



RDAs: a case for the defence

● **David Marlow**, former chief executive, East England Development Agency

Following criticism from the Conservatives, these are uncertain times for England's regional development agencies. But their role remains vital, according to a departing RDA chief executive

England's regional development agencies have had a tough time of it recently, with leading members of the shadow cabinet launching coruscating attacks on their worth and democratic legitimacy. The party has backtracked somewhat since shadow communities secretary Eric Pickles said that the nine RDAs would be scrapped on "day one" of a Tory government. But there is little doubt that the RDAs will have to start making the case for their survival urgently and vociferously.

So far as David Marlow is concerned, the need for strategic bodies with real powers to lead on economic development in the regions is self-evident. Having stepped down from his role as chief executive of the East of England Development Agency (EEDA), Marlow continues to act as a consultant to his former employer and remains an energetic proponent of the role that RDAs have to play in shaping economic development.

His arguments are based on the experience gained during a globetrotting career that took him to the Caribbean and post-apartheid South Africa as well as Southampton and Doncaster. He says that there is an obvious need

CV HIGHLIGHTS

1980 Graduates from Oxford University with a degree in PPE.

1982 Gains masters in Development Economics before spells as economist in the Caribbean, central America and post-apartheid South Africa.

1996 Executive Director of Southampton City Council.

2000 Chief Executive, Doncaster Council.

2003 Chief Executive, EEDA.

for some form of organisation that can provide a strategic leadership on setting economic priorities for the regions. "Local authorities are multi-purpose, they're major players in their communities. But they cannot be solely focused on growth and development," he says.

In areas where local authorities' boundaries don't match economic geographies, he believes that, "you absolutely need an economically-focused, strategic body with some powers and financial levers to make the economy work. I think the case for RDAs is absolutely overwhelming."

However, one of the major charges originally made by Pickles against the RDAs concerned not the need or otherwise for regional economic strategies but rather that they are democratically-deficient quangos. Specifically referencing the RDAs, he commented that the Tories would "dismantle, brick by the brick, the city of quangos that has grown up over 11 years of Labour. This Government has drained power away from the elected and accountable, to the unelected, remote and bureaucratic quangocracy". The implication is clear—the powers handed to RDAs should be returned to locally elected bodies whose democratic credentials are in no doubt. Doesn't Pickles have a point?

"Let's be clear, the RDAs have massive multiple accountabilities today," replies Marlow. "We are accountable to Parliament through ministers. We are scrutinised by the regional assemblies and there is clearly going to be a successor local authority accountability mechanism to the regional assemblies [when the regional assemblies are wound-up in 2010]. To say that we're not accountable at the moment is just too simplistic. I've been the chief ex-

ecutive of a local authority as well, and I would say that, if anything, chief executives of RDAs are more accountable."

While he is more than ready to defend the way in which England's RDAs are governed, Marlow's broader point is that the role that RDAs currently play is vital to England's economic interests. No matter how they are constituted or what they are called, he believes that the work that they were set up to do is essential. "I do think that, if there's not going to be elected regional assemblies, which clearly outside of London there's not, then a government of whatever colour does have to find a way to mediate national and local economic priorities at a level above the local authority and below Westminster," he says. "And it does have to find a way to make those bodies politically accountable."

Scrutiny by regional ministers is a potential way of doing that, he says, as are regional select committees or forums of local authority leaders. But the point remains that responsibility for economic development has to fall to a body that sits at a level between local authorities and central government, he says.

Clearly he has relished being free of direct political control. But with the Conservatives particularly critical of the RDAs' lack of a democratic mandate, it is uncertain whether his successor will have similar independence.

Does he think that the Tories can be persuaded not to use the RDAs as a stick with which to beat the current Government? "I just hope that over the next couple of years the RDAs continue to deliver a compelling agenda; and that we continue to work closely with our business partners to help the Conservatives shape an economic policy which recognises the need that I've just outlined", he says. "So, we need to argue our case with the Conservatives and what's more, we need our business partners to argue the case on our behalf."

The Conservatives have recently tempered Eric Pickles' remarks about the RDAs with some rather more conciliatory language. However, as the Tory war-machine is mobilised in anticipation of a general election, the business community will become ever more important in defending the RDAs. After all, the Conservatives are more likely to listen to the voice of business than a Labour-established quango.

Adam Branson