

Thatcher wanted the ‘managed decline’ of Merseyside. I want to manage its renaissance.

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Joe Anderson is Mayor Liverpool and is standing to become Mayor of the Liverpool City Region

Back in the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher’s government came close to writing off Merseyside. There was a serious conversation about leaving our city and its neighbours to ‘managed decline’ and the tender mercies of her economic shock therapy. As her Chancellor at the time, Geoffrey Howe, patronisingly put it: ‘We must not expend all our limited resources in trying to make water flow uphill.’

We’ve come a long way since then.

Since 2010, Labour has had the privilege of running Liverpool and I became its leader, then in 2012 Mayor of the City. As all 6 councils in the Liverpool City Region became Labour controlled, we had to face a coalition Government determined to hit us all hard.

Liverpool council’s budget has been slashed by 58 per cent. Others in the city region face similar cuts. That’s £340 million taken out of our local economy each year - and over £1bn across all 6 local authorities. We also saw valuable

national programmes like Housing Market Renewal and Building Schools for the Future, brought in by the last Labour government, scrapped.

The right economic geography

I am proud of my record. Along with my colleagues, we refused to sit there like rabbits caught in the government's headlights. We dug deep, innovated and drove through an ambitious programme of change. It is this willingness to overcome problems and get things done that has now paved the way for our ambitious devolution deal with the government.

Throughout my time as Mayor of Liverpool, I have consistently made the case that there's a missing level at which decisions should be taken and I am delighted that the concept of city-regions and metro mayors has now become mainstream. Liverpool City Region has the right economic geography to succeed. 1.5million people, 40,000 businesses and over 625,000 employees mean we have the critical mass to build a sustainable next-generation economy.

Regenerate our economy and our people

There is plenty to do.

We need to start by repairing an economy and social fabric that has been damaged by bad government decisions, ministerial neglect and, now, economic uncertainty caused by the decision to leave the EU.

The result of last month's referendum will have a huge impact on our city region. I have been meeting with key stakeholders, including faith leaders, business representatives, the universities, and political parties and one thing is clear; the decision to leave will impact on every part of our daily lives. It will make planning for our future more difficult, but we must remain focussed on our growth strategy, launched recently the LEP.

Here in the Liverpool City Region, we need to make the right investments in our economy so that we provide more, better paid private sector jobs in growth industries.

I have announced recently that if selected for the Labour nomination for Metro Mayor I would create 10 Mayoral Development zones to make the right interventions in the right places, using the experience we have gained from our existing ones in Liverpool. This will help provide thousands of local jobs to local people.

And as we regenerate our economy, we must also regenerate our people. For young people we need to set up vocational schools to train our young people, and ensure they have no problems getting skilled work on Merseyside for the rest of their lives. And to guide this I am setting up a City Region Skills Commission through my current position as Chair of the Combined Authority.

We need upgraded infrastructure to capitalise on the boom in sea freight and passenger ships now docking in the Mersey, because the Mersey is quite simply the lifeblood of our city region. We need to create new rail stations across our region, and we also need to fight to ensure HS2 is extended to Liverpool, instead of ending the line at Crewe as is the current plan.

But we also need – if you'll pardon the pun – HS3 on-track so that we can get serious about building a 'Northern Powerhouse,' connecting up the great cities and towns of the north of England, from Liverpool to Hull, opening up new export opportunities and trade routes.

Aside from the railways, we need to improve the bus services in our region. 80 percent of travel in the region takes place by bus. We need to rebrand services to make them cleaner and safer. Furthermore, we need to make our bus services more affordable, in particular, capping fares for children.

On housing, we need to see a better mix of properties across the city-region in order to make homes affordable for families, deal with shortages, and help our local councils grow their council tax base. This is why, for instance, I am pledging [to build 10,000 'rent to buy' homes in Liverpool.](#)

All of these things are now in prospect. We have negotiated a devolution deal with the government that will allow us to shape our own destiny and address these serious, inter-connected issues.

And given the issues are serious the role of metro mayor has to be taken seriously too. Anyone who thinks it's about cutting ribbons, or acting the fool like Boris, posing on zip-wires and appearing on game shows, is deluding themselves. There's a lot of hard work to be done.

The renaissance of the region

It will require decades worth, if not longer, of plans and strategies which stop at borders to be rewired to take into account a new reality. National Government, too, needs to be challenged on the old ways of working and the new Metro Mayor will have to fall in-step to an already busy program, talking

to Government about how they transfer around £100m worth of powers and responsibilities to us.

The Combined Authority is already putting in place the steps to build up the capacity we need to manage the workload of a new city region. Creating a new layer of Government will necessitate people with the skills we need to be on hand and co-ordinate the work across partners and authorities.

Staff *within* each council will also need to work together on more projects and, for example, we can see that success already at the International Festival for Business where representatives from each area are jointly representing the city region on the Invest Liverpool stand. The IFB represents the potential for our city region to gain by working together on the national and the international stage.

If we get it right, the prize for the Liverpool City Region is that we get to run the affairs of more of our country and stop the Conservatives doing what they did to Liverpool three decades ago and leaving us to managed decline.

This is the big prize that sits behind devolution and the creation of a metro mayor. It's the opportunity to do things differently, free from the interference of Whitehall officials who don't know the place and Tory ministers who simply don't care about it.

It's the challenge and honour of leading the renaissance of my home city and its partner towns and boroughs that remains my driving passion. And that's why I'm standing to become its first City Region Mayor.