A novel approach to spatial development: England dismantles its regions!

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INTRODUCTION

The geography and economics of sub-national development in England languished in a state of flux following the May 2010 election of a new UK Coalition government. The pre-May 2010 regional spatio-economic architecture was in the midst of rapid deconstruction under the rhetorical guise of a move towards operating within so-called 'functional economic space' or 'natural economic areas'. Through the introduction of Local Enterprise Partnerships, hereafter referred to as LEPs, the UK Conservative-Liberal Democraticoalition Government was unwaveringly dismantling the previous Labour Government's unelected regional tier of policy-governance in England, including unelected Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), unelected Government Offices in the Regions (GORs) and Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs). That leaves England, outside London, governed sub-nationally by no less than 319 elected Local Authorities: 201 in 27 two-tier areas (consisting of 'Districts' and 'Counties'), with the remaining 91 operating as a singlelevel of 'Unitary' or 'Metropolitan Authorities'. It is in this respect that commentators have highlighted that the economic geography of re-localisation (and associated institutional re-scaling) is a highly contentious arena of contemporary policy debate that is 'worthy of a much more honest, less evasive debate than hitherto' (MARLOW, 2010).

LEPs, expected to have a spatial reach of two or more upper-tier (including Unitary and Metropolitan) authorities, are espoused as the new 'spatial fix' for marshalling activities including transport, housing and business support, providing economic leadership and planning for economic prosperity, at a space somewhere between the local and the national level (sub-national space). Consequently, interest and curiosity in LEPs have been considerable since the Coalition outlined their intent to support them asjoint local authority-business bodies brought forward by local authorities themselves to promote local economic development – to replace Regional Development Agencies', through their *Programme for Government* on 20 May 2010 (HM GOVERNMENT, 2010a, p.10). Attention has focused on scope, role, priorities, resourcing, powers, but especially what areas they will cover. Arguably *the* prime topic of policy discussion across the regional development and regeneration industry since the election, LEPs look set to be 'the only show in town' when it comes to economic place-shaping. Hence, LEPs need to be taken seriously as the prime vehicle for sub-national development, or at least the prime vehicle for the strategic economic governance across sub-national space, over the coming years. Indeed, critical policy analysis and debate are required in order to inform this hurriedly unfolding policy direction.

The political crafting of policy narratives

Policy-making, the crafting and enacting of policies, constitutes 'practical processes of argumentation' (FISCHER and FORESTER, 1993, p. 2). It is a political act, simultaneously substantive and symbolic: a live performance that flows within 'representational democratic organs' (HAJER, 2005, p. 456). Regional development policy can be conceptualised as a

narrative whereby the policy-making process is composed of many competing, contradictory and converging policy 'stories' or 'narratives' as different interests struggle to impose their version of reality as the truth (FISCHER, 2003). Narratives are often equivocal, with a plurality of meanings allowing divergent interests to come together in either support or opposition of a scheme, proposal or vision. Narratives can be shared across different arenas, assemblages and communities of practice, as they traverse complex fields to help forge circles of friends. The heightened complexity of policy phenomena, the more narratives that can plausibly be brought to bear upon them. From this perspective, policy analysis can be utilised to understand concepts, meanings and power relations underpinning the production of sub-national space.

The dismantling of regional architecture, epitomised by the abolition of England's eight RDAs (outside of London, for which, after debate, the elected Mayor of London was proposing one LEP), is propagated on the back of three core *policy narratives*, each politically-infused, hinging on:

1. Accountability (democratic deficit)
2. Geographical scope (size)
3. Efficiency and effectiveness

Firstly, the Coalition contend that regions lack local democratic accountability and have thus worked to produce a democratic deficit. For example, regional spatial planning and economic development are deemed to lack political oversight, whilst RDAs have variously been criticised as bureaucratic machines and 'state-run development agencies' (PRISK, 2010). With 'no local buy-in to important decisions', it has been argued that people have been left nervous about development decisions impacting on their communities (PICKLES and CABLE, 2010). Operating as they did as arms of central government, the Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, maintains that 'The bureaucracy of Regional Development Agencies gave local authorities little reason to engage creatively with economic issues' (cited in CLG, 2010a).
Secondly, the narrative goes that regions are 'too large' and local authority administrative boundaries 'too narrow' to enable managerial-governance entities to operate effectively, even though it is *now* the 292 independent lower-tier local authorities which are left in charge of decisions under statutory Town & Country Planning Acts. For example, Mark Prisk, Minister for Business and Enterprise, argues that 'the boundaries set for most of the RDAs bear little relation to *real* local economies. Thus Banbury and Dover are in the same 'region' whilst Hertfordshire is deemed not to be in the South East' (PRISK, 2010, emphasis added). Writing in the *Financial Times*, PICKLES and CABLE (2010), the two ministers charged with rewriting England's economic governance landscape, declare that regions such as the East Midlands arbitrarily divide the country into 'unnatural blocks'..

Thirdly, and interlinked with the former policy narratives, regional architecture – and especially the RDAs – has been derided as inefficient and ineffective. Vince Cable, Business Secretary, claims that 'RDAs are not satisfactory ... wasteful' even and duplicating activities (cited in FINCH, 2010). The Coalition contends that the imposition of (almost) anything regional adds a bureaucratic layer, which has resulted in needless overlap, as the machinery of governance continued to expand under the previous Labour Government (PEARCE and AYRES, 2007). The lurch against regions was part of a wider ideological reaction against the 'big state' and the state-mode of production, but was accentuated by lower regional identification in Con-Lib held areas of local government. The Coalition not only reacted

against the remoteness of RDAs from local government but also detested increased coercion by Labour's regional machinery over housing-building targets. It was this which led to the prompt – and ill considered (PUGALIS and TOWNSEND, 2010) – revocation of RSSs, which also led to a re-scaling towards 'localism' and neighbourhood 'sovereignty' under the Localism Bill. However, Pickles' unilateral (and premature) revocation of the regional strategic tier of planning without any replacement arrangements was deemed to be unlawful by the High Court in November 2010.

In the case of local economic place-shaping, the Coalition Government used an open letter to invite local authorities and businesses leaders to put forward propositions for LEPs, to reflect 'natural economic geographies', which would ultimately replace RDAs that are set to be phased out by March 2012 at the latest.[i] With less than two pages of guidance set out in the letter co-signed on 29 June by Vince Cable and Eric Pickles, the deadline for initial propositions closed on 6 September 2010. It was not until 28 October that any semblance of guidance pertaining to the abolition of RDAs and the reconstructed sub-national economic governance architecture (i.e. LEPs), was issued by the Coalition Government in the form of a White Paper *Local Growth: realising every place's potential* (HM GOVERNMENT, 2010b).[ii] Thus, the purpose of this paper is to critically question the replacement of regional spatio-economic architecture.

Analytical approach and focus

Excavating such an active field for research, the authors utilise material gleaned from ministerial speeches, evidence presented to select committees, press releases, media bulletins and web blogs alongside more traditional sources of literature. But perhaps most crucial, the authors glean insights 'from the field' – from their own conversations and debates taking place in those 'soft spaces' of economic governance, which themselves are in the midst of disorganised transition (PUGALIS, 2010a). The paper thus draws on what Henri LEFEBVRE (1991 [1974], 1991 [1958]) refers to as everyday social space. Here, local knowledge is the space of *connaissance;* less formal or more local forms of knowledge distinct from the bureaucratic knowledge of so called 'experts', technocrats and doctors of space. Consequently, research material analysed in this paper is a fusion of practical experience and bureaucratic knowledge. In so doing, the paper examines:

1. The top-down definitions and strategies framing previous UK regionalist approaches by contrasting these with the Coalition's more localist approach, in this case to sub regions
2. The process of self-selection used in defining a new geography of economic governance
3. The merits, practicalities and limitations of self-defined 'bottom-up' areas

Tthe paper points to policy-relevant findings, concluding that LEPs are unlikely to provide the desired spatial fix for the dynamic, multi-scalar economic relations and wicked issues that they seek to address. In the section which follows, the paper reviews the broad history and dimensions of England's regionalisation (to date) in the light of comparable areas in the EU's Committee of the Regions. This is followed by an overarching analysis of both the aims and scope of the proposed changes, prior to an in-depth examination of the changing geography of economic governance, including highlighting the remarkable inconsistencies produced by the process of self-selection. The paper concludes with some closing remarks relating to some

major lessons of the process that can thus far be identified as the authors critically question the functions and viability of LEPs.

ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY IN THE REGIONAL POLICYMAKING ARENA

There is a tendency in England to imagine that establishing regional institutions is a dictate of the Brussels based EU; a mechanism to weaken national government. Indeed, the media mistakenly blamed the UK government's use of regions – as for Labour's regional ministerial posts of 2008 – on the EU. Yet, this section demonstrates that regional economic-architecture pre-dates the constitution of the EU and has shifted back and forth.

The pendulum of the economic geography policy 'fix'

The economic geography of the UK, and indeed England, is uneven, dispersed and diverse, reflecting assorted sectoral mixes, comparative advantages and structural weaknesses (HM GOVERNMENT, 2009; COE and JONES, 2010). England has an extensive lineage of 'regional development policy' dating back to the 1930s (MCCRONE, 1969). Since this period of regional industrial policy, England has endured a steady stream of innovations in sub-national development policy,. A regular feature of this was of an incoming Conservative government narrowing from the centre the size of areas assisted by the regional policy of the previous Labour government. As the same pack of cards continues to be reshuffled, it has not come as such a surprise to relevant communities of practice that the Con-Lib Coalition Government decided to rewrite the geography of England's economic governance by dismantling what they inherited, which had been developed strongly by Labour in government between 1997 and 2010 (PUGALIS, 2011).

The incoming Coalition Government has a professed objection to excessive bureaucracy and associates it particularly with the Labour administration. The UK long had regions for civil service administrative and statistical purposes, as examined in many past papers in this journal (for example, MARSHALL, 1985, TOWNSEND, 1986) England was first organised into regions during the two World Wars, and they have mostly had some government offices continuously from the Second World War. It is true that it was John Major's Conservative Government which was prompted to organise a full regional bureaucracy in the form of GORs in 1994 by the requirement of the EU to harmonise environmental legislation, and to have a regional strategy in place before, logically, EU funding could be approved.

It was, however, Labour's successful establishment of elected government in Scotland and Wales in 1999 which led to their unsuccessful attempt at comparable devolution in England. Following 1970s precedents in Scotland and Wales, Regional Development Agencies were established in each region, following the precedents in Scotland and Wales, and unelected Regional Assemblies were established in each English Region in anticipation of their becoming elected bodies (PEARCE and AYRES, 2007). This ambition was defeated in the only referendum held on the topic, in North East England in 2004 (SHAW and ROBINSON, 2007). This created a policy hiatus for the Labour government, which led to the eventual disbanding of unelected Regional Assemblies, but not without their statutory regional strategymaking powers being jointly transferred to RDAs and Regional Leaders' Boards. Regional spatial planning and economic strategymaking functions were further integrated under an extensive *Review of sub-national economic development and regeneration* (SNR) (HM TREASURY, 2007; TOWNSEND, 2009; PUGALIS, 2009). Building on the White Paper; *Strong and Prosperous Communities* (CLG, 2006), SNR also encouraged sub-regional

planning whereby local authorities entered into 'voluntary' Multi-Area Agreements (MAAs), especially in city regions. This makes a transition from regions to at least city regions a main theme of continuity in this paper.

Rivalry between major cities was a major feature of several regions, causing RDAs to meet almost irresolvable conflict. This may reflect the remarkable fact that the UK had the largest average size of region across the EU (see Table 1). This, along with the failure of the intended programme of establishing elected Regional Assemblies, may have created dissatisfaction with the relatively remote regional administrative bodies in the thinking of politicians of the incoming Coalition government.

Table 1. Regions of EU countries

Number of regions and thus average size of population, January, 2010, Millions

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(England	9	5777)	Netherlands	12	1382
United Kingdom	12	5167	Slovakia	4	1356
Germany	16	5113	Czech Republic	8	1313
France	22	2942	Bulgaria	6	1261
Spain	16	2874	Sweden	8	1168
Italy	21	2873	Finland	5	1070
Romania	8	2683	Austria	9	931
Poland	16	2385	Belgium	12	902
Ireland	2	2128	Greece	13	869
Portugal	5	2385			
Hungary	7	1430	EU average, excl.UK	11	2225

Table 2, Dimensions for England excluding Greater London

LEPs proposed	62	711	LEPs initially approved	24	1340
For comparison, official "Travel-to-Work Areas"					
1981	208	212	2001	141	312
NUTS 2 areas	28	1573			
Counties proposed, 1969	61	722	Counties effected, 1974	62	711
Upper tier authorities, 2010	88	501	Lower-tier authorities, 2010	292	156
(including 55 "Unitary Authorities")					

Note: table excludes eight smaller members of the European Union which do not divide their territory into "Regions" or equivalents: Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Slovenia.

Table 1 clearly shows the UK and certainly England (after Excluding Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) along with Germany, as having much larger regions (in terms of population) than other members of the EU. After excluding Greater London, which is mainly unaffected by the changes reported in this article, the average English region has a population of 5,507 thousand, and comments about remoteness from any central city were marked in the case of the South West region. It was not generally known, event to the

present authors that the average English region, shown here as 2.225 million, was almost 2.5 time bigger than the average region as found for example in Poland (2.385) or Portugal (2.128).

TABLE 2

By contrast in Table 2, the average population of the newly proposed LEP was smaller than the average regions of any EU member state, with a population of 711,000, and about the same size as the Counties proposed in a thorough rationalisation (REDCLIFFE-MAUD, 1969) effected in 1974. All would be well; these were bigger than the government's statistical Travel-to-Work Areas based on 1981 data, and on the same basis, the much smaller number for 2001. The problem is that the more locally-minded Conservative government of 1970-4 divided each of the 62 counties into second-tier districts, and *then* took the upper tier away by abolishing Metropolitan Counties in 1985, and later in some areas elsewhere by creating other Unitary Local Authorities. This system could work when all these types and sizes could be co-ordinated by GORs and other regional architecture , as they increasingly were by the Labour government from 1997 to 2010. *But the point is that they were not designed to leave the 292 lower-tier Authorities to be, for example independent Planning Authorities, which is what is now proposed! The lower tier had never worked without strategic co-ordination*, and so it was of great interest when the Coalition government saw the need at least for economic co-ordination at an intermediate level in place of the RDAs.

WHAT'S A 'NATURAL ECONOMIC AREA'?

Buildingon Labour's SNR (HM TREASURY, 2007; BERR and CLG, 2008; CLG and BERR, 2008), the 2010 incoming government's policy proposals (CONSERVATIVE PARTY, 2009) had already latched onto the notion that economic life readily transcended local government boundaries. The purpose of this section is to unpack the policy history of sub-regional arrangement in England since the twentieth century.

In developing their thoughts after the election the Coalition Government espoused the term 'natural economic area', perhaps implying that 'Labour's top-down regions' held distant and competing economic entities. As seen by the local government press they gave this a variety of names: 'Sometimes called functional economic market areas (FEMA), real economic areas, city regions or sub-regions', but what each of these concepts has in common is a move away from 'arbitrary administrative boundaries' to better reflect 'more fuzzy geographies, such as business patterns, housing markets and travel to work areas' (HAYMAN, 2010a). The Department for Communities & Local Government (CLG) saw one indicator of a FEMA as being 75% or more of the people living in the area also work in the area. (HAYMAN, 2010c)Regional scientists would not disagree with that approach, except perhaps to stress that housing market areas are proving susceptible to different definitions and that leisure trips should not be entirely ignored because of the pressure on transport links from the journey-to-work (HICKMAN *et al.,* 2010)[There was also a long history to the superimposition of sub-regions over the local authority map (see for example Figure 1 that denotes the four sub-regions of North East England used by Labour: Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, Durham and Tees Valley).

Rather than using such 'functional regions', regional policy has normally designated 'formal regions' lacking at first the inclusion of a central town or city,as were the Special Areas of 1934 , designed to meet the worst features of the major economic depression, which notably omitted Glasgow, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Cardiff as central cities of their sub-regions. In periods of post-war Labour governments, regional industrial policy took place

mainly on a designated region-wide basis, but the present 'assisted areas' are built up from local electoral wards in order to met EU limits in the proportion of population covered.

[FIGURE 1]

Functional economic regions have been recognised in British human geography since, for example, DICKINSON's (1947) 'City, Region and Regionalism'. As part of their professional training of up to 5 years, all planners are taught the inevitable growing interdependence of adjacent towns and suburbs for the activities of work, housing, shopping, leisure and services, which have to be taken account of in providing land, engineering calculations of road needs and planning approvals. By the end of the 1960s the UK's then Ministry of Labour was linking local authority areas together in Travel-to-Work Areas. It was a standard requirement of the then Ministry of Transport that new roads could be financed only by calculating detailed forward travel needs in Land Use-Transportation Surveys for conurbations and larger growth centres. The Metropolitan Counties of 1974-85 had their own Structure Plans which survived the closure of those Authorities. It is argued here that these plans provided the basis for continued growth of transport and green belts, and that they could not have been produced by the present separate Metropolitan Boroughs or present-day Integrated Transport Authorities. The rise of London in the 1980s prompted the leading Metropolitan Boroughs to band together as the Core Cities Group to lobby government for more support, amid claims of a wider urban renaissance (CORE CITIES WORKING GROUP, 2004).

The need for renewed attention to conurbation-focussed sub-regions arose from a continued concentration of journey in a reduced number of Travel-to-Work Areas (Table 2) and from a shift in the policy discourse following the failure of the referendum on devolution for North East England, along with the international background provided by SCOTT (2001; SCOTT and STORPER, 2003) and a sea change in how cities were regarded as counting and growing in terms of economic competitiveness (BODDY and PARKINSON, 2004; BUCK et al., 2005; PARKINSON et al., 2006). These fed into fresh thinking over economic governance (COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT (CLG), 2008) and a number of Multi-Area Agreements (MAAs) between local authorities arranged by the Labour government, led by the city regions of Leeds and Greater Manchester, but also including the areas of other metropolitan counties established in 1974 but later disbanded, and southern areas around Southampton and Bournemouth. Two tiers of government survive in Greater London under a Conservative mayor, and the Scottish government continues sub-regional planning in four city regions around the leading cities of the country. There was therefore, plenty of precedent for strategic planning in the UK; the questionwas, if the new government abolished the regional tier, what might take its place?

FROM REGIONS TO SUB-REGIONS

What was the recent system failing to deliver? And how will the new system correct such failures? In the months elapsed since the May 2010 election of the Con-Lib Government, little time was wasted in the Coalition's crusade to reconstitute Labour's regionalist framework. However, in executing this strategy, it can be argued that the Coalition failed to carefully consider transitional arrangements or the implementation of 'new' replacement policy-architecture.

The ending of Regional Development Agencies and theconstruction of Local Enterprise Partnerships

Through a series of crucial policy statements and budget reports (see, for example, HM GOVERNMENT, 2010a, b; HM TREASURY, 2010a, b), the government were explicit in their key priorities of deficit reduction and rebalancing the economy in both a sectoral and geographic sense. Not only were these key priorities; they were also seen as urgent priorities. Consequently, the Coalition were in a hurry to 'rewrite the economic geography of the country' through the implementation of LEPs 'unconstrained by arbitrary boundaries of Regional Development Agencies and the top-down prescription approach taken previously' (CLG, 2010a). The Government were (inadvertently) opening up debate regarding uneven patterns of development, spatial inequalities and the politics of scale to wider popular and political scrutiny.

PRISK (2010) outlined the objective of a 'modern' framework of economic development: 'One that distinguishes between strategic national needs and local economic priorities; that believes that freeing enterprise and innovation is vital for growth; and one that empowers local civic and business leaders to determine how to enable their community to create the wealth and jobs'. It is a framework underpinned by the following foundations:

- National economic leadership to strengthen the UK's global competitiveness
- LEPs to promote local economic development
- A Regional Growth Fund to promote private enterprise in areas outside South East England, especially in those areas lacking a strong private sector

(HM GOVERNMENT, 2010b: 8).

At its heart were the aims of 'shifting' power to local communities and businesses and tackling barriers to growth that the market will not address itself.

As set out in the introduction, the dismantling of regional architecture, including the abolition of RDAs (subject to the legislative formalities of the Public Bodies Act) is based on the intertwining policy narratives that concentrate on issues concerning democratic accountability, size in terms of relevance to functional economic area, and effectiveness of incumbent economic governance and associated institutions. RDAs have thus been lambasted by the Coalition Government as 'top-down impositions' on localities. 'Fixing this mess is a phenomenal challenge ....but nor can ministers rebalance economies as diverse as those of Leeds, Liverpool and Tees Valley from our offices in Whitehall' (2010). Replacing 'the artificial political regions of RDAs' are LEPs – espoused as mechanisms to provide 'solutions from local communities' that 'will better serve the needs of local business' (Pickles cited in CLG, 2010a), as Government '*shift power* to the *right* levels' (HM GOVERNMENT, 2010b, p. 11, emphasis added).

LEPs were heralded as public-private collectivities that will guide and facilitate economic place-shaping. Intended to be equal partnerships between councils and business leaders, the Con-Lib government envisage LEPs 'to be a key tool in helping areas to create a supportive environment for business growth and private sector job creation, by tackling the local market failures which are holding back growth at this level' (BIS, 2010: 14). The role(s) of individual LEPs are to be locally determined – in accordance with the Coalition's permissive policy approach – yet are anticipated to involve:

- 'working with Government to set out key investment priorities, including transport infrastructure and supporting or coordinating project delivery
- coordinating proposals or bidding directly for the Regional Growth Fund
- supporting high growth businesses, for example through involvement in bringing together and supporting consortia to run new growth hubs
- making representation on the development of national planning policy and ensuring business is involved in the development and consideration of strategic planning applications; lead changes in how businesses are regulated locally
- strategic housing delivery, including pooling and aligning funding streams to support this
- working with local employers, Jobcentre Plus and learning providers to help local workless people into jobs
- coordinating approaches to leveraging funding from the private sector; exploring opportunities for developing financial and non-financial incentives on renewable energy projects
- becoming involved in delivery of other national priorities such as digital infrastructure'

(HM GOVERNMENT, 2010b: 13).

LEPs, on the surface at least, offer the potential for a flexible, locally determined approach to sub-national economic place-shaping, beyond the traditional confines of business and enterprise activities. The philosophy of the Coalition Government is that a better alignment between the geography of decision-making (governance) and the geography of economic flows (functional economic space) will be more successful in *enabling* private sector job growth and supporting a rebalancing of the national economy. In effect these new assemblages of economic actors will take over the mantle from RDAs in providing economic leadership and guiding the renaissance across their respective 'patch', albeit with fundamentally reduced resources and a stronger democratic mandate (PUGALIS, 2011, 2010b).

THE PROCESS OF SELF-SELECTION IN DEFINING A NEW GEOGRAPHY

The open invitation from Pickles and Cable, dated June 29, to local authorities and business to form themselves into proposed areas for LEPs by September 6 created a very large amount of interest and what can only be described as frenzied activity by the actors. 'Government is offering local areas the opportunity to take control of their future economic development.' (CLG, 2010b). Those 'in the know' had anticipated that somewhere in the range of 30 to 40 LEP propositions would be submitted to Government, representing a fivefold increase from the eight RDAs operating outside of London. Such speculation led to concerns of a patch-work quilt of LEPs across England, including 'non-LEP'local authorities. It subsequently transpired that LEP submissions spanned total coverage of England.. It was perhaps even more of concern that government received several proposals in obvious competition with one another. The invitation resulted in 62 propositions being submitted to government prior to the 6 deadline, of which a first wave of 24 (including some combined initial propositions) were given the 'green light' by Government to progress. In fact, over 60 LEP proposals and expressions of interest were received by Government (which immediately struck as being unmanageable from London-centric Whitehall Departments) (PUGALIS and TOWNSEND, 2010).
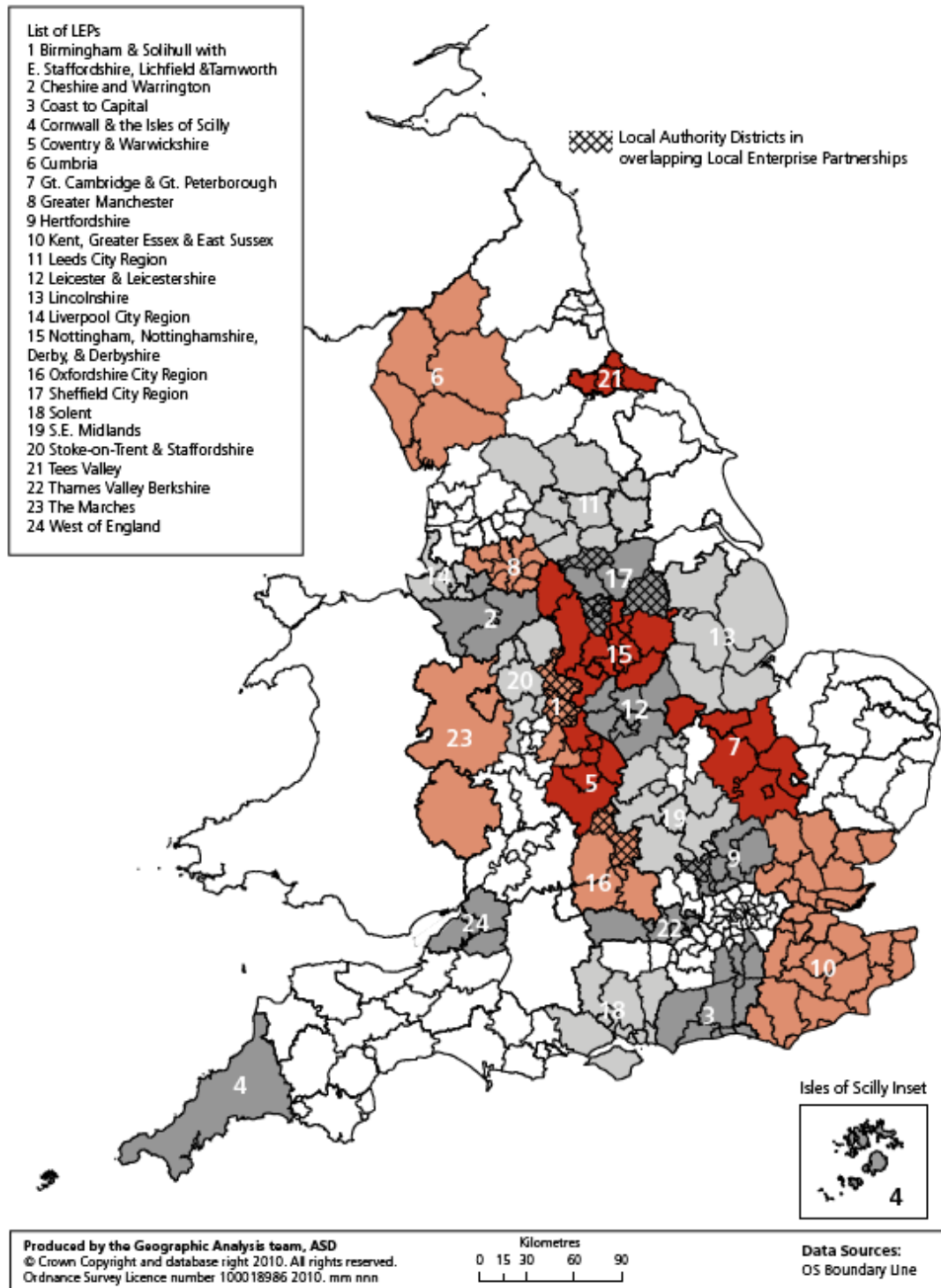
[FIGURE 2]

Fig. 2. First wave of LEPs as approved October 28th, 2010; 7 more were agreed by March, 2011(; further individual areas are expected to be announced over coming months;

As seen in Figure 2, the plethora of first wave LEPs, to replace the eight RDAs outside of London, do not neatly stitch together. 'Approaching 70 [local authority districts] were included within two submissions and four seemed to feature within three' (SQW, 2010). The outcome surprised us by the existence and number of overlapped areas, and the proportion of the country left uncovered for later negotiation and decision.

To analyse the economic logic of the map of newly formed LEPs, we draw on 2010 workplace populations and 2001 travel-to-work Census data, as the consistently available proxy measure for 'functional economic space', to draw attention to mismatches in the formation of LEPs. Grounded in this analysis, we problematise the rationale and value of dismantling regional spatio-economic architecture in such a rapid fashion, We draw on some policy-relevant findings to argue that LEPs are unlikely to provide the desired spatial fix for the dynamic, multi-scalar economic relations.

The map of 24 LEPs only partly meets the Confederation of British Industry's previous complaint that the government's permissive approach was unleashing a 'wave of parochialism' across the map. [FINANCIAL TIMES, p.3, September 6, 2010) With their basis in bottom-up thinking in local government areas, the overall coverage is quite similar to the voluntary alliances of the inter-War period; for example, in 1931 there were 97 Town Planning Regions covering, like the LEPs, most of England between the Kent-Solent coast and Cumbria, with notable gaps in rural Yorkshire and Hull, East Anglia and the South West. Coverage was expected to include almost all the industrial former coalfields, which most regret the passing of RDAs, though with the notable exception of Lancashire which had three overlapping bids.

What emerges is that a few submissions like the South East Midlands and the Brighton – Gatwick - Croydon 'Coast to Capital' area show an inspired approach to real 'Growth Areas', transgressing the soon to be defunct regional administrative boundaries. Several of the largest in terms of working population, and the most self-contained, reflect earlier work in MAAs based on former Metropolitan County areas, The proposed map looks like a re-uniting of former Counties, for the pragmatic administrative reason that this tier is responsible for much infrastructure in roads and schools etc. However, the pattern leaves the West Midlands more sub-divided than the East and a host of residual problems for the next decisions in a new jigsaw of economic governance.

Because of its origins, the map is somewhat erratic, with Kent, Greater Essex and East Sussex covering much of the official Growth Area of the Thames Gateway and having 1.49 million jobs, well above the average Region in the EU, while Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly (number 4 on the map) is the smallest with 237,600. Two areas fall below 75% of employees working in the same area as they live, below the standard of the existing official travel-to-work areas. There are, however, five cases where pairs of LEPs share one or more Districts between them. This probably militates against LEPs ever receiving purpose-built economic statistics, or becoming planning authorities, which we have argued is essential for business confidence through strategic spatial development (PUGALIS and TOWNSEND, 2010). The 'act now, think later' policy of inviting the development of LEP proposals in 50 working days created innumerable new problems and is in danger of establishing new artificial constructs out of the *reactions against* RDAs.

Table 2, The successful, and largest, LEP bids, successful ones underlined

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Workplace employed population, year-ending March 2010, <u>thousands</u>
(in brackets; self-containment in 2001Census = % of resident working population working within area)

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1. <u>1,494 (80.6%) Kent, Greater Essex & E.Sussex</u>
2. <u>1,315 (94.0%) Leeds City Region</u>
3. <u>1,131 (90.6%) Greater Manchester</u>
4. <u>903 (87.5%) Notts., Derbyshire & Cities</u>
5. <u>830 (81.4%) South East Midlands</u>
6. <u>762 (78.7%) Coast to Capital697 (83.1%) Birmingham, Solihull etc</u>
7. <u>690 (89.3%) Sheffield City Region</u>
8. <u>651 (89.8%) Solent</u>
9. <u>579 (86.0%) Liverpool City-Region</u>
10. <u>561 (93.4%) "West of England" (Bristol etc.)</u>
11. <u>454 (69.9%) Hertfordshire</u>
12. <u>436 (75.1%) Thames Valley Berkshire</u>
13. <u>435 (74.2%) Cheshire & Warrington</u>
14. <u>425 (77.3%) Stoke-on-Trent & Staffordshire</u>
15. <u>422 (87.8%) Leicester & Leicestershire</u>
16. <u>396 (82.7%) Coventry & Warwickshire</u>
17. <u>336 (83.6%) Greater Cambridgeshire & Peterborough</u>
18. <u>326 (84.8%) Oxfordshire City Region</u>
19. <u>298 (82.7%) The Marches</u>
20. <u>287 (85.6%) Lincolnshire</u>
21. <u>275 (88.9%) Tees Valley</u>
22. <u>244 (95.5%) Cumbria</u>
23. <u>238 (91.7%) Cornwall & the Isles of Scilly</u>

Leading unsuccessful or deferred proposals
1. 1,135 (91.9%) East Anglia
2. 1,076 (96.5%) North East
3. 808 (85.5%) Hampshire
4. 682 (83.1%) Kent & Medway
5. 568 (88.2%) Gloucester, Swindon & Wiltshire
6. 515 (95.3%) Devon, Plymouth & Torbay
7. 510 (64.4%) Surrey
8. 436 (89.4%) Greater Lincolnshire

Note: certain areas overlap with each other
Source of raw data: National Online Manpower Information System (nomisweb.co.uk)

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The 24 approved areas correlate strongly but not at all completely with the largest proposals as defined by workplace population; as shown earlier at Table 1, the average approved LEP has a total population of 1.340,000 compared with the average application of 711,000. In Table 3, in particular entries 2, 3, 8 and 10 are city regions recognised in the previous government's MAAs, while items 11 and 22 also include the whole of the new Counties of 1974 to 1985 also identified by the *Royal Commission on Local Government in England, 1966-1969* (REDCLIFFE-MAUD, 1969). There has thus been a tendency to revert to a pattern of sub-regions identified earlier, upon the withdrawal of the wider Regional umbrellas.

All the smallest proposals were smaller than former counties, these being eight proposed LEPs with between 100,000 and 200,000 working population. The lowest levels of self-containment were shown by commuting areas around London, falling below 70 per cent and as low as 53.8 per cent for the smallest submission, Bexley, Dartford and Gravesham, thus they fell below the defining level of 75 per cent self containment adopted by ministers along with six other unsuccessful bids. Thus it is not difficult to see how they failed to pass this round of approvals.

It is, however, relatively easy for any kind of larger sub-region to attain 75% self-containment, and a critical view of other poorer features of the process of self-definition is in order, Firstly, the idea of a close alignment with natural economic areas or Travel-to-Work Areas, built up from Ward areas, was always mistaken if the LEPs had to fit with Local Authority boundaries; the request was for LEPs comprising two or more upper–tier Authorities, but some City Regions already combined the two levels and successfully persisted in this: in all, 12 of the LEPs cut across upper-tier Authority areas by including some but not all of the second-tier districts. At least four Counties found themselves meeting opposition to their proposals from some or all of their constituent second-tier Districts. Reports indicate that some of these problems arose from existing poor relations arising from personalities and political control. Secondly, we can infer intrinsic problems and those of *residual* areas from the interpretation of geography – the City of Hull refused to join areas on the opposite south bank of the wide Humber Estuary; the south bank did not know whether to join areas to the south or north, and ended up unserved by a LEP despite adjoining two approved LEPs,as evident from Figure 2.

Thirdly, fears of domination by a Core City led to the division of natural city regions (Birmingham, Newcastle-upon-Tyne). But wider regional entities were also splintered by the Pickles-Cable invitation to form LEPs. Even the smaller of the administrative regions, the North East and East Anglia, failed to attain a single overall bid for the whole area, and there was marked splintering of these areas and of the County of Lancashire. On the other hand, LEP proposers in four regions showed interest in retaining an umbrella organisation for the overall area: these were in the four more northern regions.

It has been argued from a planning perspective (PUGALIS and TOWNSEND, 2010) that the pattern would actually be a great relative improvement on having 270 independent planning authorities if all LEPs had planning powers to fill the strategic vacuum left by the revocation of Regional Spatial Strategies. However, this lack of strategic thinking is well illustrated by some of the smaller applications not shown here.. The reactionsagainst RDAs have had different (essentially political) outcomes in different areas. Clearly, there is a great variation in the size of the new units and their quality of definition. In most city regions the process has simply confirmed existing working arrangements and understandings between Cities and Metropolitan Boroughs. Beyond that ministerial and political involvement is evident in the local government press for major mergers across the Thames Estuary and in the South West. In general, however, there was a tension in the North and Midlands between the Business Secretary committing to larger areas the size of RDAs, with business support, and a reliance on local politics 'where the debate about natural economic areas seems to have been superseded by political rivalries ultimately reducing LEP geographies to the smallest politically workable unit' (COX, 2010). Quoting two senior figures on the preparation of LEPs:

Key messages I have been made aware of include: a lack of credible business representation; negotiations dominated by local politics; and a lack of a clear focus on economic growth
(THE TIMES, November 2, 2010, p.3, quoting letter from Mark Prisk, Business and Enterprise Minister to Vince Cable, Business and Enterprise Minister)

Sadly, the debate on the role of regions in England at least has been hijacked by the rabidly anti-region Communities Secretary Eric Pickles after a Yes-Minister style turf war that saw Vince (once Britain's favourite politician) Cable lose out yet again even though RDAs were part of his BIS patch. 'Were' being the operative word
(BAILEY, 2010).

BAILEY, currently Chair of the Regional Studies Association tends to confirm that it is the processes of politics rather than economic geography which left large parts of England without an approved LEP at the time of writing, with further approvals expected on a case-by-case basis. It is of course no fault of business or labour that they may appear disadvantaged in economic stimulus and development, temporarily and possibly for the life of this parliament, and this is a new situation in the UK history of sub-national development policy and politics. There is also the point that the whole of England can feel disadvantaged compared with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with their continuing institutions based originally on RDAs for inward investment. A lot depends on the final scope of LEP activities. One of them, however, is the ability to apply for funding from the Regional Growth Fund for England, which is not being denied to areas without LEPs. On the other hand, it all matters less under the Pickles view that LEPs are loose groupings in a field where the state should have a limited role (HALL, 2010).

CONCLUSION
According self-definition to areas does not appear to have resolved the continuous tinkering and wholesale review of the structure and responsibilities of sub-national economic development and regeneration in England. Enshrined in Labour's SNR that commenced in 2007 (HM TREASURY, 2007), there has been growing policy agreement that subsidiarity – devolving power and resources to the lowest appropriate spatial scale – will produce *optimum* outcomes on the ground (see, for example, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT (CLG), 2008). England still retained the largest average size of region in the EU. The UK's Coalition Government reacted against 'top-down' solutions from industry and the views of academic commentators (such as RSA members, (PECK, 2010), but what is the merit of LEPs – as new spatial governance entities – derived from self-selected areas at this and other scales?
This paper has identified a thread of continuity in that already several sub-regions had both volunteered arrangements to be Multi-Area Agreements, and that these have been accepted among the least contentious of the LEP proposals. This is particularly the case with city regions, some of which are larger than the smaller EU administrative regions in working population, and enjoy functional integrity and sound economies of scale. However, beyond that the process of self-definition of sub-regions does not recommend itself to other countries as practical to this degree, even though there is a strong case for planning and co-ordination functions at the sub-regional level..
For one thing, it is clear that there remains adherence to several different scales.For the present it is clear that regionalism lives. Since coming to power, the Coalition has preached localism: yet it received proposals for regional bodies to work *alongside* LEPs, in the NorthEast, Yorkshire and the Humber and the West Midlands. Yet parochialism also dies

hard, as local media spanning most parts of England have reported on the many disputes as local authorities worked together (or not) on their LEP bids, 'an excessive fragmentation of delivery so that instead of supposed "natural geographical areas" we simply end up with a configuration of LEPs that rather reflects whatever backrooms deals can be done by local councils who can tolerate each other' (BAILEY, 2010)   Localism also means proper powers. Town halls and businesses want genuine devolution, with some LEP bids calling for freedoms to set up mechanismswhich are unlikely to be realised.

There are many unconvincing signs in the map of LEPs. The central indication is that they are likely to be unsuccesful fail in providing a territorial-governance fix to the wicked issues that they have been conceived to address, due to at least three considerations. **Firstly,** the territorial scope of the first wave of LEPs may better reflect the functional economic space of local economies than the previous regional architecture. But we consider that just as some old problems may be 'closed-off' by way of the alternative spatial fix, this will nevertheless 'open-up' some new problems. **Secondly,** even if one agreed with the concept of the 'natural economic area', when one accounts for the multilayered, multidirectional, multidimensional and multiplex socio-economic flows of contemporary society, any such 'natural economic area' will undergo ongoing transformation. It is improbable that LEPs, as governance entities (possibly with legal status, assets, staff and so on), could ever be what practitioners refer to as 'fleet of foot'. It may take several years before LEPs are 'firing on all cylinders'. Hence, constant tinkering with boundaries would be a diversion. **Thirdly,** the *strategic* deficiencies of many LEPs, in terms of their resident and business population together with their spatial reach, will substantially hinder their performance in terms of enabling economic growth in their respective localities.

The amount of interest and involvement in LEPs over the summer of 2010 demonstrated that LEPs cannot easily be discounted as another jargon-laden Government folly (HICKEY, 2010). Their functions and financing may be improved over time. Indeed, LEPs look set to be 'the only show in town' when it comes to economic place-shaping. As a result, they need to be taken seriously as the primary forums for the governance, co-ordination and implementation of sub-national development over the coming years. In the authors' view, however, the changed geography of economic governance has more to do with the politics of dwindling resources than it does with locating the spatial fix for the leadership and operation of sub-national development. LEPs are likely to experience the same problem that affected the existing RDAs, namely that businesses would regard their boundaries as arbitrary administrative constructs based on political divisions. There had, however, been some attention to 'fuzzy' or 'porous' boundaries,which could emphasise spatial *connections* over *separations*. With some local areas already participating in multiple LEPs and potentially more set to follow in further decisions over LEPs, perhaps these areas present a test-bed for collaborative sub-national development

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[i] The letter is available at: http://www.parliament.uk/deposits/depositedpapers/2010/DEP2010-1363.pdf

[accessed 2 July 2010].

[ii] Across the Commonwealth of Nations, the term 'White Paper' is used to denote a parliamentary paper enunciating government policy.