

NO LOOKING BACK –
Speech to the Plenary of the Cornish Constitutional Convention
Saturday 17th August 2002 – Chacewater, Cornwall

Welcome to the second plenary of the Cornish Constitutional Convention. We have travelled far since the day in November 2000 when we adopted the Constitution, approved the Equal Opportunities policy of the Convention, and launched our campaign.

Since then we have developed a campaign which now embodies the biggest single expression of positive demand for devolved regional government in the Country. We have published our proposals for a Cornish Assembly, we have met Ministers and, thanks to Andrew George and his colleagues, we have mounted an exceptional campaign in Parliament, which has placed what has become known as the ‘Cornish Question’ at the heart of the devolution debate.

When we met Nick Raynsford he explained that the Government’s immediate task is to win the debate over the general principle that devolved assemblies are good things. Margaret Thatcher used conviction and a parliamentary majority to inflict the Poll Tax – if a Government is going to change the Constitution then it needs to have a consensus of acquiescence (at least), support (at best).

He told us plainly to not expect Cornwall to figure in the White Paper. He explained that, in order not to distract from the main debate, and in order to avoid ‘running hares’, the White Paper would include a bland set of proposals. On both counts, he has been proved correct. Indeed, with a minor exception at the post White Paper launch by Mr Prescott, everything, which the government has told us, has been said in good faith, and nothing has occurred to dispel that. They are being straight with us.

We asked Mr Raynsford for access to civil servants in order to develop our proposals. He replied: *“Support us in the initial debate. Support the fundamental principle of devolution. Make your representations in response to the White Paper – get them on our desks. Once we have progressed to legislation and the first referendum, then we will have dialogue.*

The Cornwall/South West two-region solution is a real and seriously considered option. It is not the only option but we recognise the degree of public support and the coherence of your case”.

So, we are here today to finalise our representation to the government on its White Paper.

- I. Yes! Of course we support the principle of devolution. Cornwall has been advancing such a case for nigh on a millennium!
- I. Yes! We see devolution as the means of strengthening the government by bringing it closer to the people.
- I. Yes! We advance the case that Cornwall needs to be ‘cut-in’ to the policy making and resource allocating – as a peripheral region, which has suffered beyond endurance from the ravages of centralisation and from external management by the ignorant.
- I. Yes! We are anxious to get on.

The timely and focused community campaign, led by Cornish Solidarity, to achieve Objective 1 demonstrated both to the world in general and, importantly, to the people of Cornwall, that we

are resolved – “Enough is Enough” – and that we can achieve big objectives; we can deliver Objective 1; we will succeed. Look around you for a moment. We have struggled since 1537 for a University – it is rising out of Tremough, and it is becoming a presence throughout Cornwall – you can touch it; you can feel it – you can hear the wind already sighing through the grass on its roof!

We have a venture capital fund again for the first time since the collapse of Cornish banking at the end of the 19th century. This means we can invest in our own enterprises and projects.

We are in broadband communication with the World – and the World is beginning to know what modern Cornwall is about. There is much to do. Let us not delude ourselves – this is a three-generation job – we must prepare our children to carry forward what we have begun – it has been ever thus!

But are we (as the RDA seems to be willing to do) prepared to face the prospect that the only exit strategy from the Objective 1 programme is --- more Objective 1. Cornwall’s new confidence is about success – more Objective 1 would mean that we have failed – and, for Cornwall, today, failure is not an option – we’ve been there, done that and worn the tee-shirt out polishing our melancholy!

Equally, bearing in mind Nick Raynsford’s message last February, as well as the fact that he came here, and as well as the fact that, in front of all the assembled leaders and chief executives of all the local authorities in the so-called south west, he enthusiastically welcomed and recognised the Cornish Constitutional Convention (you don’t get friends in government like that every day!) – we must be prepared to maintain our campaign with a cheerful outlook and a positive approach for some time yet. I can report that we have made good progress – excellent progress, but we have a way to go yet. Our tasks are two-fold – to build and maintain the consensus in Cornwall; and to project a serious and constructive campaign to the world, and especially to that little enclave at Westminster.

If we have arguments then let us conduct them sensibly and keep a sense of proportion. If we are angry and impassioned, insulted or incited – ask first what will be the impact upon our common objective before you raise fists or utter words – this is discipline, and no campaign was ever won without it. Always consider that hasty actions feed the propaganda of those who would do us down. Never forget that, whilst we can be persuasive and intelligent, so too can those (few) who oppose us – and we must always remember that there are those in Cornwall for whom success, prosperity, sustainability and happiness represent anathema – failure; we must starve them of propaganda and outflank them tactically.

Of consensus, let us note that 5 out of 6 district councils have voted clearly in favour of either a Cornish Assembly or a referendum in Cornwall on the question of a Cornish Assembly. (Kerrier will consider the recommendation of a Scrutiny Committee on September 4th, and Caradon have chosen to take no view at all on the issue). Cornwall County Council has resolved to call on the government to hold a referendum in Cornwall in the Cornish question, and to support the principle of devolution but not necessarily on the present boundary.

This, together with many private and voluntary sector organisations, generates a picture of significant resolve coming from Cornwall. No such similar picture emanates from the ‘southwest’. There is no positive campaign emanating from the south west – indeed, there appears to be more support in the south west for Cornwall’s campaign than for a devolved assembly in that region. We must not be truculent, and we must strive to work together. It is vital to Cornwall’s devolution bid that the south west develops a positive campaign. It is vital that we approach the Government together with a mutually acceptable solution of the south west

enigma. It is vital that we concentrate our efforts upon advancing the campaign for a joint two-region strategy in the south west.

As far as working together is concerned, our next major event will be to publish the joint report commissioned by the two Conventions from Mark Sandford of the Constitution Unit of the University College, London. This will come out in September. Its most important finding is that a two-region approach is viable. This will significantly affect the landscape of the debate in Westminster, where such things are considered to be of immense importance. Mark Sandford is a close advisor to the Government on its devolution project, and his evaluation is of immense importance.

It is important that we welcome this report because it shows that the two conventions are working together; because it acknowledges the viability of the Cornish position; because it will launch a serious academic and technical debate about devolution in the south west of Britain.

We must also add a health warning to those who will try and latch on to Sandford's third conclusion. He suggests that a 7-county Assembly could develop a 'Ministry of Cornwall', or that Cornwall could be 'offered' a single unitary authority within a 7-county regional settlement. Such things cannot lie in the gift of anybody, and we should not be beguiled into believing that empty promises will be fulfilled – even if we were tempted to consider them as some form of pragmatic 'middle way' (in my mind, they represent something similar to another dose of Objective 1 – an indictment of failure and not worthy of space on the table).

It is impossible even for the government to second-guess the outcome of a review of local government by an INDEPENDENT COMMISSION. It is equally impossible for a government (or a south west constitutional convention) to try and bind a possible 7-county assembly to organising itself in a particular way.

Sandford's third option is pie in the sky, and should not form any part of anybody's serious consideration of the devolution conundrum.

So, it comes down to geography, democracy and economics – as we have been consistently arguing for over two years. In that sense, Sandford's acknowledgement that a Cornish Assembly could work and is a viable option represents an exoneration of what we all know to be true – now that he's said it then it must be true!

The most common question posed to us by the South West Constitutional Convention is: "What's your fall back position?" They become exasperated when we reply: "We have a single objective – to establish a directly elected, devolved assembly for Cornwall." The Sandford Report concludes that such a region can work. The will of the people of Cornwall is growing more firm by the day – a recent poll found that 46% of people in Cornwall want a Cornish Assembly, 34% want no assembly; 12% want a SW assembly and 8% don't know.

These figures demonstrate two clear facts. Firstly, that there is a vigorous and informed debate in Cornwall and Cornwall knows what it wants. Secondly, 80% of Cornwall's electorate is likely to vote NO in a 7-county referendum – which means that such a referendum is unlikely to be successful. If the South West Constitutional Convention wants to achieve a devolved assembly then it needs to recognise some clear facts, and to recognise that Cornwall has become increasingly resolved since the publication of the White Paper – we are not disappointed or dispirited – we are determined and we will persist.

So, once again, I call on the Bishop of Exeter, Michael Langrish, Chair of the SWCC, to meet us and to develop a dialogue on achievable regional boundaries. Let us talk about how our two Conventions might develop a positive, mutually respectful and cooperative relationship to pave

the way for two assemblies. The south west needs a Cornish Assembly in order to gain its own assembly, and Cornwall cannot afford to wait too long for the south west to catch up. Cornwall wants to 'giss on'!

It is vital that the Convention remains focused on its single objective, and that it marshals its resources to develop the campaign. We must always be in the mode of winning friends, converting sceptics and neutralising our occasional detractors. We all know that we can read big writing, and we all know that prejudice is worse than sand for building temples of righteousness upon.

We will be attacked. We will be vilified. We will be blamed. We will be held responsible and we will be used as a smokescreen by those seeking to obscure their own failures. Just as we must be canny anglers and play our fish with skill and patience, so too we must be a canny fish – sustain ourselves; grow and prosper but resist the temptation to nibble at the wriggling bait in front of our nose!

We have 10 days to despatch cards to Mr Prescott. It is August and it is difficult. This is an important task. Please take them, distribute them and send them. Put OHMS on the front and don't bother with a stamp. Give them to Andrew George and he'll deliver them. Take them there yourself – whatever it takes.

Encourage friends and neighbours to use our car stickers – we have 2 – the 'I love Cornwall, my Region' sticker is immensely valuable – all the time at the Council I ask: "Why say 'county' when Cornwall will do?" We must encourage Cornwall to raise its perception of itself and to consider that the nation is a region; that the county is a region; that the duchy is a region – and that the REGION IS CORNWALL.

Lastly, on September 20th the Convention will welcome Ruth Rendell (Baroness Rendell of Babergh) to speak at what I hope will become our annual dinner at the Greenlawns Hotel, Falmouth. It is expensive – we are trying to raise money! Ruth Rendell is a passionate and articulate supporter of devolution to Cornwall and is a Labour Peer. Please come along to hear her and to support the Convention. Tickets are £25 per head, from the Events Officer, Hayman House, Redruth.

We have come a long way; we have far to go. The Convention is in good heart; the devolution project is developing and we are playing a leading role in its development. For Cornwall, and for the Convention – there can be no looking back.

Bert Biscoe

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