

English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill

Hansard: Volume 772: debated on Tuesday 2 September 2025

Perran Moon - (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab)

Meur ras, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 5 March this year, the Prime Minister stood at the Dispatch Box and said these words:

“We do recognise Cornish national minority status—not just the proud language, history and culture of Cornwall, but its bright future.”

Since arriving in this place on the back of a pledge to ensure Cornwall is given the devolved powers and funding that we have been craving for centuries, and in line with our manifesto commitment to deliver on the greatest ever *devolution* powers out of Westminster, today is a significant milestone. With the Prime Minister’s commitment to Cornish national minority status clearly reaffirmed, I support a Bill that delivers tangible *devolution* to Cornwall. However, I would like to explore clarifications on the implications of the Bill for the people of Cornwall.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the land that you call Cornwall we know as Kernow, a term believed to have been in use for over 2,000 years that means “people of the promontory”.

However, the English word Cornwall has a different meaning: it means “peninsula of foreigners”. For centuries, the English have recognised the people of the land at the end of the peninsula as different from them. Right up to modern times, the UK Government have continued to honour the distinct territorial integrity of Cornwall, treating us in unique and exceptional ways.

Our constitutional status was perhaps most clearly outlined in a newspaper article in 2013 by the House of Lords researcher Kevin Cahill, who stated that

“the whole territorial interest and dominion of the Crown in and over the entire county of Cornwall is vested in the Duke of Cornwall...So Cornwall is a separate kingdom.”

“I know the Cornish have been shouting about this for a long time, but they turn out to be right.”

The creation of the Duchy of Cornwall in 1337 recognised the distinct history, identity and territory of Cornwall, a unique and exceptional constitutional settlement that we enjoy to the present day. In recent times, Cornwall has been the first rural area outside Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to gain a *devolution* settlement over aspects of transport, education and renewable energy. More recently it has done so over adult education, Cornish distinctiveness and the Cornish language. Indeed, Cornwall already enjoys some of the benefits offered by the Bill for mayoral combined authorities.

I am often asked—even by colleagues in this place—whether as a Cornishman I consider myself English. Along with hundreds of thousands of Cornishmen and women, I am often sadly mocked for my reply. Let me be absolutely clear today: I am Cornish, not English, although I freely admit that some of my very best friends are English. To those at home, particularly young people, who

have been equally ridiculed, I say, “Be loud and proud. It is okay to consider yourself Cornish and British.”

Let me deal with the issue of identity versus status. Cornish national minority status and Cornish identity are sometimes conflated, but when discussing the former, references to identity can sometimes be considered belittling. It is not about identity; it is about a legally binding national minority status. Our status, formally agreed by the Council of Europe 10 years ago, must be respected, upheld and celebrated.

Intervention by Andrew George - (St Ives) (LD)

Meur ras—I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way. He will be aware that in previous Parliaments I led campaigns to secure the recognition of the Cornish language and the Cornish people. Does he agree that this is not an issue of isolationism? It is not about cutting ourselves off, but about cutting ourselves into the celebration of diversity and having the identity of a place properly recognised and respected so that it can grow rather than be suppressed. Surely devolution is about enabling places rather than controlling them, which is what I fear this Bill will do.

Perran Moon - (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab)

As a result of our geographical location, for centuries we have been a safe harbour—a port in the storm—for peoples from all over the world. We are an inclusive society.

Let me get straight to the nub of the issue. The Council of Europe framework convention for the protection of national minorities makes it very clear. Article 16 says:

“The Parties shall refrain from measures which alter the proportions of the population in areas inhabited by persons belonging to national minorities and are aimed at restricting the rights and freedoms flowing from the principles enshrined in the present framework Convention.”

In 2016, when passing comment on the then Government’s plans for redrawing boundaries, the Council of Europe advisory committee on the framework convention highlighted

“that Article 16 prohibits restricting the enjoyment of the rights of the Framework Convention in connection with the redrawing of borders.”

In the Bill as drafted, Cornwall is prevented from accessing the highest level of devolution, because to do so would require us to compromise our national minority status. During the passage of the Bill, I will work with the Government to ensure that the Bill as passed respects Cornish national minority status and delivers an historic devolution arrangement that fulfils our manifesto commitment; provides for the economic development support that we need to unleash the Cornish Celtic tiger; gives us the funding and resources to deal with our crippling housing crisis; and celebrates Cornish national minority status.

This responsibility weighs not just on the mind. For us, this is not just about functional local government; it goes way deeper into our souls, to a centuries-old desire for increased autonomy and self-governance in our place on this multinational island. I urge Ministers: together, let us grasp this once-in-a-generation opportunity.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD)

I rise to make the case for Kernow, or Cornwall, and its unique status in this United Kingdom. My constituents have been crystal clear with me: Cornwall must never be forcibly joined with Devon or merged into any wider regional authority. But that is not to say that Cornwall wants to go it alone. It is not about separatism at all; this is about respecting our distinct status and history. Cornwall has proudly partnered with other UK regions for decades. It has a proud and unique language, culture, history and—crucially—national minority status, which was granted over a decade ago. We were afforded the same status as our Celtic brothers and sisters in Scotland, Ireland and Wales, and so the people of Cornwall deserve a devolution deal that recognises that.

This status is not just symbolic. It creates a duty on public authorities to promote equality for the Cornish people, to support our culture, language and identity and, specifically, to avoid any assimilationist policies. Under the UK's Equality Act 2010 and the public sector equality duty, Ministers and local authorities alike must consider the impact of their decisions, including in this Bill, on the Cornish people. If they fail to do so, their actions can be challenged in the courts using an array of legal claims, including judicial reviews, an Equality Act claim and a Human Rights Act 1998 article 14 differential treatment claim. Therefore, these rights carry real legal and political weight. To disregard or dilute Cornwall's status in this Bill would be insulting, unlawful and dangerous. I am alarmed that the Bill would grant the Secretary of State power to force combined authorities without local people's consent. Devolution, in essence, should give power to the communities, regions and counties that it aims to empower, not to a mayor, a Secretary of State or an unelected commissioner.

At Prime Minister's questions last October, the Prime Minister told me that he believes that "Those with skin in the game know what is best for their communities."—[Official Report, 16 October 2024; Vol. 754, c. 834.]

The Secretary of State has repeated that today. I agree with them both: decisions should be made for Cornwall and in Cornwall by a fully elected Cornish assembly—and not in Plymouth, Bristol or Westminster. They should be made by those from within the duchy who understand our unique way of life and our unique economic and social challenges—the immense challenges of funding rural transport; the unfair and unequal investment in our schools over decades; the plight of our farmers and fishers, who seem to be left out in the cold by Government after Government; and the enormous proliferation of second homes and holiday lets, which lock local people out of our housing market, generation after generation.

In my office, I proudly display a famous painting of the Cornish rebellion of 1497. It illustrates the Cornish spirit of fairness, justice and persistence, of proud Cornish men and women who had taxes imposed upon them by the Government in London. That spirit lives on. Given Cornwall's history and that strength of feeling, if the Secretary of State imposed a mayor of Devon and Cornwall—completely disregarding Cornwall's national minority status, as well as legal battles—she might have a full uprising on her hands.

The Bill would likely limit Cornwall to a foundation strategic authority with limited powers, funding and control. That is why we are fighting for a bespoke devolution deal. The Bill should

have mechanisms in place to allow such a bespoke deal to take place. Cornwall's MPs look forward to working together for the good of Cornwall, onen hag oll—one and all—to make that happen. I call on the Government to fully respect Cornwall's national minority status; to create a Minister for Cornwall, who could sit in the Wales Office; to consider the feasibility of an elected Cornish assembly instead of a mayor; and to commit to a devolution deal that respects Cornwall's historic identity by excluding it from combined strategic authorities with other regions. Kernow bys vyken!

Noah Law - (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab)

Few matters have occupied as much of my first year in this House as the question of Cornish devolution. For decades, if not centuries, the people of Cornwall have spoken of their desire to have a greater say in the decisions that shape their lives. That desire is founded in our distinct needs and our more than 1,000-year-old national identity. That is why the arrival of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill has been watched in Cornwall with keen anticipation and, in some quarters, with understandable apprehension.

Having pored over the text of the legislation, my conclusion is this: far from being the bulldozer that many feared, the Bill leaves Cornwall's position intact. It formalises our single foundation status and—once and for all I hope—a single geography. Crucially, it does not strip away the strategic powers that Cornwall already exercises. Recognition of our national minority status is now firmly acknowledged in this place, and, as one of the largest unitary authorities in England by geographic footprint, we retain the ability to deliver many of the functions that are only just being handed to combined or mayoral bodies elsewhere.

Intervention by Perran Moon - (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab)

Does my hon. Friend agree that the historic Cornish constitutional status must be considered as part of the devolution discussion?

Noah Law - (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab)

I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. On top of the many examples he has given of Cornwall's constitutional status, and aside from our devolution arrangements with Westminster, the leader of Cornwall council was in 2023 given permission to attend ministerial meetings of the British-Irish Council, much like the other Celtic nations and the Channel Islands. same year, Cornwall council and the Welsh Government signed a historic collaboration agreement, reflecting the shared culture of these two Celtic nations.

Perhaps more weightily in this place, the Crowther and Kilbrandon report of the royal commission on the constitution in 1973 acknowledged that the creation of the Duchy of Cornwall in 1337

“established a special and enduring relationship between Cornwall and the Crown. Use of the designation on all appropriate occasions would serve to recognise both this special relationship and the territorial integrity of Cornwall”.

It went on to say that what the Cornish want is

“recognition of the fact that Cornwall has a separate identity and that its traditional boundaries shall be respected.”

Let me be clear: while the letter of the Bill does not necessarily offer the content of devolution that so many in Cornwall have long called for, I have no doubt that it will be very welcome in cities and other regions across England. But Cornwall is different: a remote coastal community, an existing administrative unit, a functional economic geography and a very good brand, if nothing else, as many Members will know from their summer holidays. Above all, Cornwall is a proud part of the United Kingdom with a distinct national identity, a resurgent language and a desire to be heard after centuries of dismissal. With the right powers, we stand ready to not only shape our own future but help lead the way in a United Kingdom that values local voices and unlocks prosperity across all nations and regions.

I greatly welcome the inclusion of new powers such as the community right to buy. That is exactly the sort of measure that can put power back into local hands, giving people in my constituency the chance to ensure that public assets like the Dolphin Inn in Grampound or the sites of the former General Wolfe in St Austell and the Fowey community hospital remain in public hands and continue to serve local needs.

Intervention by Andrew George - (St Ives) (LD)

The hon. Member makes a very strong case for Cornwall. He should urge his colleagues in government to welcome amendments to the Bill that strengthen Cornwall's ability to achieve its unique and very special status, which we believe needs to be enshrined in this legislation as well as the historic record.

Noah Law - (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab)

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is incredibly important that Cornwall's national minority status is respected by the Bill, and that the powers and investment required to meet Cornwall's distinctive needs—if not enshrined in the text—are considered as part of the devolution process in the months ahead.

Finally, we should acknowledge that while the Bill streamlines England's devolution architecture, the mayoral model will not suit every part of our country. Cornwall has shown for over 15 years as a unitary authority that there are other effective ways to deliver devolved functions. What we need now is a plan for Cornwall—one that equips us with the powers we require over housing, transport, skills and industrial growth to meet the challenges we face. The truth is that the statutory framework set out in the Bill is not the central issue at stake. What really matters is that we secure a settlement for Cornwall that recognises our unique circumstances, protects our ability to make strategic decisions for ourselves and gives our communities the tools to thrive.