

# Where Next for Regions?

by: Dr Wendy Le-las

**Dr Wendy Le-las, a freelance planning consultant, gives her opinion on what effect last year's White Paper on Regions will have on local communities.**

For those interested in planning, whether professional or lay, the Green Paper dominated the early part of last year with consultations finishing in March.

## Your Region, Your Choice

In May 2002 a White Paper (Cm5511) appeared called "Your Region, Your Choice".

Given the publication dates, it is unlikely that any of the misgivings expressed about the former has any effect on the latter. The wish not to be confused by the facts is graphically illustrated by the front cover, which extends the boundary of England up to the Forth/Clyde estuaries: a real coup for Sassenach/Scottish relations!

## The Choice is yours

To be fair it is acknowledged that regional consciousness and enthusiasm for regional government varies enormously and the government does not wish to impose regional assemblies on areas that do not want them.

A debate on regional boundaries was thought to generate more heat than light but the fact remains that there are some strange bedfellows with some regions: Herts, Beds. And Essex have recently joined the Eastern Region regardless of the Potters Bar have little to do with Peterborough. The size of the region was determined by the government's perception of economic viability, however defined. Their intention is to build on the infrastructure of governance already in place in the areas controlled by the Government Offices.

Whilst this is understandable, it will cause problems for decades to come.

## Who wields power?

Many, including local councils, are concerned about the power wielded by Regional Development Agencies. Regional chambers, with members of local government, social, economic and environmental interests, were introduced to give some accountability.

Just to confuse matters they all style themselves as Assemblies. These are invisible to most people. Therefore the government would like to set up proper elected Regional Assemblies.

They are also anxious to retain the input from regional stakeholders and readers are asked to contribute their views on how this should be done.



Above: What difference will regionalisation make to the high street?

## **Tax raising powers**

The assemblies will be funded by central government but will also have tax raising powers via the precept.

They will have a fairly free hand in how they spend their money but be required to meet targets in key areas.

Their functions will include coordinating the efforts of the various government and non governmental agencies operating at regional level and taking a leading role in developing the following strategies:

- Sustainable development;
- Economic development;
- Skills and employment;
- Spatial planning;
- Transport;
- Waste;
- Housing;
- Health;
- Culture;
- Biodiversity



Above: Ken Livingstone's Greater London – the first regional assembly

## **Regional Spatial Strategy**

Clearly many of these issues will feed into the proposed Regional Spatial Strategy, which will set the parameters for Local Development Frameworks, the successor to structure plans, local plans and unitary development plans.

## **What happens next?**

It would appear that there are those in each region responsible for raising regional consciousness. When it is adjudged that there is a demand for a referendum, then one will be held. The first candidate is likely to be North-East, followed perhaps by the North-West and Yorkshire.

## **Move to unitary authorities**

Integral to the whole process will be the move to unitary authorities below the regional tier. Thus, in advance of a referendum, the Boundary Commission would conduct a review of local government in areas where there are still two tiers ie county and district/borough councils. Thus if the people say “Yes” to a regional assembly, they will also be saying “Yes” to a unitary authority in their area. It is certainly true that there is confusion amongst the local people about who does what in which tier of government that the move to unitary authorities would simplify the system, but people also have allegiances to their counties, which go back generations.

## **Regional Model of Governance**

Clearly the government is committed to the regional model of governance, and many organisations are aligning their administrations accordingly including NALC and the county associations. However one can foresee that it will be many years before the area south of the Trent will be enfranchised with assemblies presiding over their respective regions.

The dominance of London, over an area far wider than the Home Counties, tends to sap regional consciousness and at the other end of the scale, there are those who harbour subversive thoughts, such as Home-Rule for Cornwall. All this bears an uncanny resemblance to the proposals to simply the planning system, as set out in the Planning Green Paper.

## **Following future moves from the ODPM**

If you wish to follow the progress of both these issues keep your eyes on the website for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister ([www.odpm.gov.uk](http://www.odpm.gov.uk))

## **Contact Details**

Dr Wendy Le-las

Wendy Le Las Associates

Email: [wendy@lelas.co.uk](mailto:wendy@lelas.co.uk)

Website: [www.lelas.co.uk](http://www.lelas.co.uk)