

Cornish  
Constitutional  
Convention

# Southern Discomfort

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## 1. Brewing

When Daphne du Maurier was writing she lived a very complex and intense imaginative life – outwardly she appeared to be walking the dog but inside she was planning the invasion of Fowey by a Breton pirate cutter with the intent of humiliating a Rashleigh or two! She called this process ‘brewing’ – a most apt description of the creative processes. Working out what to do, where to go, how to get there for Cornwall and the south west as the Government’s regionalisation looms has a strong element of ‘brewing’ to it!

In the unfolding debate about regionalisation, how is Cornwall is presently fomenting?

## Inner Peace

One morning the voice of ‘Thought for the day’ referred to our “yearning for inner peace and harmony”. I thought of Cornwall and of our neighbours to the north, and of how, throughout my life, there has been a nagging voice calling me to find that place within myself which echoes and reflects the strange peace which you can feel in the middle of a force 8, standing above the dark rocks of the Strangles staring into the gnashing jaws of an angrily voracious Atlantic (*well, that’s what does it for me!*).

At the heart of democracy must lie a collective inner peace. It is what enables us to participate in a process which is likely to leave us losing more than we win – we subjugate our individual desires to the common good; we work for the greatest happiness of the greatest number; and we get, in return, freedom of speech and the freedom to vote. You can have all the rules and laws in the world, but if you ain’t got that ‘*inner peace*’ then you ain’t got democracy!

## Geo-Political Harmony

From a geographical viewpoint, it is important that individuals and communities feel that the area they inhabit, and the environment which shapes their economy, their culture and their social interaction, is coherent and supports them adequately. An exercise, carried out by the SW RDA in the late 1990s to try to identify sub-regional economic zones, took a range of indicators of economic performance (type of activity, profiling data and so on) and attempted to connect areas of ‘likeness’ or, to use their slightly mystical term, ‘coherence’!

Lo and behold! Despite efforts to persuade us that this exercise had nothing to do with administrative, constitutional or cultural boundaries, there was a clear red line running right down the River Tamar and, interestingly, south of Plymouth! A central block roughly comprising Devon, Somerset, Wiltshire and parts of Dorset also showed up, whilst there appeared to be some fragmentation at the Northern edge of the south-west ‘region’ as socio-economic influence became affected to a greater or lesser extent by other regional drivers. What the picture showed was that the South West does not have a coherent economic identity – it is, as the short-lived, unlamented SW Cultural Consortium famously concluded in its expensive and rambling study of the culture of the SW – ‘**a region of regions!**’

## Geo-Psychology

Any individual is going to comprise a number of facets of personality, skills, character, appearance and aspiration. It is true, in a sense, that people change as they grow. Growing older, we find it to be an accumulative rather than a discarding process – whilst fifty we are also twelve, and twenty and forty!

There is a danger that if an individual embraces too great a range of diverse factors in their make-up then they will become dysfunctional, unhappy, and unachieving as they attempt to reconcile conflicting drivers and emotions. This can, sometimes, lead to stress, breakdown and even illness.

We should always be careful, in my view, to relate the collective human body to that of the individual, for each is, ultimately, an expression of the other. We should expect regions to behave like people, because regions are collections of people, and the character and nature of regions is forged by the communities which comprise them, just as those communities reflect the families and individuals which live within them.

They, in turn, are shaped to a great extent by their interaction with the physical environment, as well as by whomsoever they meet from elsewhere. If they do not allow open, active expression within them, and if they do not express something territorial and cultural, as well as economic and administrative, on behalf of the people within them, then regions are not real, and will be most unlikely to prosper, and, most importantly, they will be very unlikely to sustain democracy.

## Happiness & Comfort

In this analysis I come back, time and again, to the simply complex yet complexly simple notion of 'happiness'.

Sometimes I veer towards a parallel concept – *comfort* – and when I look at the south west, and farther afield to Hampshire (or the 'Central South, or 'Wessex') or to the disjointed South East, I feel that I am viewing a regional landscape which, in geo-political terms, might be described as the '*Great Southern Discomfort!*'

The South West is not a happy region. It is a region enforced by the will of a central authority; it is not the organic or even the rational expression of a trading, cultural, legislative or self-motivating community, or even a community of communities.

It is a region which is defeated by its size; by the sheer range of diversity within it. What can Bristol possibly have in common with St Teath?

It is a region which cannot adequately manage itself and there is a growing body of evidence for this:

- Fire Chiefs have told the Government they cannot guarantee a minimum standard of service with a central control room. Despite this, the ODPM is ploughing ahead, and at a pace!
- MAFF vets in charge of Foot & Mouth have said that, with the benefit of hindsight, what hindered them most in keeping up with and overtaking the infection was the size and diversity of the area they were trying to control and manage. The South West was unmanageable, in logistical or technological terms. Operationally, the geographical complexity of an area which stretches from Swindon to the Isles of Scilly seriously hampered progress. Government Office was in the wrong place; communication was impossible; effectiveness difficult to measure because impacts

were diverse. This is not a sound basis for adequately managing an emergency and yet it is one of the key reasons for regionalisation.

- Emergency services and senior, experienced professionals, telling us that the South West is not a happy region. One of the key drivers behind the regionalisation project is to establish robust systems for governing different areas if an emergency causes a breakdown of normal, central systems. If you can't manage the South West effectively when cows have got flu, what chance will you have if some terrorist unleashes a bout of anthrax?

## **2. Is the South West 'happy'?**

The best evidence of the unhappiness of the SW lies in the now rapidly emerging failure of institutions like the Regional Development Agency and the Regional Chamber.

The RDA is a large, corporately-dysfunctional organisation which provides inconsistent policy and activity in different parts of its 'region'. Even in Cornwall, the Objective 1 region where, via the Government's contractual commitment, it is bound to be responsive and flexible, the hidebound systems, endless bureaucracy, obfuscation and unwillingness to delegate anything means that the RDA is becoming the biggest single retardant to progress in regeneration – rather than the spur it is supposed to be.

But we should not be too harsh on the RDA – it's not their fault. It is the fault of the 'region' in which they are asked to deliver. It is an essential part of the culture of such organisations that they need to assume that the territory in which they operate has a homogeneity, a coherence – that it 'hangs together', bonded by common strands of interest and expression. Other RDAs, in other more settled regions, are succeeding well.

The SWRDA is the poorest performing RDA. Why? Because the region is a 'region of regions'; it is too big; unmanageable; beyond comprehension; unmeasurable as a unit. You cannot make regions by simply drawing lines on maps – you can establish areas for administrative purposes in wartime, as the Cornishman, Sir Nicholas Roseveare did in the early 1940s when he was planning the distribution of rationed food, but you cannot manufacture regions for democratic purposes which will prosper in a market place of regions within large, market-making structures like the EU – you will simply not be able to compete, or to make the decisions necessary to compete.

As the marketing community always say – to succeed a product must be genuine. The south west is simply not genuine – it is a construct, a conglomerate bonded by expediency and required to gloss over dysfunction and unhappiness. It is so abnormal that Cornwall has simply suffered from it for too long – our economy, our identity, our marketing, our resources, our influence, our relationships, our outlook – all have become distorted and counter-productive. The contrast with how things are developing with Objective 1 – with Cornwall as the focus, as her own region – is startling. We are delivering; we are creating; we are exciting; we are rubbing our hands together with glee at the thought of tackling the energy challenge over the next generation – the breakdown is behind us – we're back at work, looking for new things to do, new pots to stir, new friends to make!

Now, let me turn to the dreadful Regional Chamber.

If there is one good reason for finding a geo-political settlement for the south west which inspires and drives a move towards democratic regional government then it must be the unsafe, uninventive and unrepresentative Regional Chamber – which, just to compound its errors, has taken unto itself the title 'Assembly'!

We must be honest with ourselves – regional government is coming, in one form or another. It is not a project demanded by the EU, just as the regions which we decide to make are regions of *our* choosing with which the EU will work. The EU will accept a region of Cornwall, and it will work for and with Cornwall. There is no plot, no subterfuge, no masterplan for domination – how could there be – regions should and will enhance self-expression – that is the nature of the beast!

So, if it is coming, what will it look like? The government has encouraged the formation of Regional Chambers. The SW Chamber is not created by statute (unlike the RDA). In constitutional terms it is a *'club by association'*, of which the subscribing members are 50 or so local authorities. The 'assembly' comprises a large number of appointed delegates, mainly from local authorities, but with a selection of social and economic partners to add a bit of cred! The SEPs can vote, but do not subscribe! The local authorities all pay for the privilege of belonging – Cornwall County Council pays a subscription of £40,000 a year. The 6 districts also pay, as does the Isles of Scilly.

The delegates do not sit as delegations from their local authority areas, but in political groupings. Officers of authorities are banished to the public gallery. The 'assembly' operates a 'top-up' list to ensure that it is made up according to the proportionality equation which applies for the whole south west. In essence, without any electoral mandate, they play at regional governance, but with the mindset of a glorified local council – a kind of co-opted, regional parish meeting.

Although having no legal standing other than that of a 'club by association' the government has vested some regional planning powers in the Chamber. To administer these the Chamber has engaged copious numbers of staff to add to the complement paid for by the local authority subscriptions. What do they do?

Well, mostly, they ask local authorities to send staff to participate in forums, meetings, exercises and so on which waste much time and much money and produce documents which are both bland and self-evident – duplication of effort and thought is not a concept which it is cool to mention in Taunton!

Peter Stethridge, Chief Executive of CCC, has found himself locked in a battle with the Chamber over 'zoning' arrangements for regional planning. He has been defeated and there is a cosmetic exercise going on to try and disguise the defeat by calling a 'city region' a 'principal urban area'.

He quite rightly perceived that the zoning template constructed for regional planning will, inevitably, provide the template for any other regional exercises, and that, in his words: *"This is the ground on which we must stand and fight!"* The outcome is a semantic, bureaucratic stitch-up which leaves Cornwall no longer able to function as a unit, forced to go along a path which many perceive has been determined more by innate hostility towards Cornwall than by reason or good planning.

That is a serious charge. Can it be sustained? Yes!

The recent Structure Plan inquiries (Devon, Plymouth and Cornwall) were the first serious effort to analyse whether there is spatial synergy between the three areas which needs to tangibly shape future land-use and transport planning. The outcome was startling and instructive. Professor Stephen Crowe, one of Europe's leading planning analysts, concluded that there was no case for continuing to promote Broadmoor Farm as a major strategic site to feed Plymouth's economy, and that the housing allocations initially made to meet supposed demand in the Plymouth travel-to-work area should be significantly reduced and dispersed to as far afield as Newquay and Callington.

In other words, the concept of Greater Plymouth – Tamarside – embracing large tracts of Cornwall does not stand up to scrutiny. The Plymouth sub-region has been stuffed by dint of as rigorous inquiry by a leading planner.

Two factors play on this outcome. Firstly, the serious degree of hidden deprivation which exists in South East Cornwall but which is obscured by inclusion in statistics aggregated with Plymouth. Despite all the benchmarking associated with Objective 1, which includes all of Cornwall, right up to the East Bank of the Tamar, and the stalwart work undertaken by the Citizens Advice Bureau to highlight and record this deprivation, the unsubstantiated obsession with what we might term Plym-centricity has done for Caradon what Devon did for Cornwall before NUTS2 and Objective 1. It has completely obscured and distorted the data profile about social and economic conditions in South East Cornwall.

The second factor is that, if you study the responses to the Structure Plan consultations, and peruse local papers, you will find a public outcry; anguish; outrage; shock; despair; abandonment; rejection – all these words occur time and again as the people and communities of South East Cornwall assert that they are, forever, part of Cornwall. Plymouth is a town which they visit, work in and go to hospital for, but it is not theirs, and they are not Greater Plymothians.

Nevertheless, the Regional Chamber has ploughed on. In doing so probably the biggest victim of such desk-bound, youthful myopia is Plymouth – a massively misunderstood, poor and failing City, a major seaport having its head twisted off its tired neck by bureaucrats and politicians forcing it to look inland for prosperity and friendship!

*Meanwhile*, in efforts to try and create a series of assurances and assertions which might quell the incisive and cheerfully persistent campaign by Cornwall to be established as a region with its own regional institutions, the Government has spoken of 'sub-regional arrangements' and having Cornwall in mind when setting up such mechanisms.

The Regional Chamber regularly takes as its text the White Paper, *Your Region, Your Choice*. In a recent document consulting on something called the Integrated Regional Strategy, the Chamber actually asserted that it is the intent of the Government, as set out in the White Paper, to have assemblies formulate such strategies. Well, apart from the fact that this is a White Paper and not legislation, the document actually states that it would expect '*elected* regional assemblies' to do such things. The Regional Chamber is not elected – it is appointed; and it is assuming a great deal about what it can and cannot do; from whom it derives authority; and it is not too sure of its assumptions about liability!

Who will pick up the bill for costs if a staff member wins an employment tribunal; who will pick up costs if a planning decision goes awry? Not the chamber, because it is simply a 'club by association'. It has no mandate, no authority, no grounding in statute. The liability will be borne by the subscribing members – *your* local authorities out of *your* council tax – and yet, *you* have not elected anybody to it; your council's delegates to it sit in political groups which do not reflect the proportionality equation of the electoral area in which you live.

The subscribing members were not asked to approve actions taken to consult upon or formulate an Integrated Regional Strategy. Nobody asked Cornwall County Council if it approved the notion that its subscription should be used to pay for such an exercise. If this was a parish council or a local charity or a micro-business all manner of lead weights would have fallen upon it by now – to whom is this aberration accountable? Why is the government vesting statutory powers in a voluntary body? What are the risks of doing so? Who will pick up the tab when things go wrong?

These are serious questions about liability and risk. Councils are being required to develop substantial strategies and mechanisms to weigh up and manage risk. PFI is all about removing as much risk as possible from the public domain. And yet, the Government is quite happy to have regions overborne by Chambers which are, in themselves, substantial risks.

Let me share a small anecdote. In the late 1990s much was made of setting up the Camborne Redruth Education Action Zone. It has been very successful. Now we want to call it an 'Excellence Cluster'! If and when central government funding runs out the people who work for the EAZ will either be shifted on to the payroll of the Council to continue their work, or will be made redundant....at the expense of the Local Authority. The Government will achieve this by issuing an Order to that effect!

Apply the same risk-aversion strategy to regional chambers and you can see who will pick up the cost. You can almost hear the audit Commission saying: "Well! You should have thought about the constitution and liability when you went into it, shouldn't you?!"

The SW Regional Chamber is the best reason I can find for motivating us to find a way towards a settlement of the regional map so that we can be rid of it, and can get a democratically grounded set of institutions.

Mr Raynsford has attempted to stroke our Cornish neck by uttering the mantra of 'sub-regional arrangements' – but he is not aware of (or is simply ignoring) the evidence which is growing in volume and seriousness day by day. As Peter Stethridge said: "Zoning for regional planning will create the future geo-regional template". That zoning is contrary to the findings of the Structure Plan Inquiry, is contrary to the will of the people whom it affects, threatens the future of Cornwall as an entity. The principle of 'constructive engagement', as pursued by Peter Stethridge, has produced total failure. The Body which is asserting itself in this way is unaccountable and unelected. Why should our taxes be used to support it and to allow it to extend its assumption of power?

If there is a single reason why Cornwall and the South West need to get together to work out how we can develop a map of regions which provides foundations for prosperity, democracy, geographical and administrative coherence, then that reason is the SW Regional Chamber (or assembly, as it calls itself).

The conglomerate 'region' of the south west is uncomfortable with itself, is unmanageable, dysfunctional and is defeating institutions set up to lead and develop it.

If there is one successful referendum in the North then the government will proceed at speed to implement its regionalisation project. At the heart of this project lies the creation of democratic, directly-elected assemblies founded in law. We must prepare, and we must get on with it. Cornwall has developed an excellent case with the strongest backing from the electorate of any region in the Country.

It is pursuing establishment as a region because it is the best way to capture and sustain the progress emerging from the Objective 1 programme; it is the intelligent way to manage the periphery in the interests of producing economic and social equality and in terms of ensuring that Cornwall is able to play a fruitful and creative role in the life of the Country as a whole. Communication technology alone says that Cornwall is no longer the 'wild land' so feared by Jane Austen.

We face immense challenges and have significant opportunities. We have assets, not least our young people. The drive for Cornwall the region is not a separatist plot – that is just a distraction floated by detractors who are afraid that their self-interest may be undermined if Cornwall is prosperous and confident - I shall never forget the words of a

Cornish MP who told me that I should always be conscious that it suits some powerful people to keep Cornwall poor. It does not suit the people of Cornwall.

The young want Cornwall to succeed; they want it to be different and to be celebrated; they want to be part of it – we owe them the right to choose and we can achieve Cornwall's ambition.

I welcome the County Council's resolution, passed last month, to actively press the Government to include a measure to enable the establishment of new regions in its forthcoming Bill. We all need to get behind the Council; and we need to lead the development of a new regional map – so, I want to ask the chairman of the SW Constitutional Convention, in public, whether he will sit down with us and work out a joint approach to finding a comfortable, positive and successful new map of regions for the south west? He knows that we are ready to do so. We must both wake up every morning to be confronted with a failing RDA and an aberrant Regional chamber. How much longer can we sit back and watch the nightmare unfold before we do something?

A smaller, happier, more coherent south west, with a confident, driving, outward-looking, innovative region of Cornwall to the south, and possibly a new central south region to the east, will undoubtedly alter the landscape and prospects for us all.

Otherwise, life is going to be one long tussle, interspersed with increasingly annoying, disengaged consultations on strategies seeking to negotiate exit routes from their own failures. Can you bear this? I can't!