cornwall has the ability to become stronger.
- 1.2 The seven councils which have run local government services for the last 35 years will become one. Originally there were two bids to create a Unitary- one from Cornwall County Council and another from 4 of the districts (including Penwith and Kerrier).
- 1.3 Whether we like it or not (and I voted against it) the Unitary will come into being in April and will then elect its 123 members on June 4th. This could either be an opportunity for Cornwall to come together to demonstrate its ambition and determination to be strategic and to create a better community and environment, or it could nosedive into narrowly focused recrimination, backward looking blame and petty point scoring. Judging by the balance of publicly reported comment, it appears more likely to be the latter than the former. But there's still time to turn things around.
- 1.4 Cornwall must be ambitious and proud. We are an outstanding region in the UK. So let's be outstanding in our political ambitions:
 - To be the green peninsula in the UK, to lead the way in sustainable policy, technology and the way we do our business;
 - To champion social justice and create the conditions for a more equal society;
 - To put our young people at the centre of our ambition; investing in training, research and technology;
 - To build a powerful brand image for Cornwall on which all sectors can market themselves;
 - To rediscover our distinctiveness and to use Cornwall's cultural and environmental strengths as building blocks for economic regeneration;
 - To be outward facing, not inward looking and to develop our communications and maritime industries and potential.
- 1.5 But local authorities have very little power to do anything other than to deliver Government policy.
- 1.6 The new Unitary Authority could choose to become an obedient agent of central Government, effectively micromanaged from the centre. Or it could demonstrate its united determination and ambition to draw down powers from Government and Government quangos and agencies.
- 1.7 After all, who should decide? Them or us? Who should decide how many homes are built in Cornwall: a Government quango or Cornwall? Who should decide if NHS monies are spent propping up private hospitals rather than investing in our local NHS? Them or us?

- 1.8 In the recent past, Cornwall's lack of actual decision making power has meant that the political discourse to become introverted. Cornish cultural, institutional and constitutional strengths and opportunities have either been ignored or belittled whilst ambition, strategy and vision have remained undeveloped.
- 1.9 Local authorities are rewarded if they prove themselves to be eager to please central Government, especially if they help to deliver Government policy and targets; leaving very little room to develop ambitions or future 'place shaping'.
- 1.10 This essay sets out a background to the current power base in local government and proposes a more ambitious plan for the future. A new structure of Government for Cornwall should be used as the first step on the road to creating a powerful directly elected Cornish Regional Assembly, able to shape the future of public services, environmental policy and economic regeneration. There is nothing wrong and everything right about seeking to create a powerful body able to negotiate directly with central Government, Europe and other public stakeholders to shape Cornwall's plans and ambitions.

Notes

- 1.11 Although I'm sure it can be shown that the proposals contained in this essay are influenced by my proud affiliation to a political party, the purpose of this document is to seek a cross party (and non-party) consensus. For Cornwall to succeed it is important for its political leaders to come together –across all parties – and agree on the big things; and, by doing so, re-emphasise the Cornish motto: “one and all – “onen hag oll”!
- 1.12 Throughout this document I have used the term “Assembly” to denote an authority which has all of the powers of the new unitary authority, but has either expressed firm aspirations for or has achieved the devolution of more powers either directly from Central Government or from its agencies, quangos or boards. It became clear when discussing this essay with others that some already have clear pre-conceptions about what an “Assembly” is and what it could do. This essay does highlight that the following areas of statutory power currently administered by Central Government or its agencies might be amongst those Cornwall should first look to have devolved to it: i) health, hospitals and social care; ii) strategic planning, economic and housing development; and iii) policing and public protection.
- 1.13 The term “assembly seemed the best available term to use to imply something of a higher status than existing local authorities and councils but less powerful than say the Scottish Parliament. For the avoidance of doubt, the implication is that this body, however referred to, would still be a directly elected representative assembly from the electoral wards which make up the body.

THE CREATION OF “AGENTS OF CENTRAL GOVERNMENT”

- 2.1 The term ‘Local Authority’ is a misnomer. The current system of local government is one in which Councils have become merely the local agents of Central Government, with precious little power of their own and hardly any latitude to decide anything for themselves, other than the site specific delivery of Government policies and targets.
- 2.2 Needless to say, Government Ministers vehemently deny this to be the case, but most independent observers and academics acknowledge it to be true¹. For example, in recent evidence to the Local Government Select Committee, Professor George Jones MBE (Emeritus Professor of Government at London School of Economics) and Professor John Stewart (Emeritus Prof of Local Government and Administration at the Institute of Local Government Studies, Birmingham University) indicated that Local Government is now dominated by a “command and control” diktat from Central Government, “whose effect has been to reduce local choice and therefore the scope for local initiative”².
- 2.3 They described the ways in which ‘command and control’ have been given expression in:
- ***The tendency to legislate as the first response without considering the impact on local choice and whether a statutory requirement is necessary. This attitude is illustrated by the government’s proposal to legislate on how petitions should be handled by local authorities without any detailed investigation of how local authorities handle petitions.***
 - ***The detailed prescription associated with legislation. This approach is illustrated through at least fifteen regulations, three directives and one hundred and fifty pages of guidance on political structures, constraining local choice and therefore innovation on the form taken by the executive models introduced under the Local Government Act, 2000.***
 - ***The proliferation of targets and performance measures. The number of targets has been recently cut back, but still retaining 35 national targets as well as at least sixteen statutory targets in education and early years. Apart from targets, local authorities have still to report performance on other activities. 1,200 plus such measures had to be reported to central Government by local authorities. An investigation for the Government concludes that 80% of the time spent by local authorities on performance reporting was upward to central Government rather than to their local electorate (DCLG, 2006).***

¹ See evidence submitted to the Communities and Local Government Select Committee’s Inquiry into the ‘Balance of Power between Central and Local Government’, 2008-09.

² Memorandum submitted to the Communities and Local Government Select Committee’s ‘Balance of Power’ Inquiry by Professor George Jones and Professor John Stewart, 8th December 2008, Paragraph 10

- ***The role of the inspectorates backed by the threat of intervention by central Government.*** There are dangers that the process of inspection limits local choice by making assumptions as to how local authorities should operate, criticising practices that are outside those assumptions and may be important innovations. There is an equal danger that the Government assumes too readily that the inspectors are correct in their judgments – the assumption of inspectoral infallibility. There is a further danger that inspections take up too much of the time and attention of senior managers and councillors that could be better devoted to their ongoing responsibilities and local concerns. The process of inspection can make it more important for authorities to satisfy the inspectors rather than their local electors; yet despite all these problems, there has been no detailed investigation of the impact of inspections on the working of local authorities.
- ***The centralised financial arrangements.*** The impact of capping, the undue dependence on government grant and the growth of specific grants all combine to limit local choice and weaken local accountability.
- ***The movement of functions away from local authorities to local appointed boards or quangos accountable to central Government.*** This shift has transformed the pattern of local governance, reducing the range of activities under local elected control, and limiting local choice and local accountability.
- ***The proliferation of requirements on local authorities to submit plans to central Government.*** Research by the Government established that 66 such plans had been imposed on authorities (DTLR, 2002), and even that was later found to have left out a number of plans.³

2.4 Also in a place like Cornwall this pattern has been further extended by the ongoing tendency requiring local communities, local ‘stakeholders’ and local authorities to compete for awards and funding to deliver what should be core public services. Such as early years support (e.g. Sure Start), Economic development (e.g. the Market and Coastal Town Initiative), community cohesion and development (e.g. Neighbourhoods for Change), countryside access (e.g. the Parish Paths Partnership), or play development (e.g. the Play Pathfinder Scheme) etc.

2.5 Wherever substantial economic development aid is available, just as it should be in the UK’s poorest region, Cornwall, it invariably has to be delivered by Central Government appointed Quango’s, like the Regional Development Agency. Or in the case of north Kerrier District, a specially created quango unaccountable to the community it is supposed to serve - the Camborne, Pool, Redruth Urban Regeneration Company.

³ Ibid. Para 11.

- 2.6 In fact, the only area of local government which could even remotely be described as one which gives locally elected representatives real power is land use planning. The most significant constraint on decision taking is the overbearing influence of centrally determined regulation and ‘guidance’ in the form of innocuous sounding planning policy supplements (PPS’s) which is backed up by the Government’s Planning Inspectorate to overrule planning committees when they dare to stop out of line. Most local authorities have become so used to their role as ‘local agents’ for the centre that they often fail to notice nor take advantage of the occasional variations in local policy making indicated by PPS notes.
- 2.7 However, more than compensating for these minor variances is the not so subtle method of successive Governments to drive its own development agenda upon local communities, whether they like it or not. This has been achieved most notably by the process of asking a collection of appointed and semi-selected representatives for the Government zone to come together to agree a Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) before the body itself, the Regional Assembly (sic), is abolished on the 1st April 2009.
- 2.8 This whole process has taken the best part of the last decade, in which the drafters have worked within the micro-managed strait jacket set for it by Central Government. The final document was, after consultation and a major Examination in Public, handed to the Secretary of State for any final modifications before it becomes the tablet of stone by which local authorities have to abide. However, the Secretary of State’s rewrite was an object lesson in the relationship between central and local government. It was published in July last year (just as Parliament rose for its summer recess) and invited responses a week or so after Parliament returned in October.
- 2.9 Those who were cynical that the RSS was no more than a top-down rather than “regionally” inspired process need only have thumbed their way through the Secretary of State’s rewrite to draw their own conclusions. Much of the Strategy itself had been prewritten by Central Government in any case through the various duties which had been conveyed to the Secretariat and the limited latitude permitted within the process itself to vary beyond the constraints which had already been laid out in previous guidance.
- 2.10 Nevertheless – and in spite of that constraint – the manner, extent and style of the rewrite represents a considerable snub to all of those who no doubt worked many hours in the preparation of the previous drafts of the RSS. Many of the changes were merely stylistic – i.e. altering “for example” to “such as” in paragraph 1.1.2, deleting “second to none” and replacing it with “highly valued” in paragraph 1.1.3.⁴ Some may wonder why they bothered at all. However, in spite of the almost pointlessness of the process itself over 35,000 organisations and individuals (including this MP) have sent submissions in response to the Secretary of State’s rewrite.

⁴ Secretary of State’s Proposed Changes to the Draft Regional Spatial Strategy for the South West

- 2.11 Even so, aside from the routine expressions of pious hope and laudable aims regarding the environment and climate change, etc, the most significant element which overshadowed everything else in the planning framework was that of housing numbers. Housing numbers drive the development process because, in normal circumstances, they give developers their quickest return. What is proposed for Cornwall is another 70,000 houses before 2026, i.e. on top of the approximately 220,000 which are here already. It's the equivalent of building another 7 Penances or 8 Truros.
- 2.12 The assumption underlying the housing policies of the RSS that high levels of development will help address the specific needs for affordable housing of local people is of course fundamentally flawed. Cornwall has experienced high levels of development in recent decades. Over the last 40 years its housing stock has more than doubled making it the 3rd fastest growing county in the UK (behind Buckinghamshire and Cambridgeshire). Such rapid growth has led to the three districts of Penwith, Restormel and Carrick now being the most densely populated of the rural⁵ districts in the South West whilst Kerrier⁶ is also similarly densely populated. But despite this rapid growth the problem of severe unmet local housing need has become much more severe.
- 2.13 The reliance of the RSS on household growth projections based on historical trends is likely to result in a repeat of the same failed growth-led housing policies which have already been tried in Cornwall for decades but which have failed to address the severe housing problems faced by the local population due to the unique nature of the County's housing market. It has also contributed to circumstances where West Cornwall has needed Government Neighbourhood Renewal funding to try to cope with the consequences of the pressure this has brought on many communities.
- 2.14 So on many planning issues, Cornwall has merely become a receptacle for central Government policy rather than a strong and strategic structure of Government able to shape its own future.
- 2.15 Faced with this reality, some local authorities have looked outside their own statutory process to see if they could influence any other areas of policy which have an impact on their local communities. Those Councils which have attempted to do this of course deserve commendation. Penwith for example, has placed a strong emphasis upon supporting local community campaigns to protect and promote local health services.
- 2.16 But even here the lack of local say in the delivery of services has been evident for all to see, as the various Central Government appointed authorities, Boards of Trusts which run Cornish health services are forced to deliver the latest Government initiative irrespective of local community wishes. Thus, the decision four years ago, to force Cornwall's Primary Care Trusts to divert 15% of funds intended for planned surgical procedures to a new private hospital in Bodmin to meet a Government target for the introduction of 'competition'. The local community and patients had no say in this.

⁵ i.e.: rural-80 according to DCLG's urban/rural classification scheme

⁶ which is classified as a rural-50 district

2.17 Similarly, decisions on the disbursement of taxpayers money to purchase NHS dentistry, or the recent centrally directed policy of creating one new super surgery to serve ‘hard to reach groups’, or the decision to remove certain specialist Cancer surgery from Cornwall. Despite creating an aura of ‘public consultation’ the decision is ultimately taken by appointed board representatives who are accountable to Government rather than our communities.

2.18 So we are and have been left with neutered and powerless communities and local authorities which are little more than agents of Central Government just like the appointed health boards in which we have no say. Indeed, a few years ago, having spotted this trend, I proudly, though perhaps (with hindsight) naively declared that one of our local authorities had been left by central Government as nothing more than a “souped-up Parish Council”.

2.19 Imagining that local councillors would admire the strength of this argument and get behind me as we collectively campaigned to take the fight to Government ministers as we collectively campaigned to restore powers to our local authorities, I was stunned to be hit by the whirlwind of criticism from councillors offended by the remark and who felt that I had seriously undermined the importance of the work they do!

2.20 Professor Vernon Bogdanor CBE, (Professor of Government, Oxford University) said that a, “centralised system institutionalises grumbling”⁷. And so it does. Those Councils who say they are doing well run the risk of having money taken away by Central Government Ministers:

*“Anyone in a centralised public service who trumpets success is letting the side down. The emphasis must always be, therefore, not on successes, but on deficiencies so that the government can be persuaded to provide more resources. This must have a demoralising effect on any organisation. An organisation which can never be seen to be successful, but must always be in the position of pointing out its deficiencies so that it be awarded extra funds, is not likely to stimulate that pride in performance which so often produces improvements in services”.*⁸

2.21 So the question remains, can we use the opportunity of this year’s changes to local Government structure in Cornwall to turn things around? Indeed, can we use it as a spring board for a new beginning? A Cornwall which can look forward with vision, imagination, pride and ambition; not to simply turn itself into a replica of everywhere else, but to celebrate our uniqueness, difference and special characteristics.

⁷ Memorandum submitted to the Communities and Local Government Select Committee by Professor Vernon Bogdanor, 8th December 2008, Paragraph 9.3.

⁸ Ibid.

“WE CAN DO IT!”

- 3.1 Ten years ago, Cornwall was awash with upbeat thinking. The recently won new European Objective 1 Regional Programme was about to kick in. Everyone agreed that Cornwall needed to adopt a “can do” attitude.
- 3.2 The programme itself had many successes, but across local Government as a whole (in Cornwall and outside) the “can do” mantra soon became a “can do as we’re told to do” culture, as policy, targets, audits, diktats, competitions, awards and initiatives cowed councils into adopting an obedient and pliant demeanour.
- 3.3 Frankly, almost any significant change in institutional structures in Cornwall must be used as an opportunity for a rethink and the stimulus to recreating a positive, ‘can do’ attitude with greater ambition and determination.
- 3.4 But why do I believe that this change should give Cornwall the great opportunity to employ the new Council as a route to developing a much more powerful Assembly?
- 3.5 It is not just because I have no tolerance for defeatism and the discourse of petty recrimination which has tended to dominate the public space. Nor is it because I am an eternal and irrepressible optimist who never accepts that the right thing to do cannot be done just because the latest of the revolving door of Government Ministers has not yet accepted my case.
- 3.6 No. It’s because, if we employ everything that we have in our favour, it more than outweighs the arguments against.
- 3.7 So, what can we bring together to build the case for a stronger tier of Government in Cornwall? Well, there is:
 - **One Strong Voice** - The new authority structure makes Cornwall one of the largest rural councils in the UK; representing more than half a million people and a very significant region of the country;
 - **Support from other “stakeholders”** - The private and voluntary sectors can be mobilised in support of a strong and more ambitious vision for Cornwall;
 - **Institutional Structures** - Although still weak, Cornwall has more coterminous institutional structures responsible for delivering public services than many other areas, from the Primary Care Trust to the Sea Fisheries Committee, etc.
 - **European Recognition** - Objective 1 and now Convergence Region, etc.
 - **Cultural Recognition** - Cornish language specified within the European Charter for Regional or Minority languages, etc, and Cornwall leading a proposal to the European Commission to develop the concept of “Regions of Culture”. The boost of Cornwall’s designation as a UNESCO World Heritage site is also significant here.
 - **Cultural bodies** - Cornwall is an acknowledged member of the pan-Celtic community with Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Brittany and the Isle of Mann. We also have a rich population of associated institutions such as the Cornish Gorsedd, etc.

- **Strong Cornish Identity/Brand** – Both culturally and commercially the Cornish brand is recognised, is strong and growing with increasing use and recognition of the St. Piran’s Flag and a strong and positive regional recognition of the place through its produce - pasties, cream, ice cream, etc.
- **Strong environmental sector** – Cornwall has an abundance of successful and renowned environmental management and technological organisations and businesses including the recently established Environment and Sustainability Institute at the Combined Universities in Cornwall which is now one of the top climate change research centres in the world.
- **Strong modern image** – For young people as the “happening” surf capital of the UK and as the home for go-ahead enterprises, through such successful initiatives as the Eden Project.
- **Creative/Dynamic** – Increasingly recognised as having a strong and successful creative industries and a place receptive to genuine vision and dynamism, particularly in the private and voluntary sectors.
- **Resilient traditional industries** – In spite of the problems faced by the fishing industry Newlyn is still the most important fishing port south of the Scottish border and Cornwall has the second largest pasture land in the country.
- **Unique Constitutional Position** - The Duchy of Cornwall is the only place in the country where the soil is owned by someone other than the Crown. The intestacy and foreshore laws are different and the basis of the Stannaries has never been abolished. The potency of this has never yet been explored in the context of mainstream public service and democratically accountable institutions.
- **High Sheriff of Cornwall** – Cornwall is the only place in the UK where the Sheriff is appointed by someone other than the Monarch and who swears allegiance to both the Monarch and the Duke of Cornwall.
- **Pre prepared case** – Cornwall has its own well established “Constitutional Convention” with a pedigree of well considered and presented case papers.
- **Sub National Review** – Treasury recognises that Cornwall is a unit of economic integrity.
- **Multi Area Agreements** – The Government is now developing an agenda which allows places like Cornwall to build a case for the negotiation of devolved powers.

3.8 It is worth developing the latter of these points. The Government has at least started to use the language of devolution. Even though it successfully devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and London it appears to have lost its way. In a recent recorded evidence session in Committee in the House of Commons the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the Rt. Hon. Hazel Blears MP had the following exchange:

Q637 Andrew George: You said, I think in November, that the Government wants to place those[city regions] on a statutory footing. I just wondered how you see the roadmap to delivering city regions generally.

Hazel Blears: *It started as very much a voluntary process, 'If you want to do this and you want to get these powers, band together, come forward with an application. We will see if it does deliver and then we will sign your agreement'. In the Bill now we have the possibility of having a statutory basis, so you can become an economic prosperity board – not another level of government, not a bureaucracy but simply a more effective unit of organisation. If you have a statutory basis then you are a legal personality, so clearly the prospects of more devolution are more secure because if you do not have a legal basis then the governance agreement that you have reached could be quite fragile. One partner could walk away and if that happened you would not any longer have the system to deliver it. That is the next stage, if you want to be an economic prosperity board, and again it is voluntary, if that is what you want to do, and then the announcement at the PBR that we would be looking for at least two areas which want to go even further on this agenda.*

Q638 Andrew George: *Just to finish off this point, on the issue of the city regions in the Local Government White Paper about three years ago there was a recognition that there would be a rural equivalent to city regions where it did not fall within the hinterland of the city region. Is that something within the Government's thinking at the moment, that a rural equivalent to city regions might be brought forward?*

Hazel Blears: *I am just thinking about Cornwall at the moment. It is going to be a big unitary authority.*

Q639 Andrew George: *What a very good thought.*

Hazel Blears: *I do not know why I think about Cornwall when I see you. Obviously, that is a unitary and a very big unitary, and therefore will have a lot of clout and ability to make a difference. If I think about one of the agreements I have just signed this afternoon, that is Pennine Lancashire, not something people would normally associate with a city environment, but they have got a lot of relatively small towns which could be quite isolated up in Pendle and Accrington, and what they have decided is that transport is their big issue: how do they get better transport links so that they can access more economic drivers? They want to come together on that. We are not hidebound in one model. It is really, as I started with in this evidence, what makes a difference for the people out there in terms of their economy.⁹*

3.9 So the ball is in our court. Only we can get things moving.

3.10 However, on the other hand there are other factors to be taken into account and which may need to be overcome. Such as:

- **Limited ambition** – at least so far. Neither of the two bids for Unitary Local Government in Cornwall developed the concept of devolution.

⁹ Minutes of Evidence taken before the Communities and Local Government Select Committee; The Balance of Power between Central and Local Government, Monday 12th January 2009, Rt. Hon. Hazel Blears MP, HC 33-iii - Q637-639

- **Failure to build** – generally, institutional control has been lost rather than gained whether through the Careers Service, the Court Services, etc, and the available building blocks for institutional development and strengthening have not been used.
- **Marginalised culture** – until the Cornish language received official recognition in 2003, Cornish culture was generally sniffed at or belittled rather than recognised as part of our unique selling point.
- **Introverted debate** – in the absence of any meaningful decisions to take, a lot of public debate has resorted to concentrate more upon such things as the cost of water fountains at County Hall, political point scoring and personal attacks than what is actually happening to Cornwall and its public services.
- **Dominance of Government agencies** – in key areas of public policy in Cornwall, decisions are not taken by local people but by Government appointed quangos, e.g.: European funding – South West Regional Development Agency; health – Primary Care Trust; public protection – Devon & Cornwall Constabulary, etc.
- **The search for a vision** – unused to addressing the larger strategic questions there are generally few who could answer the question “and what do you want power for?”, other than in the most negative terms – i.e. “to stop the others getting it”!
- **Untapped and untried** – there has been a failure to even attempt to tap the constitutional strengths or unique opportunities offered by Cornwall’s historic settlement, nor plans to explore the potential extent of devolution; even within the limited terms of the Government’s current offer through Multi Area Agreements and the development of the City Regions’ agenda.

3.11 The primary conclusions from all of this is that the delivery of a more ambitious agenda which allows the primary democratically elected body for Cornwall to drive that ambition is an attitude of mind. In any organisation which performs as an agent of central Government the big questions will be ignored as debate concentrates upon such things as the apparent cost of water fountains at County Hall and the design of logos. The Government plan to allow Cornwall to continue being a developers’ paradise and to have 70,000 new homes in the new plan pass with almost no comment.

3.12 Nothing is straightforward. The challenges are great. However, a new authority which concentrates on the big questions, unites around a bold and ambitious agenda and is determined to succeed is capable of achieving a great deal more than one which is divided, uncertain, lacking in confidence and retreating into the kind of recriminatory public policy debate we have experienced in the recent past.

WHO DECIDES: THEM OR US?

- 4.1 Devolution is a process rather than a single event. Most recognise this to be true and it is certainly proving to be the case in those institutions which have succeeded in establishing devolved structures; e.g. the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly.
- 4.2 Although the debate in Cornwall has matured in the last 20 years, there is still a lot of misunderstanding and misrepresentation of what it would be appropriate for Cornwall to try to achieve through a devolved regional assembly, which is what this paper is arguing we should be moving towards. In many ways the answer to the question about what should and should not be decided in Cornwall rather than outside it can be answered through the “them or us” test.
- 4.3 For example, if we take some of the many issues which affect people in Cornwall, the following questions could be constructed to identify which areas of public policy decision making Cornwall might reasonably seek to negotiate/draw to itself:
- Who primarily should decide how many houses are built in Cornwall over a 20 year planning period?
 - (i) a Cornish authority with directly elected representatives; or
 - (ii) a Government appointed quango covering the Government zone of the South West?
 - Who is best placed to decide how Cornwall’s European Regional Development aid should be apportioned?
 - (i) a Cornish Development Agency answerable to us; or
 - (ii) a South West Regional Development Agency answerable to the Government?
 - Who should decide if NHS monies should be diverted to private hospitals?
 - (i) elected representatives answerable to us; or
 - (ii) a Board appointed by Government?
 - Who should decide how much of our housing should be holiday homes, market housing or homes for locals?
 - (i) locally elected representatives accountable to us; or
 - (ii) agencies and boards accountable to central Government?
- 4.4 In surveys I have undertaken with local residents and parish and town councils in recent years the pattern of answers clearly shows support for Cornish based decision making. In other research it is clear that whilst this could and should extend to the policy areas of health, hospitals and social care, policing and public protection and planning, economic and social development there is little to suggest that devolution should go further in the first stages.

A VISION FOR A NEW CORNWALL

- 5.1 So what would an ambitious plan for a new Cornish tier of government look like? Set out below is merely an indicative example of one option and not a blueprint which I would die in a ditch seeking to defend!

‘CORNWALL: A NEW BEGINNING

Introduction

This Assembly is the one and only directly elected democratic voice for Cornwall. This plan sets out how we intend to make our voice heard for the good of Cornwall, its people, its economy and its environment.

The plan sets out the political ambitions of the new Assembly and the principles which will guide the way in which we will argue for Cornwall’s best interests, negotiate the best outcome with Government, its agencies and quangos and also with Europe and with our neighbouring and other authorities.

1. Cornwall – The Green Peninsula

We are determined that Cornwall should be at the cutting edge of environmental policy. We will prepare a plan to put the environment at the centre of everything we do. Cornwall will be at the cutting edge of renewable technologies, will seek to become self-sufficient in energy generation and transmission, and will set the highest standards in transport and waste management.

We want to give our farmers and growers a marketing advantage. Cornwall should be GM free, promote organic systems and will seek to be renowned as a place where farm produce is reliably unadulterated, healthy, and wholesome and meets the highest animal welfare standards.

Our fishing industry will have a market advantage through its sustainability, the engagement of fisherman and scientists working together in the management of the seas around our shores.

We will require all public authorities and departments in Cornwall to produce an annual plan setting out its environmental objectives and to report annually to the Assembly.

We will ensure that Cornwall becomes a place renowned throughout the UK and beyond as an exemplar for the best environmental practice, not only within the Assembly's own departments, but beyond.

2. Championing Social Justice

We seek to share wealth and eliminate poverty. Housing and planning priorities will concentrate on delivering accommodation which local people on local wages will find genuinely affordable. Transport policy will prioritise accessible, comfortable and safe public transport. We will improve the opportunities for our young people; to enable them to fulfil their potential and to support families with young children.

Our social priorities will mean that affordable housing comes before holiday homes or executive housing; local schooling comes before choice of schooling; public transport comes before the private car; pedestrian safety is more important than speed.

3. Cornwall – richer for our diversity

Cornwall will stand proud and will be renowned as a welcoming community where people of different cultures, religions and lifestyles can live in harmony. Cornwall will play an outstanding and significant role in the celebration of diversity both at home but also throughout the United Kingdom and beyond. All communities – including, of course, the Cornish themselves - will have the opportunity for their voice to be heard, their story to be told and to celebrate with the rest of our community, the contribution they can make.

4. Cornwall – deciding for ourselves

The Assembly will set out the powers it seeks to negotiate and draw down from Government, Government agencies and quangos. Cornwall is better served when decisions which affect Cornwall are made by locally elected representatives. This should extend to housing and planning policy, health and social care, policing and economic development.

We will seek to use every lever available to Cornwall, including our unique constitutional heritage, to negotiate a reasonable settlement with the Government.

Cornwall will create its own Economic Development Agency which will – over time – take on the responsibilities of the South West Regional Development Agency in Cornwall whilst working with that body on wider economic development issues.

5. Closer to the people

Decisions which affect one community and no other should be taken in that community and not outside it. This principle will apply to the manner in which the Assembly discharges its duties and provides services throughout Cornwall. Each local community – represented by its parish and/or town councillor or clusters of parish and town councils – will be given the opportunity to negotiate from a menu of powers those functions and services they may wish to take on on behalf of their local community.

We already recognise that, on our doorstep, the Council of the Isles of Scilly (with a population of little more than 2,000 people) has more powers than does Cornwall. We will work with local communities to help them find solutions to the problems they identify, rather than seeking to impose answers upon them.

6. Fair deal for Cornwall

Cornish school children receive less funding than the average for England. We are still near the bottom of the health funding league table. We have very high housing and transport costs and the highest water bills in the country.

The Assembly will campaign; working with Members of Parliament and others to make the case for a fair deal and fair treatment for residents.

7. Standing up for Cornwall

Cornwall is better served when it talks directly to Government Ministers and to Europe. This does not mean that Cornwall will not co-operate with neighbouring councils and other authorities as and when there is good reason to do so, but the final decision about when we need to talk directly to a Government department or European Commission will be within the gift of the democratically elected authority for Cornwall.

8. Rediscovering our distinctiveness in Cornwall

Cornwall is outstanding in the UK and the wider world, not just because of our outstanding environment. Cornwall has a unique culture, heritage and language which set it apart and, in a world which is becoming increasingly uniform, Cornwall's character and culture will provide a beacon of distinctiveness which will help us to stand out and to show that we can play our part in the celebration of diversity.

This is not an excuse for Cornwall to cut itself off. Quite the opposite. We want to cut ourselves into the celebration of diversity. Our distinctiveness has a role to play not only in our diverse communities but in the wider world.

As well as Cornwall's cultural links with Scotland, Wales, Ireland, etc, the Assembly will seek to be represented at the British-Irish Council and to develop not just cultural but also cordial political links with our longstanding and fellow Celtic nations.

9. Cornwall – proud and responsible

Cornwall proudly accepts that, on top of the challenges of meeting the needs of people and communities which are amongst the poorest in the UK, we also have responsibility to others. Charity begins at home – but it doesn't end there. Cornwall is already the international base for one of the most effective disaster relief shelter aid agencies – Shelterbox. Cornwall has a big heart to build upon.

Cornwall's policy of fair trade for its primary food and other producers will be extended to the support of "fair trade" initiatives in support of those people and environments in the least developed countries and communities in other parts of the globe.

10. What's in a name?

Cornwall's ambition and distinctiveness will be reflected in the manner the new Authority presents itself. The new Authority will take on a new name to reflect both our ambition to draw power from Government and the distinctiveness of Cornwall itself. There is nothing in legislation to stooop us doing this; only our natural caution. We will consult the whole community and invite proposals before we adopt a new name and brand image.

- 5.2 An important dimension of the new role of the new Cornwall Authority will be developing its relationships with its neighbours – especially that of the Isles of Scilly. This will be particularly important in terms of developing the outcome of the Treasury’s sub-national review and to explore the establishment of Multi Area Agreements. Although the Isles of Scilly has only a population less than 0.5% of that of Cornwall, it is already a far more powerful region in its own right – it has to be specifically included in primary legislation, something which doesn’t apply to Cornwall. The Council of the Isles of Scilly has been a Unitary Authority since before Unitary Authorities were created and has not only the powers of district and county councils, but is also its own water authority, airport authority, has many other powers, including running its own Sea Fisheries Committee and has its own direct relationship with the Duchy of Cornwall.
- 5.3 Clearly, the illustrative example set out above does not and cannot cover all aspects of policy nor all opportunities which would become available to the new Authority. There will be opportunities and a role for the new Authority in working with and indeed taking on functions from the Environment Agency, developing tourism, developing and promoting maritime industries, creative industries, etc. However, the illustration is intended to set out a reasonable indication of the kind of material which it would be perfectly reasonable for a new Authority to incorporate within its programme if it genuinely intended to be ambitious and to set out an aspirational and challenging strategy for the future of Cornwall.

CONCLUSION

- 6.1 Whether we like it or not, the seven councils created through local government re-organisation 35 years ago, will become one in April 2009.
- 6.2 Whilst the important mechanics of enabling this to happen must be completed, there remains a vacuum in the box marked “vision”.
- 6.3 Change is about to happen. Now is the time to show that Cornwall can be ambitious and proud. Now is the time to prove that Cornwall is an outstanding region within the UK.
- 6.4 Local authorities have become agents of central Government. We should be determined that the new tier of Government in Cornwall becomes the agent of change, the agent of ambition, the agent which shapes the future of Cornwall and the agent for success.

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