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**RADIX**

THINK  
TANK  
FOR THE  
RADICAL  
CENTRE

DEMOCRACY

**THE URGENT  
FUTURE OF  
CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM**



“EVERY GOVERNMENT  
THAT COMES TO POWER  
ALWAYS SAYS IT BELIEVES IN  
LOCALISM AND WANTS TO  
DECENTRALISE AND DOES  
THE EXACT OPPOSITE”

Sir Simon Jenkins

## INTRODUCTION

DAVID BOYLE

A week or so before the beginning of the 1992 general election campaign, Labour's deputy leader Roy Hattersley was chatting about strategy in the Atrium, the airy restaurant - now turned café - at 4 Millbank.

He had been lobbied every day by Charter 88, the influential constitutional reform campaign, to recognise their efforts to organise a series of public debates a week before polling day, an initiative they called 'Democracy Day'. And they should, Hattersley and colleagues agreed across the table. They would talk about constitutional reform on their grid exactly a week before voting - if only to spike the guns of the Lib Dems.

Unfortunately for Hattersley - and Charter 88 - the conversation had been overheard at the next table by a senior Conservative strategist, so it was that on Democracy Day, the pro-Conservative press were ready for them with their ridicule - even the Guardian gargled with the phrase the 'chartering classes'.

Democracy Day itself was a huge success, but there were those senior figures in the Labour Party who were inclined to blame Charter 88 - and the whole bundle of constitutional issues from PR to devolution - for the fact that they narrowly failed to win the election a week later.

My reason for telling this story is that - despite this setback - only five years later, Robin Cook and Bob Maclennan were inaugurating their joint cabinet committee to put into place most of the Charter 88 agenda (though not PR at Westminster).

The whole affair was done as a kind of consolation prize for Paddy Ashdown who had been promised a coalition government by Tony Blair in 1997. It was done despite open scepticism from Blair himself. Sovereignty remains with me, he assured Prime Minister's Questions, earning himself a rebuke from Ashdown who reminded him that, actually, sovereignty remained with the people.

It goes to show how quickly things change when it comes to the lost and neglected issues of constitutional reform.

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We forget it partly, perhaps, because of that highfalutin' and rather off-putting phrase. How many commentators dismissed any variation from the normal bread and butter issues of politics, quoting Bill Clinton's Campaign Director, James Carville, approvingly (also in 1992) that "it's the economy, stupid". Yet, suddenly, here we are – on both sides of the Atlantic – busily trashing the economy because of populist or nationalist issues that could so easily have come under the heading of constitutional reform. How Coronavirus has exposed the inadequacies of many of our governmental structures and our over-centralised state. How, the attempt to shine a light of these failures, has fallen short because our media and other mechanisms for holding public officials to account are no longer up to the job.

So given that we now have freedom of information, a Scottish parliament and a Welsh assembly, and the House of Lords has been half reformed – and it seems unlikely that anyone wants to talk about PR for a while – what are the most urgent 'constitutional' issues we need to discuss?

That is the background to this pamphlet and the online seminars Radix organised through the summer of 2020. We could potentially have chosen issues like the future of the BBC and the role of the civil service, both topical among populists, but the ones we actually chose overlap and are, in different ways, equally urgent:

- *The role of the media and a struggling local press in good government (Alan Rusbridger/22 June)*
- *The devolution of power to local level (Simon Jenkins/1 July)*
- *The future shape of the UK (John Alderdice/7 July)*
- *The importance of local economic levers (Charlotte Alldritt/20 July).*

All these issues cry out in different ways for attention. Because our ability to ask questions of those who rule us is key to the ability of government to act effectively. And without this scrutiny the UK might simply break apart with all the risks associated with those kind of separations, including unrest and civil war.

These are important considerations so I hope people will read these contributions, originally talks and interviews, and talk about the issues involved. And we in Radix will be with you talking about them in the years to come...

**DAVID BOYLE**

September 2020

**SIMON JENKINS**

## THE FUTURE OF LOCALISM

*Simon Jenkins is a journalist, author and broadcaster. In the course of his 50-year career, he has written in and edited both the London Evening Standard and The Times and has authored books on politics and the history and architecture of London. He has written regularly on different aspects of localism and has continually made the case for decentralisation. He was speaking to the HuffPost's UK Political Correspondent, Rachel Wearmouth*

It is always interesting to me that every government that comes to power always says it believes in localism and wants to decentralise and does the exact opposite.

It is fairly clear that you have a group of people in government now who do not have experience of localism in any sense. They found themselves in a situation where they had a major crisis and they really didn't know what to do. The central government machine was dependent on centralised or nationalised industry.

So Boris Johnson found himself with a covid crisis that put that promise immediately to the test and he was found wanting.

He had no mechanism for projecting central control locally in such a way that he could combat this particular disease. If you compare it with other countries, almost all of them relied on local government to enforce the lockdown and the various regulations of lockdown and then cope with the testing and the other aspects of it that were required to combat the disease.

In Britain, the system simply broke down and the NHS in effect was left trying to handle it itself. The NHS, of course, had its own interests – it has nothing to do with local government. For example, the government shared data on people who are shielding with supermarkets but not with councils.

## WHY OUR COVID RESPONSE FAILED SO BADLY?

However you define them - the local council, the parish council - the leaders of the local community would have been ideally placed to enforce what I believe should have been a voluntary lockdown and would have known who was disobeying it and known who needed protection. All those local contacts, which are the fabric of local government in Britain, were there in place but none of them were used – and the result has been a disaster. I really think that Britain has been shamed by it.

It is fairly clear that Britain was one of the worst performers. It is also fairly clear that countries – not just Korea and Taiwan but Norway, Germany and France – where they in effect conscripted local government to do the testing and tracing – were more successful. Where I live in Wales, there were some really pointless regulations – you weren't allowed to walk on a mountain, but you could walk on a beach. So when people on the ground regard these as ridiculous, they lose faith in the way in which this lockdown is being enforced. They're not there on side with government and they should have been on side with government.

Our key problem is that we don't have a constitution which stipulates localism. Instead, we have an informal constitution which places all power in the national parliament.

**'OUR KEY PROBLEM IS THAT WE DON'T HAVE A CONSTITUTION WHICH STIPULATES LOCALISM. INSTEAD WE HAVE AN INFORMAL CONSTITUTION WHICH PLACES ALL POWER IN THE NATIONAL PARLIAMENT...'**

Before I started as a journalist, I was a researcher on the Redcliffe-Maud Commission on Local Government. So I studied these things and became obsessed with them before I was even writing about them.

There is something in England – particularly in England – which is deeply centralised. People think they are the local mayor when they're an MP. They rather despise local government because they want to be seen to be doing things themselves and be credited with doing things, which is why they centralise. And yet you find that, in so many ways, there is that much more innovation at a local level and they are also a lot better at doing things there.

In this country, local taxes are fixed by the centre. That is not the case in America and it's not the case in Germany. In other countries some discretionary locality has to decide how much to tax and for what. Most people don't mind so much paying local taxes, curiously enough, when they know what it's going to be spent on, but they resent paying central taxes because they don't know what it's going to be spent on or they disagree with it.

All government is tiered: there are central governments, international governments, European governments and often two tiers of local government. Democracy is complicated. But if you legislate for those tiers, and make sure people know where they are, and decide at which level you are going to tax people, then it will not be simply a national system. But Britain has a totally national system now and I think the result is that people locally really don't feel empowered in any way.

## WHY LOCAL AUTHORITIES SHOULD TAX

I think local authorities ought to have far wider tax-raising powers. They should be able, for instance, to decide the level of business rates, which are currently determined centrally and which can be a crippling burden.

The trouble with local taxation in Britain is that it keeps changing because each government comes into power with a new idea for it. If only people knew where they stood and what their tax rates were going to be from one year to the next but that relationship has essentially to be between the business and the local authority – not between the business and centre.

Yes, there is no doubt at all that this opens up places to corruption. In Italy and Spain, I know there is terrible corruption in this relationship between business and local government. You will just have to cope with that and police it – yet it is better that it is local. As someone said to me, I would rather have a corrupt local authority than one that doesn't even have power.

I have become convinced that there is simply no way governments are going to voluntarily surrender power. You will have to legislate to make a system robust enough to protect the powers local government should have over particular areas of the economy and society, against infringement by the centre. It has to be constitutional. It is no good any longer for governments to come along saying: 'Oh, I believe in

localism' when they are actually doing centralism. You can't do it that way. Unless you go down the route that most European countries have gone down, where provinces and districts – even parishes – have systematic powers that are theirs and they can take the government to court if it refuses to let them exercise those powers. Otherwise, it won't happen. That is why I believe in constitutional change.

## THE PROBLEM WITH REGIONS

Regionalism is a problem. Britain has never been a regional country or, to be precise, England has never been a regional country. Regional devolutions never worked. When John Prescott tried to get a regional assembly for the north east, he wanted it to be based on Northumberland, Durham and a bit of Yorkshire and no-one wanted that.

Someone said to me – if you want a regional assembly for Northumberland, yes we would go for that, and the reason is that they identify with it. People identify with Cumbria. They identify with Cornwall and with Yorkshire. Where you have an entity which has a feeling of local coherence, democracy applies. But if you have carved out a chunk of England like south east Lancashire, north east Cheshire or Humberside or Avon, these are meaningless entities that no-one feels any identity or loyalty to, and they will not work as democratic bodies.

'THE NORTH EAST OR THE SOUTH EAST ARE NOT DEMOCRATIC ENTITIES AND I DON'T THINK IT WILL EVER WORK IN THAT WAY. IT WORKS FOR WALES; IT WORKS FOR SCOTLAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND. IT DOES NOT WORK FOR ENGLAND. DEVOLUTION HAS TO BE CONNECTED TO HISTORY...'

The north east or the south east are not democratic entities and I don't think it will ever work in that way. It works for Wales; it works for Scotland and Northern Ireland. It does not work for England. Devolution has to be connected to history.

The test we had about whether a place needed one or two tiers in their local government was: If you ask someone on a beach in the Mediterranean where they are from and they answer Leeds, Bristol or Southampton, then they need a one-tier local authority. If they say something like Blazberry in Norfolk, then that is two tiers – because they identify with a place and a county, and because that is where their loyalty lies.

You had these great nationalised industries in the 1920s, 30s and 40s and I think they contributed to the concentration of power. There is no doubt that when you had regional local railway companies, you had a sense of loyalty to your local railway. But when it was British Rail, it was a nationalised industry.

One of the failings about the NHS is that it became a nationalised industry, largely because Bevan and Morrison had a terrible row about whether it should be local or national. Morrison wanted it to be local because he was passionate about London; Bevan hated Morrison and said no – it's going to be national. "The sound of a dropped bedpan in Tredegar Hospital will reverberate round the Palace of Westminster," he said.

'I CAN REMEMBER WHEN THE LOCAL COUNCIL LEADER RAN THE SCHOOLS, RAN THE COLLEGES AND RAN THE CARE HOMES. IN EVERY SENSE, HE WAS A FIGURE OF SOME POWER LOCALLY...'

Nationalised industries and national businesses do tend towards centralisation, so the issues are about whether you can systematically break things up and whether there is an issue simply of a lack of lines of communication and essentially trust between central and local government. Is there just a fundamental lack of trust there?

Personally, I think there is; central and local don't live in the same world. The Westminster village has no lines out to local government. Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson were both national politicians when they came to be mayors of London, and they both had got those lines out. London has been a success as a mayoralty but there are still two separate cultures – the culture of Westminster and

the culture of locality and the culture of locality has found itself with fewer and fewer powers.

I can remember when the local council leader ran the schools, ran the colleges and ran the care homes. In every sense, he was a figure of some power locally. Nowadays, those things are run from central government. It is very difficult to get people in local government who really feel as if they are kings of their locality and that is a very important thing in local government.

## THE FUTURE OF PLACE

*Charlotte Alldritt is the director of the Centre for Progressive Policy, a UK think tank that promotes inclusive growth working in partnership with local authorities. She was director of the RSA Inclusive Growth Commission and, prior to that, led the City Growth Commission chaired by Lord Jim O'Neill. During the coalition, she was a senior policy adviser to the deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg. She was speaking to Nick Tyrone, Spectator columnist and former director of Radix.*

We need to think about how people and places work because that's where stuff happens. That is where people work – it is where people buy things. In terms of the techie jargon, we need to speak about 'functional economic geography', typically conceived as travel to work areas. That is another abstract concept but one that I think will fast come back, even if our commuting patterns change slightly. We still will live and work in places and I think that's really important to remember and it is absolutely central for policymakers to have an understanding of this at every level.

I suppose the question is really whether 'agglomeration economics' – the idea that a concentration of people working in one place creates additional value, and building business and government policy decisions around this – is going to change post-covid? As well as how and how much this is going to play into the local devolution agenda?

Whatever the answers are, I think the death of the city is much exaggerated. I think the death of place is similarly exaggerated. I don't think we are all going to be little individual worker bees sitting at home. Patterns and behaviours might change but I think it's very human to want to come together and work on a common task and meet in a social way. Not everyone can work from home and we've seen this during covid, after all.

**'WHATEVER THE ANSWERS ARE, I THINK THE DEATH OF THE CITY IS MUCH EXAGGERATED. I THINK THE DEATH OF PLACE IS SIMILARLY EXAGGERATED...'**

We have tried to tackle regional equality for decades, probably since we first started to see the numbers go off the charts in de-industrialisation during the 1980s. Back then, the government did little to intervene. Other governments have since tried to pick up the pieces. But we have seen that national policies are too blunt an instrument.

### THE ROLE OF THE CENTRE

Places operate as systems. It is all very well trying to co-ordinate a network of those systems, but we need to work out how we integrate and conceive of and invest in economic and social policy that really works for those places, rather than try to direct things from Whitehall in a kind of 'hit-it-and-hope' strategy.

They build a road or make promises on broadband speeds and expect wealth to trickle down, as previous kinds of economic orthodoxies have purported – and we know it just doesn't work.

Localism doesn't preclude central support or national policymaking. We need an integrated system of governance, as much on the political side as on the economic development side – and of course those things should go hand in hand. There is a role for the centre, both in redistribution and in policy intervention – we just have to hit a much finer-tuned balance between the two.

How places understand what their local labour market needs are is often actually a question about data. We have seen the timeliness and accuracy of data (or lack thereof) going to local government as a

key barrier to their ability to respond to the current crisis on the health side. On the economic side, we absolutely have to get that right with urgency – and linking education data in with further education and matching this with current and likely future business demand for skills.

That is why labour market intelligence would be my priority number one, were I Gavin Williamson.

**'THAT IS WHY LABOUR MARKET INTELLIGENCE HAS GOT TO BE PRIORITY NUMBER ONE IF I WERE GAVIN WILLIAMSON...'**

### FISCAL DEVOLUTION

It is interesting that the stamp duty freeze, and lifting the threshold, could potentially pave the way for the abolition of stamp duty, which would automatically take out – particularly for London – one of the biggest sources of fiscal retention that they have been asking for.

So if we get rid of stamp duty or it is significantly reformed, I think a lot of people calling for fiscal devolution will need to go back to the drawing board on what that necessarily means because some of the arguments about how you allocate central funding pots such as VAT and other centrally gathered revenue streams probably will start to look a bit more attractive.

Having said that, the move to 100 per cent business rate retention – given that it is likely that we will see relatively little growth in the short term – could perversely then give us more insight into where places are able to grow, what initiatives and interventions have supported that. And, therefore, areas that places might learn from, in terms of how they build their revenue base if we were to move to more fiscally devolved model.

We certainly need to be more creative in the types of financial instruments that we allow councils to use. Part of that will be about central government support; part of that might be things like a hotel tax - and we have seen various cities duck out of being the first mover on that, for obvious reasons. But it is something that we might want to move to once the hotel industry is out of this particular downturn.

Then we also need the ability to leverage in private finance or philanthropic finance and bring together the totality of resources in a place. We need to think about how then we invest and co-ordinate that.

At its most extreme, what I want is a real devo deal that puts your money where your mouth is. We have seen these piecemeal devo deals over the last ten years or so, since city deals in 2010 and with Greater Manchester the ultimate expression of that process so far. A real devo deal would say, 'here's all the money we put into the public sector and here's all the money we would have spent on economic development and infrastructure; now you go and sort it.

You agree with us a whole bunch of social and economic policy goals and you figure out how best to spend that money'.

### PLACE-BASED FINANCE

A place-based spending review based on those kinds of principles could be hugely transformative and start to see us really thinking about local regeneration, local economics, local policymaking and develop power in a whole different guise.

I am not against regional banking, where it seems to work and I know several people that are working in this space, whether that is setting up challenger banks or other sorts of mutuals. There is a real place for that in addressing and diversifying access to capital, particularly for SMEs and particularly where you can tie those returns to place-based outcomes because that investment is staying local.

There is also the Bristol and Bath Regional Capital Fund, which is an inspired idea that has led, for example, to the Bristol City Fund – not a regional bank so much as a regional investment fund that people can put retail deposits in and where that money is going to generate a return through benefiting the place.

I do have some worries about the risk-pooling and I know that advocates of this approach would point to other countries and say that we can do it in Germany, so why not here? It should be just one of the financial instruments and financial tools up our sleeves to enable places to have access to capital.

### REGIONAL INEQUALITY AND 'LEVELLING UP'

I would turn back to the city regions and make it a duty of elected mayors of combined authorities that they have a responsibility for within-regional equality. Levelling up seeks to address between-regional inequality so it should be Andy Burnham's concern, for example, that the people across Greater Manchester – whether that is Oldham or elsewhere – have access to opportunities and that growth and recovery is as inclusive as possible.

This should signal a new approach to how we think about local economic development and regeneration. It means that it is not just about building new tram lines in from Trafford to Central Manchester. It isn't just about building satellite offices for national firms in provincial cities because those shiny new buildings are a source of business rate revenue generation. It has got to be a more fundamental bottom-up approach that builds on the assets of places, but doesn't replicate the same mistakes we see of central government.

**'THIS SHOULD SIGNAL A NEW APPROACH TO HOW WE THINK ABOUT LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND REGENERATION. IT MEANS THAT IT IS NOT JUST ABOUT BUILDING NEW TRAM LINES IN FROM TRAFFORD TO CENTRAL MANCHESTER...'**

So I put the duty heavily onto city regional mayors to be responsible for their whole city regions. We need to go down to that level because we have such a variation in our economic geographies of cities – so the dynamics of the West Midlands are very different to the dynamics of Greater Manchester, which are in turn entirely different from a fragmented disaggregated economy of the type you see in Cornwall, for example.

So economic policy becomes strategic and part of that approach is how you build up a whole region where the city and its relationships with its towns will be much more nuanced. It can't be about Wigan or Oldham saying can you spread some of the jam over here, please. It has to be about how places work together and are part of a whole place ecosystem.

But we also have to watch central government because, to take covid and the role of local public health directors for example, central government can easily say – and we saw this in Leicester – 'you're rubbish: you're not doing your job, you're not protecting local people, you're not responding quickly enough, you're not getting test-and-trace or whatever else you need to be doing'.

And local government can rightly turn around and say 'well, you're not giving us the levers to do that at all and, in fact, your incompetence in central government is making our jobs even harder, so we appear less competent to you.

But we are trying our best, given that we're trying to operate blind here because you're not giving us the data information or the powers to respond'.

So central government plays a very canny game in that regard: it tells local government they are rubbish and then denies them the resources they need. There is a circular argument here: you deprive them of funds and then say look how little they're doing.

'SO CENTRAL GOVERNMENT PLAYS A VERY CANNY GAME IN THAT REGARD: IT TELLS LOCAL GOVERNMENT THEY ARE RUBBISH IT THEN DENIES THEM THE RESOURCES THEY NEED. THERE IS A CIRCULAR ARGUMENT HERE: YOU DEPRIVE THEM FUNDS AND THEN LOOK HOW LITTLE THEY'RE DOING...'

Then there is the devolution of adult education budgets, so what should be a real next step for devolution actually just becomes a bureaucratic nightmare. Then central government says: well, look, you can't even handle the admin.

Power is so centralised in the UK, that it can be very difficult to actually think bottom up.

ALAN RUSBRIDGER

## THE FUTURE OF LOCAL MEDIA

*Alan Rusbridger was editor of the Guardian from 1995 to 2015 and the author of Breaking News. He is now chair of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford and Principal of Lady Margaret Hall. He was interviewed by leading media lawyer, Guy Vassell-Adams.*

The question is how much people trust what they read and I think people were aware maybe a year or two ago of this profound sense of standing on the edge of a precipice - this realisation that society can't work if you don't know what's true and what's not true: you can't have law, you can't have science and you would have a government where nothing works - unless there's some agreement about the factual basis of what is being said. Where Donald Trump is really trying to muddy the waters deliberately, he targets probably the best newspaper on the planet - the New York Times - and repeatedly says: this is fake.

I don't believe that is accidental: what he is trying to do is to say that if even the best newspaper is fake, then anything is believable - and you might as well believe me.

'I DON'T BELIEVE THAT IS ACCIDENTAL: WHAT HE IS TRYING TO DO IS TO SAY THAT IF EVEN THE BEST NEWSPAPER IS FAKE, THEN ANYTHING IS BELIEVABLE, AND YOU MIGHT AS WELL BELIEVE ME...'

## STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF JOURNALISM NOW

Yet, by and large, journalism has risen to the challenge of trying to understand the science behind covid-19 carefully and responsibly - but also not allowing government off the hook and holding the people who are in power pretty powerfully to account.

Maybe some journalists were quite slow to appreciate the gravity of what was going on. I remember those sort of slightly mocking articles about Italy and what was going on there and a failure to appreciate that it was likely to happen in the UK.

There are areas where real weaknesses have emerged that say something broader about the challenges facing the media landscape at the moment. I am thinking particularly about local news but there may be others.

For example, the reporting of politics is quite troubling at the moment. One of the first things that the Johnson government did was to try to limit the number of people who could come to the lobby. There was a sense that the government wasn't going to have old-fashioned lobby briefings.

Then a very bad habit started in which shadowy Number 10 figures - we can imagine who they are - realised that, if you started anonymously leaking stuff to journalists, they would rush it out on Twitter in a completely deniable and unattributed way. The reader then had no idea where this was coming from. Sometimes this material would turn out to be not true within two hours.

Some very bad habits from Trump have been imported over here. We have seen how brilliant Trump is at distraction - so, if he's in trouble, he will throw the media fishes and say 'No, look over there!' That has also happened to political reporting here and I think that really matters.

These bizarre events happen each day which are not quite press conferences and you feel that they are being used as platforms to make statements but often with no follow-up questions.

## THE CHANGING BUSINESS MODEL

It looks as though the economic model that worked for 200 years is rapidly disintegrating. That is being felt most acutely in the local papers, which had been kept afloat by property ads, job ads and car ads. A lot of local papers responded - perhaps inevitably - by cutting back on journalists so the papers became thinner and less interesting. Then people stopped buying them and you got into a death cycle, which is difficult to get out of.

But I think there are some counter signs of quality journalism. In fact, the New York Times has done particularly well out of Trump, as I said in the book. Every time he says 'don't read the New York Times', the phones burn with people taking out subscriptions.

**'EVERY TIME TRUMP SAYS  
'DON'T READ THE NEW YORK  
TIMES', THE PHONES BURN  
WITH PEOPLE TAKING OUT  
SUBSCRIPTIONS...'**

### NEW ECONOMIC MODELS?

Yes, I think there will be new models. The old economic models were essentially about private revenue streams and they are being replaced by people considering whether news is a kind of public good or maybe an act of philanthropy. There are some interesting models emerging so that everybody can read the news.

That is essentially the *Guardian* membership model.

Societies don't work if you have very well-informed elites and everyone else watching Fox News or listening to talk radio. That is a recipe for a terrible society and people are realising that the supply of unpolluted information is almost like a public service, like an ambulance service or a police service. It is just something society needs, even if there is no conventional business model for it.

The BBC model kind of works: it employs a huge number of journalists locally, internationally and nationally. It is hugely respected and trusted and it can be consumed by everybody. All three of those things are very powerful recommendations for the BBC business model, which is effectively a form of taxation. Now if that form of taxation, which is currently attached to the ownership of a TV set, is not going to work in future – which it probably is not – then we probably have to look at two different things.

One is a different kind of taxation and there are several countries that have got there ahead of us, particularly Scandinavian or Nordic countries. The second thing is something that could be settled once and for all – to remove the BBC from any kind of political, not just control, but influence.

We should be seeking to educate consumers to become more critical of the news content that they receive from social media. It is perhaps a question of education, so that young people can learn to look at history critically and at sources of information critically and analytically. I know when you mention 'media studies' people roll their eyes, but I would teach it in every school from about the age of six.

We have to train young people to read everything – old and new media – critically and to be able to think about sources, where things come from, why people are saying things and how you check, and to use the tools that we have to determine if something is likely to be true or not.

**'BECAUSE SOCIETIES DON'T  
WORK IF YOU HAVE VERY  
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FOX NEWS OR TALK RADIO...'**

We know the local newspapers are dying already – some have already died – and there are already communities that are uncovered. So imagine what those societies are going to look like in future, when there is nobody outside applying scrutiny about how the budgets are spent or who is winking at whom when they allow such and such a planning application going through. Or whether the local police force has a problem with racism or whether the local hospitals are clean – all these really basic things that we would want to know about our communities and which local newspapers at their best used to do rather well in covering.

Since the model for that is going, there needs to be a discussion saying – 'let's agree on what kind of news we need about our communities, and what we miss now that we haven't got and how that is to be funded'.

For example, a sizeable sum recently went into 'local democracy reporting' – because we do need somebody in the council chamber and in the courts. Justice has to be seen to be done, after all.

Perhaps if we want a reporter in every court, then maybe people could tender for that job. Maybe somebody could start 'court-reporting.com', rather than just chucking more money at some people who doubtless got quite lazy and forgot what the fundamental role of a news organisation in a local community was.

My personal view is that we should welcome these initiatives. Some of them will turn out not to work, some of them will turn out to be cul-de-sacs, but some of them may turn out to be really valuable pointers to the future. The attempt to create a local democracy fund was an interesting one.

The BBC is all over Britain in one form or another. It is too central but it's also still very dispersed and it has got a very powerful local media and radio network. There is also the Press Association which is out there and reporting from all parts of the United Kingdom. In some countries – I believe it is the case in New Zealand – they have the same thing in reverse, where everybody puts their content into their Press Association so it can then be shared.

So I think we are going to have to think radically about different kinds of models. There was a very interesting debate in the Financial Times at the end of last year, essentially about what the purpose is of a corporation beyond profit, looking at these different kinds of models of social enterprises and mission-centred corporations. There are some news organisations in the USA that are registering as charities – as non-profit 501c3s.

The idea is “we are never going to make a profit out of this, but we have got a mission and a purpose which is a good one and which society needs - so what incentives can you give us to do that kind of work?”

‘IT IS A LITTLE LIKE A HEALTH SERVICE OR A LIGHTHOUSE - SOCIETY NEEDS LIGHTHOUSES BUT THERE IS NO BUSINESS MODEL FOR A LIGHTHOUSE...’

It is a little like a health service or a lighthouse - society needs lighthouses but there is no business model for a lighthouse. You will have a lot of wrecked ships if you don't have lighthouses, even in an age of GPS. So society at some point decided we must work out ways of funding lighthouses and I think that is the stage we are at now in thinking about how we get to a good, truthful and fact-based media.

LORD ALDERDICE

## THE FUTURE SHAPE OF THE UK

*Lord Alderdice was the first Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly and former leader of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland. He is now a Lib Dem peer and Director of the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict. He was in conversation with Prof Nicola McEwen, co-director of the Centre on Constitutional Change at the University of Edinburgh and senior research fellow with UK in a Changing Europe.*

The difficulties of devolution in Northern Ireland are a little bit more complex in some ways than the issues of devolution in other parts of the UK, because of the history - and not least a history of violence. Once a terrorist campaign enters into the situation, the dynamic changes and all sorts of things happen which are not easily forgotten or set to the side.

That is very relevant in Northern Ireland because, each time there is some sort of setback, you will find people regressing back to their old identities and adherences. Famously, Gerry Adams at one stage, when there were some questions about devolution,

was addressing a crowd at the front of Belfast City Hall. Someone asked about the IRA and he said: “They haven't gone away, you know!”

That was a way of appealing to some of his colleagues when others had hoped that they had gone away and, similarly on the Unionist side, whenever people feel disenchanted, there is a lot of talk about victims - those who suffered at the hands of the IRA - and demands that those who are in the current leadership of the Republican movement distance themselves from that. And, of course, when the opposite happens, it raises all the old difficulties and questions.

Having said that, there was a great struggle to get devolution back on track after a period of time when it had been off the agenda - Sinn Fein addressing more of the questions of what was happening politically in Dublin and the DUP, a little bit new-fangled with the influence that they have had with the Conservative government at Westminster.

However, I think most of us took the view that some of this was because the two parties did not also want to take any responsibility for the Brexit process. They wanted the British government and the Irish government to do the heavy lifting - then they could complain and criticise whatever they did.

And then, once that was out of the way, the probability was that devolution would come back – because, from a unionist point of view, devolution is the way of trying to keep Northern Ireland stable within the UK; from a Sinn Féin point of view, it means that they are in government in one part of Ireland and able to have the ambition to be in government on both sides of the border in Ireland – so getting devolution back was always something they were likely to do

**'IT DOES SEEM TO ME THAT, WHILE DEVOLUTION IS LIKELY TO SURVIVE, THERE IS A TRAJECTORY TOWARDS A UNITED IRELAND...'**

### DEVOLUTION WITH A TRAJECTORY

Even so, that doesn't mean that it is devolution without some trajectory. It does seem to me that, while devolution is likely to survive, there is a trajectory towards a united Ireland – that would be the traditional way of describing it. It might not be an entirely adequate way of describing it because, of course, it probably will not be a unitary state and it will retain relationships with the rest of the UK.

But, nevertheless, the trajectory I think is clear and partly that is because, while the DUP have been clever at tactics, they have been very poor at strategy: they have never really been able to see the big picture – they might make some decision for the moment which would get them a little bit of credit and credibility with the electorate or appeal to the identity questions, but not really think about the long-term strategic questions.

The DUP actually did things which strengthened Sinn Féin – voting for Brexit when actually the best way of staying within the UK was if the UK stayed within the European Union. So strategically they are not good, albeit tactically quite clever. So I think the trajectory is clear – what we don't know is timescale and exactly how, as with everything in politics.

It can be about focusing on the process and opening the doors that allowed people who had been involved in violence to see another way of promoting their political agenda – so it becomes possible for them to move away from it. Actually, I think in retrospect they came to understand that the violence had obstructed the outcome of their vision rather than promoted it.

Near the end of his life, Garrett Fitzgerald, the extraordinary liberal Taoiseach in Ireland, wrote in the Irish Times that he was afraid the IRA had actually prevented the possibility of there ever being a united Ireland because of the bad blood they had created.

So once you've got people into the political process then, although people would keep talking about the peace process, in truth there is no expectation of any going back to the use of violence to bring about an outcome and it is actually quite important for people to understand that we are now in a political process not a peace process any more.

### BREXIT AND NORTHERN IRELAND

The politics of course are very difficult too. The interesting thing about Brexit in Northern Ireland is that it is such a polarising issue with the two communities. There is an emerging middle community that I have represented for a long time now, but the two communities are at very different ends of that spectrum of debate on the future relationship with the European Union.

I remember when the Brexit referendum emerged as a political possibility and then certain colleagues at Westminster, other Lib Dem colleagues, said: 'Well now, John, you need to run a Remain campaign.'

I said: 'I'm not going to do that.'

They said: 'What? Don't you believe in the European Union?'

I said: 'Yes, of course I do. But I'm not going to run a Remain campaign because I'll tell you what it would do. It would polarise the community again – the people on the nationalist side and SDLP would vote Remain. The Alliance party would vote Remain, and that would push all the unionists together into a Brexit position.'

*'So you're not going to do anything?'*

I said: 'Oh yes, what we're going to do is we're going to run a public conversation where we explore all the issues that are involved and we will get everybody on the same platform together, to explore the questions, to think and talk about them.'

And that is what we did. We got together students and people who live around the border or lawyers or businesspeople to discuss the issues. We brought Nigel Farage over two or three times and the more times Nigel Farage came over, the more people wanted to vote for Remain – but he and his colleagues felt at least they were getting a chance to put their views.

So when the result was, yes, Sinn Féin, the SDLP and Alliance all voted Remain but the Ulster Unionists decided overwhelmingly that they were going to vote Remain and the DUP leader, Arlene Foster, at the time when she was asked about it after this public conversation, she said 'well, we've discussed it and on balance we've decided to vote for Brexit'.

I regarded that as a victory: the DUP had decided on balance that they were going to do something and, actually, it was a perfectly legitimate position for them to take. But what it meant was that the unionist community was not united for Brexit. Many unionist young people, unionist businesspeople, farmers around the border, in the course of this conversation, began to say 'we need to be very careful about this'.

There's now in Northern Ireland much more of a thoughtful conversation, which is about social and economic issues and the relationship with the rest of the island with the European Union, as well as all the traditional questions.

And, of course, the Alliance Party on that broad centre ground has actually increased to the point where there are now really three cohorts in Northern Ireland – the nationalist republican one, the unionist loyalist, but there is also this cohort of younger people and not so young people in the east of the province, but extending beyond that, who are saying *'We've got to address the future, not keep going back to the past and we feel a very different future set of possibilities.'*

### WHAT ABOUT SCOTLAND?

I think this is very encouraging. It also raises the same kinds of questions about how things might go with the relationship with the rest of the UK as it currently is.

I was of the view that Scottish nationalism was going to have considerable difficulty delivering, having failed to get the result they wanted in the referendum. And Wales had never been that strong on the independence question. But I think it comes back onto the agenda because of the way that the prime minister has been handling things.

He has been making decisions, for example, that affect Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland without any proper consultation with the first ministers of Scotland and Wales, never mind their parliaments. And, although he may think that he can ride roughshod over them, I think what he is doing is – in the terminology we use nowadays – creating antibodies. He is actually stoking up considerable resentment against himself and his advisers, against London, and indeed to some extent against the link in the relationship now.

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There are lots of very good reasons why independence for Scotland is very much more problematic than it was before previously. People could say that the budget will be fine because of oil, but that is not the situation any more. It is certainly not the case that oil is the future in terms of energy or solving the Scottish budgetary issue.

When you're in the EU, staying within the EU – even as an independent country – was a real possibility (although the Spanish would have been difficult about it), but once you are actually out of the EU and applying to come into it as a separate country, you need to get your independence first and then hope that you can get in.

Having said that, the way the current British government is acting seems to me to be stoking up antagonism between people in Scotland and their representatives and people in Wales – albeit to a lesser extent – and London.

That is a dangerous thing: I don't think it's at all clever and I think it will create substantial problems. That is not to say that I'm clear what the outcome of that will be.

This session is about reimagining the UK, so – in ten years from now – I think it does still have the same borders, though whether those have become national borders, as distinct from internal portals, is the other question. Even in terms of Northern Ireland I don't think the border itself is going to change. It is a crazy border that goes through the middle of people's houses and so on, but I don't see that changing. What that border represents is another matter.

We won't necessarily move overnight to a different constitutional construction, but these things often change *de facto* before they change *de jure*.

TEN PUBLIC POLICY  
SUGGESTIONS

This final section is bound to come with a health warning. We never asked our speakers to draw conclusions about policy, so these are my thoughts alone. Not only are they not endorsed by the speakers, we never asked them to endorse them.

But we are a think-tank so it behoves us to think a little about the future and especially when we want to put broader constitutional issues on the agenda again. So having listened to all four of our events and boiled them down to about 15 per cent of their original length, the following policy shifts occur to me. Some of them are urgent, some of them less so – but all of them are important.

1. **Organise a people's convention on the future shape of the UK.** *This may be the only way to take this out of the current damaging and dangerous political debate. The key idea is that, if Scotland does not vote to leave now, then it will do sooner or later. We need to find a solution that works for all sides – a new light touch UK that could subsume the near-independence of the UK nations.*
2. **Give systematic legal powers to cities, districts and parishes,** *giving them clear roles and the powers to carry them off, embedded in a constitution.*
3. **Put local government firmly in charge of implementing and policing any public health measures designed to combat covid.** *It would also help to put them in charge of tracing.*
4. **Provide cities with effective local market intelligence.** *They can only plan effectively if they get the right data on skills and changing demand on time.*
5. **Support cities to provide themselves with tax revenue,** *either through redistributing stamp duty, locally collected VAT receipts, or their own local fiscal tools such as hotel taxes.*
6. **Encourage places to set up their own regional investment funds,** *so that money stays local.*
7. **Make it a duty of elected mayors that they have a responsibility for within-regional equality** *as part of the levelling up agenda.*
8. **Provide for a new settlement for the BBC** *so that it is both financially secure and free of political control or influence.*
9. **Teach children to be more sceptical about what they hear or see on media,** *including by teaching media studies in primary school.*
10. **Experiment and debate better ways of funding good, truthful and fact-based media.**

THE URGENT FUTURE  
OF CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

*Edited by David Boyle*

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Sir Simon Jenkins and Alan Rusbridger*

## ABOUT RADIX

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