



Radical  
Federalism

# We, the People

The case for  
**Radical  
Federalism**

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# WE, THE PEOPLE

## The Case for Radical Federalism

Radical constitutional reform is no longer an option, it is an unavoidable necessity. The internal conflicts within the structure of the UK must be resolved. This paper is a contribution to the start of that debate, and sets out the reasons for reform, the principles upon which any future reform should be based, and the process for getting there.

We believe that the people of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England should be offered the opportunity to make a positive choice for the opportunity to envision, and contribute to the creation of a **modern, collaborative, distributed and open democracy** – the **UK transformed**.

14 January, 2021

# **We, the People**

## **The Case for Radical Federalism**

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### **Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold ...**

#### **WB Yeats**

On 18 October 2020, writing in *The Observer*, Gordon Brown reflected on the difficulties and crises besetting the UK at the moment, and issued a stark warning: “it will soon be impossible to hold together our multinational UK of distinctive nations and regions within the straitjacket of a centralised state.”

He pointed to the tensions between local and central government. He described the lack of consultation and involvement by central government of other stakeholders with considerable and legitimate interests in the development and implementation of policy. He noted the consistent trend in Scotland, as revealed in opinion polls, towards support for independence: “Never has the United Kingdom looked more divided and more polarised.”

He looked at the failings of the devolution project: “we have devolution but still a centralist mindset. We have, in theory, a decentralised constitution with supposed local powers of initiative, but a unitary state that won’t let go.”

He believes that the UK governance is fundamentally flawed, and “needs to be rethought and rebooted – starting with a convention engaging all nations and regions and built out of local citizens’ assemblies”.

These views are also reflected in the recent statements of the First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford, commenting on the impact of Covid on the state of intergovernmental relations:

“We continue to work for a more effective devolution settlement for Wales, within a strong Union. Covid-19 has raised awareness of the respective responsibilities of the UK Government and the Welsh Government. It has shown that Wales can, and should continue to, benefit from the decisions made by our devolved institutions, based

on our circumstances, as well as wider measures across the UK. The association of nations in which we have been able to share risk and reward in these unprecedented times has also been to our advantage.”

To secure those advantages for the future we need radical reform of the UK. It requires a new constitutional settlement, devolution for, and within, England, a continuation of the decentralisation of power across the UK, and a recognition of the vital importance within this process of the role of local government. It would also mean a voluntary association of devolved nations where sovereignty is held by each, and then pooled for common purposes.”

It is clear that differing views can be taken on the nature of radical decentralisation, in the light of European experience and practice, and this is an area we will examine in a forthcoming paper.

The reach of the process of devolution cannot simply end at the level of nations and regions: devolution must also extend to cities, towns and communities.

The First Minister of Wales and the Welsh Government set out substantial proposals for reforming the governance of the UK in **‘Reforming our Union: Shared Governance in the UK’**, published in 2019.

The need for this reform can be seen as being even more urgent when seen in the context of the **Internal Market Bill** currently before the Westminster Parliament. For the first time since the Devolution Act of 1998, this legislation will deny Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland intrinsic devolution powers, and assimilate them into the Westminster government.

We recognise also the statements of the cross party Inter Governmental forum consisting of legislation, constitution and Justice Committees of all the UK Parliaments and Assemblies that the **current constitutional arrangements are not fit for purpose.**

Radical constitutional reform is no longer an option, it is an unavoidable necessity. The internal conflicts within the structure of the UK must be resolved. This paper is a contribution to the start of that debate, and sets out the reasons for reform, the principles

upon which any future reform should be based, and the process for getting there.

**We believe that the Labour Party should be facilitating the debate for reform, and leading the process for engaging people in designing a better future for Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England, in which power is decentralised and brought closer to the people and their local communities.**

**Our countries, regions and cities deserve a future which is better than the options currently being offered to them by nationalists and Conservatives. The process of designing and planning for that future needs to start now - it is an urgent necessity.**

The criticisms made by Gordon Brown, and others, of the limitations of the Westminster Government are valid. The First Minister for Wales, Mark Drakeford, believes that “in its desire to centralise power and remove obstacles in all branches of government to exercising that power, the UK Government is undermining devolution.” Indeed, it is reported that the Prime Minister believes that devolution in Scotland has been a “disaster.” So, for voters in Scotland and Wales witnessing the centralising drive of this radically chaotic Conservative Westminster government, and facing an open and uncertain future in the coming post-COVID, post-Brexit world, independence may appear to offer a more appealing, alternative future.

The folly of the government trying to survive in the post-COVID, post-Brexit world by becoming even more centralist and autocratic, stands in stark contrast with the inclusive, collaborative ethos of the **Alliance for Full Employment** in which the cities, regions and nations of the United Kingdom are coming together to fight for nationwide economic recovery policies.

The **Alliance for Full Employment** is a positive example of how devolved governments, regions and cities can work together in a voluntary partnership of equals, to attack and remedy structural failings and threats which occur across the UK. Such challenges are simply beyond the reach and capabilities of our embattled, centralising Westminster government, or the smaller, weaker governments sought by the nationalist advocates for independence in the UK nations.

So it saddens us that the only choice which seems to be on offer to the voters of Scotland and Wales is a strictly binary choice between an ill-defined ‘independence’ or the status quo. Further, no choice of any sort is being made available to voters in the cities and regions of England, ignoring the importance of constitutional reform in that country to us all, and the historic links and common interest we share across the nations of the UK.

We believe that voters are looking for hope, and the prospect of a better future. We believe that the people of Scotland, Wales Northern Ireland, and England need to be offered the prospect of the **UK transformed**: transformed in the ways we govern ourselves, in how we sustain and protect the environment, in how we plan for, and share prosperity, and in how we safeguard and extend fairness, justice and equality throughout the nations, regions and communities of the UK.

Keir Starmer has described this vision as ‘**radical federalism**’, where the devolution of power and resources through a new political and constitutional consensus would deliver “power, wealth and opportunity back into the hands of the people”.

We believe that this devolution of power, wealth and opportunity would revitalise and strengthen the nations, regions, and cities of the UK. It would strengthen democracy at all levels, and encourage inclusive, active engagement.

The Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, similarly has called for devolution to be extended: "What we need is more devolution so that more places like Greater Manchester can be masters of their own destiny".

The status quo is simply not an option. The UK’s system of governance is broken, and a change is well overdue.

We, the people, deserve a better country. A country where every voice counts, a country that is fair, just and helps everyone whether rich or poor.

We believe that the vision of a **UK transformed** should be driven by the values which are at the heart of the Labour Party.

People need to be offered the prospect of a **UK transformed** on the basis of **democracy, fairness, justice, climate stability** and **equality**.

We believe that the vision for a **UK transformed** should be projected through the prism of these core values. Any structural solutions should come as a result of this process, not as the starting point for debate.

We believe that the vision for a **UK transformed** should be informed through a network of **people's assemblies**, consisting of people drawn from local communities and interest groups, who have the lived experience and knowledge of what is broken and not working, and how it should be fixed. In Northern Ireland, other means of engagement, informed by the experience of consultative arrangements provided for in the Belfast Agreement, may be required.

We believe that, through the power of people's dreams, aspirations, and visions, a transformed UK can be created, and our nations, regions and localities can be changed for the better.

So, what might a UK transformed on the basis of the values of democracy, fairness, justice, climate stability and equality look like?

- The UK state would perform **only** those strategic tasks which could **not** be performed at a more local level
- The UK state would become a genuine, cohesive voluntary union of nations and regions
- At its financial core would be a commitment to a **fair share of resources and prosperity** across the whole of the UK, and a public financial settlement for the distribution of resources on a needs-based principle
- A UK framework would guarantee **minimum and common standards** in health, social welfare, human rights, education and housing across the UK, allowing the constituent nations to set their own levels above that minimum, with delivery mechanisms, and accountabilities, strongly rooted in the nations, regions and localities
- The historic nations of the UK would be respected, and would be governed by parliaments responsible for their economies, infrastructure and the health and welfare of their

- populations, and supported by the voluntary, shared governance of a UK parliament, responsible for the key areas of defence, macro-economic, trade, fiscal and foreign policy
- The **Belfast Agreement** of 1998 provides the framework and safeguards for decisions on the shape and operation of devolved government to be made within **Northern Ireland**. The Agreement sets out protocols governing the relationship between the devolved government in Northern Ireland, and the UK Government, and provides scope for consultative engagement with civic organisations and institutions.
  - The regions, cities and localities of England would be respected, and would be given the freedom to design, through participatory people's assemblies, a model of **devolved governance** appropriate to their particular needs and desires
  - The spirit and principles of **devolution would be extended** throughout the nations, regions, major cities and localities of the UK, ensuring that decisions are taken at the most local level appropriate, transferring power, control and choice away from Westminster, through the Welsh Senedd and the Scottish Parliament, to the cities and their regions, closer to people and their communities
  - a **new constitutional settlement** would be established for **local government** embedded in legislation, giving local authorities parity of esteem and partnership with central and devolved legislatures, confidence in long term financial planning, and assurance about their place in the system of governance
  - the scope and innovative potential of local authorities would be extended by promoting the use of the **power of general competence**, in order to ensure that local services are planned and designed to match precisely the needs of their local areas and communities
  - the UK would be **outward looking**, free to forge alliances and partnerships across the world, and ready to accept its place in upholding international peace and security, climate change policy, human rights, development and disaster recovery
  - a modern, **reformed parliament** and democracy, would be supported by a modern, effective and accountable **second chamber of the nations and the regions**
  - it would be a UK free from **patronage** and **privilege**
  - the quality of corporate governance in business and industry would be opened up and strengthened by establishing a



requirement for boards of directors of public and private companies and organisations to be **gender and diversity representative**

- **workplaces** would be **democratised**, through a mandatory scheme for **employee directors**, and in association with the Trades Unions, the creation of **employee councils** to widen involvement in decision-making and planning in British workplaces
- the formation and growth of **cooperative enterprises** would be encouraged in all sectors of the economy, providing decent jobs, empowering young people, women, BAME groups, the disabled and LGBT people, and benefitting cooperative members and communities
- local solutions and responses to **accelerating climate crises**, would be encouraged, and through the engagement of people's assemblies, the creation of innovative policies on climate change, community safety and food security would be developed

The voters of Scotland and Wales are being forced to choose the 'least bad' option between independence and the status quo. Neither is a good choice. Labour must offer a progressive alternative.

We believe that the people of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England should be offered the opportunity to make a positive choice for the opportunity to envision, and contribute to the creation of a **modern, collaborative, distributed and open democracy** – the **UK transformed**.

## About this paper

This paper is intended to stimulate discussion, promote the idea of radical federalism, and encourage an open, crowdsourced and inclusive approach to shaping that vision.

The paper has been written by:

### **Mick Antoniw MS**

Mick Antoniw practised as a solicitor for over 30 years. He has represented the Constituency of Pontypridd in the Welsh Parliament since 2011. He has served in Welsh Government as Counsel General and is currently Chair of the Legislation, Justice and Constitution Committee. He is a visiting fellow of the University of South Wales.

### **Alun Burge**

Alun Burge worked for many years in Welsh central and local government, and for 15 years in international NGOs. He has also served as the Chair of a constituency Labour Party and member of its Welsh Executive.

### **Sue Essex**

Sue Essex is a former Minister in the National Assembly for Wales, and former Leader of Cardiff City Council.

### **Owen Gareth Hughes**

Owen Gareth Hughes is a journalist and political commentator

### **David Hume**

David Hume is a consultant specialising in governance and public policy. He was previously the Chief Executive of a local authority.

### **Alan Simpson**

Alan Simpson was a Labour MP for 18 years, and from 2017-2020 was the Shadow Chancellor's Advisor on Sustainable Economics.

We are a group of people drawn mainly from Wales, but with representation from Scotland and England also.

We can be contacted at [admin@radicalfederalism.com](mailto:admin@radicalfederalism.com)

**Aneurin Bevan said that the purpose of getting power is to be able to give it away. This principle underpins our views.**

## Links

Agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of Ireland. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/136652/agreement.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/136652/agreement.pdf)

Alliance for Full Employment <https://affe.co.uk>

Reforming our Union: Shared Governance in the UK. Welsh Government, 2019 <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-10/reforming-our-union-shared-governance-in-the-uk.pdf>

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