

Democracy Without Proximity

How the language of devolution can conceal the centralisation of democratic power

Adam Tugwell | 4 August 2026



Most people know something is wrong with the way they are governed. They may not describe it in constitutional terms, and they may not trace the problem through tiers of local government, statutory duties, planning frameworks, combined authorities, mayoralities, or Whitehall departments. But they feel the consequence clearly enough: Power seems distant, decisions feel pre-determined, and the routes through which ordinary people can influence the system appear to be shrinking.

This is often explained as a crisis of trust, competence, delivery, or political leadership. Those explanations are not wrong, but they are incomplete. Beneath them sits a deeper structural problem: England has been steadily losing democratic proximity.

Democratic proximity is the practical closeness between citizens and the institutions that make decisions affecting their lives. It is not merely the formal right to vote every few years. It is the ability to reach representatives, understand where authority sits, contest decisions, influence priorities, and remove decision-makers who fail to serve the communities they represent.

When that proximity is weakened, democracy does not disappear all at once. It becomes thinner. It becomes more procedural.

Citizens may still vote, consultations may still be held, and institutions may still speak the language of accountability. But the practical power of electors to shape outcomes is reduced.

This is the context in which current debates about local government reorganisation, unitary authorities, regional mayors, and the transfer of powers from Whitehall should be understood.

The central question is not simply whether power is moving away from Westminster. The central question is whether power is moving closer to voters.

The Difference Between Devolution and Consolidation

The word devolution carries a powerful implication. To most people, it means power being handed back: away from distant institutions and towards the communities affected by decisions. It suggests proximity, accountability, and local influence.

But the transfer of power is not automatically devolution in that meaningful democratic sense. Power can be moved from Whitehall to a regional mayor. It can be moved from six district councils into one county-wide unitary authority. It can be moved from numerous local representatives into a smaller number of executive offices. In each case, power has moved. The question is whether citizens have moved closer to it or further away from it.

That distinction matters. A reform can be decentralising in administrative terms while centralising in democratic terms. If authority leaves Whitehall but is then concentrated in larger, more remote institutions serving wider populations, the experience for citizens may still be one of distance. They may have fewer representatives, fewer access points, larger electoral divisions, and less practical influence.

This is why the debate cannot begin and end with whether Whitehall retains power. It must ask where power goes next. If the answer is that power is consolidated into fewer institutions, then the language of devolution may obscure the reality of centralisation.

The Gloucestershire Example

Gloucestershire illustrates the point clearly. The proposal to abolish six district councils and replace them with a single unitary authority is presented as modernisation: fewer councils, fewer managers, less duplication, shared services, and more joined-up delivery.

There is a reasonable administrative argument for efficiency. Public services do need to work. Duplication can be wasteful. Fragmented systems can be difficult to navigate. Joint working can improve outcomes. These points should not be dismissed.

But administrative efficiency and democratic representation are not interchangeable values. Shared services can exist without abolishing democratic institutions. Back-office collaboration, joint procurement, shared legal teams, pooled waste arrangements, and coordinated planning work can all reduce cost without removing elected councils from the democratic map.

The question is therefore not whether councils can cooperate, or whether services can be streamlined. They can, and in many places they already do. The question is whether the pursuit of efficiency requires the abolition of an entire democratic tier.

When six district-level authorities are pooled into one organisation with the same geographical boundaries as the existing county council, the effect is a consolidation of power. Six centres of decision-making become one. Six sets of elected members become one. Six political cultures, six scrutiny arrangements, and six institutional routes of influence are absorbed into a single county-wide structure.

To all intents and purposes, that is centralisation within the local government system. It may be presented as local because the new body remains within Gloucestershire, but for residents whose contact with democratic power has been through district or borough councils, authority has moved further away.

The Hollowing-Out of Local Power

This argument should not romanticise existing local government. Many residents already experience local decision-making as weak, arbitrary, or unresponsive. A person who attends a planning committee, makes a submission, and expects a genuinely local decision can understandably feel misled when they discover that councillors are largely interpreting national frameworks, statutory tests, and centrally shaped policy constraints.

The same is true in other areas. Licensing, housing, social care, environmental regulation, transport, and planning are often shaped by national rules, funding settlements, statutory duties, and ministerial priorities. Local representatives may be the visible face of the decision, but the real discretion available to them can be limited.

This helps explain why many citizens already doubt the value of local councils. If outcomes feel constrained from above, local democracy can appear symbolic. But that conclusion must be handled carefully. A hollowed-out institution is not proof that local democracy has failed. It is evidence that power has already been removed from it.

The remedy is not to abolish the remaining local structures through which citizens can still exercise influence. The remedy is to restore meaningful authority to them.

Genuine devolution would return discretion, fiscal autonomy, policy responsibility, and democratic weight to parish, town, district, and borough levels within clear national frameworks.

That is what makes the current direction of travel so troubling. The very weakness created by earlier centralisation is now being used to justify further consolidation. Local democracy is first constrained, then criticised for being ineffective, then removed in the name of efficiency.

Representation Is Power

The removal of a council is not merely the removal of an administrative body. It is the removal of representation, access, influence, scrutiny, and political capacity.

District and borough councillors are often among the representatives most accessible to ordinary residents. They are close enough to be contacted, challenged, and encountered in local life. They may know the place, the people, the disputes, the history, and the practical realities behind the files placed before them.

That accessibility is not decorative. It is a form of power held by electors. When a resident can speak to a councillor who has some institutional ability to ask questions, challenge officers, influence priorities, scrutinise decisions, or vote in committee, the resident possesses a route into the system.

When that councillor disappears, the resident does not simply lose a name on a website. They lose one of the practical channels through which democratic influence is exercised.

Parish and town councils can play an important role in preserving civic identity and local voice. In some areas, they may become even more necessary if borough or district councils are abolished. But they are not an equivalent substitute where they lack comparable statutory powers, policy discretion, budgets, or institutional weight. Accessibility without authority is not the same as democratic power.

Regional Centralisation Before the Regions Fully Arrive

Local government reorganisation is also unlikely to be the final stage. Larger county-wide or unitary authorities become natural building blocks for combined authorities,

regional mayoralities, and wider strategic structures. In that sense, unitarisation can function as a precursor to regional centralisation.

The pattern is already visible across England. Combined authorities and mayoralities are presented as vehicles for strategic leadership, economic development, transport integration, housing coordination, skills policy, and infrastructure delivery.

These ambitions may be serious and in some areas necessary. But they also concentrate influence in a comparatively small number of political offices.

Recent suggestions that powers should be taken from Whitehall departments and handed to mayors intensify the issue. On the surface, this sounds like a direct challenge to central bureaucracy. It appeals to a public mood that is tired of distant departments, slow institutions, and an unresponsive administrative state.

But bypassing Whitehall by handing authority to a small number of regional executives is not the same as handing power to citizens. It may simply replace one distant concentration of authority with another. Instead of asking how power can be returned to the democratic institutions closest to communities, the proposed destination is often a handful of mayoral offices whose occupants will almost inevitably be drawn from the largest political parties.

There is also a practical dilemma. If significant Whitehall functions are transferred to mayors, equivalent administrative capacity will have to be created somewhere.

Strategic powers require policy expertise, legal structures, finance teams, delivery bodies, data systems, accountability mechanisms, and bureaucratic machinery. The result may not be liberation from bureaucracy, but the reproduction of bureaucracy at regional level.

That may still be defensible if it genuinely improves accountability and proximity. But if it merely moves power away from Whitehall and into larger executive structures without strengthening the ability of ordinary citizens to influence decisions, the democratic gain is far less clear.

The Mandate Question

This is where the question of mandate becomes unavoidable. There is a clear democratic difference between giving people more power and taking power away from them.

If authority is genuinely returned to existing local democratic institutions, the reform expands democratic agency. It gives voters more influence, more discretion, and more practical control over the decisions that affect them. Such reforms may still need scrutiny, but their democratic direction is outward and downward.

The position is different when elected tiers are abolished, councillor numbers are reduced, decisions are moved to larger units, and influence is concentrated in fewer hands. That is not merely administrative reform. It alters the relationship between citizens and the state.

Consultation is not the same as consent. A consultation can invite comments on a process whose direction has already been decided. It can create a record of engagement without giving citizens a meaningful choice. For change that removes democratic access points, the standard should be higher than procedural involvement. It should require informed public authorisation.

The public should not merely be told that governance will be modernised. They should be asked whether they accept the removal of representative institutions, the consolidation of powers, the reduction in access, and the creation of larger decision-making structures. Without that informed choice, reforms of this kind struggle to claim democratic legitimacy.

The Language of Reform

The legitimacy problem is sharpened by the language used to sell these changes. Reform is described as devolution. Consolidation is described as bringing power closer to people. The removal of councils is described as streamlining. The concentration of authority is described as empowerment.

This matters because words shape public understanding. If citizens are told that power is being returned to them, while the practical effect is that access points are removed and decision-making is relocated to larger institutions, trust is damaged.

People may not follow every structural change, but they can feel the difference between being heard and being managed.

The most generous interpretation is that policymakers believe larger structures are better able to deliver strategic outcomes. The more serious concern is that the language of devolution can disguise a transfer of influence away from electors.

Either way, the effect should be judged by democratic reality rather than institutional branding.

Integrity and Distance

This is not simply a question of structure. It is a question of integrity.

Integrity in public life depends on more than personal virtue. It depends on institutional conditions. Representatives behave differently when they are close enough to the people they serve for consequences to be visible. Communities engage differently when representatives are accessible enough to be challenged. Accountability becomes more

real when power is exercised at a scale where relationships, scrutiny, and local knowledge still matter.

As decision-making moves further away, accountability becomes more formal and less felt. Consequences become abstract. Responsibility becomes dispersed. Citizens may know that someone, somewhere, has power, but they cannot easily identify who is responsible, how to reach them, or how to remove them.

This is the integrity deficit. It is not only a failure of individuals. It is the predictable result of a system that has allowed power to drift away from meaningful public scrutiny while still asking citizens to believe that they remain in control.

Why the Public Mood Is So Volatile

The public mood becomes volatile when lived experience contradicts official language. People are told that power is being brought closer, but their own encounters with the system suggest distance. They are told that reform will make government more responsive, but they see fewer representatives and larger institutions. They are told that democracy is being strengthened, but they feel less able to influence decisions.

This does not necessarily make people anti-democratic. It makes them frustrated. They look for explanations that are simple enough to grasp and leaders who sound as though they understand the anger. The risk is that a public desperate to be heard becomes vulnerable to any political project that claims to speak for them while leaving the underlying distance between citizens and power untouched.

The answer is not nostalgia for every existing institution. Nor is it opposition to all reform. Some structures may need to change. Some services may be better delivered at scale. Some strategic decisions may require coordination across wider areas.

But every reform should be judged by a basic democratic test: does it increase or reduce the practical power of citizens to influence the decisions that affect them?

Conclusion: The Test of Democratic Reform

England's governance debate is often presented as a choice between centralisation and devolution. But that framing is too crude. The real distinction is between proximity and distance.

If power leaves Whitehall but is placed in institutions that are larger, more remote, less accessible, and controlled by fewer actors, the democratic problem has not been solved. It has merely been relocated.

Genuine devolution would strengthen the institutions closest to communities. It would restore meaningful authority to the levels of government that citizens can reach. It

would increase the number of routes through which voters can exercise influence, not reduce them.

What is currently emerging risks doing the opposite. It consolidates power into fewer institutions, larger geographies, and more distant executive structures while presenting that process as empowerment.

That is why the issue is not merely administrative. It is constitutional. It concerns who holds power, how close that power is to electors, and whether citizens are being asked to surrender influence without being clearly told what is being taken away.

Public services are a cost to be managed. Democracy is not.

The test for any reform should therefore be simple: does it return power to people, or does it move power further away while telling them it has come closer?

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