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The Constitution Unit

A commentary on the Regional Government White Paper, *Your Region, Your Choice: Revitalising the English Regions* Cm 5511, May 2002

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June 2002

Contents

Executive Summary

— The White Paper is a cautious document. It proposes devolving only limited executive powers to elected regional assemblies. There must be doubt whether electors will be willing to vote for such assemblies in regional referendums, or to turn out for regional elections.

— Reading between the lines, much of the White Paper consists of reassurance to sceptical Ministers and departments. There is little attempt to build a rationale for the particular basket of powers offered to elected regional assemblies. To enable the assemblies to deliver more strongly on their core function of economic development, they should be given budgetary responsibility for Learning and Skills Councils and the Small Business Service, in addition to the Regional Development Agencies.

— The White Paper insists on wholly unitary local government being instituted at the same time as a regional assembly. This could stifle regional government at birth, and is an unnecessary gift to the opposition, who will campaign to 'save the counties'. If the government really want to see assemblies established across England, they must be prepared to relax this requirement, and go back to their previous policy of 'predominantly unitary local government'.

— Experience in Europe suggests that unitary local government is not a necessary precondition of regional government. France, Germany, Italy and Spain have all introduced a regional tier of government, but have retained (or not found it necessary to abolish) two tier local government below.

— The White Paper proposes that elected assemblies be required to meet six to ten 'high level indicators'. This runs against the spirit of devolution, as does the offer of additional funds if assemblies meet these targets. It will be hard for assemblies to contemplate significant innovation or policy divergence with such a regime in place. No such regime exists for the devolved assemblies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

— The focus on strengthening the existing Regional Chambers is welcome, since they will be the main regional forum in all those regions which do not opt for an elected assembly. But the actual proposals are weak. Regional Chambers could take on statutory strategy-making powers, and forge closer relationships with or merge with bodies such as the Regional Cultural Consortiums or Regional Observatories.

Introduction

> 'Of course, one of the main reasons why the Government wants to establish elected regional assemblies is our wish to increase democratic accountability over decisions taken at the regional level. It is clearly not possible to quantify the benefits of greater democracy.' (White Paper, 5.16)

1. It was never expected that the White Paper on regional government, despite being very long in the making, would herald a revolution in the governance of England. Expectations of a set of new regional institutions akin to the National Assembly for Wales had been dampened down for a long time by Ministerial statements. What was anticipated was an evolutionary step: breaking the democratic barrier of instituting a regional assembly, and a sufficient basket of powers for the regional body to have a visible impact on regional fortunes.

2. Given the lack of political interest in the issue of elected regional assemblies, the Government, and in particular John Prescott, the Deputy Prime Minister, deserves congratulating for persevering with the production of a White Paper at all. The degree to which the concept of regional government remains alien to Whitehall mandarins and Labour Party traditionalists should not be underestimated. Reading between the lines, much of the White Paper represents trade-offs within Government and the Cabinet.

3. At one level it is regrettable that discussions between departments have been permitted to influence the fundamental shape of the White Paper. But, in the context of the UK's history of government centralism, the White Paper as it stands is no mean political achievement, and should not be easily dismissed. Comparisons with the strong powers permitted to the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales must remember that both those decisions had considerable political impetus, and could build on existing self-contained administrations: the decision to devolve was much easier to make there.

4. Attention is given to the existing regional arrangements, in the form of Regional Chambers[1] and associated bodies. It has long been understood that elected assemblies would not be created without successful referendums, and that referendums could not be won—and would thus not be held—in some regions of England.

5. Despite the undoubted success in producing the White Paper, there are some concerns about its content. Politically, the most foolhardy is the obligation on any region voting for an elected assembly to move to unitary local government. It is not clear that this is a necessary condition: it has already aroused vocal opposition in much of the press through complaints of 'abolishing the counties'. It is not self-evident that three tiers of sub-national government is 'one too many', as the White Paper claims. The Government's inflexibility on this point is

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[1] All of the eight Regional Chambers now style themselves 'Regional Assemblies'. However, they are referred to as Chambers in this document to distinguish them from elected regional assemblies.

likely to, at best, restrict interest to the three northern regions, and at worst obstruct the whole regional agenda.

6. In terms of regional responsibilities, there is a discontinuity between the Government's stated aspirations for elected regional assemblies and the tools on offer for achieving them. At the same time, a strong centralising streak runs through the White Paper. Frequent powers only to 'influence' organisations and appoint to their board; the demand that assemblies agree high-level targets with Government; and the frequent requirements of consultation with agencies that remain accountable to the centre, all add up to a limited room for manoeuvre for elected regional assemblies.

7. This commentary reviews the events leading up to the publication of the White Paper. It then looks at the most important features of the Government's proposals. The conclusion highlights the overall impression gained from the White Paper.

Brief background to the White Paper

8. The establishment of elected assemblies in the English regions formed part of the Labour Party's 1997 Manifesto. This was one of only two commitments in that manifesto on which no action was taken in the first Labour government. Regional Development Agencies and Regional Chambers were set up under the 1998 Regional Development Agencies Act; for a majority of the then Cabinet this was enough devolution for the English regions.

9. However, in the run-up to the 2001 General Election several shifts occurred. The Chancellor, Gordon Brown, made a speech praising regional economic development in January 2001, followed by similar public contributions from Stephen Byers and David Blunkett. Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, long a supporter of regional assemblies, was able to promise a green paper on the issue not long after, which was upgraded to a White Paper during the election campaign in May 2001.

10. Following Labour's election victory, John Prescott retained overall control of regional policy, despite his move to the Cabinet Office, and was charged with leading the White Paper. Nick Raynsford was appointed as Minister for Local and Regional Government. It became clear that Raynsford, who had been involved in the creation of the Greater London Authority, was inclined towards a model of regional government similar to that existing in London.

11. The resulting White Paper escaped much media attention. It was published on 9 May 2002, in a busy news week, and was largely drowned out by a new threat to the position of Stephen Byers (the then Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions), the Potters Bar rail crash (10 May) and a government statement the following Monday (13 May) on House of Lords reform, which made a larger 'constitutional splash'. What media attention there was concentrated on the issue of 'abolition of counties', on the costs of instituting regional assemblies, and to a lesser extent on the purported link between regional government and European integration.

Analysis

Functions

12. The Government's proposals for elected assemblies open a different debate. Expectations of wide-ranging powers have been very effectively dampened in the months leading up to the White Paper, a very weak form of regional government was anticipated. In the event, the Government has opted for a 'broad and shallow' form of regionalism rather than a 'narrow and deep' one: that is to say, the proposed functions of regional assemblies, though limited, are drawn from diverse policy fields, rather than representing full power over a small range of responsibilities. This is a valuable approach, because it establishes the remit of elected regional assemblies as spreading into a number of areas of government. It marks a significant shift from the 2001 Labour Party manifesto statement that 'economic development is the core of regional policy today'.[2] Economic development remains the core, but it is far from the only function.

13. Alongside this is the suggestion that 'there are likely to be further proposals for the decentralisation of responsibilities to assemblies as time goes on.' (White Paper, Overview, 18). Although this sentence appears to be encouraging to campaigners, the precise language used is notable: the use of the word 'responsibilities' rather than 'powers' appears to replicate what Professor Kevin Morgan called 'the chronic disjunction between [the RDAs'] powers (which are modest) and their tasks (which are awesome).'[3] This statement does not, therefore, amount to a clear promise of moving extra *powers and money* away from central government control.

14. The Government has also followed the recommendations of most commentators in taking the powers proposed from existing regional responsibilities of central government and its agencies, instead of from local government (with the exception of the proposals for planning powers). There had been a widespread fear that regional government would mean centralisation of local government power, and that a central government reluctant to give away its own power would look to local government for regional functions. It may be that some residual local government responsibilities, for instance economic development, will atrophy if democratic control over Regional Development Agencies, as proposed, is achieved.

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[2] Labour Party General Election manifesto, *Ambitions for Britain*, 2001

[3] Kevin Morgan, The English Question: Regional Perspectives on a Fractured Nation, 2001, p8.

15. It is open to debate whether the proposals are 'weaker' than the powers available to the Greater London Authority, as some reports in the press have suggested.[4] The GLA's responsibilities for fire, police and transport are unique in covering the area of a 'region': they derive from the fact that London was formerly a county area. Elsewhere in England these functions are organised on a county or sub-regional basis. And some of the responsibilities proposed for elected assemblies by the White Paper are not, and will not be, available to the GLA.

16. There have also been suggestions that the White Paper's proposals will mean removing the powers of county councils and giving them to regional assemblies. This is not correct. Under the Government's proposals, county councils' powers will be absorbed by the new unitary authorities proposed in chapter 9 of the White Paper.

17. The Government identifies three types of functions to be undertaken by regional assemblies. The first is the writing of a set of ten strategies, which are listed in Table 1. Most of these strategies already exist in some form (see Table 6). But elected assemblies' strategies will have statutory force; and they will have the ability to promote 'integration and rationalisation of the separate strategies' (White Paper, 4.10). They will also be encouraged to develop an integrated regional strategy.

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[4] For instance, 'Devolution of Power', *The Times*, 10 May 2002, p13; 'Fewer powers than London', *Financial Times*, 1 May 2002, p.4

Table 1 : Strategies for elected regional assemblies[5]	
Elected regional assemblies	**Greater London Authority**
Regional Economic Development Strategy	Economic Development Strategy
Regional Spatial Strategy (replacing RPG)	Spatial Development Strategy
Regional Transport Strategy	Transport Strategy
Regional Cultural Strategy	Cultural Strategy
Sustainable Development Framework	
Regional Housing Strategy	Regional Housing Statement (not statutory)
Regional Waste Strategy	Waste Management Strategy
Framework for Employment and Skills Action	
Health Improvement Strategy	
Biodiversity Strategy	Biodiversity Action Plan
	Air Quality strategy
	Ambient Noise strategy

18. A major part of the Mayor of London's role is to write strategies. These are not delivered by the Greater London Authority but by other bodies within London; principally the boroughs and national executive agencies. In theory, the Mayor's lack of executive authority should be an incentive for him to achieve a co-operative partnership with those bodies rather than relying on executive authority within a relationship of mutual distrust. All those bodies will contribute to the development of the strategy, and they will thus derive the incentive to deliver the strategy as part of their own activities.

19. Developing strategy is a valuable governmental function, and one which potentially gives a regional assembly a good deal of influence. But more clarity on how elected assemblies should carry out their strategic role in practice would be welcome. There is no clear evidence as yet from the Greater London Authority that strategies alone can be an effective means of governance. Strategies take a long time to write, because of the need for consultation and redrafting: the GLA's Spatial Development Strategy (the 'London Plan') has taken two years from the date of the first GLA elections. Neither the GLA, nor the proposed elected regional assemblies, can enforce sanctions on agencies which do not deliver their parts of the

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[5] Source: Box 4.1, *Your Region, Your Choice*, DTLR/Cabinet Office, 2002; Greater London Authority Act 2000. The strategies written by the GLA and by elected regional assemblies are 'matched' in the table

strategies. Central government agencies in the regions often have difficulty committing to regional priorities where they conflict with national ones.

20. As long as the tools for implementation of strategies remain dispersed around central government agencies, implementation will be slower, less easily monitored, and more subject to changing priorities within central government or the agencies themselves. Co-operation with other agencies is a worthy aim, but strategy-writing alone faces in achieving co-ordinated government.

21. The other proposed functions are those for which the assembly has an **executive** role, and those for which it has an **influencing** role (White Paper, 4.16-17). The executive functions proposed for the assemblies are summarised in Table 2, and the influencing functions proposed are summarised in Table 3.

Table 2 : Executive functions of elected assemblies	
Function	**Current location**
Economic development	Regional Development Agency
European funding programmes	Government Office
Planning	Regional Planning Body/local authorities
Housing capital investment allocations Housing association allocations	Government Office Housing Corporation
Culture Tourism Museums, Libraries and Archives Upkeep of heritage sites Sport (under review) Arts 'that are regional in character' (under review)	(Regional Cultural Consortium) Regional Tourist Board Resource English Heritage Sport England Arts Council of England
Rail Passenger Partnership grants	Strategic Rail Authority
Rural regeneration programmes	Government Office
Regional contingency planning	

Table 3 : 'Influencing' functions of regional assemblies	
Function	**Nature of function**
Business support	Consultation by Small Business Service
Skills	Draw up Framework for Regional Employment and Skills Action
	Appoint two members to every local LSC board.
	LSCs to consult Assembly on plans, and have regard to Assembly's plans (statutory)
Planning	Power to request call-in of major projects by Secretary of State if not consistent with Regional Spatial Strategy
Transport	Advise on allocation of money to local transport plans (Government Offices)
	Make proposals to Highways Agency and Strategic Rail Authority: consultation by those bodies
Lottery funding	Appointment of members to regional awards committees
Culture	Regional Cultural Strategy, to be followed by Arts Council, Sport England and tourist authorities
Public health	Health Improvement Strategy with Regional Directors of Public Health
Environment	Appointments to Environment Agency's regional committee[6]
	Right to consultation of and by Environment Agency. Countryside Agency, English Nature
Crime reduction	Local crime reduction partnerships and drug action teams to consult Assembly on their strategies.

22. In some respects the executive powers exceed expectations. The Constitution Unit warned in *Unexplored Territory: Elected Regional Assemblies in England* that an extremely slim-line assembly, with no executive powers, would be unlikely to attract public support. The executive powers go further than the 'minimalist' approach outlined in that document.[7] But also important for the success of regional government is that its functions form a coherent whole. This is not the case here.

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[6] Note : Environment Agency regions are entirely different from the standard regions, being based on river basins; it is not clear, therefore, how this proposal is to be implemented.

[7] See the discussion of the 'Strategic/Co-ordination Model' in chapter 6 of Mark Sandford & Paul McQuail, *Unexplored Territory: Elected Regional Assemblies in England*, Constitution Unit, 2001

23. Both of these tables reveal that the Government is suggesting a very peculiar hotch-potch of responsibilities for elected regional assemblies. The White Paper makes no attempt to relate the choice of these particular functions to the aspirations outlined for elected regional assemblies in Chapter 3. Although the current working of each function is discussed, no rationale is given for the location of any of the functions, whether in the 'executive box', in the 'influence box', or outside either. It is quite apparent that the range of functions to be offered to elected regional assemblies owes everything to political bargaining and little to rational analysis.

24. Politically, there is no doubt that the Government has done well even to obtain this range of responsibilities: they are more than many campaigners or commentators anticipated. Ironically, the commendable 'broad and shallow' approach to allocating powers which was highlighted above means that, almost despite itself, the White Paper makes a good case for a stronger portfolio of powers than it itself proposes. It makes little sense to propose executive responsibilities in a given area but only policy influence in a closely-related one. Examples of this point are:

   — **The Small Business Service (SBS)**: Support for small business is inherently interlinked with the economic development functions of the RDAs. Although the SBS is organised on a sub-regional/local basis, this need not prevent its funding stream being channelled through an elected regional assembly, so as to allow regional assemblies to allocate funds in accordance with their priorities;

   — **Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs)**: Likewise, the functions of the Learning and Skills Councils are so closely linked to economic development that it seems perverse to divide funding for the two policy areas between two different institutions. Local LSCs are organised at sub-regional level, but funding could still be channelled through a regional assembly. Though assemblies will have the power to appoint board members, and both assemblies and LSCs must have regard to one another's strategies, this lacks the flexibility inherent in direct funding. In both this case, and that of the Small Business Service, there may be an argument that relatively new organisations should be given time to bed down; but that argument will begin to wear thin by 2005, which is the earliest date by which any assemblies will take up their powers. (The Government concedes an equivalent point with regard to the Arts Council in paragraph 4.41 of the White Paper.)

   — **Transport**: Assemblies are to be restricted to an 'advisory' role on local transport scheme funding. The decision to restrict involvement with the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) and the Highways Agency to 'powers to make proposals' means that, in reality, assemblies will have no transport expenditure at all, save for the tiny Rail Passenger Partnership grants. Given that both the SRA and Highways Agency tend to be locked into long-term plans lasting for many years, and therefore have little immediate funding flexibility, 'powers to make proposals' are of very thin value in this instance.

— **Culture**: It is proposed that regional assemblies should take over the Regional Cultural Consortiums. These bodies are three years old, and are, by all accounts, irrelevant. Their strategies (which are really wish-lists) have had no discernible influence on regional cultural activities; their funding between 1999 and 2004 averages £60,000 per annum.

The Government proposes awaiting the outcome of the current review into the funding of Sport England before deciding on whether to devolve its responsibilities to regional assemblies. The White Paper states that 'accountability and funding for the arts and sports which are regional in character will be devolved to the assembly, in a way which protects strategic national priorities.' (White Paper, 4.42). Implementation of the assemblies' proposed regional cultural strategies would be aided by the addition of all of the funding for Sport England and the regional arms of the Arts Council for England.

The same comments apply to the proposals for English Heritage. Judging from the figures given for a notional North-East Assembly budget (White Paper, Box 5.1), the Government proposes transfer of only a small part of English Heritage's responsibilities. No rationale is given for the transfer of this area rather than others.

— **Public health**: Though the regional assembly will have a duty to promote the health of the region (analogous to that of the Greater London Authority), the new public health teams, currently in the Government Offices, will remain there. This is tempered by the peculiar demand that the Regional Director of Public Health must be appointed as the Assembly's health advisor, as was done, voluntarily, by the Mayor of London.

This proposal would create a third body with responsibility for public health, alongside the regional GO teams and the new Primary Care Trusts. In addition to promoting the health of the region, the regional assembly will have to write a health improvement strategy. This will entail recruiting another team of staff. It would be easier, and more efficient, simply to transfer the existing team from the Government Office, together with its budget, and allow them to write the health improvement strategy from within the assembly.[8]

25. As an aside, it is curious that the White Paper rules out a review of the powers of the Greater London Authority. The proposed assemblies will be given some powers not available to the GLA. Despite the Government's argument that the two-year-old GLA should be allowed to bed down, it is hard to see that the transfer to the GLA of the housing, culture, and European budgets which will be available to elected assemblies would be a disturbing force. The Government could reconsider this stance, even if transfer of those powers did not take place immediately. The additional powers could be transferred to the GLA at the same time as the establishment of the first elected assemblies under this White Paper, in 2005-06. By then the GLA would no longer be 'bedding down' and should be well able to cope with increased powers.

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[8] This was proposed in greater detail in Scott Greer and Mark Sandford, *Regional Assemblies and Public Health*, Constitution Unit, 2001.

Unitary local government

> '[Regional government] would … comprise a third elected tier—region, county, district—below national government, and the Government recognises the concern that this would be one tier too many.' (White Paper, 9.5)

26. The above sentence is the Government's case as to why a regional assembly should require fully unitary local government. The concern with unitary local government has been expressed widely in the media as 'Labour's desire to abolish the county councils'—because, so the argument goes, English county councils are more likely to be controlled by the Conservatives. Though county identity does not depend outright on county-level government, counties remain popular amongst the public, and this carries over into attachment to county councils. The recent poll carried out by the BBC,[9] which indicated that over half of respondents were unworried about losing their county council in favour of a regional assembly, is not sufficient evidence to reject the popularity of counties outright.

27. The Government does not commit itself to abolishing county councils in the White Paper. It specifies that a review by the Boundary Committee for England should predate any referendum, so that the proposed new structure of unitary local government will be available to voters at the time of the referendum.

28. The Government may have misjudged both the mood of the electorate towards traditional local government structures, and the mood of local government itself. Much of local government will have no appetite for more reorganisation after the chaotic review of the mid-1990s. Though the argument of 'one tier too many' is superficially attractive, the attendant reorganisation, costs and loss of traditional structures are a high price to pay. Making that price mandatory is a gift to opponents of elected regional assemblies. Public opinion was one of the central reasons why the initial drive towards unitary authorities by the 1992-5 review was severely tempered by the then Government.

29. Some sections of local government may well support a further review. They may either believe in the principle of unitary local government; they may hope that their own authority will 'win' unitary status; they may want to finish the 'unfinished business' of the patchwork of two-tier and unitary authorities left by the Local Government Commission in the mid-1990s, hoping for an end to all further talk of reorganisation as a result. But similar feelings existed in 1994, without guaranteeing a harmonious process:

> 'Once the details begin to be worked out, the practical implications for areas, institutions, and individuals begin to be identified. Support of the general idea [of unitary local government] can turn into opposition against proposals for its implementation. That was exactly what happened in many parts of England. As authorities and local politicians looked into the future, and found that the

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[9] Available at www.news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/uk_politics/newsid_1884000/1884073.stm

perceived benefits were not going to flow to them, initial positions often changed.'10

The costs of reorganisation

30. It is possible that regional electorates would view three tiers of local government with equanimity if they were fully informed of the likely cost of a full-scale reorganisation to unitary authorities. The Government asserts that:

> 'The assessment of costs makes no allowance for cost savings that would arise from the establishment of a wholly unitary structure of local government in regions with an elected assembly. We believe that there should be savings in the medium term from such a restructuring, albeit that there will also be up-front transitional costs. It is not practicable to make a more specific estimate of costs and savings in advance of the Boundary Committee making recommendations.' (White Paper, 5.15)

31. The assertion that unitary local government leads to cost savings is not supported by research on the Scottish local government reorganisations of 1995.11 McGarvey and Midwinter found that savings, where they existed, were negligible, and that they were offset by a steep council tax rise, averaging 17%, in 1996. Identifiable management duplication between the two tiers related to only 2.2% of local expenditure. That is not enough slack to make meaningful savings through reorganisation into unitary authorities. McGarvey and Midwinter's study concludes:

> 'What [the] figures show is that in the context of labour-intensive local service provision, there is really only one way 'efficiency' savings can be achieved: provision of the same level of service with fewer personnel. To assume that all cuts in personnel would occur at the corporate centre and that front-line service delivery would not be affected was quite fanciful on the Government's part.'12

32. Michael Chisholm's exhaustive study of the mid-1990s local government review in England analyses the costs of transition to unitary authorities where it occurred. Chisholm cautions that exact figures are unobtainable, but presents a number of estimates based on the available information. His calculations of the costs of transition for the whole of shire England (i.e. two-tier areas) produce figures ranging from £500m to £1.2bn. These figures are heart-stopping, even if they only represent the correct order of magnitude rather than being exact.13 Moreover, Chisholm states that the then Government's claims that cost savings

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10 Howard Davies, 'Reviewing the Review', pp. 5-17, *Local Government Studies* 23:3, Autumn 1997, London, p.8

11 See B. Midwinter & B. McGarvey, 'Local Government Reform in Scotland : Managing the Transition', *Public Administration*, vol 75, Spring 1997

12 Ibid., p.81. Note: both *Local Government Studies* 23:3 and *Public Administration* vol 75 (Spring) were special issues on the Local Government Review.

13 Michael Chisholm, *Structural reform of British local government: rhetoric and reality*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000. See chapter 7 on 'The actual costs of reorganisation'. Chisholm deals separately with the costs of carrying out the review itself, which he estimates at some £100

would result from unitary local government—a claim that is recycled in this White Paper—have not materialised.

33. If a further reorganisation costs anything like this amount, it will offset any administrative efficiencies gained from regional assemblies several times over. Chisholm's study also shows that early estimates of transition costs in the 1990s review process (from the Government, the Association of County Councils, the Association of District Councils and the Local Government Commission itself) all turned out to be far too low. To bury one's head in the sand about the possibility of these kinds of extra costs is a perilous omission by the Government. Both politically and financially, they could become a millstone around the neck of regional assemblies.

A separate agenda?

34. The White Paper leaves the impression that the agenda of unitary local government—long tacitly supported by both major parties—is in fact a separate interest of the Government with its own momentum, which has been smuggled into the debate over regionalisation. The arguments in paragraph 9.5, in favour of unitary local government, suggest this:

> 'Elected regional assemblies will need to work closely with the local authorities in their region. Moving to a single tier of local government in such circumstances will simplify relationships for both local authorities and regional assemblies. This should lead to more effective local and regional government and facilitate effective partnerships between the two tiers;

> Similarly, the creation of regional assemblies will mean that many existing public and private sector bodies will have to enter into a new series of relationships. Moving to a single tier of local government in such circumstances will avoid creating extra complexity for them;

> Voters are not always clear at present about what activities are carried out by which tier of local government. To add a further tier would confuse matters still further. Moving to a single tier of local government in such circumstances should reduce this confusion: the local authority will deliver local services and act as the community champion and advocate for local people, whilst the regional assembly will set strategic priorities.' (White Paper, 9.5)

35. All of these arguments carry weight. But they relate to two-tier local government *per se*, not just to two tiers under an elected regional assembly. Local authorities work with regional bodies already, and are involved already in complex relationships with a wide variety of bodies. Confusion about the roles of counties and districts has existed for decades. These issues were not triggered by the concept of regional assemblies.

36. Without any real knowledge of public opinion about tiers of government, it is not necessary to assume that this alone dictates that local government reorganisation must accompany

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million. This may have been substantially inflated by the disorganised manner in which the review was carried out.

elected regional assemblies. It would have been more politically effective to leave the final decision to the elected assemblies when they were up and running.

37. Alternatively, the regional electorate could be offered two questions in the referendum. One could ask if the voter wanted a regional assembly, and the other could ask if the voter wanted unitary local government in the region. This would provide a valid test of the Government's assumption that three tiers of sub-national government is 'one too many', in the absence of more detailed research.[14]

Funding of elected assemblies

38. Chapter 5 of the White Paper, dealing with funding, is the most radical section of the White Paper, but in many ways it is also the most opaque.

39. Two items stand out as worthy of praise in the Government's plans. The first is the decision to propose a single block grant, consisting of an amalgamation of the current budget lines of the bodies proposed for devolution to regional assemblies. This will allow regional assemblies greater flexibility, notwithstanding the 'high-level targets' discussed below, than the Greater London Authority. The GLA has a variety of hypothecated budgets, which limits its budgetary flexibility. A block grant is a welcome move away from that.

40. The funding system proposed by the White Paper resembles the local authority Standard Spending Assessment system. The Government claims that 'Regional allocations of the main programmes which will go to an elected assembly are presently, or will soon be, formula-based.' (White Paper, 5.4). What is proposed implies a system where regional assemblies' budgets are amalgamated from a group of separate, policy-area and formula-based budget lines. The Barnett Formula will therefore not be extended to cover regional expenditure in England.[15]

41. The decision to provide a general grant for administration costs is also sensible. The Government estimates extra administration costs at around £20 million.[16] It deserves praise

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[14] This suggestion has been made by Sir Jeremy Beecham, chairman of the Local Government Association.

[15] The Barnett Formula is the mechanism used by the Government to allocate spending to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There has long been pressure from the North to end its use, on the grounds that it discriminates (in practice) against the poorer regions of England, and for its replacement with a more transparent needs-based formula. It is significant that the Barnett Formula is not mentioned at any point in the White Paper.

[16] This figure represents the headline figure of £25 million given in paragraph 5.13, minus £5 million representing the cost of staff transferring from existing public bodies. That expense is already accounted for within existing public expenditure, and is therefore not 'new money'. £20 million was an estimate of a regional assembly's running costs, based on the Greater London Authority's administration costs of £36 million, made by Sandford and McQuail (2001).

for its honesty over this potentially frightening figure. It would be unrealistic to oblige assemblies to find their running costs from within their overall budgets, which the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales were obliged to do, when the budgets proposed for regional assemblies are so slim.[17]

42. The decision to permit regional assemblies to have borrowing powers is possibly the most innovative feature in the White Paper. It will provide assemblies with a valuable extra dimension to make a real and discernible difference in their region. There is a caveat: the White Paper states that assemblies' borrowing powers will replace those of the RDAs, which are subject to Treasury approval. It is to be hoped that, if this provision remains, Treasury approval will not be unreasonably withheld.

43. Assemblies will also be able to set a precept on the local authorities in their region: the general administration grant from the Government will be set at a level which will take this power into account. The power to set a precept is available to the Greater London Authority; there has been some controversy over the significant increases imposed by the Mayor since his election. For this reason it is understandable that the Government states:

> 'It is council tax-payers who will bear the risk of high increases in the precept, and they may be concerned if regional assemblies are given a completely unrestricted precepting power. We therefore propose initially to limit assembly precepts through arrangements comparable to the existing local authority capping regime.' (White Paper, 5.9)

44. The White Paper states that the expected level of precept, which will be taken into account when setting general grant, will be equivalent to 5p per week for a Band D council tax-payer.

Central control

45. The overall framework of elected regional assemblies is couched in an extremely restrictive way; one which casts doubts upon the Government's claims that regional assemblies are intended to enhance democracy. On facing pages, this dilemma is revealed by the following contradictory statements:

> 'Where voters choose to have an elected assembly this will mean that, for the first time, decisions affecting the regions will be taken by a body that is directly accountable to the regional electorate rather than to Ministers and the UK Parliament.'(White Paper, 4.3)

> 'An elected assembly will set out its key objectives in a small number of high-level targets, which it will agree with central government.' (4.7)

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[17] The Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales, and Northern Ireland Assembly were all obliged to find their running costs from within the existing block grants to the territorial departments, though this took place in the context of rapidly rising budgets under the 1999-2002 Comprehensive Spending Review.

46. The proposal that elected assemblies must sign up to 'high-level targets' has affinities with the Public Service Agreements currently being rolled out to all local authorities.[18] Depending upon what the targets are, this could limit considerably assemblies' room for manoeuvre. This is complemented by the proposal that extra funding will be available for assemblies that meet or exceed their targets (which is discussed further under **Funding of elected assemblies**). This could well amount to an inducement to assembly executives to stick close to UK government priorities. The Government also proposes retaining reserve powers to alter the RDAs' economic development strategies, and to dis-approve assemblies' appointments to RDA boards.[19]

Sums available

47. Difficulties with the financial chapter relate principally to the lack of clarity over the true amount of money likely to be available to a regional assembly. There is no detail over the size of the 'bonus pot' available to regions which meet or exceed their targets. It is hard to gauge the effects of the precepting and borrowing powers. And the White Paper makes some rather wild and over-optimistic statements about improvement of efficiency through scrutiny.

48. It is very difficult to gain a clear picture of what resources will (or might) be available to a regional assembly from Chapter 5. The Government may not want to appear to commit itself; but the subject is a fundamental one, and the lack of clarity will not aid public debate. Below, the hypothetical budget for a North-East Assembly (plus additional lines from the present author) is reproduced, from the White Paper, at Table 4.

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[18] There is another antecedent to these proposals, in the *contrat de plan* which the French regional governments must agree with central government: they last six years (which is the length of time between regional elections in France).

[19] The right to alter the Regional Economic Development Strategy, and to dis-approve appointments to RDA boards, is not even available to central government in the case of the Greater London Authority.

Table 4 : Expenditure in 2001/02 on programmes for which a North-East elected regional assembly would take responsibility[20]	
National programmes	**Expenditure (£ million)**
Regional Development Agency	173
Housing capital—local authorities	48
Housing capital—registered social landlords	23
Rail Passenger Partnership	1
Rural partnership	2
Arts, sport and tourism	12
English Heritage	1
Total national programmes	260
European programmes	89
Total	**349**
Added by the present author:	
General administration grant	*20*
Precept	*5*
Borrowing	*50*
Possible total	*424*

49. The true 'headline figure' here is £260 million. European programmes will vary substantially between years, and the funding given is hypothecated to specific uses, so the £89 million referred to does not form any meaningful part of a single budget.

50. Of the £260 million, £244 million (94%) relates to two policy areas: economic development and housing. Whatever is said about the validity of strategy-writing and the uses of 'powers of influence', a budget which is so strongly skewed towards two policy fields is bound to provoke a strong temptation to the assembly executive to concentrate attention on those areas, where money can be freely and visibly spent. Though extra funds will be available from general grant, borrowing and precept, they will not be enough to redress the balance.

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[20] Reproduced from box 5.1, *Your Region, Your Choice*, DTLR/Cabinet Office, 2002, p.45, with the exception of the four lines ending in the 'possible total'.

Cost savings

51. The Government suggests that assemblies would be able to make savings through effective working:

> 'An assembly would cover most of its own additional running costs if, through more effective targeting of resources and efficiency improvements arising from scrutiny by assembly members, it increased value for money from its own programme expenditure by three to five per cent.' (White Paper, 5.13)

52. This statement is unrealistic. Even if savings could be clearly attributed to the scrutiny process, scrutiny as often results in pressures for increased expenditure as it does in reductions. The evidence available from Scotland, Wales and London suggests that increased costs of some 25-40% have followed the advent of a democratically accountable body in those territories, even leaving out of account the costs of running the new democratic institutions themselves. The Greater London Authority cost £36 million in its first year and £49 million in its second: this is mostly new money which has been raised by significant precepting on the London boroughs. It is foolhardy of the Government to claim that a new tier of government will reduce administration costs. Extra costs are an inevitable corollary of increased democratic accountability.

Boundaries

53. The White Paper states correctly that:

> 'a prolonged debate over the composition of individual regions is likely to generate a good deal of fervour but with no obvious prospect that boundaries that are more widely acceptable or practicable would emerge at the end.' (White Paper, 6.4)

54. The White Paper maintains the existing mechanism for changing Regional Development Agency boundaries, which enables the Secretary of State to do so under section 25 of the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998. S/he may adjust the boundaries, but not increase or reduce the number of regions.

55. This proposal therefore rules out for the time being the possibility of new regions—for instance, in Cornwall, which has its own regional campaign. The Constitution Unit will shortly produce a study on devolution in the South-West Region in which these issues are explored in more detail.

Constitutional issues

Electoral system

56. The Government has chosen the Additional Member system of proportional representation for use by elected regional assemblies. This is the system used in Scotland, Wales and London. Its strengths are that it ensures a 'constituency link' and a substantial degree of proportionality through 'top-up' seats. The decision that 33-35% of seats should be 'top-up'

seats—similar to the proportion in the National Assembly for Wales—will help to ensure a strong degree of proportionality. Elections will be held every four years, and 5% of the vote must be obtained to gain election (as only 30-35 seats in each assembly are on offer, this is not far above what the 'threshold' would be without such a provision).

57. A single top-up constituency will be used in each region. The White Paper argues that this will enable top-up members to more easily take a 'region-wide view'. Though this sounds intuitively right, there is scant evidence from Scotland, Wales or London to support the idea that regional list members are better able or more inclined to take a regional viewpoint than those elected in single-member constituencies. This is an academic point, however. The small number of seats on offer is a good enough argument for a single top-up constituency: if several top-up constituencies were used, the electoral arithmetic would severely dent proportionality.[21]

58. The White Paper proposes groups of local authority areas as the basis for the single-member constituencies. There is a precedent for this in the elections to the London Assembly. The Government may wish to be more flexible about this decision: in some regions, local authority areas are so irregular that it would be very difficult to create constituencies of approximately equal sizes.[22] Besides, it seems unlikely that assembly members would suffer a clash of roles with MPs, as regional assemblies' roles will be far closer to those of local government than national government.

Numbers, roles and pay

59. The White Paper largely follows the suggestions made during the course of recent debates with regard to constitutional issues. It proposes a formal separation of powers between an executive of six and the back-bench members. The back-benchers will be obliged to convene scrutiny committees to take an overview of the activities of the executive.

60. On the issue of size of assemblies, the Government is correct to state that the size of assemblies should reflect their functions. Functions, not population size, are the decisive factor in assembly workload. It is likely that 35-50 members would be a more workable number than 25-35. It will be very difficult, with below 30 members, to run enough scrutiny committees to both monitor the functioning of the executive and to carry out 'general

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[21] This is because each top-up region would contain fewer seats in total; this would mean that the proportion of votes required to win a seat would be greater. See Annex G of *Your Region, Your Choice*, at p.102, for an explanation of the Additional Member voting system.

[22] The Boundary Committee for England normally does not permit the ratio of seats to electors in local government to vary beyond 10% from the average: for the Parliamentary Boundary Committee the figure is about 14%. Neither of those figures could be adhered to if local authority boundaries were used. This is not such a problem in London, as the ratio between the smallest and largest London boroughs by population is 1:2; even so, there is a wide variation in London Assembly constituency sizes.

scrutiny' matters such as finance, audit and standards. The White Paper is silent on whether any or all of these will be obligatory, as many are in Scotland, Wales and London.

61. The White Paper proposes that 'back-bench' Assembly members should be paid two-thirds of the salaries paid to members of the executive, and should work an average three-day week (White Paper, 7.24). It is hard to see the justification for this proposal. It risks putting potentially good candidates off because of the low salary (and low status) that the position would attract as a result. Also, the breadth of responsibilities proposed for regional assemblies means that back-bench assembly members are likely to be occupied with plenty of work.

62. The Government may fear that full-time membership will encourage 'professional politicians' to dominate the list of candidates for regional assemblies. In Scotland, Wales and London, the percentage of members elected at those bodies' first elections who had previous political experience was 73%, 77% and 92% respectively. But it is doubtful that part-time positions themselves will avoid this possibility, as it will make the holding of dual mandates (for example, in regional and local government) more easily justifiable. Party selection procedures are more likely to produce more women, ethnic minorities, 'non-traditional' politicians, and other groups, as members of a regional assembly, than are part-time as against full-time positions.[23]

Stakeholders

63. The proposals to involve stakeholders 'within the structure of an elected assembly' (White Paper, 7.8) are important. Stakeholder contributions have been a success in the restricted forums of the Regional Chambers up till now, and it is valuable 'to encourage the elected members to draw on the experience and skills of individuals in the region who may not have the time or inclination to stand for election themselves' (White Paper, 7.8). Paragraph 7.14 commits the Government specifically to providing resources to facilitate engagement with stakeholders.[24]

64. The Government has decided not to permit stakeholders to be either executive or assembly members. Allowing stakeholders to sit on scrutiny committees may be a good idea, as they will be able, in theory, to bring their expertise to the scrutiny process. This does not

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[23] A survey carried out by the (current) North-East Regional Assembly in late 2000 found the greatest fear of regional assemblies—particularly in the business community—to be that they will provide 'jobs for the boys': that assembly members will be stuffed with familiar faces who inspire no confidence in the electorate or business.

[24] That said, the argument that relations with stakeholders will be strengthened because of the proposed small number of members seems unjustified. There is no reason to think that assemblies of 50 members instead of 25 would discourage the use of expertise.

necessarily require co-opted members to have voting rights, which would raise issues of representativeness.

Referendum and process

65. The process proposed for the move to an elected regional assembly in a given region is generally sound (with the exception of local government reform, discussed above).

66. The Government has retained for itself the decision as to whether to hold a referendum. Other suggestions made in recent debate, for means of triggering referendums, include public petitions from a set proportion of the population (as with elected mayors) and a formal request from the Regional Chamber. Although both the public and Regional Chamber will be consulted, they will not have independent leverage over the decision.

67. Otherwise, the stipulations for referendums, drawn from the provisions for elected mayors, are largely sensible. A five-year delay will be required, if a 'no' vote is obtained in a referendum, before another one can be held; and not all regions will move to referendums at the same pace. There is one minor exception: the Government has included a provision, lifted directly from provisions for elected mayors, that 'there will be restrictions on the promotional material which central and local government can issue in the 28-day campaign period before the referendum date' (White Paper, box 9.1). This provision was criticised by the Electoral Commission's review of 2001 mayoral referendums.[25] Most of the local electorates were unaware of or uninterested in the referendums until the final month, and then found they could only obtain political party literature. It seems bizarre that this provision has been recycled in a White Paper on regional government.[26]

New package for Regional Chambers

68. Though the main focus of this commentary is on the proposals for elected regional assemblies, it is right to look at the changes proposed for all regions by the White Paper. Chapter 2, which purports to strengthen existing regional arrangements, is in fact very short on new ideas. For the most part it proposes changes which are already in place, most of which are incremental improvements.[27]

69. The Government is right to characterise the aim of current regional arrangements as being to 'enhance capacity in the regions, on which an elected assembly will be able to build in those regions where people want one' (White Paper, 2.4). Currently, there are a large number of

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[25] Electoral Commission, *Reinvigorating Local Democracy? Mayoral Referendums in 2001*.

[26] The provision may have the effect of preventing local authorities marked for abolition from campaigning against a regional assembly.

[27] For an explanation of Regional Chambers and an account of their recent history, see Mark Sandford, *Further Steps for Regional Chambers*, Constitution Unit, 2001.

executive bodies, and quangos, spending public money in the regions. All of them are nominally accountable to Parliament, but in practice the chain of accountability is weak.

70. Alongside the executive agencies, with their significant spending powers, are a number of more shadowy bodies, such as Regional Cultural Consortiums and Sustainable Development Round Tables, as well as the Regional Chambers themselves.

71. Joint working in the regions takes place at present through strategy and consultation, between regional bodies and Government agencies, and private and voluntary sector. There are limits to the effectiveness of these arrangements.[28] In particular, government agencies must follow central policy, and thus they are limited in the degree to which they can participate in regional joint working and alter their behaviour accordingly.

72. The strategies produced in each region at present are listed in Table 5.

Table 5 : Current regional strategies	
Strategy	Produced by
Regional Economic Development Strategy	RDA with Regional Chamber
Regional Planning Guidance (RPG)	Regional Planning Body
Regional Transport Strategy	Part of RPG
Regional Cultural Strategy	Regional Cultural Consortium
Sustainable Development Framework	Sustainable Development Round Table
Regional Housing Strategy	Regional Housing Forum
Regional Waste Strategy	Part of RPG
Framework for Employment and Skills Action	Learning and Skills Councils, Employment Service, RDA

73. The most significant strategies are the Regional Economic Development Strategy (REDS) and RPG. The Planning Green Paper of December 2001 proposes to replace RPG with a new Regional Spatial Strategy, which is to be produced either by the Regional Chamber or by an elected assembly.

74. Regional Chambers were required to ensure that at least 30% of their membership were 'social and economic partners', in order to be 'designated' (i.e. officially recognised by the Secretary of State). The inclusion of a range of stakeholders, despite their lack of democratic credentials, has been one of the successes of the Chambers. The Government is

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[28] For example, see Scott Greer, *The Real Regional Health Agenda: Networks, Soft Money, and the Wider Determinants of Health in the East Midlands*, Constitution Unit, 2001.

understandably keen not to lose the input of stakeholders: they bring expertise and opportunities for networks to the table. Thus, the White Paper states:

> 'The Government is also looking for significant improvements in the quality and inclusive nature of the regional input to match the importance we attach to effective regional strategic planning…. The Government believes that regional planning bodies which involve only local authorities are not sufficiently inclusive and does not propose to recognise them for purposes of the new regional spatial strategies.'(White Paper, 2.19-2.20)

75. However, the 'inclusive nature of the regional input' does not depend upon voting rights for un-elected members: the un-elected members contribute to debate in all of the Chambers. Whilst in the East Midlands, West Midlands and East of England, planning powers have been guarded by elected members, in other regions (such as the South-West) the stakeholders have speaking but not voting rights.

76. There can be less objection to the proposal to provide direct funding to the Regional Chambers for the purposes of producing the new spatial strategies. The sums involved are not large, amounting to some £6 million per year across all of England, including London (see Table 6).[29] In at least one region (Yorkshire and the Humber) they are already paid directly to the Chamber by the local authorities. Elsewhere, there are *de facto* transfers of funds from local authorities to the region. Individual officers in local authorities, or in the regional Local Government Association, spend time working on RPG (which is recorded as 'support in kind'). Even given the controversy over the proposals in the Planning Green Paper, direct funding of the Chambers only recognises what is already reality.

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[29] This was proposed by Mark Sandford, *Further Steps for Regional Chambers*, Constitution Unit, 2001

Table 6 : Regional Planning Guidance allocation 2001-02[30]	
Region	**Amount**
South West	£510 000
South East	£920 000
East of England	£590 000
East Midlands	£440 000
West Midlands	£590 000
Yorkshire and Humberside	£560 000
North East	£290 000
North West	£800 000
London	£1 310 000
Total	**£6 000 000**

77. For the most part, however, Chapter 2 of the White Papers is long on words but short on action. This is demonstrated by Box 2.5 on page 27 (reproduced below). The first four bulleted suggestions are already in place in most regions. In most cases, senior officers in Government Offices and other bodies have been 'discussing their work' with the Regional Chambers since the Chambers were set up. Representatives from several regional bodies either sit on Regional Chambers or have regular dialogues with them. Concordats, commended by the White Paper, exist in many regions. But they give written form to understandings that were already in place: they do not signify a qualitatively different relationship than in those regions which do not possess them. It is strange that the Government goes on to promise that Government Offices will act as 'forums' for regional public-sector bodies to come together to dovetail their strategies, when Chambers are already well-placed to carry out this role.

78. The fifth bulleted suggestion, of input to spending reviews through Government Offices, is nebulous. Given that Government Offices are not distinct organisationally from their parent departments, but report back to them, it is hard to believe that either GOs or Regional Chambers will have any meaningful input to spending reviews in this way, however genuine the Government's intentions. The institutional framework all but precludes it. That is why, whilst Government Offices are able to channel information to the centre more effectively than would occur without their presence, they have not been effective at taking on

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[30] Source: Planning Directorate at the former DTLR. These sums are not hypothecated, and may be spent on other matters if local authorities choose.

board the concerns of other regional bodies. For the same reasons, they would be unlikely to be more effective as 'forums' than Regional Chambers already are.

[Reproduced from *Your Region, Your Choice*, p.27]

Box 2.5 : A Stronger Role for the Regional Chambers

The chambers have a valuable role to play in the regions alongside the Regional Development Agencies and Government Offices. Their responsibilities are being strengthened to include in the future:

— Continuing scrutiny of the relevant Regional Development Agency;

— Co-ordination and integration of regional strategies;

— A formal role as the regional planning body;

— A new relationship with the Regional Directors of Government Offices and senior officers in other government-funded bodies in the region, who will be ready to discuss their work;

— Input to the spending review process, through the relevant Government Office.

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79. Some possibilities for extensions of Chambers' powers include: [31]

— A statutory basis for the existence of the Chambers, which would be stronger than the provisions in the Regional Development Agencies Act;

— A statutory basis for the strategies that Chambers must produce: this would go some way towards giving extra 'teeth' to the Chambers in delivering those strategic objectives;

— The right for Chambers to appoint some members to regional or sub-regional boards;

— Closer relationships, or merger, with the Regional Cultural Consortiums, Public Health Observatories and Sustainable Development Round Tables, and with the variety of joint policy forums now being set up in the English regions;

— A consequent increase in funding.

80. The Government has argued that, without direct democratic accountability, there are limits to the functions which Chambers can carry out. But the proposals made here go no further than the proposals already made by the Government to transfer planning powers to the Chambers. And it is worth remembering that the Millan Report of 1996, in which the concept of Regional Chambers was first developed, proposed that un-elected Chambers should appoint Regional Development Agency boards, and that the boards should be directly accountable to Chambers.[32]

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[31] See Mark Sandford, *Further Steps for Regional Chambers*, Constitution Unit, 2001

[32] See Labour Party Policy Commission, *Renewing the Regions*, Sheffield Hallam University, 1996

Conclusion

81. This White Paper reveals the difficulties that the present Government has in constructing an adequate policy for the introduction of elected regional assemblies. On the one hand the powers on offer are sufficiently thin, and budgets concentrated in particular policy areas, as to cast severe doubt over whether the proposed assemblies could work effectively. There is a chasm between the powers on offer and the expectations and promises of the first two chapters. The Government's aim is clearly to introduce regional assemblies with a minimum of fuss, a form of 'velvet devolution', which may become an ongoing process.

82. However, in this White Paper the devil is in the detail; there are a considerable number of proposals which appear not to have been properly thought out, and which could prove considerable obstacles to workable elected regional structures. Politically, the greatest caveat is the Government's insistence on unitary local government as a precondition of an elected assembly. Early indications are that the North-East, and Yorkshire and the Humber, will be able to resign themselves to a unitary structure; but parts of the North-West and West Midlands are unlikely to be similarly inclined. Other regions such as the East Midlands and the South-West are very unlikely to vote for a structure that means the end of familiar boundaries.

83. On the other hand, the level of scepticism amongst Ministers and throughout Whitehall is such that little more could have been achieved at the first attempt. Removing the proposed budgets from central control, coupled with a traditional suspicion of sub-national government on Whitehall's part, is no small achievement. It differs from devolution to Scotland and Wales, which essentially sub-contracted two departments of state to be managed by democratically elected bodies, in that it points to an on-going regional reorganisation of decision-making. In that sense *Your Region, Your Choice* can be described as being more radical than it appears.

Annex: Glossary of acronyms

Acronym	Meaning
DETR	Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (the predecessor to DTLR until June 2001)
DTLR	Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions
GLA	Greater London Authority
GO	Government Office for the Region
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
RDA	Regional Development Agency
REDS	Regional Economic Development Strategy (produced by the RDA for each region)
RPG	Regional Planning Guidance
SBS	Small Business Service
SRA	Strategic Rail Authority

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