The Politics of Northernness:

An investigation into the framing and politicisation of the North of England

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School of Politics and International Studies

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Abstract

This thesis examines the place of the North of England within contemporary political debate. It focuses primarily on the period 2010-2021. It seeks to understand the affects that politics actors' perceptions of the North have on the contemporary politics of the region. Drawing on the academic literature, documentary analysis of the grey literature, and seventy-three primary elite interviews with Northern political actors, the study explores the ways in which the North and issues that impact the region are framed in political discourse, the ways in which and the extent to which these frames are politicised and highlights how this affects policy debates and political action. In doing so, it considers themes including the identity of Northernness, ideas of a socio-economic North-South divide, the electoral politics of the North, and policy initiatives such as the Northern Powerhouse agenda, levelling up, and devolution.

The thesis argues that the North is unique in its political saliency as a region in England. Yet, it finds that while frames based upon ideas of Northern distinction are invoked by actors from different walks of politics and society, all across the political spectrum, currently they are not commonly politicised explicitly at the national level. In fact, it suggests that the extent to which the North is centred in the national discourse has arguably waned in recent years due to the changing political context. Nevertheless, it highlights that at the local and regional level, the North does often continue to be politicised as a whole, but it notes that local and sub-regional attachments within the North remain strong, and there are few distinct and institutionalised pan-Northern political initiatives.

Given this, the thesis argues that while the North of England is a uniquely important and recognisable region, and one which holds some political pull, its place, sandwiched as it were, between broader national considerations, and sub-Northern local considerations,

means there are limits to the extent to which the North can be politicised in a far reaching and widely embraced politics of Northernness.

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List of Interviewees

Positions correct as of date of interviews

David Collins - Northern Correspondent, The Sunday Times - Telephone [16.10.19]

Andrew Wilson - Co-founder and Organiser, We Share the Same Skies - University of Leeds [21.10.19]

Ian Martin - Co-founder and Organiser, We Share the Same Skies - Clock Café, Leeds [24.10.19]

Stephanie Riches - Co-ordinator, People's Powerhouse - Community Transport Association Office, Manchester [31.10.19]

Clare Fallon - North of England Correspondent, Channel 4 News - Kapow Café, Leeds [04.11.19]

Sir Richard Leese - Council Leader, Manchester City Council - Manchester Town Hall, Manchester [11.11.19]

Bill Adams - Regional Secretary, Yorkshire and Humber TUC - Yorkshire and Humber TUC Office, Leeds [13.11.19]

Lord Bob Kerslake - Chair, UK2070 Commission - Mercure Hotel, Sheffield [22.11.19]

Anonymous - Council Leader, North East - In person [27.11.19]

Anonymous - Council Leader, North West - Telephone [10.01.20]

Jay McKenna - Acting Regional Secretary, North West TUC - Telephone [15.01.20]

Neil McInroy - Chief Executive, CLES - CLES Office, Manchester [17.01.20]

Alexis Darby - Acting Head of Policy, Northern Powerhouse Partnership - Starbucks Café, Manchester [20.01.20]

Sir Stephen Brady, Council Leader, Hull City Council, - The Guildhall, Hull [21.01.20]

Sir Stephen Houghton - Council Leader, Barnsley Borough Council - Barnsley Town Hall, Barnsley [30.01.20]

Erica Lewis - Council Leader, Lancaster City Council - Lancaster Town Hall, Lancaster [06.02.20]

Anonymous - TUC Official, North East - Telephone [10.02.20]

Giles Archibald - Council Leader, South Lakeland District Council - Telephone [11.02.20]

Susan Hinchcliffe - Council Leader, Bradford City Council - City Hall, Bradford [13.02.20]

Graeme Miller - Council Leader, Sunderland City Council - Civic Centre, Sunderland [17.02.20]

Will Jennings - Professor of Politics, University of Southampton/Co-founder of the Centre for Towns - Telephone [18.02.20]

Carl Les - Council Leader, North Yorkshire County Council - County Hall, Northallerton [27.02.20]

David Southward - Cabinet Member for Economic Development & Property, Cumbria County Council - Cumbria House, Carlisle [02.03.20]

Lord Christopher Haskins - Chair, Humber LEP - Telephone [03.03.20]

Chris Rowell - Policy Advisor to Ben Houchen, Tees Valley Combined Authority - Cavendish House, Stockton-on-Tees [05.03.20]

Joe Anderson - Mayor, Liverpool City Council - Telephone [06.03.20]

Geraldine Scott - Westminster Correspondent, Yorkshire Post - Telephone [08.03.20]

Tom Forth - Head of Data, ODI Leeds - Munro House, Leeds [09.03.20]

Jonathan Werran - Chief Executive, Localis - Telephone [26.03.20]

Lord Richard Inglewood - Chair, Cumbria LEP - Telephone [31.03.20]

Jonny Ross-Tatam - Northern Coordinator, UBI Lab Network - Telephone [01.05.20]

Mark Burdon - Leader, North East Party - Zoom [04.06.20]

Philip Davies MP - Shipley, Conservative - Zoom [09.06.20]

Alec Shelbrooke MP - Elmet and Rothwell, Conservative - Zoom [10.06.20]

Will Tanner - Director, Onward - Zoom [22.06.20]

John Denham - Professor of Politics/Director, Centre for English Identity and Politics, University of Southampton - Zoom [01.07.20]

Diana Johnson MP - Kingston upon Hull North, Labour - Telephone [03.07.20]

Toby Perkins MP - Chesterfield, Labour - Zoom [10.07.20]

Alex Sobel MP - Leeds North East, Labour - Zoom [17.07.20]

Baroness Natalie Bennett - Member of the House of Lords, Green Party - Zoom [24.07.20]

Alexander Stafford MP - Rother Valley, Conservative - Zoom [27.07.20]

Andrew Stephenson MP - Pendle, Conservative - Zoom [03.08.20]

Robert Largan MP - High Peak, Conservative - Telephone [05.08.20]

Nick King - Head of Business, Centre for Policy Studies - Zoom [24.08.20]

Simon Jeffrey - Policy Officer, Centre for Cities - Zoom [26.08.20]

Arianna Giovannini - Associate Professor in Local Politics & Public Policy, De Montford University - Zoom [14.09.20]

Anonymous - Labour MP, Yorkshire - Zoom [18.09.20]

Ian Mearns MP - Gateshead, Labour - Zoom [23.09.20]

Rob Parsons - Political Editor, The Yorkshire Post - Zoom [06.10.20]

Roger Marsh - Chair, Leeds City Region LEP and NP 11 - Microsoft Teams [08.10.20]

Nicola Headlam – Analytics Manager, NP 11 - Microsoft Teams [08.10.20]

John McDonell MP - Hayes and Harlington, Labour - Zoom [09.10.20]

Kevin Hollinrake MP - Thirsk and Malton, Conservative - Zoom [13.10.20]

Conor McGinn MP - St Helens North, Labour - Zoom [20.10.20]

Ian Lavery MP - Wansbeck, Labour - Zoom [27.10.20]

Andrew Hodgson - Chair, Northern Value - Zoom [30.10.20]

Geoff Driver CBE - Council Leader, Lancashire County Council, Conservative - Microsoft Teams [02.11.20]

Bob Buxton - Leader, Yorkshire Party - Zoom [02.11.20]

Philip Jackson - Council Leader, North East Lincolnshire, Conservative - Microsoft Teams [03.11.20]

Andrew Lewis - Chief Executive, Cheshire West and Chester Council - Telephone [11.11.20]

Laura Gordon - Chair, Northern Liberal Network - Telephone [12.11.20]

Jonathan Guest - Senior Economic Policy Manager, Sheffield City Region Combined Authority - Zoom [20.11.20]

Mick Bowman - Policy Advisor to Jamie Driscoll, North of Tyne Combined Authority - Microsoft Teams [30.11.20]

Professor Donna Hall CBE - Chair, New Local - Zoom [02.12.20]

Mick Whitley MP - Birkenhead, Labour - Zoom [04.12.20]

Paul Salveson - Hannah Mitchell Foundation - Telephone [08.12.20]

Wallace Sampson OBE - Chief Executive, Harrogate Council - Telephone [11.12.20]

Anonymous - Senior local government officer, Greater Manchester - Zoom [16.12.20]

Matt Garlick - Head of Corporate Coordination, Government Relations & Public Affairs, Liverpool City Region Combined Authority - Zoom [18.11.20]

Ed Cox - Director of Public Service Reform, West Midlands Combined Authority.

Former Director, IPPR North - Zoom [12.01.21]

Hannah Richmond - Principal Policy Advisor, CBI - Zoom [19.01.21]

Gill Furniss MP - Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough, Labour - Zoom [29.01.21]

Marcus Johns - Research Fellow, IPPR North - Zoom [05.02.21]

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

This thesis examines the place of the North of England within contemporary political debate. It is interested in the ways in which and the extent to which the North is framed and politicised and the implications of this on policy debates and political action. This introductory chapter begins by briefly setting out the context of this research agenda. It then highlights the research objectives and aims of the study. Following this, it discusses the research approach utilised in the study including the key concepts of framing and politicisation, and it details the scope of the study. Next, the chapter sets out and justifies the methodological approach used in this research. It then highlights the contributions to knowledge that this study makes. Finally, the structure and content of the rest of the thesis is discussed.

1.2. Research Context

Perceptions about Northern distinctiveness, either real or imagined, have long existed, fuelling the idea of a North-South divide in England. While there is disagreement on the precise boundaries of the region – an issue that is explored in the next chapter – it is the case that in both the popular imagination and the academic literature, the North has long been seen to be different from other parts of the country in a variety of ways (Russell, 2004). In particular, attention is drawn to perceived cultural, socio-economic, and political differences between the North and other parts of England. Attempts have been made to highlight the historic nature of Northern distinction in each of these realms with it said to date back at least several hundreds of years if not millennia (Hawes, 2020; Jewell, 1994; Musgrove, 1990).

Many have highlighted ideas of Northern cultural distinction and the identity of 'Northernness' (Rawnsley, 2000: Russell, 2004; Spracklen, 2016). Largely this is thought to have its roots in the industrial working-class North (Martin, 2004, p. 36). In no small

part because of this, it can be seen to be subject to marginalisation from other cultures, most notably those from the South of England, and London and its hinterlands in particular (Russell, 2004, pp. 113-114; Wales, 2006, p. 4). While many of the key traits of Northernness are stereotypical, historic, or simply invented (either internally or externally), they are still seen to resonate and hold significant importance for many of the inhabitants of the North (Dodd, 1990, p. 27; Rawnsley, 2000, p. 3; Spracklen, 2016, pp. 13-14). As a cultural identity Northernness speaks to a sense of Northern otherness based on the region's distinct history and cultural shaping. It is therefore a recognisable and valuable sense of identity within the often-complex nest of personal identities.

Many have raised the idea of a North-South socio-economic divide, with the North said to be economically disadvantaged compared to the South of England (Berry and Giovannini, 2017; Martin, 2004; Smith, 1994). The economic divide between the North and the rest of England is said to be deep-rooted with the severity of its impact having ebbed and flowed over time (Baker and Billinge, 2004, p. 179; Martin, 2004, p. 28; Martin and Gardiner, 2017, p. 31; Smith, 1994, pp. 20-21). It is argued that this economic divide has been a persistent and well recognised feature of England's political economy since the 1980s (Balchin, 1990; Martin, 2004, pp. 16-17; Smith, 1994). Since then, regional economic disparity has widened further still (IPPR North, 2012, p. 24). As a result, on a wide range of socio-economic measures, the North lags behind many other parts of England (Bambra et al., 2018; Longfield, 2018; Pike et al., 2016).

Connected to this economic divide, the North is seen to be economically undermined by a number of notable public spending divides, generally receiving less government funding in areas such as transport, science, technology, and infrastructure compared to parts of the South, and London in particular (Lee, 2017; Raikes and Corrigan, 2018). Moreover, many parts of the North have been extremely hard hit by austerity and government cuts since 2010, more so than many other English regions (Centre for Cities,

2019, p. 16; Gray and Barford, 2018, p. 551; Obolenskaya et al., 2016, p. 32; Raikes et al., 2018, p. 29).

Much has been written on the differences in political culture and political allegiance in the North compared to elsewhere, with the North (until very recently) being seen to be dominated by the Labour Party in contrast to a largely Conservative dominated southern England (Johnston and Pattie, 2006; Johnston et al., 2018a; McAllister, 1997). This political divide increased in the post-war decades and became especially prominent in the 1980s (Curtice and Park, 1999, p. 125; Hudson and Williams, 1995, p. 15; Johnston and Pattie, 2006, p. 82; McAllister, 1997, p. 133). Since then, the extent of the divide has ebbed and flowed but largely remained. In their 1997 landslide, Labour made significant inroads in the South of England but also remained dominant in the North (Curtice and Park, 1999, p. 125). Much of the North remained consistently Labour until the most recent general election in 2019 – an event that, as we will see below, is very significant to contemporary political discourses on the North.

The extent to which these characteristics and issues can be regarded as being distinctly Northern or applicable on a pan-Northern basis is open to debate and is explored in more depth in this study. Nevertheless, it is the case that the idea of Northern distinctiveness and a North-South divide persists in the popular imagination (Russell, 2004). Additionally, and more pertinently for this study, because of this sense of Northern difference, particularly in terms of socio-economics and politics, there have long been attempts by politicians from all sides to recognise the North politically to varying extents and ends (Parr, 2017, p. 491). This has been the case for decades. For example, it was notable in some initiatives by the Labour governments between 1997 and 2010 such as the Northern Way.

But, since 2010, the Conservatives, first in coalition and then in government alone, have arguably gone further at politically recognising the region and increasing the political

saliency of it. There have done so in a number of ways. First, with the Northern Powerhouse agenda which was launched in the summer of 2014 by the then Chancellor George Osborne. According to Cox (2016a, p. 565), the agenda was borne out of the coalition government's 'renewed focus on idea of 'rebalancing' the economy' in the context of the financial crisis and recession. Essentially, the idea of the Northern Powerhouse holds that through boosting the performance of the North's key cities and agglomerating them, the North of England will be much better placed to serve as a counterweight to London and the South-East (Lee, 2017, p. 479; Parr, 2017, p. 491).

Connected to the Northern Powerhouse agenda was devolution. On coming to power in 2010, the Coalition government placed significant focus on English devolution chiefly in the form of city deals, this was followed by a focus on devolution deals centred on city-regions with metro mayors (Cox, 2016a, p. 566; Giovannini, 2016, p. 592). While cities and regions across England have received devolution through this model since 2010, areas in the North have been the main recipient of devolution (Blunkett et al., 2016, p. 553; Giovannini, 2016, p. 592). Raikes et al. (2018, p. 48) have argued that 'the Northern Powerhouse has positioned the North at the cutting edge of devolution'. The focus on devolution in the North is perhaps a recognition of the unique challenges the region faces. While both of these initiatives have come in for some criticism from those on all sides of the political spectrum, as will be seen in this study, their role in bolstering the place of the North within the national political debate appears important.

Further to the Northern Powerhouse and devolution agendas, more recent political events and initiatives have further brought increased focus to the North. First, the role of the North in the vote for Brexit was perceived by some to be significant (Hazeldine 2017; Cox, 2016b). Connected to the vote for Brexit, the ongoing realignment of party support in England (Cutts et al., 2020; Jennings and Stoker, 2018) appears to have increased the political saliency of the region. At the 2019 general election, the North of England was a

key political battleground and the long-held dominance of Labour in parts of the post-industrial North in the so-called Red Wall was shattered by Conservative gains. Moreover, the North looks set to feature centrally in the government's levelling up agenda over the coming years (Tomaney and Pike, 2020, p. 43). While 'levelling-up' is not an explicitly Northern agenda like the Northern Powerhouse, as we will see, attempts have been made by some to present it as particularly important for the North.

1.3. Research Aims

It is in the context of this sense of historic and persistent Northern distinction and the increased political saliency of it that this study seeks to understand the ways in which the North is discussed within contemporary political discourse and to explore the implications of it. Ultimately, the study seeks to answer the question: what affects do politics actors' perceptions of the North have on the contemporary politics of the region? To do so, the study explores three key sub-questions. First, how is the North of England and how are issues that impact the region framed by political actors? Two, in which ways and to what extent are these frames politicised? Third, how does the framing and politicisation of the North impact policy debates and political action in the region? In addressing these research questions, the thesis will provide valuable insights into how political actors understand the North and ideas of Northern distinction and the ways in which this impacts the contemporary politics of the North.

The thesis focuses its analysis most prominently on the period from 2010 up until 2021. Much of the analysis focuses on the period post-2010 because, as highlighted above, there have been a number of significant developments since then that mean the North has been an important political arena in this period. Moreover, 2010, being a year when the government changed from Labour to Conservative, was often pointed to by interviewees as an interesting watershed in terms of political contestation in the North. That is not to say that the North was not recognised politically before then, indeed the thesis does

discuss developments prior to 2010 where it is useful for context. Nevertheless, for the reasons outlined, 2010 provides a useful starting point for the bulk of the analysis.

The cut off point for much of the analysis presented in this study is 2021. This is because the research rests heavily on the findings of its primary interviews which were completed by early 2021. The only exception here is where there have subsequently been significant policy developments that that have been analysed in the context of the prior interview findings where this has been suitable. This is most notable in Chapter 6 on levelling up where analysis of the Levelling Up White Paper which was published in early 2022 is situated within analysis of prior policy developments and research findings. The study has avoided commentary on significant political developments post 2021, including the two changes of prime minster in 2022, as these were out with the focus of the data collection and analysis.

To expand on these research aims set out here and to detail how the research questions will be addressed, the remainder of this chapter will set out the key concepts employed in the study, framing and politicisation, it will discuss the scope of the research focus, detail and justify the methodological approach utilised in this study, discuss the contribution to knowledge that this study provides, and outline the content and structure of the rest of the thesis.

1.4. Research Approach

To explore political actors' understandings of the North and to consider the place of the North within contemporary political discourse the study utilises the concept of framing. In political discourse frames stress 'specific values, facts and other considerations' and seek to endow them with 'greater apparent relevance to the issue than they might appear to have under an alternative frame' (Nelson and Oxleya, 1999, p. 75). Thus, in framing an issue, actors' package 'an element of rhetoric in a way that encourages certain interpretations and discourages others' (De Blasio and Sorice, 2013, p. 62). Put simply,

framing refers to 'making an aspect of an issue salient, thus suggesting a certain interpretation and evaluation of the issue' (Egres, 2018, p. 463).

Framing can occur at a variety of levels and in a number of different ways. In the literature, distinctions between generic and issue specific frames, and equivalence and emphasis frames are regularly highlighted (Brugman and Burgers, 2018, p. 1). It is worth briefly considering these distinctions in order to detail the framing approaches that will be under review in this study. To start with the distinction between generic and issue specific frames, a generic frame is best seen as an interpretation of a broad issue, while a specific frame goes further in identifying problems and proposing remedies to issues (Jacoby, 2000, p. 751). Thus, 'issue-specific frames pertain to specific topics or news events, whereas generic frames are broadly applicable to a range of different news topics' (De Vreese et al., 2001, pp. 108-109). Generic frames, therefore, 'are not tied to a specific policy debate or issue, but can be identified across issues' (De Bruycker, 2017, p. 777).

A further distinction between generic and issue specific frames is that while generic frames offer an 'interpretation that focuses on the disputed governmental activity itself', within them 'little attention is paid to the underlying causes or consequences of any policy initiatives that may result from the resolution of the issue' (Jacoby, 2000, p. 751). Specific issue frames go further in that they seek to link issues of political dispute with clear targets. As such, specific issue frames will attempt to 'promote certain policy initiatives' as well as seek to justify why this action is required (Jacoby, 2000, p. 751). Viewed in this way, it is clear that it is the latter approach, issue specific framing, that sits most comfortably with Entmen's (1993, p. 52) oft-cited definition of framing which suggest that in framing an issue, political actors can promote 'a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described'. Utilised in this way, specific issue frames serve to 'diagnose' and 'evaluate' issues and prescribe political remedies for them (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

This study explores both generic and issue specific approaches to framing, not least because the ideas within specific frames invoked by political actors will be situated within the generic frames they construct about the broader topic. For example, the study looks at how generic frames such as 'the North of England has been left behind', or the 'the North of England lacks political power and control' are utilised by actors when discussing specific issues such as the government's levelling up agenda or devolution. As will be highlighted in subsequent chapters, generic frames such as those above are invoked by actors across a multitude of issues. Understanding this is therefore essential in considering how actors perceive the place of the North of England in the national debate broadly. Yet, to properly understand actors' views on the key issues they believe impact the North and the political action and policy approaches they would like to see enacted, examining issue specific frames is also essential. Through examining both generic and specific frames, the study can detail both how the North is broadly viewed and conceived and can also consider the extent to which this is consistent across issues and gain a deeper understanding of actors' views on the specific issues and the political remedies they desire for them.

The second distinction in the studying of framing commonly highlighted in the literature is that between equivalence and emphasis frames. The debate here primarily concerns the degree to which competing frames should or should not contain differing conceptual content (Brugman and Burgers, 2018, p. 1). Equivalence frames are frames that focus on the same information presented in a different manner. Brugman and Burgers (2018, pp. 1-2) give the following example of an equivalence frame: 'a new crime policy may keep 80% of drug offenders OFF the streets… or 20% of drug offenders ON the streets'. In contrast, with emphasis frames, different actors may highlight different aspects of an issue that need not be logically equivalent (Egres, 2018, p. 465). Using emphasis frames to frame an issue, actors can therefore focus on the element(s) of it that they see as key regardless of the position of opponents.

This study focuses primarily on emphasis frames rather than equivalence frames. This is because the study is concerned with understanding the broad sentiments underlying the generic frames under review and with identifying and interrogating the key issues and interpretations of them invoked by actors within issue specific frames. Given the broad scope of the research and the variety of issues that are highlighted by actors in this study, the research here is more interested in what information actors present in frames and to what ends rather than the extent to which equivalent information is framed in competing ways.

When studying framing approaches, it is important to note that frames do not arise in a vacuum, but 'derive their appeal from existing cultural narratives, symbolic traditions, and social orientations' (Winslow, 2018, p. 584). As such, understanding the wider political and cultural context within which a frame is conceived and applied – a frames 'cultural congruence' – is essential (Kornprobst, 2017). This is because, as Kornprobst (2017, p. 62) notes, 'in order for a message to resonate with an audience, the clues that communicators select and combine need to be taken out of a repertoire that is widely shared by the audience'. In doing so, actors are better placed to ensure that their frames are 'noticeable, understandable, memorable, and emotionally charged' (Entman in Kornprobst, 2017, p. 62). Thus, in this study, understanding the sense of Northern distinction highlighted above and the cultural and political context of notions of a North-South divide is essential. And, as we will see, exploring how actors situate their frames within this context is often illuminating.

Understanding the way in which actors construct frames in order to diagnose, evaluate, and perhaps prescribe political remedies for issues is clearly important for gaining an insight into their view of broad issues and specific topics. Yet, understanding frames alone is of limited use when seeking to explore their role in political discourse and debate. To explore this, we must consider how frames are mobilised politically. To do so,

an additional concept is required – politicisation. While there is no commonly agreed definition of politicisation, it is best viewed as the process of issues becoming salient within political communication and debate (Hurrelmann et al., 2015, pp. 44-45). To make an issue more salient is to increase its notability, meaningfulness, and memorability for audiences (Entman, 1993, p. 53). Thus, actors merely being aware of an issue or being able to express an opinion on it does not in itself constitute politicisation, only when an issue becomes significant in political communication and becomes publicly contested can it be seen to be politicised (Hurrelmann et al., 2015, pp. 44-45; Wonka, 2016, p. 125). Viewed in this way, politicisation chiefly involves political actors increasing the political salience of an issue by communicating its importance. As such, it is best viewed as a 'discursive phenomenon' (Hurrelmann et al., 2015, p. 45).

Like Urso (2018) and van der Brug et al (in Urso, 2018), this study is of the view that framing and politicisation can often be considered to be one two-step process. While, as we will see, some frames remain largely un-mobilised, it is generally the case that framing is utilised by actors to identify and promote particular interpretations of the North of England and the issues that are seen to be significant to it and that these frames are then mobilised in political debate in order to achieve a certain aim through the process of politicisation. Thus, by viewing and utilising these two concepts of framing and politicisation together in tandem, the study can not only explore how the ways in which notions of the North of England are formed and presented by political actors and organisations, but also consider the extent and degree to which they are mobilised by them.

Hooghe and Marks (2009, p. 13) argue that in order for a political tension to be activated two conditions must be met. First, 'the tension must be salient'. Here, in the context of this study, this condition is applied to the exploration of frames in that we consider the way in which frames employed by actors are backed up by some form of evidence, the

degree to which they are invoked by others, and the extent to which they are culturally congruent. The second condition highlighted by Hooghe and Marks is that 'political entrepreneurs must mobilize the tension'. It is here where the concept of politicisation is key, where the study considers whether significant attempts are being made by actors to mobilise particular frames. And if so, how, for what purpose, and to what ends.

1.4.1. Scope of the Study

Politicisation can take place in a variety of arenas from 'institutional arenas' such as parliaments, to 'intermediate arenas' such as political parties and the media, to 'citizen arenas' such as the workplace (Hurrelmann et al., 2015, p. 45). Some argue that for an issue to have become fully politicised, it must reach beyond elite discourse and enter citizen arenas (Salo and Rydgren, 2018, pp. 238-239; Wonka, 2016, p. 128). This may be so, but politicisation is best viewed as a process. Salient tensions are largely mobilised initially by 'political entrepreneurs' within the institutional and intermediate arenas (Hooghe and Marks, 2009, p. 13). That an issue has not yet become significant within citizen arenas does not mean that it is not being politicised in other arenas. Indeed, if an issue is only just becoming politicised in elite arenas it is unlikely to gain traction in citizen arenas immediately.

For this reason, the study will focus on politicisation and framing at the institutional and intermediate levels. The institutional level includes elected politicians, both national and local, while the intermediate level includes party political actors more generally, journalists, and actors from other organisations such as think tanks and interest groups. Both of these arenas are therefore home to the 'political entrepreneurs' who are key to issues becoming politicised. Understanding the nature and character of issue framing at these levels therefore allows for a detailed examination of the current nature of elite level political debate regarding the North of England, shedding light not only on the ways in which the North is being conceived and mobilised politically, but also on the extent to

which there are significant tensions between different organisations and actors on the key issues facing the region and the political solutions desired.

Further to this, examining the framing and politicisation of the North in these arenas may also provide wider insights into the way in which debate and discourse on the North could take shape in the near future. The nature and character of political discourse on the North at present in both institutional and intermediary arenas is likely to shape future political and policy approaches to the region. This is because the way in which political actors frame an issue and the extent to which they politicise it can have a significant impact on the political agenda. As Urso (2018, p. 367) notes, in framing and politicising an issue, actors grant it 'access to the political agenda by defining and presenting it as a relevant problem'. Thus, even though it is the case that 'policy discourse does not always translate into action and outcomes', examining the 'formative stage of policy making' can still provide key insights into the potential future policy direction and the shape of the political agenda on particular issues (Chaney, 2015, p. 162).

As well as shaping the elite-level debate, research suggests that the way in which issues are framed and politicised by political parties, individual political actors, and the media can be seen to play an important role in shaping public opinion, thereby entering citizen arenas (Lefever et al., 2017, p. 1; Nelson, and Oxleya, 1999, p. 1042; Slothuus, 2010, p. 158). This is known as the 'framing effect' (Jacoby, 2000, p. 751). Thus, by gaining a deeper understanding of the nature of elite-level political debate on the North, it may be possible to gain an insight into the potential future direction of public debate and opinion as well. Understanding the way in which the framing and politicisation of the North is taking place within and between the 'political entrepreneurs' of the various institutional and intermediary arenas will therefore provide key insights into the current nature of political debate concerning the North of England, and it may provide some insights into the potential future direction of it.

Rather than focus on framing and politicisation and the interpretation of political actors' perspectives, the study may have taken a more political or policy focused approach to understanding the politics of the North and could have employed a number of alternative theories to do so. For example, it could have considered ideas of a North-South divide through a centre-periphery framework (Urwin, 1982). Or it may have explored central government approaches to the North through a Statecraft framework (Bullpitt, 1983). Each would have been rewarding and interesting in different ways and if utilised, the study may have taken different methodological decision. However, these approaches would have largely focused on governmental approaches to the North. The thesis seeks to makes a broader, more holistic, approach to understanding the politics of the region by highlighting wider elite perceptions of the North and how a multitude of different factors, cultural, socio-economic, and political, all play into understandings of it and shape the politics of the North.

1.5. Methodology

In order to investigate the affects that politics actors' perceptions of the North have on the contemporary politics of the region and the ways in which the North and the issues that are said to impact the region are being framed and politicised in contemporary political debate, this study takes a qualitative approach, drawing on the methods of interviews and document analysis. This section sets out this research methodology in detail and explains and justifies the reasons for taking such an approach.

1.5.1. Research Position

To begin this discussion of the study's methodology it is important to set out the epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpin this research so that the methods detailed below can be seen in the context of this broader research approach. First, in terms of epistemology, the study's position is interpretivist. Interpretative approaches stem from the assumptions that in order to 'understand actions, practices and

institutions, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, the beliefs and preferences of the people involved' (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003, p. 1). The study has chosen to adopt an interpretivist approach because it is chiefly concerned with how political actors understand the North of England and the impact that this has on their framing of it and on politicisation and political action. To explore these questions in depth requires an interpretation of the 'meanings, the beliefs and preferences' of the actors being studied.

While the perceptions, ideas, and frames employed by political elites may not be factually correct or rooted in evidence, this does not matter. That they hold such views still has a bearing on their behaviour and actions and is therefore worthy of study (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003, pp. 18-19). This is where the method of interpretivism is essential for eliciting knowledge from the study of these perceptions. Indeed, seeking to explain the understanding of others and its impact requires the interpretation of their views. As Rhodes (2017, p. 215) notes, 'to describe people's beliefs is to interpret their interpretation of the world'. Doing so, guided by the context in which these beliefs and ideas are rooted, allows the researcher to develop a rich understanding of actors' views and explore the implications of them. The study has sought to ensure that its interpretations are robust and fair by being reflexive (Vromen, 2018, p. 245) in its analysis and taking steps to triangulate the data analysed. This is discussed in more detail below.

In employing the concepts of framing and politicisation as a guiding theoretical approach and in taking an interpretivist position, a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis has been adopted. It is driven by a desire for in-depth answers that take into account history, context, and personal understanding (Vromen, 2018, p. 237). An interpretivist epistemology and qualitative approaches are closely linked. In taking a qualitative approach to gain such insights, the need for interpretation is unavoidable (Schreier, 2012, p. 20). Indeed, 'interpretation is the challenge at the heart of qualitative research' (Willig, 2014, p. 136). Without interpretation, qualitative researchers cannot

make sense of their data. As Willig (2014, p. 136) points out, only through making data 'meaningful through a process of interpretation' can qualitative researchers 'make connections between different components and aspects of the data in order to increase our understanding [of it]'. Qualitative approaches therefore provide the rich detailed data required for understanding views and meanings, but this is not possible without interpretation which illuminates these views and meanings within the data and enables them to be interrogated and connected to other views and the wider context within which they are situated.

This interpretivist epistemology and overall research approach reflects the study's anti-foundationalist ontological position. An anti-foundationalist ontology holds that the world is 'always socially constructed' in contrast to a foundationalist position which holds that there is a 'real' world, 'out there', 'independent of our knowledge of it' (Marsh et al., 2018, p. 178). Anti-foundationalists therefore posit that 'social properties are outcomes of the interactions between individuals, rather than phenomena 'out there' and separate from those involved in its construction' (Bryman, 2016, p. 375). To take an anti-foundationalist position is not to say that institutions and other social entities have no impact or causal power on the social world but that their impact or causal power is 'dependent on the agent's/group's/society's understanding of it' (Marsh et al., 2018, p. 183).

An interpretivist epistemology is therefore strongly linked to an anti-foundationalist ontology because the focus is on how the world is 'socially constructed' which places the emphasis on 'understanding rather than explanation' (Marsh et al., 2018, p. 184). Indeed, anti-foundationalists stress the need for 'interpreting political actions and institutions to reveal how they are constructed' (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003, p. 3). This is the case in this study.

As the following discussions in this section will highlight, the methodological approach employed in this study is consistent in its focus on understanding the way in which the North is framed and politicised and in seeking to gain insights into meanings and beliefs that inform different approaches to framing the North and issues that are seen to impact the region. This study's overall methodological approach can therefore be seen to be clearly and unerringly informed by its interpretivist epistemology and anti-foundationalist ontology. This is in line with the view of Marsh et al. (2018, p. 177) that ontological and epistemological positions are integral to research to the extent that 'they are like a skin not a sweater; they cannot be put on and taken off whenever the researcher sees fit'.

1.5.2. Interviews

The main method of primary data collection in this study has been qualitative, semi-structured interviews with representatives from all of the institutional and intermediary political arenas outlined previously with an interest in the politics of the North. There were three main aims of the interviews. The first was to gain an insight into how participants frame the North generally and how they frame specific issues that they see as being important to the region. The second aim was to learn about how participants perceive other actors' and groups' approaches to the framing of the North. The third aim of the interviews was to understand participants views on the extent to which and ways in which the North is currently being politicised in political debate and the potential reasons for and aims of this. Interviewing was identified as a useful method to gain an insight into these issues because, as Aberbach and Rockman (2002, p. 673) note, interviews are a particularly useful technique when seeking to 'know what a set of people think, or how they interpret an event or series of events, or what they have done or are planning to do'.

In line with the interpretivist, anti-foundationalist research approach that underpins this study, the choice of this qualitative approach was motivated by the desire to capture the 'meaning, process and context' of participants' views and to enable participants to explain their ideas and thought processes (Devine, 2002, p. 199). A semi-structured approach to the interviews was selected as it allows for 'specific topics to be covered' in each interview but also gives the 'interviewee has a great deal of leeway in how to reply', allowing flexibility in the questions asked (Bryman, 2016, p. 468). As a result, participants were able to go into 'depth and detail about the research topic' and it was possible to follow up their responses in various ways to gain more specific insights (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p. 4). The qualitative, semi-structured approach has therefore enabled the research to highlight some of the key ideas and arguments that exist in contemporary debates around the politics of the North of England and provide a greater understanding of the numerous and complex views and feelings on the issues in question.

The interview sample is made up of elected national and local politicians from a variety of political parties as well as political advisors, civil servants, and key players from interest groups, think tanks, and the media. The sampling method used was purposive with potential participants being identified in a strategic way, 'so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are posed' (Bryman, 2016, p. 408). The study therefore chose potential interview participants based on their relevance and contribution to the current debates about politics in the North of England with the view of representing all groups within the institutional and intermediary arenas under review in this study. The majority of participants were elected representatives from the North or representatives from organisations based in or focused on the North. But attempts were also made to gain an insight into perspectives on these debates from those from outside of the region as well, both in the interviews and more so in the documentary analysis.

In taking a purposive approach to sampling it was possible to take steps to ensure that the interview sample was diverse in terms of seeking participants from different arenas and professional positions, making sure that the contrasting perspectives and arguments of the different sides of the debates on the North were heard, and in ensuring that the sample was demographically and geographically representative of the North as far as possible. Taking these steps can be regarded as a form of triangulation of the interview data whereby findings from each of the different groups and categories of participants sampled can be compared and contrasted with one another to provide a fuller, more representative, and robust understanding of the questions under study (Natow, 2020, p. 161; Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2007, p. 579).

One of the main challenges the researcher faces in seeking a strong and diverse interview sample is that inevitably many potential participants identified in the target sample will not want to or be able to take part in the study (Goldstein, 2002, p. 670). This challenge was made even stiffer by the arrival of Covid-19 in the spring of 2020, whilst the study was still in the early stages of data collection. Many already extremely busy potential participants found their workload increased further, this was particularly so for MPs, councillors, and civil servants. As such, it became increasingly common to receive responses declining invites to participate in the study citing a lack of time due to the pandemic. Others declined to participate for alternative reasons, while many others did not respond to requests to take part at all. A small number of potential participants agreed to take part in an interview which did not materialise either due to a change of heart or a change of circumstances on their behalf.

To overcome, or at least mitigate these issues, several steps were taken. First, the study approached many more potential participants' than it sought to interview (Cowley, 2021, p. 8). The target sample frame of potential participants that were approached for interview requests included a wide range of different participants from different target

groups, different political perspectives, and different geographic locations to ensure a diverse sample even accounting for declinations (Goldstein, 2002, p. 670). Second, all potential participants were re-contacted up to a maximum of three times if they did not respond to requests to participate. This was useful as it was quite common to receive positive responses on the second or even third time of asking. Perhaps because earlier requests had simply been overlooked or maybe because participants circumstances had changed at the time of the subsequent request. The vast majority of potential participants were contacted solely by email. Where email addresses could not be found, contact was made via direct message on Twitter. Initial contact was made with a very small minority of participants at in-person events.

The final sample is made up of seventy-three participants. It includes MPs; council leaders and other senior councillors; representatives from combined authorities and advisors to metro mayors; representatives from smaller political parties; council chief executives and other civil servants; journalists from both the print and broadcast media; and representatives from other organisations including the TUC, the CBI, LEPs, and numerous think tanks. The interviews therefore provide a good representation of views from all actors across all of the key institutional and intermediary political arenas integral to framing and politicisation. A full list of participants is available from pages 8-13.

Given this sample, the interviews can be regarded as being elite interviews. An elite is an individual who holds or has held some powerful position that has afforded the individual unique knowledge or information from a privileged perspective' (Natow, 2020, p. 160). Elite interviews can be a particularly useful approach for gaining insights into key political actors' views and understanding of political issues and policy questions and they allow for detailed examination of the way elite's construction of the political world shape these views and understandings (Beamer, 2002, p. 87). Delving into elite understandings

of these issues in in-depth semi-structured interviews can often provide insights and data that are not easily, if at all, available elsewhere (Natow, 2020, p. 160).

Undertaking elite interviews does however present a number of challenges, not least those concerning the perceived gaps in knowledge between the researcher and interviewee. As Mikecz (2012, p. 483) notes, unlike in non-elite studies where the researcher tends to be the 'expert', in studies involving elites it is the interview participants' that tend to be the ones 'in the know' about the issues under question. As such, when conducting elite interviews, the researcher must be mindful of this and take steps to mitigate against any potential negative impact that may arise from it. Harvey (2011, p. 434) suggests that elite interview researchers 'must show that they have done their homework because often elites might consciously or sub-consciously challenge them on their subject and its relevance'. Similarly, Cowley (2021, pp. 10-11), when discussing the interviewing of MPs, stresses the importance of being prepared in order not to waste time finding out information easily obtainable elsewhere. Additionally, he suggests that researchers should make clear their knowledge on the issues under discussion in their questioning. Taking these steps may help reassure participants 'that they are not wasting their time with you', and it also 'allows them to pitch their answer at the right level', preventing 'very general school tour' answers (Cowley, 2021, pp. 10-11).

All of these steps were taken and generally there were no issues that arose as a result of potential discrepancies in expertise. In fact, on several occasions, interviewees, perhaps self-deprecatingly, suggested that it was the researcher who was the expert, not themselves. While some participants did give rather general answers to some questions this was not particularly problematic and was sometimes rewarding. The decision was taken to allow interviewees to talk freely and to largely resist the temptation to jump in mid-answer (Cowley, 2021, p. 12). As a result, even answers that initially appeared rather general often developed into ones that provided useful insights as participants expanded

on their ideas as they were going. Any probing questions or follow up questions on specific points were then raised subsequently so as not to disrupt participants answer's as they were setting them out and developing them freely.

As a result of the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, the majority of interviews were conducted via online video call using either Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Many earlier interviews had been conducted face-to-face and all throughout the data collection process telephone interviews were conducted on occasion when this was the preference of the interview participant. The use of these different mediums for conducting the research interviews presented some challenges but also provided benefits and enabled some interesting insights to be gleaned concerning the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Within the methods literature on interviewing, face-to-face interviews are often seen to be the 'gold standard', but it is increasingly recognised that different modes of conducting the interview can be used with success (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013, p. 604). Indeed, this study found few discernible drawbacks of online video interviews compared to face-to-face interviews and found that they can instead provide a number of advantages both for the researcher and interview participant. First, online video calls provided a number of benefits in terms of convenience. The researcher and interviewees could participate from a location of their choosing, significant time and expense was saved in travelling to meet participants face-to-face, and it meant that more than one interview with participants in different locations could be conducted in a day (Archibald et al., 2019, p. 4). In terms of the dynamics of the interviews, this study found that it was still possible to experience the benefits of face-to-face interviewing such as rapport building and responding to the visual cues of the participants with video call interviews (Archibald et al., 2019, p. 4; Deakin and Wakefield, 2013, p. 613). The only drawbacks were the occasional connection issues, and it did appear that participants were more likely to request to rearrange video call

interviews than face-to-face interviews although this was not a problem because no time or expense was lost (Archibald et al., 2019, p. 5; Deakin and Wakefield, 2013, p. 613).

Much of the above is also true of telephone interviews although, in this study's experience, they can present a few additional drawbacks primarily associated with the lack of visual cues (Stephens et al., 2016, pp. 209-211). Unlike face-to-face and video call interviews it was sometimes more difficult to pick up on participants' sentiments without the addition of facial expressions or hand gestures. It was also sometimes hard to gauge whether participants had finished answering a question or had just taken a pause, this presented extra challenges around interrupting participants to ask additional probing questions or to determine when to move on to another line of questioning. That said, these issues did not significantly harm the dynamics of the interview and all of the telephone interviews conducted for this study did provide many useful insights. Given the circumstances and the restrictions in place for most of the data collection period, utilising alternatives to the face-to-face interview was unavoidable. This did, however, highlight that the alternative mediums to the face-to-face interview, in particular the online video call, have many positives and are likely to continue to be employed by researchers as we move forwards.

When it comes to the other practical details of this study's research interviews, interviews tended to last, on average, around forty-five minutes. Some interviews were longer at around an hour, while interviews with especially busy participants like MPs could be a little shorter at around half an hour. There is little consensus in the literature on the ideal length of an interview but often when conducting elite interviews, the researcher, as was the case in this study, has to strike a realistic balance in what can be asked of participants in terms of time demands and seek to glean as much useful data as possible when constrained by a pre-agreed time slot (Harvey, 2011, p. 436).

All of the interviews were audio recorded. During the interviews this had the benefit of the interviewer not being distracted with extensive note taking and instead focus more closely on the full response of participants (Mikecz, 2012, p. 488). Additionally, it allowed a full transcript of the interview to be produced in which all of the interview data could be analysed in full. The process of transcribing the interview recording was in itself extremely useful for reflecting back on the interviews and the information provided and was an important early element of the data analysis process (Mikecz, 2012, p. 488).

All interview participants signed a consent form agreeing to take part in the study, for their interview to be recorded, and giving their preference on whether their data would be attributed to them or presented anonymously in any write ups of the research. The vast majority of participants were happy to be named but some did opt to remain anonymous. Of those who stated there were happy to be named, some requested to see and check the transcript of their interview, while others asked to see any quotes that would be attributed to them prior to publication. All of these requests were fulfilled, and all participants were happy with their attributions. There were a number of instances in interviews where participants stated that small pieces of information they had given were off the record and this was of course respected. Overall, the study has taken the view that, where consent has been given, attribution is preferable as it can make it easier to highlight the background and context of actor's views and discuss the potential implications of them, it also simply improves the flow of the writing when it is clear who is saying what (Cowley, 2021, p. 6). All attributed quotes are presented using the interviewee's full name and, at their first mention in the thesis, their professional position at the time of the interview, and any other necessary background information is noted. Quotes from participants who wished to remain anonymous are presented using an agreed description of their position.

1.5.3. Document Analysis

Conducting so many interviews with such a broad sample provided many interesting insights that would not have been possible to uncover by other means. But findings from the interviews alone are insufficient to construct a clear and detailed explanation of the framing and politicisation of the North in contemporary political discourse. To do so, the findings from the interviews have been triangulated with knowledge gleaned from other sources. As Natow (2020, p. 161) notes, 'triangulation is particularly important in research that involves elite interviews in order to obtain a fuller picture of the situation being investigated'. Viewing the interview data alongside other sources can have a number of benefits including identifying corroboration or contestation of points raised in the interviews, and by providing additional information to contextualise, interpretate, or expand on the interview data (Gross, 2018, p. 545; Natow, 2020, p. 161). It may also shed light on important information not raised by interviewees (Goldstein, 2002, pp. 671-672). As well as bolstering the research findings, the process of triangulation can be seen to reduce risks of bias and increase the credibility of the research findings (Bowen, 2009, p. 38; Gross, 2018, p. 545).

This study takes the common approach of triangulating the interview findings with data from documentary sources including the academic literature; the popular literature; political manifestos, policy documents, and reports; speeches and interviews; and newspaper pieces, blogs, and other articles (Gross, 2018, p. 545; Natow, 2020, p. 166). The study also refers to some quantitative material such as opinion polls to add extra context to discussions where useful. There are a number of reasons why such a broad range of texts have been selected for analysis. First, drawing on insights from the academic literature and other literary works on the North is essential for placing notions of the North, the North-South divide, and the specific political and policy issues raised in this

study within existing frameworks and understandings. This is important as it roots the findings within the existing knowledge which this study seeks to further.

When it comes to the rationale for selecting the primary documents for analysis it is the case that manifestos are important documents in setting 'out parties' political vision', reflecting their 'ideological position' and outlining 'substantive details of future government and opposition policy' (Chaney, 2014a, p. 587). But manifestos do not necessarily include all policy visions, and do not always prove 'reliable guides to the policies parties pursue in office' (Clark and Bennie, 2018, p. 254). As such, it is necessary to explore other documents that commonly express political views and policy proposal such as speeches, policy documents, and articles (Chaney, 2014b, p. 257). Similar such documents from interest groups and think tanks provide further insights into their views as well. Analysis of media documents is useful in studying the way in which issues are framed and politicised because, as Helbling et al (2010, p. 506) note, 'the mass media constitute the most important arena for public debate on politically relevant issues' given the key function of the media in the chain of political communication.

Given the breadth of documentary material available, the study has had to apply selective criteria in choosing its sample for document analysis. The study has applied a consistent 'inclusionary and exclusionary' criterion in selecting the documents for analysis (Gross, 2018, p. 546). It has focused on material that is clearly seeking to raise issues concerning the North and frame them in a certain way and/or politicise these issues in calling for or critiquing certain actions or initiatives. In doing so, it has sought to ensure that the sample is both relevant to the research questions and aims and that it is representative of all of the political arenas under investigation. As a result, while a significant number of documents have been analysed, the study has prioritised the quality of the material over quantity (Bowen, 2009, p. 33). Documents from different time periods have been analysed according to their relevance to the above criteria and in order to provide

necessary historic context or to illustrate or expand on specific points. But given this study's focus is on the North of England within contemporary political discourse, the majority of material considered is from recent years.

When viewing and studying these materials it is important to remember that all documents are 'versions of reality, scripted according to various kinds of convention, with a particular purpose in mind' (Coffey, 2014, p. 369). Thus, as Coffey (2014, p. 370) highlights, in seeking to make sense of documents and assess the aims and purposes of them and their importance to the issues in question it is essential to examine 'their role and place in settings, the cultural values attached to them, [and] their distinctive types and forms'. It is for these reasons that a qualitative interpretivist approach to document analysis has been chosen because it allows for documents to be analysed in a systematic way but unlike quantitative approaches to document analysis, it also allows for the data within them to be 'examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge' on the research at hand (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). As such, it is a useful approach for eliciting 'underlying meanings, patterns, and processes' within texts (Altheide, 2000, p. 290). It is also necessary for eliciting an understanding not only of what different documents contain in themselves but also of how they interact with other documents and data (Coffey, 2014, p. 375). Through triangulating the interview data with all of the documentary material it has been possible to construct, understand, and present the various complementary and contrasting understandings and approaches to the framing and politicisation of the North (Natow, 2020, p. 163).

1.5.4. Data Analysis

Now that the research methods utilised in this study have been set out and justified it is useful to describe more specifically how the data gleaned from these methods has been analysed. Broadly, the study has followed the three common steps of data reduction, data

reorganisation, and data interpretation (Roulston, 2014, p. 301). First, to reduce and reorganise the data the study took the approach of 'constant comparison analysis' whereby the data from the literature, other documentary sources, and the interviews were constantly analysed and compared in order to identify the underlying themes within the data (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2007, p. 565).

Initial analysis was largely conducted inductively in order to establish the key themes and issues present within the data. Once this was achieved and themes and codes were established, the data has been further analysed deductively with these in mind. This combination of inductive and deductive analysis of the data enables the researcher to glean a clear understanding of the broader study and further explore the data pertaining to the key issues identified. As such, it is a common approach in qualitative studies (Natow, 2020, p. 162)

When returning to analyse the data deductively to reorganise it further the study first took the approach of grouping the data into clearer themes. These themes were the basis of each of the subsequent chapters in this study. Thus, data concerning definitions of the North, Northern identity and culture, socio-economic inequality, the electoral politics of the North, government investment and the levelling up agenda, and governance and devolution respectively were grouped separately. Thematic analysis is a useful step in organising and making sense of data as it allows the researcher to clarify the key broad themes relating to an issue and can draw attention to the links between these themes which is important for further analysis (Willig, 2014, p. 147).

Following this thematic analysis, the data within each of these groups were further interrogated with codes associated with specific issues within these themes being applied. This can be regarded as a form of qualitative content analysis, a process which involves 'systematically describing the meaning of qualitative data' by breaking down the data and 'assigning successive parts of the material to the categories of a coding frame' (Schreier,

2013, p. 171). Unlike quantitative approaches to content analysis which tend to focus on frequency counts and the manifest meaning within data, qualitative content analysis also focuses on the latent meaning and 'context-dependent meaning' within the data (Schreier, 2013, p. 174). Moreover, qualitative content analysis can be used to search out 'underlying themes' within the data being analysed (Bryman, 2016 p. 563). It therefore enabled the study to examine the salience of particular issues and ideas in the political discourse concerning the North, the existence of both generic and issues specific frames, and the extent to which any of these frames are being politicised without detaching this from the latent meaning and context of the arguments put forward in the data.

Taking this two-step approach employing thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis enabled the study to first organise the data according to key themes identified in the initial inductive analysis, then further organise the data within these groups into more detailed codes. Initial interpretation of these data was then possible in order to glean the insights and knowledge required to address the study's research aims. To understand and interpret the role and impact of frames in greater depth however, another method of data analysis was required – frame analysis. This method of analysis is a key analytical tool for understanding the different viewpoints and frames employed on an issue (Creed et al., 2002, p. 38). It is unsurprising, therefore, that the method is commonly used in studies of issue framing (Chaney, 2013a; Chaney, 2013b; De Blasio and Sorice, 2013; Hanggli, and Kriesi, 2010; Wonka, 2016).

Using frame analysis to understand how frames are constructed and what they are saying was useful in three key regards. First, it enabled the study to explore each frame in depth, gain an understanding of its overall message and reach a judgement on the strength of the argument and the coherence of it. Second, it allowed the study to understand in detail the way in which different groups and actors within the intermediary arenas frame the North and how these frames are utilised in their politicisation of it. This was essential

in order to compare and contrast the different views and arguments from different players within the process. Thus, as with the general qualitative content analysis, frame analysis is concerned not only with meanings, but also with the context and interaction of discourses (Creed et al, 2002, pp. 42-43). Third, this method allowed the study to break down the different elements of a frame – the 'problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' – and analyse and interpret them in turn and as a whole (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Thus, it enabled greater insights into what the particular issues relating to the North being framed and politicised are, the reason(s) why, and the desired outcome of the selected framing approaches and politicisation.

Using thematic analysis, qualitative content analysis, and frame analysis in the reduction, reorganisation, and interpretation of the data has been of great benefit to the study. It has allowed it to understand the key broad thematic issues around political discourses of the North; gain a deeper insight into the specific issues within these broad themes; understand the competing ways in which frames are constructed and presented; and understand the extent to which and the ways in which they are politicised, and the reasons for the politicisation of these frames. The use of these complementary approaches to data analysis has therefore been essential in order for the study to address each of its research aims. Additionally, the use of these different types of analysis can be seen as another form of methodological triangulation which, as Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007, p. 574) point out, can further strengthen the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings.

When it comes to the generalisability of the research a distinction can be drawn between the concepts of internal generalisability and external generalisability. Internal generalisability has much in common with the concept of validity and is important for qualitative studies and the robustness of the interpretations presented within them (Maxwell and Chmiel, 2014, p. 542). This study has sought to ensure its internal

generalisability through its use of various forms of triangulation both in its collection and analysis of the data. Additionally, in drawing on a broad and diverse sample both for its document analysis and for its research interviews the study has sought to guard against a lack of diversity that may produce bias and undermine the internal generalisability of the findings (Maxwell and Chmiel, 2014, p. 543)

In qualitative studies external generalisability generally refers to the extent to which the findings from the research can be theoretically or analytically applied to other cases rather than to other populations or universes (Maxwell and Chmiel, 2014, p. 546). As Devine (2002, p. 207) notes, qualitative researchers have to be 'tentative about making inferences from a small number of cases to the population at large'. This is the case with this study. The findings from interviews with individual political actors cannot necessarily be generalised to the organisation and arenas they represent at large. But Devine (2002, p. 207) also notes that 'it is rarely the case that a sample of interviewees is so unrepresentative or the interpretations so misleading that suggestions about the wider incidence of certain phenomena are wholly specious'. Given this, in analysing the interview data alongside the wide range of documentary evidence considered in this study, it is possible to suggest that some analytical generalisations can be extrapolated from the research findings (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007, p. 240).

While this is worthwhile and is a valuable contribution of this study, external generalisability is not the primary aim of the research. Ultimately, its purpose is to increase our understanding of the politics of the North as a result of its analysis and interpretation of the myriad approaches to the framing and politicisation of it in contemporary political discourse (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007, p. 242). Therefore, its value comes largely from shedding light on these issues and in increasing knowledge of these approaches and processes. Given the interpretivist epistemology and anti-foundationalist ontology that underpins this research, the study agrees with the view 'that

reality is constructed, multi-dimensional, and ever-changing' (Merriam in Natow, 2020, p. 163). As such, external generalisability can only go so far. It can only be applied to the context and time period in which the study was undertaken. Thus, while it is the case that analytical generalisations from this work can inform our understanding of the framing and politicisation of the North and provide some insights into the potential future shape of it, given the multi-dimensional, ever-changing nature of political discourse concerning the North, to make sense of these processes constant reappraisal and analysis is important.

1.6. Research Contribution

In pursuing this research agenda, this study makes several important contributions to the knowledge of the issues under review and to the literatures on them. First, it makes a useful contribution to the literatures on framing and politicisation and offers an innovative approach to the application of these concepts at the regional level. Many studies employing these concepts tend to focus on the framing and politicisation of one specific policy area often studying it on a nationwide basis (Chaney, 2014c, pp. 276-277; De Blasio and Sorice, 2013, pp. 61-62; Libbrecht et al., 2009, p. 60). This study differs from this approach in that it seeks to explore the framing and politicisation of numerous policy areas but only in one specific region in order to gain a more holistic view of the broad political debate surrounding it.

It is this broad but detailed holistic approach to the study of the politics of the North that is the key strength of this research in terms of its contribution to knowledge. While there is much important scholarship on many of the key policy themes and issues that are discussed in this study – and this is drawn on throughout – there have been few attempts to highlight how each of these issues interact to impact and shape the politics of the North as a whole. Given the current political saliency of the region, a number of popular literary works on it have recently been published but these too tend to have a narrower

focus than this study. For example, Tom Hazeldine's (2020) *Northern Question* looks predominantly at the economic history of the North. Deborah Mattinson's (2020) *Beyond the Red Wall* and Sebastian Payne's (2021) *Broken Heartlands* focus largely on the drivers of recent shifts in the electoral politics of parts of the North. And Brian Groom's (2022) *Northerners* looks at the history of the North through its people. In considering and exploring the framing and politicisation of the North across numerous policy areas which, in varying ways, draw on the cultural, socio-economic, and/or political understandings of the North and Northern distinction highlighted above, the study provides a more comprehensive picture of contemporary political understandings of the North of England.

1.7. Thesis Structure

To meet all of these aims and objectives and provide these important contributions to knowledge outlined above, the next six chapters all draw on the literature, other documentary sources, and the study's interview data to consider understandings of the North, the framing of it, and the politicisation of it. The final chapter pulls all this analysis together to conclude. The thesis proceeds as follows.

Chapter 2 considers the question where is the North of England? It details and discusses the different approaches employed to define the North. It considers whether or not it is problematic that the boundaries of the North tend to be imprecise and changeable. And it explores the extent to which the North can be seen as one homogenous region.

Chapter 3 looks at the issue of identity and culture in the North. It explores ideas of Northern cultural distinction and the identity of Northernness. It looks at the different ways in which Northern identity is framed. In doing so, it considers how ideas of Northernness interact with other forms of identity and belonging and considers the extent to which there is a truly pan-Northern identity. It then considers the ways in which notions of Northern cultural distinction and Northernness have been politicised.

Chapter 4 explores understandings of socio-economic inequality in England and the UK more broadly and looks at how this is framed. It shows that there are tensions between the framing of this in terms of the extent to which inequality is perceived as being a North-South issue, or whether other framings of inequality are more appropriate. It then discusses how these frames have been politicised.

Chapter 5 considers how the electoral politics of the North are framed and how this relates to preconceived notions of the North highlighted in the previous chapters. In particular, the chapter focuses on the Conservatives' breakthrough in the so-called Red Wall in 2019 and the ramifications of it. It looks at how the changing political landscape of the North is framed, and how these frames influence the party politics of the North.

Chapter 6 looks at the policy debates concerning the North focusing in particular on approaches to addressing regional inequality, including the Northern Powerhouse agenda and, most prominently, the levelling up agenda. It explores the competing framings of different elements of this agenda and examines the ways in which these are being politicised.

Chapter 7 concerns another key policy debate in the North, that around governance and devolution. It highlights how this devolution is largely framed positively despite there being some issues with the current approach to it, which are discussed in the chapter. Again, the extent to which issues around devolution in the North are currently being politicised is considered.

Chapter 8, the conclusion, brings together the analysis of the previous chapters highlighting the complex and diverse nature of contemporary political discourse concerning the North. It details the extent to which there is consensus and division on the key issues facing the region and discusses how approaches to framing and politicising the North differ according to position or perspective. It argues that while the North is

uniquely salient as a region in England, there are limits to the extent to which it is politicised in an all-embracing politics of Northernness.

In being structured in this way the thesis is able to flow to detail how broad understandings of the North impact specific debates and how these interact with one another. Chapter 2 is essential to place the study and offer some early insights into how the North is understood and perceived. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 all consider broad understandings of the North pertaining to the ideas of cultural, socio-economic, and political distinction highlighted at the beginning of this chapter and the framing and politicisation of these issues. Chapters 6 and 7 then seek to understand the implications of these findings in the context of discourse on key contemporary policy debates concerning the North, namely those around levelling up and devolution, respectively. Chapter 8 then draws all of this analysis together to make greater sense of what it means for contemporary debate on the North and what the political implications of it are.

In taking this approach to organising the thesis and presenting the research findings the study is better able to illustrate how specific issue frames on certain political or policy debates sit within actors' or organisations' overall generic frames of the North. It also enables the study to detail how the politicisation of frames interact and overlap with one another, again straddling the boundary between issue specific and generic notions of the North. In doing so, the thesis presents a holistic picture of the contemporary political discourse on the North.

1.8. Conclusion

This introductory chapter has set out the aims and objectives of this study and situated these in the context of historic and persistent notions of Northern distinction and the notable contemporary political saliency of the North. It has detailed the key concepts utilised in this study and set out the scope of the research. It has detailed and justified the study's interpretive, qualitative methodology and the methods and modes of analysis

employed. Additionally, it has highlighted how this study makes a number of important contributions to knowledge. And it has set out the structure of and provided an overview of the content within the rest of this thesis.

Chapter 2: Placing the North

2.1. Introduction

In order to effectively examine the politics of the North of England in any detailed way it is necessary to begin by considering what is meant by the term 'the North'. The first task in considering the idea of the North is to ask, where is the North of England? Answering this question is more complicated than simply drawing an arbitrary line across a map. There are numerous approaches to placing the North that are commonly drawn upon by scholars, commentators, and political actors who seek to define it and definitions of the North fluctuate over time and space. As such, we can differentiate between historical, cultural, socio-economic, statistical region, and political definitions of the North.

As this variety of approaches to defining the North suggests, 'there is no universal agreement as to which counties constitute the North' (Rawnsley, 2000, p. 4). Indeed, some have gone as far as to suggest that 'the North is a geographical expression rather than a precise area' (Pocock, 1979, p. 64). Despite this, it is essential for the purposes of this study to understand the ways in which the North is defined in spatial terms because the way in which individuals and organisations place the North can have an important influence on how they understand the region and, as we will see in subsequent chapters, the ways in which they frame and politicise it.

To do so, this chapter considers each of the different approaches utilised to geographically define the North in turn, drawing on the academic literature, other documentary material, and interview data. In doing so, it highlights the extent to which the approaches compete with or complement one another. It also highlights how these definitions of the North shape the idea of the North as a region, arguing that it is best viewed as being both one and many. The chapter concludes by discussing how these approaches to defining the North play into the debates considered in the rest of the thesis.

2.2. Historical Definitions of the North

Historically grounded definitions of the North tend to rest heavily on the idea of an historic North-South divide in England. According to Burton (2020), this imagined line that renders the two halves of the country 'economically, socially and culturally different, permeates English history' and 'leaks into the very idea of Englishness'. Similarly, Hayton et al (2016, p. 6) note how the concept of a North-South divide 'is a longstanding feature of life in England', a feature that runs 'deep in our national psyche'. It is the deep-rootedness and persistence of this sense of a North-South divide that is key to historic definitions of the North. Helen Jewell (1994, p. 6), one of the key proponents of taking a historical approach to defining the North, argues that 'analysis of the political, economic and social material indicates that the north-south divide is literally as old as the hills, and has real manifestations throughout recorded history'.

When it comes to geographical definitions of the North based upon historical criteria there is a relatively wide body of literature available to draw upon. Writers in this tradition tend to highlight how a North-South divide, and with it the idea of the North as a distinct part of England, has shifted according to the events that have shaped the country over the past two millennia. As such, the definition of the North in this approach tends to shift according to the historical period under discussion. Nevertheless, by examining the different approaches to defining the North based upon historic criteria it is apparent that there is a broad consensus on a core North and debate over contestable border areas that permeate through other approaches to defining the North as well as contemporary political understandings of it.

It is the case that from the Roman era up until around the 1200s at least, the North was widely regarded as a troublesome and rebellious place. This is evidenced by the fact that the Romans had to continuously place much of northern England under military occupation (Spracklen, 2016, p. 7). And in the second half of the Roman period in

England, they felt compelled to form a distinct northern province, Britannia Inferior, separate from their southern heartlands in Britannia Superior (Musgrove, 1990, p. 1). The divide between Britannia Inferior and Britannia Superior is thought to have run roughly from the Mersey to the Wash (Jewell, 1994, p. 11).

Following the Roman's exit, Northern distinction can be seen to have continued in Anglo-Saxon England, specifically in Northumbria. According to Musgrove (1990, p. 1), during the 'age of Bede' from the 'early seventh century to the end of the eighth… Northumbria enjoyed cultural and religious influence and renown on a truly international scale'. During the golden age of Northumbria, the work of Bede suggests that the Humber served as the southern boundary of the kingdom (Northumbria meaning North of Humber), separating the northern Angles of Northumbria from the southern Angles of Mercia (Jewell, 1994, pp. 12-13). For Jewell (1994, p. 14) 'there is little sign of transhumbrian fellow feeling' as highlighted by its role of a historic boundary. This lack of transhumbrian unity, she argues, can be seen to have persisted into modern times noting that 'the bureaucratic reorganisation of Humberside in 1974 was resented on both sides of the river'. As we will see below, the role of the Humber in defining the south-eastern boundary of the North today is an issue of note in both cultural and statistical region approaches to placing the North.

The next significant period that has shaped perceptions of the idea of the North was the Viking rule of much of the region under the Danelaw. The Danelaw divide followed the Thames out north west from London to join and follow Watling Street (Jewell, 1994, p. 20). That the Danelaw was a political boundary that included within it large parts of the southern Midlands and East Anglia, but not Lancashire or Cheshire, or large swathes of the far north of England means that it is at odds with almost every other geographic definition of the North. Instead, the significance of the Danelaw and the continued Anglo-Scandanvian presence in the North of the country following its collapse as a

political entity persists to a greater degree in the form of cultural markers such as place names and linguistical features. Therefore, while not particularly useful as a North-South boundary, the legacy of the Danelaw and Viking presence in the North resonated for some interviewees as a point of northern difference. 'The influence of the Vikings for instance is very heavily marked on the north' suggested Labour's Alex Sobel (Interview), MP for Leeds North West.

It was not until 954 that Northern England was brought permanently under the English crown (Jewell, 1994, p. 4). Even then, English rule was largely nominal because with Viking influence and other issues of Northern distinction long persisting, 'effective control from the South took a long time to achieve' (Jewell, 1994, p. 4). Indeed, the Normans were apprehensive of 'Northern separatism' both politically and religiously (Jewell, 1994, p. 6). Early Norman rulers viewed the North as a 'source of rebellion' to be tightly controlled (Spracklen, 2016, p. 7). William the Conquers' Harrying of the North campaign over the winter of 1069-1070 in which many Northern settlements were decimated and vast numbers of civilians killed is indicative of Norman mistrust and, in turn, repression of Northern England (Jewell, 1994, p. 23). Some interviewees have highlighted the role of this history. Talking about the idea of the North identifying as being different, Nick King (Interview) of the Centre for Policy Studies think tank, said, 'there's probably historical phenomena dating back to the Normans and possibly before that, which led to a sense of otherness in the North'.

The marginalisation of the North began to change to some extent around 1200 when Norman rulers who had often cared little for the North and in fact 'had often been willing to concede parts of the North to Scottish kings for various political and diplomatic advantages', began to embrace the policy of defending the whole realm (Jewell, 1994, p. 5). As a result, over the following centuries, centralisation became increasingly apparent in approaches to the North. The fact that the fourteenth and

fifteenth centuries were marked by 'the military age' of the Nevilles and the Percies, two significant families based in the North, and that this period also 'provided England with its first and only Northerner king' in Richard III is testament to the Norths increasing role in national affairs (Musgrove, 1990, p. 1).

Jewell (1994, p. 5) suggests that this process of centralisation reached a high point in the Tudor period which she suggests witnessed the 'end of the North-South divide as a major political concern', particularly following the failure of the Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536. Indeed, aside from the rather limited Northern Rising of 1569-70, every other significant riot or rebellion in England between 1550 and 1640 was in the Midlands or the South (Langton, 2004, pp. 133-134). Even the extent to which the Pilgrimage of Grace was a distinctly Northern rebellion is debatable as Lincolnshire was at the epicentre of the rebellion, while Lancashire 'conspicuously abstained' (Langton, 2004, p. 133).

All of this points to a decline in Northern distinction and Northern rebelliousness in this period. The role of the North during the civil wars of the mid-1600s also points this way. Although there was significant Royalist support in the North and Parliamentarian support in the South, there are far too many outliers and internal challenges that undermine the idea of a Royalist North set against a Parliamentarian South (Langton, 2004, p. 133; Jewell, 1994, p. 5). In reality the North housed significant numbers of both Royalists and Parliamentarian supporters (Musgrove, 1990, pp. 6-7).

For Campbell (2004, p. 145), 'late-medieval England was a land of dichotomies'. While 'many these dichotomies had a strong north-south dimension', this, he argues, 'does not necessarily mean that there was such a thing as a 'north-south divide' or that distinctions between north and south should be privileged above other spatial and regional differences'. It is in the early medieval period that Campbell (2004, p. 169) suggests that 'the idea of England as one country and the English as one nation is manifest in the creation of the first national maps'. This emerging sense of Englishness in Campbell's

(2004, p. 174) view, leads him to argue that 'to both northern and southern English, it was the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish who always remained the 'significant others''.

Indeed, the fate of Scotland in particular has long been significant to ideas of the North. For centuries, the North of England, especially its far north, had long been impacted by war or the threat of war around the contested Anglo-Scottish border lands (Campbell, 2004, p. 154). This can be seen to have shaped a distinctly Northern consciousness based around the idea of the North as a frontier territory (Jewell, 1994, p. 19). Campbell (2004, p. 154) argues that 'remoteness from the seat of power in London was not by itself responsible for the north's distinctive administrative history and character… at least as important was the proximity of Scotland' with 'war and the threat of war' affecting the north 'far more directly than the south'. The unification of the crowns of England and Scotland in 1603 followed by the full unification of the kingdoms in 1707 altered this. According to Jewell (1994, pp. 5-6), 'the social conditions bred by centuries of border warfare slowly gave way to conditions more like those in the rest of the country'. The Union thus undermined a long-held sense of common Northern identity shaped by its historic role as a 'frontier society' (Musgrove, 1990, p. 13).

The next significant period for the North was the industrial revolution. The events of the industrial revolution from the late eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century saw Northern England play host to 'a powerful new system of industrial production' as well as being the site of 'a great burgher civilisation and a successful bourgeois revolution' (Musgrove, 1990, p. 1). That the North was the epicentre of the industrial revolution owes more to the prior existence of cottage industries, its distinct geography, and its natural resources than design (Caunce, 2015). Nevertheless, the changes in the North as a result of the industrial revolution are undisputable. Lancashire serves as a particularly stark example here. In the late 1600s the county was one of the poorest in England and was relatively sparsely populated. By the early 1800s however, it

had transformed to be the third wealthiest county in the country and one of the most densely populated (Langton, 1998, p. 84).

The process of increasing urbanisation continued apace across the whole country throughout the period of the industrial revolution but was particularly apparent in the North with its rapidly emerging 'great factory towns' (Howell, 2004, p. 77). As Priestley (1934, p. 157) notes, places such as Bradford are distinct 'products of nineteenth-century Industrialism' and the resulting urbanisation boom. This is evidenced by the fact that its population rose from 13000 in 1801 to almost 280000 in 1901, making it the second fasting growing English town or city in this period behind a fellow Northern town, Middlesbrough (Priestley, 1934, p. 157). As these significant demographic changes suggest, the impact of the role of the industrial revolution on shaping the contemporary North cannot be understated. Indeed, as we will see in subsequent chapters, the industrial revolution and its impacts have long shaped the North culturally, economically, and politically, and have had a significant impact on ideas of the North and Northernness.

The role of the industrial revolution in shaping the idea of the North and serving to define it was commonly highlighted by interviewees. Ian Lavery (Interview), Labour MP for Wansbeck, spoke of the North as 'the industrial heartland of the Industrial Revolution'. Meanwhile, Christopher Haskins (Interview), former peer and former chair of the Humber LEP, talked of the Industrial Revolution being 'predominantly a Northern phenomenon'. That it was chiefly concentrated in the North is seen by some to have imbued the region with a notable distinctiveness. Marcus Johns (Interview) from the think tank IPPR North, spoke of the North as having had 'a distinct economic history to England, or just to the south' with the Industrial Revolution meaning 'the North urbanised and industrialised very quickly'. And Wallace Sampson (Interview), chief

executive of Harrogate Council, suggested that 'the north's distinctiveness and unique identity is because of the Industrial Revolution'.

Subsequently, the process of de-industrialisation that has affected the North over the last half a century or more was also invoked by interviewees as imbuing the North with a distinction, though not a particularly positive one. Laura Gordon (Interview), chair of the Northern Liberal Network, spoke of the cities of the North having a 'shared history of industry and deindustrialisation'. While deindustrialisation has resulted in the North 'suffering some challenges in the latter part of the last century', Gordon suggested that the common industrial heritage of large conurbations in the North 'does forge a certain amount of shared identity'.

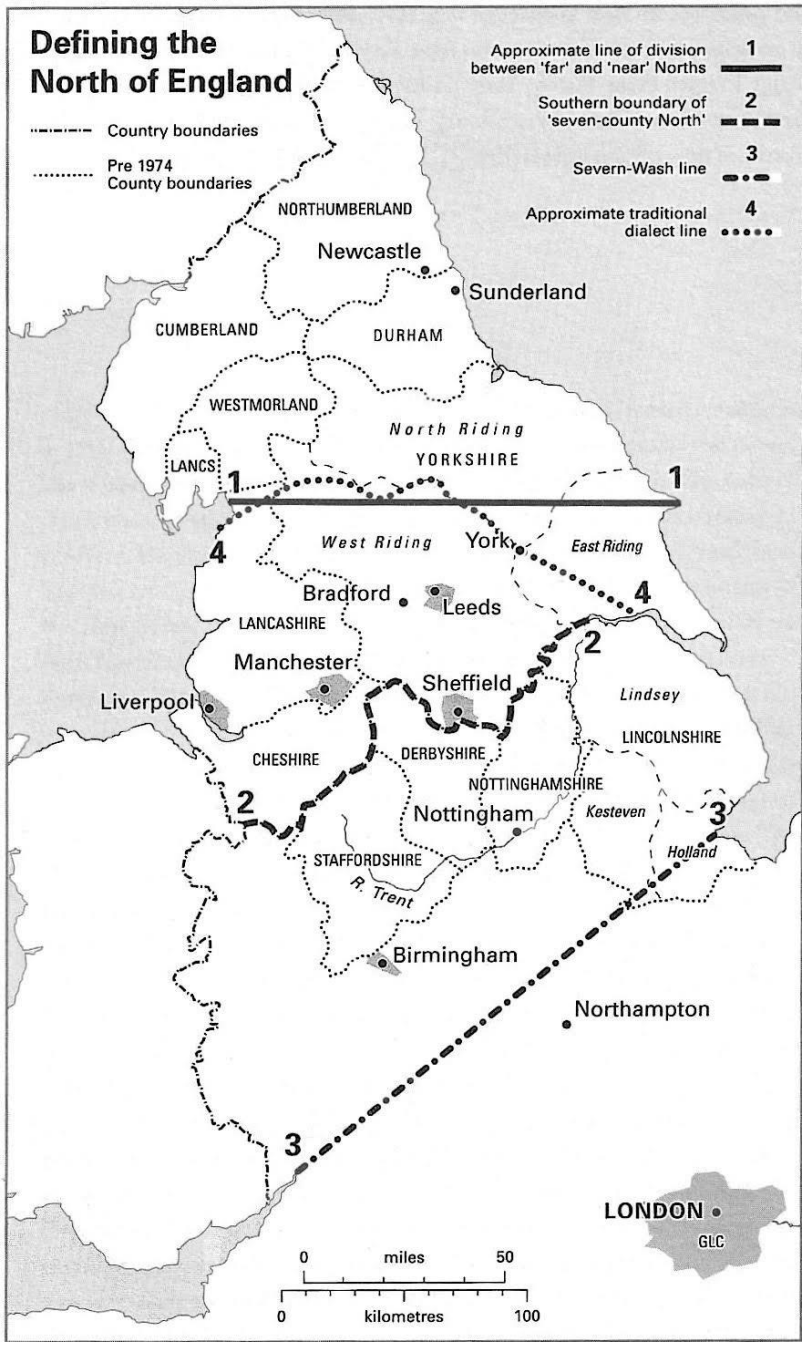
All of these historical developments can therefore be seen to have shaped understandings of the North as a place and the geographical definition of it. While there has been no formal border between the North and the rest of England for over 1000 years, throughout the medieval period and onwards, ideas of an imagined North-South boundary in England have persisted to varying degrees. While inevitably the perceived boundary of the North has shifted depending on the historical period in question, by and large, historically rooted definitions of the North tend to highlight the role of key rivers as boundaries. As noted above, in the east the Humber is regarded by some as serving as a boundary. On the west, it may be that historically the Ribble served as a significant North-South boundary, however, in more recent times the Mersey has been acknowledged to be the key dividing river at the west of the North's southern border, and indeed its name derives from an old English term meaning boundary (Jewell, 1994, p. 15).

Between the Humber and the Mersey in the middle of the country, numerous writers have highlighted the historic role of the Trent in serving as the southern border of the North (Hawes, 2020; Jewell, 1994, p. 14). Thus, Jewell (1994, pp. 24-25) argues that 'from

Humber to Mersey, with attention to the Trent between them… [there exists] a border which would be recognised by people on both sides of it as generally accepted as the beginning of the North of England, when travelling north, or the end of it, when travelling south, for more than a millennium'.

This Humber-Mersey axis with attention to the Trent in between is a common theme within historical approaches to geographically defining the North. From it, a map emerges of a North that contains some core counties alongside some other more contested border counties. Campbell (2004, p. 155) suggests that a 'tight' definition of the North would include the historic counties of Cumberland, Westmorland, Northumberland, Durham, Yorkshire, Lancashire, Derbyshire, and Nottinghamshire which he suggests 'can be seen to have been regarded as the North throughout much of the middle ages' and which circa 1500, possessed 'a common linguistic identity, in so far as it was within this area the English was spoken with a predominantly Northumbrian dialect'. Additionally, Campbell makes the case that both Lincolnshire and Cheshire could also be seen to be part of the historic North.

Figure 2.1 - Definitions of the North



Source: Russell, D. 2004. Looking North: Northern England and the National Imagination

In his account of the history of the North, Musgrove (1990, p. 7) adopts a similar definition. In common with Campbell's tighter definition, he excludes Lincolnshire but, while acknowledging the historically contested place of Cheshire within the North, he includes it. Another difference between Musgrove and Campbell's definition is that the former also excludes the counties of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. Instead of the

Trent, Musgrove (1990, pp. 7-8) prioritises the role of the Don in serving as a historic boundary arguing that 'Doncaster has long been viewed as the 'gateway to the North' from Roman times onwards, largely because it has historically marked the half-way point between London and the English-Scottish boarder'. Thus, Musgrove's (1990, p. 7) historically grounded North comprises of Northumberland, Durham, Cumberland, Westmorland, Lancashire, Yorkshire and Cheshire. Russell (2004, pp. 16-17) also uses these same seven historic counties in his definition of the North, although he too acknowledges the contested nature of Cheshire.

From these various geographical definitions of the North deriving from an historical approach, a picture emerges of a core North based around the historic counties of Northumberland, Durham, Cumberland, Westmorland, Lancashire, and Yorkshire. As does a picture of a contested southern boundary with counties such as Cheshire, Derbyshire, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, and Staffordshire appearing to be problematic.

2.3. Cultural Definitions of the North

Cultural approaches to geographically defining the North have much in common with historically rooted ones in that they draw on the North's perceived historic distinction and sense of difference to bound it as a region. Where they differ is that they generally prioritise the cultural understanding of what it means to be Northern. In doing so, they seek to understand what historic and contemporary differences delineate the North from the rest of England, prioritising the role of cultural perceptions and self-identification in doing so. As with historical approaches, cultural approaches to defining the North largely tend to identify a core North which is broadly agreed upon and contain debates over disputable border areas.

This approach was regularly used by interviewees when asked to define the North. When rationalising their Northern boundary, several participants highlighted the idea of places

that feel Northern. Ed Cox (Interview), former director of IPPR North, said 'I think there's a sense in which being northern is associated with place and there are northern places'. Similarly, Neil McInroy (Interview), former director of the Manchester-based think tank CLES, recognised this, saying 'there are clearly places that are seen as the North and places that are not the North, but where the actual boundary lies, I'm not sure'. This idea of there being places that are Northern and places that are not leads people to define the North in ways like this: 'Manchester, Sheffield, and up is unequivocally North' (Nick King Interview).

The idea of values and the way in which the relationship with the rest of England is perceived is also seen as a cultural marker of where the North begins and ends. Ed Cox (Interview) argued that 'I think socially and culturally, there is a sense that being northern isn't necessarily associated with a particular geography… it's more about a way of being… and it's to do with how you perceive your role in the relation to the rest of England'. In this view, if enough people identify with being Northern, a place can be seen to be Northern.

Cultural definitions therefore rest heavily on ideas of what it means to be Northern. These ideas are constructed in a variety of ways. For some, it could be cultural markers around terms of endearment or food references that mark a shift. Helen Pidd (2015), Northern Editor of the Guardian, has written 'I think the north stops when you go far enough into the Midlands that people start calling you "babs" instead of "duck" or "love". Or when people have dinner instead of tea and lunch instead of dinner. Or when chippies stop asking if you want gravy'. Chris Rowell (Interview), policy advisor to Tees Valley metro mayor Ben Houchen, also highlighted the importance of gravy: 'the best explanation I've heard is the North of England is that actually, it depends on your attitude towards gravy. So, I was brought up thinking gravy's the kind of stuff you put on top of your food, whereas in the South, gravy is something they have occasionally'.

Clearly, there is some jest in such markers but it is also the case that simple markers of cultural distinction can be of importance. For example, Connor McGinn (Interview), Labour MP for St Helens, based his definition of the North as being from the M62 corridor upwards, or places 'where rugby league is played, and anything beyond that'.

Another cultural element raised by several interviewees was the importance of accents and dialects in separating places that feel Northern from those that do not. There is some merit to this view because despite the North being home to a vast range of dialects from Geordie to Scouse, there are a number of shared linguistic features and characteristics that unify them in some ways. As Hickey (2015, pp. 8-11) points out, despite the wide range of dialects found across the region, 'the linguistic North is characterised by a number of phonological and grammatical features shared across the entire region, irrespective of the profiles of local forms of English within the North'. Most notably there is the 'Foot-Strut split' and 'Trap-Bath split' where all Northern dialects can be found to have retained early modern English vowel pronunciation that have been altered in the South and elsewhere (Hickey, 2015, pp. 8-11; Wales, 2006, pp. 20-21).

Other factors too are highlighted. Again, the North's industrial heritage is seen to be extremely important. Tom Forth (Interview), head of data at ODI Leeds, highlighted that 'in a lot of parts of the North, there is a certain proximity to an industrial past that is quite unique'. Issues such as the topographic nature of the country have also been raised. In the North 'we tend to have more hills' noted Carl Les (Interview), leader of North Yorkshire county council. As we will explore in more detail in the next chapter, both of these elements – the industrial past of significant parts of the North and the wild, hilly, remoteness of other parts of it – have long been invoked in the popular imagination as markers of Northern cultural distinction.

When these various cultural factors are drawn upon to define the North, largely the definitions that emerge share much in common with the historically rooted ones

considered above. The Humber-Mersey axis is often invoked as demarcating the North, with places above that line perceived as definitely being Northern. But again, there is much debate and grappling with the 'fuzzy boundary' (Jonathan Guest Interview) or 'vague hinterland' (Will Jennings Interview) where the North begins. Chiefly, the so-called border counties of Derbyshire, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, and Staffordshire, and to a lesser extent Cheshire. It is worth briefly examining the debate around each in turn to illustrate the ideas that shape cultural understandings of what is and is not the North.

When it comes to Derbyshire, some interview participants suggested that the county as a whole should be viewed as being in the North. More commonly though, it was argued that North Derbyshire was part of the North but the southern part of the county, including Derby itself, was not. Robert Largan (Interview), Conservative MP for High Peak, was of the opinion that his constituency was certainly a part of the North. He suggested that it sticks up like a knuckle out of the rest of Derbyshire and into the North and stressed that links with Manchester and Sheffield were much more important to the area than those with southern Derbyshire. Similarly, Sheffield-based, Laura Gordon (Interview), argued that 'if you live in one of the bits of Derbyshire that's in the Peak District, that's kind of between Manchester in Sheffield, it feels a little bit meaningless to say that you live in the Midlands and not in the North'. The idea that High Peak is of the North is also present within the literature. Tebbutt (2000, p. 164) also notes the links with Manchester and Sheffield while highlighting that the area shares much in common with ideas of the rural North of 'mountain and moorland' and 'wild, rugged terrain'.

As well as High Peak, some of the former industrial towns of North Derbyshire, in particular Chesterfield, are highlighted by some as being distinct from the south of the county and being of the North. Toby Perkins (Interview), Labour MP for Chesterfield, pointed to a number of cultural markers such as the town's industrial heritage and its

role in the miners strike, cultural institutions such as miners welfare clubs and crown green bowling clubs, as marking the town as culturally northern. Perkins also stressed the town's historic and persistent links with Sheffield. Based on all of this, Perkins represented the view that feeling is important to cultural definitions of the North, suggesting that 'if you're walking around Chesterfield, you'd feel like you're in a Northern town'.

Discussion around Lincolnshire follows a similar pattern with the county generally being viewed as culturally not of the North but the north of the county, particularly places like Scunthorpe and Grimsby commonly said to be part of the North. As we will see below, this view is reflected in the statistical region approach to defining the North and has been reflected in political administration terms too, most notably with the short-lived county of Humberside. Despite Jewell's argument that historically the Humber has served as a boundary, there is clear evidence of historic and persistent cultural links between the north and south banks. Neave (1998, pp. 196-197) argues that 'it cannot be denied that many of the East Riding's distinctive characteristics are parallel in north Lincolnshire' and notes the important role of Hull as a focal point for those on both sides of the estuary.

Nevertheless, the extent to which these links have forged a sense of trans-Humbrian feeling is debatable. Neave (1998, pp. 197-198) himself acknowledges that 'Humberside County Council discovered, the Humber is as much a barrier in the late twentieth century as it was when it formed a barrier between the Parisi and the Coritani in the first century, and Northumbria and Mercia in the seventh century'. He noted that opponents viewed it as an unhistorical and an unnatural joining together of separate communities in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. This view was reflected by Philip Jackson (Interview), Conservative leader of North East Lincolnshire Council, who said 'we don't like being classed as Yorkshire and the Humber because we don't really like the concept of the

Humber', arguing that 'the old county of Humberside… was very unpopular and that is not something we really want to go back to'. Largely in Jackson's view, this was because, despite the economic ties between the north and south banks of the Humber, he argued that culturally the population in his area 'looks more south towards Lincolnshire than it does North across the river'.

The contours of the debate around the place of Nottinghamshire take much the same shape. Despite the prominent role of the river Trent in historically rooted definitions of the North, only one interviewee suggested that the Trent be used as a boundary today. Meanwhile, Nottingham itself is seldom regarded as being Northern. But the former industrial towns in the North of the county are perceived by some as feeling to be in the North in cultural terms. Speaking of both northern Nottinghamshire and northern Derbyshire, several interviewees, including Wallace Sampson (Interview), chief executive of Harrogate and former Derbyshire resident, suggested that these areas 'would certainly see themselves as part of the North rather than as of the Midlands'. The Nottinghamshire town of Mansfield was highlighted by some interviewees as feeling decisively northern. Alexis Darby (Interview) of the Northern Powerhouse Partnership and who was brought up in the town suggested that the town 'feels more northern than southern' (Alexis Darby Interview). Again, this feeling of Northernness that some suggest is present in north Nottinghamshire in particular, appears to owe much to the region's industrial past and, as with Derbyshire, its historic and cultural links to places like Sheffield.

When it comes to Staffordshire, the county as a whole is rarely described as being in the North culturally. There are some exceptions, however. Helen Pidd (2015) notes that while Staffordshire and Derbyshire too for that matter, are officially in the Midlands, to her 'they feel' Northern. Similarly, the Northern Editor of the Sunday Times, David Collins (Interview), regards Staffordshire as being Northern. Few others have remarked much on the Northernness of the county as a whole but several interviewees have

highlighted that they see the town of Stoke-on-Trent as being Northern. Largely, this is due to the cultural identity thought to be imbued by its industrial heritage.

The final disputed border county is Cheshire. Here, however, there is a much greater consensus, both in the literature and amongst interviewees, that the county in its entirety is in the North in comparison with the other disputed areas. Indeed, as Russell (2004, pp. 16-17) notes, Cheshire is the 'least problematic of the border counties'. In particular, Russell (2004, pp. 16-17) argues that Cheshire's 'industrial region abutting Merseyside [is] clearly of the North'. Similarly, Maconie (2007, p. 55) draws on this industrial heritage arguing Warrington is 'the first big proper indisputably Northern town' (2007, p. 55). Maconie (2007, p. 55), as well as several interviewees, also highlights the idea of Crewe as being the eastern gateway to the North. While places such as Chester, Alderley Edge, and Knutsford may not seem decisively Northern largely due to their socio-economic profile – an issue that will be considered in more depth in chapter 4 – Russell (2004, pp. 16-17) argues that they are linked and connected deeply enough with the rest of the county for it as a whole of be perceived as Northern. Maconie (2007, p. 55) agrees, arguing 'Cheshire is where the north begins'.

Much of the debate around these contested border areas, perhaps Cheshire aside, involves consideration of the extent to which cultural definitions of the North should cut across or respect traditional county lines. The extent to which this matters is contested. There was a tendency amongst some interviewees to stick to a county approach suggesting certain border counties as a whole were of the North such as Derbyshire, whereas others such as Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, and Staffordshire were more commonly seen to be in the Midlands.

Much depends on individual views on whether county ties trump a broader attachment to the North. In the case of Derbyshire, Tebbutt (2000, p. 163) notes that while High Peak can be seen as 'an area manifesting many features of 'Northernness' [it] is distanced

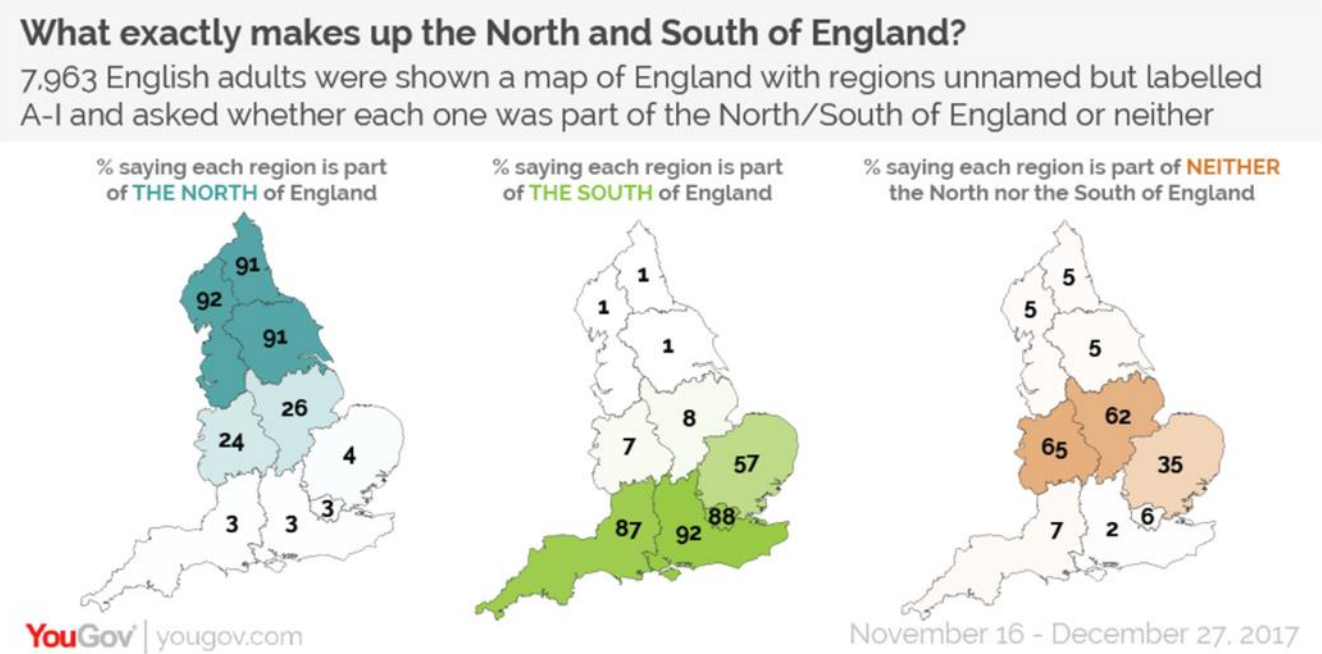
from surrounding urban communities by a regional identity based on being an integral part of midlands Derbyshire' (Tebbutt, 2000, p. 163). In a similar vein, Toby Perkins (Interview), suggested that while in his view Chesterfield was certainly of the North, many people there 'would also consider themselves Derbyshire [and] very strongly not Yorkshire'. This view suggests that county attachment and Northern attachment need not be in conflict. In doing so, it highlights that identity and cultural attachment is often multi-layered, an issue that will be explored in greater depth in the next chapter.

All of these debates raise interesting questions about the concept of the Midlands and where exactly that starts and ends. It is beyond the scope of this study to address this, but it is important to note that historical, cultural, socio-economic, and political ideas of the North, overlap with areas traditionally viewed as being part of the Midlands arises to varying degrees. Rob Parsons (Interview), the political editor of the Yorkshire Post, argued that there cannot be seen to be a 'strict dividing line between what's the North and what's the Midlands'. Similarly, Alex Sobel (Interview) noted that 'it's not a simple thing, you don't just cross a line and you've moved from the north to the Midlands'. Others argue that all across the Midlands, many people will feel a greater affinity with the North of England than the South (Jonathan Guest, Interview; Ian Lavery. Interview). There is, however, a middle ground. That is that the Midlands is both 'not North and it's not South' (Alexis Darby Interview).

This view is reflected in public opinion according to research by YouGov (Smith, 2018). Polling suggests that over 60% of people in the Midlands (defined as the two NUTS1 statistical regions of East Midlands and West Midlands) regard it as a distinct entity to both the North and the South. The idea of the links between the Midlands and the North being stronger than those between the Midlands and the South is, however, reflected to some extent. Around a quarter of Midlanders see their region as being part of the North compared with less than 10% who view the Midlands as being part of the South of

England (Smith, 2018). When it comes to the views of those in the North of England (defined as the three NUTS1 statistical regions of North East, North West, and Yorkshire and the Humber), the survey suggests that a significant majority also regard the Midlands as being neither the North nor the South. This is particularly pronounced with those in the North East of England with only around 10% of respondents there viewing the Midlands as being part of the North (Smith, 2018).

Figure 2.2 - Public Opinion on Defining the North



Source: Smith, M. 2018. What regions make up the North and South of England?

These findings further illustrate the point that cultural definitions of the North can be seen to rest heavily on perceptions. Whereabouts individuals perceive the North as beginning depends much on their 'angle of vision' (Russell, 2004, p. 14). That is the position from which they are viewing the North. Mick Bowman (Interview), policy advisor to the North of Tyne metro mayor, made this point, suggesting that if asked where the North begins 'people who live in the South East and certainly a lot of politicians and senior civil servants in Whitehall, probably think it begins roundabout

Birmingham. Similarly, Joe Anderson (Interview), former Labour mayor of Liverpool, suggested that viewed from a southern perspective the boundary of the North would be further south, perhaps as far south as Milton Keynes. Lots of other interview participant's made half-jokes about the North beginning outside of the M25 or at Watford Gap. This idea that people from the south of England have an unthoughtful view of where the North is and what the North is, seems to be largely driven by the not necessarily unreasonable idea that many of those in power, be it political or cultural, are based in the South and in London in particular, and that they have an insular vision of the rest of the country outside of it, especially the North.

It is not only the angle of vision from the South that has a bearing on geographic ideas of the North. People in the most northernly parts of England may also have different views of what constitutes the North. Again, there is a half-joking element to this. Jonathan Guest (Interview), economic advisor to Sheffield City Region Combined Authority, spoke of how when living in Newcastle, friends from Leeds would be referred to as a Southerner. Similarly, Conor McGinn (Interview) spoke of how his colleagues in Teesside will speak of his St Helens seat as being in the Midlands.

There is a more serious element to this perspective, however. Graeme Miller (Interview), Labour leader of Sunderland council, was of the firm view that 'the North of England runs from the Scottish border to roughly York'. His North encompasses 'Carlisle across to Berwick and down through Newcastle, Sunderland, Durham, the Tees Valley and across to Penrith' while 'anything below York is the North Midlands'. While Miller's definition is an uncommon one it does speak to the idea of a division between a 'far' north (that roughly corresponds with Miller's definition) and a 'near' North that contains the majority of the North's big cities such as Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, and Sheffield (Russell, 2004, p. 17). This idea of a distinction between a 'near' and 'far' North was

picked up by several interviewees, particularly those based in the most northerly areas of England.

Andrew Lewis (Interview), Chief Executive of East Cheshire council, noted that when he 'worked in the North East, people would regard places like Cheshire to be pretty southern'. There appears to be a sense of greater collectiveness between those in the 'far' North than with their southern neighbours in the 'near' North. Graeme Miller (Interview) highlighted one of the key characteristics of the 'far' North is its rurality, with few major cities and much empty countryside. David Southward (Interview), Labour member of Cumbria County Council, shared this view highlighting the rurality and sparseness in terms of population in common across much of Cumbria, Northumberland, and North Yorkshire, and suggested that this imbued the three areas with a commonality and that they were 'all in it together in a way'. The distinctions between the 'near' and 'far' North are not only cultural, however. As we will see in subsequent chapters, these differences are important in economic terms, and in political debates, there is a relatively widespread view that the 'far' North is disadvantaged at the expense of political focus being centred on the big cities along the M62 corridor of the 'near' North.

2.4. Socio-Economic Definitions of the North

Socio-economic approaches to spatially defining the North draw a dividing line between what is seen to be a generally more prosperous South from a more disadvantaged North. Danny Dorling (2010, pp. 24-25), one of the chief proponents of this approach, argues that based on divides in criteria such as life chances, health, and wealth, there is a clear North-South divide that can be spatially visualised with a line running across England from the north bank of the Severn in the west to the south bank of the Humber in the east. Based on this definition, the North contains cities such as Worcester, Birmingham, Coventry, and Nottingham. The area of northern Lincolnshire containing towns such as

Grimsby and Scunthorpe are also within the North, although the rest of Lincolnshire falls within the South. Thus, Dorling's (2010, p. 25) line can be seen to dip much further south in the west rising northwards as it moves east.

The majority of other definitions of the North based on a socio-economic approach differ from Dorling's slightly in that they place the line on the map slightly further south in the east of the country – usually at the Wash as opposed to the southern banks of the Humber. Martin (2004, p. 21), Balchin (1990, pp. 1-2), and Lewis and Townsend (1989, p. 1) all argue in favour of recognising the North-South dividing line as running from the Severn to the Wash. While these definitions differ slightly from that of Dorling, they all propose a dividing line based on socio-economic criteria that, while acknowledging outlaying pockets, see a relatively depressed North as distinct from a much more affluent South based on a number of socio-economic criteria. Some proponents of a socio-economic North-South dividing line including Dorling (2010, p. 26) and Balchin (1990, p. 2) suggest that both Scotland and Wales can be placed alongside the northern part of England within such definitions.

There is a recognition among advocates of this approach to defining the North that it is not perfect and does rest on generalisations. Balchin (1990, pp. 1-2) notes that parts of inner-city London may have 'more in common with Liverpool or Sunderland than with the outer South-East – and as such could be regarded as 'northern' – whereas Harrogate or Macclesfield might appear to be as affluent as Guilford or Winchester – and could this be assumed to be 'southern''. Nevertheless, proponents of this approach tend to argue that in general terms, there is 'no denying the significance of this broad regional divide' (Hudson and Williams, 1995, p. 15).

Some do, however, highlight that socio-economic criterion while key, is not the only factor, and that the idea of a cultural North plays a part too. While acknowledging, that there are outlying areas of poverty within the South and pockets of affluence within the

North, Dorling (2010, p. 26) contests that the concentration of difference each side of the line coupled with broader cultural notions of North and South means that these pockets of difference ultimately remain Southern or Northern respectively. Dorling (2010, p. 24) also invokes elements of historically rooted approaches, noting that his line 'separates upland from lowland Britain, the hills from the most fertile farmland, [and] areas invaded by Vikings from those first colonised by Saxons' (Dorling, 2010, p. 24). In doing so, he highlights what he sees as the historical roots of both socio-economic and cultural distinction between his North and South. Balchin (1990, pp. 1-2) meanwhile, attempts to recognise that the cultural notion highlighted above of places feeling and being seen to be Northern, arguing that 'the north-south line cannot be drawn solely on socio-economics and must reflect a degree of reality in popular recognition of north and south' (Balchin, 1990, pp. 1-2).

Despite these attempts, critics of socio-economically rooted approaches to defining the North find the approach unsuitable from a cultural perspective. Russell (2004, p. 15) argues that socio-economic approaches at geographically defining the North along the Severn-Wash line or similar colonise 'large numbers of people who have no meaningful connection with the region and… [are therefore] unhelpful in terms of defining a culture of shared interests and experiences recognisable both from within and by informed observers without'. Moreover, geographical definitions of the North based on the socio-economic approach are based on a purely North-South divide which ignores the idea of a distinct Midlands thereby placing the southern boundary of the North relatively far south.

It is essential to recognise the framing and politicisation of the idea of a North-South socio-economic divide, an issue that many interview participants saw as being pertinent, and one that is the focus of Chapter 4. Nevertheless, the use of socio-economic criteria to spatially define the North was very rarely invoked by interviewees. John Denham

(Interview), former Labour MP turned academic, recognised that there can be seen to be 'a sort of economic and social north in the sense that statistically you can show that the levels of poverty, or deprivation, or skill levels, or productivity, income levels are lower than in the country as a whole'. Similarly, a senior local government officer who wished to remain anonymous (Interview), recognised the basis of the socio-economic approach to defining the North and found some merits in it but they did not think that the idea of a socio-economic North necessarily fostered any sense of 'common feeling'. Thus, it appears that broadly the negation of a sense of cultural attachment is seen to be an impediment to the use of socio-economic definitions of the North such as Dorling's or that along the Severn-Wash line.

In contrast to this, Ed Cox (Interview), who now works for the West Midlands Combined Authority, recognised the merits in arguments that Midlanders may have a greater cultural affiliation with the North than the South, but raises questions about the socio-economic commonalities between the North and the areas more commonly viewed as the Midlands. Cox argued that increasingly 'the Midlands, economically, sits within the hinterland… of London', and, as such, the 'commonalities between the Midlands and the South are very real'. This view is at odds with socio-economic definitions of the North in which much of the Midlands is included.

2.5. Statistical Region Definitions of the North

While the above approaches highlight the varied and contested nature of defining the North, the use of neat lines to settle upon an agreeable definition of the North is not generally spurned. The popularity of the statistical region approach is testament to this. The statistical region approach is based on NUTS1 statistical regions. Geographic definitions of the North based on this approach tend to comprise of the three statistical regions of the North East, the North West, and Yorkshire and the Humber (which

includes areas of northern Lincolnshire, specifically the council areas of North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire).

This approach is commonly utilised by organisations such as the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and Confederation of British Industry (CBI) which divide themselves according to the government statistical regions and largely regard the three regions mentioned above as comprising the North (Bill Adams Interview; Hannah Richmond Interview). Similarly, the statistical region approach tends to be favoured by think tanks with representatives from the Centre for Cities, Localis, IPPR North, and Onward all favouring this approach. Chiefly, organisations favour this approach because it provides clarity and the data required for research reports is more easily available at the level of the existing statistical region boundaries. As academic and former interim director of IPPR North, Arianna Giovannini (Interview), notes, 'for the purposes of research, especially when you try to do something that is applicable on the ground, I think that working around the administrative boundaries has got advantages'.

The clarity that the statistical region approach enables for definitions of the North does seem to have broad appeal not only to those involved with research and large organisations. Over 20 interviewees, including elected representatives and political advisors, highlighted the approach as being the best way to define the North. Invariably it was only the three regions of the North East, North West, and Yorkshire and the Humber that were regarded as comprising the North. Many of the other contested border areas discussed above including all of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, and the majority of Lincolnshire are in the East Midlands statistical region, and Staffordshire is in the West Midlands. As such, none of these counties are viewed as being part of the North on this approach. The other county that is occasionally contested within other approaches, Cheshire, is within the North West statistical region and therefore viewed to be in the North.

Thus, while the statistical region approach rules out several areas in which there are historic and cultural arguments in favour of them being classified as northern, it does correspond much more closely with many historic and cultural definitions than the various socio-economic approaches to defining the North do. Moreover, many advocates of the statistical region approach recognise the validity of historic, cultural, and socio-economic definitions of the North and highlight the potential to draw upon alternative definitions of the North depending on the issue at hand (Arianna Giovannini, Interview; Ed Cox, Interview; Marcus Johns, Interview). For the purposes of clarity, however, proponents of the statistical region approach rightly regard it as being most useful.

2.6. Political Definitions of the North

Evidently, there are a variety of different ways in which the North can be conceived and defined. As such, it is unsurprising that in political discourse and policy terms, definitions of the North often remain unclear. Asked in parliament in 2015 what geographic area the Northern Powerhouse concerned, the then Northern Powerhouse minister, James Wharton (in Pidd, 2015) replied 'the exact extent of the north in the context of the Northern Powerhouse is not prescribed by the government'. Since then, however, the government have settled on a definition of the Northern Powerhouse. This definition is based around Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), with the 11 LEPs covering Cheshire and Warrington, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Humber, Lancashire, Leeds City Region, Liverpool City Region, North East, Sheffield City Region, Tees Valley, York, North Yorkshire and East Riding being regarded as the North of England (Northern Powerhouse, 2021). In addition to this however, the Northern Powerhouse also stretches into north Wales, incorporating Welsh towns including Wrexham, Rhyl, Colwyn Bay, Llandudno, and Bangor.

The role of LEPs in political definitions of the North is important. As well as being the basis of the Northern Powerhouse, the 11 Northern LEPs also make up the body NP11

which seeks to 'play a leading role in realising the vision for an economically thriving Northern Powerhouse' (NP11, 2020). Roger Marsh (Interview), chair of Leeds City Region LEP and the NP11, believes that the footprint of the 11 northern LEPs provides a neat definition of the North. The NP11 also leads on the Convention for the North, an event that seeks to bring political, business, and civic leaders from across the North together (NP11, 2019).

One issue with LEPs, however, is that their boundaries are not fixed. For example, the Humber LEP previously comprised areas of areas on both the north and south banks of the river. Recently, leaders on the south bank, in part because of the rule that areas can no longer sit within two LEPs, have opted to leave the Humber LEP and join the Lincolnshire LEP. As such, this has an impact on how organisations that prioritise the role of LEPs conceive the North. Hannah Richmond (Interview), Principal Policy Advisor for the North at the CBI, noted that now the Humber LEP has been split, officials focused on the North now 'don't really do anything sort of south of the Humber', with responsibility for that region being passed on to colleagues in the East Midlands. Thus, despite the south bank of the Humber being part of the North within the statistical region definition, changes to bodies such as LEPs can have an impact on the way in which the North is conceived.

Other Northern organisations tend to favour the statistical region definition above the LEP based NP11 approach. Transport for the North, for example, takes the statistical region approach (Transport for the North, 2021). So too do the People's Powerhouse, an organisation that seeks to amplify the voice of citizens in the North within political debate. Although, it is perhaps less prescriptive than other organisations. Stephanie Riches (Interview), then coordinator of the People's Powerhouse, set out that the organisation largely took the statistical region approach to defining the North but also

recognised the importance of cultural ideas of the North, noting that the People's Powerhouse 'wouldn't discourage people from self-defining as being from the North'.

Other political definitions of the North include party political definitions. As will be discussed in more depth in chapter 5, several of the main political parties have made attempts to recognise the North as a distinct political space. The Liberal Democrats Northern Liberal Network adopts the standard statistical region definition of the North. Other party-political visions of the North, however, often tend to be more informal. As Mick Bowman (Interview), political advisor to the North of Tyne metro mayor, notes, Labour has done so largely through the informal grouping of its metro mayors from North of Tyne down to West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, Greater Manchester, and across to Liverpool who seek to speak up as one for the North as a whole. The Conservatives meanwhile have the Northern Research Group (NRG). MPs associated with the NRG predominately come from constituencies within the North East, North West, and Yorkshire and the Humber but MPs from constituencies in the Midlands as well as Scotland and Wales have also backed campaigns by the NRG (Toal, 2020).

This informality in some party-political visions of the North, particularly the NRG vision, links into wider unclarity about the North of England within contemporary political discourse. Much of this stems from the concept of the Red Wall. This was initially conceived ahead of the 2019 general election as a useful label for a swathe of long-held Labour constituencies where the Conservatives had historically underperformed but, it was argued, had the potential to appeal to and win, across the North of England, the Midlands, and North Wales (Kanagasooriam and Simons, 2021). This original idea of the Red Wall does, however, appear to have been lost in many cases where the term is utilised in political debate and commentary now. Indeed, all post-industrial constituencies across the North and Midlands are now often framed as being in the Red

Wall. Thus, the concept and the geography of it has become unclear. Understanding of the Red Wall and the politics of it are explored in detail in Chapter 5.

The idea of the Red Wall and the political discussion around it does, however, highlight the commonalities identified in other approaches to defining the North between the North and the Midlands. This was recognised by several interviewees. Jay McKenna (Interview) of the North West branch of the TUC, noted that 'this political version of the North… sometimes does include the Midlands'. And Geraldine Scott (Interview), then Westminster Correspondent for the Yorkshire Post, highlighted that the North and the Midlands are often invoked together in political discussion. She suggested that in seeking to appeal to voters in the so-called Red Wall, 'the boundaries and the borders [between the North and the Midlands] are manipulated sometimes for potential gain'.

In part, this is because as Laura Gordon (Interview) notes 'any kind of policy conversation that you have about the North will have implications for the North Midlands and vice versa'. Moreover, there is a sense amongst some, particularly Conservative representatives, that cultural and political values bind together these areas. Alexander Stafford (Interview), Conservative MP for Rother Valley, suggested that if 'ideals and values' are taken into account, the North can be seen to stretch down into places like Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, and Lincolnshire. For Stafford it is almost like 'having two different sets of England', where there is 'more and more of a strain between what's going on in the South and around London and the South East and the rest of the country'. Largely, this view is premised upon the idea of there being a broad cosmopolitan-communitarian divide between much of the North and Midlands and London and its environs and is explored in greater depth in Chapter 5.

Despite the inconsistencies and, in some cases, potentially purposeful vagueness within many political definitions of the North, that so many exist at all highlights both the importance of the idea of the North within the collective imagination and an

acknowledgement that the region merits significant recognition as a whole. While there are other regional political and economic initiatives in other areas of England, such as the Midlands Engine, for example, the proliferation of organisations and initiatives that claim to represent the North of England does suggest that the North holds a distinct place within popular consciousness both internally and externally.

2.7. The North as a Region

This overview of the literature and primary interview data on the key approaches commonly used to define the North geographically corroborates the idea that 'in different times and circumstances, and viewed through different eyes, the definition of North and South has varied considerably' (Jewell, 1994, p. 8). Indeed, it is evident that 'the North has been imagined in various ways according to time, context, subject matter and… angle of vision' (Russell, 2004, p. 14). Within the approaches utilised to define the North discussed in this chapter, it is clear that they highlight some of the key arguments both for and against framing and politicising the North of England as one distinct region that permeate throughout the issues considered in the rest of this thesis. As such, it is worth here briefly considering the idea of the North as a region.

The task of defining the region is somewhat challenging. As Keating (1998, p. 9) notes, it is often seen as 'an elusive concept, covering a variety of territorial levels and a range of social contents'. The term region can be applied to both sub-national and supra-national territorial spaces (Paasi, 2009, p. 122). For instance, some may apply the terms to various geographical spatial scales such as Europe, the Mediterranean, or Iberia while others use the term largely in reference to 'territories within nation-states' (Tomaney, 2009a, p. 136). This latter use of the concept of the region is the one that will be utilised in this study. Viewed in this way, the region can be seen to be a 'category at the subnational level' (Tomaney, 2009a, p. 136) that occupies 'an intermediate territorial level, between the state and the locality' (Keating, 1998, p. 9).

There is a multitude of ways in which a region may be characterised. In the case of the North, it is apparent that there exists a widespread view that the North exists as a shared cultural identity that people recognise. There is also recognition of a shared economic identity and shared socio-economic challenges, and there is evidence of an increasingly pan-Northern appetite for political cooperation and identification. Musgrove (1990, p. 8) points out that the north has never been a 'principality or a province' and 'has never been encompassed by a single administrative authority', yet he argues that 'the North has always been marked by cultural and administrative pluralism… and yet it has always had, and still in some measures retains, a strong sense of separateness and of its own distinctive identity'.

Hayton et al (2016, p. 6) point out that 'the North is often referred to as 'a region'' but highlight that 'it defies a univocal definition, it does not have clearly defined borders (especially towards the South), it does not appear on official government maps, and lacks its own political institutions'. But they note that 'regions are by definition dynamic, shifting and fluid entities that exist as much on the territory as in the mind of their inhabitants'. As such, they argue that 'from this perspective, the North can be seen as a 'vast region' – an imagined community made of and constituted by collective values, traditions, beliefs, history, [and] a shared sense of belonging to a distinctive social space' (Hayton et al, 2016, p. 6).

It is commonly recognised by interviewees who argue that, for all of the reasons mentioned above, the idea of the North as one region has significant resonance. Nick King (Interview) noted that 'the North is quite nebulous, and it isn't exact, but there is a sense of either belonging or coherence to it as an entity'. He suggested that this sense of collective belonging to the North tended not to be the same in other regions of the country such as the Midlands. Similarly, Bob Kerslake (Interview), crossbench peer and Chair of the UK2070 commission, suggested that the North can be viewed as one region.

He noted that 'I don't think it would be a heterogeneous area and it doesn't have the same sense of political identity as say, Scotland or Wales, but nevertheless, I think most people in the North would recognise that they're part of the North'. Thus, in this reading, the North as a region 'exists as an idea', one that holds 'that there is something called the North' (John Denham, Interview).

That the idea of the North is so prominent is not just due to perceptions of Northern distinction, it can also be seen to be indicative of the North's 'subordinate relationship to the 'South'' (Russell, 2004, p. 14). Russell highlights that the idea of the South is 'so unconsidered' it can range from greater London, the so-called Home Counties, or all the way from across the south coast up until where the equally illusive Midlands begin. This idea that the North often defines itself in contrast to the South was widely highlighted by interviewees. There was a clear view that 'the idea of the North itself has been developed in contra-position with the idea of the South' (Arianna Giovannini, Interview), and thus defines itself through not being the South (Richard Leese, Interview).

This oppositional definition of the North was seen to be some as being a unifying force across it. Conservative peer and chair of the Cumbria LEP, Lord Inglewood (Interview) suggested that 'perhaps what unites us is that we aren't the South or the Midlands or Scotland'. There was a clear sense that this understanding of the North was both historically rooted in and also a contemporary driver of persistent notions of a North-South divide in England (Ed Cox, Interview; Hannah Richmond, Interview). This is an interesting and important point as the idea of Northern subordination to the South is a recurrent theme throughout this study. It ties into the concept of centre-periphery relations (Rokkan and Urwin, 1983) and the notion of the North as a periphery that, as we will see, permeate the ways in which it is framed and politicised.

Despite all of this, the idea of the North as one homogenous region can rightly be questioned. Historian Asa Briggs (in Russell, 2004, pp. 18-19) argued 'the concept of a

homogenous North… is a dangerous simplification'. He suggested that 'the variety of the North requires at least as much explanation – historical and otherwise – as the difference between North and South'. Indeed, the intra-North differences in terms of history, culture, socio-economic profile, and political structures identified in the approaches to defining the region considered above are testament to this variation that exists within the North.

This view was reflected by several interviewees. David Southward (Interview) suggested that 'regarding the whole area as vast as that [the North] as one entity is nonsense – you have to look at it in smaller bits than that'. Diana Johnson (Interview), Labour MP for Hull North, argued that 'the North East is very different, I would suggest, to the North West, and where I represent in East Yorkshire, I think, again, we are very different to West Yorkshire. So, this idea of a geographical north, I think, is a rather lazy way of identifying the regions outside of London and the South East'.

In a similar vein, Geraldine Scott (Interview) thought that the idea of seeing the North as one region was 'a mistake that's very often made'. She made the point that people in 'Leeds city centre have a very different experience to say someone living up in Richmond in North Yorkshire' noting that 'it's different issues, different opportunities, different problems'. As such, she argued that 'to lump everyone in the same category is incorrect'. This view is central to discussions in subsequent chapters regarding the framing and politicisation of the North and the extent to which issues are perceived to be pan-Northern or instead apply to only specific parts of the North.

The middle ground that tends to emerge from this tension between viewing the North as one or as distinct units is the idea that it is legitimate to conceive of the North as both one and many – one 'vast region' with smaller regions and sub-regions within it. Russell (2004, pp. 21-22) argues that 'while there have been many 'Norths' and many tensions

between them, it is undeniable that the region shows features that, although rarely unique, help both to distinguish it from other parts of the country'.

This idea of the North at once being a collectively recognisable region and yet host to internal differences was recognised by many interviewees. Natalie Bennett (Interview), former leader of the Green Party noted that 'there are divisions in the north, but I think the North is very recognisably an area'. For some, this recognisability comes down to cultural and historic ideas of the North that prevail despite internal differences. For example, Nick King (Interview) suggested that Lancashire and Yorkshire… have very strong identities themselves, but would still, even though they're knocking seven bells out of each other, be quite happy to be collectively thought of as the North'.

Will Tanner (Interview), Director of the think tank Onward, pointed to historical and cultural notions of the North holding the region together despite differences within it. He noted that 'on one level' it is 'completely ridiculous' to regard the North as one 'because it contains lots of different economic and political geographies which are very, very different in their characteristics'. However, Tanner suggested that when it comes to the idea of a collective region, 'it's as much about the kind of identity and imagined sense of belonging rather than necessarily a government defined or economically defined region'. As such, he believed that is why 'the north of England in particular… has a resonance with the people who live [there]'. The idea of the North as a region and its persistent resonance was, in Tanner's view, connected to a 'historical way of understanding the country - North versus South - which is… baked into our political and historical tradition'. Thus, he suggested that viewing the North as one 'has some validity, but clearly, it's problematic in some ways'.

Further to these historic and cultural understandings of the North as one region, as highlighted above, the idea that the North shares common issues and challenges is often invoked as binding it, even if those issues play out in slightly different ways in different

parts of the North. As a council leader in the North West (Interview) put it, whilst it is important to 'look at individual parts' of the North, 'there can be specific policies that apply' across much of the region as a whole.

It is for these reasons that many view the idea of the North as a region as a useful shorthand, particularly in terms of political campaigning and policy debates, even if this approach is at the expense of some of the nuances that exist at more local levels. Rob Parsons (Interview) expressed this point, noting that from a point of view of campaigning and making your point in Westminster and getting people in the corridors of power to hear you, you need to have a strong sort of coherent message… cabinet ministers don't want to hear the nuance about, 'oh, it's slightly different in North Yorkshire, it's slightly different in West Yorkshire'… I think, if you have everyone in the North, talking as one, and with a similar loud voice, then that does carry more weight… So, I think from that point of view, talking about the north as one entity is very much legitimate'.

This is a commonly held view, but a number of participants highlight that a cautious approach is still required in presenting the North as one. Chris Rowell (Interview) noted that despite the common interests and political and economic needs across much of the North, when framed and politicised as one 'you can lose a bit of nuance'. Again, the perspective from which the North was viewed was seen to be important on this issue. Laura Gordon highlighted that in parts of the rural 'far' North the issues can be significantly different from the towns and cities that dominate the 'near' North. As such, she argued that 'I think there is a shared identity, shared vision, and shared set of challenges that makes the North a useful category to talk about. But I think you also just have to be careful how far you take it and be aware that as soon as you start using something as shorthand, you immediately start excluding people'. Similarly, Gateshead MP, Ian Mearns (Interview) noted that 'I've got no problem with us being part of that

greater north, but as long as there is some sensitivity from the other parts of that greater north, that the North East does exist, and does have historical problems'.

In historic, cultural, socio-economic, and political terms, there appears to be a broad consensus that, as Arianna Giovannini (Interview) noted, 'if we talk about the north as a whole… on the one hand, it can be a powerful shorthand to kind of convey what are the needs and the culture and the political kind of outlook of a specific part of the country. But on the other, you could also argue that it is reducing the complexity of all the different areas that you have in the north'. As such, she notes that it is useful to say 'that the North is a region made of regions itself'. Thus, the North can legitimately be seen as a region of both one and many.

2.8. Conclusion

This chapter has considered the variety of different approaches utilised in framing geographical definitions of the North and has considered the extent to which these approaches and definitions compete with or complement one another. This thesis does not seek to prescribe its own definition of the North, instead, it is more interested in understanding how the political actors and organisations under study understand the place of the North. For clarity though, it is worth noting that the study has largely utilised the statistical region approach of the North East, North West, and Yorkshire and the Humber as comprising the North when a definition has been required. Some deference has, however, been paid to cultural and historic understandings of the North with interviews being conducted with actors representing debatable border areas in places such as Derbyshire and Lincolnshire. The reason for utilising this definition where necessary is largely because, as highlighted above, much data tends to be available at this level as it is the definition of the North most commonly utilised in research on the region. Moreover, it does coincide to a considerable degree with many cultural and historic definitions of the North. Socio-economic definitions of the North, as we have

seen, tend to be significantly different to definitions rooted in other understandings of the region.

This chapter has also highlighted the ways in which these different approaches to defining the North and framing it geographically shape the idea of the North as one distinct and recognisable region. It has been argued that the North can be viewed as both one and many regions. It is an area with shared characteristics and challenges but also with significant diversity within it. This is reflected in the ways in which the North has been perceived and framed historically. And, as we will see in subsequent chapters, the extent of these shared commonalities as well as these differences have a vital role on the ways in which the North is framed in contemporary political discourse. In turn, these framing approaches have a significant impact on the ways in which the North is politicised and the extent to which there exists a notable Northern regionalism in debates concerning the region's cultural, economic, and political distinctions and grievances.

Chapter 3: The Cultural North

3.1. Introduction

The chapter considers the imagery, culture, and identity of the North of England and its inhabitants, in order to consider the ways in which the North is framed as being culturally distinct from the rest of the country and the extent to which Northern Identity is politicised. To do so, it begins by considering the idea of the North within the popular imagination and popular culture. It then considers the idea of Northernness as a distinct identity, examining its attributes and characteristics as well as some of the problems with it. Following this, it examines the extent to which intra-Northern rivalries undermine notions of Northernness and explores how Northernness fits within other forms of belonging, particularly Englishness. Throughout, it is shown that the North of England is commonly framed as being culturally distinct from the rest of the country. Finally, the chapter demonstrates that while Northernness is a distinctive and important source of identity for many within the North, albeit one that is problematic in a number of ways, Northern cultural identity is rarely politicised explicitly. However, it is argued that Northernness may serve as a basis for pan-Northern cooperation and politicisation on other issues.

3.2. Images of the North

To begin it is illustrative to highlight the North's perceived distinctiveness both historically and contemporarily in the popular imagination as shaped by its place within popular culture. The construction of the North within the popular imagination has historically taken place externally. Notably from the centre, that is to say London and the South East. These external constructions of the North have historically been 'pejorative', highlighting differences not only in the landscape, and the 'bleak' environment of the North, but also portraying the north's inhabitants as somehow 'primitive' and 'unsophisticated' (Russell, 2004, pp. 33-34).

Negative external views of the North and its inhabitants which were little changed from the middle ages can be seen to have eventually entered the popular imagination by the late nineteenth century (Russell, 2004, pp. 33-35). These popular images of a bleak North were further exacerbated by the industrial revolution whereby 'to older notions of the North as harsh and bleak were added innumerable descriptions of the horrors of Northern townscapes' (Russell, 2004, p. 34). As Wainwright (2009, p. 17) notes, it was this vision of the industrial North that give us the images of a 'dark', 'grim', 'black' North. Dodd (1990, p. 17) terms this image of the industrial, largely working-class North, the 'Lowryscape'. The importance of this industrial past in shaping the image of the North was highlighted by interviewees. And, as we will see in the next section, was commonly invoked as being a key element of a distinctive Northern identity.

Despite the prominence of this Lowryscape image of a harsh, industrial North, however, the north has also been imagined from a rural perspective. This image of the North was first popularised by the Romantic Movement from the late eighteenth century onwards, most notably the Lake Poets (Russell, 2004, pp. 34-35; Spracklen, 2016, p. 8). This vision of the north places it in contrast with the South just as much as the industrial image. As Wainwright (2009, p. 151) describes, 'the sweep of the Pennine moors, the beetling cliffs at St Bees and Flamborough and the majestic summits of Lakeland' are at significant odds with the 'sweet', 'softly' landscape of much of the South of England. The extent to which these two alternative images of the industrial and rural North dominate visions of the North within the popular imagination can be seen in their prevalence in popular art forms such as literature, television, and film.

In non-fiction literature evidence of images of the industrial North abound. Perhaps the most notable framing of a bleak industrial North comes from George Orwell in his 1937 work *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Orwell (2001, pp. 14-15) describes 'the monstrous scenery of slag-heaps, chimneys, piled scrap-iron, foul canals… [and] paths of cindery mud criss-

crossed by the prints of clog'. Similarly, in his 1934 *English Journey* J.B Priestly (1934, p. 252) remarks on Manchester's 'Amazonian jungle of blackened bricks', describes Liverpool as being 'like a city in a rather gloomy Victorian novel' (p. 235) and notes that so black is Newcastle that it 'might almost have been carved out of coal' (p. 291).

Works of fiction have also contributed significantly to the development of the image of the Lowryscape North in the popular imagination. One of the first novels to do so was Elizabeth Gaskell's work of 1855, *North and South*. Gaskell (1994, p. 66) visualises a townscape of 'hopeless streets of regularly built houses, all small and of brick' interspersed 'here and there [by] a great oblong many-windowed factory stood up, like a hen among her chickens'. One of the most notable novels to describe the industrial North is Walter Greenwood's 1933 work *Love on the Dole*, in which he offers some vivid descriptions of industrial life based upon his native Salford. He describes how 'three huge chimneys challenged the lowering sky; three banners of thick black smoke gushed froth from their parapets, swirling, billowing, expanding as they drifted, with 'unperturbed pace' to merge, imperceptibly into the dirty sky' (Greenwood, 1993, p. 20).

In contrast to these visions of the industrial North, images of the rural North also pepper works of literature, both fiction and non-fiction. Owing to its origins in the Romantic Movement, images of the rural North first emerged in the work of Lake Poets such as Wordsworth (Spracklen, 2016, p. 8). Later, the works of the Brontë sisters further developed the image of the rural North (Pocock, 1979, p. 65). As Spracklen (2016, p. 8) notes, the novels of the Brontë sisters, in particular Emily's 1847 work *Wuthering Heights* captured the 'wild moors' often seen to characterise much of the rural North. In to the twentieth century, despite his numerous Lowryscape descriptions of parts of the North, Priestly (1934, p. 154) also highlights the rural North. He talks of the North of England as 'the region of stone walls… [that] run from the edges of towns to the highest and wildest places on the moors, firmly binding the landscape'. Priestly (1934, p. 187) well captures

how the contrast between these two images of the industrial and rural is a hallmark of the of the North, noting that 'the West Riding keeps one eye on the mills and markets and the other on the moors'.

Just as the images of the industrial North stand in contrast to popular ideas of a more genteel South, so too do those of the rural North, which when portrayed in the literature is almost always characterised as being entirely different from the rural south (Spracklen, 2016, p. 8). Typically, the rural North is portrayed as 'harsh' while the rural South is seen to be rather more 'gentle' (Pocock, 1979, p. 65). Moreover, as well as its visual appearance, climatic harshness also distinguishes images of the rural North (Pocock, 1979, p. 65). Both of these distinctions are captured in Gaskell's (1994, p. 42) *North and South* where Margaret is said to possess 'a detestation for all she had ever heard of the North of England… [including] the wild and bleak country'. And where 'warm light of the pure sun' of Hampshire is contrasted with the 'smoke and fogs' of Darkshire (Gaskell's fictional Northern industrial town) (Gaskell in Pocock, 1979, p. 65). This is a typical contrasting of 'the 'grim conditions' in the industrial north with the 'southern rural idyll'' (Martin, 2004, p. 36). This simplistic stereotypical image is resonant but problematic, and not only from a Northern perspective. Clearly, the image of the idyllic rural South overlooks London and its dominant place in the South (Martin, 2004, p. 36; Mercer, 1993, p. 170). This may, however, owe something to the notion of London and its hinterlands being distinct from the rest of the country at large, an idea that is explored in more depth in subsequent chapters.

In addition to illustrating both the images of an industrial and rural North, portrayals of the North within literature can also be seen to have connected with the socio-economic realities of their times in other ways. As Pocock (1979, p. 66) notes, during the 1930s there was a notable focus on the worklessness resulting from the great depression which hit the North of England particularly hard. Indeed, this is a common theme throughout

the works of both Orwell (2001) and Greenwood (1993) and is also highlighted by Priestley (1934, p. 286). More recent literary works from the 1980s and 1990s can be seen to persist in portraying the industrial North but again, reflecting the socio-economic realities, images of industrial decline have become increasingly prevalent. In her 1984 *English Journey* Bainbridge (1984, p. 158) talks of 'the brutal wastes of the Northern cities'. Similarly, in *Notes from a Small Island*, Bill Bryson describes a state of decline in a number of the North's big cities. Liverpool is said to feel like a place with 'more past than future' (Bryson, 1996, p. 258).

Still newer works of literature reflect more recent socio-economic shifts that have resulted in some regeneration of parts of many Northern cities. For example, in Maconie's *Pies and Prejudice*. He describes Manchester as 'the Shanghai of the North-West', it being 'construction crazy, in a state of permanent restless revolution, a frenzy of hard hats and scaffolding' (2007, p. 102). Similarly, Leeds, 'the gentrified jewel of the new North', is described as 'the Barcelona of the West Riding' (2007, p. 202). Additionally, Maconie (2007, p. 176), like Priestly, captures the contrasting images of the industrial and rural North but additionally entwines them with images of the contemporary North's multiculturalism and its regeneration where in Oldham 'beyond the houses and chimneys and Mosques, the Pennine moors rise under what is now a glowering sky'.

Moving away from popular literature, when it comes to the portrayal of the North on television and on film it can be seen that images of the industrial North dominate over those of the rural north. On television, arguably the most notable and persistent portrayal of the North comes from *Coronation Street* which, since it first aired in 1960, has continued to present a vision of an industrial, working-class North (Russell, 2004, p. 190). As Spracklen (2016, p. 9) points out, television programmes have often served to commodify the North of England's working-class cultures, reducing them 'to a simulation of terraced streets, village bobbies or daft old men'. Northern accents,

meanwhile, have often been deployed in televisual parody (Spracklen, 2016, p. 9). Thus, Russell (2004, p. 195) rightly notes that while providing 'increased exposure to the North' and enlarging 'the nation's vision of what it actually encompasses', ultimately, televisual portrayals of the North have done little to alter the common derisory images of the North that predominate the popular imagination. Instead, they have served to reinforce them and distribute them to large audiences.

Similarly, when it comes to portrayals of the North on film, Russell (2004, pp. 185-186) argues that generally the North has been depicted in ways that reflect and reinforce 'long-established and often prejudicial external views' with cinematic portrayals often centred on the 'bleak, industrial, working-class lives' of the Northern protagonists. As Spracklen (2016, p. 9) points out, while kitchen-sink dramas from *Room at the Top* to *Kes* seek to visualise an authentic North, again, they tend to be externally constructed and intended to appeal to 'middle-class tastes and sensibilities' rather than accurately depict Northern life. Shields (1990, p. 229) argues that within the popular imagination 'since the nineteenth century a relatively coherent and continuous image of the 'North' of England divided off from the South has persisted'.

Coupled with this analysis, findings from the research interviews highlight that the relationship between culture and the socio-economic environment is often framed as being an important one. Alex Sobel (Interview) talked about how TV programmes like Coronation Street and films such as Kes – which Sobel noted as 'a really important marker of the north… before the pits were shut' – present a particular vision of an old industrial North, while more recent TV shows such as the work of Sally Wainwright have played into this notion in more contemporary, yet equally distinctive ways. Similarly, in terms of music, Marcus Johns (Interview) suggested that 'it's no surprise… that the North had distinct outputs of music in the in the late 20th century, in that atmosphere of de-industrialised cities and urban decline'. Now that much of the traditional industry of the

North has disappeared, much of the architecture and memories associated with it are still seen to be important but as 'cultural heritage' rather than as a contemporary reality of Northern culture (Alex Sobel, Interview).

Nevertheless, the idea that the image of a bleak North continues to dominate within the popular imagination at the expense of more positive contemporary cultural developments across the region was one which had some prevalence. Alexis Darby (Interview) suggested that 'there's so much culture [in the North] that people don't know, like David Hockney's from Bradford and Bradford is amazing, the Piece Hall in Halifax… all these fantastic places that are dismissed by people down South'. The way in which the image of the North is presented in the media ties into this. There appears to be some sense that negative portrayals of the North largely tend to be favoured over more positive ones. For example, Rob Parsons (Interview) noted that there are 'certain areas of the North which the national media sort of has in general decided represents Northern England, and these are the kind of go to areas that they like to focus on, and other areas, which don't perhaps fit in with their narrative, or that they just don't know about quite so much, don't fit in so well'. Yet, despite largely being externally constructed and to some extent challenged by Northerners, these images of the region can be seen to highlight a sense of Northern cultural distinction. Moreover, they play into ideas of a Northern cultural identity, a shared sense of Northernness.

3.3. The Identity of Northernness

As with defining the North geographically, defining it culturally poses a number of challenges. The notion of a shared Northern culture, or Northernness, is viewed as simultaneously being 'real' and 'inauthentic' (Spracklen, 2016, pp. 5-6), as 'a cast of mind, not a set of co-ordinates' (Maconie, 2007, p. 337), a 'palimpsest of narratives, myths, stereotypes and symbols' (Riches et al, 2016, p. 1), and as a 'complex and layered identity, which can assume different connotations according to the vantage point from which it is

viewed, perceived and experienced' (Hayton et al, 2016, p. 7). These points suggest that there is no single and definable set of characteristics that can be pinned to Northernness as a sense of identity. Moreover, they suggest that Northernness is more of a personal identity than one that might be commonly recognised and shared across the whole of the North of England.

While this is true to an extent, the influence and importance of ideas of a shared cultural heritage and, in turn, a shared sense of Northernness on the inhabitants of England's North cannot be dismissed. The idea of a distinct and meaningful sense of Northernness that resonates across the whole of the region can be seen to exist in a number of ways. As Paasi (2003, p. 477) highlights, narratives of regional identity can develop from a range of factors including shared history, ideas on landscape and the built environment, the influence of the region's relationship with the centre and the extent to which it is marginalised, the stereotypical image(s) of its inhabitants, issues related to dialects, and its economic status.

Based on these criteria, it can be seen that, in common with the prevalent theme in recent Northern history and as highlighted by the common portrayal of the north in the popular imagination, it is the North's industrial heritage that has the most profound effect on the formation of a distinct sense of shared Northern identity. It is said that the industrial landscapes of the pit village, mill town, and industrial city are the natural home of a sense of Nothernness (Spracklen, 2016, p. 7). The reason for this, as Pocock (1979, p. 66) highlights, is that the harshness of the landscape, and indeed of life generally, in the North, has historically been thought to imbue its inhabitants 'with a certain harshness'. Embodied by a distinct 'Northern 'grit'' and an 'earnest and matter-of-fact' nature that is often regarded as being notably different from that of 'the soft and gentle Southerner' (Pocock, 1979, p. 66). Similarly, Shields (1990, p. 212) writes of 'a 'cult of Northern-ness', a kind of snobbishness by which Northeners regard anyone to the

South as in some way compromised'. Thus, as highlighted in the previous chapter, Northernness as a cultural identity often manifests itself in opposition to the South and ideas of Southernness, with Northern Culture presenting itself as 'a site of resistance against an inauthentic South' (Riches et al, 2016, p. 1)

The region's industrial past was invoked by several interviewees as being an important element of Northern cultural identity. Sir Stephen Houghton (Interview), Labour leader of Barnsley Council, argued 'that [the North's] industrial heritage has bred a different culture over time'. For Houghton, 'what marks that culture is historically hardship; people swimming against the tide'. As a result, 'it's therefore, a sort of blunt culture, straight talking'. Similarly, Wallace Sampson (Interview) suggested that 'the North has always had its unique and distinctive identity that hails back to the contribution that it played to the growth of the economy in the Industrial Revolution. There was a recognition that the economic conditions that moulded this popularly recognised sense of Northernness have significantly waned, yet the ideas of Northernness associated with it persist (Jonathan Guest, Interview; Wallace Sampson, Interview).

3.3.1. Characteristics of Northernness

Just as the images of the North considered above have entered the popular imagination so too has the image of the Northerner, whether real or imagined. Indeed, ever since the industrialisation of much of the North, this working-class sense of Northernness can be seen to have served as the chief driver of perceptions of a North-South cultural divide (Martin, 2004, p. 36). The idea that the people of the North who reside in 'blackened back to backs', eat 'dinner' and wear 'flat caps' were viewed as foreign to those in the South who live in 'thatched cottages', have 'luncheon' and sport 'bowler hats' (Wales, 2006, p. 28).

Literature and social commentary in the early twentieth century continued to view North and South in a similar vein tending to characterise a 'predominately working-class North

versus a middle-class South' (Martin, 2004, p. 36). Thus, manual work, union membership, council house occupancy and Labour voting were key traits of the Northern man. Conversely, the Southern man was a blue collar or white-collar worker, a likely home owner, less inclined to be a union member and more inclined to vote Conservative (Martin, 2004, p. 36). This idea of Northernness was highlighted by some interviewees. Ian Martin (Interview) highlighted the idea that a distinct sense of Northernness often presents itself in the idea of industrialised towns [and] strong levels of unionisation.

Other common traits associated with the Northern character, according to Mazierska (2016, pp. 5-6), include being 'friendlier and closer to their roots than those living elsewhere'. Additionally, Russell (2004, p. 277) highlights that the characteristics of being hard working, unpretentious, generous and warm spirited are often associated with Northernness. These characteristics were commonly invoked by interviewees. David Collins (Interview) spoke of how Northerners 'respect the idea that hard work and graft can get you to places because that's what we've always had to do'. Similarly, Conservative MP, Kevin Hollinrake (Interview) suggested that 'we [Northerners] think we're culturally pretty gritty, pretty kind of determined that we can do things for ourselves, that we don't need to be patronised by the South'. Thus, Hollinrake suggested that Northerners 'see the South as being a bit softer than us, a bit kind of more privileged than that we are', whereas Northerners are 'a bit tougher' and possess 'a bit more ability to carve our own path'.

The idea of people from the North being more friendly was also raised by research participants. Mark Burdon (Interview), Leader of the North East Party, suggested that the North 'has a more kind of friendly, but sarcastic, playful kind of attitude, [and] way of communicating with each other'. Conservative MP, Philip Davies, noted that 'I think we're friendlier in the north' and he contrasted the perceived friendliless of the North

against the idea of a colder London. This idea of Northerners' friendliness is often seen to have an edge to it, however, with the idea of the warm yet direct Northener commonly alluded to. Thus, in addition to highlighting Northern friendliness, Davies (Interview) noted that 'we [Northerners] tend to speak our mind a bit more'. Similarly, Alexis Darby (Interview) suggested that in the North the 'people are more friendly' but, equally, many Northerners have 'a bit of a chip on the shoulder and a bit of attitude'. Clare Fallon (Interview), Northern Correspondent at Chanel 4 News, also suggested that in the North there's a bit of chipiness, a bit of being difficult'.

Another supposed characteristic of Northernness that was highlighted by some interviewees was that of a stronger sense of community and community-mindedness across the North. Andrew Hodgson (Interview) spoke about the North as being 'about strong community, strong on families, strong on honesty, strong on fairness'. This sense of community was invoked by others at both ends of the political spectrum. Bill Adams (Interview) of the TUC suggested that in the North 'there's a much more communal, much more cooperative view on life', although he noted that that is perhaps 'waning a little'. Adams' idea of a community orientated North likely rests heavily on ideas of unionisation and worker cooperation. Yet, there's also a more conservative view of the communitarian North. Conservative MP, Alexander Stafford (Interview) spoke of the 'very big cultural difference in attitudes' between the North and elsewhere, suggesting that in the North 'it's far more about community'. In Stafford's view, that community was bound by an attachment to 'traditional values' which prioritise caring 'about your family, your country… [and] your community'.

As within the literature, the vast majority of these perceived characteristics of Northernness highlighted by interview participants can also be seen to be rooted in ideas of a working-class, industrial North. Additionally, they also support the idea that Northernness is largely defined in opposition to the South and ideas of Southernness. As

Arianna Giovannini (Interview) noted, largely 'defining the North… means finding some characteristic that really are different from what we see in the South'. There's a sense that this is a two-way process, a Northern 'sneeriness at London and sneeriness back' (Clare Fallon, Interview). Ultimately, for some, this results in the sense that 'the feel of the North is different… to the feel of the South' (Stephanie Riches, Interview).

3.3.2. Places of Northernness

So, where do these characteristics and ideas of a distinct Northern cultural identity most clearly present themselves? As discussed above, many of these ideas are present within the ideas of the North presented in popular culture, in literature, television, cinema, and music. These representations of Northernness have played significantly into the idea of the North and Northerners within the popular imagination. As Stephanie Riches (Interview) noted, 'culturally the North has its own identity, in terms of music, art, [and] people', as such 'people identify' with such actors and their works 'as being good representatives of Northerners". Again, this comes back to the idea that Northerners' have embraced a largely externally constructed image of themselves and come to own it as a positive marker of cultural distinction.

Away from the arts, another key cultural field in which Northernness is said to be clearly apparent is sport. Historically, Russell (2004, pp. 38-39) highlights that 'physical toughness in sport… has been much celebrated and seen as an extension of this experience of daily 'graft" within the North. Despite being an obvious source of potential intra-North division and rivalry, sport can also be seen to have contributed to a distinct sense of Northernness framed against a contrasting Southernness (Russell, 2004, pp. 258-259; Huggins, 2000, p. 132).

Northern clubs were pivotal in the formation of the Football League and dominated the competition in its early years (Mason, 1996, pp. 42-46). In rugby, the split along North-South lines is even more apparent with the vast majority of Northern clubs splitting from

the ‘Southern-dominated’, amateur Rugby Union to form the professional Rugby League. This schism can be seen to reflect the class divides that have long influenced a distinct sense of Northernness in that it stemmed from the ‘Southern amateur elite tradition’ being in conflict ‘with the working-class acceptance of payment to compensate for lost earnings’ in the North (Holt, 1996, p. 157). That Rugby league was, and to a large extent remains ‘concentrated in the woollen textile towns of the West Riding and in South Lancashire’ further highlights this North-South division (Holt, 1996, p. 157). This was highlighted by interviewees (Ed Cox, Interview; Jonathan Guest, Interview; Ian Martin, Interview).

Thus, it can be seen that the qualities of ‘professionalism, competitiveness and hardness… came to be closely associated with sport and its playing in the North’ (Collins, 2016, p. 40). As Collins (2016, p. 40) notes, these characteristics are not intrinsically Northern but they can be seen to reflect ‘the impact of industrialisation on the culture and communities of the North of England’ which, as we have seen, has been pivotal to forming a distinct sense of Northernness more broadly. The extent to which this remains to be the case in the twenty-first century is contestable, however (Collins, 2016, pp. 41-42). Nevertheless, the memory and legacy of this distinctiveness still resonates for some today.

Another area in which Northern cultural distinction is said to be most notable is language, accent, and dialect (Arianna Giovannini, Interview; Ed Cox, Interview, Ian Martin, Interview; Tom Forth, Interview). As noted in the previous chapter, while there is a vast array of different accents and dialects across the region, Northern English as a whole shares a number of notable distinctive characteristics (Hickey, 2015, pp. 8-11; Wales, 2006, pp. 20-21). What really unites these Northern dialects though, more so than their shared linguistic features, is their shared historic and continued marginalisation. This is particularly apparent in their relationship with so-called ‘Standard English’

(Wales, 2006, p. 4) and the apparently 'accentless' 'Received Pronunciation' (Russell, 2004, p. 112). Taylor (1991, p. 151) argues in England 'language is used to divide rather than unify'. Indeed, as Wales, (2006, p. 4) notes, Northern dialects, and the speakers of them, have long been perceived as 'other' and 'subordinate' to the perceived 'prestigious' and 'superior' Standard English, and its speakers.

This prejudice against Northern dialects can be seen to connect with the broader and long-established notions of Northern 'barbarism and philistinism' which have 'often been directly connected to the supposedly vulgar or comic modes of speech' within the North (Russell, 2004, p. 113). Additionally, it is the case that, as with the majority of other characterisations of the North and Northernness, the marginalisation of Northern dialects can be connected with issues of class. Wales (2006, p. 4), Osmond (1988, p. 166), and Russell (2004, pp. 113-114) all highlight how the vast majority of Northern dialects have long been, and continue to be, associated with the working-class and working-class culture. This can be seen to further cement the role of dialect within the wider cultural characterisation of the North-South divide (Wales, 2006, p. 210). These are not just historic issues though. It remains that 'marginalisation, illegitimacy or subordination… is still part of the modern definition of Northern English' (Wales, 2006, p. 4).

3.3.3. Imagined Northernness

Hill and Williams (1996, p. 6) suggest that 'being a Northerner is a creation of the imagination, a product of cultural traditions, assumptions and memories'. This idea of the North and Northernness as an 'Imagined Community' emerges in a number of academic discussions on Northern identity (Russell, 2004; Spracklen, 2016; Mazierska, 2017) and within the primary research findings. The idea has its origins in the work of Benedict Anderson (2006, p. 6) who suggests that 'all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined'. This, he suggests is because 'the members of even the smallest nation [or other community such as a region]

will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 2006, p. 6). While largely applied within the context of nations and nationalism, Andersons's ideas can aptly be applied to other spaces such as the region (Royle, 1998, p. 4). As a result, the imagined community serves as a useful concept for considering Northern identity and the formation and extent of pan-Northernness.

As with all discussion of cultural identities, the extent to which these characteristics and manifestations of Northernness are real and tangible or largely invented is a contested area of debate. While most scholars and political actors recognise that many elements of a cultural identity are to some degree imaginary, as we can see above, many identify key characteristics and locations of Northernness. Others, however, argue that 'Northernness is authentic only at the level of the imagined' in that it 'is a white, working class identity constructed from various myths and invented traditions' (Spracklen, 2016, p. 10). For Spracklen (2016, p. 13) this imagined Northernness is largely externally constructed 'imposed on the north by people with cultural power in the south of England, people who control policy-making, industries and popular culture'.

Yet, Northernness is 'performed' by the inhabitants of the North. Spracklen (2016, p. 13) suggests that 'we [Northerners] know we must continue to perform because without the performance of northernness, the north of England, the simulation and the imagined community, will collapse'. Similarly, Dodd (1990, p. 27) argues 'as the son of a Yorkshire miner… the Lowryscape North has to be preserved in order that 'We' can speak on its behalf, lament 'Our' separation, and speak of its settled virtues'. In this view, therefore, Northernness is largely externally constructed and imaginary but is embraced by people in the North both as a collective identity and, again, as a cultural marker against the Southern other.

These ideas were shared by some interviewees. Jay McKenna (Interview) argued that people in the North 'feel different as opposed to actually being different'. On the idea of Northern cultural distinction, therefore, he argued 'I don't think it's a feeling of how people want to see themselves, it's a feeling that's been passed on through generations and, you know, how you see you're spoken about in the media or by politicians… or by people you interact with… it's a perception that's almost become reality or that feels like reality but maybe actually isn't'. As such, McKenna noted that 'there are lots of stereotypes and jokes about the North that people elsewhere might carry on, [and that] even people in the North joke about and have adopted themselves'.

In much the same vein, Nick King (Interview) suggested that 'if everyone talks about [Northernness] and you grow up thinking of that as a concept, you're likely to continue to use those terms of reference, and then political figures are probably more likely to use them and keep repeating them back and so it becomes self-fulfilling'. Ed Cox (Interview) also raised the idea that largely negative external constructions of Northernness have long been embraced by Northerners themselves as a badge of difference, noting 'there's a sense of the South calling out the north and identifying it with brutishness, its difficult environment, and so on and so forth, and then [the North] almost owning that identity, and then that gets… rolled out over decades, and decades, and decades'.

3.3.4. Issues with Northernness

The findings above highlight that, real or imagined, ideas of Northernness do exist and appear to be well recognised. However, there are several issues that can be seen to undermine Northernness as a distinctive and unifying identity. One potential issue with this sense of Northernness outlined above is that it is not necessarily defined in its own terms but is defined to signify something as 'other' to the perceptions of the South and Southernness (Shields, 1990, p. 207). As we have seen, many common narratives of the Northernness articulate its sense of marginality and second-classness in relation to the

South (Mazierska, 2016, pp. 5-6). There is concern that this approach 'tends to define the north in a negative way' (Arianna Giovannini, Interview).

Russell (2004, p. 275) suggests that 'anti-metropolitanism and Northern self-consciousness have in fact become effectively inter-changeable concepts'. In some ways, that a key component of constructions of Northernness is 'a dislike for another imagined community rather than a clear sense of its own', could be seen as a weakness of Northernness as a significant cultural project (Russell, 2004, p. 275). However, as Paasi (2003, p. 477) highlights, relations with the centre and feelings of marginalisation play a key role in regional identity construction.

Perhaps more problematic for this construction of Northernness is the degree to which it draws on stereotypes, and the extent to which these are exclusionary. Indeed, many of the Northern character traits and markers of identity listed above provide a rather simplistic and stereotypical, and arguably outdated portrait of Northernness. Osmond (1988, p. 68) argues that 'the key images of the North… still belong to a past era, the late nineteenth century'. That such stereotypical images of cultural distinctions between the inhabitants of the North and the South are so similar and so frequent suggests there is a significant basis to them. Nevertheless, that they are stereotypes must be kept in mind when considering their use as markers of a distinct and unifying sense of Northern identity.

With regard to its exclusionary nature, it may be that this working-class centric vision of Northernness and the North-South cultural divide serves to exclude many non-working-class Northerners or those from the rural as opposed to the industrial North from the sense of Northern identity it offers. Therefore, as Hensher (2013) suggests, it may be that rather than being a symbol of a North-South cultural divide, this sense of Northernness may be perceived as merely representing a working-class-bourgeois cultural divide. Similarly, Osmond (1988, p. 69) suggests that on occasion Northernness is 'a kind of substitute for class consciousness, class looked at through a prism'.

A further potential drawback of this sense of Northernness is its inherently masculine nature, typified by the fact that male sporting traits have often been cited as representative of wider Northern cultural traits (Collins, 2016, p. 40; Russell, 2004, pp. 38-39). While women have been associated with the perceived Northern traits of 'homeliness' and 'lack of 'fuss'', and the image of the strong Northern women has held a distinct place within popular culture over the years, the sense of working-class Northernness outlined above largely tends to contrast a gritty and masculine Northern identity against a more 'effeminate' Southernness (Russell, 2004, pp. 38-39). As such, it may be viewed as being exclusionary to some female inhabitants of the North.

Additionally, Northernness may also be exclusionary to ethnic minority inhabitants of the region. There is much evidence to suggest that ethnic minorities are far less likely to view themselves as English than any other demographic (Easton, 2018; Wyn Jones et al, 2012, p. 24; Wyn Jones et al, 2013, p. 24). Instead, those from ethnic minority communities are much more likely to prioritise their British identity (Wyn Jones et al, 2013, p. 24). However, the extent to which sub-national identities in England, and in the North in particular can be seen to be inclusive to ethnic minority residents is unclear. It has been argued that race has acted as a barrier to an inclusive sense of Scouseness in Liverpool, with Scousenesses white working-class nature being seen to alienate black Liverpudlian's (Frost, 2000, p. 195). Similarly, Fletcher and Swaine (2016, p. 87) suggest that there is evidence that 'ethnic communities' are viewed 'as 'Other' and anathema to Yorkshire culture'.

In contrast to this, the Yemini community in South Shields are said to have become well integrated and embracive of Geordie identity (Carr, 1992, pp. 143-144). In this case, Carr (1992, p. 143) suggests that it may be that for minorities it is easier 'to relate to a regional identity than a national one', particularly for those in Northern regions as Englishness may be viewed as being 'invested in the South' and thus even more alien. While

multiculturalism has come to be seen as a hallmark of significant parts of the North since the 1960s and 1970s typified by changes to the Northern townscape, demographics, and cultural patterns (Russell, 2004, p. 283), the extent to which ethnic minority residents in the North can be seen to possess a sense of Northernness (as opposed to sub-regional identities such as Geordieness) is unclear.

Spracklen (2016, pp. 10-11) suggests that in addition to its inherently working-class nature, Northernness is also an overwhelming white sense of identity. Russell (2004, p. 283) does not go this far but does suggest that it would be difficult to argue that the North's 'various black and Asian communities have ever been, or felt, fully part of Northern culture in the sense of shaping it or connecting with its major institutions and forms of expression'. Moreover, he suggests that the 'strength of pre-existing personal and group loyalties combined with the experience of some hostility from sections of the indigenous population will have often rendered the search for a 'Northern' identity largely irrelevant' (Russell, 2004, p. 283).

These issues with Northernness must be recognised and taken seriously. Ultimately, Spracklen (2016, p. 11) argues that 'northernness serves only to exclude and marginalise… those that do not fit the stereotype of northernness: those not white, not working-class, not hewn from the millstone grit, not born with coal-dust or cotton under their finger-nails'. This view was seldom raised by interviewees, however, and as we will see below, Northernness remains an important badge of cultural distinction. Nevertheless, as with all cultural identities, Northernness is not unproblematic.

3.4. Northernness and Intra-North Identities

In addition to the issues with Northernness as a cultural identity as outlined in the previous section, Northernness faces significant challenges from other sources of identity as well, not least from intra-Northern identities within. Russell (2004, p. 19) suggests that the North 'has always been the site of internal economic, political and cultural tensions'

with ‘a variety of sub-regional and local conflicts’ having long tended ‘to fracture the wider North’ (Russell, 2004, p. 19). As Musgrove (1990, p. 8) notes, historically, despite possessing a significant degree of shared identity, the North has always been culturally plural. Indeed, there is a broad consensus with the view that while Northerners can be seen to share a wide range of shared features and characteristics, the North is also marked by ‘an array of conflicting, competing, contested and complex range of identities’ (Frost, 2000, pp. 195-196).

This was recognised by numerous interviewees. Chris Rowell (Interview) noted that ‘the North isn't one contiguous culture itself’. He noted that ‘people in North Northumberland, and rural Cumberland, and Durham Dales, and the Yorkshire Dales - that's quite a large area north of England - they're going to have a quite strong rural northern identity. Whereas a Teessider is something different, and a Scouser is different, and someone from Manchester is different again, and [for] people from Yorkshire… there's a very strong Yorkshire identity’. Similarly, Conservative MP Alec Shelbrooke (Interview) noted that across the North and the country as a whole, there is ‘a rich tapestry of different regions and different cities with their own identity’.

For some interviewees there was a clear sense that these intra-Northern identities trumped any sense of pan-Northernness. Andrew Lewis (Interview) argued that despite there being an important ‘common interest as part of a wider North of England’, in many cases, there are ‘very clear, distinct identities within the North which are, if anything, stronger than the North itself’. Andrew Stephenson (Interview) suggested that ‘once you get down to a more local level, people in Lancashire would say they come from Lancashire, people in Yorkshire say they come from Yorkshire, you don't necessarily say I come from the North’.

Yorkshire in particular is often cited as a part of the North with a fiercely distinct sense of identity (Hayton et al, 2016, p. 7; Neave, 1998, p. 184). This sense of pride and belonging

in Yorkshireness is typified in the popular descriptions of the region as 'God's own country' (Hayton et al, 2016, p. 7). Unsurprisingly, Bob Buxton (Interview), leader of the Yorkshire Party, argued that 'Yorkshire is a very powerful identity', suggesting that 'it's probably the most powerful regional identity in the world'. This view may be a little exaggerated but there is a sense that Yorkshireness resonates more than many other sub-regional identities within the North. Ian Martin (Interview) was of the view that 'east of the Pennines most people talk about their region as being Yorkshire, whereas west of the Pennines, particularly around Manchester, they describe themselves not as Lancastrians or North Westerners, but as Northerners'. Similarly, Jonathan Guest (Interview) believed that there was perhaps limited attachment to the North West and North East as markers of regional identity, whereas 'Yorkshire… is different… people identify with Yorkshire'. Even Mark Burdon (Interview), leader of the North East Party, noted that while 'there are some things' that serve to forge a collective North East identity, 'it's certainly nowhere near as strong as the Yorkshire identity'.

Thus, the importance of county identities cannot be overlooked. Perhaps the most well-known intra-North rivalry is that between Yorkshire and Lancashire (Spracklen, 2016, pp. 8-9; Russell, 2004, pp. 19-20). However, the bitterness of this rivalry is often overstated. In reality, as Russell (2004, pp. 19-20) points out, there is a 'considerable degree of mutual recognition and respect' between the inhabitants of the two counties owning to a 'body of shared values' that can be seen to connect with a broader sense of Northernness.

At a lower spatial level, intra-Northern city and town rivalries can also be seen to be significant, both within (Hayton et al, 2016, p. 7) and across (Russell, 2004, p. 20) counties. Many of these rivalries between the cities and towns of the North have their roots in the rapid growth of such places and the emergence of political and economic rivalries between them during the period of Northern industrial dominance (Rawnsley, 2000, p. 6; Russell, 2004, p. 20). Moreover, the civic pride that gripped burgeoning

Northern towns and cities during this period can be seen to have created intense and persistent intra-Northern rivalries (Spracklen, 2016, pp. 8-9). Thus, Martin (2004, p. 35) suggests that 'the south is based on counties, market towns and villages of great age, where any rivalries are long dead'. The North, in contrast, 'contains a series of mainly nineteenth-century city states'. The intense and persistent rivalry between Manchester and Liverpool is perhaps the greatest example of this (Russell, 2004, p. 20). However, the prominent role of Manchester as the '(partly self-proclaimed) capital of the North' can be seen to be a key source of tension between it and all of the other major cities of the North (Russell, 2004, pp. 20-21).

Despite these intra-North rivalries and tensions, it is important to remember that identities and attachments are layered. Thus, strong local and regional attachments within the North are not necessarily a barrier to there also being a shared sense of Northern identity. Indeed, the strength of local attachment within the North may in fact play into wider notions of Northernness. Arguments were made that 'local pride is… something that is very distinctive in the north' (Arianna Giovannini Interview). That in the North 'identity seems to play a much greater role in people's relationship with politics and their local community' and that this sense of 'local attachment potentially plays into Northernness' (Will Jennings, Interview). A sense that 'being northern means having a local identity as well' (Mark Burdon, Interview). This idea relates to the views highlighted concerning cultural definitions of the North, the sense that there are Northern places. Thus, a strong cultural attachment to these respective Northern places may feed into a wider sense of attachment to Northernness. Recognising the layered nature of cultural attachment and identity was, therefore, seen to be important (Arianna Giovannini, Interview; John Denham, Interview; Paul Salveson, Interview; Will Jennings, Interview).

Just as the idea of the North as a region can be described as being both one and many, it is fair to conceive of Northernness as playing host to one and many cultural identities and attachments. As Russell (2004, pp. 21-22) highlights, 'while there have been many 'Norths' and many tensions between them, it is undeniable that the region shows features that, although rarely unique, help both to distinguish it from other parts of the country'. Thus, while the North can be seen to be 'a place of remarkable contrast and complexity that defies easy characterisation' (Russell, 2004, p. 19), a place that 'from within… shows a diversity and richness of meanings and identities' (Hayton et al, 2016, p. 7), overall, it emerges that the North is a shared and 'consistent social and cultural space' (Hayton et al, 2016, p. 7), marked 'by a considerable degree of mutual recognition and respects and a body of shared values' (Russell, 2004, p. 20). It can therefore be argued that a shared sense of pan-Northernness can serve to unite Northerners and overcome intra-North divides. In this way, it can be said that there is more that unites than divides the North.

This was a commonly held view amongst interviewees. There was a sense 'that there is a strong Northern identity as well as very strong local identities' (Jonny Ross-Tatam, Interview) and that 'those local identities become subsumed in a wider sense of being northern' (Ed Cox, Interview). It was argued that 'there is a… common interest as part of a wider North of England which is important… not instead of those local identities or county identities or city identities, but complementary to them (Andrew Lewis, Interview). Northernness was typically viewed as being 'multifaceted', a collective identity in its own right but one in which there are 'distinct identities within' it (Conor McGinn, Interview). Thus, it is often seen to be the case that 'it's simultaneously true that people feel like they are Scouse or Mancunian, or from Yorkshire, and also northern at the same time' (Marcus Johns, Interview). Northernness is therefore commonly framed as sitting within individuals 'nests' of identities. That this is so, is not unusual. As Tom Forth (Interview) suggested Northernness is 'definitely one of many identities that people

have to very differing degrees, just as many people in Wales or Scotland would feel other additional identities to being Welsh or Scottish'.

3.5. Englishness and the North

While the previous section considered how internal identities play into Northernness, this section considers how Northernness relates to ideas of Englishness. Numerous scholars have argued that in recent decades there has been an increased affiliation with Englishness as an identity. It is argued that 'while a majority retain a dual sense of English and British identity, there is evidence to suggest that we are witnessing the emergence of a different kind of Anglo-British identity, in which the English component is increasingly considered the primary source of attachment for the English' (Wyn Jones et al, 2012, p. 3). Similarly, Kenny (2014, p. 5) suggests that a growing sense of 'English nationhood has not resulted in a straightforward rejection of a sense of British affiliation' but instead has resulted in the Anglicisation of English politics and culture which can be seen to represent 'a shifting emphasis within the combined and overlapping loyalties associated with England and Britain'. Henderson and Wyn Jones (2021, pp. 47-48) have found that in every region of England apart from London 'the balance is towards the English end of the English– British Moreno spectrum'.

Yet, as highlighted above, feelings of attachment and identity are often nested. This is not just between the State (British) and National (English) levels though, it is also the case further downwards to the regional and local levels. Data from the 2012 FoE survey suggests 80% feel a strong attachment to their local area compared with 75% to England and 66% to the UK (Cox and Jeffrey, 2014, p. 2). When it comes to mapping this sense of regional and local attachment in England, it emerges that strong local attachments are felt relatively uniformly across every region although they can be seen to be lowest in London and the South East (Cox and Jeffrey, 2014, p. 6).

These points suggest that strong local identity is not a distinctively Northern trait although other surveys have found that 'the further from London someone lives, the more they identify with a particular part of England' (BBC, 2018). That there is a strong sense of regional/local attachment in many parts of England, including the North, does not necessarily mean this is felt on a pan-Northern basis. Instead, given the aforementioned difficulties associated with defining the North as a whole, as well as the existence of intra-Northern divisions, it may be more likely that it is felt on a sub-regional, country, or city/town level. Indeed, a recent self-selecting survey found that in Yorkshire, over 50 per cent of respondents consider themselves to be more 'Yorkshire than English' (The Yorkshire Society, 2021, p. 5).

Given the national-centric focus of the majority of studies looking at identity in England, it is difficult to truly assess the way in which identities such as Northernness and sub-Northern identities interact with Englishness. Within the literature, however, arguments pointing out the southern-centric nature of Englishness and, in turn, the exclusion of Northern identities from it, have been highlighted. Historically, as is evident from the analysis of popular images of the North above, the dark, dirty, industrial North has long been 'constructed as 'other' to the sense of Englishness constructed around the capital and the South of England' (Rawnsley, 2000, pp. 10-11). Taylor (1993, pp. 140-141) highlights that historically notions of England and Englishness are often centred on the 'tranquil rural image' based on the South, and the Home Counties specifically, in which the image of the industrial North was largely absent. He suggests that 'the 'real' English, the 'authentic' English, 'true' England is to be found in the south of the country' (Taylor, 1993, p. 137). This implicitly leaves the North and Northernness outside of notions of England and Englishness.

This sense of Northern otherness within the popular imagination is particularly prevalent in travel writing and literature (Rawnsley, 2000, pp. 15-16; Williams, 1993, p. 177).

Indeed, as highlighted above, within popular culture 'there is a firmly established tradition of seeing the North and South as two different countries within England' (Taylor, 1993, p. 145-146). The comparison has therefore become not just Southern-centric Englishness against a distinct Northernness but 'that of England compared with another country' (Rawnsley, 2000, pp. 15-16). Ultimately, Taylor (1993, p. 146) argues that 'the North is Unenglish'.

This view was espoused, or at least sympathised with, by several interviewees. Ed Cox (Interview) agreed with the idea that 'notions of Englishness tend to be defined by how we perceive the South'. Thus, 'the North is othered and made to feel something different'. Largely because of this sense of Northern otherness, in Ian Martin's (Interview) view, the North is characterised by people 'questioning the idea of England' and the relationship between Northernness and Englishness. In contrast, in the Midlands and the South of the country, Martin suggests 'they accept that they're part of England'.

Speaking of his personal experience of working in London in the past, journalist, David Collins (Interview) suggested that as a Northerner 'sometimes it's like being a foreigner in these large corporations'. Collins spoke of his sense of being looked down on and noted that 'I've been in meetings where people have asked me where I'm from as if I'm literally from, you know, far east Asia'. Barnsley Council Leader, Sir Stephen Houghton (Interview) suggested that 'whilst we're in the same country [we're] not in the same world as other parts of the country'.

Further to this, a recent study by Richards and Heath (2021) found that in England 'the north/south divide appears to run deeper than the England/Scotland divide'. The study 'asked whether participants felt people in other parts of the country shared their values'. It found that 'northerners show rather positive assessments of their fellow northerners alongside surprisingly negative views of the southerner out-group: more than 80% of northerners said they shared values with fellow northerners but barely more than 30%

felt the same way about Southerners'. This was wider than the values gap between the English and Scottish as a whole.

This divide is perhaps indicative of wider political discontent felt across the North (Richards and Heath, 2021), an issue explored in much more depth in subsequent chapters. But it may also be seen in the context of longstanding ideas that the North, or at least significant parts of it, have more in common with other nations rather than a southern-centric England. Historic and persistent ties between the North of England, especially the far North, and Scotland are well recognised (Jackson, 2021; Paddison, 1993, p. 166). This was highlighted by several interviewees (Andrew Hodgson, Interview; Bill Adams, Interview; David Southward, Interview). Bill Adams (Interview) argued that Northerners 'have a lot more in common… with parts of Scotland than we do with the South West and the South East. In other parts of the North such as Liverpool, the historical links with Ireland are seen to result in a 'complicated relationship with England' (Thorp, 2021).

Yet, while these ideas of the North as un-English are interesting and to an extent valid, the degree to which England as a country and Englishness as a sense of identity is seen as alien to Northerners both in the recent past and in the present cannot be overstated (Henderson and Wyn Jones, 2021, pp. 47-48). As touched on in the previous chapter, England and ideas of Englishness are deep rooted. Certainly, there are no signs to suggest there is a deep and widespread sense of complete alienation between the North and the rest of England as evidenced by the lack of a Northern nationalism (Harrison, 2016; Taylor, 1993, p. 146). As such, some argue that it may be more appropriate to think of Northern identity as a distinct strand of Englishness. It is commonly argued that the North and Northernness can be seen to fit within the system of nested identities described in the previous section. As Hayton et al (2016, p. 7) point out, 'being

'Northern', in all its shades and forms, can be seen as a specific, and perhaps distinctive, way of being English'.

John Denham (Interview), a leading proponent of the argument that recognition of England as a distinct political space is required, spoke about the importance of a 'strong sense of rootedness' to English identity. In a similar vein to the arguments described in the previous section about strong local identities in the North playing into wider notions of Northernness, Denham suggested that this is true of regional identities and Englishness, 'that people's Englishness very often has a rooted local dimension'. He argued that 'if you say you're English, you are more likely to say that you also come from a particular part or identify with a particular part of England. So, if you're in the North East, you are as English as somebody in Hampshire but your Englishness as a Geordie will rest on being from the North East'.

As we have seen, it is a key feature of identities that they need not be mutually exclusive and in fact often operate in a nested way both upwards and downwards. As a result, it is possible to feel a sense of attachment to each different form of identity considered above without necessarily placing overwhelming emphasis on any particular one. For example, it is perfectly possible to be a proud Bradfordian, a proud Yorkshireman, a proud Northerner, a proud Englishman, and a proud Briton. While the way in which identity is felt is often personal and fluid, the extent to which and ways in which identity is mobilised in wider political discourse can be important to broader notions of a collective and shared identity. It is therefore necessary to turn to consider the perceived political importance of Northernness and the extent of its politicisation.

3.6. The Politicisation of Northernness

Based on the analysis above there appears to be enough evidence to suggest that there is, at least to some degree, a well-recognised range of shared myths, memories, ideas, and characteristics that are commonly invoked to frame a distinct and, at least partially,

unifying sense of Northern identity. If a sense of Northernness that draws on much of that outlined above does exist then, how important can it be seen to be as a marker of cultural identity in the North of England today? A number of scholars and commentators believe that Northernness as an identity holds significant sway.

Rawnsley (2000, p. 3) suggests that 'the North of England evokes a greater sense of identity than any other 'region' of the country'. This, he suggests, is because 'the North is much more than a tract of land', instead 'it is a reified landscape which encapsulates various rhetorical interpretations of the past and the present, of classes and cultures, and of geographical and topographical features of a large area of England'. As a result of the combination of these influences on the Northern character, 'no other region has such an intensified sense of 'place''. Furthermore, that Northernness is often the focus of derision and rejection from 'those whose identity has been constructed and shaped elsewhere' points to its significance as a recognisable cultural identity in Rawnsley's (2000, p. 3) view. Similarly, Russell (2004, p. 278) notes that while perhaps not the most coherent or even the strongest sense of identity, Northernness can be seen to provide communities across the whole of the North of England with a valuable resource in 'their search for identity, recognition and self-respect'.

A small minority of interview participants questioned the importance of Northernness as a cultural identity. For example, Neil McInroy (Interview) acknowledged that 'there are some cultural things [that unite the North] but there's no real ethnicity'. He argued that 'the North of England is not a Scotland, or a Wales, or even the South West of England, a Cornwall or Devon, or a Normandy - it's not as distinctive as that… it's much more diffuse'.

The majority of interviewees, however, saw Northernness as an important and prominent cultural marker across the region. Some participants who were not originally from the North expressed this view strongly. Jonathan Guest (Interview) recognised a distinct

identity across the North, one that he felt able to 'talk about as confidently as an outsider'. Jonny Ross-Tatam (Interview) was of the view that 'there's a general sense of being a Northerner if you live up here or you're from here you're a northerner and you identify with other people from other places in the North'. Bob Kerslake (Interview) was also of the view that 'there is a distinct and tangible identity to the North that exists'.

Hannah Richmond (Interview) stated 'I'm clearly from the South originally, I think it's [the North] got a much stronger identity than almost any other part of the country, maybe with the exception of the devolved nations. I think there is a real sense of Northernness, and sort of protection over that identity and pride in that identity. I think that doesn't really exist in any other parts of the country'. This idea of Northern identity being stronger than those elsewhere in England was also remarked on by Ian Martin (Interview) who suggested that the North's 'sense of itself and its sense of identity' is 'one of the clearest things' that differentiates it from other regions.

Some Northerners also shared this view. Stephanie Riches (Interview) said 'as a Northerner myself… I identify it as being a very particular place, and people often define themselves as being a Northerner which maybe you don't necessarily get in the rest of the country'. Similarly, Nick King (Interview) spoke of there being 'a greater willingness to be thought of as the 'The North' in the North'. Comparing this with the Midlands where he has some professional experience, he noted that 'people in the Midlands tend to think of themselves as part of something a bit smaller… it might be a town, it might be a county, it might be West Mids, East Mids'. This sense of people commonly identifying as Northern was highlighted by others too (Mark Burdon, Interview; Tom Forth, Interview).

Thus, the notion that Northern culture 'binds us [Northerners]' (Andrew Hodgson Interview) was common. Lord Inglewood (Interview) suggested that identifying with being Northern is 'rather like supporting a football team, it's quite difficult to define why

or how you support a football team, but you do… and the North is cohesive like that'. For some it often came back to the idea of being united against a common opposition, a sense that if 'you're a Northerner you've got something in common… [a] kind of bond in that you're not from the South, and things are tougher because we get less of our fair share' (David Collins, Interview). Also highlighted was the sense of pride that this identity invoked, particularly for those who relished the commonly framed working-class sense of Northernness. Labour MP, Ian Lavery (Interview) noted 'I'm so proud to be from the North… it's part of my identity, being a northern, working class, man… it's my culture'.

Yet, despite the commonly recognised importance of Northernness, as noted in the introduction to this chapter, Northern cultural identity is rarely politicised in its own right in contemporary political discourse. In large part, this may be related to some of the problematic issues concerning Northernness highlighted above and the often subjective and personal nature of cultural identities. There are a few exceptions to this, however. Notably, Conservative MP Jake Berry, leader of the Conservative Northern Research Group, sought to make political use of ideas of Northern cultural distinction in discussions about financial support for lower league football clubs who had suffered economically due to the pandemic.

Berry (in Simons, 2020) suggested that 'for many people who live in London and the South of England, things like the opera house and the ballet will be the heart of their culture… in the North of England for many of us it is our local football club… our Glyndebourne or Royal Ballet or Royal Opera House or Royal Shakespeare Company will be Blackburn Rovers, Accrington Stanley, Barrow, Carlisle or Sunderland'. Berry received some ridicule for drawing such a sharp cultural distinction, but seemingly, he was seeking to draw on working-class ideas of Northernness that, as noted above, have historically found a home in sporting Northernness.

From a Labour perspective, the explicit politicisation of Northern identity has also been rather limited. Some figures, most notably Manchester metro mayor, Andy Burnham, have, however, sought to politicise notions of Northerners being culturally looked down upon by elites in the South of England, perhaps as a metaphor for the wider arguments that the North of England is treated unfairly. Burnham (in Chalmers, 2019) argued that 'Northerners face discrimination in certain walks of life in London'. As such, he took it as evidence that 'we [Northerners] are different'.

While examples of the outright politicisation of a distinct Northern identity is rare, this does not necessarily undermine the importance of ideas of Northernness to wider political debates concerning the region. As the analysis in this chapter has highlighted, the framing of the North as culturally distinct is commonly undertaken by political actors. That these cultural frames are not politicised explicitly in terms of cultural grievances does not mean that they do not play a part in the politicisation of the North when it comes to other issues, such as socio-economic grievances. As Urwin (1982, p. 430) argues, 'there must be something upon which regional mobilisation can be built, and that something is a form of cultural, usually ethnic, identity within the region. He suggests that together, 'cultural base and economic catalyst seem to offer a satisfactory approach to regional political mobilisation'. Thus, in the case of the North, it may be that the shared sense of cultural identity that is commonly seen to exist across the region serves as a basis for pan-Northern political mobilisation in other areas despite being rarely politicised in its own right.

This argument will be developed further in the following chapters but the idea that a sense of a common cultural bind serves to aid the North in acting as a platform upon which collective political mobilisation can take place was referenced by several interviewees. Sir Stephen Houghton (Interview) recognised that 'there is a Northern identity to build on… as we [in the North] are separate, different in some ways to

elsewhere'. Similarly, Wallace Sampson (Interview) argued that 'there is a distinctiveness' that fosters 'a shared sense of identity that is held as pan-northern cooperation'. The former political editor of the Yorkshire Post, Rob Parsons (Interview), agreed that 'there is a distinct idea of Northernness' which the paper seeks to 'highlight' in its coverage. Parsons suggested that 'the idea of being a Northerner and that being a distinct identity… has become stronger in recent years'. Bob Buxton (Interview) took a similar view. Despite his primary attachment to Yorkshire, Buxton recognised that he had begun to utilise 'the identity of being a northerner' in press releases and tweets. Thus, he suggested that politically, Northern identity 'is coming to the fore'.

This all seems to corroborate Will Tanner's (Interview) view that 'the north of England… does make sense as a political entity because of the culture'. Even those who were less convinced about the tangibility of the foundations of Northernness as a cultural identity recognised this. Jay McKenna (Interview) suggested that being a Northerner is 'almost a badge of convenience'. The Liverpudlian noted that 'whilst I have my differences with those in Manchester… I'm likely to stand shoulder to shoulder with the person in the North West and call for better things for the North'.

Russell (2004, p. 273) points out that when it comes to the academic literature, the extent to which a Northern identity exists within the shared consciousness of the North's inhabitants is an issue that has not been extensively considered. When it has been, Russell (2004, p. 273) notes that it is often concluded that 'Northern consciousness is both extremely fragile and generally secondary to other systems of identification'. Similarly, Taylor (1993, p. 137) argued that 'the North continues to refuse to be a self-conscious political entity'. Yet the evidence here appears to suggest that may be changing.

A small number of participants did question the extent to which a politics of Northernness could be built upon Northern identity. A senior local government officer who wished to remain anonymous (Interview) suggested that 'in very rough and ready

terms north-south makes sense to people' but he argued that 'it doesn't go much beyond that in terms of helping build a politics of the North'. John Denham (Interview) meanwhile, noted that 'there is a level of which the North makes sense but below that, there are identities which are probably as strong and probably more important'. Yet, overall, there appears to be a sense amongst many that there is a, at least burgeoning, Northern political consciousness. While Northern cultural identity is rarely politicised explicitly, it appears to imbue actors with a sense of pan-Northern collective consciousness that serves to frame the politicisation of the North on other issues explored in the following chapters.

3.7. Conclusion

This chapter has considered the ways in which the North is framed as being culturally distinct from the rest of the country and the extent to which Northern identity is politicised. It has highlighted how images centred on both the real and imagined industrial, working-class, Lowryscape North dominate the framing of ideas of Northernness. This, it is suggested, provides Northernness with a distinctive and significant set of supposed attributes and characteristics highlighting its strength as a recognisable cultural identity. Yet, more problematic for the applicability of a shared sense of pan-Northernness is that some of these characteristics associated with it are exclusionary in terms of gender, class, and race. Nevertheless, Northernness still appears to resonate for many.

The chapter has also highlighted that while there are numerous sources of intra-Northern division and rivalry, overall, there appears to be a common view that there is more that unites than divides the North in cultural terms. When it comes to the relationship between Northernness and other sources of identity such as Britishness and Englishness, the chapter has found that while these statist and national identities are significant to many, local and regional identities remain just as important if not more so. It has

highlighted that identities need not be mutually exclusive and can sit within one another. In this way, Northernness can sit comfortably within notions of Englishness and Britishness as well as above strong local and sub-regional attachments.

Based on all of this, it emerges that there appears to be a strong consensus that the North of England does possess a number of key traits that mark it as culturally distinct from other parts of the country. Evidence from this study's research interviews suggests that ideas of Northernness are commonly employed by political actors when framing the idea of Northern distinction. Yet, the chapter has highlighted that Northern cultural identity is rarely politicised explicitly. Instead, it argues that Northernness may serve as a cohesive basis upon which pan-Northern cooperation and politicisation of other issues can take place.

Chapter 4: Regional Inequality and the North-South Divide

4.1. Introduction

This chapter considers the ways in which issues of regional inequality are framed and politicised. It is often argued that the most clearly visible North-South divide is the socio-economic one. This is seen as a divide that negatively impacts the North with the region being economically weaker than the South and faring worse according to most socio-economic indicators. This chapter begins by highlighting that this is the case and that many political actors are happy to frame regional inequality in terms of a North-South divide. However, given the complex nature of inequality many highlight that other approaches to framing socio-economic division are more appropriate. Indeed, on further consideration, even many who are happy to apply a North-South framing, acknowledge that other approaches may in fact be more accurate.

As such, the chapter considers these other divides in turn, including a London (and the South East)-the rest divide, the town-city divide, and arguments that inequality exists everywhere thus framing it in divisive terms is unhelpful. Following this, the chapter looks at how each of these different understandings and approaches to framing have been utilised in political discourse and the politicisation of regional inequality. In doing so, it demonstrates that, owing to the often multi-dimensional understandings of regional inequality as well as concerns around negative or divisive approaches, the politicisation of socio-economic inequality is only occasionally politicised in terms of a North-South divide. When it is, it is often caveated or used in conjunction with some of the other socio-economic divides noted above.

4.2. Socio-Economic Divides

It is widely accepted that the UK economy is imbalanced and that it suffers from a significant degree of regional inequality which has worsened in recent decades. IPPR North (2012, p. 24) find that when compared with other major economies such as

France, Germany, Italy, and the USA, since 1985, the UK has had the highest rate of regional economic divergence. As a result, the UK is now the most geographically imbalanced economy in Europe (IPPR, 2018, p. 19). Indeed, the economist Philip McCann (2019, p. 263) shows that when compared with 30 OECD countries, 'the UK is one of the most interregionally unequal countries in the industrialised world, and almost certainly the most interregionally unequal large high-income country'.

Similarly, Lord Kerslake (UK2070 Commission, 2020, p. 4), chair of the UK2070 Commission that has looked into the issue of regional inequality, argues that 'there is no longer any real debate about the scale of these inequalities'. He too suggests that 'whether in terms of health, housing or productivity, it is now accepted that the UK is one of the most regionally imbalanced economies in the industrialised world'. Yet, while the idea that the country is severely economically imbalanced is widely accepted, the spatial scope of this inequality is contested and a variety of divisions are invoked to explain issues of regional inequality. This chapter considers some of the key ones, beginning with the North-South divide.

4.2.1. North-South Divide

As highlighted in the previous chapter, there is a long history of the North being regarded as somehow 'other' from the socio-cultural and political centre. Another impact of this is deep-rooted economic inequalities (Jewell, 1994, p. 4). The idea of a North-South divide began to develop within the national conscience during the industrial revolution (Baker and Billinge, 2004, p. 179). This was expressed in popular literature as highlighted in the last chapter. Even then, however, the divide was framed more in socio-cultural terms than economic ones, with the increasingly industrialised, urban, Lowryscape North contrasted with the rural South (Howell, 2004, p. 65; Jewell, 1994, p. 4). It was not until the early decades of the twentieth century that the economic North-South divide became increasingly apparent with the depression of the late 1920s hitting

'the old, staple industries' primarily located within the North hard (Smith, 1994, pp. 20-21). In contrast, new and expanding 'lighter industries' based in the South and the Midlands fared much better in the inter-war period (Smith, 1994, pp. 20-21).

The economic changes of the interwar years signalled the beginning of the end of Northern industrial dominance and thus can be seen to lay the foundations for the emergence of the contemporary North-South economic divide (Dorling, 2004, p. 44; Martin, 2004, p. 28). As highlighted in the previous chapter, Northern socio-economic distinction in the period was a common feature of contemporary literature featuring prominently in the works of Greenwood, Orwell, and Priestly. Moreover, the significant widening of the divide during the 1920s and 1930s can be seen to have influenced policy makers with it being a key factor in the development of regional policy that began in the 1930s and went on to become a notable part of the so-called post-war political consensus (Balchin, 1990, p. vii). To some extent the socio-economic divide did narrow as a result. Post-war regional policy is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

From the mid-1970s and particularly into the 1980s a North-South divide began to noticeably remerge. The extent to which this divide clearly re-emerged in this period both in reality and within the national conscience is attested to by the widespread journalistic attention it received throughout the decade (Martin, 2004, pp. 17-18). Moreover, as was the case in the inter-war years, the divide in this period was noticeable enough to be highlighted in contemporary popular literature. For example, Bainbridge (1984, p.8) in her 1984 work English Journey states that 'I had thought that North and South had long since merged, and discovered they were separate countries'. Further still, the increased academic attention on the divide as highlighted by the proliferation of books on the subject in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Balchin, 1990; Hudson and Williams, 1995; Lewis and Townsend, 1989; Martin, 1989; Smith, 1994). As Taylor (1993, p. 142) argues,

concern for regional differences took a sharp upturn in the 1980s… [and] the spectre of the 'North-South divide' became a political issue (Taylor, 1993, p. 142).

While there can be little doubt about the widening of the North-South economic divide by the end of the 1980s, there is evidence that in some measures the economic North-South divide narrowed again in the 1990s (Smith, 1994, pp. 1-2). This was largely due to the effects of the early 1990s recession which negatively impacted the South more than the North (Hudson and Williams, 1995, p. 219; Martin, 2004, pp. 19-20; Smith, 1994, pp. 1-2). As a result of this narrowing of the economic gulf between North and South, political debate about the North-South divide subsided significantly by the late 1990s (Martin, 2004, p. 20). However, despite this narrowing in the 1990s, the divide can be seen to have persisted and since widened in many regards.

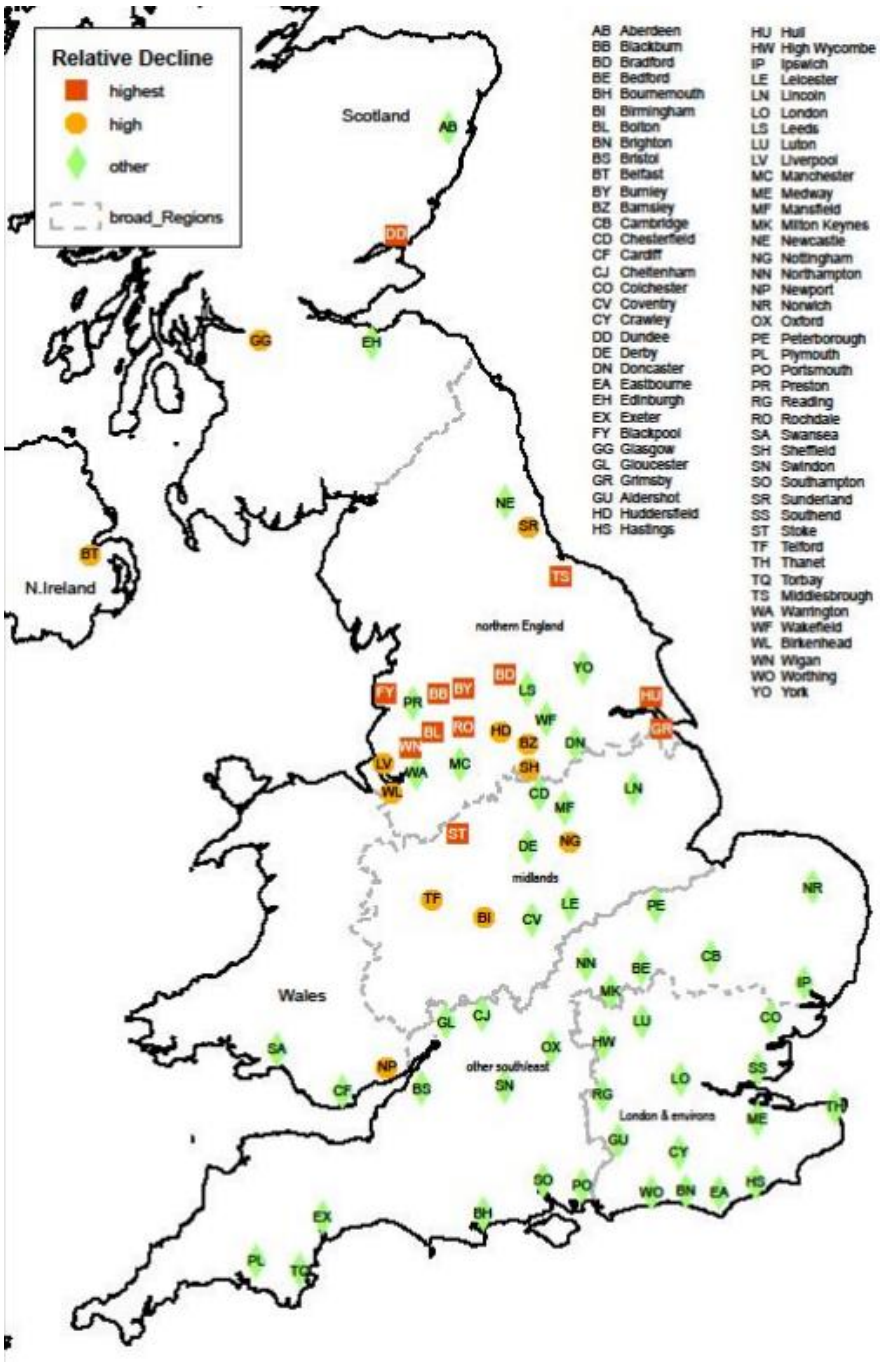
Today the North of England lags behind the South in the majority of conventional measures of economic performance including those on output, productivity and employment (IPPR North, 2012, p. 5). Moreover, there is a significantly greater proportion of households living in poverty in the North than in the South (Lawrence and Blakeley, 2017, pp. 7-8; IPPR North, 2012, p. 5). In addition to this, for the last ten years, the growth of gross value added (GVA) per capita in the North has lagged behind that of the rest of the UK, 'and is now 25 per cent lower than the national average and 15 per cent lower when excluding London' (Lawrence and Blakeley, 2017, pp. 7-8). As Lawrence and Blakeley (2017, p. 9) highlight, 'the performance gap between the North and the rest of the economy is greater than between comparable geographies in most other developed economies'.

A number of studies comparing the socio-economic characteristics of cities and towns across the UK have found further evidence of a North-South divide. Firstly, Pike et al (2016) have examined the issue of city decline. They find that while no British cities face absolute decline, many cities in the North of England 'are characterised by relative

decline or low growth' (Pike et al, 2016, p. 1). Indeed, nine out of twelve of the cities experiencing the highest levels of relative decline, according to the report, are to be found within the North (Pike et al, 2016, p. 18). Additionally, half of the cities ranked 12-24 worst in terms of relative decline are in the North (Pike et al, 2016, p. 18). In contrast, there are no cities in Southern England among the 24 most relatively declining cities identified by this index, those not in the North are either in what is commonly viewed as the Midlands or other nations of the UK (Pike et al, 2016, p. 18).

Another study by PwC and Demos (2018) which ranks UK cities based on a wide range of factors such as health, housing affordability, job opportunities, skills, incomes, and environmental factors paints a similar picture of North-South inequality. No Northern cities make the top ten of the rankings. In contrast, six out of the ten are indisputably in the South. Meanwhile, two others are in Scotland, and another two are in the Midlands (PwC and Demos, 2018, p. 2). Against this, eight out of the bottom ten cities according to this index are in the North (PwC and Demos, 2018, p. 11). The UK2070 Commission (2020, p. 14), meanwhile, find that 'the core concentrations of deprivation in England have remained unchanged over the last five years'. The local authorities with the highest proportions of neighbourhoods among the most deprived in England are all in the North – namely Middlesbrough, Liverpool, Knowsley, Kingston upon Hull and Manchester. Moreover, Middlesbrough and Blackpool are the two authority districts with the highest levels of income deprivation among children.

Figure 4.1 - Relative Decline in the UK



Source: Pike, A. et al. 2016. Uneven growth: tackling city decline.

This highlights that not only are these broad divides between the North and the South of the country an issue of economic concern but they can also be seen to negatively impact people in the North's wellbeing in a variety of ways. Not least in terms of health

outcomes. As with the majority of socio-economic North-South divides, the health divide is deep-rooted and persistent (Balchin, 1990, pp. 51-56; Curtis and Mohan, 1989). Raikes et al (2018, p. 40) note that 'England has some of the most extreme regional health inequalities in Europe'. The North-South health divide is evident for both men and women and across all social groups (Bambra et al., 2018, p. 9). This is most starkly marked by the continued variance in mortality rates between the North and the rest of the country (Marmot et al, 2020a, p. 13). At present, life expectancy at birth for men in the North is 78 years in comparison to 79.8 for men in the rest of England, meanwhile, for women in the North it is 81.9 years, compared to 83.6 for women in the rest of England (Raikes et al, 2018, p. 40). The neighbourhood with the lowest male life expectance in England however is Blackpool where it stands at just 68 years (Raikes et al, 2018, p. 40).

Mortality rates and life expectancy are not the only measures to provide evidence of a North-South health divide. In fact, much of the North lags behind the rest of England in a wide range of other health indicators such as certain types of cancer rates and chronic liver disease (Ellis and Fry, 2010, p. 62; Raikes et al, 2018, p. 40; The Lancet, 2017, p. 716). Further to this, the North also fares worst in unhealthy lifestyle indicators such as alcohol consumption, smoking rates, and obesity (Ellis and Fry, 2010, p. 62; The Lancet, 2017, p. 716). As a result of all this, it is the case that people in the North 'tend to experience poor health at an earlier age' (Raikes et al, 2018, p. 40). In parts of Blackpool, Bradford, the Wirral, and Sunderland, the average age a person becomes unhealthy is under 50 (Raikes et al, 2018, p. 40). Healthy life expectancy has worsened in some parts of the North in the last decade with around one-third of local authority areas witnessing a fall in healthy life expectancy for men and almost 60 per cent seeing a fall for women (Johns et al, 2020, p. 29). Moreover, health among children in the North is also generally poorer than their counterparts elsewhere in England. The North can be seen to perform worst in childhood health indicators such as infant and child mortality rates, low birth weights, childhood

obesity, childhood hospitalisations due to injuries or asthma, and children's dental health (Raikes et al, 2018, p. 40).

When it comes to mental health, the proportion of people at risk of poor mental health has risen across England in the past decade but nowhere more so than in the North, and the North East in particular (Marmot et al, 2020a, p. 33; Obolenskaya et al, 2016, p. 24). Further to this, suicide rates in young people are higher in the North and have been increasing since 2008 (The Lancet, 2017, p. 716). The rise in young people's suicide in the North 'has been linked to increases in unemployment, associated with poverty, inferior social welfare, educational attainment, and poorer health outcomes' (The Lancet, 2017, p. 716). While this is not solely a health issue, it highlights how a broad range of socio-economic inequalities coalesce to make life difficult for many in the North, particularly young people.

The evidence of the North-South health divide is startling, yet, far from abating, the health divide is actually widening (Dorling, 2010, p. 17; Raikes et al, 2018, p. 40; The Lancet, 2017, p. 716). Based on mortality data from 2006 and 2007, Dorling (2010, p. 17) argues that regional health inequalities are 'returning to relative levels of inequality last seen in the 1920s and 1930s'. There is evidence that mortality amongst 25-44-year olds has been increasing in the North since the mid-1990s while plateauing or falling in the South (Bambra et al., 2018, p. 10; The Lancet, 2017). As Bambra et al. (2018, p. 10) point out, 'England's regional health inequalities are now some of the largest in Europe'. In fact, the North-South health divide is even greater than that between the former East and West of Germany (Bambra et al., 2018, p. 10; Dorling, 2010, p. 26).

Figure 4.2 - Average Life Expectancy in England

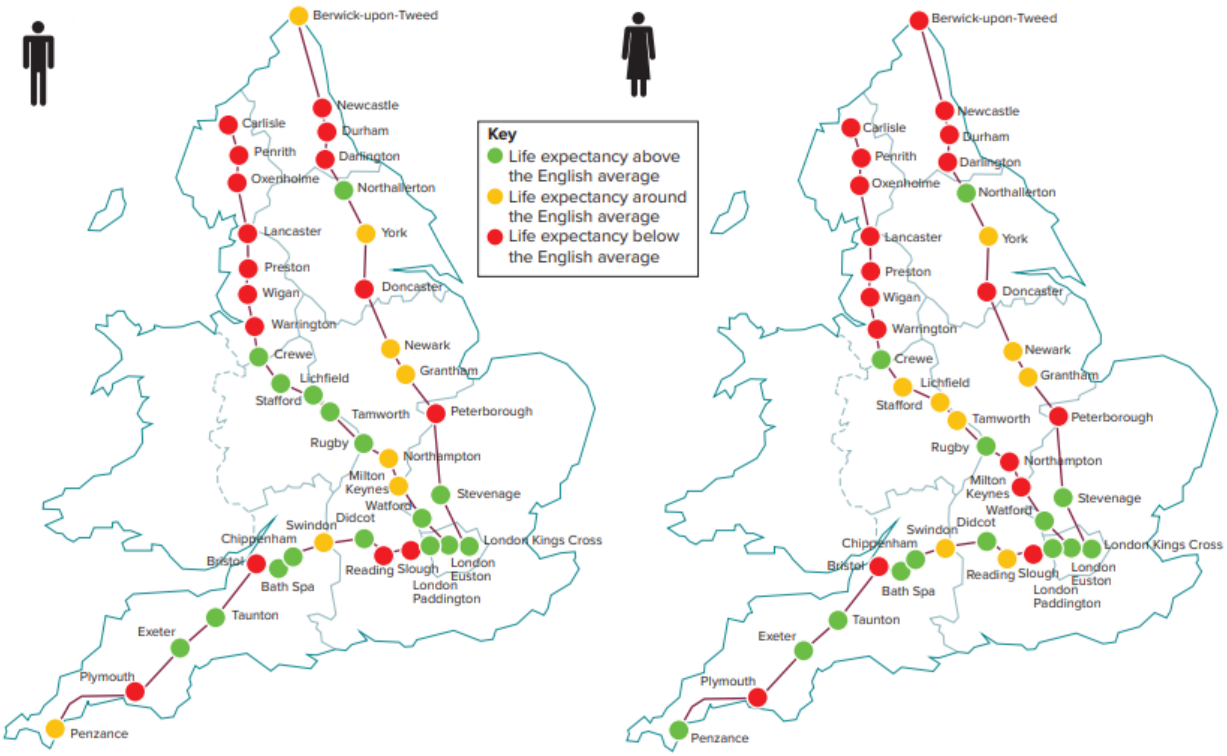


Figure 1.4: An English Journey – life expectancy for men along the East Coast, Great Western and West Coast Mainlines[27]

Figure 1.5: An English Journey – life expectancy for women along the East Coast, Great Western and West Coast Mainlines[28]

Source: Bambra, C. et al. 2018. Health for Wealth: Building a Healthier Northern Powerhouse for UK Productivity

These differences in health outcomes were highlighted by several interviewees as being indicative of a North-South divide. Hannah Richmond (Interview) of the CBI questioned the extent of some measures of a North-South divide, but she suggested when it comes to 'health deprivation… that does appear to be highest in the North'. The Labour leader of Hull Council, Stephen Brady (Interview) argued that in many parts of the North 'there are definitely problems in terms of the general longevity of the population'. Similarly, John McDonell (Interview), Labour's former Shadow Chancellor, spoke of the differences between Kensington in Liverpool compared with Kensington in London, noting that there are 'differences in life expectancy of over a decade'. Both Brady and McDonell pointed to wider issues of poverty, deprivations, wages, and skills between parts of the North and South as playing a part in these differing health outcomes.

For some, the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on many communities across the North has highlighted the issue of health inequality. Donna Hall (Interview), Chair of the New Local think tank spoke of there being a 'real inequality between the North and the rest of the country'. She argued that the prevalence of underlying poor health across many areas of the North alongside issues such as overcrowded and poor housing were the reasons for many areas in the region suffering high numbers of Covid deaths. Similarly, Rob Parsons (Interview), speaking of the high impact of Covid in the region noted that the data appears to suggest that there are some 'causative factors across the North, which are consistent enough and common enough in the North… and sort of lacking in the South, [particularly] in the South East, that you can make a sort of general distinction between the North and the South'.

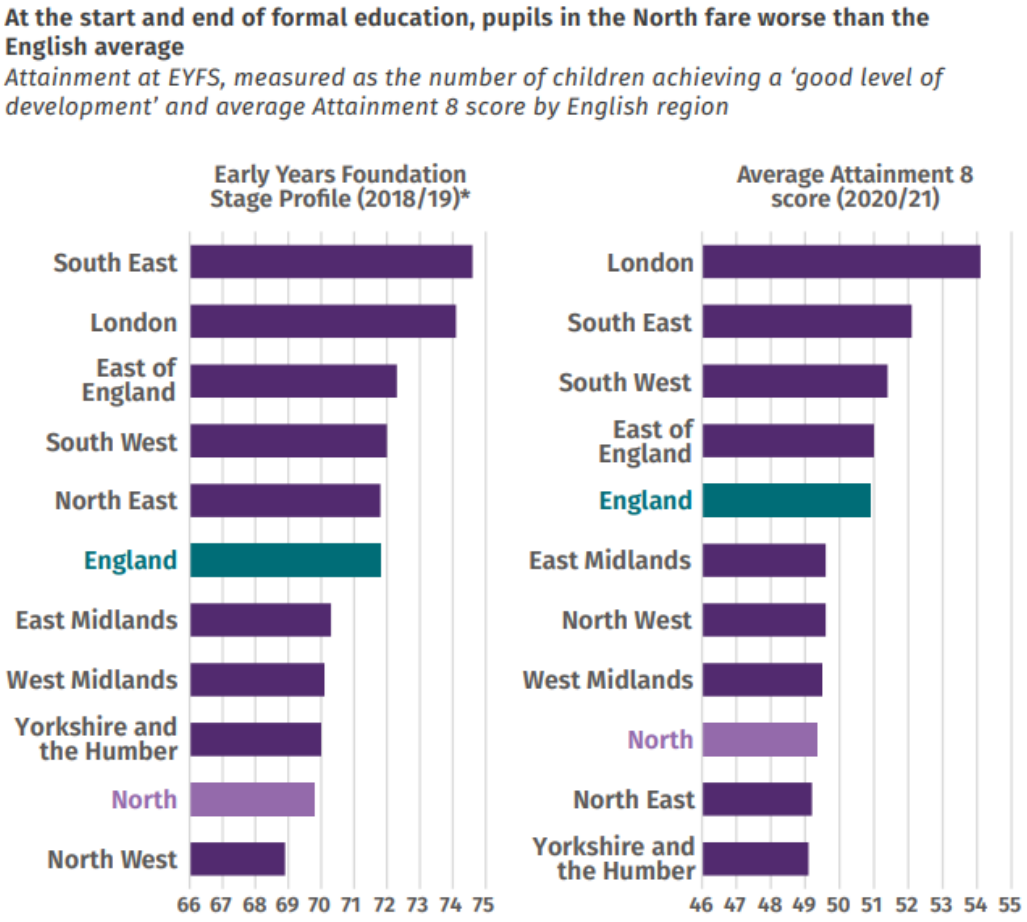
These arguments are backed up by findings from Marmot et al (2020b, p. 66). They note that 'while the pandemic is affecting different regions differently over the course of the pandemic, the close association between underlying health, deprivation, occupation, ethnicity and Covid -19 makes living in more deprived areas in certain regions particularly hazardous'. Pointing to widening health outcomes within England over the last decade, Marmot et al (2020b, p. 66) argue that 'it is to be expected that mortality rates will be higher in regions outside London and the South – particularly in the North West and North East – and that has indeed been the case since the end of the first wave of the disease'.

Another key indicator of a socio-economic North-South divide can be seen in educational attainment and opportunities. Longfield (2018, p. 4) notes that 'a disproportionate number of children in the North are growing up in communities of entrenched disadvantage which have not enjoyed the financial growth or government energy and spotlight that have so boosted opportunities in other areas of the country' and suggests that the effects of this inequality are apparent when it comes to regional differences in

educational attainment. As Johns et al (2020, p. 24) highlight 'the North of England has stubbornly high rates of child poverty'. They find that in the last decade rates of child poverty have increased in the North compared to other parts of the country, with the increase in child poverty particularly notable in the North East.

When it comes to educational attainment, Longfield (2018, p. 23) points out that in England, by the end of reception class at the age of four, 71 per cent of children have reached a good standard of development. However, in the North, while the North East is in line with the national average, the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber fall below 68 per cent and 69 per cent respectively. In contrast, in London and the South East 74 per cent of children reach a good standard of development by the end of reception. (Longfield, 2018, p. 23). When it comes to the performance of secondary schools, again, a North-South divide is apparent (Longfield, 2018, pp. 8-9; NPP Education and Skills Group, 2018, p. 17). Indeed, seven of the worse performing eight city regions for GCSE results are in the North (Longfield, 2018, p. 33). Jopling (2018, p. 39) suggests that this outcome likely owes much to the funding gap between schools in different parts of the country. Longfield (2018, pp. 34-35) argues that the poor performance of schools in the North 'in areas of entrenched deprivation, with high-levels of poverty, historic low-levels of attainment and high worklessness' means the poorer Northern children are faced with a 'double-whammy' of disadvantage which in turn negatively affects their educational attainment.

Figure 4.3 – Educational Attainment by Region



Source: Webb, J. et al . 2022. State of the North 2021.

Research by the Centre for Cities (2019, p. 54) finds that half of the cities in the bottom 10 of cities in terms of the number of formally qualified residents are in the North, while eight out of the 10 cities with the lowest number of people with no formal qualifications are in the South. Indeed, almost 10 per cent of the population of the North have no formal qualifications, this is almost double that of the South (Lawrence and Blakeley, 2017, p. 8). Even discounting London with its more highly qualified population, more people in the North hold a qualification at NVQ level 2 or lower as their highest qualification compared with those in the rest of the country (Johns et al, 2020, p, 16)

No Northern cities reach the top 10 when it comes to graduate population (Centre for Cities, 2019, p. 53). However, while the fact that less young people from the North attend

university is a likely cause of this, the lack of job opportunities for graduates in the North in comparison to other areas is also likely to be a significant factor here. Nevertheless, the result is that 'the northern economy has a higher share of people with lower skills, and a lower share of people with higher skills relative to the rest of the economy' (Lawrence and Blakeley, 2017, p. 8). As a result, it seems that the North-South education divide is a significant negative not only in terms of Northerners' life chances but also when it comes to growing a skilled workforce that could boost the economy of the North.

Given all of these factors, that the North can be seen to lack behind the South in broad terms was widely accepted by many interviewees. A senior local government officer in Greater Manchester who wished to remain anonymous (Interview) accepted that on the whole the North 'lags' behind the rest of the country 'on most major indicators'. Geoff Driver (Interview), the Conservative leader of Lancashire County Council sought to visualise this, stating if you layered up acetate sheets on a projector 'showing poor health, put another one on showing low wages, put another one on showing poor education attainment, put another one on showing poor housing, any fact you need to remember, at the end of it all you look as if you'd only put one on because they're all in the same areas'.

Ed Cox (Interview) highlighted much the same criteria and argued that from it emerges a dividing line roughly from the Mersey to the Wash, where you can say 'well hang on a second, there is a very clear distinction between the North and South'. Other interviewees highlighted the differences in productivity (Simon Jeffries, Interview), as well as weaker economic growth, lower GDP, the depth of poverty, and the lack of opportunities for young people as being indicative of a North-South divide (Anonymous TUC Official, Interview). Stephen Houghton (Interview), Labour leader of Barnsley council put it succinctly, when talking of the differences between North and South, he stated 'economically it's poorer'.

Yet, despite all of this data and these arguments, many are of the view that the idea of a North-South socio-economic divide is much too simplistic as it ignores issues of poverty elsewhere in the country, areas of affluence in the North, and numerous other regional and local economic dynamics. Even some who accept that the idea of a North-South socio-economic divide makes sense in broad and general terms, on further discussion suggest that other sources of socio-economic division and various nuances must also be taken just as seriously, if not more so. As such, it is worth turning our attention now to some of these other understandings of regional inequality because, as will be discussed in more depth in the final section of this chapter on the politicisation of regional inequality, many of these other approaches to framing regional inequality play an important role in the contemporary political debate on this issue.

4.2.2. London (and the South East)-The Rest Divide

One notable alternative way in which regional inequality was framed by some research participants was the idea of a divide between London, and perhaps its hinterlands in the South East, and the rest of the country. Clare Fallon (Interview), Northern Correspondent at Channel 4 news, was clear in expressing this view, stating 'I don't think it's a North-South divide. I think it's a London and the area around London versus other places'. Similarly, Rob Parsons (Interview) argued that 'a North-South divide is perhaps, in some ways, an inaccurate way of describing it… I think the divide is more between the North and London and the South East'. Both Fallon and Parsons highlighted that other regions like the South West and the Midlands could be seen to have more in common with the North than with London and the South East.

Will Tanner (Interview) of the thinktank Onward made much the same point, noting that 'across quite a large number of economic indices, you'd expect the North to be doing worse, certainly than London and the South East, but arguably not the South West or the Midlands'. So too did Conservative MP, Kevin Hollinrake (Interview). He argued that

that there is ‘a huge social divide’ between London and the South East and the rest of the country, but he suggested that ‘that's not just the North… there are lots of other parts of the country, the Midlands and the South West have similar issues’. Even Lord Kerslake (Interview) whose UK2070 Commission highlighted the existence of distinct disadvantages in the North noted that, in terms of regional inequality between the North and elsewhere, largely ‘it’s London and the South East where the difference is, less so with the Midlands and the South West’.

This idea of a decoupling of London and the South East from the rest of the country is reflected in the economic data and the literature. The UK2070 Commission (2020, p. 5) finds that over the last decade real growth in productivity in London has been almost twice the UK average. Moreover, in the same time, period almost 50% of employment growth in the UK has been in London and the wider South East. As McCann (2016, pp. 103-104) argues ‘little or no growth benefits appear to spill over from the London regional economy to many of the UK’s regions’. As a result, in England, the London region and its adjacent regions… appear to act largely as islands of prosperity’, this provides ‘real benefits’ for its inhabitants that do not spill over to most other regions.

While largely the idea of a divide between London and the South East and everywhere else is framed in terms of the former regions wholly benefiting and all the over regions being negatively affected, there is also a relatively common view that this imbalance is to the detriment of the whole country, including London and the South East itself. The UK2070 Commission (2020, p. 5) argue that ‘we all lose from the imbalance in the economy. Regions outside London and the Wider South East are not fulfilling their full economic potential whilst London and the Wider South East are increasingly experiencing intense pressures on housing, transport and the environment’. This idea of an ‘over-heated’ South East and the need to ease this burden by better spreading

economic growth elsewhere, particularly in the North was a view shared by several interviewees.

Stephen Brady (Interview) argued that 'you need that balance actually so that the overheated economy in the South East actually starts to spread, which seems to me natural that the North of England really should be where the investment goes and where some of the major government departments actually should be based'. Lord Kerslake (Interview) argued that this imbalance is 'bad news for everyone because we're not tapping into opportunities in the North, we're creating an economic divide that's turning into a political and cultural divide, and we're creating very uncomfortable conditions for those in London and the South East as well'. Meanwhile, Labour MP in Yorkshire who wished to remain anonymous (Interview), placed the imbalance within a broader context noting, 'if you look at the United Kingdom, and compare it with other countries, there is a bigger difference between the economic contribution of the capital, the main city, and other important cities in the UK than there is in, say, France or Germany'. As such, they argued that 'we're not making the most of the current contribution and the potential of the North'

4.2.3. Town-City Divide

Another socio-economic divide that is highlighted by some is the idea of there being a gulf between thriving cities and struggling towns. Again, this may be an oversimplification but as an economics advisor at a large Northern authority (Interview) noted, the idea of a town-city divide is 'a really crude way of trying to capture something which has got some reality to it'. Indeed, just to take employment, over the last decade, 'great strides' have been made by the majority of Britain's second order cities (Townsend and Champion, 2020, p. 582). In the North of England, employment growth has surpassed the national average in six out of seven core cities (Townsend and Champion, 2020, p. 582). Despite the impressive performance of the cities, however, there is 'very

little evidence of trickle down' in terms of this success spreading to surrounding towns (Townsend and Champion, 2020, p. 583). Indeed, in their study looking at employment rates in towns over a similar time period, Beatty and Fothergill (2020, p. 1248) find 'there is little evidence that proximity to one of the main regional cities has led to faster growth in employment or bigger reductions in unemployment'. They suggest that 'as a general rule, Britain's older industrial towns tend to share similar labour market trends wherever they are located'.

It is not only in employment rates where a division can be seen between towns and cities. Again, when it comes to health, there is a notable gap with health outcomes in towns generally being worse than those in cities and diverging further in recent years with the pattern of rising life expectancy having 'stalled or gone into reverse in many English towns' (Goodair et al, 2020, p. 5). These poor health outcomes are apparent in many different types of towns but there is also a notable regional dimension to the data where 'healthier towns are more likely to be based near to London, and the least healthy are spread across the North of England' (Goodair et al, 2020, pp. 17-18).

The idea of a town-city divide was highlighted by several interviewees. Speaking of his plans for economic renewal in the North, former Shadow Chancellor, John McDonell (Interview) argued that he 'could see where transformation would be brought about readily within the cities – Manchester, Liverpool, etcetera, - [but that] it was the smaller towns on the edge of those cities that were always the challenge'. Across the political divide, Conservative MP for Rother Valley, Alexander Stafford (Interview), suggested that 'as soon as you get to the hinterland, towns and villages are quite different from the cities'. Stafford went on, 'look at Manchester - very prosperous, Leeds - very prosperous, Hull - very prosperous, Sheffield - very prosperous, and then, what, Sheffield is a 15-20 minute drive away from here… [and there is] one of the most deprived parts of the country… it's chalk and cheese between the levels of deprivation'. Some would dispute

this characterisation of wholly prosperous cities against uniformly deprived towns, yet the idea of a town-city divide does appear to resonate.

This is particularly so when it comes to specific types of towns, particularly former industrial towns that 'have a long history of economic problems, rooted in the decline of the mining and manufacturing industries' (Beatty and Fothergill, 2020, p. 1239). Coastal towns and rural towns are also highlighted by some as being distinctly disadvantaged (Gill Furniss, Interview; Will Jennings, Interview). Numerous interview participants highlighted the disadvantages suffered by many post-industrial towns in the North of England but went on to note that in this they shared much in common with similar communities in former industrial areas such as the Midlands, South Wales, or Clydeside in Scotland (Andrew Wilson, Interview; David Southward, Interview; Ian Martin, Interview; Laura Gordon, Interview; Lord Haskins, Interview). Nevertheless, it is still recognised by some that there is a regional dimension to this. The academic and co-director of the Centre for Towns, Will Jennings (Interview), noted that 'post-industrial towns, which are heavily concentrated in the North and the Midlands, tend to be at the sharp end, and so there is a divide'.

The idea of town-city divide is not only important in terms of socio-economic framing, it is also a key theme within discussions of political polarisation and electoral politics, particularly in the North of England in the context of the vote for Brexit and the politics of the Red Wall. As Beatty and Fothergill (2020, pp. 1239 – 1240) argue, 'the older industrial towns of England and Wales were among the places that voted heavily for Brexit, a development that has been widely interpreted as a symptom of disillusion with globalization and deindustrialization'. This so-called 'revenge of the places that don't matter' (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018) is explored in more depth in the next chapter.

4.2.4. 'Inequality Knows No Compass Points'

Another approach that is commonly utilised in framing socio-economic issues is that there is division and inequality everywhere across the country in all kinds of different communities, that 'inequality knows no compass points' (McInroy and Jackson, 2012). This approach is particularly popular with those on the political left. For example, McInroy and Jackson (2012, p. 7) recognise that 'there are economic and social divides between the North and South' but argue that 'this may not be the core issue which progressive economic thinking should be focused on'. Instead, they suggest that 'the real problem is inequality and division between the haves and have nots, and between the elites and excluded across the UK'. As such, it is argued that 'the problem is not solely in the North, and there is no land of milk and honey in the South (McInroy and Jackson 2012, p. 7).

McInroy (Interview), then director of the think tank CLES, expanded on this argument when interviewed, stating that 'we say there is no North, what there is is social injustice, failing public services, and failing economies across all of this land of ours, irrespective of geography. It happens in geographies, and there's deeper bits that happen in certain geographies, but the problem is the economic and public service stewardship of the whole of the country'. He noted that 'one in four children are in poverty in Manchester and one in four children are in poverty in London'. He went on, that whether in the North or the South, people will be 'suffering in same zero hours contracts, it's the same economy that doesn't work for them, it's the same wealth extraction, it's the same austerity public services'.

In much the same vein, looking at socio-economic inequality from a class perspective, Mick Bowman (Interview), advisor to the Labour North of Tyne metro mayor, argued that 'working class people… in London and the South East are doing just as badly as working class people up in the North East or up in the North of England'. Speaking of

inequality in London, Marcus Johns (Interview) of IPPR North, argued 'there are so many people who have not benefited from the growth in London, the poverty, house prices, all of those things that have just not worked for millions of people'. Ultimately, therefore, he suggested that rather than a North-South divide or a London versus the rest divide, the reality is simply that 'the UK is a very unequal country'.

Just as it is incorrect to ignore challenges in the South, it would also be disingenuous to suggest it is all economic doom and gloom in the North. Indeed, there are areas of significant wealth in parts of the North. As Conservative MP for Pendle, Andrew Stephenson (Interview) noted 'you've got some of the wealthiest areas in the country and in the North of England, if you look at parts of Cheshire, in particular, or North Yorkshire, you know, there's some really wealthy areas and really well-educated people'. But 'at the same time', he noted, 'we've got real challenges with deprivation and some of the worst deprivation in the country'. Moreover, within the North, areas of poverty and wealth can sit closely together (Johns et al, 2020, p. 15; McInroy and Jackson 2012, p. 3; Raikes et al, 2019, pp. 10-11). As Sheffield Brightside MP, Gill Furniss (Interview), highlighted, she has 'massive divides really within one constituency'. Similarly, Andy Burnham has spoken of the need to bridge the North-South divide within Greater Manchester itself (Williams, 2021a).

This idea that inequality exists everywhere is not solely the reserve of the left. Hannah Richmond (Interview), of the CBI, also noted that 'deprivation exists across the whole country'. On both sides of the political divide, the extent of deprivation in parts of the South of the country was highlighted by MPs. Conservative MP, Alec Shelbrooke (Interview), suggested that speaking of a North-South divide is 'looking at the South with rose tinted glasses', he argued that doing so neglects 'the huge areas of deprivation in the capital city or out in some of the home counties and areas like this – [deprivation] exists everywhere'. Meanwhile, a Yorkshire Labour MP, argued that 'if you compare Harrogate

to Jaywick in Essex, well, the divide is very much the other way - Jaywick is an extremely deprived community, and Harrogate is a prosperous one'. Like Shelbrooke he questioned the appropriateness of framing inequality in terms of a North-South divide, noting that 'it's not quite as simple as that because there are areas of great deprivation in the South'.

Given this, there was a clear sense for some that because inequality exists across the country, framing it in North-South terms does a disservice to those struggling in the South. John Denham (Interview) argued 'the problem with the construction of the North as the antithesis of the South, is that it depends not so much not saying things that are true about the North, but saying things that are untrue about the South'. Similarly, Matt Garlick (Interview), of the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, made the case that just as there are negative stereotypical images of the North, failing to recognise that inequality is widespread can result in equally damaging stereotypical views of the South - 'that it's all Buckinghamshire, it's all basically dead posh, and people live in huge houses' – when that is not the reality for many.

4.2.5. The Archipelago Argument

There is a widespread recognition of poverty elsewhere in the country coupled with the existence of areas of affluence in the North. But there is also a recognition that socio-economic challenges often tend to be particularly highly concentrated in the North and that on many measures, in broad terms, the North as a whole can be seen to fare worse than elsewhere. As such, perhaps the most common way of conceiving socio-economic inequality and regional imbalances, particularly in the context of debates around the idea of a North-South divide, is the so-called archipelago argument.

Largely archipelago approaches to framing regional inequality acknowledge that at a broad level a distinction can be seen between the North and the South, but they suggest that a more nuanced understanding of the local dynamics of poverty in the South and affluence in the North should be taken into account above the framing of a North-South

divide. In this regard, they share much in common with the inequalities everywhere frames described above. However, others argue that while recognising these archipelagos is essential to nuanced understandings of disadvantage, that they exist at all as archipelagos points towards the existence of a broad North-South divide.

González (2011, p. 71) notes that 'an 'archipelago' scalar narrative' has often been utilised in discourses on socio-economic challenges in the North. Indeed, both the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s and the New Labour Government elected in 1997 played down the idea of a North-South divide, espousing the 'archipelago' argument that both the North and the South have pockets of extreme deprivation and significant wealth (Martin, 2004, p. 20; Morgan, 2006, p. 191). In this sense, the argument is used in attempts to discredit the idea of a systemic North-South economic divide (Hudson and Williams, 1995, p. 15) either for political purposes or as a justification for a more 'fine-grain' approach to economic geography (González, 2011, p. 71)

Yet, as Morgan (2006, p. 191) argues, 'there is no logical reason to dismiss interregional inequalities simply because intraregional disparities also exist'. Likewise, Martin (2004, pp. 21-22) points out that 'few proponents of the North-South divide… would seriously suggest that the North is a land of uniform deprivation, or that the South is a land of uniform prosperity' or 'deny that local inequalities exist in every region'. Instead, it is the 'relative concentration of pockets of local prosperity and disadvantage in different parts of the country' that is key to mapping the North-South economic divide.

This idea – that there are economic divides and inequality across the country, but that the concentration of inequalities within the North justifies the framing of a North-South divide, or a least a London and South East versus the res divide – was shared by many interviewees. For example, Labour MP, Ian Lavery (Interview), argued that 'there is definitely a North-South divide, and it's getting bigger and bigger and bigger'. But he added 'that isn't to say, that there aren't problems in the South, there are huge issues…

[including] huge problems in the capital city as well… so, I'm not saying that we're unique that we've got these, but there definitely is a huge, gaping divide, in my view, in this country with regard to a North-South divide'.

Jonathan Guest (Interview), economic advisor at South Yorkshire combined authority, highlighted that there are areas of affluence within Sheffield and elsewhere in the North but he argued that such areas are 'not as much of an island as perhaps is sort of made out' because, Guest noted, even 'where you have areas that are outperforming in certain metrics, they're still linked to more deprived neighbouring areas'. Stephen Brady (Interview) made much the same point, arguing that while notable socio-economic inequalities exist within his own Hull council ward, even in affluent areas 'there's still a big difference to life' when compared with that in the South, and in particular, the South East.

Indeed, there was a widespread view that despite challenges across the country, socio-economic inequalities do tend to be most heavily concentrated in the North (Jonny Ross-Tatam, Interview; Lord Kerslake, Interview; Philip Jackson, Interview; Tom Forth, Interview; Stephanie Riches, Interview; Will Jennings, Interview). Ian Mearns, Labour MP, summed this view up neatly noting that 'in the North of England… we have large areas of disadvantage and poverty, with pockets of prosperity… whereas I think in London and the South East, it's the other way around, you know, large swathes of prosperity but with pockets of disadvantage (Ian Mearns, Interview).

Thus, in the language of islands and archipelagos, it is inherent that while inequality exists across the country it is more highly concentrated in some places than others. Namely, in the North of England. In terms of political focus therefore, while it is rightly pointed out that the language of divides, be they North-South, town-city, or others, can be divisive (Raikes et al, 2019, p. 3; UK2070 Commission, 2020, p. 4), given the socio-economic realities, attention must be paid both to interregional and intraregional

challenges. As we will see next, in many ways, this view is apparent in some contemporary politicisation of regional inequality, though not always.

4.3. The Politicisation of Regional Inequality

This section explores the extent to which and the ways in which issues of regional inequality have been politicised in recent years. First, it looks at party politicisation, both at the national and local levels. It then considers how other groups and organisations, including think tanks, have politicised regional inequality. Following this, it highlights the ways in which local and regional newspapers across the North have increasingly come together in recent years to politicise regional inequality. From all this, the section finishes by assessing the extent to which regional inequality has been politicised within North-South frames.

To start with the party politicisation of the North in the context of discourse on regional inequality in recent years, on coming to power as the dominant partner in the Coalition government in 2010 the Conservatives acknowledged the idea of a North-South divide. They sought to politicise it primarily through the Northern Powerhouse agenda and, in part, through the connected city-region devolution deals. The Northern Powerhouse agenda was driven by the then Chancellor, George Osborne, and was launched in the summer of 2014. Osborne (2014) framed the agenda as an attempt at economically rebalancing the country by agglomerating the key cities of the North - the idea being that together they would be more than the sum of their parts and that in the process they would provide a counter-weigh to London and the South East.

Speaking ahead of the 2015 General Election, David Cameron (in Yorkshire Post, 2015) directly politicised the idea of a North-South divide, stating 'what I'm pledging to here is nothing less than the most important commitment to the north for decades: we're going to close the north-south growth gap. We're going to build a Northern Powerhouse, with more jobs and new investment coming to the North'. The approach, impact, and aims of

the Northern Powerhouse agenda will be discussed in much more detail in Chapter 6 as with other policy agendas highlighted in this section such as levelling up. What is apparent here though is that both Cameron and Osborne recognised the concentration of disadvantage in the North and sought to frame and politicise it either in the language of a North-South divide, or at least a North-London and the South East divide.

During Theresa May's time as prime minister, the Northern Powerhouse remained as an element of government rhetoric on tackling regional inequality and focusing on the North. But May did take a slightly different approach to Osborne and Cameron in seeking to pursue a broader strategy on regional inequality and industrial policy. Focus on the key cities of the North waned. Although new devolution deals in the North were struck or come into being, the focus on other regions of England also increased with initiatives like the Midlands Engine for example. This was indicative of May's supposed ambition to improve productivity and reduce the gap between London and other regions rather than focus predominantly on the North-South divide. Yet, for this, May was charged with abandoning the Northern Powerhouse agenda and with it the government's Northern focus overall and she received much criticism both from the opposition and from within her own party (Ahmed, 2018).

However, Will Tanner (Interview), May's then advisor, suggested that May's shift in approach was about broadening the Northern regional agenda from cities to towns. Tanner suggested that 'for Theresa, it was more about bringing life back to the towns of the North, who for a long time where lots of people - the core voters that she was trying to appeal to - felt disenfranchised and alienated from the political world'. In part then, this shift is said to be driven by May's belief in the need to address regional imbalances more broadly, with a growing focus on ideas around town-city divides. But it can also be seen to reflect the Conservative's increased recognition that there was significant electoral potential for the party in some Northern towns, particularly post-Brexit, as we will

consider more in the next chapter. This shift in focus in terms of regional policy under May could be seen as a precursor to the current government's levelling up agenda.

Indeed, on becoming prime minister in July 2019, Boris Johnson, like May before him, has rarely sought to explicitly politicise the idea of a North-South divide. Instead, Johnson and many other Conservative MPs have often tended to frame and politicise regional inequality within the broader agenda of levelling up. He has done so in a variety of ways. Invoking the idea of a London and the South East versus the rest division, Johnson (in Walker, 2019), has noted that 'it is one of the many astonishing things about our nation's capital that it is the most productive region in the whole of Europe ... and yet there are many other regions of the country that are far less productive'. This, Johnson has suggested, makes it the job of the 'government to unlock talent in every corner of the UK. Because that is the right thing to do in itself and because that is the way to release the economic potential of the whole country'.

More recently, Johnson (2021a) has increasingly highlighted the extent of inequality within the North itself, noting that people in the Ribble Valley 'live seven years longer than the people of Blackpool only 33 miles away'. Or that 'half of York's population boast a degree' compared to 'only a quarter of Doncaster's'. Johnson (2021a) argued that statistics such as those are 'not just a question of social justice, it is an appalling waste of potential and it is holding this country back because there is no reason why the inhabitants of one part of the country should be geographically fated to be poorer than others'. Similarly, Conservative MP, Neil O'Brien (2021) has made the point that levelling up is 'not about north v south, or city v town', noting that 'there are poor places even in affluent regions like the south-east and London'. This is indicative of the shift to increasingly politicise inequality as existing everywhere, even beyond the London and the South East versus the rest or the town-city divides most commonly invoked under

Theresa May and in the earlier stages of Johnson's premiership. The rhetoric now is on uniting and levelling up the whole country.

Yet, some Northern Conservatives such as Tees Valley metro mayor, Ben Houchen (2018) have invoked the framing of the North-South divide in making arguments for the North collectively, arguing that 'with the combination of more powers to local leaders, targeted investment and a modern industrial strategy, we really can start to close that north-south divide'. Additionally, given the Conservative Party's success in the so-called Red Wall seats in the North, many Conservatives, particularly its newly elected Northern MPs, are concerned about ensuring that commitments around levelling up are delivered specifically in their constituencies. In the autumn of 2020, we saw the launch of the Northern Research Group of Conservative MPs, led by former Northern Powerhouse Minister, Jake Berry. Their aim is to ensure that the government is held to account in delivering its election commitments to the North. Despite Berry and Johnson being personal friends, and the group apparently having the backing of the Prime Minister when formed, the NRG has already made its voice heard, challenging the government on a number of occasions. Notably, around the debates on tier 3 restrictions in the North in October 2020, and more recently on issues around the post-Covid economic recovery (Scott, 2020a).

Berry (2020) has argued that 'we need a recovery plan from Covid for the whole of the North, not only creating jobs to replace those that will sadly be lost, but jobs to kickstart the Northern economy, create a more balanced UK and driving the levelling-up agenda'. He goes on to invoke the North-South divide, arguing that 'we can address one of the most significant factors in the North-South divide, that of relatively poor levels of educational attainment, with targeted support for the most Northern pupils in left behind areas'. Similarly, William Wragg (in O'Carroll, 2020), the Conservative MP for Hazel Grove and an NRG member, has argued that the pandemic has exacerbated the

need for 'a good deal for the north from the government'. Speaking of the role of the NRG, Wragg argues that 'there are compelling and constructive arguments we, as a group of northern MPs, can make to government about how it delivers on its promise to level up the north'. Collectively, the NRG (in Pidd, 2020) have, however, expressed concerns that 'the cost of Covid could be paid for by the downgrading of the levelling-up agenda, and northern constituencies like ours will be left behind'.

When it comes to the Labour Party's approach to the politicisation of regional inequality in recent years, while the Conservatives under David Cameron were pursuing the Northern Powerhouse agenda, Labour, out of office and under the leadership of Ed Mililband, arguably lost significant ground to the Conservative's in terms of politicising regional inequality in the North. Miliband paid some recognition to the idea of a North-South divide and criticised the Coalition's approach but largely sought to frame it within his One Nation rhetoric. In fact, Miliband was actually warned against politicising the North-South divide too much by some Southern MPs at the time such as John Denham (in Watt, 2012). At this point many in the party were more concerned with winning again in the South rather than the party's declining vote share in its Northern heartlands. After Labour's defeat at the 2015 election, several notable Labour Party figures including Peter Mandelson (in Wearmouth, 2015) argued that Labour's failure to compete with the Conservatives on the Northern Powerhouse and devolution agendas was a 'huge political mistake'.

Under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, the impact of regional inequality on the North as a whole did receive more attention from Labour nationally. Yet, while Corbyn recognised the impact of regional inequality on the North, generally he sought to frame and politicise it as a symptom of the divide between the establishment and the people, or between the many and the few, arguing that 'we as a Labour Party have to work together to change this rigged system… an economy in which the North is neglected while

London and the South East get all the investment… this isn't North versus South… it's the people versus the establishment' (Corbyn, 2017). Nevertheless, under Corbyn's leadership, Labour was increasingly critical of the Conservatives' approach to the region with Corbyn arguing that the Northern Powerhouse was nothing but a 'cruel joke' and arguing that the government had merely presided over the devolution of austerity rather than any meaningful powers (Corbyn, 2019).

Other senior Labour figures at this time also critiqued the government in the language of regional divides. Angela Rayner (2018), then Shadow Education secretary, speaking about regional differences in educational attainment argued that 'where a child is born should not determine their life chances'. She suggested that 'by slashing funding for local services, introducing the first cuts to school budgets in a generation and denying the north the level of investment that some areas in the south can take for granted, the Tories are holding back children in the north of England'. Rebecca Long-Bailey (2019), then Shadow Business Secretary, politicised regional inequality in terms of a London and the South East versus the rest divide, highlighting 'the only two regions with labour productivity above the UK average are London and the South East, masking far lower rates of productivity – below the UK average –for the ten other regions'. This, she argued, highlighted 'the lack of investment and concern for many regions' under the Conservative government.

In terms of policy proposals, in both the 2017 and 2019 general election campaigns Labour did seek to highlight how their policies would benefit the North in particular. The then Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell (2019) was significant here arguing the case for 'an irreversible shift in the centre of gravity in political decision making and investment in this country from its location solely in London into the North and regions and nations of our country'. Indeed, McDonnell (Interview) has argued that a key focus of Labours 2019 agenda 'was about sharing out power to the regions and in particular,

the North. Because of the imbalance, not just of resources, but… of power and decision making'.

Specifically, McDonnell pledged to move parts of the treasury and the Bank of England to the North and prioritise the region in terms of allocating money from Labour's proposed national transformation fund. But, perhaps as a result of the Labour leadership's sense that the real divides were between the many and the few rather as well as between different regions, rather than talk of specific Northern agendas, instead, in trying to speak to the North, Labour largely sought to frame and politicise many of their national policies such as the Green Industrial Revolution, Regional Investment Banks, and the National Education Service, as being of particular benefit to the region. Labour did so through the production of regional manifestos highlighting how these policies would have an impact in specific areas. McDonell (Interview) did, however, express some regret that the party 'didn't have enough time to draw out most of the detail' on this. Speaking of the North specifically, he claimed that 'if we had had another 12 months' he would have liked to have had 'a written, developed plan on the Green Industrial Revolution that focused on the North that people had signed up to'.

Since taking on the leadership of the party in April 2020, Keir Starmer has had little to say about the North specifically and has not invoked the language of a North-South divide. Nevertheless, Starmer, (2021a, pp. 10-11) has argued that the old rhetoric of David Cameron arguing that "we're all in this together" does appear to ring hollow when, citing Centre for Cities research, Starmer notes that seven out of ten cities that have faced the worst government cuts in the last decade have been in the North. Additionally, Starmer (2021b) has highlighted worsening regional divides in life expectancy highlighting that a child growing up in a deprived area in the North East 'can expect to live for 5 years less… than a child growing up in a deprived area in London'. Largely, Starmer has sought to frame and politicise inequality as being an issue across the country

but has also acknowledged the regional dimensions of it without overtly politicising them. Thus, he argues that 'for too long, it has been accepted that many people in this country will not achieve their potential simply because of the circumstances of their birth. But there is nothing inevitable about this. We must aggressively strike down the pre-existing inequalities that mean too many children still have their life chances influenced more by their background and where they live' (Starmer, 2021a, p. 24).

Over the last five or six years, While the politicisation of the North at the national level of the party has ebbed and flowed, at the local level, Labour's metro mayors and council leaders across the region have become increasingly vociferous in politicising the region as a whole and in cooperating with one another to do so. Local leaders have made significant play of frames around the North-South divide as well as the idea of a North versus London divide which draws on the argument of the country being London-centric. In fact, often there is a conflation of the two.

Greater Manchester metro mayor, Andy Burnham (in Pyne, 2019) has stated 'my argument is that Westminster has failed the north of England… "The country is inherently London-centric and that has to change… we have hit a point in British history where this country is more divided than ever before… it is very divided on geographical terms'. Again, in the debates around the Tier 3 restrictions in the North of England and the following national lockdown in Autumn 2020, Burnham (2020) argued that 'for a government elected on votes in the north, and promises to "level-up", it is surprising how quickly it has reverted to the default, London-centric mode in this crisis' arguing that there approach 'certainly felt more suited to the south than to the north'.

In very similar language, the then South Yorkshire metro mayor, Dan Jarvis, along with and Burham, and Liverpool City Region metro mayor, Steve Rotheram (Jarvis et al, 2019), have argued that 'there has never been a greater need to rebalance the economy outside of London and give the North the power and resources to get firing on all

cylinders'. On other occasions, Jarvis (2019) has politicised regional inequality in terms of a London versus the rest divide, arguing that 'we need a Prime Minister that is serious about tackling the fundamental inequalities in our country. Only when we do this can we begin to close the gap between London and the rest of the UK; and heal the deep divisions that have become so apparent in recent years'. Steve Rotheram (2016) has made much the same point in the language of a North-South divide, suggesting that 'the North/South divide isn't a recent concept… it's just that it has got much worse under the Tories'. This conflation and mixing of different approaches to framing regional inequality when politicised by the Labour metro mayors highlights the complex ways in which regional inequality can be understood. It may also suggest that there is some confusion as to whether it is best to politicise inequality as an explicitly North-South issue, a London versus issue, or a country-wide issue with different regional dimensions to it.

Moving on to look briefly at some of the smaller parties, starting with the Liberal Democrats, given their role within the Coalition government, the party leadership in that period were unsurprisingly supportive of the Northern Powerhouse agenda and the role out of English devolution. When Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg (in Yorkshire Post, 2012) argued 'I am absolutely committed to closing the North-South divide – something I am disappointed to say is all the more urgent after 13 years of Labour in power'.

However, in government there was some disquiet from the party's Northern MPs who argued that the cuts pursued by the Coalition disproportionally impacted the North and that there was little room for Northern voices within the Coalition government. In 2014, John Pugh (in Boffey, 2014), then Liberal Democrat MP for Southport, argued that 'there are disproportionately few northern voices in the corridors of power. We are not a bunch of whinging northerners asking for a handout, but a region demanding the financial and political powers to shape the nation's economy in a more balanced and sustainable way'. At that time the party had 8 MPs in the North but none of them were in government.

Back in opposition after 2015, and under the leadership of Tim Farron, MP for Kendal, the party's focus on regional inequality in the North increased. In a similar vein to Labour figures, Farron (2016) criticised the Northern Powerhouse agenda and called for greater investment in the region and further devolution suggesting that 'unless the government gives proper funding to the Northern Powerhouse, it will remain a grand title with no substance and voters in the North will continue to feel neglected by this Conservative government'. Farron stood down as leader after the 2017 election and since then, the party's focus on the North has waned under the successive leaderships of Vince Cable, Jo Swinson, and now Ed Davey. This is perhaps unsurprising given the party now has only one MP in the region, Tim Farron, and controls few Northern councils. Nevertheless, at the regional level, there have been some attempts to engage with the politics of regional inequality in the North. For example, the Northern Liberal Network (in Scott, 2020b), weighed in on the debates around local lockdowns last autumn arguing that the government's approach was evidence of the region being treated unfairly, suggesting that the North is too often 'overlooked by a London-centric government'.

In addition to the national, or multi-national parties, there are also a number of regionalist parties active within the North, most notably the Yorkshire Party and the North East Party. Both parties take a similar line to that that we have seen from other opposition parties in terms of critiquing regional differences in spending, and the government's approach to the regions more broadly, but they focus their arguments specifically on their regions, Yorkshire and the North East, respectively, rather than the North as a whole. Nevertheless, both of the current leaders of the parties do seem to recognise their place within the wider regional context of the North and the potential for pan-Northern cooperation on issues of regional inequality (Bob Buxton, Interview; Mark Burdon, Interview)

Away from the party politicisation of regional inequality, other groups and organisations who have focused on the issue have largely accepted that inequality disproportionally impacts the North but have shown a reluctance to politicise it in North-South terms. For example, IPPR North often highlights how issues of inequality impact the North as a whole, but equally, they stress that 'inequalities are prevalent not only between regions but also within them' (Johns et al, 2020, p. 15). Indeed, they suggest that while UK 'regional inequalities in productivity, income and health are far worse than in any comparable country… these divides are not straightforward and they defy simplistic interpretation: the 'North-South divide' omits high poverty in London and the South West; the 'cities versus towns' debate ignores affluent towns and stagnant cities' (Raikes et al, 2019, p. 3). This view is most indicative of an inequality everywhere framing, though one that also recognises certain concentrations of disadvantage in the North. In this sense, it is similar to arguments expressed by representatives of CLES, that while 'there are economic and social divides between the north and south… the real problem is inequality and division between the haves and have nots, and between the elites and excluded across the UK' (McInroy and Jackson 2012, p. 7).

Similarly, Lord Kerslake, chair of the UK2070 Commission (2020, p. 4), stresses that their report seeks to avoid the 'divisive rhetoric that is sometimes used of North-v-South, Towns-v-Cities, or Urban-v-Rural'. He suggests that to succeed, 'we need to think about North and South, Towns and Cities, and Urban and Rural [and how] the issues of economic underperformance and wellbeing affect all parts of the UK'. However, Kerslake (in Scott, 2020c) has argued that 'I personally believe they need to keep it at the very specific agenda of regional spatial inequalities, the North/South divide, as many people call it, I think it's got to stay in that space, because that's at the core of our inequality in this country, [although] it is not the only inequality we have, we have huge other differences as well… we're a very unequal society in many ways.. but I think if levelling up was going to mean anything is got to be tackling the huge spatial imbalances'. This

view highlights that a recognition of the need to address inequalities everywhere need not be in conflict with addressing the most notable and persistent regional divides between North and South.

Finally, local and regional newspapers across the North of England have played a role in politicising the North-South divide in recent years with joint campaigns focused on the need to 'power up the North'. The former political editor of the Yorkshire Post, Rob Parsons (Interview) stated that the aim of the campaign was to put aside any 'relative parochialism' and speak with one Northern voice telling the government "these are our issues and these what we want you to address"'. Parsons suggested that one of the key drivers of these efforts is that there are many issues, particularly those associated with poor transportation, 'that most people in the north can kind of coalesce around as being something that is an issue for everyone'. The power up the North campaigns received attention from political actors and was utilised by some within the North as evidence of a growing pan-Northern consensus on the need to tackle regional inequality. Burnham (in Williams, 2019) argued that 'the north is waking up. We are getting organised, our voices are unifying and getting louder all the time, our politicians, business leaders are collaborating - and the media - and we are increasingly giving out one message: Power up the north'.

From all of this, it can be seen that, in the last decade, the framing of a North-South divide has been politicised to some degree within political discourse on regional inequality, but it has been far from the only framing approach politicised and has perhaps become a less prominent way of politicising regional inequality, at least for those outside of the North. There are several reasons why the idea of a North-South divide persists for some. Not least because as the data highlighted above demonstrates, at least at the broad, aggregate level, a North-South divide can be seen to exist. It also likely owes much to the way in which historic understandings of the country as being split along

North-South lines have long existed, as well as that the North exists, at least to some degree, as a recognisable space and as a distinct cultural identity as highlighted in the previous two chapters.

Indeed, as (González, 2011, p. 72) notes, 'invoking the North/South divide speaks of historically entrenched injustices and path dependencies'. Thus, it is an important 'discursive device' utilised to contextualise and place issues of regional inequality within 'longer historical trends and wider socioeconomic processes'. An interviewee who wished to remain anonymous (Interview) recognised this, noting that in 'our economic history, the language of North and South, has been present for a long time… and certainly since I've been active, there's always been debate framed in those terms'. They went on to note, however, that the politicisation of the divide has ebbed and flowed, that 'sometimes governments have sought to downplay, and sometimes they've thought to, at least in worm words, in aspirational terms, make [it] a bit of a thing'.

There are numerous reasons why governments and other actors may seek to downplay the idea of a North-South divide or at least not utilise it as the only framing of regional inequality. Not least because as some of the other evidence discussed above points out, disadvantage exists across the country and other divides be they London and the South-East versus the rest, the town-city divide, or the idea of inequality being everywhere and symptomatic of a divide between the many and the few can all be backed up and deployed. As the UK2070 Commission (2020, p. 11) notes, 'this interplay of interregional and intra-regional disparities has complicated and confused the debate about where the need for action lie'. This complexity is part of the reason why, as we have seen, many actors adopt and employ more than one understanding of regional inequality and division. Even within the idea of a North-South divide itself, focus on more micro issues can be apparent. Thus, as González (2011, p. 72) argues, it may be that the North/South

divide is better seen… as a discursive device mobilized by actors… to justify their 'scalar political projects'.

There may also be other reasons why actors prefer to frame and politicise inequality in certain ways, however. Perhaps most obviously because the language of divides is in itself divisive. Hannah Richmond (Interview) suggested that 'other parts of the country do get quite frustrated with the North-South thing, because, you know, it comes back to that point about it being far too simplistic, and there are other parts of the country that feel that they need attention, and they feel that a lot of the attention is on the north'. This is why it is more common to see representatives within the North politicise the North-South divide to a greater degree than those outside of the region. It may also be the case that, as will be considered in greater depth in the following chapters, that actors invoke the language of divides as a matter of political expediency. This may explain the evolution of the Conservative party's framing of regional inequality in the last decade, from a North-South divide, or at least a London and the South East against the rest divide, to ideas around town-city divides, to now a growing discursive focus on inequality and left behind communities everywhere.

A final reason highlighted by some as to why the idea of a North-South divide may not be the best way in which to frame and politicise regional inequality is that it presents a negative and overly dependent image of the North, the idea of Northerners as being 'moaning Minnies' in the words of Margaret Thatcher (in Taylor, 1993, p. 143). Arianna Giovannini (Interview) made this point about the idea of the North-South divide portraying the North in negative terms, noting 'it's always like the poor North, less developed North, and the under-developed North, and the North being in need of help'. So too did Marcus Johns (Interview) who suggested that inherent in the language of a North-South divide is 'the idea that the North is this poor relative that the family is a bit embarrassed about'. Conservative MP, Andrew Stephenson (Interview) accused some

Northern leaders of perpetuating this negative view of the region in their framing and politicisation of the idea of a North-South divide by making arguments which he surmised as 'saying, "oh, you know, we're all so poor, we need money, we need resources, we need investment"'.

Connected to this, there was a sense for some that the use of the North-South divide in talking about regional inequality fails to recognise the success of parts of the North and stifles an optimistic economic vision of the region. Roger Marsh (Interview), Chair of the NP 11 group of Northern LEPs, argued that the idea of a North-South divide had 'become rather factious, in the sense of actually recognising the economic potential of the north, and fully exploiting it, rather than saying that, "well, we haven't had our fair share of the cake" – that may be true' he went on, 'but I think it's become a very sterile argument, and creates a defensive nature on the part of people elsewhere rather than creating an encouraging aspect of what the North has to offer'.

4.4. Conclusion

This chapter has examined the ways in which issues of regional inequality are framed and politicised in the context of ideas of a North-South socio-economic divide. It has shown that there are strong grounds, at least at the broad, aggregate level, upon which to argue that there is a socio-economic gulf between North and South. Indeed, this is accepted by many. Despite this, the chapter has shown that it is commonly the case that political actors and organisations prefer to take a more nuanced approach to issues of inequality and employ different frames such as a London and the South East versus the rest narrative, a town-city division, or the argument that inequality exists in all places across the country. Given these different ways of understanding and presenting regional inequality, it is not uncommon to see actors utilise more than one frame in discussions of the issue.

When it comes to the politicisation of regional inequality, this is again apparent. The chapter has demonstrated that party leaders, other political actors, and organisations have applied these different frames at different times in the last decade, and sometimes in conjunction with one another. In terms of the explicit politicisation of the North-South divide, it has been shown that there has been a step back from talking in terms of North-South from both of the current main party leaders. However, party political representatives within the North are increasingly coming together to highlight their shared issues and frame inequality in regional terms, often in North-South terms but also in London versus the rest terms, be it the Conservative NRG or Labour's Northern metro mayors. That this is the case owes much to the shared challenges and grievances across the region. But given that to some degree similar challenges exist elsewhere, it can also be seen to be underpinned by notions of historic Northern distinction and ideas of a collective cultural Northernness, as highlighted in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively.

The reticence of national parties and organisations to frame and politicise regional inequality in terms of a North-South divide is understandable given the inherently divisive nature of such language. However, as many actors within the North warn, and as we will explore in greater depth in Chapter 6 when looking at the debate surrounding the current levelling up agenda, to focus solely on tackling broad-based country-wide inequalities without focusing on the significant interregional inequalities would be a mistake. First, though, it is important to place these arguments within the contemporary party-political context. As such, we will now turn our attention to the electoral politics of the North.

Chapter 5: The Electoral Politics of the North

5.1. Introduction

This chapter explores the electoral politics of the North. It begins by assessing the reality of the idea of an historic North-South political divide. In doing so, it suggests that while slightly simplistic this argument does have credence for much of the post-war decades. Yet, the results of the 2019 general election where the Conservatives breached Labour's so-called Red Wall upset notions of a North-South political divide. As such, the chapter looks at the ways in which the key drivers of this historic result including Brexit, party leadership, the shifting focus of the Conservative Party, and the longer-term approach of Labour in the North, have been framed. Following this, the chapter assesses the implications that the current electoral settlement is having on the party politics of the North, both in terms of party-politicisation of the region and the potential for intra-party conflict that this may have. The chapter focuses on Westminster electoral politics. The electoral politics of regional and local arenas will be covered in Chapter 7. While much of the analysis is pertinent to the region as a whole, primarily the chapter centres on the Northern Red Wall given the political importance of these seats at present. The focus within this chapter is largely on the Labour Party and the Conservative Party given that these are the two most dominant parties in the North of England by far.

5.2 An Historic North-South Political Divide

When it comes to electoral politics in England the North has long been dominated by the Labour Party, while much of the South has leaned towards the Conservatives (McAllister, 1997, p. 133; The Economist, 2013). The extent to which this political divide was a central feature of British politics ebbed and flowed in the first half of the previous century (McAllister, 1997, p. 133). In reality, it was not until the decades post-World War Two that the North-South, Labour-Conservative political divide became a particularly marked

feature of England's political landscape (Curtice and Park, 1999, p. 125; McAllister, 1997, p. 133).

The process of Conservative post-war decline in the North of England is indicative of this widening political gulf. As Kellner (2013) notes, when Winston Churchill and the Conservatives returned to power at the 1951 General Election the gap between the Conservative vote in the North and that in the rest of England stood at just three points, being 47% and 50% respectively. Similarly, the Conservatives won over 45% of constituencies in Northern England in both the 1955 and 1959 General Elections (Randall, 2009, p. 184). While Conservative support in the North began to fluctuate in the 1960s and 1970s, the party still 'never won less than a quarter of northern constituencies' (Randall, 2009, p. 184). Moreover, at certain times the Conservatives controlled the local council in a number of key Northern cities (Randall, 2009, p. 184).

However, by the late 1980s, Conservative councillors had become 'extinct' in cities such as Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield, and Newcastle (O'Brien and Wells, 2012, p. 12). And, despite winning their third General Election in a row in 1987, the Conservatives received fewer votes than Labour in all of the three statistical regions of the North (as defined then) (House of Commons Library, ND, p. 3). Thus, the divide that had been becoming increasingly apparent in the 1960s and 1970s had become a key feature of the country's political geography by the 1980s (Curtice and Park, 1999, p. 125; Hudson and Williams, 1995, p. 15; Johnston and Pattie, 2006, p. 82; McAllister, 1997, p. 133). As McAllister (1997, p. 133) notes, the extent of the divide was such in this period that some observers came to view regionalism 'as a new political cleavage to rival class in its importance for the parties'.

The North-South political divide persisted into the 1990s. The electoral map of England following the 1992 General Election in which the Conservatives won a fourth term in office represented a clear North-South, Labour-Conservative divide (Smith, 1994, pp. 32-

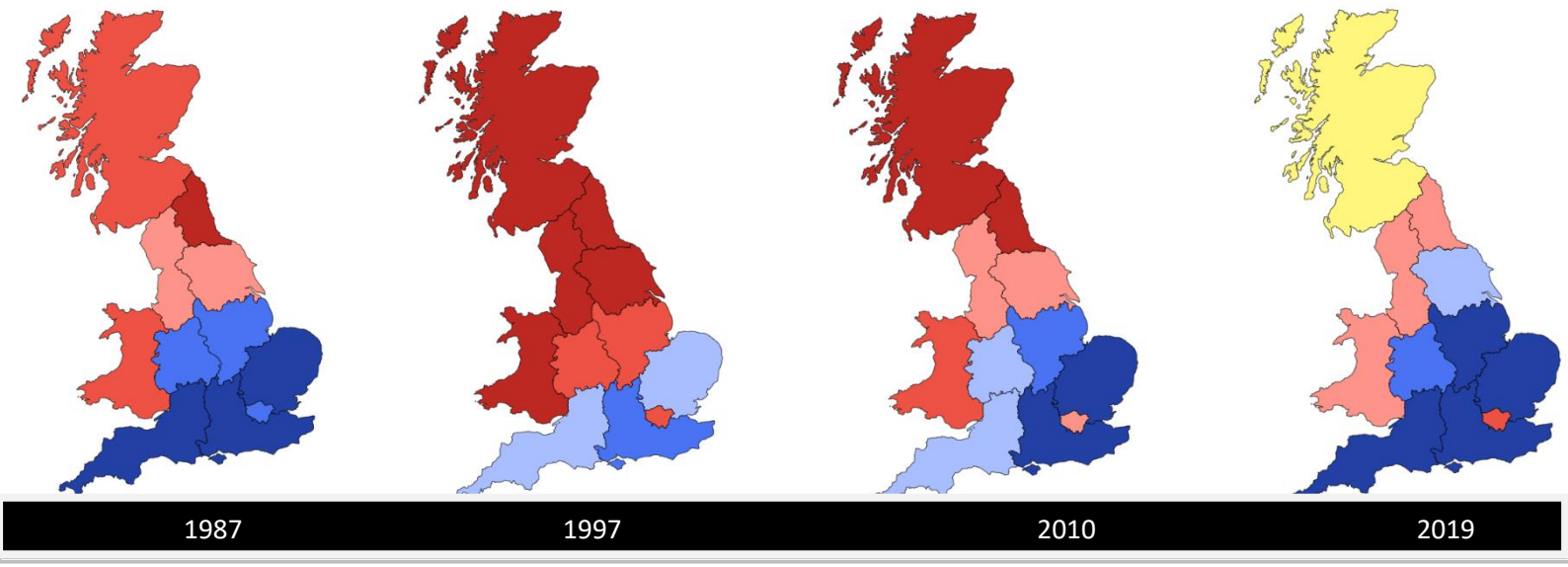
33). Indeed, despite winning the election, the Conservatives won less than one third of the seats in the North of England (Randall, 2009, p. 184). Meanwhile, Labour won just 12 seats in the three Southern regions outside London, namely the East of England, South East and South West (Johnston et al, 2018a, p. 102). This result prompted the writing of the *Southern Discomfort* pamphlet by then Labour MP, Giles Radice, which considered the party's woes in the South of England.

The Conservatives slumped further still in the North at the 1997 General Election winning only 17 seats in the region, a mere 10.5% of the total available (Randall, 2009, p. 184). In part, this owed much to Labour's landslide which also involved the party making significant inroads in the South (Curtice and Park, 1999, p. 125). Nevertheless, even in the landslide of 1997, a divide was still apparent with the Conservative vote across the South being 'almost double the vote they attracted in the North, while the reverse was the case for Labour' (McAllister, 1997, p. 147). In the General elections of 2001 and 2005, the Conservative performance in the North improved only marginally (Randall, 2009, p. 184). Meanwhile, 1997 proved to be the zenith of Labour support in the South of England (Johnston et al, 2018a, p. 102). By 2005 therefore, the electoral map, once again reflected a notable North-South political divide. Thus, it is the case that between 1992 and 2005, 'despite considerable shifts in the two parties support' regional variation between the North and South remained a constant feature of England's political landscape (Johnston et al, 2005, p. 799)

The political divide continued into the early part of the last decade. In 2010, Labour was virtually 'wiped out' in the South apart from London, winning just 10 MPs in the whole of the East of England, South East, and South West regions combined (Johnston et al, 2018a, pp. 101-103). Despite being returned to power in 2010, the Conservatives' position in the North remained relatively weak. The party won just 31% of the vote in the North, 12 points less than their average in the rest of England (Kellner, 2013). Johnston et al

(2018a, pp. 101-103) highlight that this poor performance in the North was the reason why the Conservatives failed to win a majority in the House of Commons in 2010, thereby necessitating their coalition with the Liberal Democrats. At the 2015 General Election, despite being marked by a strong performance by UKIP, the significant decline of the Liberal Democrats, and a seismic change to the political landscape in Scotland, the electoral geography of England in terms of the Labour-Conservative, North-South divide remained remarkably similar to 2010 (BBC, 2015; BBC, 2010; Johnston et al, 2018a, p. 103).

Figure 5.1 – Selected General Election Results by Region



Source: Electoral Calculus. 2023. Electoral Map Timeline.

A number of potential explanations have been posited to explain this historic North-South political divide. First, when it comes to the role of social class, historically, it is the case that working class social and political movements have prospered in the North (Howell, 2004, p. 80; Russell, 2004, p. 23). This is testament to the historic role of industrialisation and urbanisation on the culture and economy of the North, and the ways in which this fed into the politics of the region (Russell, 2004, p. 23). Yet, despite the significance of such movements in the North, the extent to which they can be seen to

signify a North-South divide should not be overstated. It remains that none of these movements were solely Northern and had support elsewhere in the country. Nevertheless, given its industrial history, it may be that the North has historically had a higher proportion of working-class voters and was therefore more fertile ground for working class movements and political parties, chiefly Labour (Butler and Stokes, 1974, p. 122).

Yet, this idea of the different class composition of each region being a key driver of the political divide is undermined by the fact that while the class cleavage was often said to be in significant decline in the late twentieth century the divide persisted (MacAllister et al, 2001, p. 41). Moreover, it is the case that party support by class has long differed substantially by region (Butler and Stokes, 1974, pp. 124-125; Curtice and Park, 1999, pp. 126-127; O'Brien and Wells, 2012, p. 5). That the role of the class cleavage has long been so inconsistent across the different regions of England suggests that region specific contextual effects may have a key role to play in explaining the political divide (Eagles, 1995, p. 10; Gallego et al, 2016, p. 529; Johnston and Pattie, 2006, p. 46). These contextual effects can be both at the micro-level, so-called neighbourhood effects, or at larger regional scales (Agnew, 1996, p. 133; Johnston and Pattie, 2006, p. 45).

Chiefly, socio-economic contextual effects are often cited as playing a key role in the historic North-South political divide. Put simply, the argument goes that 'spatial discrepancies in economic conditions' which have made the South increasingly affluent has created substantial electoral support for the Conservatives (McAllister, 1997, p. 137). In contrast, the economy of the North, which has long lagged behind the South, has resulted in greater support for Labour. The significant increase in the North-South political divide in the 1980s has been heavily linked with the socio-economic regional inequality of the period which was often associated with the policies of the Conservative

governments of the decade (Bailoni and Waine, 2014; Johnston and Pattie, 1989, p. 213; McAllister, 1997, p. 133).

This relationship between socio-economic prosperity and party support has persisted beyond the 1980s (McAllister, 1997, pp. 140-141; O'Brien and Wells, 2012, p. 48). In part, this may have been down to the role of collective experience and memory (Randall, 2009, p. 187), as well as the effects of socialisation, 'the process whereby an individual's beliefs, outlooks, and other related values are shaped by the environment in which they find themselves' (Jeffery, 2017, p. 390). Therefore, the Conservatives' persistent problems in the North were said, until recently, to owe much to its tainted 'brand' (Kellner, 2013). As we will touch on below, there is a sense that this is now changing for the Conservatives in the North.

When it comes to the direct impact that political parties themselves have on the North-South political divide, party organisation, and the issue of local strength appears to be key. Indeed, as O'Brien and Wells (2012, p. 12) note, long-term failure in a particular local area can lead to parties becoming 'stuck in a self-reinforcing cycle' whereby its weak local support base results in a low activist base and virtually no local political presence. Randall (2009, p. 192) has also drawn attention to the historic and persistent weakness of the Conservative party base in the North and suggests that this weakness had rendered it incapable of mounting serious opposition to Labour in its Northern heartlands. Moreover, because of the party's limited presence in the region, Randall (2009, p. 192) noted that the party was often 'short of authentic Northern voices', further weakening its ability as an effective political force across much of the region. Again, as we will see below, there is a sense that this too is now changing for the Conservatives in the North.

Finally, it must also be noted that the North-South political divide has long been significantly influenced by an urban-rural split in party support, and indeed party presence. Despite the evidence of a general historic North-South divide, the whole of the

North has never been a Conservative desert. The party have persistently fared well in largely rural areas such as North Yorkshire (O'Brien and Wells, 2012, p. 5). A similar picture in reverse has also long been the case in the South of England where despite Labour generally doing less well in the region, it has regularly performed well in inner city areas, particularly in London (O'Brien and Wells, 2012, p. 5). In this sense, the historic political divide may not necessarily be an issue of intrinsic regional differences but rather owe much to the different socio-geographical makeup of each region. However, this regional geography cannot be viewed in isolation from other significant factors. As highlighted in previous chapters, the distinct history of the North in terms of the urbanisation and industrialisation of large parts of it has had a profound influence on the culture and socio-economics of much of the region. Seemingly, this significantly impacted its politics as well.

Despite all of these factors and the persistence of a North-South political divide, as we will see below, under the surface, party-political allegiances had been beginning to shift in England from at least the 2000s. This process continued apace in the 2010s. When it came to the electoral geography of the 2017 General Election, there was again a notable North–South divide between Labour and Conservative support respectively (Johnston et al, 2018a, p. 105). The electoral map in England in 2017 was not substantially different to that of 2015 (Johnston et al, 2018b, p. 181). Yet, as Sobolewska and Ford (2020, p. 287) argue, the 2017 election 'result flattered to deceive, with Labour's overall advance masking a hollowing out of support in formerly rock-solid Leave-voting seats with large concentrations of identity conservatives'. As such, they suggest that the 'foundations' of the Red Wall were eroded in 2017, and 'a further push in 2019 brought it down' (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020, p. 301).

5.3. The 2019 General Election

The result of the 2019 general election upended notions of a North-South political divide. In winning an eighty-seat majority, the Conservatives gained 26 previously Labour-held seats in the North East, North West, and Yorkshire and the Humber. The Conservatives now hold 48% of seats in Yorkshire and the Humber, 43% in the North West, and 34% in the North East (Bevington and Cheung, 2020). Unsurprisingly, this notable Conservative success in the North of England and other Red Wall seats has justifiably been a dominant narrative of the election and its aftermath. As we will consider in the final section of this chapter, the result is having a significant impact on the party politics of the North. But first, it is worth considering the different understandings and framings of the drivers of this election result. Brexit and the unpopularity of then Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn are commonly cited as the two key factors in the Conservatives' success. Yet other factors including the Conservative Party's Northern shift in the 2010s, the growing political importance of social values, and ideas around Labour leaving the North behind are also seen to be crucial.

5.3.1. Brexit

To begin with Brexit. When it comes to the geography of the Remain and Leave vote in the EU referendum, the North voted 56% to 44% in favour of Leave (Hazeldine, 2017). In particular, support for leave was high in deprived seaside towns such as Blackpool, former mill towns such as Burnley, former mining communities such as Wigan and Doncaster, and former ship-building towns such as Hartlepool (Hazeldine, 2017). In contrast, Northern support for Remain was most prominent in the large cities, in particular Manchester and Liverpool, and more prosperous places such as York and Harrogate (Hazeldine, 2017).

As such, despite significant support for Leave in the North, rather than representing a North-South divide with 'much of northern England [being] inherently eurosceptic'

(Payne, 2021, p. 34) as some commentators have put it, the results of the EU referendum within the North of England represents the broadly national picture of more deprived towns opting for Leave while more affluent cities backed Remain (Jennings and Stoker, 2018, p. 2). Jennings and Stoker (2018, p. 2) suggest that this town-city divide that came to the fore during the 2016 referendum is the result of cities 'becoming younger, more ethnically diverse, more educated and more socially liberal' while towns by contrast 'are aging, are less diverse, more nostalgic and more socially conservative' (Jennings and Stoker, 2018, p. 2). Thus, they suggest that these dynamics are shifting 'Britain's political axis towards the cosmopolitan-communitarian dimension'.

Similarly, Sobolewska and Ford (2020, p. 57) describe it as a gulf between 'identity liberals' on one side and 'identity conservatives' on the other. In this sense, the vote for Brexit can be seen to tie in with political divides along education, social class, and age lines that had been bubbling under the surface of English politics for some time before 2016 but became increasingly significant with the EU vote (Evans and Tilley, 2017, pp. 201-202; Goodwin and Heath, 2016, pp. 324-325; Johnston et al, 2018b, p. 163). While Brexit did not create these identity and value divides, it was the key moment in bringing them to the fore (Cutts et al, 2020, p. 8; Sobolewska and Ford 2020, p. 248; Surridge, 2021).

Connected to these value divides are perceptions of economic decline. As Swinney (2018) notes 'the Brexit vote was reflective of the varying economic outcomes for people in different parts of the country'. He suggests that generally 'places which have responded well to changes in the national economy voted to Remain in the EU, and those that have been 'left behind' – be they towns or cities – were more likely to have voted to Leave'. This is true in the areas of the North that heavily backed Leave with local contextual factors associated with economic decline frequently seen as important (Hazeldine, 2017; Lawrence and Blakeley, 2017, p. 10). As Sobolewska and Ford (2020, p. 300) note 'the

'Leave' campaign 'proved very effective in mobilising political disaffection, with strong 'Leave' victories among voters who felt British democracy was not working, or that politicians did not care about 'people like me''.

In this sense, support for Brexit in many relatively disadvantaged parts of the country including areas of the North can be seen to be part of the wider global trend of what Rodríguez-Pose (2018, p. 190) terms 'the revenge of the places that don't matter'. Be that socially, politically, and especially in terms of perceptions of economic decline (McCann and Ortega-Argilés, 2021, p. 546). Connected with this, it may be that support for Brexit in the North can be viewed as being indicative of Northern anger at perceived neglect from Westminster rather than principled opposition to the European Union. While the Brexit vote cannot be seen to represent a North-South divide, that support for Leave was high in significant parts of the North is indicative of the sense of social, political, and economic discontent felt in many communities in the region relative to that felt elsewhere in the country. The former IPPR North director, Ed Cox (Interview) summed this view up, arguing that 'Brexit shows us that there are significant numbers of people in the north of England, who are… for different reasons, pretty pissed off with the settlement that they are getting at the moment'.

When it comes to the implication of the referendum result on electoral politics, at the 2017 General Election the social divides apparent at the 2016 poll appeared significant once again in terms of education levels (Curtice and Simpson, 2018, p. 23), age (Harding, 2018, p. 6), and social class (Curtice and Simpson, 2018, p. 25). As Jennings and Stoker (2017, pp. 359-360) note, the 2017 general election represented 'a continuing battle of mobilisation between cosmopolitan and non-cosmopolitan areas' with the young, the more highly educated, professionals, and more liberal minded voters increasingly likely to vote Labour, while older, less well educated, semi-skilled workers, and those with a more socially conservative outlook were increasingly likely to back the Conservatives.

Nevertheless, as noted above, despite some early bricks being knocked out of the Red Wall, there was little significant change in terms of the electoral map of the North-South divide in 2017.

It was the 2019 general election where these cultural divisions associated with Leave and Remain really became key to the electoral geography of the North. As we will explore further below, in part this was due to the Conservatives' successful targeting of voters who on paper should be more inclined to vote Conservative but previously had been reluctant to do so. These voters were more likely to have voted Leave in 2016. As Sobolewska and Ford (2020, p. 295) argue, 'Brexit has catalysed a re-alignment of politics around identity divides'. For Miscampbell et al (2020, p. 4) this cultural shift in voting habits means that 'it is now impossible to characterise the Conservatives as the party of wealth, privilege or the South of England'.

Above all else though, the significance of Brexit on the 2019 general election lay in the Conservative's success and Labour's failure in politicising the EU referendum result and operationalising this around these cultural divides. Miscampbell et al (2020, p. 3) note that in 2019 the Conservatives managed to largely consolidate the Brexit vote, boosting their share of Leave voters from 57% in 2017 to 71%. This, they argue, was down to the party's electoral strategy of chiefly framing the election around '"Getting Brexit done" or "ending the dither and delay of a paralysed parliament"' (Miscampbell et al, 2020, p. 39). The importance of these messages to the Conservative's success in politicising Brexit to its advantage in 2019 was widely highlighted by interviewees. Will Tanner (Interview) of the think tank Onward noted how 'the phrase 'get Brexit done', just had huge resonance way above everything that the Labour Party put out'. He spoke too of the idea that voters 'genuinely were sick and tired and they wanted to get it done' and saw the Conservatives as the best vehicle for that outcome.

Similarly, Conservative MP Andrew Stephenson for Pendle (Interview) noted the importance of the idea that 'parliament wasn't delivering on what many people in the North [had voted for]' in Brexit. Therefore, he suggested that the Conservative message had so much appeal because '[in] the majority of the North… people just felt that they're being let down and being betrayed by politicians who were not respecting the referendum result'. The journalist Rob Parsons (Interview) also reflected on this, suggesting that because 'large swathes of the North voted for Brexit, in the election they voted for an option that they thought would get it done most quickly'.

Many Labour figures put forward much the same view. John McDonell (Interview) reflected that 'no matter what [Labour] did… [the party] couldn't break through that wall of Brexit'. Similarly, Ian Mearns (Interview), MP for Gateshead, noted how the message '"get Brexit done", undoubtedly cut through', while much of Labour's messaging did not. As Dianna Johnson (Interview), MP for Hull North, put it, there was a sense that 'the very simple language that Boris Johnson used was very attractive'. Meanwhile, as Ian Lavery (Interview), MP for Wansbeck, stated, Labour couldn't get people to listen, because they were listening to "get Brexit done"'. Analysis by Miscampbell et al (2020, p. 39) does indeed suggest that against the Conservatives' relentless focus on Brexit, Labour was unable to shift the framing of the election onto other issues, as they had managed to do to some degree in 2017. They find that 'only 3% of the population believed that the election was being fought to transform society, end austerity or deliver climate justice'. This, they argue, reflects 'the complete failure of the Labour Party to reframe the election on their own terms'.

Some Labour figures also recognised the idea that owing to their support for Brexit the Conservatives were seen to be on the side of voters in the North while Labour was not. While acknowledging that it would be wrong to see the EU referendum result as evidence of a North-South political divide, Toby Perkins (Interview), MP for

Chesterfield, noted that 'there was certainly a sense amongst my constituents, that it was the Tories that were sticking up for the North by backing Brexit'. Emma Hardy (2021, p. 59), Labour MP for Hull East, has argued that the sense that Labour was not "honouring' the referendum result came to symbolise so much more than just leaving the EU' suggesting that 'Labour was effectively painted as in cahoots with… [the] elite and the Conservatives managed to reposition themselves as the party of the ordinary man and woman in the minds of some'.

This sense that Labour has somehow moved away from representing the views of its historic heartland communities and core voters is a theme that will be referred to throughout the chapter. It is an idea that goes beyond Brexit, nevertheless, the party's position on the issue was clearly problematic in 2019. Figures from across the party have highlighted this. Alex Sobel (Interview), MP for Leeds North West, spoke of how the party was 'facing both ways' and 'couldn't make a decision'. While the Conservatives had a clear message, 'the Labour Party dithered' according to Birkenhead MP, Mick Whitley (Interview). For Graeme Miller, Leader of Sunderland Council, the Labour position was 'confused' and 'not sensible'. And for Mick Bowman (Interview), advisor to the North of Tyne metro mayor, Labour's position was 'absolutely disastrous'.

There is a clear sense that a key driver of the 2019 general election result was the success of the Conservative's clear message on Brexit and the failure of Labour to agree upon and articulate a similarly decisive position. Yet, while Labour lost around 1.7 million Leave voters between 2017 and 2019, the party also lost around 1 million Remain voters (Labour Together, 2020, p. 12). In contrast, while the Conservatives benefited from significant Leaver support, that the Conservative Remain vote did not move away from the party en masse 'was also an important element in securing the 80-seat majority' (Surridge, 2021). This suggests that although Brexit was important, there were other issues in play in 2019 that explain the collapse of Labour in parts of the North.

5.3.2. Leadership and Approach

The other most commonly cited decisive factor in the 2019 general election is leadership, in particular problems concerning Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party. Corbyn's leadership was widely criticised by interviewees on a range of issues, not least his perceived weakness on issues of national security, antisemitism, and his broader approach to party management. Labour figures (Dianna Johnson, Interview; Gill Furniss, Interview; Yorkshire Labour MP), Conservatives (Andrew Stephenson, Interview; Geoff Driver, Interview; Kevin Hollinrake, Interview), those from other parties (Mark Burdon, Interview; Laura Gordon, Interview) and non (Rob Parsons, Interview) were equally damning of elements of his leadership approach. Polling data suggests that by 2019 much of the public had come to share a similarly negative view of Jeremy Corbyn (Ipsos MORI, 2019). Even those broadly supportive of the Labour leader recognised that there 'was an antipathy towards… [his] leadership', although suggested that this 'was grossly unfair' (Ian Mearns, Interview).

Research by Hart (2021, p. 15) finds that amongst former Labour voters in Colne Valley, negative perceptions of Corbyn's leadership were a key factor in them choosing not to vote Labour in 2019. He argues that voters' concerns about Labour's leadership 'spilled over' into broader questions about the party's position on Brexit and the economy. Tony Blair (in Payne, 2021, pp. 105-106) has made much the same point arguing that 'Brexit was a major problem, though I think Corbyn was at least as big a problem', suggesting that 'you can't divorce people's feelings about Brexit from the absence of any Labour leadership on the issue'. Indeed, on the issue of Brexit and party leadership, Cooper and Cooper (2020, p. 754) suggest that the unpopularity of Corbyn made it 'easier for remain compromisers to justify voting Conservative'. In much the same vein, Labour's own analysis of the 2019 defeat argues that "Stop Jeremy Corbyn' was a major driver of the

Conservatives' success across all their key groups including previous non-voters, and among all the swing voters Labour lost to the Tories' (Labour Together, 2020, p. 12).

Some interviewees suggested that Corbyn's unpopularity was particularly damaging for Labour in the North. Geoff Driver (Interview), Conservative leader of Lancashire County Council, took this view. Citing his experience canvassing in traditional Labour areas, he recalled voters saying '"I'm voting Conservative this time and if my dad and my granddad knew, they'd turn in their graves"'. Largely, such antipathy to the party that they had long felt a traditional attachment to was driven by their negative views of Jeremy Corbyn, according to Driver. Similarly, Will Tanner (Interview) argued that 'we shouldn't underestimate the extent to which Labour lost the 2019 election', noting that 'Jeremy Corbyn did far worse than any Labour leader has done in recent times and [that] he lost particularly with the group of voters that the Labour Party has relied upon to win a number of Northern constituencies'.

Some Labour figures shared this view. Several suggested that Corbyn's unpopularity in traditional Labour strongholds in the North owed much to the sense that his 'values' were alien to many voters in such places. Talking of the seats Labour lost in the North, Alex Sobel (Interview), argued that 'in those communities there are certain values and views of the world which we in the Labour Party were out of step with'. He cited the issue of national security in particular and how Corbyn's past views on NATO and the nuclear deterrent, and his response to the Salisbury poisonings were counter to the position of many such voters. Another Yorkshire Labour MP (Interview) also raised this issue and suggested that in voters' eyes Labour under Corbyn were seen to be lacking on 'basic questions of patriotism [and] standing up for the country'. While criticism of Corbyn's leadership has come from actors from different traditions in the Labour Party, there was also an ideological disdain for Corbyn's leadership and values. Toby Perkins (Interview) likewise suggested that Corbyn failed to connect with, what he termed, the

'socially conservative values of the North'. But Perkins argued that 'people of a more moderate Labour tradition… had a much more realistic sense of what people in the North wanted and the reasons why we were alienating them'.

Issues associated with Jeremy Corbyn's leadership have also been invoked in reference to perceived policy and tactical failures in 2019. The Labour Together (2020, p. 12) report argues that 'a combination of concerns about the leadership, Labour's position on Brexit and our policy programme damaged Labour's chances in this election' and that the party's 'weaknesses going into [the] election were interlinked, and indivisible'. In terms of policy, the report argues that 'whilst individual policies polled as popular, resistance to Labour's reform programme came as people evaluated the overall package in our manifesto'. It suggests that 'unlike in 2017 many thought our manifesto was considered as unrealistic, risky and unlikely to be delivered'. Ultimately, Labour 'failed to provide a believable narrative for change, that enough of the electorate could vote for' (Labour Together, 2020, p. 12).

Several Labour interviewees shared this view. A Labour MP in Yorkshire who wished to remain anonymous (Interview) believed the manifesto was 'over promising' and that as result 'people didn't think it was credible'. There was also a sense for some that Labour failed to speak directly to the issues voters were most concerned about. Connor McGinn, MP for St Helens, argued that 'when the last labour manifesto mentioned the Chagos islands but not coalfield communities, we had a big fucking problem'. He went on, 'that's not to disparage lots of causes around the world… [and] our role as an international party… but it is to say, we've got to get our priorities right on this stuff… we've got to deliver for our people'. Lisa Nandy (in Payne, 2021, p. 303) has made much the same point, arguing that 'people often feel that we're obsessed in the Labour Party with being radical… but what we often aren't is relevant'. This, she suggests 'very much

came to the fore at the last election'. 'People couldn't understand the relevance to their own lives' of many of Labours' manifesto pledges.

When it comes to Labour's broader tactics, Matinson (2020, p. 9) argues that 'Labour compounded the errors of a very poorly run campaign by redeploying local activists away from defending Red Wall constituencies and sending them instead to seats considered winnable targets or strategically important'. Indeed, it was not until the later stages of the election campaign that Labour's election chiefs appeared to take seriously the dangers the party faced in its former heartlands (Pogrund and Maguire, 2020, pp. 327-329). Seemingly, 'Labour went into the 2019 election without a clear strategy of which voters we needed to persuade or how' (Labour Together, 2020, p. 13). Additionally, the party was unprepared for an election (Labour Together, 2020, p. 13). John McDonell (Interview) made this point, suggesting that Labour had not had 'enough time to draw out most of the detail' in its policy commitments. He argued that the party would have been better placed to fight on its policy platform if it had had an extra 12 months to develop it further.

All of these issues of leadership and approach are seen to have been responsible for, or at least compounding, Labour's woes in 2019. In contrast, Boris Johnson's leadership is widely perceived as being a key electoral asset for the Conservatives at the last general election. While it is not the case that Johnson was wildly popular, indeed polling often showed Johnson to also have a negative net-popularity rating in December 2019 (Ipsos MORI, 2019; Opinium, 2019), it was the case that 'Jeremy Corbyn was considerably more unpopular' (Miscampbell et al, 2020, p. 25). Johnson did, however, appear to have a degree of popularity amongst decisive voters in many of Labour's former heartlands, including those in the North, largely because of his position on Brexit (Ford et al, 2021). Moreover, on questions such as patriotism and strong leadership, Johnson was viewed

much more favourably than Corbyn by the electorate at large (Miscampbell et al, 2020, p. 25).

Additionally, there is a widespread belief that Johnson and the Conservatives put forward a much more positive and optimistic vision than Labour and were rewarded by voters for doing so. Reflecting on focus groups across the Red Wall, Matinson (2020, p. 145) claims that 'against a backdrop of despair about the whole political class, [Johnson] seemed to radiate hope'. When compared to Theresa May's campaign in the 2017 general election, the Conservative campaign of 2019 is seen to be notably more positive. Cooper and Cooper (2020, p. 757) suggest that essentially 'Johnson's messages promised change, whereas May focussed on protecting the status quo'.

As we will consider in more depth in the next section, Cooper and Cooper (2020, p. 757) point out that Johnson's focus in 2019 was centred specifically on making positive 'appeals to traditionally Labour voting leave areas that were repeated relentlessly throughout the campaign', encapsulated within the promise of 'levelling up'. Several Northern Conservatives have made this point. Alexander Stafford (Interview) suggested there was a 'real contrast' between 'Boris' positive attitude' and 'Jeremy Corbyn's talking down of the country'. Paul Howell (in Payne, 2021, p. 114), the Conservative MP for Sedgefield, first elected in 2019, similarly argued that the Conservatives' positive message was key to their success 'because for too long politicians in this part of the world have talked the area down, so the fact that we talk it up is a different tone'.

As well as the resonant messages around delivering on Brexit and offering more investment to the North, the Conservative presentation of an optimistic vision for the North owed much to the party's cynical argument that many of the seats that the party were targeting in the Red Wall had long had a Labour MP and Labour dominated council that had failed to halt these places perceived decline. Labour's record in the North when in government between 1997 and 2010 will be considered later in this

chapter, however, the Conservatives' success in framing the perceived decline in places in the North of England as being the fault of Labour despite the Conservatives having been in office for almost a decade by 2019 was remarkable. Labour MPs Yvette Cooper (2021, p. 37) and Emma Hardy (2021, p. 70) point out that in many parts of the North, the Conservatives successfully managed to shift the blame for the damage inflicted by the party's austerity agenda on to Labour run councils. Indeed, in her study of the Red Wall, Matinson (2020, p. 104) finds that most of the reactions to largely Labour run local councils that she experienced 'were uniformly negative'.

All of these issues of leadership and the influence of it on broader party strategy combined in 2019 to the detriment of Labour and the benefit of the Conservatives. As Melanie Onn (in Payne, 2021, pp. 204-205), former Labour MP for Great Grimsby who lost her seat in 2019, put it, 'people felt everything [Labour] were talking about wasn't reflective of their lives. Ultimately, they wanted somebody who was upbeat, they felt Boris was so sure of himself, he obviously knew what was right for the country. Labour's message in 2019 did not present its own vision of that optimism'. Matinson (2020, p. 148) likewise suggests that Jeremy Corbyn's leadership 'exacerbated and accelerated an already perilous situation' amongst some of the party's long-standing support in the North. Meanwhile, 'positive views of Boris Johnson managed to neutralise some long-standing negative associations with the Tory Party brand'.

5.3.3. The Conservatives' Northern Tilt

This positive Conservative rhetoric directed towards the North did not emerge from nowhere in 2019. As noted in the previous chapter, it is a marked feature of attempts at a Conservative Northern tilt that can be traced back almost a decade. As highlighted, this began with the Northern Powerhouse agenda pursued under David Cameron and George Osborne. The economic impact of this agenda is considered in the next chapter, but, politically, it is widely acknowledged that Cameron-era Conservative rhetoric on the

Northern Powerhouse sharpened political focus on the region. Talking of the period, Andrew Stephenson (Interview) talked of the North gaining an 'identity and kind of a positive focus'. Similarly, while acknowledging that he is not 'his biggest fan in the world', Conservative MP, Philip Davies (Interview), argued that George Osborne deserves great credit for making 'a massive thing about the Northern Powerhouse and all the rest of it'. For Davies, 'Osborne really put [the North] on the political agenda'.

Across the political divide, similar arguments were made by interviewees. While questioning the extent to which it has actually delivered, Labour's Dianna Johnson (Interview), suggested that Osborne's Northern Powerhouse agenda brought to the political fore the idea 'that the North was punching below its weight', and argued that as a political slogan it has been 'successful' in drawing attention to the region. Again, while questioning the extent to which the agenda has delivered for the North, Toby Perkins (Interview), suggested that Cameron and Osborne gave 'the sense that the Northern Powerhouse was something that really mattered to them and was a priority for the government'.

While, as we have seen, in terms of regional policy Theresa May took steps to move away from the Cameron/Osborne approach, electorally she remained committed to making inroads into the North. May's former advisor, Will Tanner (Interview), suggested that 'since around 2016, 2017, although some people would say before then, there's been a growing awareness of the importance of constituencies in the north of England in terms of their kind of political interest'. This he suggests is because 'the North of England has become a key battleground'. Thus, as (Kanagasooriam and Simon, 2021, p. 8) note, the Conservatives' 2017 campaign was focused on these types of voters. The view was that they 'would offset Remain losses by making gains in Labour's traditionally working-class heartlands'.

Yet, this strategy did not pay electoral dividends in 2017, the Conservatives made just three gains in Labour's heartlands. However, 'there were substantial swings towards the Conservatives in many historically safe low-wealth Labour seats' (Kanagasooriam and Simon, 2021, p. 9). Indeed, in seats such as Bishop Auckland and Blyth Valley which would fall to the Conservatives in 2019, the Conservative's vote share had increased by over 20 percentage points between 2010 and 2017 (Kanagasooriam and Simon, 2021, p. 9). Evidently, the tide was beginning to turn in the Conservative's favour in parts of the North of England by 2017. Thus, as Kanagasooriam and Simon (2021, p. 9) argue, 'the 2019 fall of the Red Wall should not have come as a shock'. Similarly, Payne (2021, p. 4) argues that 'the ground-work' for the Conservative's Northern success in 2019 'had been laid by Theresa May two years previously'.

Johnson successfully built on this earlier chipping away of the Red Wall in 2019. As Cooper and Cooper (2020, p. 760) argue, the Conservative strategy in 2019 'was carefully calibrated' towards a specific set of seats and specific types of voters within them. The seats prioritised by the Conservatives were those identified by the political analyst James Kanagasooriam as making up what he termed the Red Wall. In total, this was a list of 42 target seats in the Midlands, the North, and North Wales that had tended to normally vote Labour but where, given their demographic makeup, the Conservatives should have performed stronger than they historically had done (Wells, 2020). More specifically, the Red Wall seats identified by Kanagasooriam all had a Leave vote of 55% or more in 2016 and had all seen a Conservative swing from Labour greater than 5% between 2010 to 2017 (Kanagasooriam and Simon, 2021, p. 10).

Within these seats, the Conservatives targeted a specific type of voter, what the Conservative-leaning think tank Onward dubbed 'Workington Man'. Will Tanner (Interview), director of Onward, described the 'Workington Man' type voter as 'leaning towards Brexit and Leave, slightly older, typically male, typically lives in a town rather

than a city, more likely to live in the North and the Midlands'. He went on, 'those type of voters who are kind of common sense, lower middle class, upper working class to use old terminology, kind of decent, hard-working people'. Tanner argued that the Conservative Party 'understood' and 'strategized' its appeal to these voters in 2019. In doing so it managed to 'shrug off the old views of the Conservative Party as rich, out of touch, interested in furthering its own ambitions rather than supporting hardworking people, and it put itself on the side of ordinary folk'. For Tanner, this was key to the Conservatives' success. He suggested that while Brexit and the Labour Party's woes were important factors, the Conservative victory 'was really about very, very successful voter targeting'.

Others agree that while these factors were crucial, the way in which the Conservatives appealed to its target seats and voters in other ways in 2019 was also important. As Nick King (Interview) put it, while Brexit played a role in shifting Conservative focus further towards the North, it also led the government to think more carefully 'about what those voters care about'. As such, he argued that Brexit was merely 'the route in… to a wider policy diagnosis and understanding which, in turn, has then led to clearly a romping electoral success'. This wider policy diagnosis was encapsulated within the Conservatives' proposition to 'level up'. This was an attempt to speak to and a promise to address voters' sense of 'loss' and 'decline' in their areas, and their feeling of having been 'left behind' (Matinson, 2020, p. 20). As noted above, these factors likely played into support for Brexit in certain parts of the region.

As highlighted in the previous chapter, the levelling up agenda was a continuation of the approach bolstered under May with the Conservatives seeking to appeal more directly to the towns of the North. The success of the Conservatives in many such Northern towns in 2019 led some Labour MPs to note how the election has exacerbated the idea of Labour predominately being the party of the cities, while the Conservatives, at least for

the time being, are increasingly the party of towns, including many previously staunchly Labour towns in the North (Toby Perkins, Interview; Alex Sobel, Interview).

All of the factors discussed so far in this chapter, coupled with the weakening of collective historical memory, seem likely to have played into a detoxification of the Conservative Party in parts of the post-industrial North. Kanagasooriam and Simon (2021, p. 11) argue that 'the Red Wall exists because for a highly geographically concentrated cluster of people, living across the Midlands and North, the Conservative Party no longer seems unappealing'. Labour's Dianna Johnson (Interview) also made this point. She suggested that 'some of the toxicity around the Conservatives, which has been around in the North for a long time… [has] dissipated'. Speaking to the idea of the weakening of historic party attachments, Johnson noted that 'there's a whole new generation now and that adherence to just voting Labour because you always vote Labour and your family always vote Labour, I think that's going, that's gone'.

The Conservatives Northern tilt over the past decade is broadly understood to have paid electoral dividends for the party. Indeed, 'the centre of gravity for the 2019 Conservative intake is Sheffield, nearly 100 miles North of the previous centre of the parliamentary party in Buckingham' (Miscampbell et al, 2020, p. 4). Opinion, however, is split on the extent to which the Conservative shift towards the North has been based on cold, hard, electoral calculations, and the extent to which it has been driven more by an altruistic desire to address regional inequality between North and South.

Unsurprisingly, opponents frame the Conservatives' shift in emphasis as based solely on electoral considerations. Speaking of the Northern Powerhouse agenda, Peter Mandelson (in Wearmouth, 2015) argued that 'George Osborne got it… I think he got it because he saw an electoral advantage in it'. Coming from a different Labour perspective, John McDonell (Interview) similarly argued that the Conservatives' focus on the North has been driven by the potential they see in it for 'harvesting' votes. Mick Bowman

(Interview), advisor to the Labour North of Tyne metro mayor, argued that the geography of the Brexit vote which, as noted above, has played into the Conservative's changing approach to its framing of the North in recent years, has been shaped by 'self interest' and the desire 'to capitalise on what happened with the Brexit vote'.

Figures from outside the Labour Party have also argued that the Conservative's Northern tilt has largely been driven by electoral calculations. The former Conservative, now non-affiliated peer, Lord Inglewood (Interview) suggested that in recent years the Conservatives have 'realised there's some political mileage to be made out of it… the Conservative Party has changed, and it sees the North as a happier hunting ground than it used to be'. He suggested that this owed much to the shifting political role of social values and the idea 'that perhaps the South will be less happy a hunting ground than it has been' for the party in the coming years. This is an idea that will be explored in more detail below.

While the majority of interviewees recognised the electoral benefits of the Conservative's Northern tilt, several were of the view that the shift has also been underpinned by a genuinely held belief in the need to tackle regional inequality. Carl Les (Interview), Conservative leader of North Yorkshire County Council, took this view noting that 'the Conservative Party has wised up to the fact that there is a large amount of votes to be earned in the North of England' while also suggesting that 'I think we've always felt that there was a need to level up'. Ultimately, Nick King (Interview), was of the view that whether the Conservatives' Northern tilt was 'for political reasons or for principled reasons, it sort of doesn't matter'. In their view what is important is that 'there is currently an absolute focus on delivering a set of policies and interventions which are meant to benefit people from the North'.

5.3.4. Labour's Long Decline

Whilst the Conservatives have turned their attention Northwards, there is a perception that the Labour Party has been drifting away from its traditional Northern heartlands. This drift can be traced back to the New Labour period in office and is said to have worsened post-2010. Labour is commonly framed, by Labour figures as well as opponents, as leaving the North behind, taking the region for granted, and no longer representing the views or speaking to the values of its traditional voters in its old core seats. As the Labour Together (2020, p. 3) report argues, Labour's electoral defeat in 2019 'had deep roots… [the] loss is the story of more than one election—indeed it is a story that stretches back two decades'.

When it comes to New Labour, Curtice and Park (1999, p. 125) note that 'Labour's modernisation project' seems to have been rather 'successful in easing its 'southern discomfort''. Indeed, the party was successful both in changing its policy positions moving closer to the perceived values of Southern voters and persuading Southern voters that it had changed (Curtice and Park, 1999, pp. 133-134). Labour's policy shift in the 1990s did however invoke criticism in some quarters. As Martin (2004, p. 20) notes, there was a perception that the party had 'effectively abandoned its concern with the economic and social plight of its traditional economic heartlands in the Northern industrial regions of the country in order to win the support of wealthier Southern voters'.

Sobolewska and Ford (2020, pp. 135-136) argue that 'the architects of New Labour wagered that they could broaden their party's appeal with the middle classes while retaining the loyalties of traditional supporters with nowhere else to go'. This approach paid electoral dividends for New Labour for a time. As Diamond and Radice (2010, p. 12) note, in both 1997 and 2001, 'Labour won landslide election victories, [by] putting together an alliance of its' Celtic and Northern heartlands with the aspiring voters of the Midlands and South'.

However, the roots of the party's electoral woes in parts of the North were beginning to take hold in the 2000s. Sobolewska and Ford (2020, pp. 135-136) argue that 'as Labour and the Conservatives converged ideologically, there was an unprecedented erosion of traditional political loyalties in the electorate – partisan attachments, engagement with politics and trust in politicians decayed, turnout declined and voter dissatisfaction rose'. Additionally, they note that changes in approaches to political campaigning further weakened the bond between Labour and its traditional voters (Sobolewska and Ford 2020, p. 128). In the New Labour era, many of these disaffected former Labour voters in safe seats simply stayed at home rather than switching parties. As such, the electoral dangers to the party were masked, but these dangers became increasingly apparent in the 2010s. Indeed, the once 'safe Labour seats where turnout slumped after 1997 included many which elected Conservative MPs for the first time in generations in 2019' (Sobolewska and Ford 2020, p. 141).

The sense of New Labour taking its traditional voters for granted and believing they had nowhere else to go has been invoked by many within the party. Ed Miliband (in Payne, 2021, p. 329) has argued that 'there was too much complacency that people in the Red Wall seats weren't going to vote for anyone else'. Indeed, Ian Mearns (Interview) has spoken of Labour in this period seeing the electorate in its traditional bases in the North as 'voting fodder'. Similarly, Matinson (2020, pp 8-9) argues that, in government, 'Labour felt that they didn't need to worry about their 'heartland constituencies', populated by voters who would never let them down, who would always be on side'.

While there is a common perception that New Labour took much of the North for granted, unsurprisingly, there is much disagreement, both within and without the party, on the extent to which the party delivered for the North during its last period in office. For some the 1997 New Labour government heralded the building of new schools and hospitals and the 'alleviation of huge swathes of poverty', making it 'the most

transformative government for the North' (Connor McGinn, Interview). Despite this, advocates of New Labour's record concede that the positive impact that the party had on the region often went unnoticed at the time and has been forgotten in the last decade. For McGinn (Interview) the problem was that Labour 'didn't tell people enough about the good things we were doing… we assumed that people would remember the bread they ate yesterday'.

This view is shared by several prominent New Labour figures. Tony Blair (in Payne, 2021, pp. 118 - 119) has suggested that the memory of New Labour's achievements have been eroded by 'the distance of time' and undermined by 'ten years of austerity'. Meanwhile, New Labour stalwart, David Blunkett (in Payne, 2021, pp. 238-240), has argued that 'when you don't have a clear narrative of what you've done, and you don't sing about it in a way that relates to people's lives, and when you then find your own side trashing the things you've done, it's not surprising that people get the opposite message'.

These complaints about the dampening of New Labour's legacy are rather thin, however. First, they highlight the fragility of some of New Labour's achievements. As Ed Miliband (in Payne, 2021, p. 331) has argued, people 'got disaffected with Labour in government. Not because Labour in government didn't do good things, but I don't think it fundamentally changed some parts of the economic settlement'. Indeed, while New Labour significantly reduced poverty, it did little to tackle rising inequality (Eaton, 2021). The idea that figures on the left of the party have purposely undermined the memory of new Labour in the North is disingenuous. There have certainly been critiques of the party's approach in office, but these largely tend to be coupled with recognition of its achievements. For example, John McDonell (Interview) has argued that while there were attempts to revive the economy of the North under New Labour and 'they had the best of intentions', its efforts were 'not on the scale that was needed'. Meanwhile, Lavery and Trickett (2020, p. 4) state, 'we do not agree with those who condemn the whole New

Labour period'. They suggest that 'much work was done to improve the lives of our fellow citizens and in former mining constituencies like ours', but they argue that 'the measures which were taken were essentially ameliorative rather than transformational'.

If notions that Labour had failed the North or somehow moved away from it continued to persist into the last election this was in part because of issues like Brexit and questions around the Corbyn leadership as highlighted above. Yet it is also seen to owe something to the perceived continuation of the drift by Labour away from its traditional heartlands post-2010. As Labour's Connor McGinn (Interview) suggested, that the Conservative's 'have had the gall to talk about the North as if they were its guarantors and protectors… [suggests that] something somewhere went very fundamentally wrong for us in that conversation over the last 10 years'. In focus groups carried out in Red Wall seats after the 2019 election, Matinson (2020, p. 129) notes that many voters agreed with the verdict that Labour has moved away from them and that it is now the party for 'the south'.

Political opponents have made similar points as well. Conservative MP, Andrea Jenkyns (2020) argues that 'places which had never voted Conservative changed hands, as many grew tired of Labour taking seats for granted and their London-centric leadership'. Alexander Stafford (Interview) noted that while 'Corbyn and Brexit were hugely important… they were symptomatic of Labour neglecting the North and taking the North for granted'. Across the political spectrum, the Green Party's Natalie Bennett (Interview) has made much the same points. She argued that the result in 2019 'was part of the long-term decline in the Labour vote, [of] Labour essentially being a southern party and not being involved in its communities, not being embedded in the North'. As such, Bennett suggested that 'people voted anti-Labour, they didn't really vote pro Tory'.

This sense that Labour has left behind its traditional Northern voters can be seen to be related to the increasingly important role of social values in political choice as highlighted above. As has been noted, these divides predate the 2016 referendum, but the

vote for Brexit has exacerbated their political saliency (Labour Together, 2020, p. 11; Matinson, 2020, p. 8; Raikes, 2021, p. 34). As Miscampbell et al (2020, p. 11) argue, the 2019 result was 'a continuation of a geographical and philosophical resorting of the electoral map that has been visible for some time – in which Labour is becoming more metropolitan and the Conservatives are increasingly rooted in a provincial, town-based worldview'.

Several Conservative interviewees reflected on this cultural shift. Andrew Stephenson (Interview) noted that 'in seats like Pendle, 70% of people live in a terraced house, [there is] a very high proportion of people still working in manufacturing, [but they are] saying 'what does the Labour Party offer me'. He went on, 'these used to be the absolute core vote of the Labour Party and they got themselves into a position where, in 2019, their vote fell again after falling in 2017, 2015, and 2010'. For Philip Davies (Interview) 2019 was indicative of the fact that 'the Labour Party had basically completely lost touch with its working class roots and represented this sort of metropolitan, middle class, politically correct sort of cult, which didn't really have much in common with people in working class areas'. Davies argued that 'over time… [these voters have] seen 'actually, these people in the Labour Party, they don't represent me, they don't have anything in common with what I think''. For Davies, 'Brexit was just the final straw' is severing the link between these culturally conservative working-class voters he describes and the Labour Party.

As the above discussion highlights, this issue of Labour losing votes in its traditional heartlands in the North is applicable largely in post-industrial towns and villages. As noted above, the party's position in the cities, including those in the North, tends to be strong. At the same time as the Conservatives have been pivoting towards these towns, Labour figures have been warning about their own party's precarious situation. Most notable amongst these is Lisa Nandy. She suggests that 'underlying socio-demographic

trends have set our towns and cities on different trajectories, while political choices made by all parties, including Labour, have at times exacerbated these trends rather than ameliorating them' (Nandy, 2020, p. 327).

Further to these demographic shifts and the growing political salience of social values, there is also a sense that the industrial, and with it, the economic decline of Northern towns in the last half a century or more, as touched on above and as outlined in the previous chapter, has served to erode 'the institutional and cultural bonds that linked many voters to Labour' such as trade unions and local Labour clubs (Labour Together, 2020, p. 3; Perkins, Interview). Taken in the whole, these demographic and social factors alongside the increasing importance of the politics of social values, the politicisation of Brexit, the role of party leadership and approach, the Conservatives' Northern tilt, and perceptions of Labour no longing listening to and speaking for the North, have all played into the current electoral politics of the North. But what are the political implications of 2019 on the region and where is the electoral party politics of the North headed?

5.4. The Party Politics of the North

There was a consensus amongst many interviewees that the North is now the key electoral battleground in England. The vote for Brexit in 2016 and, more importantly, the Conservative gains in the North in 2019 were commonly viewed as marking a significant step change in the role of the North as a competitive political arena (Mark Burdon, Interview; Philip Davies, Interview; Marcus Johns, Interview; Geraldine Scott, Interview). As John McDonell (Interview) put it, the politics of the North has shifted because 'the Conservatives see the electoral potential there for them… [and] because the Labour Party has woken up to the fact that actually, they can't take votes in the north for granted'. As such, 'both parties are desperately fighting to appeal to the voters [t]here according to Hannah Richmond (Interview). There is a sense that 'both parties, whether in government or opposition… have to understand that they've got to appeal to voters in

the North of England or they'll be out on their ear' (Chris Rowell, Interview). This section explores how the main two parties are seeking to appeal to the North and assesses some of the broader political implications of the electoral politics of the North.

5.4.1. Conservatives

With Brexit perceived by many to now be 'done', and with Labour no longer hamstrung by the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, there is a widespread belief that the key to the Conservatives retaining their popularity in parts of the North lies in the party's ability to deliver on levelling up. Peele (2021, p. 409) argues that the role of Red Wall constituencies in the Conservatives' 2019 victory 'has made it essential to find ways of 'rewarding' that support'. Similarly, Geraldine Scott (Interview) argued that 'Boris Johnson can't let it slide because if he does, those voters that voted for him in December [2019] won't vote for him in five years… he knows these people aren't dyed in the wool Tory voters, so he does need to deliver something'. In her research in the Red Wall, Matinson (2020, p. 163) found that voters saw the delivery of levelling up as essential. She notes that 'shifting the balance of spending in favour of the North was a recurring theme in many people's future wish lists'.

It is for this reason that, as noted in the previous chapter, there is much Conservative pressure from the likes of the Northern Research Group to get the government to deliver on its commitments to the North. William Wragg (in O'Carroll, 2020), the MP for Hazel Grove and an NRG member, argues that the role of the group 'isn't about giving government a tough time' but suggested that 'there are compelling and constructive arguments we, as a group of Northern MPs, can make to government about how it delivers on its promise to level up the North'. Meanwhile, the NRG leader, Jake Berry (in Thomson and Swinford, 2020), argues that delivering for the North is essential, noting that 'there are now 80 northern MPs, that represents the size of the prime minister's majority. If we don't win the north, we are not going to be a party of government'.

This focus on the need to deliver was a widespread view among Conservative interviewees. Alec Shelbrooke (Interview) argued that while factors like Brexit and Corbyn were important there was also popular buy-in amongst voters to the Conservatives levelling up pledges. Shelbrooke suggested that it is essential 'to get those underway and do that because that then shows that actually your vote wasn't wasted the first time you've given it to us and we're doing something with it'. Several other Conservative representatives made much the same argument, that action on levelling up at least has to be seen to be underway by the next election in order for voters to trust the party on its commitments (Philip Davies, Interview; Geoff Driver, Interview; Kevin Hollinrake, Interview; Philip Jackson, Interview; Alexander Stafford, Interview; Andrew Stephenson, Interview)

There is a sense now that the Conservatives cannot 'hide behind 'it's Labour this, it's Labour that'' (Chris Rowell, Interview). Rowell, advisor to the Tees Valley metro mayor Ben Houchen, noted that 'here in the Tees Valley they [voters] won't have a Labour council, they won't have a Labour MP, they don't have a Labour government, there is nobody between the government and the people that will hide the government from responsibility to deliver'. The ways in which levelling up might be delivered and the extent to which it is merely rhetoric and spectacle for electoral purposes will be examined in detail in the next chapter.

Another important issue when it comes to the party politics of the agenda is the extent to which a perceived focus on the North of England may be unpopular amongst Conservative MPs elsewhere, particularly in the party's more comfortable Southern heartland seats, and the extent to which this may be a source of internal party division. While it is not quite 'as simple as a case of north versus south' – as Webber (2021) notes, 'the party is grappling with how to represent voters across a more diverse range of places and ages who have divergent expectations of what government should do, or not do, for

them' – the chasm between Red Wallers and more traditional Conservatives is recognised.

Indeed, Webber (2021) suggests that 'old-school Tories feel that their voters are being sidelined in order to win over and retain the support of people in the so-called Red Wall in the North of England and Midlands that traditionally voted Labour'. Moreover, there is some disquiet among the former that the latter increasingly 'speak as one' and are thus able to gain the ear of number 10 more easily than other Conservative MPs (Webber, 2021). Indeed, according to Balls (2020a), the success of these MPs in politicising their cause means that those 'representing seats such as Great Grimsby and Blyth Valley have an influence that MPs in Surrey or the New Forest don't, regardless of their personal qualities'.

Some Conservative interviewees reflected on these tensions but sought to play them down. Andrew Stephenson (Interview) noted that 'the North and the Midlands swung significantly towards the Conservative party and without that you might have lots of MPs in the South of England, but they wouldn't be able to actually move forward the manifesto and move forward the commitments they want and so on'. As such, he claimed 'I don't think there's any hostility towards Northern MPs' but suggested that MPs always ask the question of others "are they getting something that we're not?".

For some, there is a sense that the party's new Northern MPs are distinct in other ways from more traditional Conservative representatives. Jake Berry (in Connolly, 2020) has argued that Northern Conservatives have 'always been slightly different'. In particular, he argues that for Conservatives in the North 'we are the party of towns, we're not the party of the cities and we're not the party of London'. Others have also recognised a degree of distinction amongst these MPs. Marcus Johns (Interview) argued that many 'have different political backgrounds and traditions… they're much more anti-austerity, but socially very conservative, and that might jar with the kind of Southern Cameroonite

Tory party that was very socially liberal but the architects of austerity'. The idea that many Northern Red Wall MPs are 'blue collar Tories' or working-class Tories' has also been highlighted as a mark of difference (Geraldine Scott, Interview). So too has the argument that many new MPs are originally from the areas they now represent and are therefore more rooted and more likely to staunchly advocate for their places (Geraldine Scott, Interview; Alexander Stafford, Interview).

It is understandable that there may be some concern from Conservatives in traditional heartlands in the South and elsewhere. From an electoral point of view, it may be that such seats in the 'blue wall' (Akehurst, 2021) or 'remain wall' (Ford, 2021) are vulnerable, some to Labour, others to the Liberal Democrats. Such seats tend to be suburban, lean Remain, be younger, more highly educated, and more socially liberal (Akehurst, 2021). It is not just a question of political focus and characteristics, however, there are also differences between many Conservative Red Wall seats and their traditional seats in terms of policy requirements (Peele, 2021, p. 407; Gamble, 2021, p. 466).

Many 'blue wall' or 'remain wall' seats have been trending away from the Conservatives since 2016 (Akehurst, 2021; Ford, 2021). Ford (2021) argues that the government 'cannot afford to alienate either the red wall or the remain wall'. But he notes that the challenge of balancing the contrasting demands of voters in each is significant arguing that 'the two new fronts the Conservatives must defend are different worlds, at odds over the government's domestic policy agenda'. While 'ambitious levelling up investment is what red wall voters want to see; remain wall voters fear higher tax bills will follow'. As such, Ford (2021) argues that 'having raised hopes of radical domestic reform, the Conservatives now face a difficult choice: plough ahead and risk defeat on one front, or back off and risk a beating on another'.

This danger was raised by only a few interviewees. Will Tanner (Interview) noted the challenges to the party in parts of the South, suggesting that it 'risks fighting the next

election on two fronts if it's not careful'. He too highlighted that 'it'll be quite difficult to align those two groups of voters'. Alexander Stafford (Interview) also recognised that the party may face problems in the South of the country. He noted that he could see the Conservatives 'losing more seats in the South and gaining more in the North'.

When it comes to the idea of whether we have seen a lasting realignment of the electoral politics of the North there was a range of views. Some argued that this was a strong possibility. Kanagasooriam and Simon (2021, p. 11) suggest that 'the seats gained by the Conservatives in Labour's heartlands in 2019, could become the party's new safe seats and secondly, that more historic gains could be made at the next election'. Similarly, Conservative MP for Scarbrough, Robert Goodwill (in Scott, 2020d) argues that 'none of us think that… December [2019] will be the high water mark for the Conservatives in the North of England'. Alexander Stafford (Interview) was also of the view that we are seeing a lasting realignment. He contrasted the drift away from the Conservatives in some Southern seats as highlighted above with the situation in the North where, he argued, 'we're seeing almost the opposite reaction [with a] lot of people realising, that their views, which are actually conservative with a small 'c'… are far more aligned with the Conservative Party than a more liberal Labour Party'.

Philip Davies (Interview) took a similar view, arguing that 'it would be a mistake for people to presume' that the Conservative's new Northern voters will abandon the party now Brexit is perceived as being done and now that Jeremy Corbyn is no longer Labour leader. He argued there is not 'any guarantee that just because working class people have come later to the table in the North to voting Conservative… that means that therefore they're going to be first to go back'. Davies sought to draw parallels between 'working-class people in the South - Essex Man, so to speak' who moved to the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s and 'never went back to Labour again', with the party's new voters in the North.

Others were less sure that the party's 2019 Northern success was so secure. Andrew Stephenson (Interview) suggested that 'this could all evaporate overnight and normal voting habits could return easily'. Although he did express some cautious optimism noting that 'for the first time in a very, very long time, I'm surrounded by blue seats… it could all change…in politics, as I say, you should never take anything for granted… but there could be a realignment going on'. Will Tanner (Interview) also expressed caution, commenting that 'I think we've seen a realignment but I'm not sure it's permanent'.

Tanner (Interview) suggested that while voters in 2019 positively voted for the Conservatives, the vote is 'quite soft', with many Northern voters 'not that kind of baked in and hard in their view of the Conservative Party, they still have reservations about the Conservative Party as a whole'. In his research in Colne Valley, Hart (2021, p. 3) also found that there was 'limited attachment to the Conservative Party' amongst former Labour voting 2019 Conservative backers. As such, Hart (2021, p. 14) argued 'that if 2019 is a moment of class realignment in British politics, it is built on shaky ground'. Similarly, Tanner (Interview) argued that 'I don't think Boris Johnson can rest on his laurels and assume that they will stay Tory. He added 'I think he [Johnson] was right to say that the votes have been lent rather than given and I think there are large numbers of constituencies which are still relatively marginal and could very easily swing back the other way'.

5.4.2. Labour

When it comes to Labour there is conflicting opinion concerning the party's prospects of winning back the lost Red Wall seats in the North. Matinson (2020, p. 187) suggests that 'while of course it would be possible for Labour to win again, winning may well be harder than even the most pessimistic Labour activists and politicians are expecting'. She notes that 'voting Labour has been a habit for many: a habit that, once broken, could be tricky to revive'. Labour MP, Alex Sobel (Interview) made much the same point, stating

'I'd be happy if it was just a one off, if it was a blip in those communities, but having said that, if we just bank it, and then go they'll come back to Labour, then that's a massive mistake'.

The Labour Together (2020, p. 15) report makes similarly pessimistic observations, arguing that 'Labour cannot be complacent about the seats we currently hold, and we must be mindful that without fundamental change there is further we could fall'. Some have compared Labour's current woes in parts of the North with the party's recent rapid decline in Scotland and argued that themes such as 'entitlement, neglect and lack of empathy' (Matinson, 2020, p. 101), and voters' sense of 'being taken for granted' by the party are common perceptions in both areas (Lavery and Trickett, 2020, p. 24).

Others, however, take a slightly more optimistic view. While Toby Perkins (Interview) pointed to cultural and societal changes in parts of Labour's traditional heartland such as the 'collapse of major industry and the reduction in the importance of trade unions' and spoke of how this had weakened bonds with the party and mean that in such areas 'it will continue to be difficult', he argued that 'I don't think they're necessarily lost [permanently]'. Connor McGinn (Interview) struck an even more optimistic note, suggesting that while 'it's a big ask for Labour to win the next election… I don't think it's a big ask with the right candidates, the right policies, and some work, that we win back those seats that we lost the last time at the very least'. Meanwhile, Gill Furniss (Interview) noted that while some of the Northern Red Wall seats may be out of reach for the party at the next election, there are others with slim Conservative majorities that Labour could win back.

Furniss's view chimes with work by Baston (2019) that highlights how Labour face different challenges across the Red Wall. In line with Furniss's point, Baston notes that there are numerous Red Wall marginals where 'if Labour gets its act together, many of these seats… will be straightforward targets in the next election'. He argues that 'there is

no demographic destiny that will keep them Tory'. In contrast, however, Baston notes that there are many more seats in the Red Wall which, as discussed above, have been moving away from Labour for some time and where the party's challenge is now 'more deeply rooted'.

From a Conservative perspective, there was much emphasis among interviewees on Labour's approach as well as their own party's in assessing the electoral prospects in the North going forwards. In particular, attention was drawn by some to the politics of social values and the idea that Labour is out of step with many of its traditional voters in the North (Alexander Stafford, Interview; Philip Davies, Interview). Several were of the view that Starmer, while an improvement on Corbyn, is still unlikely to connect with Labour's lost Northern voters ((Alexander Stafford, Interview; Kevin Hollinrake, Interview; Philip Davies, Interview).

There is a recognition within the party that Labour must win back lost seats in the North if it is to have any chance of success, but there is disagreement on the extent to which this revival should be framed and politicised as being specifically Northern. For Northern advocates like Andy Burnham (in Payne, 2021, p. 291) the party needs to regain its 'lost emotional connection with large parts of the North' in order to 'get serious about regaining [them]'. While Lavery and Trickett (2020, p. 16) warn against alienating 'progressive middle class' voters - mainly in the South', they are clear about Labour's need to appeal to the North both for electoral purposes and as a matter of principle. Indeed, they stress that 'the Labour Party was born in the North of England' (Lavery and Trickett, 2020, p. 23). They suggest that it would be wise to set up a 'Greater Northern Caucus' within the party to better represent the views of the region, perhaps even in the form of a distinct Northern Labour Party (Lavery and Trickett, 2020, p. 35). This idea of a 'distinctive brand of northern Labour' is also one that Burham (in Perraudin, 2016) has toyed with in the past.

Others stress the importance of reconnecting with the party with towns. Although this applies to many in the North, it also applies elsewhere and is not exclusively a Northern framing. Yvette Cooper (2021, p. 31) has spoken about how places in both the North and Midlands had lost faith in the party and argued that 'Labour's plans for the north and midlands need to be bold and ambitious – responding to the scale of the challenge, not tinkering at the edges as the Tories are trying to do'. Cooper (2021, p. 31) argues that Labour's 'challenge is to make sure that towns, not just cities or regions, are at the heart of our plans'. She recognises that 'Labour has been seen too often in the last few years as focused mainly on cities and Boris Johnson's Tories have taken advantage of that'. This chimes with arguments by Nandy (2020, p. 326) who, like Cooper, does not frame this challenge as specifically Northern but argues that the idea that Labour can somehow focus largely on piling up 'even more votes among the younger professional populations of urban centres'… is an 'argument [that] defies electoral gravity'. Instead, Nandy argues that 'the path to a parliamentary majority at the next general election runs through Britain's towns'.

Yet, just as with the Conservatives, within the Labour Party, there is a sense of resentment from some about the political focus on the North. Cruddas and Rodwell (2021, p. 67) argue that 'there is little thinking around Labour's modern southern discomfort today'. In London in particular, Labour figures have highlighted the socio-economic challenges that exist there and argued that this is often neglected by those advocating for the North (Sleigh, 2021). Leonie Cooper (in Sleigh, 2021), a Labour member of the London Assembly, argues that 'it's such a shame Northern leaders sometimes gloss over... [poverty in the capital] and pretend all of London's streets are paved with gold'. Andy Burham (in Sleigh, 2021) responded to this accusation by suggesting that figures in the South should show 'a bit of solidarity' with the North. Adding that 'it's about time all Labour figures got serious about winning back the North'.

While this is a particularly testy example of disagreements over Labour's geographical focus it highlights the challenges facing the party leadership about how to frame its analysis of the political and socio-economic challenges facing the country at large while also hoping to reconnect with its lost heartlands in particular. On the one hand key party figures, including Keir Starmer, have argued that Labour's troubles in the North are not unique and that the party's attention should not be too narrowly focused. Starmer (in Payne, 2021, p. 374) has argued that Labour's problems need to be seen in the national context, that the challenges in the Red Wall exist in 'other parts of the country' and that 'the emotion that I think was driving certainly the 2019 election and the referendum is not dissimilar across the country'.

Similarly, Bridget Phillipson (2021, p. 41) has argued that 'there is a wider danger that in focusing too narrowly on places, and on the striking spatial patterns UK general elections so often provide, we lose sight of one of the lessons we should have learnt from the referendum: people vote, not places'. As such, Phillipson suggests that 'while a focus on marginal seats is absolutely organisationally crucial, our political strategy has to be one that attracts support across the country'. She adds that 'many of the concerns and priorities of the people who we need to vote Labour in 2024 are not actually that different between Darlington and Dagenham'. IPPR North's Marcus Johns (Interview) made much the same point arguing that from a national point of view, 'zooming in on one geography… electorally isn't a long term strategy because things change'.

These are fair points and indeed an overly strong focus on the North alone, or the Red Wall more broadly, would likely isolate potential Labour voters elsewhere. Nevertheless, as Will Tanner (Interview) put it, 'there is very little way for Keir Starmer to win without the North of England – he needs to win back a large number of those Red Wall seats, it's not optional for him'. Further to this, beyond the cold, hard electoral politics, for some, there is an emotional attachment to Labour's place in the North that cannot be ignored.

As Connor McGinn (Interview) noted, 'for the Labour Party, there's a big issue for us because we emotionally felt the result of the last election… people were heartbroken about some of the seats that we lost that had been Labour'.

5.5. Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the electoral politics of the North. It has assessed the reality of the post-war North-South political divide and the rupture of it in recent years, particularly in 2019 with the Conservative breakthrough in the so-called Red Wall. It has been shown that while commonly cited factors such as the role of Brexit and the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn are seen as vital in explaining this result, other factors including the Conservatives' Northern tilt over the last decade, and Labour's long decline in the North are also framed by many as being key. While the chapter has focused mainly on the politics of the Northern Red Wall given that it is these seats that are currently most highly politicised, it has recognised that Labour is still dominant in many Northern cities and that the Conservatives recent success in Northern towns and villages must be seen in the context of similar success elsewhere and the seemingly increased political importance of social values.

When it comes to the current party politics of the North, it is apparent that many see the region as continuing to be a key political arena and are explicit in framing the region as such. For Labour, there are some fears that the party could slump further in the North, but generally there is cautious optimism that with the right approach it can begin to rebuild in its former heartlands. For the Conservatives, equally, there is a sense among some that demographically parts of the North are now solid seats for the party. Largely, however, there is a sense that in order to retain many of its Northern gains from 2019, the party must deliver on its promises to the people of the North, not least its pledges to level up. As such, it is to the details of this agenda that the thesis will now turn.

Chapter 6: Levelling Up the North

6.1. Introduction

This chapter considers the government's levelling up agenda. It looks at how it has been framed by advocates, observers, and opponents, and considers the extent to which the agenda has been politicised. To do so, the chapter starts by placing levelling up in context by considering previous initiatives aimed at addressing issues of regional inequality including post-war regional policy, the initiatives of the New Labour governments, and the Northern Powerhouse agenda. Drawing from these, it then goes on to explore levelling up, looking at three key areas in particular. Namely the geography of it, the aims and ambitions of it, and the extent to which the agenda is seen as heralding a transformational shift or is merely an example of spectacle politics.

6.2. Historic Approaches to Addressing Regional Inequality

Before looking at the latest approach to addressing regional inequalities, levelling up, it is worth contextualising it by briefly assessing previous approaches. To do so, this section looks at regional policy pursued largely in the post-war decades up until the mid-1970s and the subsequent moves away from it in the 1980s and early 1990s. It then considers New Labour's approach to regional inequalities during its period in office between 1997 and 2010. Finally, it looks at the Conservative's Northern Powerhouse agenda launched in 2014 but now already largely overtaken by rhetoric on levelling up.

6.2.1. Regional Policy

As the thesis has highlighted already, the idea of a North-South divide began to develop within the national conscience during the industrial revolution (Baker and Billinge, 2004, p. 179). Even then, however, the divide was framed more in socio-cultural terms than economic ones, with the increasingly industrialised, urban, Lowryscape North contrasted with the rural South (Howell, 2004, p. 65; Jewell, 1994, p. 4). It was not until the early decades of the twentieth century that the economic North-South divide became

increasingly apparent with the depression of the late 1920s hitting 'the old, staple industries' primarily located within the North hard (Smith, 1994, pp. 20-21). In contrast, new and expanding 'lighter industries' based in the South and the Midlands fared much better in the inter-war period (Smith, 1994, pp. 20-21).

It is apparent that the economic changes of the interwar years signalled the beginning of the end of Northern industrial dominance and thus can be seen to lay the foundations for the emergence of the contemporary North-South economic divide (Martin, 2004, p. 28; Dorling, 2004, p. 44). The significant widening of the divide during the 1920s and 1930s can be seen to have influenced policy makers with it being a key factor in the development of regional policy that began in the 1930s and went on to become a notable part of the post-war political consensus (Balchin, 1990, p. vii).

The Barlow report 'created the intellectual framework for postwar regional policy' (Morgan, 2006, p. 191). The key aim of regional policy was to 'ensure a more even distribution of economic activity' throughout the country (Smith, 1994, p. 93). It was recognised that 'over- and underdevelopment were two sides of the same coin', as such, the solution offered 'consisted of containing growth in Greater London and diverting it to the depressed areas of "Outer Britain"' (Morgan, 2006, p. 191). It was marked by policies of 'positive discrimination in favour of the depressed areas', many of which were in the North (Balchin, 1990, p. 65). As such, successive governments 'involved themselves, both consciously and unconsciously, in the regional distribution of population and resources' in the attempt of narrowing regional imbalances within the country (Lewis and Townsend, 1989, p. 6).

As a result of increased government intervention in the form of regional policy as well as wider Keynesian welfare-state policies, the post-war decades of the 1950s and 1960s witnessed the long existing North-South economic divide that started to widen in the 1920s and 1930s begin to narrow (Martin, 2004, p. 29). That is not to say the divide

ceased completely, but these policies coupled with low unemployment and steady economic growth throughout the period served to detract significant attention from it (Balchin, 1990, p. vii; Jewell, 1994, p. 3). Indeed, as Martin (1989, p. 28) argues, by the late 1960s it was possible to think of the North-South regional problem as 'a marginal one in an otherwise buoyant economy'.

There was a shift in policy from the mid-1970s as more affluent regions began to suffer from unemployment problems of their own, and the fiscal constraints of the period resulted in 'the then Labour government to dilute regional as discreetly as possible' (Morgan, 2006, p. 191). This move away from regional policy continued throughout the 1980s which, coupled with broader economic shifts, resulted in a worsening of the North-South socio-economic divide. Yet, while it is true that the focus on regional policy waned significantly in this period, some efforts at addressing regional inequalities were still evident. Indeed, this period saw an increase in the role of the private sector in economic regeneration through initiatives like Enterprise Zones and Urban Development Corporations. There was a focus on attempting to regenerate declining inner-city areas, perhaps most notably in Liverpool (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. 106).

According to Lord Heseltine (in Payne, 2021, p. 60) who was a key player in these initiatives, the Thatcher government pursued 'a very interventionist policy of restoring hope and opportunity to some of the most deprived parts of our economy'. This is perhaps a slightly generous interpretation given the negative impact of the politics of Thatcherism on regional inequality. Nevertheless, it is fair to recognise that regeneration initiatives that were begun in this period continued to influence regional policy in the subsequent decades.

6.2.2. New Labour's Approach

When New Labour came to office in 1997, they pursued several initiatives aimed at addressing regional economic imbalances. Notably, Labour set up Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) across nine regions, expanded the Government Office for the Regions first created in 1994, and established regional chambers which sought to connect local political leaders and regional stakeholders (Ayres et al, 2018, pp. 854-855). In essence, RDAs were mainly responsible for economic development and regeneration spending, and along with regional chambers had the role of 'compiling economic development, planning, housing, transport and skills strategies for their areas', while the 'Whitehall outposts' of the various Government Offices for the Regions supported them in these tasks (IPPR North, 2012, p. 155).

New Labour's approach was positive in a number of ways. Chiefly, it heralded a shift away from focusing only on the 'physical regeneration' of places towards taking a more holistic approach that included developing skills and social infrastructures and focusing on 'the wider determinants of health outcomes such as work and employment, education and housing', focusing in particular 'on the most deprived areas' (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. 106). Indeed, between 1999-00 and 2007-08 central government invested £1.7bn 'in improving place-related outcomes, including crime, education and worklessness in 39 deprived communities in England' (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. 106). As such, Arianna Giovannini (Interview), suggested that the Labour governments between 1997 and 2010, 'were the ones who really tried to address the issue of the North-South divide'.

However, despite the positives of New Labour's approach, the overall vision of their redevelopment agenda was flawed in terms of its ability to narrow inequalities between regions. As Morgan (2006, p. 201) notes, not only was Labour's RDA agenda significantly reduced in comparison to the post-war regional policy approach, but it was also

profoundly different in its ambitions. New Labour's RDAs sought 'to promote economic efficiency within regions', whilst the aim of previous post-war agenda 'was to secure economic equity between regions' (Morgan, 2006, p. 201). This focus on raising performance across the board has been seen as a rejection of the 'the Old Labour interventionist regional policy' (González, 2011, pp. 69-70).

Morgan (2006, pp. 201-202) argues that this distinction spawned a 'new discourse of regional competitiveness' whereby every region was challenged to grow. Yet, as Morgan notes, 'raising GDP per capita in each region… would do little or nothing to redress the interregional inequalities at the heart of the North-South divide'. The Labour MP, Ian Mearns (Interview) made much the same point. He accepted that the RDAs had 'reasonable levels of funding' and 'did a reasonable job' but noted that he 'always thought that it was perverse that if regional development agencies were meant to be a way of redressing the balance between North and South' that RDAs in the South, particularly the South East had just as much or more funding than those in the North. New Labour's rationale for this was that the goal of 'reducing the growth gap between north and south…must be achieved by raising the performance of the northern regions and not by containing the growth in the south' (Morgan, 2006, p. 202). Using language that has much contemporary resonances, in 2001 the Treasury (in Morgan, 2006, p. 202) described the government's approach to regional policy as being driven by the mantra of "levelling up, not levelling down".

New Labour's approach was not focussed solely on regions through the RDAs. They also focused on the micro level with their New Deal for Communities programme. An initiative that, as Kenny and Kelsey (2021) note, echoes in current approaches to levelling up. Further to this, New Labour also drew on previous thinking from the 1980s early 1990s and focused on cities and city regions, particularly in the later years of its time in office (González, 2011, pp. 69-71; Morgan, 2006, p. 202). The Northern Way initiative

launched in 2004, whilst headed by the three northern region RDAs, increasingly focused on the role of cities as drivers of economic growth (González, 2011, p. 70). In terms of its framing of regional inequality, González (2011, p. 70) notes that 'initially, the Northern Way used the rhetoric of the North/South divide… and its aim was to reduce it'. Yet, as the agenda developed, emphasis on the differences between regions declined and the focus shifted to addressing challenges concerning 'the overall competitiveness of the UK economy without compromising the success of the South and London's role as an economic driver and world city' (Northern Way in González, 2011, p. 70).

Further to this negation of broad regional divides, the increasingly city-centric focus of New Labour has been critiqued on the grounds of failing to consider inequalities within regions. Lisa Nandy, Labour's current Shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, argues the decision of the previous Labour governments 'to concentrate that investment outside London, in cities which had long needed it, in the hope that the benefits would trickle out to surrounding towns, meant that some in cities prospered from the well paid, white collar jobs that were created there, while many towns became home to warehousing jobs and courier delivery firms providing minimum wage, insecure work'.

Despite these criticisms, it is the case that the Northern Way played an important role in the evolution of approaches to regional policy in the North of England. Indeed, in many ways, it can be seen as a precursor of the Northern Powerhouse agenda. Richard Leese (Interview) who was the Labour leader of Manchester City Council throughout this period noted, 'the Northern Way did quite a lot of groundwork about what it needed to do to realise the potential of the North'. He went on to explain that in many ways the thinking done around transport in the North as part of the Northern Way initiative went on to 'underpin the concept of [the] Northern Powerhouse'. And it is that agenda to which we now turn.

6.2.3. The Northern Powerhouse

On coming to power in 2010, the Conservative-led coalition continued as Labour left off, focusing on the city region as the prime space for regional devolution (Sandford, 2019a, p. 9). However, the way in which the Coalition government pursued this regional devolution agenda differed from Labour's approach in practical terms. First, the coalition government replaced RDAs with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), non-statutory bodies, made up of stakeholders from local authorities and business (Giovannini, 2016, p. 168; Sandford, 2019a, p. 9). They are eligible for substantial growth funding but via the process of competitive bids to central government (Sandford, 2019a, p. 9). The replacement of RDAs with LEPs owed much to the coalition government's increased focus on the city-region scale and 'functional economic areas' (Nurse, 2015, p. 690). That there are 38 English LEPs compared to just 9 RDAs highlights the shift towards lower regional scales.

Next, the Coalition pursued a series of city deals. These city deals were 'bespoke' agreements between central government and local authorities that involved 'giving cities greater control over some aspects of public expenditure on economic development' (Cox, 2016a, p. 566). Quickly, however, the focus on city-deals was overtaken by a new focus on devolution deals (Ayres et al, 2018, p. 855). As part of this focus on 'devolution deals', significant attention has been given to the creation and rolling out of Mayoral Combined Authorities (Ayres et al, 2018, p. 855). This agenda gained fresh impetus following the Conservative victory in the 2015 General Election and the passing of the Local Government Devolution Bill (Giovannini, 2016, pp. 168-169). The process of devolution will be considered in much greater detail in the following chapter.

The key tenet of the Coalition and latterly Conservative approach to regional policy in the North in this period, however, was the Northern Powerhouse agenda. Several interviewees highlighted that in many ways the Northern Powerhouse could be seen as 'a

successor to the ideas of the Northern way' (Arianna Giovannini, Interview; Neil McInroy, Interview). Arianna Giovannini (Interview) argued that 'the whole idea of the Northern powerhouse… [was] nothing new', describing it as 'old wine in new bottles'. Yet, she noted that this changing and rebuilding of similar initiatives – a 'constant institutional churn' - by different governments has long acted as an impediment to effective change in the North.

As touched on in Chapter 4, the Northern Powerhouse was launched in June 2014 by the then Chancellor, George Osborne. Osborne (2014) stated that the cities of the North are individually strong, but collectively not strong enough and identified four key policy areas for action. The first was transport, and the need to provide modern intercity transport connections across the North. The second and third were backing northern science and universities, as well as northern creative clusters. The fourth key area outlined by Osborne concerned local power and the need for devolution.

The Northern Powerhouse agenda brought welcome renewed focus to the extent of regional inequality in England and it provided a recognisable lens to consider it through. As Lee (2017, p. 479) argues the Northern Powerhouse agenda reflected 'longstanding concerns about the North-South divide and the need for spatial rebalancing, [of] the centralized British state'. This recognition was far from new (Parr, 2017, p. 491). Yet as Lee (2017, p. 487) notes, the Northern Powerhouse agenda did have a notable profile compared to previous initiatives such as New Labour's Northern Way. This was recognised by interviewees across the political spectrum.

Alec Shelbrooke (Interview) suggested 'that the phrase Northern Powerhouse, the project of the Northern Powerhouse, the objectives of the Northern Powerhouse, put the North slap-bang centre of policymaking'. Similarly, fellow Conservative MP, Philip Davies (Interview) claimed that the Northern Powerhouse put the idea of North-South regional inequality on 'the political agenda in a way that it was never on the political agenda

before'. Carl Les (Interview), Conservative leader of North Yorkshire County Council, was also of the view that it has raised the North 'up the agenda' and 'delivered awareness' of the issues of the region.

Some Labour figures also shared this view. Diana Johnson (Interview) stated 'to give George Osborne his due… he recognised that the North was punching below its weight… he put that on the agenda'. Similarly, Graeme Miller (Interview) pointed out that 'it's not often you'll hear me saying, as a Labour politician, good things about George Osborne, but George Osborne genuinely tried to get something done that was necessary'. Despite this recognition, however, all of these interviewees, and many others, were of the view that in terms of delivery and policy success the Northern Powerhouse agenda had been muted.

It is worth assessing this through considering Osborne's four initial policy priorities in turn. First, when it comes to transport, the Northern Powerhouse helped bring about the creation of important pan-Northern bodies like Transport for the North. Yet the North continues to lag behind other parts of the country in terms of transport spending and transport for the North's budget has recently been cut significantly (Hyde, 2022). As we will consider in more detail in the next section, the recent scaling back of Northern Powerhouse Rail and the eastern leg of HS2 is a major blow for the North and runs counter to successive governments' framing around the importance of transport to boosting economic growth across the region. Reflecting on the Northern Powerhouse, Andrew Stephenson (Interview), a Minister of State for Transport, noted that 'the initial [Northern Powerhouse] concept started with transport infrastructure. And have we really seen transformational transport changes in the North? Not really'. He added, 'there have been some investments, but they've not been the real step change, the transformational changes, that we need'.

When it comes to investment in areas such as science in the North, it remains that the majority of research and development spending continues to be centred on the South East (Jones, 2019). In the life sciences, for example, the North of England receives £4 billion less investment per year in health R&D than the South (IPPR, 2020). London also continues to receive the lion's share of funding when it comes to culture, and significant disparities can be found within and between regions. When it comes to Osborne's fourth key area, local power through devolution, that will be explored in detail in the next chapter. It is, however, fair to note that despite the positives that devolution has brought, many flaws remain with the process. Moreover, many of the benefits and funding that came to the region through the Northern Powerhouse were undermined by the austerity agenda that was pursued simultaneously.

While acknowledging that 'the general concept is a good one', Lee (2017, p. 480) argued that 'new resources have been relatively limited, particularly given reductions in finance elsewhere'. He therefore suggests that 'given the significant resources which would be needed to achieve the government's vague aims', the Northern Powerhouse project appears to be more of a 'brand' than a 'strategy'. Indeed, Lee (2017, p. 487) points out that the term came to be used 'as a generic brand for government policy in the North' and notes that sometimes 'initiatives labelled as part of the Northern Powerhouse are not even exclusive to the North'. As such, there is a sense that the concept became increasingly devalued and impotent in terms of enacting significant policy changes in the North.

The idea of the Northern Powerhouse being a brand rather than a serious policy agenda was highlighted by numerous interviewees. Neil McInroy (Interview) argued that 'it was a political construct, used as a positive to mask the deep austerity that was taking place at that time'. Similarly, Lord Haskins (Interview) suggested that the agenda was largely 'a PR exercise'. The idea that the agenda was style over substance played into some

reflections on its success. Jonathan Guest (Interview) argued that 'it's a great marketing ploy. But when you start to pick away at it, there's not actually any substance behind it'. Similarly, representatives from the NP11 (Interview) suggested that as a brand 'it stands for everything and nothing'.

Nevertheless, there was a sense amongst some that even if the Northern Powerhouse was largely a branding exercise, this was still a positive for the region. Tom Forth (Interview) argued that the Northern Powerhouse was 'a really good brand and I think that some people have done really well to get on board with it and promote it'. He suggested that it had played into a more positive vision of the North. Others noted that as a brand, the Northern Powerhouse had helped to 'galvanise northern identity' (Ed Cox, Interview). And that the pan-Northern institutions and forms of cooperation that emerged from the agenda have been a new and positive development (Ed Cox, Interview; Lord Kerslake, Interview). Looking at it from a Southern perspective, John Denham (Interview) noted that 'down here, it's certainly given the North a brand, which is what people look at quite jealously… they're not quite sure what it is, but they think it's a brand people talk about it, you've got a name'. Others highlighted the importance of branding from a business perspective (Susan Hinchcliffe, Interview), particularly in terms of seeking to attract foreign investment into the region (Chris Rowell, Interview; David Collins, Interview; Hannah Richmond, Interview).

Yet despite these positives in fostering cooperation and the branding successes as framing the Northern Powerhouse as a positive for the whole region, there are significant questions about the extent to which it was a truly pan-Northern agenda in practice. Osborne (2014) stressed that he did not wish to create an 'artificial political construct' in the North but the agenda did foster pan-Northern cooperation through bodies such as the NP11 and Transport for the North. Yet, the agenda has been criticised for its inherent city-centric nature (Cox and Longlands, 2016, p. 3). In particular, its focus on a narrow

group of Northern cities along the M62 corridor. Indeed, Osborne's (2014) focus from the start was on a 'collection of northern cities - sufficiently close to each other that combined they can take on the world'. Osborne (in Payne, 2021, p. 307) has since spoken of the agenda as a 'solid economic theory' aimed at connecting cities 'particularly around the Pennines; Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, Liverpool'.

Similarly, Lord O'Neil (2021, p.10) who played a key role in the development of the Northern Powerhouse has noted that 'the essence of the idea was to explore the economic concept of agglomeration and to try and create somewhere in the UK that had a scale to be similar to that of London'. Indeed, O'Neil (2021, p.10) coined the term 'ManSheffLeedsPool' for this agglomerated 'North'. O'Neil (2021, p.10) has reflected that those who sought to frame the Northern Powerhouse as a wholly pan-Northern agenda were misguided, that such a thing was 'misuse of the concept'. He argues that 'it is undoubtedly true that other regions of the North should participate in the broader development of the Northern Powerhouse, but to service all of their needs and to neglect the basic importance of truly creating an agglomerated powerhouse misses the core point'. Richard Leese (Interview), the then Labour leader of Manchester City Council, was a keen and early advocate of the Northern Powerhouse. He suggested that O'Neil's vision 'about fetching Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, Liverpool, and the area in between, effectively as a notional supercity… had a catalytic impact on the political debate', providing 'a very strong theoretical economic framework on which we can develop plans'.

Yet, overlooking the role of smaller cities and towns within the North was seen by some to be ill-advised if the aim was to build a true Northern Powerhouse rather than to merely boost the economy of a handful of Northern city regions (Cox and Longlands, 2016, p. 3; Martin et al, 2017, p. 231). While others have questioned the economic merits

of the positive effects of the 'agglomeration' of city-region economies (Cox and Longlands, 2016, p. 3; Haughton et al, 2016, p. 359).

Indeed, there was a sense amongst several interviewees that too little of the region had been the focus of the agenda. Wallace Sampson (Interview), Chief Executive of Harrogate Council, argued that the Northern Powerhouse did not translate 'into action and activity… [that] enables the whole of North to benefit'. The narrow focus of the Northern Powerhouse on the big cities of the North around the Pennines, especially Manchester, was also noted. The academic Will Jennings (Interview) suggested that 'the Northern Powerhouse agenda has certainly been helpful to Manchester' in that it resulted in 'a way of accruing power there'. Similarly, Will Tanner (Interview), noted that 'the Northern Powerhouse agenda has been brilliant for Manchester [but] I struggle to see huge benefits to other parts of the North of England'.

This sense that the Northern Powerhouse was not, despite its name, an agenda for the whole of the region was most keenly felt in the parts of the North furthest away from the cities of the south Pennines. Matt Garlick noted that 'whenever government talk about the Northern Powerhouse… basically it's about the M62… it's not about the A1 going up to the North East, or even Cumbria. Indeed, this was highlighted by several political representatives in the North East (Anonymous North East Council Leader, Interview: Graeme Miller, Interview; Ian Lavery, Interview). In the same vein, the then leader of Lancaster Council, Erica Lewis (Interview), argued that the agenda was 'focused on that Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds corridor' while places 'north of that line' like 'all of Lancashire and all of Cumbria' are largely overlooked. Thus, she added that when talking about the Northern Powerhouse, advocates for the agenda were 'not talking about the whole North'.

A further critique of the agenda is that, in common with other initiatives pursued from the mid-1970s onwards, the Northern Powerhouse did not seek to fundamentally address

and resolve the causes of regional inequality in England. As Martin et al (2017, p. 230) note, chiefly, the policy has not had an effect on tackling the North-South economic divide because 'despite the rhetoric of cities in the North of England acting as a counterweight to London's hegemony' the Northern Powerhouse agenda must be 'read alongside the contemporaneous Treasury anxiety that "the growth of London is not hindered or compromised in any way"". Similarly, Berry and Giovannini (2017, p. 6) note that the agenda was premised upon the idea that the North must 'catch up' with the South but provided no 'clear analysis of why the North-South divide exists'. Moreover, they suggest that despite the rhetoric of the Northern Powerhouse agenda, 'the economic development of the country as a whole' remained 'the focus of the sovereign institutions at the centre'. These views speak to the idea of inherent biases within England's political economy as highlighted earlier in this chapter. Thus, as with previous attempts at addressing the North-South divide, it appears that the continued hold of London and the South East as the economic centre of the country held back a truly transformative shift to rebalance the economy to the detriment of the North and other English regions.

This was the sense of some non-Conservative interviewees. The Green Party's Natalie Bennett (Interview) argued that in its approach, ambitions, and scope, the agenda simply did not 'reflect the realities of inequality' across the country. John McDonell (Interview) meanwhile, question the economic underpinnings of the agenda, arguing that while some initiatives may have 'reaped a lot of rewards for [the Conservative Party's] developer friends… [there has not been] 'an awful lot of specific regeneration for working class people within those areas'. As such, he suggested that this development-led focus of the Northern Powerhouse may have served to 'almost replicate some of the inequalities that exist within London and the South East' in parts of the North.

Similarly, Ed Cox (Interview) argued that owing to its city-centric nature and its emphasis on 'trickle down' economics coupled with its lack of focus on 'inclusive economic

development', the Northern Powerhouse was a 'bastardised concept of economic development'. It was also criticised in terms of approach by some Conservative interviewees. In particular, Alexander Stafford (Interview) bemoaned its 'top down' nature. In contrast, he argued that the levelling up agenda, to which we will soon turn, is much more of a 'ground up' agenda, largely due, in his view, to the increased presence of the Conservatives in the North today compared to the Northern Powerhouse era.

This chapter has written of the Northern Powerhouse largely in the past tense. Some would dispute the notion that the agenda is dead (Nick King, Interview). But others suggested that the agenda appeared to have 'sort of fizzled out' (Gill Furniss, Interview), and that it has 'lost a bit of its impetus' (Geoff Driver, Interview). There was a sense that this was largely because Osborne is no longer Chancellor (Diana Johnson, Interview; Graeme Miller, Interview). In part because of this, but largely for reasons associated with shifts in political geography and electoral priorities as touched upon in the previous two chapters, it is fair to argue that the Northern Powerhouse has now been subsumed within and overtaken by the levelling up agenda.

As noted in Chapter 4, this shift began under Theresa May and, according to her advisor at the time, her 'desire to do more for the regional economies of the UK [as a whole]' (Will Tanner, Interview). Tanner (Interview) noted that there was a sense, as others above have raised, 'that the Northern Powerhouse agenda was really a city's agenda branded as a Northern agenda'. And a sense 'that the Northern Powerhouse agenda was always about agglomeration rather than about levelling up… that it was actually a kind of globalisation story rather than a regional economics story'.

In contrast to this, he suggests that 'Theresa wasn't that interested in cities policy, but she was very interested in kind of regional economic policy and trying to generate investments in jobs for the types of communities that had lost them'. And that for her the focus 'was more about bringing life back to the towns of the North, who for a long time

where lots of people - the core voters that she was trying to appeal to - felt disenfranchised and alienated from the political world' (Will Tanner, Interview). Thus, the shift towards something akin to levelling up can be seen to have begun under May with her thinking around a country-wide industrial strategy (Kenny and Kelsey, 2021). However, the agenda has taken on a new impetus, at least rhetorically, under the leadership of Boris Johnson. But what are the key tenets of levelling up? What are the similarities and differences between it and the many previous government initiatives aimed at tackling regional inequality already outlined in this chapter? And what, if anything has it achieved so far?

6.3. Levelling Up

Levelling up has been a core tenet of Conservative rhetoric since Boris Johnson became prime minister in July 2019. Indeed, Johnson has argued that 'from day one, the defining mission of this government has been to level up this country' (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. viii). Yet more than three years later there is still uncertainty about the extent and ambition of the agenda and its achievements. In particular, this section will highlight the geographic tension of levelling up, consider the mixed thinking on regional imbalances than the many policy objectives associated with the agenda highlight, and look at the extent to which it can be viewed as, at least the beginning of a transformative agenda, or more accurately, as ideologically incoherent spectacle politics.

6.3.1. The Geography of Levelling Up

The geography of levelling up has not been clearly defined. This has allowed various actors to frame the agenda in different ways. For some, it ought to be predominately about the North, for others, it is focused on the Red Wall more broadly. Some frame it as an agenda for so-called left-behind places all across the country, others suggest that it is a predominately towns focused agenda. Still others, the government often included amongst these as we will see below, tend to frame levelling up as a country-wide agenda,

suggesting that almost everything everywhere can be levelled up. This view is encapsulated within Boris Johnson's (2021b) oft-used pledge to 'unite and level up across the whole UK'. This section will consider this differing understanding and framing of the geography of levelling up.

It is largely well-recognised that unlike previous initiatives such as the Northern Way and the Northern Powerhouse, levelling up does not attempt to speak solely to the North of England. Instead, as touched upon in previous chapters, the agenda aims to connect with long-held grievances that came to the fore during the EU referendum and its aftermath, as well as the shifting electoral geography of England (Tomaney, and Pike, 2020, p. 43). Yet, given the predominance of places in the North in these events, for some, there is a perception that levelling up is primarily aimed at places in the North of England, or across the Red Wall more generally (Bailey and Pazos, 2021).

Indeed, polling carried out for the Conservative Home website finds that there is a sense that levelling up is 'primarily for former industrial towns in the North of England' (Frayne, 2021). Similarly, Kenny et al (2021, p. 5) find that 'in the North East, North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, the East Midlands and the West Midlands, between 40% and 48% of people think that levelling up will be good for their local economy'. In contrast, 'in the East of England, this falls to 25%, and then falls further again in London (18%) and the South East (14%)'. Matinson (2020, p. 178) reports that the chief view that she encountered across the so-called Red Wall areas was that levelling up is, or at least ought to be, an agenda for tackling the North-South divide. She notes that many sensed that for too long the South had been 'favoured' and that this must now be 'resolved'. This sense resonates with polling that suggests that over 60 per cent of people in the North believe that government cares less about their area than others (Jennings et al, 2021, p. 305). This is in contrast to 36 per cent in the Midlands, 31 per cent in London, and 23 per cent in southern England outside London (Jennings et al, 2021, p. 305). Will

Tanner (Interview) highlighted similar sentiments, suggesting that the phrase levelling up has appeal to voters in the North because it seeks to tap into ideas of 'fairness', particularly around the issues of opportunity being evenly spread around the country.

Yet even in all of this, there is a sense that if levelling up is speaking predominately to the North, it is speaking to specific parts of it rather than the whole region. In particular, to places that feel a sense of left-behindedness. As MacKinnon (2021, p. 3) notes, the concept of 'left behind' places is 'multi-dimensional'. It encompasses not only economic concerns but 'social, demographic, political and cultural concerns' as well. A focus on left-behind places, not just in the North but across the country, is implied within the Levelling Up White Paper (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. x). In the introductory section written by the then Levelling Up Minister, Michael Gove, and the economist Andy Haldane, it notes that levelling up is 'about unleashing opportunity, prosperity and pride in places where, for too long, it has been held back. It is about growing the pie and everyone sharing in the fruits of this success'.

As Kenny and Kelsey (2021) argue, levelling up 'enables the Government to signal how it intends to tackle a new 'geography of discontent': a deep-seated pessimism about the fortunes of places that feel 'forgotten about' by government and other public authorities, and a growing disenchantment with the priorities of mainstream politics'. Similarly, Jennings et al (2021, pp. 306-307) suggest that levelling up seeks to target 'political attention and interventions in specific places—in a way that speaks to some voters' feelings of having been neglected over many decades and having lost status to other groups in society'. In particular, they argue, it aims to appeal 'to those who feel left behind in coastal and postindustrial towns, as well as some rural and suburban communities'. Politically they note, the agenda is aimed at 'the heart of Brexitland, places that voted strongly for Leave in 2016 and which swung heavily to the Conservatives in 2019'.

Thus, while many of these issues might be more pronounced in parts of the North given the socio-economic profile of many places in the region as outlined in chapter 4, and its shifting politics as detailed in chapter 5, they are not uniquely Northern. As such, if levelling up is predominately aimed at speaking to a sense of left-behindedness, it is inevitable that there will be a focus on many places in the North but not necessarily on the North as a whole. Further to this, there will inevitably be a focus on left-behind places in other areas too, therefore it is not solely a Northern, or even a Red Wall, agenda.

A further way in which the geography of levelling up has been framed, however, is that it is an agenda for everybody, everywhere, all across the country. It does so by emphasising inequalities not just at the regional level but at the micro-local levels and through pledging to address them for the benefit of all (O'Brien, 2021; Ed Cox, Interview; Nick King, Interview). In his foreword to the Levelling Up White Paper, Boris Johnson speaks of taking the 'radical steps needed to make us more prosperous and more united by tackling the regional and local inequalities that unfairly hold back communities and to encourage private sector investment right across the UK' (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. viii). Similarly, Gove and Haldane talk of a 'plan for levelling up the UK, from Aberdeen to Antrim, Newport to Norwich' (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. xi).

Others outside of the government have taken this approach as well. Nick King (Interview) spoke of the need to address inequalities at all levels, also taking the view that 'half of the issue we've got is the disparities within regions, as much as between them'. In much the same vein, Kippin and Lucas (2021, p. 21) argue that 'we need to get beyond some of the false divides that have unhelpfully emerged as part of the recent narrative, such as between cities and left behind towns, agglomeration and inclusion, and London and the rest of Britain'. They therefore add that 'levelling up needs to happen for people in places, but it should apply wherever it is relevant'. While an ambition to tackle such

inequalities would be laudable, there is a risk that through taking an approach which suggests that every place everywhere with any needs will be levelled up means that the term becomes somewhat meaningless. As the journalist, Jenifer Williams (2022), notes 'the term 'levelling up' has… become all things to all people'.

This is apparent in the framing of the agenda as a solely positive one – that all places that need to be levelled up will be, while at the same time, already successful places will continue to thrive. As Newman et al (2021, p. 7) note, levelling up is presented as an agenda 'to reduce inequality between places, while maintaining outcomes in all places'. Indeed, the Levelling Up White Paper itself states that the agenda will not cut down 'the tall poppies' or attempt to 'hobble the areas that are doing well' (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. viii). Successful rebalancing of the country, it suggests, will not be achieved through 'dampening down the success of more prosperous areas' (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. xiv). Thus, researchers at the Centre for Cities suggest that 'there is a broad consensus that it [levelling up] aims to reduce regional inequality by improving prosperity in struggling places rather than by suppressing growth in successful local economies' (Breach and Jeffrey, 2020, p. 6).

There is some support for this approach. Lord Kerslake (Interview) argues that debates about regional inequality should not be 'a zero-sum game'. Addressing inequalities in the North should be about 'harnessing the potential of the North, not about doing down London and the South East'. Alec Shelbrooke (Interview) takes a similar view. He argues that it is an inherently One Nation Conservative agenda shaped by the belief that 'we need to bring everybody up' and not bring 'people down to close the gap'. Nick King (Interview), meanwhile, suggested that this framing of levelling up was wise in that framing the agenda as an attempt to 'level up' the whole country 'neutralises some of the concerns about rebalancing being to the detriment of London and the South East'.

The extent to which this is the case is questionable, however. Polling suggests that almost one in three Londoners and a quarter of those in the South East think that levelling up will result in less being spent in their area (Kirk, 2021). As touched on in chapter 5, similar fears have been expressed by some, particularly Conservative, politicians. Moreover, the extent to which this approach to levelling up – that everywhere can win and nowhere has to lose out - is valid in practice is also open to question.

From her research across the Red Wall, Matinson (2020, p. 178) notes that there is a sense that for too long the North has been on the losing side of the North-South divide and, as such, many do feel that levelling up ought to be 'a zero-sum game'. She suggests that many were of the view that 'it's impossible for everybody in the country to do better'. Instead, there is a desire to see funding 'diverted away from the south so that the Midlands and the north can have their fair share of the good fortune that has eluded them for too long'. Additionally, from a purely pragmatic point of view, 'the hard fiscal reality [is] that not everywhere can be levelled up' (Jennings et al, 2021, p. 311). Similarly, Tryl and Burns (2022, p. 19) find 'the public expect that levelling up, particularly in the North-East, North West, and Yorkshire, which they see as the priority areas for levelling up, will require some form of levelling down'. Polling carried out for their study suggests that across the country, 'three in five Britons consider it fair that places like London and the South East become less wealthy and prosperous to reduce inequality between different regions of the UK'. Ultimately, as Jennings et al, (2021, p. 311) note, 'not everywhere can have a new bypass, rail link, town centre revamp or library restoration'. Indeed, 'even a government that is willing to increase significantly public spending will have to pick winners and losers'.

From all of this, it remains unclear where exactly the geographical focus of levelling up is. Newman et al (2021, p. 7) note that 'at its heart, the levelling up agenda seeks to tackle inequality between places'. Yet it is illusive which places will be levelled up and at what

scales this will take place. As Jennings et al (2021, p. 307) point out, 'it remains ambiguous whether levelling up is about the productivity gap between regions (or more specifically between London and the South East and the rest) or is a more fundamental attempt to offset forces of agglomeration that have opened a divide between core cities and more peripheral areas'.

In terms of the towns-city dimension of the agenda, for some, this latter reading of levelling up, that it aims to tackle the gap between core cities and the more peripheral, or left behind towns and other places, is most convincing. Even Lisa Nandy (in Payne, 2021, p. 304), Labour's Shadow Levelling Up Secretary and long-time advocate of a greater political focus on towns suggests that levelling up is 'a recognition that for a very long time, communities like mine have seen relative economic decline'. Meanwhile, the Conservative MP Andrew Stephenson (Interview) has emphasised the towns-focused nature of levelling up, noting that 'one of his [Boris Johnson's] first big announcements was the town deals and billions of pounds going towards supporting 100 left behind towns in the Midlands and the North and saying, you know, let's look at what the plans are to move them forward.

Yet, the Levelling Up Secretary, Michael Gove (in Parsons, 2021) has expressed mixed messages on the extent to which levelling up is predominantly towns focused. Speaking of the town of Oldham, on the one hand, he noted that 'it's not sufficient to say, the rising tide of Manchester will lift all of the boats in Greater Manchester and around it'. Yet, on the other hand, he noted that 'Oldham itself can't succeed unless Manchester succeeds'. This rather mixed message on Gove's part is representative of the tensions in the wider debates on the economic destiny of cities and towns.

Indeed, there are numerous critics of the idea that a focus on left-behind towns can be divorced from a focus on their nearby large cities. Again, speaking of Oldham, Tom Forth (in Jayanetti, 2022) notes 'do I think Oldham's best future is as part of Greater

Manchester? Absolutely I do'. He notes that 'Oldham could easily have its own specialisms and its own strengths within Greater Manchester, but I don't see any way in which it thrives separately and as its own thing'. Economist and former employee at the Northern Powerhouse Partnership, Nicola Headlam (in Jayanetti, 2022) goes further arguing it 'is totally economically illiterate' to suggest that 'towns have got a separate economic destiny to the cities they sit in'. She suggests 'it's not towns or cities, ever – it's all part of a functioning geography under which mechanisms can be deployed strategically within city regions'. Unsurprisingly, the Centre for Cities (2022, p. 3) is also of the view that the key to economic improvement involves 'improving the underperformance of big cities, rather than spreading resources thinly across the country'. Simon Jeffrey (Interview) a researcher there, was of the view that 'trickle out economics' from city centres to their surrounds remained the best approach to tackling regional inequalities.

Gove's mixed message on the towns and cities debate is borne out in the reality of levelling up. Coupled with rhetoric on towns and left behind places and the funding pots available for such places, there also remains a Northern Powerhouse-style focus on the benefits of agglomeration with a focus on economic clusters, the so-called 'Medici Effect', and a continuation of initiatives being focused on improving economic productivity being centred on cities (Jayanetti, 2022). This tension between a towns or cities approach is representative of the challenge the Conservatives face of, on the one hand, having to reflect the reality of 'England's new, town-oriented electoral map' (Jayanetti, 2022). And on the other hand, the seeming desire to not stray too far away from the long-held, city-focused orthodoxy of economic approaches to regional inequality.

Finally, in terms of scale, while a focus on regional inequalities continues to be a key tenet of discussions on levelling up, there is simultaneously a significant emphasis on intra-regional inequalities and micro-level inequalities (Department for Levelling Up,

Housing and Communities., 2022, p. xv). For some, a focus on better targeted interventions at lower 'spatial scales' rather than at the 'macro-regions' level is welcome (Kenny and Garling, 2021, p. 7). Indeed, this is likely the case for many of the interventions discussed under the theme of 'place' in the next section. Moreover, polling suggests that the public 'is more concerned with levelling up helping their town or city than their region', with 41 per cent and 37 per cent desiring the government to focus on helping their town and city respectively, compared to 26 per cent 'that wish the government to focus on helping their region' (Glover and Phillips, 2021, p. 6). However, as advanced in Chapter 4, local level inequalities cannot be entirely divorced from broader regional disparities. As such, while local, place-based approaches are welcome, it is also important not to lose sight of the wider regional picture.

6.3.2. The Aims and Priorities of Levelling Up

As with its geographic scope, the declared aims and priorities of levelling up are equally broad. The Levelling Up White Paper (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. xx- xxvii) outlines four key objectives: 'boosting productivity, pay, jobs and living standards by growing the private sector'; 'spreading opportunities and improving public services'; 'restoring a sense of community, local pride and belonging'; and 'empowering local leaders and communities'. Within the four broad aims, the White Paper identifies twelve key missions to address. This section will consider each of these missions pertaining to the first three objectives outlined (the fourth on empowering local leaders will be discussed in the next chapter). In considering these aims and priorities of levelling up, it is apparent that there is a diverse focus on issues to address but broadly they can be categorised into three themes, namely place, people, and projects.

6.3.2.1. Places

When it comes to place, one levelling up aim is to 'restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where they have been lost (Department

for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. xviii). To address this, the agenda seeks to restore a sense of 'pride in place', whereby 'people's satisfaction with their town centre and engagement in local culture and community', will rise 'in every area of the UK' (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. xviii). This mission largely speaks to the framing of levelling up as an agenda for so-called left-behind places, or those that at least feel a sense of decline. Speaking of this strand, the then Levelling Up Minister, Neil O'Brien (2021), noted that pride in place is 'a bit battered' in 'places where economic decline has strained the social fabric: the clubs, the charities, community life… [where] town centres… are struggling to adapt to online shopping'.

Indeed, as Kenny and Kelsey (2021) point out, a decline in retailing offerings and the decline of cultural institutions and community resources can have a significant impact on 'on local feelings about an area's fortunes'. This challenge is recognised by others too. Tomaney and Pike (2020, p. 44) note that 'the loss of traditional industries with their well-paid, skilled jobs and communal infrastructure, and the failure to adequately replace them, has undermined the identity' of places, particularly those 'former mill towns, mining villages and coastal resorts'. Similarly, polling for Conservative Home is interpreted to demonstrate that 'in working class communities there is an immense feeling of wounded civic pride' (Frayne, 2021). Many such places were the scene of first-time Conservative electoral victories in 2019. As such, this strand of levelling up can be seen to be shaped by 'the political argument that government needs to show voters in 'Red Wall' seats that it takes these issues seriously and will, by the next election, have solid achievements to present to the electorate' (Kenny and Kelsey, 2021).

This is the position of many Conservatives. The Conservative advisor, Rachel Wolf (in Payne, 2021, p. 32) argues that the government 'need to be able to show quick, tangible change to how places look and feel'. Similarly, in his own area of Blythe Valley, the MP Ian Levy (in Payne, 2021, p. 49) speaks of how the reopening of the local railway line and

town centre improvement are key to demonstrating levelling up in action. Meanwhile, Simon Fell (in Webber, 2021), MP for Barrow-in-Furness, notes that 'if we don't breathe fresh life into high streets, tidy up backstreets, and give people pride in their communities once again, it will be hard to convince them that lending us their vote was worth it'.

Others are less explicit on the electoral dimension of this element of levelling up, instead, they highlight its wider social importance. For Paul Howell (2021, pp. 38-39), MP for Sedgefield, there is a need to see 'targeted investment in the local social infrastructure that is so essential to underpinning modern healthy and prosperous communities and economies: the spaces and places in the community where people can meet and interact, from community centres and pubs, to libraries, leisure facilities, and parks'. The MP, Danny Kruger (2020, p. 16) has also spoken often about the need for 'renewing and modernising the social infrastructure of the UK'. Further to this, Rother Valley MP, Alexander Stafford (Interview) has stressed the importance of high street renewal, noting that at present if you 'walk around that [neglected high street in his own constituency] every day, it's bloody depressing' suggesting 'it's nothing more than neglect'. Labour figures too have spoken of the importance of the need to 'reimagine, reshape, and regenerate our town centres' (Conor McGinn, Interview).

There also appears to be notable public support for this theme of the levelling up agenda. Polling for the think tank Demos found that '88% of the general public would like to see improved physical social infrastructure - improved high streets, parks and public services' (Glover and Phillips, 2021, p. 6). This compared with '69% that wish to see improved physical economic infrastructure - new transport infrastructure, new employers offering good jobs and better broadband'. When considering what the public might want to see in order to boost 'civic pride', polling for Conservative Home finds 'it's ultimately about the

quality of shared spaces and the public streetscape', places like 'parks… historic buildings and the high street' (Frayne, 2021).

To address these issues, the agenda aims to invest to revive high streets and improve the physical environment more broadly through schemes such as the Levelling Up Fund, the Towns Fund, and the High Street Renewal Fund (Bailey and Pazos, 2021). Additionally, the agenda's focus on crime and anti-social behaviour (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. xviii) can also be seen to play into thinking on pride in place. Indeed, anti-social behaviour, as well as issues with litter and disrepair impacts the sense of decline in a place (Frayne, 2021). The then Levelling Up Secretary, Michael Gove (in Parsons, 2021) rightly noted that 'if parks are unkempt and dangerous, if high streets after six o'clock are places where women fear to go, that is a big problem'.

This approach to levelling up has, however, received criticism. For some, it is viewed as a 'hanging basket' model (Berry in Jayanetti, 2022; Webber, 2021). This view suggests that it is 'focused on easier, cosmetic improvements to deprived areas while ducking bigger structural changes that might close regional divides (Webber, 2021). The researcher Christine Berry (in Jayanetti, 2022) argues that while places may be made to look nicer, 'it's not really about raising living standards for the majority of people who live there'. Similarly, Lord Kerslake (in Hill, 2021) argues that this approach might 'work politically in the short term… and deliver some nice things… but it won't address the fundamental long-term issues, it won't really level up the country'. This has largely been the critique of the Opposition as well. Lisa Nandy (2021) has argued that 'small pots of money doled out by Whitehall to a few favoured areas to patch up high streets are no substitute for good jobs that bring spending power'.

Moreover, this approach to levelling up has been accused of exemplifying pork-barrel politics (Conor McGinn, Interview; Toby Perkins, Interview). As Nandy suggests, and indeed the Conservative arguments on the need to deliver quick wins for their voters

implies, certain places are prioritised for electoral reasons. Analysis of the distribution of Towns Fund spending by Hanretty (2021, pp, 10-11) finds that 'the proportion of towns in Conservative-held seats which secured funding was much higher than the proportion for towns in all other seats (14 per cent compared to 9 per cent)'. Further to this, he points out that 'the data strongly suggests that marginal seats were targeted', he notes that 'the highest success rates are for seats where the Conservatives are very slightly behind, but the rates for Conservative-held marginals are very much higher than the rates for safe Conservative seats'.

Moreover, Hanretty (2021, p. 11) finds that when towns are split into medium and low priority groups, the success rate for Conservative towns in the medium priority group is very much higher than the rate for all other towns, and this pattern is repeated for the low priority group'. Lord Kerslake (in Hill, 2021), notes 'I don't think there's an innocent explanation for the way money is being allocated the way it is'. Speaking of the Levelling Up Fund allocations rather than the Towns Funds allocation, he points out that 'it is very hard to understand how [the then Chancellor, Rishi Sunak's seat of] Richmondshire gets into being a priority one for the levelling up fund, while Barnsley and Sheffield does not'.

6.3.2.1. People

Moving on to look at the second broad dimension of levelling up, here initiatives are largely aimed at boosting productivity in places where it is lagging and are often framed as being people focused. It includes a focus on issues such as education, training and skills, jobs, and living standards. On education, the White Paper sets out its mission that 'by 2030, the number of primary school children achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and maths will have significantly increased… and the percentage of children meeting the expected standard in the worst performing areas will have increased by over a third (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. xviii). Similarly, another aim is that 'by 2030, the number of people successfully

completing high-quality skills training will have significantly increased in every area of the UK'. In particular, it hopes that there will be '80,000 more people completing courses in the lowest skilled areas' (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. xviii). Indeed, skills is highlighted as being key to the agenda (Johnson in Payne, 2021, p. 358)

The importance of improving educational outcomes and skills is recognised across the political spectrum. The Conservative leader of Lancashire Council, Geoff Driver (Interview), spoke of how 'we've got to get rid of the skills gap and the educational attainment gaps'. Many Labour interviewees were of the same opinion (Richard Leese, Interview; Stephen Houghton, Interview; Susan Hinchcliffe, Interview; Toby Perkins, Interview). Many in the world of policy are also of this view. Speaking of improving outcomes in the North, Nick King (Interview) noted that 'at the heart of all this stuff is skills and education'. The Centre for Cities has also argued that in most places, addressing skills ought to be the 'first priority' of levelling up (Breach and Jeffrey, 2020, p. 5). Meanwhile, the CBI's, Hannah Richmond (Interview) also suggested that 'making sure the education system works in all parts of the country and giving people access to higher and further education' is essential in 'putting some kind of meat behind the bones of levelling up'.

Improving education and skills is closely linked with another levelling up mission, spreading opportunities (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. xviii). Indeed, for Neil O'Brien (2021), 'spreading opportunity is key to any Conservative vision of levelling up'. Similarly, Boris Johnson (2021b) has often highlighted the importance of this mission too, noting that 'everyone knows that talent and energy and enthusiasm and flair are evenly spread across the UK… it is opportunity that is not'. As such, he argues that levelling up opportunity is both 'morally right' but also essential 'because if we fail then we are simply squandering vast reserves of human

capital we are failing to allow people to fulfil their potential and we are holding our country back'. Tees Valley Mayor, Ben Houchen (2021b) frames it in much the same way, 'the aspirations of people in Tees Valley… are much like those of people in any other part of the country… they need good-quality, well-paid jobs to support their families; they want to see opportunities to transform their communities seized, rather than watching those chances pass them by'.

As Houchen highlights, bringing new jobs, particularly to parts of the North that feel a sense of loss of old industries, is viewed as essential to the opportunities strand of levelling up. The UK2070 Commission (2020, p. 18) notes that 'a more balanced economy requires that over time the distribution in jobs (particularly good quality jobs) would increase outside the areas that are currently experiencing fast growth'. This sentiment was shared by several interviewees. Regional Secretary of the Yorkshire and Humber TUC, Bill Adams (Interview), argued that 'we need to be sending our kids to college to wear white coats… [to] have clean, highly paid, highly qualified jobs in the places where they want to live'. Conor McGinn, (Interview), meanwhile, argued we need to invest in people to ensure that people get the education, the training, and the skills that they need to do good jobs. But additionally, for those jobs to be there, he noted that 'you've got to ensure that there is an equality of opportunity that just doesn't exist at the moment'.

When it comes to public opinion on this dimension of levelling up, polling suggests that there is strong support for the idea of government 'helping people retrain in areas where industry has declined' and the idea of government 'encouraging business investment into particular areas' (Frayne, 2021). However, alternative polling suggests that public opinion is split on the benefits of new jobs if it means lots of new people moving into the area (Glover and Phillips, 2021, p. 5). Additionally, opinion is divided on whether it is better for an area to have more lower paid jobs more quickly, or to have better paid jobs in the

area but have to wait longer for them to materialise (Glover and Phillips, 2021, p. 5). Overall, this polling suggests that 'in the eyes of the public, well-paid jobs are only good for a local area if they are taken by local people' (Glover and Phillips, 2021, p. 6).

When it comes to the views of political actors, there is also a difference of opinion on how these outcomes of increased jobs and opportunities might be achieved. Some on the political right have emphasised the importance of private sector investment in job growth. A report by Berry and King (2021, p. 4) argued in favour of economic reforms aimed at producing a 'Northern Big Bang' that will 'unleash a torrent of investment into the Northern economy, to deliver the productivity gains, economic growth and higher wages that are so desperately needed'. Ben Houchen (2022), meanwhile claims that private investment is key to much of the levelling up agenda, noting that 'what will really restore pride to left-behind areas and create the new opportunities we all want to see is private initiative'. He argues that currently this thinking is lacking from the levelling up agenda, arguing that the 'relative silence on this essential part of the equation is a missed opportunity' and that 'a free market focus could have supercharged the [Levelling Up] White Paper'.

One way in which private investment can be encouraged, it is argued, is through a 'more comprehensive set of incentives… like making certain areas super enterprise zones' where incentives such as business rates exemptions and hundred per cent capital allowances encourage investment and jobs growth (Kevin Hollinrake, Interview). Similarly, Dehenna Davison (2021) argues that 'a relaxation of red tape and regulation can… entice businesses to invest and encourage young people to stay in and move to the North'. Some of this thinking has played into the government's freeports initiative. Several interviewees pointed to the important role that freeports could play in the North (Chris Rowell, Interview; Nick King, Interview). As yet, however, there is little sign that current freeports initiatives in Teesside, Hull, and Liverpool, have had a significant impact.

Many of the chief advocates of the importance of the role of private investment do also recognise that this needs to be coupled with public investment as well (Berry and King (2021, p. 4; Kevin Hollinrake, Interview). Others have made this argument too. In particular, that R&D and science funding needs to be distributed more fairly across the country to encourage innovation and high-skilled jobs in areas where they are currently lacking (Hannah Richmond, Interview; Richard Leese, Interview). As noted above this inequity in funding is seen as a significant barrier to Northern growth. As such, Hannah Richmond (Interview) argues that it is essential that such funding 'doesn't always go to the usual suspects of the London, Cambridge, Oxford Golden Triangle Area'. In fairness, the Levelling Up White Paper does state that 'by 2030, domestic public investment in R&D outside the Greater South East will increase by at least 40%' (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. xvii). It also suggests that 'this additional government funding will seek to leverage at least twice as much private sector investment'.

While few would have little to complain about with these aims, there is a sense for some that government thinking on both public and private investment across the country needs to be rooted in a broader, all-encompassing industrial strategy (Alex Sobel, Interview; Bill Adams, Interview). One initiative that could form part of a broader strategy, and that is agreed upon by actors on both the left and right, is that the North should play a central role in a 'Green Industrial Revolution' (Berry and King, 2021, p. 4; Hardy, 2021, p. 64; NP11, 2019). It is argued that a focus on the new green industries would serve to replace the lost industries of the past across many areas of the North. Framing the initiative in such a way taps into sentiments touched on in previous chapters, particularly those concerning the importance of industrial heritage on ideas of Northernness, and the role of deindustrialisation on ideas of Northern decline. Indeed, polling suggests that 'people in former industrial areas… [are] positive about the prospect of new, green technologies replacing industries of the past' (Frayne, 2021).

In taking steps to address education, skills, opportunities, and jobs, it is hoped that it will increase productivity and wages, 'especially in those places where they are lagging' (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. xvii). Through doing so, there is a belief that this will have a positive impact on other 'people' focus areas of levelling up such as living standards, wellbeing, and health (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. xvii-xviii). Others have made these connections too. Tracy Brabin (2021) notes that 'low skills all too often go hand in hand with poorer health, and social and environmental challenges' and she argues' that we need to overcome [these challenges] to give everyone the best quality of life'. Researchers at the JRF have also noted that there is a 'close relationship' between the twin challenges of boosting productivity and improving living standards (Innes and Earwaker, 2020, p. 3). IPPR North has stressed this point too, framing it in terms of 'the chance for people in the north to live a good life', and noting that 'a productive economy that delivers better living standards… [is] really fundamental' (Marcus Johns, Interview).

6.3.2.3. Projects

The third broad dimension of the levelling up agenda is a focus on large-scale infrastructure projects, in particular digital connectivity and transport. As Kenny and Kelsey (2021) note, 'this focus on connectivity and hard infrastructure emerged as a consistent policy idea in the Coalition Government, after 2010, which diverted considerable resources to projects like HS2 and the Northern Powerhouse, even as it introduced significant retrenchment in other areas of public expenditure'. As such it continued to play a role in some of the earlier thinking and framing of levelling up. Indeed, some interviewees such as Alec Shelbrooke, (Interview) argued that 'it's the capital infrastructure… it's the upgrading of rail, it's the thinking of roads, it's the fibre broadband' that are key to levelling up. The issue of improved digital connectivity remains important to the agenda (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and

Communities., 2022, p. xvii). However, the focus on other such initiatives, particularly high-speed rail investments in the North, has waned somewhat as the focus of levelling up has shifted to some of the other policy themes outlined above.

Given the central role that discussions of high speed rail, both the Northern legs of HS2 and the East-West connection dubbed Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) (although sometimes referred to as HS3), played in thinking around the Northern Powerhouse agenda, many interviewees argued that it should remain central to levelling up (Kevin Hollinrake, Interview; Nick King, Interview; Richard Leese, Interview; Susan Hinchcliffe, Interview; Toby Perkins, Interview; Hannah Richmond, Interview). The then Minister of State responsible for HS2, Andrew Stephenson, extolled the virtues of both NPR and HS2 arguing that 'connecting up the North and the Midlands all together, and the Midlands Engine and the Northern Powerhouse coming together, you can really get some dynamic things happening'. Similarly, Geoff Driver (Interview) encapsulated much of the thinking on the importance of these projects comparing them with historic transport initiatives, noting 'it's no coincidence that the industrial revolution took part in this part of the world because we sorted the transport infrastructure… but if we don't sort the transport infrastructure out now, we won't be able to improve the economy'. Again, there is a sense that the North has declined in prominence and is in need of renewal to compete with the rest of the country, both as a matter of economic productivity and of fairness.

There has always, however, been some scepticism to such schemes, especially HS2. Matinson (2020, p. 181) notes that she 'heard scepticism from some Red Wallers concerned that, once again, this policy [HS2] might deliver' more for London than their local area'. As such, she highlighted 'speeding up local rail links' may be seen to be more effective. These sentiments were shared by some interviewees. Alexander Stafford (Interview) stated that in his constituency of Rother Valley 'HS2 is very unpopular'. He

added that it is viewed as ‘a complete waste of everyone’s time’, people ‘don't want to get to London a few minutes quicker’, instead they want better local connections to Sheffield, Leeds, and Manchester. As such, something akin to NPR was seen as much more important than HS2 for Stafford. Lord Haskins (Interview) expressed much the same sentiments but on NPR he argued that we do not ‘need 200mph trains from Hull to Liverpool… we need trains that go regularly and reliably’.

There is also a sense for some that a focus on trains neglects the chief transport concerns of many constituents (Alexander Stafford, Interview; Stephen Houghton, Interview). Philip Davies (Interview) argued that ‘politicians are obsessed with trains… [but] if you speak to most sort of working-class people, cars and buses i.e., roads, are much more important to them than trains… you've got to stick to what are the real priorities for the public’. Simon Jeffrey (Interview) of the Centre for Cities made much the same point arguing that focus on schemes like NPR is wrong ‘when the issue is getting into central Manchester or getting into Leeds or getting into Liverpool’. He argued that ‘trying to get faster trains between cities when almost no one makes these journeys’ is wrong. The issues that need to be addressed is ‘people sat on a bus in terrible traffic’. Arianna Giovannini (Interview) made a similar point, noting that while big infrastructure investment would be welcome, ‘they are not the solution to the problems, it paradoxically is more important to fix local buses system than to build, you know, a new fancy, big station in Leeds’. Even Lord O’Neil (2021, p, 11), a chief architect of the Northern Powerhouse and the associated infrastructure ideas, has noted that, particularly after Covid, other forms of infrastructure, including digital connectivity, may be ‘a greater priority relative to fast trains’.

Further to these critiques about whether other forms of transport ought to be prioritised ahead of high-speed rail, there have long been question marks around the extent to which high-speed rail investments would actually deliver for the region as a whole. A senior civil

servant in Greater Manchester (Interview) recognised that 'if you look at HS2, for example, or HS3 [NPR] there's no way of making that generically fair to the entire North'. As is the case with many of the later New Labour-era and Northern Powerhouse-era initiatives, they are seen to chiefly be focused on the cities around the southern Pennines and M62 region, much to the dismay of those higher up in the region, in the North East (Graeme Miller, Interview; Ian Mearns, Interview) and Cumbria (Lord Inglewood, Interview).

The government's Integrated Rail Plan (IRP) published in November 2021 which focused on rail transport plans in the Midlands and the North seemed to reflect the wavering views on both the merits and geography of high-speed rail investments across the region (Department for Transport, 2021). The IRP confirmed the long-trailed decision to scrap the eastern leg of HS2 which would have connected Leeds and South Yorkshire with the route at Birmingham. Additionally, in contrast to Boris Johnson's (2019) commitment on becoming Prime Minister to build NPR between Manchester and Leeds in full, the IRP pledged only to build a new high-speed line running from Warrington, through Manchester, to Marsden near Huddersfield where the new line will then connect with the existing Transpennine line. This, however, is a far cry from NPR as envisaged by many Northern leaders and representatives who sought a brand-new line running from Manchester to Leeds, potentially through a new city centre station in Bradford.

As well as reflecting growing scepticism towards high-speed rail from some quarters, the decisions set out in the IRP reflect some of the other chief tendencies, namely the search for quicker wins at the expense of longer-term planning and thinking, and the desire to at least appear to be delivering for smaller towns in the North as well as the larger cities. This is also reflected in the commitments on transport in the Levelling UP White Paper where it is simply stated that 'by 2030, local public transport connectivity across the country will be significantly closer to the standards of London, with improved services,

simpler fares and integrated ticketing' (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. xvii)

The IPR was, however, politically contentious. Northern newspapers united in condemning the proposals (Williams, 2021b). And several Conservative MPs criticised the plans. Keighley MP, Robbie Moore (in Topham et al, 2021), has argued that the proposals leave the region 'completely short-changed'. Meanwhile, the Conservative Chair of the transport select committee, Huw Merriman (in Topham et al, 2021), has accused the Prime Minister of 'selling perpetual sunlight and then leaving it to others to explain the arrival of moonlight'. Both Labour's Northern Mayors and the party leadership sought to politicise the IRP, particularly the decision to scrap NPR, as 'betrayal of the North' (McMahon in O'Donoghue, 2021), as a breaking 'promises to the North' (Starmer, 2021c), which mean that 'nobody in the north should believe a word they [the government] say again' (Jarvis in Cox, 2021). With these criticisms in mind, we move on to consider the extent to which levelling up as a whole can be viewed as transformative agenda or merely an example of spectacle politics.

6.3.3. A Transformative Agenda or Spectacle Politics?

The Levelling Up White Paper suggests that it 'outlines the scale and causes of geographic disparities across the country, as well as a programme of change grounded in ambitious missions' (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022, p. 248). It is, it argues, 'a critical stepping stone on the UK Government's ambition to radically alter spatial disparities, ensuring that geography is no longer destiny and that all people and places in the UK are equipped to share in the country's substantial economic, social and cultural wealth' (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022, p. 248). These are bold claims, but questions remain over the extent to which the agenda is truly transformative in terms of its ability to tackle deeply rooted regional disparities.

The White Paper and broader rhetoric on levelling up does recognise many of the causes of regional inequality such as the role that economic restructuring has had on many places in the North and elsewhere, the negative effects of the political economy of the last 40 years or more which has largely tended to 'back southern winners', and connectedly, the effects of unequal investment across the country. These are significant issues to resolve, particularly at speed and scale, however. Moreover, on the causes of regional inequality, many discussions around levelling up from the government perspective have tended to shy away from highlighting the role of the austerity agenda in worsening many of these challenges (Jennings et al, 2021, p. 308).

This is an important point, however, as at present the scale of investment in the name of levelling up is underwhelming. Webb et al (2022, p. 12) note that in 2021 £0.5 billion of Levelling Up Fund money was allocated to projects in the North of England. Yet they point out that this 'is less than a tenth of the lost £5.16 billion in annual service spending by the North's councils since 2009/10'. To put it in context they note that the '£0.5 billion is an investment of just £32 per person in the North compared to the £413 per person fall in annual council service spending from 2009/10 to 2019/20'. While there are some other funding streams associated with levelling up, these figures are illustrative of the lack of financial weight behind the agenda at present.

Comparisons are often drawn with the German approach post-reunification. Alex Sobel (Interview) argued that in Germany, 'they re-floated the East German economy at the same period where we deindustrialised the north and the Midlands, and people's jobs and prospects went through the floor'. Boris Johnson (2021b) himself has drawn on this comparison too, noting 'it is an astonishing fact that 31 years after German unification, the per capita GDP of the North East of our country, Yorkshire, the East Midlands, Wales and Northern Ireland is now lower than in what was formerly East Germany'. He added that 'to a large extent Germany has succeeded in levelling up where we have not'. A

crucial difference in the German approach and levelling up (and previous UK approaches to economic rebalancing) is the serious financial weight Germany has put into its addressing of regional inequality. As Enenkel (2021) points out, 'reunification did not come cheap'. Indeed, she notes that 'in total it is estimated that up to €2 trillion was spent on the reunification project between 1990 and 2014… the equivalent of around £71 billion every year'. By comparison, she notes that 'the UK's levelling up fund is £4.8 billion in total'.

When it comes to the broader approach to levelling up, as this chapter has noted, the geography of the agenda remains fuzzy at best. While there is a rhetorical focus on left behind places, often other framing approaches have been deployed, largely to suggest that everywhere can be levelled up. In terms of the focus of the agenda, it remains broad and all encompassing with a focus on people, places, and projects as detailed above. Levelling up aims to be all things to all people. In this sense, the agenda can be seen as embodying the wider political approach of Boris Johnson. As Saunders (2022, p. 20) argues, rhetoric about levelling up has been used 'a placeholder: a way of evading more difficult conversations about 'redistribution', 'equality' and 'structural disadvantage''. Given this, he suggests the agenda is typical of Johnson's 'cakist' approach to politics, whereby it is promised, regardless of the political reality, 'that everyone can rise, that no one need lose, and that no one pays'

In terms of its guiding principles, as Newman (2021, pp. 316-317) puts it, levelling up is ideologically ambiguous, 'it acts as an expansive container for disparate policies and priorities without the need to address the tensions between them'. Similarly, Jennings et al (2021, p. 306) argue that there is a 'lack of philosophical or ideological underpinning' behind the agenda. As such, Jennings et al (2021, p. 309) suggest that levelling up is an example of 'spectacle politics' whereby the focus is on 'symbolic policies and projects that enable [the government] to narrate a national story of levelling up, of 'unleashing' the

potential of the country'. They argue that 'spectacle politics may enable the government to muddle through on levelling up, despite its incoherence, and may avoid scrutiny on the degree to which real long-term change is delivered for the areas that need'.

This plays into the idea of levelling up being centred on quick wins, and the often-utilised rhetoric that 'it'll be clear levelling up is underway by the next election' (Johnson in Payne, 2021, p. 360). This approach is likely the reason why the place strand of the agenda has become increasingly dominant. While important it is also easier to deliver quicker wins here, on improving the aesthetics of high streets for example, compared to the other two strands which would involve improving skills and bringing in new jobs or delivering on large scale infrastructure projects.

For some, there is a sense that so far levelling up has 'been more of a political strategy' rather than a serious rebalancing initiative (Webb et al, 2022, p. 8). This, unsurprisingly, is the view of many opposition politicians. That levelling up will deliver 'in places', that at best there will be 'pockets' of success (Alec Sobel, Interview). Speaking to the idea of levelling up as spectacle, Toby Perkins (Interview) stated 'I think they will make a big song and dance about the capital expenditure they make, but I think that in comparison to previous generations there won't be anything like the infrastructure spend that is needed'. It is not just opposition politicians that take this view, however. Hannah Richmond (Interview) of the CBI noted that 'at the moment, it feels like quite a lot of the interventions have been quite superficial, and kind of scratching the surface of how you could really address the problems of inequalities'.

Others have noted how levelling up as spectacle politics could serve to be divisive. Mick Whitley (Interview) noted that the competitive dimension to many of the levelling up funding pots, arguing 'it's like an auction, it's like a bidding war'. Similarly, Andy Burnham (2021a) argues that 'levelling up is at risk of becoming at best the latest in a long line of clever slogans without substance (see also "northern powerhouse",

"industrial strategy", and "big society") and, at worst, a highly divisive, highly politicised exercise in hand-picking winners and losers'.

Some are even more damming, suggesting levelling up is an empty slogan entirely. Labour's Yvette Cooper (2021, p. 35) argues that 'the Conservatives' approach to levelling up is far too weak and superficial'. Similarly, John Denham (Interview) stated, 'I have seen nothing as yet to suggest that the scale of change that is needed to do levelling up is on the agenda'. Donna Hall (Interview) argued that it is 'just words on a piece of paper… there's no substance behind it'. Similarly, Ed Miliband (in Payne, 2021, pp. 323-333) argues that 'they're [the government] good a talking the talk on this stuff, but they're not really good at walking the walk'. Jennifer Williams (2022), argues that the contradictions within the agenda, coupled with 'the many previous failed strategies, is partly why so many people are inclined to dismiss it out of hand'.

Polling of public opinion suggests that this is indeed the case. There is scepticism across the country that 'good, well-paid jobs' that improve the local area will be delivered 'in the next five years' (Glover and Phillips, 2021, p. 5). Across the so-called Red Wall specifically, polling, as of June 2022, suggests that 60 per cent of voters within it do not think the government has made a clear effort to level up their area (Redfield & Wilton, 2022a). This figure includes 46 per cent of those who voted Conservative in 2019. The poll suggests that across the Red Wall, it appears that the government's ability to deliver on levelling up is distrusted more than its ability to deliver in any other policy area. Moreover, it suggests that voters across the Red Wall are now more likely to trust Labour to level up their areas rather than the Conservatives.

This is somewhat surprising as, despite all of these criticisms and the scepticism of the public to the government's approach to levelling up, apart from a few exceptions such as the issue of the IRP as highlighted above, Labour has largely failed to politicise the agenda as a source of inter-party competition. The party make the argument 'that the

Conservatives' approach will not address the economic and social injustices that divide our nation' and that as such 'much stronger action is needed to turn those inequalities around' (Cooper, 2021, p. 31). Yet, Labour has yet to come up with a coherent vision itself for how it would tackle regional inequalities. As such, the government's ownership of the politics of levelling up has largely been unchallenged.

As this chapter has highlighted, the concept of levelling up is not new. Indeed, Kenny and Garling (2021, p. 6) note that it 'should be seen as the latest incarnation of a longstanding, and mostly unfulfilled, aspiration… to tackle the significant divergences in the economic fortunes and prospects of the country's regions and nations'. While elements of the levelling up agenda are different from previous initiatives, it is seen to be 'the same broad thing' (Anonymous senior local government officer, Greater Manchester, Interview), or if not, a new 'twist' on previous attempts (Simon, Jeffrey, Interview). One that reflected the political climate in which it arose.

Given the current political context, the future of the levelling up agenda is unclear. However, as noted above, the process of almost continual institutional and political churn in approaches to regional inequalities over the past several decades has been problematic. As MacKinnon (2021) points out, 'there is a pressing need for the Government to develop a more strategic, integrated and long-term approach to levelling up which is likely to take twenty to thirty years to achieve, reflecting the depth and magnitude of UK regional inequalities and the lessons of international experience'. That kind of transformational thinking appears to be some way away from the largely spectacle-based agenda we see at present.

6.4. Conclusion

This chapter has placed the levelling up agenda in context through considering previous initiatives aimed at addressing issues of regional inequality including post-war regional policy, the initiatives of the New Labour governments, and the Northern Powerhouse

agenda. Drawing from these, it has then explored levelling up. Looking at three key areas in particular, namely the geography of it, the aims and ambitions of it, and the extent to which the agenda is seen as heralding a transformational shift or is an example of spectacle politics, the chapter has explored how the agenda has been framed and the extent to which elements of it are currently politicised.

In doing so it has highlighted that levelling up is geographically confused but is certainly not a solely Northern or even Red Wall focused agenda. Its aims and ambitions are equally disparate, suggesting that it is ideologically incoherent. While there has been a shift away from some of the large-scale project thinking of the Northern Powerhouse agenda towards more of a focus on quick win 'pride in place' initiatives, some of the economic underpinnings of previous agendas still shape levelling up rhetoric, especially on the issues such as the benefits of agglomeration in the form of economic clusters and the need for private investment.

In these ways, it argues that levelling up has been framed in differing ways in order to seek to appeal to the broadest audiences. Yet this has led to the agenda largely, and rightly, being viewed as an example of spectacle politics, rather than as a transformational shift in UK regional policy. Despite this, or perhaps because of the ambiguities of levelling up, opposition parties including Labour have found it easy to critique the government's approach to levelling up and to question its commitment to the agenda, but so far they have struggled to develop their own narratives and ideas on levelling up in order to politicise the agenda as a significant source of inter-party competition.

Chapter 7: Devolution and Governance in the North

7.1. Introduction

This chapter looks at governance in the North, focusing largely on the issue of devolution. The chapter begins by highlighting the extent to which there is widespread support for devolution across the North, and how it is perceived that alternate governance approaches may serve to remedy the issues of over centralisation highlighted elsewhere in the thesis. The chapter then explores the evolution of devolution in the North, looking at the approaches of the Labour governments between 1997 and 2010, and then in more detail at the approaches followed by Conservative-led administrations from 2010 onwards.

Following this, some specific issues and themes associated with the current approach to devolution are discussed in more detail. Namely, the geographies of it, the role of metro mayors, the powers and resources available, the top-down, competitive nature of the process, and that it remains that some parts of the North are currently still without any form of devolution. In doing so, the chapter highlights that while there is some dissatisfaction with the current approach to devolution and support for alternative approaches to devolution, it remains that it is largely framed in a positive light. Indeed, both main parties and the vast majority of political actors appear to broadly support the concept of devolution. As such, while discussions around the nature and shape of devolution are politically salient, they tend not to be politicised as a source of inter-party conflict.

7.2. The Case for Devolution

Many of the problems discussed at the beginning of the previous chapter that are seen to hold the North back, particularly the perceived political and economic focus on London and the South East are often framed as being, at least in part, the product of over centralised governance. Many suggest that the UK, and England in particular, is one of, if

not the most, centralised countries in the developed world (Bob Buxton, Interview; Lord Kerslake, Interview: McCann, 2016, p. 453; Raikes et al, 2019, p. 3). This over centralisation is seen as a key driver of the economic concerns discussed previously, with the link between centralised governance and weak regional economies often noted (Marcus Johns, Interview; McCann, 2016, p. 453). Indeed, (Raikes et al, 2019, p. 8) argue 'that the UK's economic geography is closely related to our centralised governance'.

Among many interviewees, there was a clear sense that the concentration of political and economic power in London and the South East, coupled with the lack of power held elsewhere in the country, was one of the chief drivers of the North, and indeed other regions distant from the capital, receiving less preferential treatment from central government (Andrew Wilson, Interview; Anonymous North East Council Leader, Interview). Lord Kerslake (Interview) suggested that the centralised nature of the country means that 'the wealth and the power tend to gravitate to one place i.e. London and the South East'. The Chief Executive of Harrogate Council, Wallace Sampson (Interview) argued that because 'power and influence gravitate towards London and the South more than it does to the North, there is an inevitability that investment decisions made by the government will benefit the South more than it will benefit the North'. Meanwhile, Bob Buxton (Interview), leader of the Yorkshire Party, argued that over centralisation has resulted in a 'self-fulfilling prophecy', whereby because leaders 'believe that London is the most economically important powerhouse, [they] focus less on the north… [and] sure enough, the North becomes less and less economically powerful.

Overcentralisation is not only seen to result in economic imbalances, it is also seen to hamper political decision-making more broadly. Ed Cox (Interview) argued that because the vast majority of decision-makers are based in London and the South, 'there's a complete lack of understanding of the North'. As such, there is a 'gap in mindsets as to how policy might best benefit other parts of the country'. Similarly, Graeme Miller

(Interview) noted that 'the vast majority of our leaders…. are entrenched in the South, in the South East… because that's where the population is, that's where the power is, that's where the money is… but (when) they talk about the North East they have no idea what they're talking about'.

Given these commonly cited issues associated with overcentralised governance, unsurprisingly there are many calls and much support for greater devolution. Raikes (2020, pp. 3-4) argues that devolution is essential to bring 'power closer to the people, and away from Westminster, where many damaging policies have originated'. Moreover, he suggests that in contrast to central decision-makers, 'local policymakers are able to give a higher level of attention, responsiveness and insight; that they are more accountable, transparent and traceable; and that they are more efficient coordinators of economic policy within a place'.

Among interviewees both the potential economic benefits of greater devolution (Mark Burdon, Interview; Susan Hinchcliffe, Interview) and the governance benefits (Anonymous Yorkshire Labour MP, Interview) were highlighted. Arianna Giovannini (Interview) recognised that devolution is not 'a panacea for all the problems', but she argued that a strong and 'functioning system of sub-national governance' would 'benefit local communities in economic and social terms'. In terms of governance, an anonymous Yorkshire Labour MP (Interview) argued that 'it's much more sensible to let the people who are closer to the issues and the challenges decide on the prioritisation than asking civil servants and ministers in Whitehall to do that'.

These views largely cut right across the political spectrum. Indeed, the Conservative metro mayor for Tees Valley, Ben Houchen (2021), makes much the same point, arguing the 'key decisions should not be left to Whitehall officials who have no idea where towns such as Loftus or Billingham even are; people are much better off with the power to transform their own communities'. Geoff Driver, Conservative Leader of Lancashire

County Council, linked devolution with economic rebalancing and the levelling up agenda noting 'the message I give to, you know, my senior party colleagues in government, I say, 'look, if you're going to stick to your promise of levelling up, part of that agenda must be greater devolution'. Because there's no way it can happen centrally. It simply won't happen'.

Of all of the participants interviewed as part of this study, only one was against any form of devolution. The Conservative MP for Shipley, Philip Davies (Interview), had two key concerns. First, he argued that 'there's a democratic deficit with devolution' because, in his view, central government was still perceived as being responsible for developed issues, therefore he argued of existing devolution deals that 'people who have got all the power, don't take any of the responsibility'. Additionally, Davies suggested that devolution 'dangerous for the North' if 'the government in Westminster, whichever party it is, basically says to the North 'right, it's all down to you now, we're not taking any responsibility for it anymore, you're on your own''. As such, he argued that it is preferable that decisions are 'taken in London' with Northern representatives putting 'pressure on the government in London to do things in the North'. As we will see below in discussions of the current approach to devolution, some of these concerns about responsibility are not wholly without merit. However, far from undermining the case for devolution, many would suggest that devolution ought to be bolstered given the positive perceptions of the potential of greater devolution highlighted above. We will now turn our attention to the evolution of devolution in the North.

7.3. Historic Approaches to Devolution

Historically, 'England has been a landscape of almost permanent administrative reconfiguration and rescaling during the second half of the 20th century' (Ayres et al, 2018, p. 854). During which time, the UK state 'encouraged a diverse proliferation of sub-national regional and local spatial frameworks in England', marked by asymmetry 'in

terms of their territorial expanse, economic development, population density and composition, cultural identities, and political organisation' (Mycock, 2016, p. 539). Nevertheless, within this asymmetric and disjointed approach, there have some been efforts by both Labour and Conservative governments to 'deconcentrate powers and functions to regional or local tiers of government' (Ayres et al, 2018, p. 854). Despite this, England remained an exceedingly centralised country throughout the last century (Mycock, 2016, p. 539)

In recent decades there has been a global shift towards the decentralisation of powers from central government to regional tiers (Sandford, 2019a, p. 1). The political role of regions and regionalism has increased significantly across the world, and in Europe in particular, over the last thirty years (Calamai, 2009, p. 1129; Jeffery, 2008, p. 545). Regionalisation in Europe has taken place in countries both large and small and in both ethnically diverse and ethnically homogenous societies (Marks et al, 2008, p. 169). In this context, it is unsurprising that on coming to power in 1997 Labour placed significant focus on devolution, chiefly to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but also to the English regions (Morgan, 2006, pp. 193-194).

To start, as part of their English regional devolution agenda, as highlighted in the previous chapter, Labour set up Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) across nine regions, expanded the Government Office for the Regions, and created regional chambers which sought to connect local political leaders and regional stakeholders (Ayres et al, 2018, pp. 854-855). Ultimately, Labour wished to see the introduction of regional level governance in England (Ayres et al, 2018, pp. 854-855). However, despite the success introduction of the directly elected mayoralty in London, the expansion of Labour's regional devolution agenda in the rest of England faltered at the first hurdle with an overwhelming rejection by voters in the 2004 referendum in the North East of England

for a regional assembly (Ayres et al, 2018, pp. 854-855; Mycock, 2016, p. 534; Willett and Giovannini, 2014, p. 350).

As Mycock (2016, p. 540) notes, following the North East referendum, 'the received view of many politicians, academics and commentators' came to be that 'the English public have little interest in regionalism, and lack strong regional identities that could underpin and sustain regional polities'. This failure to pursue devolution in England in any serious way following 2004 left much of England without any devolution, in contrast to both Scotland and Wales. This was highlighted as problematic by several interviews (Bob Buxton, Interview; Diana Johnson, Interview).

As a result, after 2004, Labour's English devolution agenda became increasingly business driven. In the North, this included the championing of 'Northern Way' which sought to foster more joined up policy working in the North, boost business activity and work towards a more integrated transport network, and increased focus on the role of RDAs (Giovannini, 2016, p. 167; Nurse, 2015, p. 690). Moreover, in the latter years of Labour, in line with global trends, the city region became the key focus in thinking on devolution in England (Ayres et al, 2018, pp. 854-855; Giovannini, 2016, p. 167; Morgan, 2007, p. 1243). This can be seen to represent a growing focus on economic development and competition (Morgan, 2007, p. 1244). In 2009, Labour also introduced the combined authority model, whereby 'local authorities associate voluntarily for the purpose of taking over particular responsibilities that are beyond their individual jurisdictional or technical competence' (Parr, 2020, p. 8). These shifts would prove significant to the devolution agenda pursued by successive Conservative-led governments since 2010.

Labour's approach to regional governance in England can be seen to have given recognition to the North as a distinct political space to some degree. Although Labour's English regional devolution agenda was national in scope, and London proved to be the main beneficiary of it, there is evidence that some special attention was paid to the North.

Initiatives such as the Northern Way, and the choice of the North East as the first region for the ultimately doomed regional assemble project highlight this. Yet, on the whole, and in particular following the failure of the regional assembly agenda in 2004, Labour's approach to regional governance can be seen to have been centre-driven, largely focused on economics, and technocratic in nature (Ayres et al, 2018, p. 855).

7.4. Current Approaches to Devolution

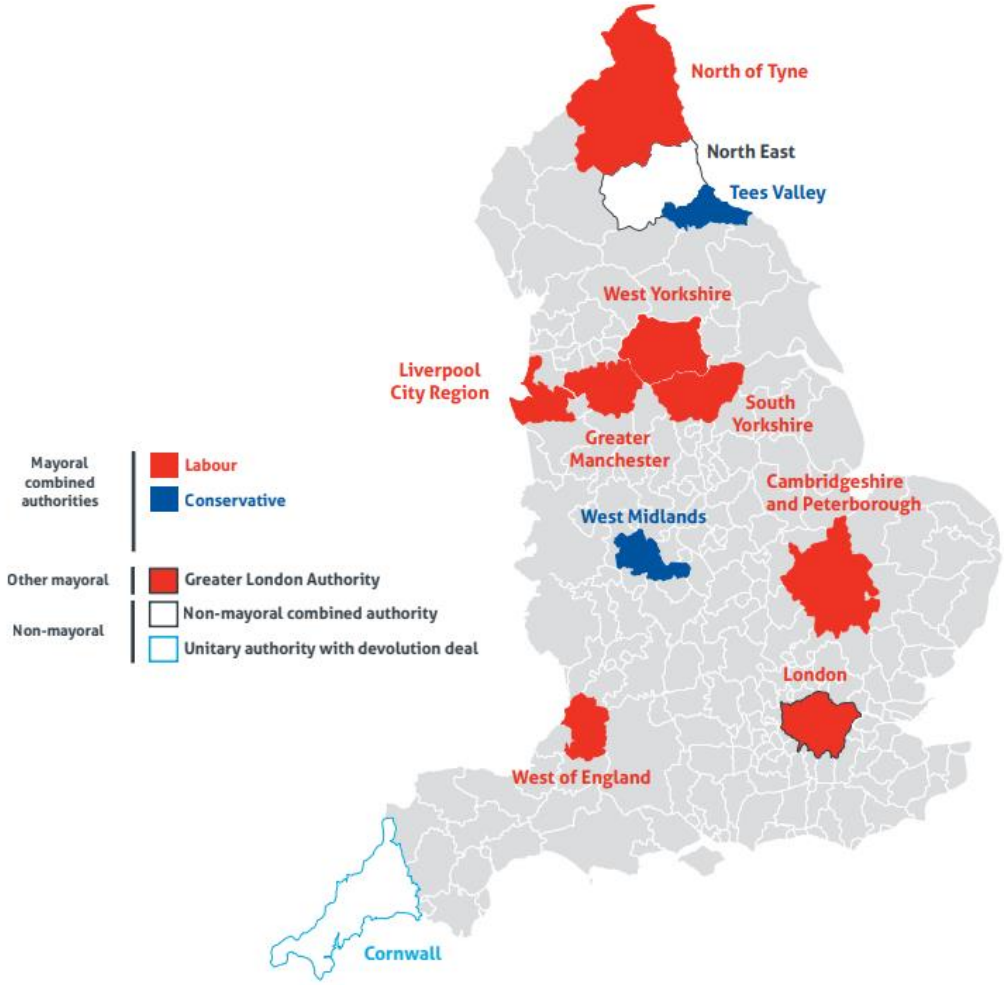
On coming to power in 2010, the Conservative-led coalition continued as Labour left off, focusing on the city region as the prime space for regional devolution (Sandford, 2019a, p. 9). However, the way in which the Coalition government pursued this regional devolution agenda differed from Labour's approach in practical terms. First, the coalition government replaced RDAs with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), non-statutory bodies, made up of stakeholders from local authorities and business (Sandford, 2019a, p. 9; Giovannini, 2016, p. 168). They are eligible for substantial growth funding but via the process of competitive bids to central government (Sandford, 2019a, p. 9). The replacement of RDAs with LEPs owed much to the coalition government's increased focus on the city-region scale and 'functional economic areas' (Nurse, 2015, p. 690). In part, this was driven by perceptions that Labours RDA regions were an 'expensive bureaucracy, which did not reflect local identities, lacked democratic accountability, and local ownership by LAs and partners' (Marlow, 2019, p. 140). That there were 39 English LEPs compared to just 9 RDAs highlights the shift towards lower regional scales.

Next, the Coalition pursued a series of 'city deals'. These 'city deals' were 'bespoke' agreements between central government and local authorities that involved 'giving cities greater control over some aspects of public expenditure on economic development' (Cox, 2016a, p. 566). As part of this agenda, the government encouraged the formation of combined authorities covering city regions, first in Manchester in 2011, followed by Leeds, Liverpool, Newcastle and Sheffield in 2014 (Nurse, 2015, p. 691). The focus on

'city-deals' was then overtaken by a new focus on 'devolution deals' (Ayres et al, 2018, p. 855). As part of this focus on 'devolution deals', significant attention was given to the creation and roll out of Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) (Ayres et al, 2018, p. 855). This agenda gained fresh impetus following the Conservative victory in the 2015 General Election and the passing of the Local Government Devolution Bill (Giovannini, 2016, pp. 168-169). There is a perception that the Conservative government under Theresa May was less enthusiastic about devolution and was largely preoccupied with Brexit (Roberts, 2020, p. 998). Nevertheless, several MCAs did come into existence during May's time in office and negotiations on deals elsewhere began.

At present there are nine Mayoral Combined Authorities in England, six of which are in the North. That Northern areas have so far been the chief recipients of devolution deals suggests that there may have been some element of the recognition of the greater need for decentralisation in the North for some of the reasons outlined above and in the previous chapter. Jonathan Werren (Interview), Director of the think tank Localis, suggested that in his experience of dealing with local leadership, there was a much 'greater appetite for deals in the North'.

Figure 7.1 - Combined Authorities in England



Source: Paun, A. et al. 2022. How metro mayors can help level up England.

In recent years, however, there has been a growing focus on rolling devolution out across the country. In part, this may be the result of initial devolution deals in the North being framed as being closely related to the Northern Powerhouse agenda (Osborne, 2014). Whereas, as we have seen, the shift to Levelling Up is framed as being a countrywide initiative, and greater devolution is highlighted as one of the core tenets of that agenda. Indeed, the Levelling Up White Paper speaks of the need to 'empower local leaders and communities, especially in those places lacking local agency', and pledges that by '2030, every part of England that wants one will have a devolution deal with powers at or

approaching the highest level of devolution and a simplified, long-term funding settlement' (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities., 2022, p. xviii).

As part of this shift of seeking to roll out devolution all across the country, there has been an increased focus on county deals, particularly in more rural areas (Paun et al, 2021, p. 1). As we will explore in more depth below, the dynamic in such areas often tends to be different to that in more urban authority areas. As such, Boris Johnson (2021b) has spoken of the 'need to re-write the rulebook' in order to provide 'new deals for the counties', stating that the government will not be 'proceeding with a one size fits all template'. This may be viewed as a pragmatic and flexible approach, yet it is also indicative of the 'scattergun' nature of English devolution to date, marked by numerous different initiatives, a deal-based approach, and multiple geographic focuses (Sandford, 2020). For some, 'the Conservative government's vision of English devolution has never been coherent' (Warner et al., 2021, p. 2).

The Labour Party's stance on English devolution has also been far from clear over its last twelve years in opposition. As highlighted in Chapter 4, there is a sense that Labour lost ground to the Conservatives on the issue of English devolution in the first half of the 2010s. Chapter 4 also noted that under the Corbyn leadership, John McDonell in particular did speak about the merits and need for greater devolution, yet, details on how the party would pursue this were limited. Under Starmer, the pattern has been similar. Keir Stamer (2021, p. 24) has highlighted the highly centralised nature of the country and has stated that 'we will put power and control in the hands of the people, whether at work, in accessing public services, or over the decisions that affect their lives'. As yet, however, there have been very few specific policy proposals put forward by Labour that outline how it would further devolution across the country.

For some around the party there is scepticism about how far Labour in government would go with devolution. Andy Burnham (2021) has argued that 'Labour has been, at

best, lukewarm about English devolution'. John Denham (Interview), former Labour government minister, stated 'I don't think the Labour Party as a party has become a genuinely devolutionist party'. He added, 'I don't think Labour has yet got itself out of a mindset that says that government is about getting ministers in Whitehall who will run the country from Whitehall'.

7.4.1. Geography

We will now move on to look at some of the specific issues and themes pertinent to current debates around devolution in the North. To begin with geography, Sandford (2019b, p. 29) notes that in many discussions about devolution in England over the past decade 'debate over the appropriate geography for devolution deals has been muted'. This is largely true at the national level. However, there have been a number of examples across the North where geography has proved (or continues to prove) significant in the shaping of devolution deals. The initial phase of devolution deals across the North was largely focused on seemingly functional economic areas given the increased focus on the geography of city regions. Indeed, as Sandford (2019b, p. 29) notes, 'the impetus to devolve power' was aligned 'with concerns over the productivity and competitiveness of many English cities in comparative terms'. For some, the focus on the city region is sensible when looking to improve regional economies: 'if you seeking to achieve economic outcomes, you should, you should try and think in terms of economic unit' (Anonymous senior local government officer, Greater Manchester, Interview). This view chimes with the focus of the Northern Powerhouse agenda as described in Chapter 5.

In the North this approach has resulted in devolution deals in Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, South Yorkshire, and West Yorkshire that are largely seen to reflect some form of city region economic geography. Indeed, these deals largely reflect the geography of former Metropolitan Counties (Parr, 2020, p. 10; Townsend, 2019, p. 130). While not as clearly a distinct city region as the others, the Tees Valley mayoral

combined authority largely resembles the former non-metropolitan county of Cleveland, with the addition now of Darlington (Parr, 2020, p. 11). Meanwhile, given the problems of agreeing on a devolution deal in the North East (as discussed in more detail below), the North of Tyne mayoral combined authority has an unusual geography including rural Northumberland and Newcastle, but not neighbouring Gateshead.

While four out of the six existing devolution deals in the North can be seen to reflect some form of economic geography, there have been disputes about this. In no small part, this is due to the multitude of ways in which a functional economic region can be defined (Sandford, 2019, pp. 16-19). As such we have seen concerns raised by places feeling left out of what they see as their closest economic units.

Wallace Sampson (Interview), spoke of how Harrogate, while economically linked with West Yorkshire is out with the devolution deal there. Similarly, Toby Perkins (Interview), highlighted how some around Chesterfield felt strongly about not being included within the Sheffield City Region. Meanwhile, Robert Largan (Interview) highlighted that in his High Peak constituency, people have close economic links with both South Yorkshire and Greater Manchester, yet, as things stand are excluded from each and instead sandwiched between both deals. He suggested that there is a 'democratic deficit' in that his constituents are impacted by decisions taken in Greater Manchester and in South Yorkshire but cannot influence them.

Even in places which are included within regions that are seen to be economically functional, tensions can sometimes arise. Jonathan Guest (Interview) talked of how some people in places like Doncaster and Barnsley may feel a sense of disconnect from Sheffield. Similarly, Rother Valley MP, Alexander Stafford (Interview), suggested that 'down here in South Yorkshire, there's a lot of scepticism that "well, Sheffield gets all the money, all the resources, power, we're just sort of added on extras, if you like"'. Stafford noted 'we don't want the hinterlands to be neglected. In West Yorkshire, several

commentators have highlighted similar sentiments, notably in Wakefield in terms of its relationship to Leeds (Geraldine Scott Interview; Payne, 2021, p. 153). In part, these sentiments may be down to local rivalries and parochialism, but they may also owe something to the idea that 'regional hinterlands' and areas outside of city centres feel 'more and more left behind' compared to their cities (McInroy and Lloyd-Goodwin, 2020, p. 7). This is resonant of the town-city divide frames highlighted in Chapter 4. Further to this, some highlighted that city region deals take little notice of distinct rural challenges (Giles Archibald Interview).

Nevertheless, some have called for the economic geography of devolution deals to be centred and strengthened further (Jeffrey and Swinney, 2020; Lord Sainsbury, 2021). Jeffrey and Swinney (2020, pp. 3-4) of the Centre for Cities argue that 'the alignment of political geography in England with local economic geography' is essential. They suggest that 'what is needed is the creation of local government institutions that better match the geographies over which people work and live their lives, that have the capacity to make better use of existing powers, and that are well placed and able to take on new ones'. To achieve this, Jeffrey and Swinney (2020, p. 5), set and call for the implementation of an extensive devolution framework that would see the role out of devolution to so-called functional economic areas all across England.

Yet, further to the issues of defining a functional economic area, as touched on above, there are other concerns regarding centring economic geography in determining the shape of devolution deals. Most common amongst these is the issue of identity. Mycock (2016, p. 542) argues that the focus of functional economic areas and city regions has 'encouraged local authorities to coalesce into a range of new spatial arrangements which often lack historical lineage and are thus 'artificial' themselves'. Similarly, Connor McGinn (Interview), MP for St Helens, speaking largely of the nearby Liverpool City Region, noted that it is 'a political and an economic construct' but suggested that 'people

don't live their lives in these constructs', and that 'there's no discernible affinity' in the region.

In contrast, however, Roberts (2020, pp. 1001-1002) suggests that some of the existing combined authorities across the North are beginning to, or at least have the potential to, become spaces of strong identity attachment, and highlights several examples of 'place shaping' approaches being taken in places like Greater Manchester and Tees Valley. There was some disagreement over this process among interviewees. An anonymous senior local government officer, Greater Manchester (Interview) suggested that 'what the Greater Manchester experience demonstrates is that little by little and over time, if you can get the politics right, you build the culture'. In contrast, Paul Salveson (Interview) argued that increasingly Greater Manchester becomes shortened to Manchester, this, in his view, undermines the role of other places in the city region and becomes 'a way of actually stealing people's identity'.

When it comes to the role of identity in debates about administrative geographies in England, as Sandford (2019b, p. 25) notes, the place of traditional county areas is often centred. For some, 'our counties are natural and fundamental local government structures across large parts of England. They are, and should be regarded as, the most obvious building blocks upon which the Government can build its devolutionary agenda and achieve its levelling up ambitions' (Henham Strategy, 2020, p. 6). In contrast to other potential geographies, it is argued that there is greater public understanding of what a county is and the public can easily identify with counties. (Henham Strategy, 2020, p. 7; Nick King Interview).

County identity in the North and its role in governance arrangements was highlighted by numerous interviewees. In Yorkshire numerous interviewees spoke in support of the One Yorkshire devolution proposal. Chief amongst these was Bob Buxton (Interview), Leader of the Yorkshire Party. But One Yorkshire enjoyed cross-party support. Conservative MP,

Alec Shelbrooke (Interview) stated 'I'm disappointed that it's a West Yorkshire mayor and not greater Yorkshire mayor - I think it's to focus down into just one area, it's not looking at things holistically'. The Conservative Leader of North Yorkshire Country Council, Carl Les (Interview) noted the almost county-wide, cross party support for it, suggesting our Yorkshireness overcame the party politics. Meanwhile, Labour Council Leaders including Susan Hinchliffe in Bradford and Stephen Brady in Hull also spoke of how they have been keen advocates for the One Yorkshire proposal.

The picture was somewhat different in Lancashire. Some advocated for Lancashire-wide devolution, based on the historic boundaries, including Manchester and Liverpool (Paul Salveson Interview). More commonly, however, differences within the county were highlighted. MP for Pendle, Andrew Stephenson (Interview) noted 'the challenge in places like Lancashire is as much as we fight with Yorkshire, we actually fight ourselves as much'. Similarly, Lancashire County Council Leader, Geoff Driver (Interview), noted that to get some in Lancashire 'to look county wide' was 'an impossible task'. This sense of disconnect in the county was illustrated by then Lancaster Council Leader, Erica Lewis (Interview), who noted that 'Preston's only 15-20 minutes by train, but we still feel that often decisions that are made [there] by the county council forget that there's anything north of Preston in Lancashire'.

Debates around the geography of devolution in the Humber area are indicative of the tensions that exist between functional economic geographies and county geographies. On the North bank of the river there is much appetite for a pan-Humber devolution deal that would include Hull and towns such as Grimsby and Scunthorpe in North East Lincolnshire (Stephen Brady, Interview; Diana Johnson, Interview). South of the river, however, there was greater support for a Lincolnshire-wide county deal, 'from the Humber down to the Wash' (Philip Jackson, Interview). Hull North MP, Dianna Johnson (Interview) argued that a pan-Humber deal would be centred on the 'economic

drivers for devolution, and jobs and skills, and all of that'. A Lincolnshire country deal, by contrast, would, in her view be a 'harking back to… a Lincolnshire way of life, which seems to involve growing peas, and agriculture, and farming, much more than it does about perhaps the future'. As well as the evident economic-cultural tension, the party political dynamics whereby Hull is largely Labour dominated, whereas the south of the Humber is increasingly Conservative leaning, may not have helped proceedings.

Above the county level, there is an appetite amongst some for regional governance in the North, at a level at or similar to the existing statistical regions. Shaw and Robinson (2019, p. 854) argue that 'England is too big, and our current city-regions and Combined Authorities are too small, to allow disadvantaged regions to compete effectively in a global economy', thus, the regional tier is the optimal level of governance. However, as Parr (2020, pp. 11-12) notes, historically there has long been an aversion to regional governance in England. Nevertheless, he notes that regional bodies have existed, most recently, as detailed, with Labour's RDAs.

For advocates of regional governance, the failure to fully embed the regional tier under Labour, and its subsequent dismantling since 2010 is a cause for lament. Shaw and Robinson (2019, p. 845) note that 'the former regional level has simply withered away'. As a result, looking at the North East especially, they argue that the region today 'does not have a voice; it has virtually no power and little influence'. This view was not common amongst interviewees, however. While there was some support for much more powers and cooperation over certain policy areas at the regional level (Bill Adam, Interview; Will Tanner, Interview), only a few spoke specifically about the case for regional assemblies (Laura Gordon, Interview; Mark Burdon, Interview). Others were strongly opposed to this approach, rooting their opposition in the rejection of the North East Assembly in the 2004 referendum (Chris Rowell, Interview).

Finally, when it comes to the geography of governance, it is the case that public discussion about the case for some form of pan-Northern governance arrangement that would include the whole region is virtually non-existent. Indeed, despite the existence of pan-Northern initiatives like the Northern Powerhouse and the Convention for the North and bodies like TfN and the NP11, and the fact that Northern media and leaders increasingly cooperate to politicise the region as a whole (as highlighted throughout this work), there appears to be little appetite for a formal pan-Northern level of government.

Some, however, have floated the idea previously. For example, Lord Prescott (2015) has argued that 'One of the reasons for the north's inability to strategically plan ahead, compared with London, is its lack of power'. In contrast to the capital, he notes that 'The north has a hotchpotch of local councils, elected Mayors, city regions and combined authorities'. He argues that 'too many voices lack clarity' and calls for 'a body that sees all three [Northern statistical region] areas working together as a super region'.

While the vast majority of research participants were in favour of continuing and bolstering pan-Northern cooperation and some were keen on more pan-Northern powers in some specific policy areas, only a small number talked of the potential of pan-Northern governance. Lord Kerslake (Interview) talked of the need to 'consolidate the various partnerships into a kind of single kind of collaboration across the North'. Stephen Houghton (Interview) talked of the need for 'something pan-Northern'. Bill Adams (Interview), of the TUC, talked in similarly vaguely terms about some kind of Northern Assembly. The most specific ideas on pan-Northern governance were offered by Ed Cox (Interview). He spoke of the need for some form of pan-Northern 'political forum' which would have 'some kind of constitutional basis', this would be coupled with a regular 'Northern citizen's assembly'. While more detailed than other pan-Northern proposals, Cox did suggest that any form of governance at this level would have relatively limited remit 'around things like transport and energy and, inward investment'.

7.4.2. The Role of Metro Mayors

We will now move on to explore to look more specifically at debates around the details of the existing devolution deals across the North. To start with the role of metro mayors, many have highlighted that there are positives associated with having the position of metro mayors within the current approach to devolution. The then minister in the Levelling Up department, Neil O'Brien (2021) has spoken of the importance of mayors in proving strong local leadership, and being 'local champions'. For some, there is a sense that metro mayors, being democratically elected figureheads, makes them a more 'visible' and 'accountable' form of local leadership (Jeffrey, 2019).

As has been highlighted in previous chapters, the visibility of particular metro mayors during the Covid-19 pandemic was notable. Warner et al. (2021, pp. 6-7) note that many metro mayors did enjoy a 'new-found visibility [in] 2020, as they battled Whitehall for resources when regional restrictions were tightened across the north of England'. Similarly, Blakeley (2020) argued during the pandemic that 'the political leadership being demonstrated by combined authority mayors across the North is all the more striking in its contrast to the absence of clear and coherent leadership from the centre'. She suggested that 'metro-mayors are proving their worth by using their collective voice to draw attention to the plight of their city-regions'. Yet, while it is the case that some metro mayors did become increasingly prominent during the pandemic, it remained that they were 'largely frozen out of the policy-making process' with 'uniform rules' continuing to be 'pre-scribed' by central government (Warner et al., 2021, pp. 6-7).

This is perhaps illustrative of the limited powers available to metro-mayors. We will discuss the powers and resources available under the current approach to devolution in more detail below, but when it comes to metro mayors specifically, there is much consensus that many lack significant 'hard' powers but do have a great deal of so-called 'soft' powers. 'Hard' powers tend to refer to statutory powers and resources that metro

mayors have at their disposal, while 'soft' powers refer to the wider 'symbolic aspects of their role' such as their ability to convene and to 'raise the flag for their area' (Roberts, 2020, p. 1005). Indeed, Andy Steet in (Pidd, 2021), the West Midland metro mayor, has noted that while mayors may not have significant hard power, they have 'huge soft power', including 'the power to convene [and] bring people together'. This, he suggests, is 'actually the most important part of [the] job'.

This idea of 'soft power', and of metro mayors serving as a voice for their areas was highlighted by numerous interviewees. It was suggested that mayors act as powerful 'figureheads' (Carl Les. Interview; Ed Cox, Interview), that have a unique ability to both convene other local leaders but also speak up for their areas nationality, both in the media and in Westminster and Whitehall (Arianna Giovannini, Interview; Conor McGinn, Interview; David Collins, Interview; Geraldine Scott, Interview; Stephen Brady, Interview). Conservative MP, Andrew Stephenson (Interview), highlighted that several former parliamentary colleagues such as Andy Burnham and Steve Rotheram had chosen to leave Westminster in order to serve as metro mayors. This, he suggested, is because they recognised the 'significance of the role and the significant power that [they] would have becoming the metro mayor for the area'.

For some, the significant soft powers of the metro mayors were seen to make them much more powerful than other local politicians, including local authority leaders (Chris Rowell, Interview; Donna Hall, Interview; Philip Jackson, Interview; Robert Largan, Interview). Geoff Driver (Interview) noted 'I can sometimes feel a great deal of envy for the fact that the elected mayors and they can speak with much more authority about their own area than I can'. Even as the then chair of the West Yorkshire Combined Authority, prior to the election of the metro mayor, Susan Hinchcliffe (Interview) remarked 'as a Leader and Chair of a Combined Authority… [it] can be a bit irritating because I just

don't same media profile [as a metro mayor]. Thus, this 'soft power' and profile of mayors is seen as being a key positive.

Beyond this, however, the ways in which metro mayors have exercised their varied and limited hard powers has been seen as crucial to their success. Giovannini (2021, p. 482) notes that metro mayors have utilised the 'formal, soft and symbolic powers; bargaining and transaction skills; and the performative element of their political leadership' in different ways, and to varying success. She highlights both Ben Houchen and Andy Burnham as being particularly successful examples (Giovannini, 2021, pp. 482-483).

While the visibility and success of both Houchen and Burnham is notable, it must be noted that Burnham presides over the most advanced of the English Devolution deals in terms of powers and resources in Greater Manchester. Houchen, meanwhile, has served as the governing party's one and only Northern metro mayor which has likely improved his capacity to get things done. As Giovannini (2021, p. 482) argues, the line between the Houchen's 'soft power and old-style pork barrelling' has at times been 'blurred'.

Indeed, this party-political dimension of the metro mayors has been one of the key criticisms levelled against the model. Some have suggested that a key driving factor behind George Osborne's initial push for metro mayors was the hope of seeing Conservative inroads into traditional Labour areas, particularly in the North (Giovannini, 2021, p. 475; Roberts, 2020, p. 998). Yet, at present, Ben Houchen is the only successful example of this. The extent to which the Conservatives' wider Northern tilt that began with the Northern Powerhouse agenda and the devolution process, and has continued to varying extents since, played a role in Conservative successes in the North at the 2019 general election was discussed in Chapter 5. While it may have had some impact, particularly in places where the Conservatives have been increasingly visible such as Teesside, it is likely that the success of 2019 owed more to other issues, most notably Brexit.

On the other side of the debate, Conservative leader of Lancashire County Council, Geoff Driver, highlighted that despite being in favour of mayoral devolution himself, several Conservative colleagues were opposed because an elected Lancashire mayor will always 'always be Labour' and thereby weaken the party's position in the county. This partisan view of devolution is again noticeable with several actors on the right having argued that Labour's metro mayors are 'not always as constructive as they might be' (Nick King Interview) and that they're often 'too politicised and working against the government' (Alec Shelbrooke, Interview).

Others are sceptical of metro mayors for different reasons. Graeme Miller (Interview), leader of Sunderland council, noted that part of his opposition to Sunderland being included in the North East devolution deal was because of the position of the mayor. He invoked the 2004 North East referendum arguing that voters then 'didn't see the need for an extra level of bureaucracy'. He argued that this was still the case and that devolution to the combined authority level without the need for a metro mayor was preferable.

A similar sentiment is often apparent when it comes to devolution at the country level (King and Ives, 2019, p. 19). Erica Lewis (Interview) argued that 'I don't know that an elected mayor works the same way in a large rural county'. There was a sense, as Will Tanner (Interview) highlighted, that while the boundaries of metro mayors are clearly defined in city region areas, this, he suggested, was different in counties. Thus, he also took the view that every county deal probably does not need a mayor. Similarly, Andrew Stephenson (Interview) suggested that 'most people in Lancashire would find the idea of a mayor, an elected mayor for Lancashire something they wouldn't want… [because] Lancashire is a very big area [and] it doesn't have a central focus point.

Further to the role of metro mayors specifically, the impact of the combined authority model of devolution was discussed by some interviewees. Some highlighted the positives of this approach. Matt Garlick (Interview) of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority

suggested that it has 'ensured that there is better cooperation between leaders and between local visions', suggesting that they now 'work together better and can coalesce around things in a better way'. Similarly, Chris Rowell (Interview) of the Tees Valley Combined Authority noted that in his region the five local authority leaders have increasingly banded together.

For some, the mayoral combined authority model to devolution has precipitated a new, more positive approach to politics. Burnham (2021) has argued that in Greater Manchester they have been 'using devolution to forge a new way of doing politics: bottom-up, more participatory, more connected'. Similarly, Ben Houchen (in Balls, 2020b) has suggested that devolution allows politicians to move away from 'a one-size fits all', more ideological approach. Instead, he argues that Conservatives in Teesside have been able to adopt a different, more 'pragmatic', approach to politics. Perhaps it is unsurprising that the two metro mayors who have been identified as being the most successful out of the current approach to devolution are most positive about it.

Despite these perceptions, some interviewees were more sceptical of the combined authority model. For some, one of the biggest issues with the model concerned scrutiny and accountability (Marcus Johns, Interview). Labour's Ian Mearns (Interview) noted, 'the problem that I've got with the mayoral model is, where are the lines of accountability? Who holds mayors to account? Ok, the electorate once every four years, but in the intervening period, who does it?'. He contrasted the current metro mayor approach with the longer established model in London where the London Assembly, in Mearns' view, serves to hold the mayor to account.

Another critique levelled against the current mayoral combined authority model was that in some cases it serves to suck up power from lower level authorities. Toby Perkins (Interview) questioned whether 'the government have they really devolved a lot from Westminster, or have they just devolved stuff from the council'. Meanwhile, the leader of

the Yorkshire Party, Bob Buxton (Interview), argued that under the existing model of devolution in West Yorkshire, 'most of the power is being sucked up from the five up authorities, the five councils'. This, he argued, is 'the opposite of devolution'.

When it comes to the role of mayoral combined authorities in speaking up for the North as a whole, while it has been highlighted elsewhere in the thesis that Northern metro mayors, alongside other bodies, have often united in politicising the region, on a day-to-day basis several interviewees noted that the chief focus of metro mayor was, unsurprisingly, on their own areas. For example, Diana Johnson remarked, 'Andy Burnham is doing a great job in Manchester, but he is very focused, rightly so, on the North West and Greater Manchester'. Similarly, Geoff Driver (Interview) stated, 'I get on very well with Andy Burnham and Steve Rotheram but, you know, they're looking out for their own area'. Thus, there was a sense that pan-Northern collaboration is utilised when seen as appropriate, but it is not key to most metro mayors' approach.

7.4.3. Powers and Resources

As has been highlighted, all of the devolution deals across England differ in terms of the powers and resources that places have at their disposal. This is due to each devolution deal emerging from negotiations between central government and local leaders (Shutt and Liddle, 2019, p. 200). For some, this asymmetric nature of English devolution is the right approach in that it is indicative of different devolution deals reflecting the different needs of different areas (Andrew Stephenson, Interview; Chris Rowell, Interview). For others, the bespoke nature of the government's devolution deals has resulted in differentiated, asymmetric, and frankly unfair political geographies across England (Ayres et al, 2018, p. 855; Mycock, 2016, p. 543; Sandford, 2017, p. 77).

Yet, regardless of the area in question, for many, the powers and resources available for devolved mayoral combined authorities across the North are seen as inadequate in meeting the needs of the region. This lack of powers was highlighted by numerous

interviewees. For Lord Kerslake (Interview), devolution across the North has been 'modest'. As such, he suggested that 'it's probably reaching the limits of its effectiveness' in terms of what I can achieve with the existing levers. Similarly, John Denham (Interview) described it as 'pretty meagre stuff in terms of what's actually being really delivered or allowed to take place'. Some who work within mayoral combined authority equally noted the limited powers. Jonathan Guest (Interview) of the South Yorkshire Combined Authority, noted that the 'powers of devolution are so limited, so centralised'. Meanwhile, Mick Bowman (Interview), advisor to the North of Tyne metro mayor noted how their region has only a limited form of devolution. Bowman contrasted this with the powers that other leaders such as Sadiq Khan in London, or Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester, have at their disposal.

Often, however, the limitations of devolution in England are contrasted with perceived cases of successful devolution in other nations. King and Ives (2019, p. 19) of the centre-right think tank, the Centre for Policy Studies, write in support of metro mayors but note that 'most commentators would agree that they are limited in their powers and potential impact when compared to their international peers'. Ed Cox (Interview) stated that devolution in the North is 'terribly partial, and piecemeal, and tiny in respect of what other countries have'. Some contrasted it with federal models elsewhere (Northern combined authority economic advisor Interview). Others suggested that English regions should have power more akin to the devolved parliaments in Scotland and Wales (Bob Buxton, Interview).

Because of the lack of power in the hands of devolved authorities in England, some have argued that the process we have seen over the last decade does not amount to devolution at all (Raikes et al 2018, p. 49; Hambleton, 2017, p. 6). Hannah Richmond (Interview) of the CBI made this point, noting 'it's quite hard to measure the success of devolution in England because it kind of feels more delegation than devolution'. An economic advisor

at a Northern mayoral combined authority (Interview) similarly noted how many powers are merely 'delegated' or 'shared with agencies of national government' rather than devolved. There was a sense that 'governments always are reluctant to devolve real decision making away from themselves because they don't want to lose power and influence' (Wallace Sampson, Interview).

As such, Sandford (2019a, p. 13) argues that only a 'relatively small' number of commitments within the current deals in England can actually be defined as 'devolution'. Moreover, the extent to which responsibilities vary deal by deal means that some areas such as Tees Valley and North of Tyne deals, 'exhibit substantially fewer 'devolved' powers' than others such as Greater Manchester (Sandford, 2019a, p. 13). So, while it appears that some devolution of powers to the newly formed Mayoral Combined Authorities has taken place, it should not, as Sandford (2019a, p. 13) notes, be 'overstated'. Indeed, according to Shutt and Liddle (2019, p. 199), this lack of power in the hands of mayoral combined authorities means that they 'are hamstrung in just how much they can achieve in re-balancing the national economy'.

Moreover, even with the limited powers that they have at their disposal, mayoral combined authorities face constraints on the extent to which they can exercise them in novel ways for their areas. Sandford (2019c, p. 5) identifies a number of structural constraints which taken together, he suggests, 'mean that mayors often do not have the means to deliver expansive policy change'. Similarly, Warner et al (2021, pp. 321-322) argue that the 'combination of centralisation and complexity limits the capacity of local actors to respond to localised challenges in bespoke ways'. As we will explore in more detail in the next section on resources, the existence of these constraints on devolved powers is indicative of the charge that the government views metro mayors principally as 'local delivery partners of choice for central government initiatives' rather than independent actors in their own right (Sandford, 2019c, pp. 3-4).

When it comes to the financial resources that mayoral combined authorities have at their disposal, the picture is much the same; it is asymmetric and limited. English devolution is marked by high levels of financial dependency on the centre (Raikes et al, 2018, p. 49; Seaford et al, 2020, pp. 5-6; Warner et al, 2021, p. 322). Fiscal devolution has been extremely limited or non-existent despite there being wide-ranging support for various forms of it (Alex Sobel, Interview; Ed Cox, Interview, John McDonell, Interview; Marcus Johns, Interview; McInroy and Lloyd-Goodwin, 2020, pp. 9-10; Warner et al., 2021, p. 2). As such, mayoral combined authorities are merely left managing funds handed down from Whitehall. This, Warner et al (2021, p. 324) argue, leaves metro mayors 'as the figureheads of 'grant coalitions' at the mercy of central policy priorities rather than autonomous regional actors with executive power'.

As with the powers available to devolved authorities in England, the resources at their disposal vary widely according to the deal in question. In the North of Tyne, for example, powers and resources are much more limited than elsewhere. The North of Tyne metro mayor, Jamie Driscoll (in Hill, 2019), noted that 'it's not a brilliant deal', adding, 'I mean, £20m a year – what do you expect me to do with that?'. Indeed, Graeme Miller (Interview), Sunderland Council Leader, noted that as well as being opposed to the position of the metro mayor, the issue of funding was also key to him opposing a wider North East devolution deal. Put simply, he stated 'it wasn't giving us enough money and it wasn't giving us enough power'.

As with the policy constraints highlighted above, there is a widespread view that the financial constraints of English devolution are a purposeful design feature that serve to ensure that mayoral combined authorities operate within a specific national policy framework. This centrally imposed constraint has been conceptualised as a form of 'metagovernance', defined as 'the governance of governance networks conducted by the central state as a privileged (although not uncontested) site of political authority' (Bailey

and Wood, 2017, p. 968). As such, English devolution can be viewed as conforming 'to a 'local delivery of central objectives' model of devolution' (Bailey and Wood, 2017, pp. 973-974).

It is argued that this centrally driven vision of devolution is rooted primarily within the particular economic approach set out most notably by the 2010-2015 coalition government. Thus, Tomaney (2016, p. 550) argues that the English devolution agenda is driven ultimately by a theory of economic development that fosters inter-urban competition and economic concentration, tolerates and indeed even celebrates high levels of socio-economic inequality'. Moreover, this driving theory of devolution 'is comfortable with some groups and places being losers and locks in enduring austerity, most especially in the places that have borne the brunt of public expenditure cuts to date' (Tomaney, 2016, p. 550).

Indeed, the connection between English regional devolution and the austerity agenda cannot be ignored. Given that local authorities, and particularly those in towns and cities in the North, have been hardest hit by government cuts, as highlighted in Chapter 4, some have taken a cynical view of the handing of fiscal responsibility to newly formed local and regional tiers of government. McInroy and Lloyd-Goodwin (2020, pp. 2-3) argue that devolution has been 'embedded into an economic model prescribed by the Treasury and Whitehall, who continue to this day to hold all the cards'. Moreover, they argue that 'instead of giving local areas the proper powers to deliver prosperity, devolution has been used to pass the responsibility to deliver austerity'.

Gray and Barford (2018, p. 546) suggest that a key driver of the Conservative devolution agenda has been shifting 'some economic and social responsibilities down to city-regions'. Similarly, Hambleton (2017, p. 6) argues that 'the Government is more interested in defusing blame for their misguided public spending cuts to local

government than in empowering elected local authorities'. This was a view shared by some interviewees (Ian Mearns, Interview, Neil McInroy, Interview).

7.4.4. Top-down Devolution

Many of these issues concerning the power and resources available to mayoral combined authorities and the significant asymmetry between different deals across the North, are the result of the top-down, centre-driven nature of English devolution. the process of English regional devolution in the last decade has been shaped by central government driven 'elite-to-elite negotiations' with little to no room for public consultation or debate (Lee, 2016, p. 17; Mycock, 2016, p. 541). When it comes to democracy and accountability, it is noted that 'the process of devolution 'deal-making' has been far from transparent' (Cox, 2016a, pp. 569-570). In terms of asymmetry, as Newman et al (2021, p. 20) note, 'ad-hoc negotiations… have created huge complexities and inequalities in the various powers of different places'.

The top-down nature of the process is apparent in that, as touched on above, the current 'devolution deals' in England are largely akin to contract-style agreements between central government and local public bodies, centred around pledges to pursue agreed outcomes in discrete policy areas where a common interest can be identified (Sandford, 2017, p. 64). As such, Sandford (2017, p. 64) argues that 'issues of governance, accountability and geography, whilst not ignored, have taken second place to the imperative of effective local policy delivery on behalf of the Government'.

This inflexibility in the process was clear from the beginning when, in 2015, the then Chancellor, George Osborne, stated that 'I will not impose this model on anyone: but neither will I settle for less' (Osborne in Ayres et al, 2018, p. 855). Subsequently, areas which have sought different devolution arrangements to those on offer from central government have not been granted any deals (Ayres et al, 2018, p. 855). As Hambleton (2017, p. 6) points out, central government ultimately can pick and choose which

localities receive devolution, what the criteria are, what the powers and responsibilities devolved are, and what the funding formula is. Again, that central government has been so keen to impose its preferred form of devolution only suggests that the chief concern is not the handing of power to local or regional tiers but the advancement of its own political and economic goals (Tomaney, 2016, p. 550).

A number of examples from the North of England neatly highlight these flaws in the current approach to devolution. For instance, there are a number of accounts of the way in which local leaders in Manchester have been particularly willing to forgo democratic accountability in order to push through the 'Devo Manc' deal with central government. In interviews with local leaders in Greater Manchester, Kenealy (2016, p. 578) found that 'there were palpable fears that they might lose control of a public debate and thus not get the prize that they have been seeking for so many years [greater powers from central government]' if public consultation occurred. Similarly, Deas (2014, p. 2308) highlights that the priority for leaders in Greater Manchester has above all else been on 'getting things done' on devolution in whatever way possible.

The merits of this approach are questionable, however, because as Haughton et al (2016, p. 366) point out, while 'Manchester leaders have been active in helping shape the policy landscape, in effect the devolution settlement has been imposed from above, with the rewards going to those who can dance most credibly to the tune of central government'. They point out that there is a fine line between towing the central government line in order to receive some financial benefits and enhanced powers locally, or merely being handed the responsibility of delivering central government's austerity agenda, gaining increased discretion only over how dwindling funds are allocated (Haughton et al, 2016, pp. 366-367).

The case of the North East also highlights the top-down, take it or leave it approach to devolution in England. The North East Combined Authority (NECA) was established in

2014 and consisted of the seven local authorities of Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, South Tyneside and Sunderland (Lempriere and Lowndes 2019, p. 154). However, when the NECA agreement could not be reached between all seven local authorities and central government on the creation of a Mayoral Combined Authority, Newcastle, Northumberland and North Tyneside opted to do their own Mayoral deal with central government resulting in the North of Tyne Mayoral Combined Authority (NoTCA) (Lempriere and Lowndes 2019, p. 154).

Lempriere and Lowndes (2019, p. 155) suggest that the failure to secure a deal for the whole NECA was chiefly because of disagreements about the central government driven and private nature of the negotiation process, and differences of opinion amongst local authorities leaders on the imposed requirement of a directly elected Mayor (Lempriere and Lowndes 2019, p. 155). Ultimately, they suggest that 'the nested character of the process – whereby institutional developments at 'higher' levels shaped local outcomes – further constrained the room for manoeuvre by a fragmented local leadership' (Lempriere and Lowndes 2019, p. 163). When it comes to the current geography of regional devolution in the North East, as a result of the failure of the NECA deal and the creation of the North of Tyne mayoral combined authority, as well as the previously agreed mayoral combined authority deal in the Tees Valley, the state of local government in the North East is now extremely patchwork and asymmetric (Lempriere and Lowndes 2019, pp. 154-155).

Finally, the devolution process in Yorkshire can also be seen to highlight the inflexible, top-down nature of the English regional devolution agenda. While South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire now have mayoral combined authorities, and a deal has also been agreed in North Yorkshire, there was much debate concerning central government's rejection of initial proposals backed by many local leaders across the country for a devolution deal for

the whole of Yorkshire, often referred to as One Yorkshire (West Yorkshire Combined Authority, 2019).

Yorkshire leaders argued that such a deal would make sense as 'Yorkshire (and Humber) is a coherent and interconnected economic area', and Yorkshire as a whole is a recognisable 'brand' and holds greater attachment in terms of identity than the city-regional level (Steer Economic Development, 2018, pp. i-iii). Despite this, central government has refused to budge from its focus on the city-region level for local devolution deals and refused to countenance the One Yorkshire proposal. In rejecting the One Yorkshire devolution plan in February 2019 the then Housing, Communities and Local Government Secretary, James Brokenshire (in BBC, 2019) reasoned that the proposal did 'not meet our devolution criteria'. As Bradford Council Leader, Susan Hinchcliffe (Interview), put it 'we tried with the whole of Yorkshire. But we didn't really get anything back from them apart from "no, we don't really like that, because it doesn't really fit with our devolution vision"'. Evidently, there remains little room for local leaders to shape the regional devolution agenda in the North, or elsewhere in England for that matter.

The top-down, central government-led approach to devolution also means that some areas in the North remain left without any form of devolution entirely. For such areas, there is a sense that they're being 'left behind' (Roger Marsh, Interview). This sentiment was expressed by participants in Lancashire. There was a sense that 'things that can be done in other geographies that we can't do (Erica Lewis, Interview), and that as a result 'without a doubt we've lost out' (Geoff Driver, Interview). The lack of devolution was noted in parts of Chesire too (Conor McGinn, Interview), it was suggested that places such as Warrington were being 'left behind' (Matt Garlick, Interview). In East Yorkshire too, Diana Johnson (Interview) argued that while some parts of the North now have a strong voice, if you come over to East Yorkshire, there's a complete lack of voice.

As touched on above, the scope for devolution deals has become slightly more flexible in the last couple of years, most notably with the shift to county deals, some even without necessitating a mayor. The Levelling Up White Paper sets out a form of devolution framework aimed at delivering devolution to all areas of England that desire it by 2030 (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022, pp. 139-141). Much detail of how this will be utilised in practice, however, remains lacking.

Others have called for much clearer devolution frameworks (Jeffrey and Swinney, 2020; Paun et al, 2021, p. 2; UK2070 Commission, 2020, p. 66; Webb et al, 2022, p. 10). For Arianna Giovannini (Interview) such a framework should 'clearly set out what are the principles that underpin the process of devolution, [and what] power is available to all areas'. For Giovannini, it should have 'clear principles' but not be 'too prescriptive' and allow for flexibility. Indeed, for some such as John Denham (Interview), a flexible or 'messy' approach to a devolution framework is much more appropriate that a more rigid one as it provides more bespoke local arrangements that people can better identify with.

Beyond a clearer devolution framework, others have suggested that there should be much greater citizen involvement in the devolution process. Warner et al (2021, p. 329) argue that devolution 'should be a democratic process driven from the bottom up, connecting communities with local leaders and encompassing consultation, consensus and consideration'. Similarly, Webb et al (2022, p. 10), argue that any form of devolution framework ought to be 'co-produced with local leaders and communities and not imposed upon them'. Going further, McInroy and Lloyd-Goodwin (2020, p. 9) suggest that we need to hold 'a national constitutional convention, involving devolved nations, local government, metro mayors, Parliament, the business community, Trade Unions and civil society organisations' to determine the future of devolution. Diana Johnson (Interview) suggested that, in contrast to other places such as Scotland, there has never been an opportunity for the public to shape devolution in England.

Within these debates on the way in which the future of devolution should be shaped there is a tension between those who argue that devolution should remain flexible and accommodating to different local wishes and priorities, and those who would like to see greater uniformity imposed. For some, the '"well, you put together a proposal" approach' has resulted in 'uneven and confusing devolution' that leaves voters lacking 'a clear sense of what it is and isn't devolved' (Bush, 2021). This sentiment was not widely highlighted by interviewees, although Mick Bowman (Interview) did suggest that devolution would be more 'meaningful' if 'powers were pretty standardised' and there were 'wider powers across the piece'.

Another negative consequence of the top-down, proposal and bid focused nature of English devolution is that it fosters what many see as harmful competition between places. This was highlighted by several interviewees. Arianna Giovannini (Interview) spoke of devolution fostering 'competition rather than cooperation across the north'. Similarly, Roger Marsh (Interview) argued that 'the deal culture has served to further pit areas against one another'. For some, this is a purposefully divisive process, an attempt by central government to 'divide and rule' the North (Neil McInroy, Interview). Barnsley Council Leader Stephen Houghton (Interview) argued that 'Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool, Newcastle, York, Hull, Bradford, whatever, scrapping with each other to get the best out of the system… suits the government, it doesn't suit the North. For Alex Sobel (Interview), 'Northern regions fighting with each other is a bit like two bald men with the comb'. As well as being corrosive to pan-regional cooperation, competitive bidding is also an ineffective use of local resources. As Newman et al (2021, p. 5) note, 'it means that place-based strategies develop according to the bids they manage to win, rather than the actual needs, specialisms, and ambitions of the local economy'. This, they argue, results in a short-termist and fragmented approach to policymaking.

Overall, despite some attempts to broaden the scope of devolution and clarify the process of it in recent years, it remains that, like previous governments over the last several decades, the Conservatives' approach to regional devolution has largely come in the form of centre-driven, economy-focused, technocratic 'solutions' (Ayres et al, 2018, p. 855). As Berry and Giovannini (2017, p. 7) note, this is indicative of the long prevailing 'Whitehall 'knows best'' approach when it comes to dealing with the challenges facing the North. Thus, while there is widespread support for devolution, the ways in which, and the extent to which, the North can benefit from the current approach to devolution, which remains tightly controlled by the centre, has rightly been questioned.

7.5. Conclusion

This chapter has looked at governance in the North, focusing largely on the issue of devolution and the framing of it. The chapter began by highlighting the extent to which there is widespread support for devolution across the North, and how it is perceived that alternate governance approaches may serve to remedy the issues of over centralisation highlighted elsewhere in the thesis. The chapter has then explored the evolution of devolution in the North, looking at the approaches of the Labour governments between 1997 and 2010, and then in more detail at the approaches followed by Conservative-led administrations from 2010 onwards.

Following this, it considered some specific issues and themes associated with the current approach to devolution. First, when it comes to geography, it found that there is some support for devolution to so-called functional economic areas, which has been the key feature in the North to date, but there is disquiet in areas which perceive they have unjustly been detached from economic areas. Additionally, there is debate over the extent to which these geographies reflect existing identities. Some argue that other geographic entities such as the country may be better suited to this. While there are some advocates for regional assemblies, support was limited. Similarly, while many are in favour of pan-

Northern collaboration, there was only very limited support for more formal pan-Northern governance arrangements.

When it comes to perceptions of the current devolution deals, the role of metro mayors was perceived by many to be positive. Mayors were commonly framed as providing strong voices for their areas, although it was noted that the mayoral model may not be best suited in some areas. While the soft powers of mayors were centred, it was largely recognised that in terms of powers and resources more broadly, devolution across the North has been extremely limited, in some places more so than others. Finally, the top-down, competitive nature of the process was highlighted. As with the limitations placed on MCAs powers and resources, this was commonly framed as being indicative of the continued dominance of central government over the North.

Yet, while there is dissatisfaction with the current approach to devolution and support for alternative approaches, it remains that devolution as a concept and as a process is largely framed in a positive light. Indeed, as highlighted at the beginning of the chapter, both main parties and the vast majority of political actors appear to broadly support the concept of devolution. As such, while discussions around the nature and shape of devolution are politically salient, they tend not to be politicised as a source of inter-party conflict.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1. Introduction

This thesis has examined the place of the North of England within contemporary political debate, focusing primarily on the period 2010-2021. It has explored the affects that politics actors' perceptions of the North have on the contemporary politics of the region. Drawing on the academic literature, documentary analysis of the grey literature, and seventy-three primary elite interviews, the study has adopted an interpretivist approach to exploring the ways in which the North and issues that impact the region are framed in political discourse, the ways in which and the extent to which these frames are politicised and has highlighted how this affects policy debates and political action. This chapter reviews and summarises the findings and analysis outlined in the thesis, it reiterates this study's contribution to the literature, notes some of the limitations of the work, and highlights some future research possibilities.

8.2. Research Findings

The study began by considering the varying approaches to framing the North geographically and defining the region. In doing so, it argued that the North can be viewed as both one and many regions, that it is an area with shared characteristics and challenges but also with significant diversity within it. It highlighted that there are numerous characteristics that are centred in different definitions of the North including the role of history, of culture and identity, of economics, and political definitions. In particular, cultural definitions of the North and ideas of 'Northern places' seemed to be important to many. The extent to which each of these different understandings of the North and Northernness are centred has a bearing on the ways in which the region is framed and politicised. This was detailed in subsequent chapters.

First, Chapter 3 looked at the role of culture and identity. In doing so, it considered the ways in which the North is framed as being culturally distinct from the rest of the

country and the extent to which Northern identity is politicised. It highlighted how images centred on both the real and imagined industrial, working-class, Lowryscape North dominate the framing of ideas of Northernness. This, it was argued, provides Northernness with a distinctive and significant set of supposed attributes and characteristics highlighting its strength as a recognisable cultural identity. Yet, it was noted that more problematically for the applicability of a shared sense of pan-Northernness is that some of these characteristics associated with it are exclusionary in terms of gender, class, and race. Nevertheless, Northernness still appears to resonate for many. In part, this likely owes something to the fact that Northernness is often defined in opposition to other identities, particularly a supposed Southernness.

The chapter also highlighted that while there are numerous sources of intra-Northern division and rivalry, overall, there appears to be a common view that there is more that unites than divides the North in cultural terms. When it comes to the relationship between Northernness and other sources of identity such as Britishness and Englishness, it was argued that while these identities are significant to many, local and regional identities remain just as important if not more so. It noted that identities need not be mutually exclusive and can sit within one another. In this way, the identity of Northernness can be seen to sit comfortably within notions of Englishness and Britishness as well as above strong local and sub-regional attachments.

Overall, Chapter 3 argued that the North of England possesses a number of key traits that mark it as culturally distinct from other parts of the country. Evidence from this study's research interviews suggests that ideas of Northernness are commonly employed by political actors when framing the idea of Northern distinction. Yet, the chapter also highlighted that Northern cultural identity is rarely politicised explicitly. Instead, it argued that Northernness as a cultural identity is important in that it serves as a cohesive

basis upon which pan-Northern cooperation and politicisation of other issues can take place. This was illustrated in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 4 considered socio-economic understandings of the North, examining the ways in which issues of regional inequality are framed and politicised in the context of ideas of a North-South socio-economic divide. It argued that, at least at the broad, aggregate level, there can be said to be a socio-economic gulf between North and South. It highlighted that this is accepted by many. Despite this, the chapter demonstrated that some political actors and organisations, particularly those operating at the national level, prefer to take a more nuanced approach to issues of inequality and employ different frames such as a London and the South East versus the rest narrative, a town-city division, or the argument that inequality exists in all places across the country. This is understandable because, as the chapter notes, inequalities do exist elsewhere. To speak only in terms of a North-South divide would alienate the grievances felt in other areas. Given these different ways of understanding and presenting regional inequality, the chapter highlighted that it is not uncommon to see actors utilise more than one frame in discussions of the issue.

When it comes to the politicisation of regional inequality, Chapter 4 highlighted that party political representatives within the North have often come together to highlight their shared issues and frame inequality in regional terms, often in North-South terms but also in London versus the rest terms, be it the Conservative NRG or Labour's Northern metro mayors. That this is the case, it was argued, owes much to the shared challenges and grievances across the region. But given that to some degree similar challenges exist elsewhere, it can also be seen to be underpinned by notions of historic Northern distinction and ideas of a collective cultural Northernness, as highlighted in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively. That the North of England already exists in the popular imagination as a notable and distinct region seemingly makes the politicisation of

regional inequality in the language of North-South easier to invoke, particularly for those within the North.

At the national level, the chapter demonstrated that party leaders, other political actors, and organisations have applied many of the different regional inequality frames highlighted at different times in the last decade, and sometimes in conjunction with one another. In terms of the explicit politicisation of the North-South divide, it has been shown that there has been a step back from talking in terms of North-South from both of the main party leaderships. It is suggested and expanded upon in subsequent chapters that this is likely driven by the increased focus on left behind places across the country post-Brexit and post-the 2019 general election. Indeed, this approach is evident in the shift to levelling up outlined in Chapter 6 and in the evolution of the approach to devolution in England as outlined in Chapter 7. The development of these two policy agendas, however, owes much to the party-political context in which they have been situated in recent years.

This was the focus of Chapter 5. The chapter considered the electoral politics of the North. It began by assessing the reality of the post-war North-South political divide and noting how this perception of an historically Labour voting North contrasted with a Conservative voting South played into afore discussed ideas of Northern distinction**.** The chapter then moved on to look at the contemporary party politics of the North, focusing particularly on the 2019 general election and the fall of the so-called Red Wall. It highlighted that while commonly cited factors such as the role of Brexit and the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn are seen as vital in explaining this result, other factors including the Conservatives' Northern tilt over the last decade, and Labour's long decline in the North are also framed by many as being key drivers of this political shift. The chapter focused predominately on the politics of the Northern Red Wall given that it is these seats that have recently been most highly politicised. Nevertheless, it recognised

that Labour is still dominant in many Northern cities and that the Conservatives' recent success in Northern towns and villages must be seen in the context of similar success elsewhere and the increased political importance of social values.

The chapter highlighted the perceptions of interviewees and others concerning the future party politics of the North. Many of these thoughts were shared in 2020 and 2021, and much has changed politically since then, as will be discussed further below. Nevertheless, at that time, there was a clear sense the North will continue to be a key political battleground. For Labour, there were some fears that the party could slump further in the North, but generally there was cautious optimism that with the right approach it can begin to rebuild in its former heartlands. For the Conservatives, equally, there was a sense among some that demographically parts of the North are now solid seats for the party. Largely, however, there was a view that in order to retain many of its Northern gains from 2019, the party must deliver on its promises to the people of the North, not least its pledges to level up.

Chapter 6 began by placing the levelling up agenda in context through considering previous initiatives aimed at addressing issues of regional inequality including post-war regional policy, the initiatives of the New Labour governments, and the Northern Powerhouse agenda. It suggested that the Northern Powerhouse was seen as an important initiative in politicising the idea of addressing regional inequality with an emphasis on bolstering the performance of the North of England. Nevertheless, the extent to which the agenda was ever truly pan-Northern, and the extent to which it has benefited the region was questioned by many.

Following this, the chapter then explored levelling up, looking at three key areas in particular, namely the geography of it, the aims and ambitions of it, and the extent to which the agenda can be seen as heralding a transformational shift or is an example of spectacle politics. In doing so it argued that levelling up is geographically confused but is

certainly not a solely Northern or even Red Wall focused agenda. Instead, the agenda can be seen to be an example of the shift to a wider focus on left behind places post-Brexit. This began under Theresa May and continued under Boris Johnson in the lead up to and following the 2019 general election.

Further to this, the chapter highlighted that the aims and ambitions of levelling up are equally disparate, suggesting that it is ideologically incoherent. It noted that while there has been a shift away from some of the large-scale project thinking of the Northern Powerhouse agenda towards more of a focus on quick win 'pride in place' initiatives, some of the economic underpinnings of previous agendas still shape levelling up rhetoric, especially on the issues such as the benefits of agglomeration in the form of economic clusters and the need for private investment. In these ways levelling up has been framed in differing ways in order to seek to appeal to the broadest audiences. The confused focus of levelling up can be seen to be illustrative of Johnson's 'cakist' approach to politics, the idea that everywhere can be winners. This has led to the agenda largely being viewed as an example of spectacle politics, rather than as a transformational shift in UK regional policy. Despite this, or perhaps because of the ambiguities of levelling up, the chapter noted that opposition parties including Labour had so far struggled to politicise the agenda as a significant source of inter-party competition.

Finally, in Chapter 7, the thesis turned to the issue of devolution and governance. It highlighted that places in the North were prioritised in early devolution deals given the connections between this and the Northern Powerhouse, but that the agenda has now spread to be framed as an England-wide initiative. In terms of the details on devolution, the chapter noted that while there is some dissatisfaction with the current approach to devolution and support for alternative approaches, devolution as a concept and as a process is largely framed in a positive light. It noted that both of the main parties and the vast majority of political actors appear to broadly support the concept of devolution. As a

result, while discussions around the nature and shape of devolution are politically salient, they tend not to be politicised as a source of inter-party conflict. Even Labour's Northern metro mayors who have often decried the government's approach to the region, while often calling for greater devolved powers and resources, do not call into question the overall approach to devolution.

Overall, the analysis put forward in this thesis suggests that the North of England is politicised as a concept or an idea much more commonly than it is as a distinct political space. The varying definitions of the region outlined in Chapter 2 are testament to the difficulties in clearly delimiting the North. That the North is politicised as a concept despite this owes much to the historic and persistent framing of Northern cultural distinctiveness detailed in Chapter 3, which continues to hold significant resonance in the popular imagination both within and without the North. A similar pattern is at play with ideas of a North-South socio-economic divide. While rooted in a broad socio-economic reality, other frames of understanding economic inequalities are increasingly politicised and can often be more persuasive. Yet, notions of a North-South divide are still recognised and utilised in no small part due to it being symbolic of historic, long-rooted ideas of Northern difference.

Again, a similar pattern can be seen when it comes to the electoral politics of the North as discussed in Chapter 5. While historically a North-South political divide of sorts did exist it has narrowed, most notably in 2019. Yet, the politics of the Red Wall, somewhat contrary to its initial purposes as an idea, are now presented as being symbolic of Northern political difference (here the fluidity of the concept of the North is apparent as many discussions concern the Midlands too), whereas the results in 2019 are in fact indicative of a closing of the gap in terms of how the North and South votes.

In terms of policy, there is a tension between the idea of the North as being merely a culturally symbolic framing devise to be politicised occasionally, or as a clear and distinct

political space. First, despite its flaws, advertently or not, the Northern Powerhouse and its associated institutions did imbue the North with a sense of political distinction. Yet, post-Brexit and more pertinently, post-the 2019 general election, the political language and focus associated with the levelling up agenda has largely shifted to a concern with left behind places everywhere across the country. Many parts of the North continue to be seen as important to this agenda, but it is not a wholly Northern story.

Similarly, when it comes to devolution and governance, the Northern focus that the agenda was framed as having in the mid-2010s has waned. Devolution is now seen as a nationwide agenda by both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. Within the North itself, while Northern leaders, other organisations, and Northern media often come together to frame the region as one and to politicise it as a whole, there is little appetite for more formal pan-Northern governance arrangements.

In summary, the North is unique as such a politically salient region in England, yet this is largely symbolic and rooted in ideas of historic, cultural, economic, and political distinction. As shown throughout this thesis, frames pertaining to this continue to be invoked by actors from different walks of politics and society, all across the political spectrum. That this is so is testament to the symbolic importance of the North which is unrivalled in England. This was acknowledged by numerous interviewees, as highlighted in Chapter 2. These frames, however, are currently rarely politicised at the national level. In fact, the extent to which the North is centred in national discourse has arguably waned as the focus has shifted to left behind places everywhere. As noted, at the local and regional level, the North does often continue to be politicised as a whole, yet local and sub-regional attachments within the North remain strong, and there are few clear, distinct, and institutionalised pan-Northern political initiatives.

8.3. Research Contribution

In pursuing this research agenda, this study has made several important contributions to knowledge of the issues under review and to the literatures on them. First, it makes a useful contribution to the literatures on framing and politicisation and offers an innovative approach into the application of these concepts at the regional level. Many studies employing these concepts tend to focus on the framing and politicisation of one specific policy area often studying it on a nationwide basis (Chaney, 2014c, pp. 276-277; De Blasio and Sorice, 2013, pp. 61-62; Libbrecht et al., 2009, p. 60). This study differs from this approach in that it seeks to explore the framing and politicisation of numerous policy areas but only in one specific region in order to gain a more holistic view of the broad political debate surrounding it.

It is this broad but detailed holistic approach to the study of the politics of the North that is the key strength of this research in terms of its contribution to knowledge. While there is much important scholarship on many of the key policy themes and issues that are discussed in this study – and this is drawn on throughout – there have been few attempts to highlight how each of these issues interact to impact and shape the politics of the North as a whole. In combining contributions to these specific literatures on issues such as regional identity, perceptions of socio-economic inequalities, on electoral and party politics, on the Northern Powerhouse agenda and levelling up, and on devolution, this study provides a broad and comprehensive picture of contemporary political understandings of the North.

Moreover, the rich and extensive qualitative data that runs throughout the thesis adds further weight to collective knowledge on perceptions of the politics of the North of England. Indeed, the interpretivist approached adopted in thesis has allowed for the illumination and interrogation of the voices of a significant number of important political actors. The insights shared by the interview participants largely came at a pivotal

time in the Politics of Northernness, after ten years of Conservative government which had seen the Northern Powerhouse agenda, the role out of devolution, Brexit, the 2019 general election, the shift to levelling up, and (in many cases) the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. As such, while this interview data was essential in shaping the findings of this thesis, it also has much value to future researchers considering political perceptions of the North of England during this period.

8.4. Limitations and Future Research

Whilst the broad and holistic approach to the study of the North taken in this thesis is a strength of the study, such an approach naturally has its limitations too. In each chapter certain interesting and worthwhile avenues were highlighted but, due to constraints, perhaps not ventured down as far as they could have been. Whilst this may be a shame, it also provides positive opportunities for future research with more specific, deeper dives, probing further into some of the ideas and issues highlighted in this thesis.

As with all qualitative work of this nature, limitations arise concerning the sample of research participants. While the sample could have been more diverse and could have included some specific key actors, this was largely beyond the control of the research. Instead, mitigations to limit the effects of this, as highlighted in Chapter 1, were taken. Another potential limitation relating to the fieldwork may be that the data presented in this thesis is now several years old and arguably not as relevant as it once was. Nevertheless, the data provides an illuminating and worthwhile insight into elite political perspectives on the North at that time. Whilst the political context may have changed in a number of ways since the fieldwork was carried out, it remains a valuable resource. Again, there is potential for further study to undertake new qualitative work to reassess political perceptions of the North in this evolving context.

8.5. Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed and summarised the findings and analysis outlined in the thesis. It has argued that the North is unique as such a politically salient region in England, yet this saliency is largely symbolic and rooted in ideas of historic, cultural, economic, and political distinction. It noted that while frames based upon ideas of Northern distinction continue to be invoked by actors from different walks of politics and society, all across the political spectrum, they are currently rarely politicised at the national level. In fact, it suggests that the extent to which the North is centred in national discourse has arguably waned post-Brexit and post-2019 as the focus has shifted to left behind places everywhere. Nevertheless, it highlights that at the local and regional level, the North does often continue to be politicised as a whole, but local and sub-regional attachments within the North remain strong, and there are few clear, distinct, and institutionalised pan-Northern political initiatives.

Looking ahead, while the North of England is a uniquely important and recognisable region, and one which holds some political pull, its place, sandwiched as it were, between broader national considerations, and sub-Northern local considerations, means there are limits to the extent to which the North can be politicised in a far reaching and widely embraced politics of Northernness. As such, while it is likely that the region as a whole will continue to be invoked and play a role in political debate, the extent to which it does so will continue to ebb and flow depending on the electoral and wider political climate in which we are in.

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