

## **TRELAWNY LECTURE 2002.**

June 12<sup>th</sup> 2002.

London Cornish Association

### **Finding Cornwall's Place in the World**

The Cornish Constitutional Convention was formed at a General Meeting in November 2000. It arose out of awareness that the Government was intent upon launching a major effort to follow up devolution to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London with devolution to the English regions. It was spurred on by the astounding numbers of signatories to a petition calling for the establishment of a devolved Cornish Assembly, which had been launched by Mebyon Kernow on St Piran's Day 2000. After the inaugural General Meeting of the Convention Mebyon Kernow relinquished the petition and it was taken up by the Convention.

The Convention draws together a wide spectrum of opinion and activity, from Conservatives to Mebyon Kernow, from young single parents to retired people, from private business people to voluntary sector workers. In particular, the Convention Steering Group includes a Labour Councillor, Andrew George MP, and Robin Teverson, former MEP and Chairman of Finance Cornwall - an Objective 1 funded venture capital scheme partnered by Barclays Bank - which, of course, started life as Bolitho's Bank - a welcome return to its Cornish roots!.

It is important to point out that the Cornish Assembly campaign which has arisen has been conducted on two fronts - in Cornwall, and in Parliament. Andrew George MP has become a leading exponent of regional devolution in the House of Commons, and has caused debate on the issue in several arenas, including the Regional; Affairs Standing Committee - of which he is a prominent member. It is true to assert that, whenever the issue of regional devolution has been debated in Parliament - in either House - the Cornish Question has been at the heart of the matter - thanks to Andrew and his fellow Cornish MPs.

What is the Cornish Question?

To answer this, we must first ask "What is a Region?"

In the White Paper preceding the creation of Regional Development Agencies, 'Building Partnerships for Prosperity', the Government wrote:

*2.1 England has regions which are rooted in history, some based on geographical features, such as the Fens of eastern England, on our industrial heritage, as with the Potteries of Staffordshire, or on administrative boundaries dating back centuries. Though now they may seem quaint, or romantic, these local structures were created*

*as the most practical way to meet the needs of the day. Such regions are part of our history, and of our rich sense of identity and place. But we recognise that the distinct economic and social regions of modern England demand new forms of governance to serve their needs for now and for the future.*

This begs the question - so what has changed in our understanding of regions? - geography, materials, position - all critically affect social and economic circumstances. Why should it be that, as we embark upon the adventure of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, the concept of 'region' should suddenly embrace concepts such as 'critical mass' or 'optimum scale'. Are these 'quaint, romantic' regions so easily dismissed? Is it the case that small regions and big regions, existing side by side, can flourish and prosper? The evidence around us all suggests that they can and do. Indeed, the evidence in the Government's own White Paper suggests that they know this is the case.

Since an anonymous Civil Servant sketched out a regional map in the early 1940s to facilitate the distribution of rationed food and munitions, we have continued to use that map, and we have become used to its designations - although, certainly in the case of the so-called 'south west', his hurried plotting has never gelled into a coherent or compliant 'region' in a cultural, social or organisational sense. Why, as we consider a new constitutional function for regions, as extensions of central government, should we assume that the juggernaut regions of wartime are what modern Britain needs, or indeed wants?

If we are now going to move towards a democratisation of regions, then the issues of culture, coherence, community and identity move to the forefront. In many parts of the World, of course, democracy is considered quaint and romantic. If we are going to take it seriously, and to develop it, then we must ask serious questions about feelings, about geography, about culture and identity, about how others perceive areas and communities. Nowhere is this more of an issue than it is in Cornwall.

The post-war Cornish economy has been bedevilled by the ravages of centralisation. This is an effect of peripherality, and the product of improved communication and accessibility. Our economic profile, as identified by the south west regional development agency in the past three years, has a highly distinctive profile - we do different things differently; we have different opportunities, different potential - different to Devon, or to the south west. These perceptions are no longer merely the assertions of Cornish people; they are clearly shown by economists, sociologists and statisticians. How do we utilise our distinctiveness to build a modern, prosperous economy working for a secure and stable society? In the concept of 'region' Cornwall can find structures, institutions and status which will enable the green-shoots of regeneration to flourish. That is the hope, which we have kindled through the process of winning Objective 1; the hope bursting out of a regional and peripheral society that has said 'Enough is enough'!

Why is Cornwall different?

In 936ad Athelstan settled the east bank of the River Tamar as the border between Wessex and Cornwall.

In 1337 Edward II fixed the settlement between the fledgling England and Cornwall which persists to this day. He created his eldest son the Duke of Cornwall in a series of Charters which have effect to this day. When a person dies intestate in Cornwall, his goods and chattels pass to the Duke, not to the Crown. There are many other examples of the unique status of Cornwall through the constitutional instrument of the Duchy.

In 1497 Henry VII defeated a Cornish army when it marched on London to regain the institutions of the Stannary which the Tudor creator of the modern State and modern fiscal system had abolished the year before. Although the Cornish were defeated militarily, Henry reinstated the Stannary Parliament and Courts in the Charter of Pardon of 1508. The 'difference' was upheld.

In 1549 Cornwall rose once again against the imposition of the English language Book of Common Prayer. Whilst it is probably impossible to accurately gauge the cultural impact of the campaign waged by the Lord Protector Somerset, it is clear that the Cornish language began a downwards spiral towards the temporary oblivion of the late 17<sup>th</sup> century from this point.

During the Civil War Cornish regiments fought tenaciously and professionally on the side of the King, led by the brothers, Bevill and Richard Grenville. Historians are beginning to suggest that the Agreement of Millbrook of 1646 "*amounted - in its practical consequences, if not in its formal terms - to a separate Cornish peace treaty. Scawen and his fellows had without doubt betrayed the King's cause - but in doing so they had helped to preserve Cornwall itself from utter disaster.*" (West Britons, Mark Stoye University of Exeter Press).

Cromwell abolished the Stannaries. Charles II reinstated them. The Act of Union of 1707 remained silent on the question of Cornwall - why this is so when Queen Anne's Chancellor, Lord Godolphin, was a Cornishman and a Stannator, is one of those teasing questions of history which will remain unanswered as long as the National Curriculum persists in preventing Cornish history being fairly or adequately presented to young people in the UK.

Forty years after the Act of Union, the last Parliament other than Westminster to convene in the United Kingdom met at the command of the Duke of Cornwall at Lostwithiel in 1752.

Before 1832 Cornwall had 44 MPs. Parliament reduced this number significantly in the Reform Act, and it has continued to diminish ever since.

In 1889 - one year after all others - Cornwall County Council was created. This was

the first attempt at governance of Cornwall by democratic process created by Act of Parliament. Why was it only done 12 months after the Act came into force? Another of those teasing questions - why should Parliament's will be defied because Truro and Bodmin couldn't agree about which should be the County seat? Or was another, hidden Authority's consent required before such an Act could be enforced?

Throughout the industrial revolution Cornwall has been in the vanguard of economic and social evolution. Massive intensification of mining, followed by cataclysmic decline and emigration, are experiences which render Cornwall unique. When similar things occurred during the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the North East or South Wales, the pain and poverty were real enough, but comparatively short-lived. In Cornwall we have lived through a century of post-industrial trauma and recovery.

When the Great War claimed not only the flower of a generation of skilled artisans but also the sons of the land-owning gentry, Cornwall lost the key driver of its economic life - the investors or adventurers lost heart - many left or withdrew - the results are all around us - Tehidy; the Lost Gardens of Heligan; the shell of Carclew; the unkempt woodlands of Tregothnan and so on.

A former member of London Cornish, the late Richard Jenkin - one of those individuals whose life has focused around reviving the Cornish heart; who refused to lay down - he commented to me once that, after the Second War the Cornish found themselves in the situation of - "for the first time in a thousand years, not knowing what to do next! We had something akin to a collective nervous breakdown!"

I believe that Cornwall's collective experience throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century - in all its diversity - has been a pioneering and noble effort to rebuild our shattered confidence and personality. Nobody has helped us - nobody knows the nature of our problem!

Various aspects of social, economic and cultural life have contributed to this - and I believe that, at that cathartic moment when South Crofty shut, the Cornish community - those who can trace ancestry back to battlefields of Hingston Down and Stratton, and those for whom Cornwall has become a seductive, compelling and fruitful home in more recent times - especially for the young whose parents came to Cornwall seeking something mysteriously life-giving who have discovered what their parents sought in a sense of place, of belonging, a place which is full of hope and dynamism, of succour and excitement - that diverse, bickering, creative, outward-looking, caring, brash, knowing community found its collective self once more - Richard Jenkin's collective nervous breakdown is repaired!

Objective 1 showed that, if we can focus on a single purpose and set aside our differences, we can achieve anything. The spirit of the Cost Book - that all adventurers bring their skill and resources to bear upon finding and exploiting the mother-lode - is alive and can work for us.

Throughout the period of our depression Cornwall has sought to address the same issue which Scawen, Coryton, Grenville and their compatriots sought to secure -

Cornwall's 'place in the world'. In 1967 Kilbrandon recommended that, on the basis of the evidence presented, Cornwall should be known as the Duchy of Cornwall. During the battle to defeat 'Tamarside' Mr Kimberley Foster invoked our culture and our pride to send a message to the Government of the day that Cornwall must remain as she has been since 936ad - bounded by the Tamar.

In the period between 1976 and 1997 Cornwall caused no less than 5 public inquiries to occur to try and secure a Cornish Euro-Constituency.

In 1994, when the government tried to reform local government, the community of Cornwall mounted a campaign, led by the late David Treffry and Philip Payton, to establish a single unitary authority for Cornwall. This was the best option on offer. The campaign was unsuccessful, partly because existing local authorities mounted a campaign for self-preservation; partly because the Commission failed to follow the advice of its officials and recommended the dreaded 'status quo'!

Again, in 1997, Cornwall mounted a sterling campaign to achieve a Cornish Development Agency - which was then the determining institution of a region, and the best option on offer. Local government yet again stumbled into an act of deferential timidity which failed Cornwall, broke election pledges and caused lasting harm - not least in the administration of Objective 1.

Now, as the Government unveils its proposals for devolution Cornwall, always uncomfortable in the post-war era in being merely a 'county', is aspiring to achieve the best constitutional option on offer. Cornwall wants to create conditions where the promise and foundations for the future of a vibrant, outward-looking and dynamic post-industrial, information-led economy can be reinforced and built upon with the status and leadership offered by devolved government.

Cornwall must be careful not to allow deferential and self-preserving local government to dash the strongly expressed 'will of the people' yet again. 50,000 people signed the Petition calling for a Cornish Assembly. Contrary to the opinion of some for whom Cornwall is more of a platform than a home, all those signatories could read and write! The Petition was presented to the Prime Minister in December 2001. The Government has had access to the audited database of signatories and has not challenged the petition, or tried to claim that it is anything other than a genuine expression of public opinion.

Recently, a market research survey carried out by a reputable company working for Cornwall Enterprise shows that 46% of people in Cornwall want a Cornish Assembly; 34% want no devolved assemblies; 12% want a SW England Assembly; 8% don't know. There are no comparable figures for any other English region. Some believe that the debate about devolution has yet to spark the public into life - these figures bely that complacent assumption. With only 8% of 'don't knows' it is clear that the debate is vigorous in Cornwall. We should, of course, be wary of placing too much reliance upon such figures - but we should be equally wary of ignoring the fact that,

in the matter of devolved regional government Cornwall is - as football fans seem so keen of saying - "UP FOR IT!"

The White Paper 'Your Region, Your Choice', published in May 2002, does not mention Cornwall. It does speak of revisiting the boundaries of what have become known as the 'standard planning' or RDA regions at some time in the future. This is a chink of light for Cornwall. It is, however, only the opening over in a lengthy test match - there is everything for Cornwall to play for. The Government knows that it cannot walk away from the Cornish Question - and it knows that the community of Cornwall will not flag in its persistence to secure the institutions and democratic leadership which it needs to develop and prosper.

The Government's White Paper sets out a process for holding a referendum to determine the 'will of the people'. This involves a Minister deciding on the basis of 'soundings' to initiate a referendum in a region. This will trigger a review of local government where there is not unitary local government at present. With the review complete, and so that everybody knows what they're being asked to decide upon, a referendum will then - and only then - be held. If the result is YES then the reform of local government will take place, and an Assembly will be established. If the answer is NO, nothing will happen - no Assembly; no unitary local government.

Cornwall is a two-tier local government region that campaigned for unitary local government in 1994. The present structure is failing. The District Councils are, with one or two exceptions, 'disabled'. Parish and town councils are denied a sensible role in local governance, and the County Council, whilst flourishing, is bedevilled in its ability to adequately lead and govern Cornwall by the crippling loss of powers and functions which has occurred since the 1974 reorganisation, and by the divisiveness of the districts. In Cornwall there is widespread acknowledgement, even amongst the dreaded 'self-preservation society' itself, that we need to sort out local government.

Such a general view is not evident in other two-tier local government areas. In Cornwall it is rendered urgent by the recognition that, whilst Cornwall as a region is 'flavour of the month' in terms of regeneration and government focus, this will not last. The depopulated North is competing - and with justification - for resources and attention to reverse the debilitating demographic trend which is, also creating increasingly difficult pressures on the south and south east.

The fact that Cornwall functions as, and is perceived of as being a region provides a way through. By initiating the referendum process in Cornwall the Government will be paving the way for the vital reform of administrative and governance structures, which Cornwall needs if it is to sustain the momentum of Objective 1. Time is short. The Programme ends in 2008. If Cornwall has to wait while the 'southwest' lumbers towards being in a fit condition to stage a referendum - if it ever does - then all the energy and momentum will be lost. Cornwall cannot afford to wait while the South West tries to catch up. This is the critical, strategic question thrown up by the White

Paper.

When Cornwall finds herself, as she undoubtedly will, in a more hostile environment, and needing to marshal her arguments, develop and promote her case, and win resources and partners to sustain the momentum gained as the result of Objective 1 and all that is flowing from it, then we will need status, focus, leadership and skill - all things which the establishment of a devolved Regional Assembly will enable us to achieve.

Whether we like it or not - for the time being the UK is a member of the EU. Cornwall's opportunities - many of them unique to us as a 'peripheral' region - lie in developing a presence as a region - brokering regional partnerships in search of resources; establishing new markets in European regions; playing our part in reforming and rebuilding the agricultural and fishing industries, which are not in decline - food is not a luxury commodity - farming and fishing are strictly regulated and restructuring - Cornwall has a role to play and wisdom to share. Cornwall is a knowledge-hub, and it is geographically exceptionally placed to develop this. These are key factors in tomorrow's Cornwall.

It is ironic, but Cornwall's future lies in understanding the nature of her past - archaeology tells us that Cornwall was a European trader and supplier - Phoenicians, Greeks, Irish, German, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, African, the Americas, Australian - all traded with, and via, Cornwall. The Single Market is our opportunity, but it is an opportunity, which will only be grasped by regions.

The great danger for Cornwall is that, if she is swallowed up into the large, dinosaur-like grip of a cumbersome, unmanageable South West, then those opportunities will be overlooked and misunderstood - or simply hi-jacked (as many Cornish initiatives are being today!).

The imposition of a greater south west on Cornwall would dissipate the energy and achievement of the past few years, and cause a further, debilitating decline into poverty, depression and dysfunction. Cornwall should be, and aspires to be a vibrant, creative, dynamic and prosperous regional economy and society. We are saying to the Government - if you want a payback on your generous and spirited investment in Cornwall, then give us the toolkit to build Cornwall, the Region - be adventurous, be innovative, break the mould - listen to the people of Cornwall - we want to succeed - hold a referendum for a devolved Assembly for Cornwall as soon as possible.

In this debate, one thing is an absolute - there are two places that want devolved regional government - and loads of places, including the south west, which don't really care one way or the other. Those two places are the North East and Cornwall. 50,000 people can't be wrong.

So, I call on John Prescott, as he assumes the reins of the devolution chariot, to hear the voice of Cornwall, and to remember the words he uttered when he was on

holiday there last year - "Cornwall has the strongest regional identity in the UK!" I say to Mr Prescott - 'Cornwall has the potential; the fire is lit in our collective belly. Let us sit down and begin to work through the detail of how Mr Prescott and his colleagues can create the institutional means for harnessing that fire, unleashing that potential - and launching the most successful region the UK will have.

I hope the London Cornish will use its best offices to assist this campaign.

Much of what I believe finds echoes in the writing of 'Q'; I sometimes hear the voice of Kimberley Foster whispering in the walls of the house of Cornish Government which he built; my inner voice always shouts 'Trelawny' as one or other of the bridges is crossed; I look at the wind-turbines and rejoice in our modernity; I see the University rising next to the fields of Glasney; I see the films and the painting and the theatre of our young people - I hear the laugh of Peter Lanyon high above the clouds; I drink the wind in the company of the stones; I feel the land which almost lost its tongue slowly regain its language; I thrill at the ride of the surfer; I watch the renewal of the Ordinalia at St Just; I quietly note the return of the Chough and half-mockingly mutter to old friends - "Arthur's back!"

We must never allow ourselves to be engulfed in the evils of racism or isolationism - our gift is our welcome and the home, which it offers. We do not, as Mr Prescott suggested at a recent press conference, seek UDI, or independence or separation. Cornwall wants to prosper and to play her full part in the affairs of modern Britain; Cornwall wants respect.

Another market research survey recently undertaken in Cornwall, to measure peoples' aspirations and perceptions, found that, right across social, age, gender and economic spectrums the highest aspiration amongst the modern Cornish community is that 'Cornwall must find her place in the World'. 50,000 people can't be wrong!

Bert Biscoe