

The Manchester Rebellion

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The political row over Greater Manchester having greater restrictions imposed^[1] due to the novel coronavirus pandemic has overshadowed other political and economic events this week. Indeed, it has even managed to overshadow Brexit (where another major row has broken out).

There are two or three fascinating facets to this. Ultimately, however, it appears to be a seminal moment. The “lost” regions of (particularly) England have perhaps finally found their voice.

The first interesting thing is that this has centred on one particular character: Greater Manchester’s mayor, Andy Burnham. Burnham served in the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown and twice campaigned to become leader of the Labour Party (first in 2010 and again in 2015). On the latter occasion he placed second to Jeremy Corbyn leading some to speculate on what might have been.

However, what is relevant is not the character of Burnham himself but rather the fact that he is a politician with a significant national profile. Politics in the UK is remarkably centralised: political talent (and I appreciate that some readers will take issue with this term!) tends to migrate to Westminster.

Local politics is all-too-often seen as a stepping stone to its national counterpart. Indeed, some have argued that this has plagued “national” parties (particularly Labour) in the devolved nations. Swapping Westminster for a more local role is highly unusual (especially in the English, rather than Scottish or Welsh, context).

Yet this is not solely Mr Burnham’s fight. There appears to be cross-party agreement in the area that any move towards greater restrictions should be accompanied by a commensurate increase in financial support. Do not forget that Graham Brady – the Chair of the powerful 1922 Committee in the Conservative Party – is one of Greater Manchester’s MPs.

Yet it is Burnham who has assumed the position of speaking on behalf of the nearly 2.8m residents of Greater Manchester, leading some to dub him (with apologies to George R. R. Martin) “the king of the north”. A major English political figure whose powerbase lies outside Westminster.

Whilst Burnham might be the figurehead, this issue is not confined to Greater Manchester. It is politically toxic across vast swathes of northern England. When the national Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme was set up, it paid 80% of wages (up to £2500). This made sense: it helped ensure that jobs were not needlessly lost when businesses were (temporarily) closed by government fiat.

Why is the need suddenly less in the autumn when businesses are also being shut by government fiat? What conceivable justification can there be for choosing two different (arbitrary) amounts?

Certainly, a degree of penny pinching by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, appears in evidence. At the beginning of the crisis, people were (rightly) told “whatever it takes”. The situation was compared to wartime. I find it hard to imagine Churchill shutting down Spitfire production due to fears about the government deficit.

Even within what is already being spent, people are rightly entitled to ask about spending priorities and value for money. When many millions could be found for the “eat out to help out” scheme over the summer, it has now proved impossible to reallocate just an extra £5m for an area of 2.8m people (less than £2 each).

We have spent £12,000m on “test and trace”. As a whole, government borrowing appears to be on track for £300,000m this year. The numbers here just don’t add up. At present, the areas facing such restrictions are all in the north of England (notwithstanding the situation in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland where such powers are devolved). I can understand why people feel they are being abandoned by Westminster.

Our own research (in the West Midlands rather than the north) suggests that this is not a new phenomenon and lay behind some of the myriad reasons people voted to leave the EU. Where Manchester

goes now, other places are sure to follow. A marker has been laid down.

This is surely not a situation that is sustainable. We spend a lot of time talking about regional economic disparities in the UK. But being in a so-called (and I loathe the term) “left behind” community is about more than just money, and I say that as an economist!

If we are serious about healing the divisions of Brexit and dealing with the fallout of Covid-19 we need to start talking seriously about regional disparities in *power* and resources. Greater equality in public spending might go a long way towards remedying some of these feelings, but it is not enough.

For many regions of the country, Westminster feels remote. Indeed, in many areas Westminster *is* remote. The Houses of Parliament are a long time away when you’re stuck in gridlocked traffic in Bolton.

Only political power and decision-making made physically closer to the people on whose behalf it purports to act can bridge this gap. The case is unanswerable: what conceivable argument can there be against Yorkshire – a county the size of a country – having substantial autonomy and devolved powers?

Yorkshire has a powerful sense of regional identity and a population almost as large as Scotland’s. Yet decisions are taken hundreds of miles away – in Westminster – by a parliament that all-too-often does not represent the interests of Yorkshire.

Greater Manchester (and, indeed, the West Midlands metropolitan area) has a population as large as that of Wales. These are areas with a great history, a powerful sense of identity and yet they lack the ability to make decisions for themselves.

England’s regions have long been silent and forgotten. Perhaps in the current crisis they are finally starting to find their voice. Once awakened, I doubt they will be quiet.

[1] In current government jargon, moving from “tier 2” into “tier 3”.