



PROJECT ROME

# NORTHERN AGENDA

DECEMBER 2018 EDITION

## Editorial

**As Parliament prepares to finish for the Christmas recess there is not much festive cheer to be found within the north's political tribes.**

Both main parties are bitterly divided over the continuing Brexit saga, with many northern MPs fearing for their own futures when the time comes to face the electorate. Meanwhile in South Yorkshire, the Labour party are at loggerheads over the continued absence of a signed devolution deal, whilst the rest of Yorkshire watch their hopes of a One Yorkshire deal in 2020 ebb away, as Brexit becomes all-consuming for the machinery of government.

Conservative divisions over Theresa May's Brexit deal, and subsequent confidence vote, appear to have been kept largely behind closed door among her 37 MPs in the North-West and Yorkshire and Humber regions. Only four of the 37 were willing to go public and confirm that they voted against



her in the confidence vote. However, anger amongst Conservative activists in the region is said to be at record levels, with one senior Conservative activist telling Northern Agenda, “Most of the party faithful could stomach a no-deal Brexit, even welcome it, but what they won’t forgive is if the parliamentary leadership parlour games lead to an early general election and a Jeremy Corbyn government.”

They may not have much to fear, at least according to a number of Labour MPs and activists we have spoken to. “There is general air of dismay and despondency in much of the parliamentary party after the events of the last week. We have the most incompetent government in living memory, a Prime Minister with few allies left, a cabinet split down the middle, open revolt in the Tory party, and somehow the story is about Jeremy’s quadruple U-turn over the censure motion that never was. Utter incompetence”, according to one we spoke to. Another Labour wag summed it up as, “The left hand doesn’t know what the far-left hand is doing. Corbyn has managed a remarkable feat. He’s managed to unite Theresa May, the DUP and the Hard Brexiteers. Astonishing.”

As the Brexit crisis rumbles into the New Year, the potential threat of an early general election is certainly concentrating minds in our regions, which will form key battlegrounds whenever the election is held. Across the North-West and Yorkshire and Humber regions the Conservatives hold 14

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**- A Labour Wag**

seats with majorities of less than 5,000, 10 of these are defending majorities of less than 3,000. That accounts for more than a third of the seats the Conservatives hold across the two regions. For Labour the figures are similar, with 18 seats held with majorities of less than 5,000, 10 of those defending majorities of less than 3,000. The stakes are high for those MPs and, unsurprisingly, we haven’t detected a great appetite for an early general election amongst those defending marginal seats. One veteran political commentator told Northern Agenda, “On balance, the Tories have most to lose in the North if there was an early election. This will ensure even the most ardent Brexiteers will get behind Theresa May if there is a vote on no confidence. Never underestimate an MPs sense of self-preservation.”

One Yorkshire campaigners also fear that the Brexit crisis could put paid to their hopes of securing government agreement for a devolution deal by 2020. As all government departments are instructed to prioritise planning for a no-deal Brexit, the machinery of government appears to be grinding to a halt, including the hopes of securing future devolution deals. The department for



Housing, Communities and Local Government were due to publish their blueprint for devolution by the end of 2018, but that deadline appears to have been pushed back indefinitely as Brexit takes priority above all else. Ironically, the One Yorkshire campaign did sense a positive change in the government's position in November when the Northern Powerhouse minister, Jake Berry, held a series of meetings with local authority leaders from Yorkshire. One individual involved in one of those meetings told Northern Agenda that it was, "really positive. Jake wasn't his usual belligerent self. He seemed genuinely to want to make progress."

South Yorkshire Mayor Dan Jarvis also met with Berry and the Secretary of State to discuss breaking the devolution impasse in South Yorkshire. Jarvis was said to be upbeat following the meeting and was preparing a plan to put before the government outlining a way forward. So far, so positive. But life in South Yorkshire Labour politics rarely runs

smooth, and within days of his meeting, Sheffield council passed a resolution, drafted by the ruling Labour group, restating their opposition to a One Yorkshire deal and demanding Jarvis get the South Yorkshire deal over the line by the end of January 2019. The build up to the meeting saw a series of seemingly co-ordinated attacks on Jarvis's administration, including one from a Sheffield Labour council cabinet member, who suggested anyone who failed to do their job would expect to be sacked. A solution to the South Yorkshire deal, key to unlocking any wider One Yorkshire deal, looks further away than ever.

A One Yorkshire campaigner told Northern Agenda, "It looks like a combination of South Yorkshire infighting and a Brexit sucking the life out of the government could derail the progress we have made on devolution. It feels like our window of opportunity is closing."

Meanwhile, in an uncertain world it is good to see that some things remain constant. As details emerged of two Northern Powerhouse conferences to be held on consecutive days in Leeds in February (see Leeds City Region report, below) Northern Agenda asked one political observer if they were attending either conference. Our frugal Yorkshire insider responded, "Well, tickets for George Osborne's conference are £165, and the other one is £25. Go figure."

Here's to a Happy Christmas and an uneventful New Year from all at Northern Agenda.



**Dan Jarvis**



**Jake Berry**