

## **Localism – a ‘new regionalism’ or the tactical device of a closet centralist?**

In Robert Bolt's 'Man for all Seasons', Thomas More is portrayed as a man who remains true to himself and his beliefs under all circumstances and at all times. And, superficially, it appears that the mantle of More is nowhere more evident in the coalition government than in the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (CLG) – Eric Pickles.

Pickles announced his priorities on entering government as "Localism, localism and localism....But we may not deliver our priorities in that order " [CfC blog](#). His first acts included the abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies; and the announcement of a Decentralisation and Localism Bill to replace RDAs with Local Enterprise Partnerships. More recently, the intention to terminate Government Offices in the Regions has been signalled, together with the abolition of the Audit Commission – both justified as liberating localities from a centralist command and control bureaucracy.

The 56 outline proposals for Local Enterprise Partnerships have been submitted to BIS and CLG have been broadly welcomed by Pickles – “The secret to the success of local enterprise partnerships will be working on the basis of (real) local economic geography - gone are the artificial political regions of RDAs - this will better serve the needs of local business” [CLG newsroom](#).

He will no doubt have particularly welcomed the proposal for a Kent and Greater Essex LEP. He is widely reported as having actively intervened throughout the proposal preparation period to push Kent, Essex and neighbouring councils together to form this ‘super LEP’ [LGC plus briefing](#).

The Kent and Greater Essex ‘local economic geography’ is striking. With a population of 3.4 million, 115000 businesses, and the support of 20 local authorities (although apparently not eight Kent district councils and unitary Medway), this ‘local’ partnership couples Tendring’s deprivation with Tunbridge Wells’ affluence (almost 100 miles to the south); it links the Minister’s own constituency in the London commuter belt of Brentwood, with the challenges of seaside decline in Broadstairs.

The Kent and Greater Essex proposal to collaborate on strategic economic leadership for this large area runs the risk of creating new barriers to coherent local economies. Whilst this LEP manages to straddle the Thames, it fails to cross the rather more modest Stour – thus separating Harwich port from its owners anchored at (the much larger) Felixstowe port a couple of miles away; and Colchester from its work with Ipswich in the Haven Gateway economy. Similarly, affluent West Kent looks East to its less successful neighbours, rather than West to its shared characteristics with Surrey’s commuter belt and the economic driver of Gatwick and its major business cluster.

Of course, Kent and Greater Essex do share challenges – relationship to London, relative and sustained economic underperformance compared to its neighbouring counties, transport and skills ‘deficits’ etc. But these challenges, championed by Kent and Essex County Councils under the previous government, as part of their ‘county region’ model, are clearly not of a localist character.

This economy is much larger than that of the North East (where Pickles actively discouraged a ‘regional’ LEP). When the Kent and Greater Essex proposal proudly asserts national contributions that are ‘greater than the Leeds and Manchester City Regions combined’ Kent and Greater Essex LEP outline proposal, it rather misses the point that these adjacent city regions have actually submitted separate LEP proposals – they have not proposed a new trans-Pennine ‘region’.

Indeed, the enthusiasm for this super-LEP (effectively a new region) was rejected in August by the Essex County Council Chief Executive as “a step too far” [Essex CX comment](#).

In summary, whilst there are compelling reasons for Kent and Greater Essex economic collaboration, and there are many merits in their LEP proposal, this is an argument for a ‘new regionalism’ for which Pickles’ enthusiasm seems at odds with his localism beliefs.

In recent times, Bolt’s portrayal of Thomas More has come under severe challenge. He has been described as an intolerant religious fanatic “evasive in argument, lusty for power, and repressive in politics”.

It would be premature and unfair to apply such revisionism to the Secretary of State. However, his professed priorities of ‘localism, localism and localism’ have always been much more ambiguous and complex than the manner in which he has articulated them. The economic geography of localism is highly contentious and worthy of a much more honest, less ‘evasive’ debate than hitherto.

Pickles first 100 days in office was lauded by many – even beyond the Tory faithful – as the coalition’s star performer. His next 100 days will be more revealing. Will the localism idealist sustain his position as the Thomas More of this government; or will he be shown, when political expediency requires, to actually be a ‘man for all regions’?

David Marlow

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