



PROJECT ROME

# NORTHERN AGENDA

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## Editorial

It was not the St Valentine's Day dispatch leaders of the One Yorkshire devolution campaign were expecting from government.

For some months, key figures from the 'coalition of the willing' – the 19 local authority leaders in favour of a One Yorkshire Mayor – had been conducting a quiet, behind-the-scenes diplomatic courtship of senior government ministers and officials to persuade them to back their plans for the largest devolution deal in England.

Confidence was building ahead of the One Yorkshire devolution conference on March 8, due to be addressed by Northern Powerhouse minister, Jake Berry. Officials from West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA), on behalf of One Yorkshire, were in contact with Berry's own officials to discuss the content of his speech. On Monday 11 February, at a meeting of the One Yorkshire Campaign committee, WYCA staff briefed

members present that, based on those discussions with Berry's officials, they were confident that he wouldn't rule out a One Yorkshire deal. There was genuine confidence that the conference on 8 March would kick-start substantive negotiations with the government to set a timetable for a One Yorkshire devolution deal. The One Yorkshire campaign meeting agreed a formal campaign strategy document and to appoint consultants to run the campaign to win over the public to their cause.

Two days later, a letter arrived in the Inbox of South Yorkshire Mayor Dan Jarvis from Secretary of State James Brokenshire, emphatically rejecting the One Yorkshire proposal. The proposals "do not meet our devolution criteria", was the government's blunt assessment. The letter went on to say that the government is prepared to "begin discussions about a different, localist approach to devolution in Yorkshire", thought to refer to the so called Four-Mayor model for Yorkshire, based on City Regions. To say there was shock among local authority leaders in Yorkshire is something of an understatement. This was a genuine bolt from the blue.

Conservative controlled Hambleton district council in North Yorkshire immediately announced that it was pulling out of the One Yorkshire coalition, and there were



**Jake Berry**



**James Brokenshire**

fears that other Conservative councils would follow suit. Leeds Council's Labour leader Judith Blake and North Yorkshire County Council Conservative leader Carl Les hastily issued a joint statement urging the coalition members to remain firm and calling for an urgent meeting with government.

Although the coalition still retains 17 members, a number of key local authority figures are said to be "wavering" and in favour of pursuing City Region deals. Bradford's Susan Hinchcliffe, also Chair of the WYCA, and Wakefield's Peter Box, never the most enthusiastic supporter of Mayors, believe that the One Yorkshire dream is over. Business leaders who were





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backing One Yorkshire may also be willing to support different models of devolution. A One Yorkshire insider told Northern Agenda, "Business support was always conditional. The CBI and IOD were backing One Yorkshire because it was the only show in town. If other deals are on the table, they may be willing to support those. They just want some form of devolution and aren't so wedded to geography as some of the political leaders."

The situation is still very fluid and is changing by the day. James Brokenshire has agreed to meet local authority leaders in Ripon on 1 March, which could be D-Day for the future of One Yorkshire. There are also questions about the future of Dan Jarvis. The South Yorkshire Mayor made no secret of his wish to become Mayor of One Yorkshire and saw the South Yorkshire position as an interim job. Without the incentive of the bigger stage some doubt whether Jarvis will remain in post in South Yorkshire.

Brokenshire further angered One Yorkshire campaigners when, just a week after snubbing their proposals he made a keynote address in which he called for devolution to form the basis of a 'new unionism' for the UK. He said the government wanted to

give, "people a sense of ownership of and confidence in their places", which certainly raised some eyebrows in Yorkshire. One insider told Northern Agenda, "What a nerve? A week after telling Yorkshire it can't have what its democratically elected leaders want, he's banging on about extending devolution. Shameless hypocrisy."

The government's decision has been seen as a triumph for those Yorkshire Conservative MPs who have been quietly lobbying Ministers to rule out a One Yorkshire deal. A number of Conservative MPs had expressed reservations that a single Mayor for Yorkshire would inevitably mean a Labour Mayor with a huge personal mandate. However, others believe that their pessimism at the party's prospects of winning a Yorkshire Mayoral contest is unfounded. One political commentator told Northern Agenda, "If Labour selects a far-left candidate, and the Tories can persuade a high-profile populist to stand under their banner, then it would be up for grabs. The first election wouldn't include South Yorkshire, which takes out a huge bloc of Labour votes. The Tories could win it."

That view has been borne out by a recent YouGov survey, which suggested that the Conservatives could become the largest party in Yorkshire if Labour voters desert the party over their handling of the Brexit crisis. The survey indicated that Labour's vote share in Yorkshire has fallen dramatically since winning 49% of the vote at the 2017 general election. Three quarters of Labour voters in the region want to stay in the EU and there is evidence that they are turning their back on the party over its confused Brexit strategy.

Meanwhile, the fallout from the ongoing Brexit hostilities continue to cause divisions within the two major political parties. As we go to press, further votes are expected in the House of Commons and both Conservatives and Labour remain divided over the various options on the table.

Northern Labour MPs representing vote-leaving constituencies were well represented in the list of rebels voting with the government last month and may do so again. South Yorkshire's Sir Kevin Barron and Caroline Flint were joined by the North-West's Rosie Cooper, Laura Smith and Graham Stringer. Abstainers included Judith Cummins, Melanie Onn, Tracy Brabin, Yvonne Fovargue, Mike Kane, Jim McMahon and Stephen Twigg. Although no official disciplinary action was taken against the rebellious MPs, senior Labour backbenchers in the region are said to be furious at their actions and have demanded retribution.

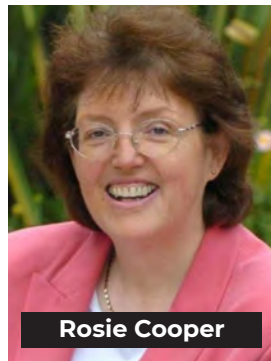
All is not well in the White Rose county, as both parties come to term with these extraordinary times.



**Kevin Barron**



**Caroline Flint**



**Rosie Cooper**



**Laura Smith**



**Graham Stringer**



**Judith Cummins**



**Melanie Onn**



**Tracy Brabin**



**Yvonne Fovargue**



**Mike Kane**



**Jim McMahon**



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