

Government Offices in the Regions – a Response to David Higham

I read [David Higham's paper on the GOs](#) with interest, albeit from a different perspective. Where he is an advocate, based on fifteen years of his career spent in GONW, mine is deeply sceptical, having ended my chosen career in 1995 after thirty years in the Dti, a year after GONW's creation. A reader might reasonably conclude that David knows more about it than me. I would argue in my defence that I spent twenty years in the regions as well as two periods of five in Whitehall.

David's comprehensive analysis of the GO experience takes at face value what the politicians said in their manifestos and public statements. I take a more jaundiced view. The GOs were essentially about cost cutting and power diminution. David identifies three roles for the GOs in his paper (page 2). The first, representing Whitehall in the regions was the central one. The other two had always been in play, particularly informing Whitehall policy on the regional perspective. It was often said cynically that a US/Grade 3 posting to the regions was a punishment posting. That may have been Whitehall's intention. What I will say is that, of the three Grade 3s I worked for who I most admired and venerated, two were North West Regional Directors. A common Whitehall complaint concerned these senior civil servants going native which is evidence that they did the job of representing the region to the centre. Regional civil servants have a natural loyalty to their region.

It should be born in mind what was lost when the GOs were created. In the NW, Dti and DoE had Grade 3 Directors, DEm a Grade 5. This partnership was a powerful force in pushing regional interests, especially when collaborating with the RD of the Bank of England and senior LA leaders. Programme delivery was at the coalface. In the Dti's case, teams supported exporters, others helped with inward investment, researchers provided industry intelligence; a unit I headed responded to policy issues. The other departments were no doubt closely involved with their regional audience. Their replacement by a single Whitehall appointee with a clear Whitehall ToR was always going to weaken the regional response.

Much of David's argument centres on improved coordination between the departments. He cites the EU Structural Funds as an example. In fact, Dti and DoE in the North West worked very closely together. My colleague's unit ran the Monitoring Committee and the Capital programmes, mine the Objective 2 map preparation and the revenue programmes including all the Community Initiatives such as PERIFRA and RECHAR. (Indeed, so close was our relationship as joint Heads of the EU unit that the new RD decided to move us at one and the same time). Some years later, I heard a BBC File on Four programme in which the Head of DG 16/REGIO was asked about the performance of GOs in the administration of the Structural Funds. He singled out GONW as the worst.

The paper summarises the benefits of the GO operation, thin stuff indeed. Improved programme delivery? DG REGIO would disagree. City Action Teams were an example of cross-departmental

action long before. A contribution to resilience? Old hands might say been there, done that. I doubt the Foot and Mouth crisis, as awful as it was, could compare with the oil crisis and the three day week in the Seventies. Long hours, weekend working, all together, established strong relationships across departmental boundaries and with the private sector.

Interestingly, before that emergency, the office protocol was the stereotypical suits, ties, Mr this and that – afterwards, the dress code changed completely and senior staff welcomed first name usage. Furthermore, the departments had emergency officers who occasionally went off on emergency exercises as a regional team.

Breaking down barriers? David seems to suggest that departmental loyalty and expertise was a bad thing, that staff hopping between departmental jobs was a positive. It's a point of view, if generalists rather than specialists are the objective. I used to joke to outsiders that we were moved for career reasons as soon as we became competent in the current job. Influence on regional policy? In my period involved in policy, I worked with a professor at Lancaster University who worked on regional policy. We fed into Whitehall. I also persuaded the Dti RD to fund a study by SQW into "The Performance of Manufacturing Industry in the North West" which was presented to regional companies and sent to Whitehall. Knowledge of the region? It's been diminished, David.

I return to my opening argument. Conservative governments are not interested in regional policy. Consider the closure of the RDAs and Regional Assemblies. The power lies with the money, with the Treasury. City Mayors are controlled by budgets set by Westminster. The Northern Powerhouse is a slogan. Brexit removes the one great support to regional development, the EU Structural Funds. The GOs were just a part of the process of control. Their failure led inevitably to their closure.

What happens now? I've no idea, which distresses me.

Bob Nicholson
8th December 2020.