

‘Do as I say’ Regionalism: time for a reset

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In the run up to the last General Election, the Conservatives made clear their focus was on ‘levelling up’. PM Johnson signalled a willingness to rewrite Treasury rules with more money intended to go to ‘red wall’ areas in Northern England, Yorkshire, North East, Wales and the Midlands.

Watching the unedifying spectacle of negotiations between Greater Manchester and government, it was hard not to feel for the city-region as an underdog being overwhelmed by the over-weaning power of Westminster. This tells us everything we need to know about over-centralised governance in England.

Mayor Andy Burnham attempted to hold out for a £65m deal in assistance to citizens in Greater Manchester being place in Tier-3 constraints. The response from the government was that the £60m ‘on the table’ was final. This was despite concerns that thousands of hospitality businesses and livelihoods were at risk. The process turned from impasse to acrimony and, ultimately, apparent humiliation of Burnham.

Just £5m was the difference between; a sum being spent ‘every five minutes’ by the Chancellor as stated in the *Financial Times* article ‘Manchester v Westminster, tiers before bedtime’ (23rd October 2020). Whilst Greater Manchester had originally sought £90m, or £15m a month, its stance was that £65 million represented the minimum sum required to cover furlough payments for 36,000 workers at up to 80% of normal pay.

Negotiations appeared to seem that they were intended to reach a preconceived ‘correct answer’. When this did not happen, they were cut short. Mayoral Authority was side-lined with central government communicating directly with the only Conservative-led authority in the area, Bolton, led by Cllr David Greenhalgh.

[Cllr Greenhalgh was immediately criticised for breaking ranks. Bolton's Labour Group Leader, Cllr Nick Peel, rued the splits in the previously 'steadfast opposition' between all Greater Manchester's boroughs.](#) Cllr Peel claimed, "I welcomed the strong opposition to the Tory Government voiced by Cllr Greenhalgh, who (was) joined by Tory MPs in pointing out the shambolic way that the Government handled the Covid-19 crisis from start to finish, and I welcomed the statements made by Cllr Greenhalgh when he was backing the GM Mayor, Andy Burnham, and the other nine leaders, in getting the very best deal for Greater Manchester."

For a government priding itself on its ability to negotiate and communicate, such heavy-handed tactics look unnecessary, particularly when, just two days later, the Chancellor engaged in a U-turn on his wage support package such that his £13bn package more than equalled what Manchester had been requesting.

On hearing of the Chancellor's U-Turn, Burnham wearily noted, "Why on earth was this not put on the table on Tuesday to reach an agreement with us?" This degree of disjointed government is indeed hard to comprehend. Indeed, Sean Fielding, Leader of Oldham's Council argued, "Our businesses have struggled under the equivalent of tier two restrictions or more, for three months and received nothing."

Lord Michael Heseltine has made it clear that the lack of local delivery mechanisms is, in his view, hampering progress: "There should be no presumption that civil servants in London devising schemes which seem sensible to ministers should be imposed on local economies."

A continued disintegration in relations between local leaders and government ministers does not inspire confidence in the opportunities for 'levelling up'. With plans for more combined authorities, as well as directly elected mayors, sitting alongside proposals for the creation of simplified unitary authorities causing unease in Tory heartlands, it's disappointing to see the government's devolution white paper shelved until next year.

[As noted in the *New Statesman*,](#) at the very time that the Chancellor was making his announcements, Andy Burnham and other Mayors were appearing before a BEIS select committee to discuss the lack of

support for business in their areas. The view presented by them was that lockdown should not be implemented or imposed on Greater Manchester ‘on terms dictated from 200 miles away.’

Dame Carolyn Fairburn, Director General of the CBI, proposed in the *Financial Times* that there should be a simple transparent formula for each tier of restriction to end the time-consuming wrangling fuelling suspicion, so clearly apparent in the case of Greater Manchester (‘Boris Johnson is mishandling the northern lockdowns’ 23rd October 2020).

[As highlighted in our recent book, English Regions After Brexit](#), Mayors Andy Burnham and West Midlands’ Mayor, Andy Street, have for many months been calling for a seat on the governments’ emergency planning committee, COBRA, fearing that lack of regional representation and knowledge is hampering efforts to deal with Covid-19.

Sir Paul Nurse, Director of the Francis Crick Institute, stresses the importance of good governance being based on combining tentative scientific knowledge with political action in developing health strategies the public will support. Crick highlighted the confusion among government bodies in terms of who is actually in charge of decision-making, operation and implementation. Like many, he wonders if it is “Ministers, SAGE, the Office of Life Sciences, or Public Health England, or whether any of them were clear”.

Drawing out the ‘desperate need’ for clear leadership to avoid a ‘pass-the-parcel’ approach to decision-making, Crick called for greater openness in our debate (BBC Radio 4, May 22nd, 2020). Health professionals also believe that regional health directors must be involved in the ‘test track and trace’ strategy of SAGE (Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies) to appropriately utilise, as fully as possible, the many resources distributed across the country.

However, none of the above is happening. It’s increasingly clear that ‘chaotic’ data is being provided to local authorities. Salford’s Mayor, Paul Dennett, in a letter to the Health Secretary, has stated that this approach is, “[at best unhelpful and at worst dangerous](#)”. Dennett believes that public health directors are unable to fulfil their legal

duties concerning Covid-19 because ministers are withholding key information on test results.

As Dennett contends, “All (datasets received) show slightly different elements of test, track and trace information, with different timeframes, different baselines, and different points of comparison”.

“They have been foisted on our local teams (often without pre-warning) in what can only be described as an unplanned and chaotic way. These have come via standard email, secure email, uploaded to secure websites requiring multiple passwords to access.

“Some have required data sharing agreements before we have been allowed to access them. And yet we still don’t know how many people in Salford have been tested, who they are, where they live or why they were tested.”

Dennett noted that data provided did not include information on the total number of tests, the type of testing, or their setting. Additionally, no information was included on suspected cases, only positive test results. Occupation, workplace, and workplace postcode were generally missing or incomplete. Data related to postcodes only, with no personalised information, making it virtually impossible to connect information to reliable track and trace data or to map cases to settings or locations in the city.

Dennett’s letter echoed sentiments made by Andy Burnham and [Leicester’s Mayor, Sir Peter Soulsby](#), in demanding the government provide ‘real-time’, patient-identifiable information on people testing positive through commercial labs. There is universal agreement that public health departments are unable to keep the virus in check without such information.

A difference of views has subsequently emerged between Dennett and Burnham and the Health Secretary on patient specific information with Matt Hancock, speaking on the BBC’s Andrew Marr show (Sunday 25th October 2020) arguing: “I checked and Manchester has had access to that data.” This statement caused further [incredulity among leaders and public health professionals](#) in Manchester.

The *Sunday Times* investigation, 'Revealed: how elderly paid price of protecting NHS from Covid' (25th October, 2020) describes how a 'triage tool', drawn up at the request of Chris Whitty, England's Chief Medical Officer, was used to prevent many elderly Covid-19 patients receiving ventilation in intensive care. One documents advised that anyone over 80 should be excluded.

With patients over the age of 80 making up 60% of total deaths from Covid-19, it stated that only 2.5% of that age group were treated in hospital and given access to intensive care. Many of those who did receive ICU treatment survived Covid-19.

With thousands of patients being discharged from hospital without testing, there had been, by April 17th, almost 10,000 excess deaths in care homes. Data revealed that only one in nine who died as a consequence of Covid-19 had received intensive care treatment. This undermines Hancock's claim that "everybody who needed care was able to get that care".

With public confidence in government rapidly declining, and the country facing a crisis without precedence in living memory, it seems essential that all efforts should be based on ensuring the best local outcomes for residents and businesses. As Burnham believes, ["You've got a powerful centre, and it's not treating places equally. That is a terrible place to find ourselves in the middle of the pandemic. I would just say to the government: there has to be a bit of a clearing of the air and a coming back together – a reset, really, between national and local government."](#)

Seminal political commentator, John Pienaar, writing in the *Sunday Times*, 'In 40 years of reporting I've never known such a wretched absence of leadership', (25th October 2020) is led to conclude with exasperation, "it is possible that this crisis might have been handled worse. But if I'm being perfectly honest, I can't immediately see how that might have been accomplished."

The government's 'Do as I say' approach is failing us. It serves no one's interests apart from ensuring power remains in Westminster.

There's got to be a better way of dealing with the crisis.

One that is explicitly based on the expertise and knowledge that undoubtedly exists locally.

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