

People power

CLÉS calls on the next government to...

Let's ensure that every person, community and local authority has the power and resource to shape their own destiny.

The UK is over centralised and economically unbalanced. Successive haphazard attempts to correct this have failed to address economic divides and social pain. Recently, we have seen devolution to some English city regions. However, these devolution deals have been framed by austerity and locked into an economic model prescribed by the Treasury and Whitehall, who hold all the cards.

Today we are left with growing divides and competition between towns, local authority areas, cities, regions and nations and a confusing set of differing powers and responsibilities. Recent innovations such as the Northern Powerhouse and the Midlands Engine have been strong on pleading to Whitehall, but short on real devolution of resources and power to people and place. **Let's end haphazard and unfair devolution once and for all.**

Hold a national constitutional convention

Devolution has been weak and created confusion. It has failed to tackle the fundamental imbalances of power and wealth. It is incrementalism, with winners and losers: unfair and not working.

To resolve this imperfect mess, we need a national constitutional convention, involving devolved nations, local government, metro mayors, Parliament, the business community, unions and civil society organisations. This conversation should consider:

- how to develop an enduring package for constitutional reform;
- the likelihood of a federal UK and England;
- reshaping local government so that it sits alongside central government as a co-director of the nation.

This whole conversation should form the basis to new legislation, to be taken forward by Parliament.



Establish a new national redistribution process

We need a clean break and a fair start in which we develop a national process of redistribution to deal with decades-long and ingrained regional economic imbalances. We must ensure a more level platform for all areas, in perpetuity. To this end, there have been some calls for a national UK renewal fund, or greater retention of local business rates, but these mechanisms are limited in their ability to make the country fairer or give power back to local authorities. What we need is a comprehensive local needs assessment with a recognition that poorer areas require more resource in order to achieve social, economic and environmental justice.

Create new fiscal powers for local areas

New local tax powers should be agreed, but only once an appropriate national redistribution method is established (as above). These new powers should be used to create more secure links between people and local government by increasing local tax intake. Business rates reform, a local land value tax, hotel or tourist taxes should also be considered.



Further social devolution

Human and social capital are the basis to a new productive and inclusive society. Therefore, English devolution must shift its predominant focus on infrastructure, skills and economic development towards social powers and resources. This includes devolved power over health budgets so that services can target specific local priorities and facilitate better alignment between health and other sectors. Local areas should also gain more control and power over national sources of social investment, including welfare, education, funding for the social sector, cultural policy and arts funding. This should be facilitated by pooled pots of place-based funding for local government, covering the main elements of public resources within any given locality.

Enact deliberative democracy

Civil society, social action and democracy are the basis to a productive, inclusive economy and society. However, a substantive democratic process means going beyond the mere expression of preferences at the ballot box. We should enact more deliberative mechanisms that allow all citizens to participate and have a real impact in the decisions that affect their daily reality. Therefore, we must accelerate existing experiments in deliberative democracy within combined authorities and local authorities, as well as any new regional institutions. This should include citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting.