

Overview

Now that devolution is six years old we can make some clear-cut assessments of its impact across the UK. The road has not always been smooth. In Northern Ireland devolution has been suspended for more time than it has been in operation. And in England the rejection of regional devolution in the North East in November 2004 caught the government unawares with little evidence of any 'Plan B'.

Only in Scotland and Wales has devolution bedded down smoothly. Support for devolution – even further-reaching - devolution is high. People like self-government. And we have seen important innovations in policy which challenge, reverse, or simply show different priorities than those at Westminster. That is surely what devolution was for.

And yet even where devolution is working well there is something amiss. There has been remarkably little thinking about devolution as a *package* of reforms which collectively reshape the UK. The tendency is to think of devolution as a set of separate reforms, each tailored to the needs of a particular part of the UK.

That is at best a complacent tendency. Decisions taken in one place inevitably have spillover effects on other places. We can see this on a small scale on questions like university tuition fees – where in the UK can students get the best financial deal and how can they ensure eligibility for it? We can see it on a much bigger scale in the impact that decisions taken in Westminster that apply in principle only to England have on policy in Scotland and Wales, like health, where devolved health policy all too easily end up getting judged by targets Westminster has set for England

What devolution lacks are mechanisms for thinking across jurisdictions. UK departments responsible for England all too often fail to consult devolved administrations adequately. The mechanisms of intergovernmental relations we nominally have to ensure coordination between UK-level and devolved policies are not used. We don't have a capacity to think UK-wide any more.

And that could signal trouble. The 'system' works for now, but largely because Labour has led the governments in Westminster, Holyrood and Cardiff Bay since 1999. Where problems have arisen they have been managed informally through party channels. That won't last. At some point territory will become the subject of party-political conflict. And at that point we may well rue our failure to think hard enough about devolution as a project of the UK as a whole.