

Episode 4: About the Future

Introduction *New Narratives for the North East, brought to you by New Writing North. Telling fresh stories, exploring the historical legacies, and looking to the future of the North East.*

Episode Four: About The Future.

Richard T Kelly [reading] Democracy has its discontents, and one of which we hear a fair bit is the fear that our elected politicians don't really speak for us, don't share our daily concerns, because they haven't walked a mile in our shoes and wouldn't much care to. It might be that such fears are felt especially sharply in the North East, a place that considers itself uncommonly apart: distinctive, but hostage to neglect by successive London governments. Politically, who really speaks up for the North East? Do you need a special set of credentials or bona fides? Must you be from here? Should you have the coalminer's grit in your eye? And even if you have license to speak, does anybody actually hear you? Or are you so far removed from power as to be handily ignored?

Richard T Kelly

I'm Richard T Kelly, and the T is just because I have a boring name that I share with a lot of writers, so I have to add that affectation. I'm a novelist and a nonfiction author.

The piece is very much a sort of North East against the world type angle, I think the North East does think itself apart and its sons and daughters feel a bit that way, all through their lives. It's partly geographical and to do with the centre of government being down south. It's partly about community and landscape, and a strong sense of regional identity that comes from the way people live.

Richard Benson The North East is very distinct as a region.

My name is Richard Benson, and I'm a nonfiction writer.

One distinguishing element of it, I think, is that – I say this as someone from Yorkshire – I think those cities to the south of it, that M62 corridor of the big industrial cities from Liverpool to Hull across the middle of the country, perceive themselves to be in competition with London and the metropolitan area. I have the sense in the North East, that for better or worse, they're less interested in it. And they are happier to be an autonomous region. I don't think they crave London's recognition. I don't think they need to feel that they've somehow bested the South East. I think they have a very secure sense of a history and a culture that in many respects feels older and more venerable than London's does.

Alex Niven Lots, if not most, people from the North East are aware that it's a place apart in some sense. And I think for most people, they feel that it's a very special place that they're sad to leave and kind of pine for when they're away from it.

I'm Alex Nevin. My job is lecturer at Newcastle University in English literature. But I also write political commentary and cultural analysis.

Some people of course, can't wait to get out, again, because it's a place apart in terms of its dislocation, if you like, from other parts of the country in its remoteness. On the other hand, lots of people and, I would say, perhaps more people, go to London and the South East because that's where the work is. So there is a kind of narrative of migration. The North East is still, even in an age where unemployment has been replaced by higher employment, even though we kind of tend to think about in-work poverty now – but even in an era where employment's higher than it used to be, the North East still tends to be at the bottom of all the kind of tables of employment, so people go to London to get jobs.

India Hunter There's definitely this kind of idea that if you don't leave for university or you don't leave when you're young, then you're stuck here.

My name is India Hunter. I am currently in college, so sixth form. I also do poetry.

There's a song by Sam Fender called 'Leave Fast'. He's from Newcastle. The one line that stuck with me, just made me think more, is 'leave fast or stay forever'. He's talking about how, if you don't get out and you don't get a job somewhere else, and you don't kind of leave while you've got the opportunity to, then there's not really another way out. I like a Chinese on the weekends, so that's kind of what I've written my poem about: about life, in the area where I work.

India Hunter [reading] Customers, conversation, Chow Mein / A flurry of deliveries and orders / A rush of people and food / Sparks of brief connection / Over a central human tradition. // "What have you got there?" she asks / I cross the last 't' on my politics essay / She wants to know where I'm going after I've passed / Hopefully uni, but definitely away / Good on me for getting out, she says / She talks of this town as if it's a trap: / A TS postcode wrapped around her wrists / Council house curtains used as a gag / Her foundation is thick, but I still spot the bruise / "I look forward to seeing you out there on the news!"

Richard T Kelly In my lifetime, the North East has been a place that has not had this voice on a national stage, and so talented people in general have had to leave, because it's just not a big enough stage for them. They may want to depart the North East and leave it behind; that's a perfectly valid feeling for people who come from anywhere. But to do things for the North East, or to represent it in some way seems to require you not to be there very much. But then, of course, if you leave your authenticity, your integrity, connection, is immediately questioned. I remember feeling really glad the first time I had the chance to write and publish something about the North East and there was some interest in it. And then immediately, some reviewers and interviewers, the first thing out of their mouths was, well, you're not there anymore. I think you have to make peace with that. I'm really happy to have the opportunity to still comment on the region and its politics and people, even from this distance. But I perfectly respect people who would say, "You're not there right now." That, too, is valid. It's done with affection and as

much expertise as I can muster. It's a simple fact I'm not there anymore. And I'm unlikely to return there. But then, who knows?

Alex Niven For me, certainly, I felt the kind of exile's yearning to return quite soon after leaving the North East. I felt very lucky to eventually get one of the, kind of, few jobs for someone like me in the North East. I felt, on going down south to university, very much like I was in a kind of different country. But the North East is physically apart, in that it's far away from the centres of power and influence. But also it's apart in terms of how politics in this country is, and how it has been for, really, a long time. It's left out in terms of its denied resources, much less is spent on the North East in terms of transport. In terms of austerity, over the last decade or so, the North East suffered very badly – or certainly parts of the North East, Newcastle in particular. With a couple of exceptions, it's left out of political conversations, and it is denied resources.

Mim Skinner The North and particularly the North East is chronically ignored politically. And there are much bigger questions to be asked, if we want to see the region become more creative and more entrepreneurial, and see more brilliant things go on.

I am Mim Skinner. I'm a writer and community worker. And I've been writing about our café, REfUSE Café in Chester Le Street in County Durham.

I mean, there's some really shocking statistics about the investment we have per person in the North East in transport infrastructure versus what is invested in the South East and in London. So I do think it's such an exciting place to be because of all the really amazing, creative stuff that's going on. That's true. I think we need to invest in that potential as well, in a kind of big scale way where we listen to voices in the North East in politics, and it's prioritised as a region, and that creativity and ingenuity is really invested in – for example, in transport infrastructure.

Richard T Kelly The government agenda of levelling up, and whatever else one might say about it, I can't see any serious or substantive effort that doesn't involve moving more of the crown jewels out of London – and why is it all hoarded in one corner? It has to be given away,

but not just giving away that largess, but also devolving more power for people to make decisions and spend money nearer to where those decisions are made.

Alex Niven The kind of centralising dynamic of England and of Britain in general is very damaging in terms of having all of the institutions or, you know, kind of 95% of our institutions in London, having at least some institutions redistributed throughout the country and having some form of regional government in the North East, and some form of institutional power is crucial.

Richard T Kelly It's in the course of my lifetime that the remarkable economic dominance of London over the rest of the country has been substantially engineered. It's always been the capital, but it's the way our economy has been engineered, has coincided with the North East becoming this satellite, looking for favours, feeling it's got no real control of its fortunes. Rejecting, of course, the elected assembly when it came along – clearly a lot of people in the North East did think that politics is talking chuff, and the real question is, how do we get the power?

Lyndsey Ayre So I come from a family who always voted Labour. One of my earliest memories is being taken to the polling station with my dad, and him saying, "You always vote Labour". And that's always stuck in my head. But they recently, like, I think, they now vote Conservative.

I'm Lyndsey Ayre. I'm from Gateshead, live currently in Newcastle. I'm a writer, I won the Sid Chaplin Award for working-class writers last year.

I feel like you read about this in the news, and you read about, like, the Red Wall crumbling and stuff, and areas like Blythe that have always voted Labour now having their first Conservative MP, and that kind of thing. Things like Brexit. I just – I knew that was going to happen before the vote was even announced, because I could hear it in the conversations that I was having with my parents and with other family members, and that kind of thing. So it just wasn't really a surprise. There definitely is a sense that we've been left behind, a little bit, in

some ways, I think. So I think maybe it started off as a protest vote. And now it's just kind of become the way that a lot of people think and the way that a lot of people see things.

Richard T Kelly Interestingly, name just before this project came along, I had been chatting with a number of fellow North East writers about North East politics and the whole idea of how many north-easterners have ever made a real impact on the national political stage. When we're thinking about the present day and who that might be, we all looked a bit guiltily at one another. But there is only one answer. We have an enormous North East figure astride of national politics right now. And as difficult as a figure as he might be, he's unmistakably a north-easterner. And that's Dominic Cummings.

Andrew Hankinson Dominic Cummings is the biggest voice from the North East and about the North East at the moment. He really is. So I'm not surprised that people look to him as the person who can help them out of this and show them a way forward – because nobody else really is. Nobody else has got that platform. Nobody else is that close to the Prime Minister.

My name's Andrew Hankinson, and I'm a writer. I grew up in Newcastle and moved away for a little bit and then moved back when I started a family of my own.

I think arts and culture aren't as important as having powerful politicians or people with lots of money speaking on our behalf. I think those are the people who are really going to change things for you. We used to have these powerful MPs up here, you know, under New Labour – you know, Tony Blair's constituents up here: Mandelson and Miliband. We had these powerful voices up here, and we don't really, anymore. And some of the MPs are really trying and some of the council leaders are trying, but they just don't have the voices the way the politicians used to from up here.

Richard T Kelly If you asked most people who care or know about this "Who are the great north-eastern politicians?" you're going to get mainly Labour figures, I'd've thought. They're not going to be very essential figures in government. The distinctiveness of Cummings politically is really of interest. He is this, by his own proclamation, unideological figure. His view is that left

and right are increasingly redundant concepts – it's just about ideas. He's not hatched out of a tradition. But also the fact that he is, unquestionably, a child of Durham. You see it, you hear it. It's almost graphically obvious that Durham – the city of the great castle, cathedral, and eminent university – and the county of Durham – full of colliery villages – that there's an obvious disparity there. So to be of Durham is not going to be some simple formula, because all of that is Durham. His father was an engineer. He worked most conspicuously for Lang Offshore, who helped to build the North Sea oil platforms that went up in the mid-70s that made possible the UK's extraordinary adventure in the North Sea oil. North Sea oil was an impossible adventure that nobody thought the UK could do. If Cummings grew up in that kind of household, his father was part of that adventure. It might incline you, I don't know, to venture some sense of what's possible in the world.

Richard Benson The North East is a practically minded place – it likes to think of itself as a place that gets on with things and does things and solves problems. I remember talking to a man called Tony Quinn who works in offshore renewables, very senior. And he felt that the North East was actually remarkable in the way that it had reinvented itself continually over history. It was actually incredibly good at reinventing itself. The shipyards were devastated, as we know, in sort of the 70s and 80s. But they reinvented themselves and actually created a huge industry for servicing oil and gas platforms, building oil and gas platforms. And out of that came the technologies that support oil and gas, and now they were transforming to renewables. There's something hopeful about that, and the idea of the really genuine legacy of engineering knowledge and problem-solving knowledge that is just in the area. Because of the heritage there's a pretty good claim that it invented the Industrial Revolution. Certainly it gave us the railways; it gave us the way that we use electricity and power generation; shipbuilding expertise; all kinds of things.

Alex Niven Certainly going back, the North East was a kind of wilderness, this quite violent border territory – up until the Industrial Revolution, which really flipped things on its head, so that you got, you know, Newcastle, Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool, other northern towns, becoming the centre of – certainly the centre of the country in terms of wealth generation, but also the centre of the world in terms of these kind of Northern industrial cities being the kind of

workshops of the world and producing prodigious amounts of the world's goods, and inventing... in Newcastle, you know, the steam train was invented, the light bulb was invented. The North East was kind of a bit like Silicon Valley, or Shanghai, or something like that, in the 21st Century. This was the most advanced place in the world, really. I mean, for me, personally, I would point to this modern or modernist heritage in the North East of embracing science and technology in a way that is quite different from at least the stereotypes of English tradition.

Richard Benson [reading] It scarcely needs repeating that of all the countries' regions, the North East played the most illustrious role in Britain's Industrial Revolution in the 18th and the 19th Centuries. The coal and the steel, the ships and the railways, the electric and the power generation, the engineering and the manufacturing, the new philosophies of science and society. To list and analyse the area's achievements in these respects is beyond the scope of this piece. The question is, rather, does this past have continuity with the present? And can that continuity be helpfully adapted as a foundation for the future?

Richard Benson The question of whether North East is trapped by its history is a really interesting one. And it was really key to my approach beginning the piece, not at the end of it. And I really was corrected doing this, because I realised that I thought of it a bit like that, if I'm honest, in fact to my embarrassment now. I think that the idea that the North East is trapped by its history is more about what people on the outside think, than what people on the inside think. People there, actually, have shown, you know, a lot of dynamism in reinventing themselves. It's really true to say that we are going through a new industrial revolution. You could also say that we're just going through a new phase of the old one, and that this has been a, you know, 200-, 300-year process. We're dealing with the need to decarbonise and of course that original carbonisation really began with – I mean, you could go right back to coal mining in the North East in the 13th Century. So this isn't necessarily a footnote to something that happened 200 years ago. You can see this as a continuation of a project that is centuries and centuries old. I mentioned in the piece that, you know, I'm not sure that even people in the region understand that, you know, the area is a world leader. Not *national* leader – is a *world* leader in renewable

energy in wind turbines. Technologies can change the world, and it's happening there. And I feel that people, even in the region, don't fully know that. And it's because they're modest, and they're quiet about. This is an area, not that can change the world, but that is changing the world, now, in 2020.

Lauren Davies Having moved up here, you realise there's amazing talent up here.

I'm Lauren Davies, and I'm an author and screenwriter and film producer.

I'm inspired every day by the people here. There's amazing writers up here. There's amazing filmmakers up here. And there's an amazing music scene up here, which I'm quite connected with as well. There's so much talent in this region, I wish people would realise that more and believe in it more and come here, you know, to experience it more and to draw it out and bring it to the rest of the country.

Lyndsey Ayre I'd like to see Newcastle have a bit more belief in itself as a cultural city. I always had a bit of a sense of, like, you have to leave Newcastle, or you have to leave the North more generally, to kind of achieve anything. There's still a perception that you have to leave. But I don't think that that's actually true. It was only really when I moved away to Glasgow – I was there for three years – that I could see it from an outside perspective. And that's been really nice, actually, then, to come back to that. And what I used to see as quite claustrophobic, I now see as really supportive. And it really feels like there's a lot of possibility for the future.

Lisette Auton

It's just that... what's the phrase? Brain drain? That's a horrible phrase. It's the loss of skills.

My name is Lisette Auton. I'm a disabled writer, activist, poet. I do stuff with words.

I don't want to create opportunities that then disappear down there. I want to create opportunities that are up here, that value the place and value the people, and keep talent up

here, as well, rather than creating and developing these people who feel that they then have to leave because there's nothing for them here. That can't continue to happen. And I think it won't.

Mim Skinner Around arts and writing and social enterprise, the North East is absolutely amazing. I also think there's something about the region that makes you more able to take risks. So it's not that there's kind of more ability to take risk, but there's more space for risk. And I guess risk takes time and, kind of, creativity and ingenuity. All of those things take time and they take space. And you would not have been able to do that paying, you know, £1,500 rent a month and commuting three hours a day. That kind of rampant optimisation is just exhausting, and doesn't leave space for creativity and for risk.

Lisette Auton We've got loads of new hungry artists who are working within pop-up shops and creative spaces. And, you know what? It's cheaper to live up here as well, which is you know, really good. I can buy a house up here. In London, I think I could maybe buy a front door. Yeah, it's not what people think it is.

Mim Skinner The way that the North East is talked about as a region is that it's got less going for it, or it's talked about in terms of "oh, it's not as economically busy as one of these bigger cities". And I think confidence is partly about the recognition of value. And what, in the very, very micro, our experience has been in the café, is there's lots of people that have come in who, for whatever reason – whether that's a learning disability, whether that is time spent in prison – they've been told that their time and their skills are not valuable. And what we've been able to see, and what has just felt amazing, is that as soon as people come into a setting where they're told, "Actually, what you have to give is valuable, and you can contribute, and you can participate, and we are really in need of what you have", then actually it really flips the script in terms of confidence, as well, in terms of people feeling like they can do things and they can start businesses. In many ways our confidence is built by what we see people doing around us. So I guess what's then needed is a real recognition of that value coming from central government, coming from central media, coming from the narratives and culture. And

then we need to massively invest in what started in that creativity, to help it grow and to help it sustain.

Andrew Hankinson Getting things in national magazines, national newspapers, getting books which are read across the country, by people from up here, about up here – I think that's enormously important. Because suddenly you've got a voice in the game, you know? Without that, people don't really know what's going on up here. They have these ideas about what the North East is. But if we tell them that, actually, there's all this other stuff here, and this is what we want, and we're not satisfied with what we've got, and we need more, we need these things to change, and we're willing to do it, but we're going to need some help doing it, then suddenly, people might realise.

Richard Benson The region might have to look to itself, and to solve these problems themselves and to do it itself. Because the experience of the past is that if you wait for outside help, either it means the future kind of gets inflicted on you or, probably even more common, the help never really turns up. While that can seem a bit bleak and lonely, it can also be quite empowering. If you do do it yourself, no one can take it away. Then it's yours.

Mim Skinner I got lots of friends who've made a life here, and I got married here, and my parents-in-law are up the road. And we've moved the granny up recently – we've dragged her up from Southampton and she's in a care home in Chester Le Street now. And actually, the life that we're able to have up here is so rich, and just such a thriving sense of connection and possibility and creativity.

Richard T Kelly I love the North East, but, you know, to say that it's God's own country and it'll always... the fact is that the future is by no means certain. It's ascending, but it depends on how we behave. So I have great confidence in the fundamental decency and integrity of north-eastern people and its institutions.

Richard Benson That willingness to stand alone, to be proud in itself, I just think is a massive asset, because it kind of stands you against that kind of creeping blandness that is a part of 21st-century life.

Alex Niven I think there is a lot of optimism. The North East is an incredible place with lots of potential and a really kind of unique sense of, you know, that this was a place where you could do extraordinary things. That's still kind of somewhere, buried underground, almost.

Richard Benson [reading] What other region could ever have given us Bobby Robson and Paul Gascoigne together? What other region could be represented by an iron angel with its feet on the ground?

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