

# Two-tier authority could divide town and country

**HAMPSHIRE** could be divided between town and countryside under shock plans being discussed to create a new unitary authority along the built-up fringes of the Solent.

The possibility was raised at a meeting on Friday in last week between leaders of the mainly urban councils in the south of the county and government figures including Lord O'Neill, the commercial secretary to the treasury.

But it excluded bodies such as New Forest District Council, which up until now has been part of county-wide discussions with Whitehall about securing a deal to transfer greater powers locally under a partnership of authorities.

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) would only confirm that a "private meeting" about devolution had taken place involving Lord O'Neill.

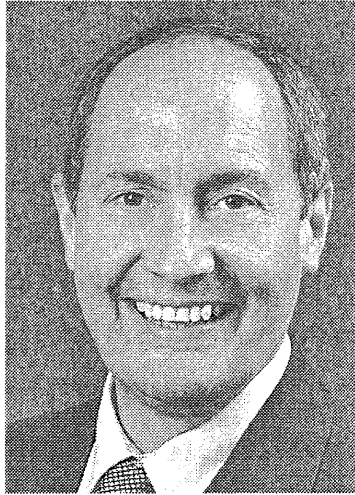
The 'A&T' has been told the new partnership that was floated, possibly under an elected "metro mayor", comprised Southampton, Portsmouth, Fareham, Gosport, Havant, Eastleigh, East Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

Many parts of the county have two tiers of local government - district, borough or city councils and county councils. But under a unitary system there is just one tier providing all the local services; London boroughs operate in this way.

The meeting followed a discussion earlier in the day involving all Hampshire's authorities which turned stormy when the breakaway group was revealed. A third meeting between the uninvited authorities was scheduled to have been held on Thursday.

The development came as a shock to many, as only last month a spokesman for the Hampshire devolution deal had described work on it as "all but completed".

Coun. Perry, leader of the county council, is pushing for a united



**Excluded: Coun. Barry Rickman**

Hampshire partnership without a mayor and, in a letter to MPs, described the prospect of it being divided in two as "little short of a disaster for the area".

He said: "From the county council's perspective, the dismembering of this great county would be damaging on two fronts: undermining the economic viability of the area, and risking the overall effectiveness and quality of council services."

Coun. Perry signed off by saying he would consider the option of a mayor "if that will help secure the deal this area so badly needs".

Coun. Barry Rickman, leader of New Forest District Council, rejected the suggestion his council had been excluded from the new plans: "I do not see it like that. We are significantly different, with different needs and a different agenda for growth."

He added: "Fundamentally, NFDC will not support an elected mayor. I



**Warning: Coun. Roy Perry**

would support the Roy Perry proposal."

He left open the option of the New Forest turning its back on Hampshire and instead looking west to Christchurch and East Dorset and for potential partnership opportunities.

A spokesman for the DCLG said: "The government's devolution agenda offers a real opportunity for local areas to take greater control of their future - and we are discussing this with local partners across Hampshire and the Isle of Wight."

"We have always been clear this is a bottom-up process and there is no one-size-fits-all approach, with every deal bespoke and providing arrangements that are relevant to each local area."

"We look forward to continuing constructive discussions on devolution with local partners across Hampshire and the Isle of Wight as their proposals develop."