

(as provided by BBC)

TRANSCRIPTS

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Ministers have refused to rule out further referendums for English regional assemblies in the wake of the resounding rejection of the idea by voters in the north east of the country. Just 22 percent of those who took part in the postal ballot voted "YES". Our political correspondent, Terry Stiasny, examines the implications of this morning's result:

[<mos>Audio Insert NAME: stiasny/north east NUMBER: 15151 IN WORDS: the government OUT WORDS: in the near future DURATION: 1 '35"</mos>] STIASNY: The government said it had wanted to give a choice to the people of the North East about regional devolution. The voters' answer was a decisive, no. It was a personal setback for the deputy prime minister, John Prescott, who called the result an 'emphatic defeat'. The local government minister, Nick Raynsford, wanted to look at what happened in the North East before making any decision on holding a vote elsewhere. RAYNSFORD: We'll certainly reflect on the outcome here in the North East and the views of people in the Yorkshire and the Humber and North West before taking any decision on that. I don't want to make an instant decision on anything frankly. There are important lessons from the outcome of yesterday's referendum and we need to consider them in the cool light of day rather than jumping over rapidly into any precipitate conclusions. STIASNY: The prospect of referendums in two other regions, the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber, is now a very distant one. The plans had already been postponed because of question marks over the use of all-postal ballots in those areas. The Conservative leader, Michael Howard, said he was sure that the idea of English regional assemblies would now be dropped. HOWARD: I hope this will mean the end of John Prescott's fantasies of elected regional assemblies. Even John Prescott will have to concede that his plans have been a complete failure, it's a humiliation for him really, he's put himself on the line for this and I think he's now in a very difficult position. STIASNY: Some supporters of devolution to English regions believe voters weren't offered enough autonomy, but even they no longer believe regional assemblies will be created in the near future.

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The East of England Regional Assembly has approved plans to build nearly half a million houses over the next seventeen years. But, the Assembly wants the government to provide one-point-six billion pounds to improve infrastructure, especially water supplies, in the area. Our environment correspondent Richard Black was at the meeting in Southend: [<mos>Audio Insert NAME: housing/black NUMBER: 15271 IN WORDS: following a year... OUT WORDS: ... new homes DURATION: F01 "</mos>]

BLACK: Following a year of debate and consultation, the assembly concluded today that the region's need for housing outweighs concerns over the environmental impact. However, many delegates questioned whether the plan will deliver significant amounts of affordable housing for key workers as it's designed to. There was also considerable concern over environmental factors. An assessment released last week concluded that some parts of the region faced serious shortages of water if the building goes ahead. To construct four hundred and seventy eight thousand new houses sustainably, the assembly calculates, would need an investment of one point six billion pounds in the next three years alone from central government. Many delegates express doubt that anything like that level of funding will be forthcoming. There's particular concern that counties closest to London, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and parts of Essex, will slowly turn into new commuter suburbs for the capital. The plan now goes to the deputy prime minister's office for further public consultation and final approval but the reality is that the building has already started. Planning permission has been granted for half of these new homes.

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The government is shelving plans for devolution in the English regions, in the light of last week's resounding "No" vote in the referendum on an elected assembly for the North East. The Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, told the Commons that he would not be bringing forward orders for referendums in two other regions; the North West, and Yorkshire and the Humber. Reporting from Westminster, here's our political correspondent, James Hardy: [<mos>Audio Insert NAME: HARDY/assembly NUMBER: 1168' IN WORDS: It was the day OUT WORDS: shoulder the blame alone. DURATION: P26"<mos>]> [duration: 1 '26"] HARDY: It was the day John Prescott must have dreaded - an appearance in the Commons to tell MPs his twenty year dream of elected regional assemblies was dead. It was a face-saving vow to continue handing greater powers to the

regions, but there was no ducking the central issue. The north east assembly had been decisively rejected he said and even if the government were to call votes in the north west and the Yorkshire and Humber regions they couldn't be held before September next year at the earliest:

PRESCOTT: All this would result in a long period of uncertainty for local government in the two regions and we do not think this is acceptable. I will not therefore be bringing forward orders for referendums in either the north west, Yorkshire and the Humber.

HARDY: Opposition MPs, always swift to bait the deputy prime minister, jeered "it's over, he's gone." Prescott's opposite number, Caroline Spelman, wasn't so brutal but she did accuse him of wasting millions of pounds on a humiliating flop.

SPELMAN: I'm not going to ask the right honourable gentleman to resign because he won't, but the nation is owed an apology for the tens of millions of pounds wasted in pursuit of a pipe dream that is very definitely history now and, if the House is honest so is he. HARDY: The idea of an apology was given short shrift by Mr Prescott. "They must be joking", he said. But even though Tony Blair made a point of flanking his deputy, it was hard to escape the impression that Mr Prescott was being left to shoulder the blame alone,

(see <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmhansrd/cm041108/debtext/41108-13.htm> for speech by Prescott referred to above)