How can the North East hold to account a government determined to ride roughshod over us?

Paul Benneworth argues that any true regional conversation must be more than a few celebrities popping up when the North East is news for a day

Ian Forsyth 2015

Hundreds attend a torch-lit procession to the top of the Eston Hills that overlook Teesside on October 24, 2015 in Eston, England. The rally was organised by the group, 'The Friends of Eston Hills' a local community group who wanted to create an opportunity for people to come together to show their support for the steelworkers of Teesside. Over two thousand workers at the SSI UK steel site at Redcar lost their jobs recently following the closure of the blast furnace and coke ovens bringing to end an over 170-years of steelmaking on Teesside.

I’ve arrived in North Shields for our annual Christmas trip, and was delighted to see the first real shoots of economic recovery after seven long years. It hurts to think that we could have got here so much sooner if the Government hadn’t stuck dogmatically to their clapped out austerity dogma.

Perhaps more shocking was that the Tories seemed impervious in 2010 to arguments that cutting spending in a recession would shatter the fragile recovery, later proven true in glorious Technicolor. And rather than apologising for their shocking mismanagement, they are now trying to bask in reflected glory of a global upturn!

When Teesside’s steel industry was threatened with closure this year, we heard a series of wasp-faced Conservative MPs trot out pious humbug that their hands were tied by European red tape: so the plant must close!
What they didn’t say was Brussels explicitly stated it didn’t oppose state aid: apparently only deep-seated Tory hatred for manufacturing stopped them saving our jobs. But when that truth came out, I don’t remember hearing them correcting their earlier misspeaking.

So why do the Conservatives get away with telling bare-faced lies and why don’t they apologise when they are caught out? Sometimes the national press do their job and challenge their version of events government, but they’re never going to do that for a region so far from the leafy London commuter belt.

All too often there’s a collective amnesia in London who shuffle quickly on to another topic. The upshot is malicious government policy is defended with a lie that’s never challenged when it all goes pear-shaped.

So how can a region hold a government to account that seems determined to ride roughshod over us and weasel out of responsibility when later caught out?

Looking northward, Scotland succeeded in getting a Parliament and an independence referendum despite deep-seated London antipathy. But no-one’s seriously advocating north east nationalism here, so what can we do to have our voices heard?

Scotland also benefited from a clear Scottish Conversation, a group of people who publically discussed what mattered to Scotland, even where London didn’t care. Then when the opportunity arose, these champions could clearly explain Scottish criticisms of the London-made mess, and Scotland’s preferred solution.

I’ve long wanted to see a real North East Conversation talking about what really matters to us in the region. What energy there is gets channelled towards artificial subjects that only set a few policy wonks’ pulses racing, such as local devolution of the EU referendum.

Any true regional conversation must be more than a few celebrities piping up when the North East becomes news for a day, a vibrant debate about our region, its problems and where we are heading. It should be based in our everyday experiences, recognising for example that we don’t have billionaires’ wealth here to trickle down and compensate for slash-and-burn social policy.

So I was delighted to see the sixth issue of Northern Correspondent waiting for me at my parents-in-law. Published quarterly as a showcase for great North Eastern writing, it’s quickly established itself since 2015 as a north east Conversation in miniature, telling ‘big stories from a small part of England’.

It’s not just worthy political stories, but also life at ground level, with beautiful odes covering everything from non-league football at Heaton Stannington and family life.

Celebrating diversity rather than pillorying the poor, it’s an important step towards mobilising voices articulating what matters in the north east of England.

I’m truly hopeful it’s a real first step towards this wider regional conversation. So I wish Northern Correspondent – and Journal readers – all the best for a healthy, prosperous and successful 2016!

North East-born Dr Paul Benneworth is a senior researcher at the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente in the Netherlands.