



PROJECT ROME

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Editorial

The new year heralded a new resolution within the White Rose county to put Yorkshire devolution at the top of the political agenda.

The pessimism that had gripped the One Yorkshire campaign in the final months of 2018 has been replaced by a new optimism that the government may be ready to seek a resolution to the devolution deadlock.

The county city of York was host to two meetings early in the new year that signalled a much-needed kick-start to the One Yorkshire campaign and a renewal of the resolve of the members of the 'coalition of the willing' lobbying for a One Yorkshire Mayor. The Yorkshire Leaders' Board, made up of the leaders and chief executives of the Yorkshire local authorities, heard from Leeds city council chief, Tom Riordan, that behind-the-scenes progress was being made following talks with the government. The leaders had requested a joint meeting with



Tom Riordan



Jake Berry

Northern Powerhouse minister, Jake Berry, but he initially refused their request.

The government had hoped to divide the Yorkshire forces by holding three separate meetings with local authority leaders covering West, North and East Yorkshire. The government's strategy was to try to isolate loyal Conservative council leaders in North and East Yorkshire, and to get them to support a 'Four Mayor' model for Yorkshire, the preferred outcome of Secretary of State, James Brokenshire. However, Jake Berry was left in no doubt about the commitment of all Conservative leaders to the One Yorkshire solution. The government's strategy merely succeeded in bonding the cross-party

leaders' group of 18 closer together. The Yorkshire Leader's Board meeting issued a press statement reaffirming their absolute commitment to a One Yorkshire model.

During the same meeting, South Yorkshire Mayor Dan Jarvis reported that he had held talks with two senior government ministers to discuss devolution and both had privately admitted that the economic case for Yorkshire devolution was compelling. Feedback from inside government suggested that the stubborn stance of the Conservative leaders came as a genuine surprise to ministers and officials. They may now be ready to discuss a compromise solution that includes an election for a Yorkshire Mayor, possibly in 2021. One Conservative insider told Northern Agenda, "the government doesn't want to fall out with Yorkshire, especially not their Northern council leaders. They need all the friends they can get at the minute."

A sign of the perceived step-change in the government's relationship with the North was the claim made by Jake Berry that the government is considering radical plans to establish a new department for the North of England with its own Secretary of State. Speaking in Yorkshire, Berry indicated that





the government would also consider allowing the new devolved administrations in the North to raise local taxes. “The Minister may have been ‘flying a flag’, but he wouldn’t have said it without clearance from government”, a key player in the North told Northern Agenda. “It’s a reaction to the disastrous performance of the rail network in the North last year, and the perceived lack of government enthusiasm for the Northern Powerhouse project.”

Brexit remains the main threat to a Yorkshire deal, as both senior government ministers privately acknowledged in their recent talks with Dan Jarvis. It continues to consume government bandwidth, with government departments diverting human and physical resources to planning for the 29th March deadline. However, in the spirit of the new optimism, some One Yorkshire campaigners believe that they can use the Brexit crisis to their advantage. A representative from the campaign told Northern Agenda, “If we can present the government with a workable compromise agreement, acceptable to all parties, that doesn’t box them in and meets

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The gathering of Yorkshire leaders was followed later the same day by a meeting of the nascent One Yorkshire Committee, jointly chaired by Labour MP, John Grogan, and Conservative MP, Robert Goodwill. The cross-party campaign group also brings together other smaller political parties, the business community through the CBI and IoD, trade unions and even a representative from the Archbishop of York (“We still have God on our side”, joked one attendee at the meeting).



Dan Jarvis



John Grogan



Robert Goodwill

The campaign has been bolstered by a £32,500 donation from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, which will enable them to run a media and public-awareness campaign, buying in expertise to help co-ordinate their efforts. A full campaign strategy document is currently being drafted for approval by the committee at their next meeting in February. One source told Northern Agenda, "It's not a huge amount of money and we're still going to be relying on a lot of goodwill and pro-bono work, but it's a start and gives us some legitimacy as the voice of One Yorkshire."

The most forceful voices in the meeting, however, were not those of politicians. The business community representatives from the IoD and CBI were adamant that 2019 is the year that a devolution deal needs to be agreed with government. Their usual reticence at getting involved in 'political' campaigns appears to have been abandoned and they have offered to be front and centre of the One Yorkshire campaign.

The one piece of the jigsaw which is still missing, and a substantial piece it is too, is public support for a Yorkshire Mayor and a devolution settlement. Whilst the prospect of

devolved government for England's largest county might excite the political classes in Yorkshire, it has made little headway in the consciousness of the county's 4.5 million population. In the 2012 City Mayor referendums, Bradford, Leeds, Sheffield and Wakefield all rejected the idea, and there is concern amongst campaigners that without widespread public support the campaign lacks the necessary democratic legitimacy. Some campaigners are keen to use some of the Joseph Rowntree grant to commission independent opinion polling to gauge the current level of public support, both for devolution and for an elected Mayor. Expect the One Yorkshire Committee to begin a public awareness campaign about the economic benefits of devolution, in bread-and-butter terms, to people in Yorkshire.

New year resolutions have a tendency not to last much beyond the first weeks of the new year, but there is a real determination throughout Yorkshire that 2019 will be the year that a county-wide devolution deal is agreed with government, and a timescale for an elected Mayor is put on the statute books. This resolution is one that campaigners intend to stick to.



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