



PROJECT ROME

# NORTHERN AGENDA

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## Editorial

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**As the new northern Metro Mayors in the North-West and North-East get to work on delivering their manifesto pledges, we'll focus our attention on Yorkshire, where divisions over the route of the HS2 high-speed rail line and, inevitably, regional devolution threaten a fractious summer and autumn in the White Rose county.**

The Government's announcement of the HS2 route from Birmingham to Leeds caused a difference of opinion amongst Labour politicians in South Yorkshire, with most

commentators calling a win for Sheffield at the expense of some of their South Yorkshire neighbours. The route will go east of Sheffield, with a spur taking some trains into Sheffield itself, the preferred option of the city council and Sheffield MPs. The alternative plan for a new HS2 station at the Meadowhall shopping centre outside of Sheffield, the preferred option of much of the rest of South Yorkshire's political leaders, was scrapped, much to the chagrin of former Labour leader Ed Miliband.

The proposed route will go through the heart of his Doncaster North constituency and through the heart of a newly built housing estate, resulting in the demolition of up to 20 new homes. Responses to the consultation



process were 15:1 against the government’s preferred route. Miliband slammed the process as a “sham” and called the decision “wrong and perverse.” He was joined by other South Yorkshire MPs who are concerned their constituencies will bear the disruption of HS2 without feeling the immediate benefits.

The divisions among South Yorkshire’s dominant party – Labour control all four local authorities and hold all 14 parliamentary constituencies – were deepened over regional devolution. At this month’s meeting of the Sheffield City Region Combined Authority the devolution deal offered by the Government was officially put on hold until September while the leaders of Barnsley and Doncaster explored other options, including a Yorkshire-wide solution. Barnsley leader, Sir Steve Houghton, stepped down as Chair of the

Combined Authority, a move welcomed by other local authority leaders. And whilst the public statements of supporters of the Sheffield deal were measured and comradely, behind the scenes local authority leaders and MPs were said to be “incandescent” that Barnsley and Doncaster had effectively killed the Sheffield deal. “It’s dead in the water, it will never go ahead” was the verdict of one veteran Labour figure.

Does this mean the Yorkshire-wide devolution deal is now a serious option? Enter new Northern Powerhouse minister, Jake Berry. Berry is the third holder of the office in three years, the MP for Darwen and Rossendale was a close ally of George Osborne, architect of the Northern Powerhouse, and is known as a key advocate of devolution. On his first ministerial visit to the North-West he praised



Ed Miliband



Sir Steve Houghton



Jake Berry MP



Labour's Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham as a "great figure for the North" and Burnham's team confirmed it was a constructive meeting between the two.

The hopes of the White Rose devolution lobby were therefore high when Berry made his first ministerial sortie across the Pennines two days later. The optimism lasted as long as it took to read the article the minister penned for the Yorkshire Post on the day of his visit. "Let me be clear about one thing, there will not be a 'full Yorkshire' devolution deal", was his opening gambit.

Keighley MP and devolution advocate John Grogan used DCLG question time to gently admonish Berry for his impertinence and to suggest that Yorkshire should decide on Yorkshire's future. Berry answered that it wasn't for him or government "to tell Yorkshire what devolution deal it should have", which rather begged the question of when his article in the YP had been penned.

Opinion appears to be divided on Berry's appointment. One pessimist feared that his apparent antagonism toward Yorkshire, contrasted with his warm words about Andy Burnham, indicate that he will be the "Minister for the North-West Powerhouse." Others remain optimistic and the summer recess has probably come at an opportune time. Grogan's call for all parties to "take a deep breath and come back with an open mind" was echoed by veteran political fixer Bill Adams, Regional Secretary of the TUC.

He suggested that he would use the summer to try and broker a cross-party deal for a Yorkshire-wide devolution deal to take to government.

Rumours persist that Wakefield council leader, Councillor Peter Box, will step down as Chair of the West Yorkshire Combined Authority. Although a recent convert to the cause of devolution, for many years he was regarded as the major road block to a devolution deal of any kind. His likely replacement would be the highly regarded Councillor Susan Hinchcliffe, leader of Bradford Council, and a firm supporter of

**“ Let me be clear about one thing, there will not be a ‘full Yorkshire’ devolution deal...**

**- Jake Berry MP**



**John Grogan MP**



**Bill Adams**



**Cllr Peter Box**



**Cllr Susan Hinchcliffe**



**Rachel Reeves MP**

devolution. But time is not their side. The all-consuming Brexit is looming and a weakened government means Parliamentary time and backbone might be missing.

Meanwhile, Yorkshire Labour MPs secured a number of chairs of key House of Commons select committees. Rachel Reeves (Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy) and Clive Betts (Communities and Local Government) won out in hotly contested elections. Hilary Benn (Exiting the EU), Yvette Cooper (Home Affairs) and Mary Creagh (Environmental Audit) were elected unopposed. With a hung parliament and a lack of government business going through the Commons, select committees will become the frontline of backbench scrutiny of government departments and legislation. Yorkshire MPs will be playing a key scrutiny role in this two-year parliament.

As MPs head into the summer recess there is much speculation about the future of the

Prime Minister. Will she survive to conference? Will she want to? But there appears to be a growing consensus that she will not lead her party into the next election. All eyes will be on the manoeuvrings of potential successors, not least Yorkshire's own David Davis. However, talk of an early election in the autumn appears to be way off the mark. Jeremy Corbyn continues to poll well and he has promised a summer campaign tour of 40 marginal seats, many of them in the North. One senior Conservative activist put it bluntly, "The very real spectre of Corbyn in No 10 is concentrating the minds of Tory MPs."

"Everyone is utterly exhausted" was the verdict of one MP as Parliament went into recess until September, "we all need a holiday, a good book, a glass of wine or two and a quiet summer." We think the country might agree.



**Clive Betts MP**



**Hilary Benn MP**



**Yvette Cooper MP**



**Mary Creagh MP**



**David Davis MP**