

The North East region referendum campaign 2004: issues and turning points

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Paper prepared for the 2005 PSA conference, University of Leeds, 4-7 April 2005

Introduction

Our policy of devolution set out in our manifesto means giving power to people in our nations and regions - so that they can set their own priorities and make more decisions, which affect their lives. London now has citywide government and a Mayor powerful enough to run a global city. The Scottish Parliament enables the people of Scotland to make key decisions without recourse to Westminster for the first time in hundreds of years. The Welsh Assembly has given the Welsh people a powerful new voice to create jobs, prosperity, and social justice. Each of these new bodies was voted for by the people and has since proved to be very popular. (John Prescott, 8 November 2004)¹

On 5 November 2004, the returning officer for the North East of England reported the results of the referendum on whether there should be an elected assembly for the region. His report was an unmitigated disaster for the government and a personal blow to the Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's long-standing dream of devolving power to the English regions: not only was the government's proposal rejected by almost four times as many voters as supported it, but it was resoundingly rejected in even the staunchest of Labour strongholds.²

Although governments have lost referendums before, as John Prescott reminded the House of Commons on 8 November,³ and whilst even their victories have sometimes been very close, the scale of the defeat in the North East was unprecedented. Unlike other polities, in the UK referendums are rarely used and usually then only *both* when there is a proposed amendment to that constitutional settlement *and* where the ruling party is not entirely certain of its political support on an issue. Through referendums, major policy changes can be depoliticised to a limited degree, and the potential damage of defeat offset.

¹ Statement to the House on the Elected Regional Assembly Referendum in the North East, 8 November, Hansard, 426 (151) col 587-588

² Referendum result: 'Yes' 197,310 votes (22.1%), 'No' 893,829 votes (77.9%), Turnout 47.4% and in no local authority area did the Yes vote exceed 30%.

³ "It is worth remembering that the proposal for Scottish and Welsh devolution failed to win public support in the first referendum in 1979 - only for the situation to be reversed 20 years later in a new referendum." 8 November, Hansard, 426 (151) col 587-588

Nevertheless, there are good general reasons for expecting governments to win referendums. First, while some constitutions require referendums to be held, the very decision to hold a vote is in the government's hands. Second, research evidence from numerous referendums in different countries suggests that, whilst the referendum is used to defend and legitimise their plans, governments tend to win them because they are able to tilt the broader public agenda in their favour, and also mobilise their supporters.⁴ Third, governments are able to choose the timing of the referendum to suit their objective. Indeed, as Table 1 shows, the record of governments in the UK is good. While six of eight previous referendums had been won, the government's proposals actually polled a majority in all but one of the previous attempts. The most notable success was in 1975 over membership of the EEC, but other victories have been won in specific territories including Scotland and Wales in 1997 and London and Northern Ireland in 1998. At a more local scale, on the other hand, ODPM-backed proposals to introduce elected mayors in England and Wales were backed in only 11 of 31 local referendums. Even so, at the outset the government was relatively confident about the North East referendum result. Drawing on informal 'soundings', the government had initially planned to hold three simultaneous referendums in each of the three northern regions, only to postpone indefinitely (and subsequently cancel) those in the North West and Yorkshire & the Humber as it became increasingly clear that these would be lost. The government remained convinced that a vote in the North East vote was a 'safe bet', not least because a BBC North opinion poll in 2002 had suggested that 72 per cent of the electorate would support an elected assembly. Furthermore, although the Electoral Commission's rules were adhered to, the Labour

⁴ Walker, C. (2003) *The Strategic Use of Referendums: Power, Legitimacy and Democracy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan). Paul, D. and Brown, C. (2001) 'Testing the Limits of Elite Influence on Public Opinion: An Examination of Sports Facility Referendums' *Political Research Quarterly* 54(4), 871-888

Party placed considerable resources behind a yes vote. Third, the North East has, from the outside, long appeared to have a relatively coherent and articulate regional elite, where the public and private sectors joined together in defence of the regional agenda. It appeared reasonable for Westminster politicians to believe that the regional elite was already well placed to influence the wider local agenda. Even though the reality of the North East may have been somewhat different, most research evidence from elsewhere suggests that, where there are political divisions, the public aligns with popular political forces, which in the case of the North East was the Labourist establishment.

In such circumstances, it is important to understand why the electorate in the North East voted as they did. Not only did the result effectively destroy the government's strategy for both elected regional government in England, but also the lessons to be learnt have a wider resonance for future referendums in the UK.

Explaining the result

'I do not know why the referendum was lost—there is a range of reasons. I have probably spent more time than anyone else defending the proposal and listening to people's views in markets, streets and in debates. I gave some of the reasons, which included worries about too many politicians and cost. Europe was mentioned from time to time, as if the proposal were a Euro-plot. All those factors played a part. I do not think that there was one major reason. I cannot therefore really give an answer to the question "Why?" All I need to know now is that I did not convince people and that I was emphatically defeated. (John Prescott, 8 November 2004)⁵

Limited devolution

Although England has 85 per cent of the UK population, devolution since 1997 has focused primarily on Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and, echoing its tradition of separateness in local government, London. For the remainder of the English regions, devolution has enhanced and strengthened the regional 'Government Offices' and created new business-dominated Regional Development Agencies and the somewhat ineffectual and unelected Regional Assemblies.⁶ To its supporters, the referendum in the North East was seen as the first stage of a process whereby the balance of power and authority would begin to shift away from Whitehall and Westminster and towards a region that has consistently lagged the rest of England according to most economic and social indicators.

However, the powers of the proposed elected assembly fell far short of those granted to the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly. The new elected assembly would be responsible for appointing the Chair and Board to One North East (the Regional Development Agency), set the regional economic strategy and have a limited input into other strategic and operational economic matters in the region (such as transport

⁵ Hansard, 426, 151, col 598

⁶ Tomaney, J. (2002) 'The evolution of regionalism in England' *Regional Studies* 36(7), 721-732

planning and support for small businesses). Whilst most of those campaigning for a Yes vote privately admitted that these powers were limited and in themselves would not let them deliver on their aim of shifting the balance of power in England, they remained enthusiastic about the prospect of an elected assembly and saw it as part of a longer-term *process*. Support for greater regional powers would burgeon as the idea and legitimacy of regional institutions grew in the popular imagination.

Stifling of the Yes camp

Translating this enthusiasm into an effective campaign was no easy task. It relied on selling a sophisticated reading of the imperatives of political change and simultaneously maintaining that the limited powers that the elected assembly would have could make a significant difference to the region.⁷ On one level, the campaign tended to over-emphasise the degree to which the region would be changed if a Yes vote were achieved. In one press release, for example, the Yes4theNorthEast campaign claimed, “a North East Regional Assembly will be able to reverse this trend [towards regional economic divergence]. It would be able to focus spending on local priorities and directly tackle the causes of slow economic growth that are currently hampering the region.”⁸ But alongside these yes claims, the public could observe many counter claims, such as Lord Rooker’s declaration the region would have ‘no money, no powers.’⁹

Militating against these potential weaknesses were exceptionally strong levels of support for the Yes campaign from a broad regional coalition. This included iconic

⁷ For example, the Yes campaign claimed that the assembly could create 125,000 new jobs and help establish 5000 new businesses (Press Release 20/10/04 ‘Yes campaign unveils business backers’)

⁸ 09/10/04 Leading academics back North East Regional Assembly (This file is archived by the research team at the University of Bristol and available for consultation)

⁹ Hansard, House of Lords, 5 March 2003: columns 813-814

business figures such as Sir John Hall, the founder of the Metro Centre and chairman of Newcastle Football Club and Sir John Bridge, the former chief executive of the regional development agency; the regional political establishment including the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats and figures such as Ray Mallon, the Mayor of Middlesbrough and populist former police chief; the trade unions; and figures from sport and the arts, such as Brendan Foster and opera singer Suzannah Clarke.

The Yes campaign made extensive use of this coalition and there was strong logic behind such a strategy. The region was perceived to have a strong regional identity, based on a culture that unified the elites and masses.¹⁰ The Yes campaign was explicit; not only did they associate the historical impetus for regional government with the economic crises of the 1920s and 1930s,¹¹ but one of four main reasons they gave for voting for the assembly was that:

North East England is our community and a place to be proud of.

The people of the North East have a shared culture, which comes from their history. They have a strong sense of community, born out of the industries of the past. These industries made sure people had to work hard, together, to succeed. Around its three major rivers the people of the region share some of the best landscapes in Britain, including England's last wilderness, its finest castles and its greatest cathedral. People are proud to be from this region and many expatriates want to return.

Of all the English regions, the North East has the strongest sense of identity. We share a proud history and great potential for the future.¹²

However, the Yes campaign failed to underpin their evocation of a sense of history and community with a street level campaign that involved the people of the region.

This was a contentious issue amongst supporters of elected regional government even

¹⁰ See for example Tomaney, J. (2003) 'Governing the region past, present and future (inaugural lecture).' Newcastle upon Tyne, University of Newcastle/Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies.

¹¹ Campaign Background Pack (2004) page 15 (archived at Bristol University)

¹² '4 reasons 4 Yes' (http://yes4thenortheast.com/yes/main2.php?menu_id=issues&page_id=47) (archived at Bristol University)

before the launch of the official campaign. While some had argued that there was a need to mobilize and enthuse the electorate, the official campaign supported a more elite-orientated, media-delivered campaign. This reflected a tendency of politicians in the UK as a whole to deliver their messages via the media rather than directly to the electorate. At the same time it appeared that while prominent government figures including John Prescott was fully behind the campaign, other prominent northern Labour MPs including Graham Stringer were against the proposal. Furthermore, the Prime Minister, who had long been regarded as a devolution sceptic, gave public support to the campaign at a relatively late stage.¹³

It became clear during autumn 2004 that opposition to the regional assembly was gathering momentum, particularly after an opinion poll in the *Northern Echo* in mid-October suggested that the No campaign was trailing by 7 per cent. The Yes campaign adopted a more aggressive approach, drawing attention to right-wing groups opposing the assembly including the British National Party and the United Kingdom Independence party. They also attempted to elide the No campaign with the Conservative Party, notably through the use of a pantomime rat ('Rather Arrogant Toff Southerners') that doorstepped the No campaign offices for the media. This message was echoed by the Deputy Prime Minister who consistently drew attention to the Conservative Party connections of members of the No campaign board and team. Although a region with a strong Labourist tradition and continued antipathy to the Conservative Party, both insiders and external observers now believe this line of attack to have been a tactical error that trivialised the campaign issues as they were understood by the electorate and failed to provide a convincing defence to the claims being made by the No campaign. In any case, negative campaigning is inherently

¹³ 'Blair supports regional assemblies' *Guardian* 19 August 2004

risky, and the academic assessments of its effectiveness cannot draw definite conclusions.¹⁴

The timing of the vote

The timing of the vote was critical for the outcome of the referendum in three senses. First, advocates of devolution felt that it had been hard work even to get to the stage of a referendum and compared this unfavourably with the situation in the national territories, and particularly London. For them, this gave a negative signal to the electorate about the government's real – rather than rhetorical – commitment to devolution, a signal that was compounded by the cancellation of the votes in the two other regions. Second, the referendum took place towards the end of the political cycle and had, at times, resembled a by-election as national politicians descended to the North East to urge a yes vote and the Deputy Prime Minister spent a week on the campaign trail. Perversely, in this context traditional Labour Party supporters felt that they could vote against the proposals as a relatively low cost means of 'punishing' the government for disaffection elsewhere. Finally, most of the electorate had their ballot papers for two or three weeks before sending them in: Yes For the North East had timed their campaign to peak at the start of this period whilst North East Says No was most effective at the end. In a very real sense, the use of the postal ballot, and the campaign groups' understanding of the effect of this, may have made a difference to the scale of the proposal's defeat.

¹⁴ Lau, R. Sigelman, L. Heldman, C. and Babbitt, P. (1999) 'The effects of negative political advertisements: a metaanalytic political assessment' *American Political Science Review* 93(4), 851-875.

The No campaign

At the outset of the campaign, opposition to an elected assembly was hampered by significant, and occasionally publicly fractious, splits. Two credible applications for the designation (and government funding) as the official No campaign were made. One was led by Neil Heron, a former market trader who hit national prominence over his refusal to sell goods using metric weights and measures and who now led the Metric Martyr's campaign, whilst the other had a business dominated board with closer – but downplayed – links to the Conservative Party. When the Electoral Commission designated the latter, Neil Herron cried foul, criticised the designated group and continued his own campaign. Although this received relatively little coverage and the media mainly focused on the official No campaign, ultimately that there were two No campaigns served to undermine the message that the elected assembly was a broadly popular aspiration. Furthermore, opponents of change do not need to have to have a coherent message, while proponents must.

The official No campaign group consistently fought on a simple message: that the elected assembly would be expensive and have little power. This message was very effectively underwritten with a sophisticated use of images: first, burning £1 million in fake £50 notes for the television and newspapers and, second, with an inflatable white elephant that toured the towns and cities of the region and was memorably photographed next to the Angel of the North. The white elephant came to be the iconic image of the campaign and was so effective because it chimed with the key negative theme that the No campaign fought on. The campaign was helped by a series of preoccupations in the media about MPs' expenses, with the implication that elected politicians have their 'snouts in the trough', and the last stages of the bad publicity over the escalating costs and waste of the Scottish Parliament building.

During the course of the autumn, the No campaign also began to emphasise an anti-politics rhetoric: not only would an elected assembly be expensive, they argued, but it would create an additional cadre of politicians who were, it implied, out for themselves. In doing so, the campaign presented itself as both a- and anti-political and, in this they were helped by the Conservatives: whilst Tony Blair, John Prescott and Charles Kennedy all campaigned for a yes vote, national Conservative politicians – who were strongly opposed to the proposal – were notable for their absence from the region.¹⁵ Over the course of the campaign this anti-politician and anti-tax message increasingly chimed with an electorate whose historical support for the Labour Party was already weakening without a natural replacement having been found: after all, a monkey and a former police chief had been elected city mayors in place of party politicians that had ruled northern local authorities for many decades. More generally, the result of the North East may be seen as an expression of the decline in political trust in Britain, and the strengthening of the view held by the public that politicians only act for their own interest.¹⁶ Such sceptical opinions make citizens want to reject proposals that have been rolled out by the political elite and warmly embrace more straightforward and populist messages. The way in which the No campaign portrayed itself as politically independent and hostile to the established political elites may have helped its cause.

¹⁵ The Yes campaign consistently tried to cast the No campaigners as a Conservative Party front with little success

¹⁶ See Bromley, C. Curtice, J. and Seyd, B. (2001) 'Political engagement, trust and constitutional reform', *British Social Attitudes*, 18th Report (London: Sage)

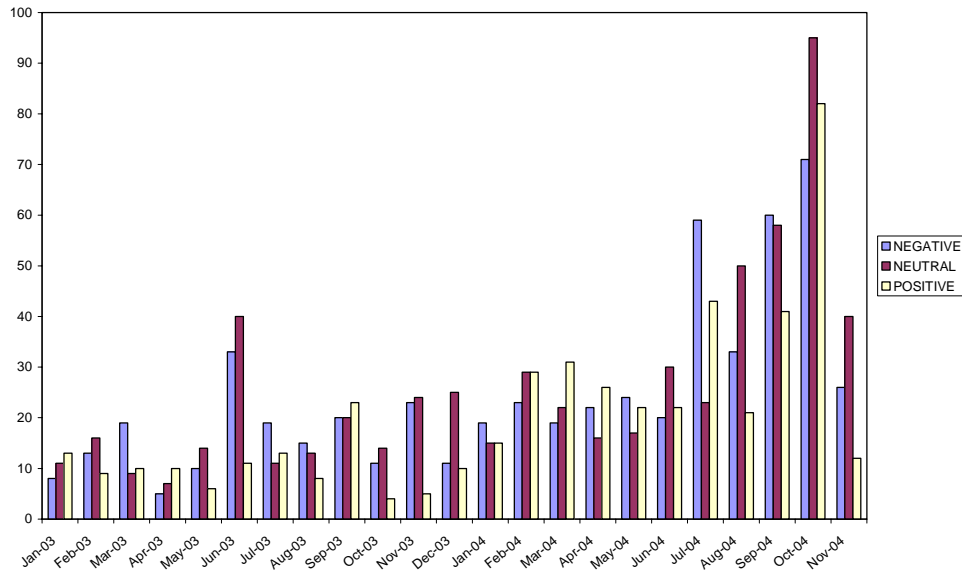
The change in the tone of media coverage

"We will lose because we have failed to get across a coherent message" Alan Milburn¹⁷

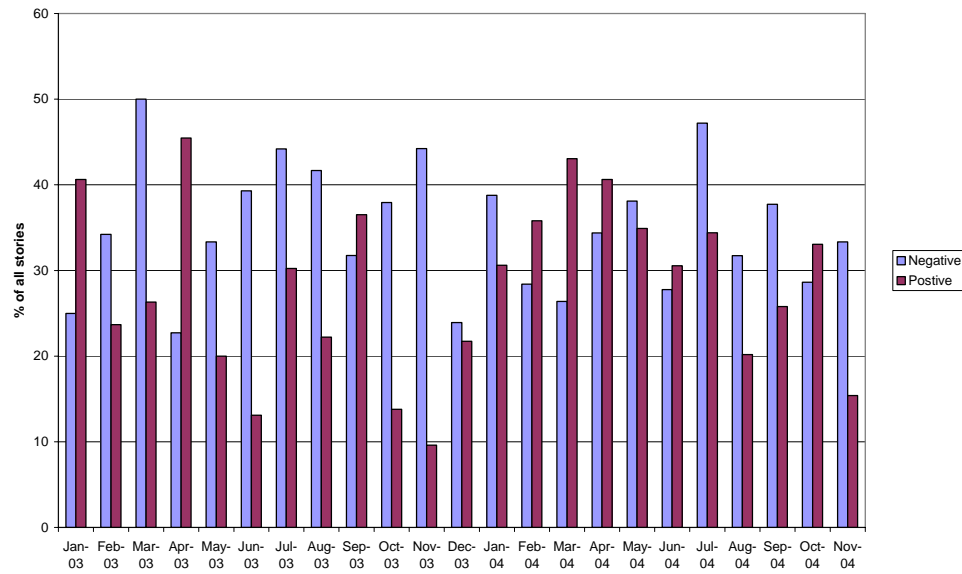
The failure of the Yes and the concomitant success of the No campaigns led to a transformation in the tone of the coverage in the print media. Between January 2003 and the date of the referendum there were 1,628 significant features in the regional and national print media on the issues. As the graph shows, in the six months up to the vote, the balance of opinion only positive in one month. The North East still has a vibrant and popular set of newspapers, and the relationships between regional political journalists and the individuals in the Yes camp, and their supporters, were personally close. Furthermore, the [Newcastle] *Journal* had long supported the principle of regional elected government but during the campaign declared itself to be against the proposals and whilst the *Northern Echo* (based in Darlington and with a wide circulation in County Durham) supported the elected assembly, its coverage was balanced and reflected the news agenda that was being set by the campaign groups.

¹⁷ Quoted in Hansard, 8 November 2004, 426 (151) col 589

Tone of newspaper coverage, January 2003-November 2004¹⁸



Tone of Newspaper coverage (% of all stories in month)



¹⁸ All newspaper articles in the regional and national newspapers (excluding the *Financial Times*) were collected and have been categorised as broadly positive, neutral or broadly negative. The full results of this analysis are available from the authors.

An error of judgement on the part of the political elite?

Given that referendums carried out at the discretion of the governing elite, many of the reasons for failure lie at the hands of the government who thought (or claimed they thought) they could win. What is striking about the North East result is that it was not a narrow defeat. It was crushing, far higher than other referendums. Was this a massive failure of intelligence on the part of the Labour party? Or was it just that electoral behaviour is not always predictable, and that it was reasonable to judge that the campaign could have been won? For the former point of view, it is possible for policy-makers to note that the public has a limited appetite for constitutional reform, as epitomised by the failure of the campaign to have a significant number of elected mayors, the narrow win for the Greater London Assembly and the Welsh Assembly, and the low public support for the new European Constitution and the Euro. In addition, it is likely that the main reference group of Labour strategists were the very regional elites who were behind the Yes campaign, which meant that the message was filtered in this way. Of course, not all Labour leaders were gun ho for elected regions and it may have been the case the defeat was just what some wanted.

Conclusions

The defeat of the government's proposals on inaugurating an elected assembly in North East England was not only a personal blow to the Deputy Prime Minister, but has apparently derailed the elected dimension to regional government in England, a proposal that had been sustained by a series of institutional reforms for approaching a decade. Furthermore, there are important lessons for protagonists in future

referendums in the UK. First, the timing and mode of the election matters: a postal vote at a low point in the electoral cycle gives disgruntled government supporters the opportunity to inflict an *apparently* painless blow. Second, it is easier to campaign to maintain the status quo unless there are compelling reasons for change. Third, effective use of the media and symbols that chime with the core message are vital.

It would be easy to blame the fate of the outcome as a series of tactical blunders on the part of the Yes, campaigning as their strategy needs to be seen in context where many of the mistakes by the Yes-policy-makers had been made much earlier. The timing and nature of the proposals made it harder for the Yes campaigners to gain much ground and encouraged them to use more desperate tactics. As often is the case in politics it the combination of factors that come together at particular points in time that can explain striking political events. Why observers inside the North East were not so surprised at the result was because of the combination of a poor proposal at a late part of the political cycle, which allowed the No campaigner to devise a campaign that hit home so well. Constitutional reformers need to be aware that the early choices matter and persuasion is hard to achieve when the cards are stacked in the wrong direction.

Acknowledgement

The authors acknowledge the support of ESRC. We also gratefully acknowledge Ricardo Balarezo for conducting the analysis of newspaper coverage.

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Table 1: Referendums in the United Kingdom (excluding local mayoral elections 2001-2004)				
<i>Year</i>	<i>Territory</i>	<i>Question</i>	<i>Result</i>	<i>Data</i>
1973	Northern Ireland	'1.Do you want NI to remain part of the UK? Or 2. Do you want NI to be joined with the Republic of Ireland, outside of the UK?'	Option 1 accepted Government win	Option 1 98.9% Option 2 1.1% Turnout 58.1%
1975	United Kingdom	'The government have announced the results of the renegotiation of the UK's terms of membership of the European Community. Do you think that the UK should stay in the European Community?'	Yes Government win	Yes 67.2% No 32.8% Turnout 64.5%
1979	Scotland	'Do you want the provisions of the Scotland Act 1978 to be put into effect?'	No Government loss*	Yes 51.5% No 48.5% Turnout 63.8%
1979	Wales	'Do you want the provisions of the Wales Act 1978 to be put into effect?'	No Government loss	Yes 29.3% No 70.7% Turnout 58.3%
1997	Scotland	'1. I agree that there should be a Scottish Parliament; or 2. I do not agree that there should be a Scottish Parliament'	Yes Government win	Yes 74.3% No 25.7% Turnout 60.4%
		'1. I agree that a Scottish Parliament should have tax-varying powers; or 2. I do not agree that a Scottish Parliament should have tax-varying powers'	Yes Government win	Yes 63.5% No 36.5% Turnout 60.4%
1997	Wales	'1. I agree that there should be a Welsh Assembly; or 2. I do not agree that there should be a Welsh Assembly'	Option 1 accepted Government win	Option 1 50.3% Option 2 49.7% Turnout 50.1%
1998	London	'Are you in favour of the Government's proposals for a Greater London Authority, made up of an elected mayor and a separately elected assembly?'	Yes Government win	Yes 72.0% No 28.0% Turnout 34.1%
1998	Northern Ireland	'Do you support the agreement reached at the multi-party talks on Northern Ireland and set out in Command Paper 3883?'	Yes Government win	Yes 71.1% No 28.9% Turnout 81.1%
2004	North East England	'Should there be an elected assembly for the North East region?'	No Government loss	Yes 22.0% No 79.0% Turnout 47.8%

*At least 40% of the electorate was required to vote 'yes' for the Scotland Act 1978 to be put into effect