



Devolution: What Difference Has it Made?

Interim Findings from the ESRC Research Programme on
Devolution and Constitutional Change

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Key Points

- Devolution has led to substantial policy innovation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and opened up real alternatives to policies decided at Westminster
- Devolution opens up scope for a widening of economic disparities among the UK's nations and regions
- If the narrowing of economic disparities is an important policy goal – or equally if common standards of public services in other fields are desirable - then UK central government needs to reinvent itself as guarantor of UK-wide minimum standards
- The UK's system of territorial finance is at best intransparent. There is an urgent need for better data and easier comparability of socio-economic conditions ('needs') and public expenditures across all the UK's nations and regions
- Devolution has been implemented remarkably smoothly because of: continuities of procedure and personnel from the pre-devolution era; pragmatic responses by UK and devolved authorities to new challenges of coordination in policy-making; and Labour's electoral pre-eminence since 1997 in Great Britain
- These are conditions unlikely to last. The UK's governments should flesh out the institutional arrangements for intergovernmental relations now so that future conflicts– which will become inevitable when different parties are in power in different places - can be effectively managed
- The government of England and the English regions has become more complex since devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Whitehall has not yet got to

grips with its new territorial roles and needs to 'mainstream' England-wide and English regional issues more systematically

- Though devolution has led to significant new policies, public opinion in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland feels that it has not yet made much difference to the way they are governed. This perception does not mean that the public has turned against devolution, but rather that it is still felt that Westminster is too powerful. Reaction against an over-powerful centre also appears to be driving (rather lower) levels of support for regional devolution in England.
- Devolution is the most popular constitutional preference in Scotland and Wales, and even in Northern Ireland, despite the marked polarisation of views around the Unionist-Nationalist divide that was confirmed when Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionists and Sinn Féin made significant gains in the 2003 Northern Ireland election.
- The 2003 election results in Scotland and Wales were marked by the sense that devolution in practice has so far made little difference. This sense of disappointment helped produce a low turnout and, in Scotland, a shift in support from 'establishment' parties like Labour and the Scottish Nationalists to a series of minor parties and independents.
- Devolution has not strengthened adherence to Britishness and seems to have sharpened national identities in England, Scotland and Wales. But at the same time citizens continue to profess multiple identities such as English *and* British, Scottish *and* British, and with those multiple identities suggest that there is no threat as yet to cohesion of the UK union.

Introduction

Devolution has established new political institutions in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, London and the other English regions since 1997. These devolution reforms have far-reaching implications for the politics, policy and society in the UK. Radical institutional change, combined with a fuller capacity to express the UK's distinctive territorial identities, is reshaping the way the UK is governed and opening up new directions of public policy.

In 2000 the Economic and Social Research Council, which funds social science research at UK universities, launched a research programme on Devolution and Constitutional Change. The aim was to explore the implementation and the consequences of the devolution reforms. Where these reforms are leading is still not fully clear. Some see devolution as a destabilising process likely to produce conflict between the different parts of the UK. Others see the new territorial politics of devolution as a way of revitalising a union which had become imbalanced by an over-strong centre in Westminster.

The Devolution and Constitutional Change programme was designed to build a critical mass of researchers capable of building sound evidence and providing rigorous, balanced analysis of the impact and outcomes of devolution. The programme has funded 35 research projects at universities around the UK and has worked closely with the devolved administrations, the UK government, think tanks and other experts to inform its work. This briefing sets out an interim overview of the findings so far.

The briefing presents a 'bigger picture' which looks beyond developments in the different parts of the UK to explore also the UK-wide implications of devolution. This UK-wide dimension has been neglected, perhaps understandably as policy-makers have worked hard to transform devolution proposals into practice in each part of the UK.

We cannot present here a comprehensive analysis of all aspects of devolution because we are reporting only on the findings from the work the programme has funded. There are inevitably gaps. But still this briefing will be essential for anyone looking for a 'ready reckoner' of the difference that devolution has made so far. We set out our findings below in three sections, in each case responding to the key questions the programme was set up to answer. A final section written by the Programme Director, Charlie Jeffery, provides a brief, analytical commentary.

Delivering Public Policy after Devolution: Diverging from Westminster

Our key questions here are:

- a) Does devolution result in the provision of different standards of public service in health or education, or in widening economic disparities from one part of the UK to another? If so, does it matter?
- b) How might public finance better be distributed in order to fund post-devolution responsibilities in different parts and at different levels of the UK?

Policy Variation

The devolved institutions have started to make a significant difference in policy terms. The main policy differences in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland compared to Westminster are set out in the boxes below.

Box One: Different public policies in Scotland since devolution

- Free long term personal care for the elderly
- Abolition of up-front tuition fees for students in higher education
- Three year settlement for teachers pay & conditions
- Less restrictive freedom of information Act
- Abolition of fox hunting
- 'One stop shop' for Public Sector Ombudsman
- Abolition of the ban on 'promoting homosexuality' in schools by repeal of Section 2A of the Local Government Act (known as 'section 28' in England)

The Scottish Parliament has clearly made a difference, with some of its new policies – e.g. on long term care and tuition fees – having a UK-wide resonance. The Parliament has also delivered in Scotland commitments which have eluded the Blair government in London like the abolition of fox hunting, and of 'section 28'.

Wales has fewer policy differences. Wales has less capacity to be different from Westminster, because it has no powers of primary legislation, and a smaller per capita budget than Scotland. And when Alun Michael was First Minister there was little desire to be different. But when Rhodri Morgan became First Minister some distinctive policies began to emerge (described by Morgan as putting 'clear red water' between the Welsh and UK governments' policy agendas). Under his 'partnership' (i.e. coalition) agreement with the Liberal Democrats which ran from 2001-03, he delivered free school milk for all children under seven, a freezing of prescription charges, and free bus travel for pensioners from 2002. And in the 2003 Welsh election, which produced a majority Labour government, Morgan campaigned explicitly on his record of doing things differently than Westminster. A fuller list of distinctive Welsh policies appears in the box below.

Box Two: Different public policies in Wales since devolution

- UK's first Children's Commissioner
- Creation of 22 Local Health Boards, to work alongside Wales' 22 local authorities
- Homelessness Commission, and extending support for the homeless
- Abolition of school league tables
- Free medical prescriptions for those under 25 and over 60
- Free bus travel for pensioners
- Free school milk for children under seven
- Piloting a new Welsh Baccalaureate in 19 schools and colleges
- Six weeks free home care for the elderly after discharge from hospital.
- Finance Wales established as a 'user-friendly bank' for small business.

Even in Northern Ireland, where the possibilities for distinctive policy making have been limited by the repeated suspensions of devolution, the Northern Ireland Assembly has also brought with it policy innovation (Box Three).

Box Three: Different public policies in Northern Ireland since devolution

- Abolition of school league tables
- Establishment of a commissioner for children
- Decision to provide for a Single Equality Act, consolidating legislation on religion, sex, face and disability with new provisions on sexual orientation and age
- Free fares for the elderly
- Introduction of bursaries for students
- Decision on the abolition of the 11+ examination

Devolution's Policy Laboratories?

Devolution has clearly made a difference in policy terms. Interestingly, as is discussed below, citizens are not yet convinced of this. But policy-makers in different parts of the UK increasingly are. There have been several examples where new devolved policies have had knock-on effects in the wider UK.

The abolition of up-front tuition fees, but the levying of graduate contributions afterwards, is a policy first adopted in Scotland, which later appeared in Charles Clarke's higher education White Paper for England. The Children's Commissioner, first introduced in Wales, has since been legislated for in Scotland, and established in Northern Ireland. Other issues like free long term care in Scotland, though not (yet) emulated, have set the terms of policy debates throughout the UK.

Devolution in these ways creates policy 'laboratories' which enable policy experiments in different parts of the UK. The costs of failure of introducing new policies are less great when they are restricted to one part of the UK, and the marker of success is imitation elsewhere.

Forces for Policy Convergence

Alongside examples of divergence from Westminster there are also powerful countervailing forces for UK-wide policy *convergence*, including the role of the Treasury in territorial finance and in setting the parameters for (some) policy debates around the UK. European considerations can also be a strong force for convergence in areas such as agricultural policy where, for example, the Scottish Executive appears to be prepared to accept the UK line on agricultural issues even where there is a distinct Scottish interest, as the price of maintaining access to Europe via London.

In other fields such as higher education there is an integrated and well-networked UK-wide policy community which helps to contain strong political pressures for divergence in funding policy, access and links between higher education and the economy.

Economic Disparities – and the Role of the Centre

One of the assumptions underlying devolution – especially in the Welsh and English cases – is that it would bring an economic dividend and address some of the problems of imbalance of a UK economy driven in large part by South East England. Those assumptions were probably over-optimistic. This at least is the message of the 2003 report by the Select Committee on the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on regional economic disparities (in

England) made clear, and, more implicitly, of the establishment of a Public Spending Agreement Target in the 2002 Spending Review designed to reduce growth disparities among the (English) regions.

There is a growing consensus that a much more nuanced strategy is needed which combines the decentralising thrust of devolution with a re(new)ed role for central government in the evening out of economic opportunity in an approach carefully targeted on the differential policy needs of different places. As a report by the think tank ippr - which was informed by research in this programme - stresses, Hackney and Hartlepool may both face unacceptably high unemployment, but the means of addressing this has to differ from place to place, and has to involve central government in at least a coordination role.

There is a wider point about the role of the centre in a devolved UK. Devolution also transforms the role of the centre. It may do less, but it still has responsibilities in macroeconomic management and in maintaining some form level playing field for competition and the provision of public services UK-wide. It has powerful policy and financial levers for these UK-wide roles. What it has barely done yet is to discuss how, and to what ends, it still needs to use those levers.

Devolved Economic Policy-Making

Policy capacities also vary from place to place. Devolution has seen a major reorganisation of policy-making structures for economic development. But reorganisation has not taken place on a standard model and may limit capacities to achieve overarching UK-wide goals post-devolution. Of the four UK nations Scotland has retained the most settled institutional architecture. Elsewhere, reorganisation has led to frictions within and between organisations and duplication of activity.

There are policy implications. Economic development policies are more streamlined in Scotland than elsewhere. There is emerging evidence that this has allowed Scotland to develop a more pro-active strategy focused on harnessing the knowledge economy, whereas in Wales innovation may have taken a back seat amid the constraints of the weaker form of devolution in Wales. In England there is a widespread sense that the forms of decentralisation proposed for the English regions are too limited to have much impact. Box Five below sets out why

Box Four: Deficits in English Regional Governance

- the powers decentralised to Regional Development Agencies – which would be exercised by future Elected Regional Assemblies - are too modest to achieve any ambitious economic development strategy.
- there is insufficient capacity to join up initiatives in interlinked policy fields, such as between transport, economic development, or rural policy.
- current and future powers and structures may not be adaptable enough to the different needs of English regions; the South East for example sits uneasily in English devolution because the policy challenge there is to manage the problems of economic success, whereas the main concern behind government policy on the English regions is to boost poorly performing regions in the north.

Territorial Finance

Territorial finance is an area in which pre-devolution arrangements (for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) have been adapted quite smoothly to the new context of devolution. The 'Barnett' formula was and remains the main mechanism for allocating changes to the 'blocks' which finance the activities of the devolved institutions.

The Barnett formula has a convergence property which, if rigorously applied, should lead to the convergence of historically higher per capita public expenditures outside England onto the lower English level. The formula does appear now to be operated in a stricter manner, so that noticeable convergence can be expected in the medium term. This may produce a greater potential for conflict over resource allocation.

If the formula continues to be strictly applied, economic modelling suggests that the long-term effect would be to produce a contraction of employment in the Scottish economy of up to 5%. Projections of the effect of levying the 'tartan tax' (the power of the Scottish Parliament to vary UK income tax rates by $\pm 3\%$) are that it would lead, in the long term, to contraction in Scottish GDP, employment and population, assuming that workers would seek to restore their post-tax wage either through pay demands or migration.

As the process of English regional devolution goes forward, calls for a reconsideration of English and UK-wide territorial finance will grow. However the transparency of the current funding system remains low, and the availability of data poor, perhaps in part consciously so that the potential for a more open reform debate is restricted. There is least transparency in the case of England, where Whitehall departments have typically failed to recognise or measure the regional impact of the programmes they fund (as recent research commissioned by the Treasury, ODPM and DEFRA has shown).

The Pressure for Reform

There is a growing sense in English regions ranging from the under-performing north to overheating London under the Greater London Authority that public spending is too low relative to regional needs. This sense, together with any concerns about the convergence effects of the Barnett formula in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, is likely to generate pressures for a region-by-region needs assessment exercise. For that to happen, though, adequate data for the comparability of services across all UK territories will need to be collected and made available.

The Institutions of Devolution

Our key questions here are:

- a) How well do the new devolved institutions work? How effectively are devolved and UK-level matters coordinated in new forms of intergovernmental relationship?
- b) How have political organisations which have traditionally operated UK-wide – political parties, interest groups – responded to multi-level politics?

Intergovernmental Relations

With the exception of Northern Ireland devolution has been implemented and has worked extremely smoothly in practice so far. There have not been any notable legal disputes about the division of competences between UK and devolved institutions, even in areas which in other decentralised states are frequently the cause of conflict, like territorial financial arrangements or devolved participation in EU affairs.

In EU matters pre-devolution arrangements for incorporating Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish issues into UK positions have been adapted smoothly to the post-devolution context. In addition, the devolved administrations have taken a cautious approach to establishing a distinctive profile in EU matters, though Wales and especially Scotland are now beginning to push the boundaries and develop sharper territorial aims in Europe. One outcome was the radical contribution presented by the UK government in the debate on regions and Europe at the European Convention, which was largely authored by the Scottish and Welsh governments.

Mechanisms established to organise and manage intergovernmental relations have not been utilised systematically: the concordats on cooperation between Whitehall and the devolved administrations; and the Joint Ministerial Committee designed to bring together UK and devolved ministers with equivalent or overlapping policy responsibilities. Though some Whitehall departments have adapted better than others to the new terms of cooperation with devolved governments, the informal relationships between UK and devolved levels – whether carried out through civil servants or politicians – that tend to predominate have so far contained any major difficulties.

Parliamentary Cooperation

The UK and Scottish Parliaments have organised pragmatic legislative cooperation through regular use of the Sewel convention, under which it can be agreed that Westminster legislates in areas formally devolved to Scotland. Sewel resolutions have been used to ensure UK-wide uniformity on certain matters, to enact EU or international obligations or, most pragmatically, to free up the legislative timetable in Scotland for what are perceived to be more pressing matters. 'Sewel' equally applies to the Westminster-Northern Ireland Assembly relationship, though because of devolution's frequent suspensions there has not been used.

The relationship between Westminster and the Welsh Assembly is more difficult because of the dependence of devolution in Wales on case-by-case empowerment by UK legislation. Westminster has shown a striking lack of consistency in how it empowers the Assembly. The complexity and ambiguity in the division of powers that results has done much to fuel the dissatisfaction with the Welsh devolution model that led to the establishment of the Richard Commission in 2002. The Commission, chaired by the Labour peer Lord Richard, will make recommendations in spring 2004 on reforms to the powers and electoral arrangements of the National Assembly. It seems likely to recommend a larger Assembly with at least some primary legislative powers on the Scottish model.

Elected members at devolved and UK levels

In one area UK-devolved parliamentary relationships are more problematic: in the division of labour between UK and devolved elected representatives. One aspect of this relationship which has hits the headlines periodically is the so-called 'West Lothian question', which challenges the right of Scottish MPs at Westminster to vote on legislation for England in subject areas which have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament. This kind of question is inevitable in the kind of asymmetrical system of devolution that the UK - and several other European states - have. The Conservative Party at Westminster has tried to make political capital out of the Labour government's reliance on Scottish MPs to win votes on technically England-only policies. The proposed reduction in the number of Scottish MPs, which was planned as a response to devolution, may take the sting out of this issue.

A second problem of division of labour concerns the role of representatives, Westminster and devolved, in providing a point of contact for citizens with the political process. There appear to be frequent instances of tension, with MPs in Scotland and Wales at times ill at ease with the 'competition' in constituency work from Scottish MSPs and Welsh AMs. These tensions are at their strongest when Westminster and devolved constituency representatives are from different parties. Members of the public are largely unable to distinguish the roles of elected members at UK and devolved levels.

There is also evidence of tension between the two types of representative elected to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly: constituency representatives elected on a first-past-the-post basis; and regional representatives elected from regional party lists. Problems of division of labour exist here too, with regional members accused of 'cherry-picking' constituency business and targeting particular constituencies in their region in order to win a nomination for a constituency seat at the next election.

Why has devolution been such an easy ride?

These tensions aside, devolution has enjoyed an extraordinarily smooth introduction. There are a number of reasons for this:

- Labour is the main party of government at Westminster, Holyrood and Cardiff Bay. Potential problem issues can be finessed through party channels. For example, the Secretary of State for Wales is as much a party manager as cabinet minister, providing a coordination point between the Labour majorities in Westminster and Wales.
- In the cases of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, devolution has adapted procedures for accommodating territorial priorities which existed before devolution, opening up procedures within UK government to new intergovernmental relations between UK and devolved governments. There was considerable civil service continuity 'before' and 'after', and civil servants working for the Scottish and Welsh administrations form part of a common Home Civil Service with Whitehall, which is bound by a collegiality favouring pragmatic, informal relationships.
- An unprecedented period of growth in UK public spending has led to significant real growth in the budgets of the devolved governments. Budgetary growth underpins a benign environment and limits the potential for conflict over territorial finance.

All these reasons for the smooth introduction of devolution are contingent and vulnerable. As the box below explains, they will not last.

Box Five: Why the easy ride will not last

- Labour will lose a UK or devolved election at some point, importing a new potential for party-political conflict into intergovernmental relations.
- Different party majorities in Westminster and Edinburgh and/or Cardiff would strain the collegiality of the Home Civil Service. There is already some evidence that career structures in Wales or Scotland are separating from Whitehall, which suggests that the unifying force of the common Home Civil Service is already beginning to wane.
- A less benign budgetary environment – which seems likely on current macroeconomic projections – would open up new potential for conflict over the distribution of resources. And again there is already evidence of incipient tension over resource allocation.

Strengthening Intergovernmental Coordination?

This mix of vulnerabilities suggests a need to think through at an early stage the mechanisms for managing conflict. The House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution in a report which drew heavily on evidence from members of this Programme was clear on this in its very first recommendation

We recommend that further use should be made of the formal mechanisms for intergovernmental relations, even if they seem to many of those presently involved as excessive ... Such mechanisms are likely to become increasingly important when governments of different political persuasions have to deal with each other.

The UK government's response was to reject the call for strengthening formal intergovernmental coordination. However, the establishment of a new Department for Constitutional Affairs in 2003 with at least partial responsibility for relations with devolved bodies in Scotland and Wales and for a new mechanism for the resolution of devolution disputes – the 'Supreme Court' – suggests that the Lords' case is meeting growing acceptance in central government.

Whitehall and England

One implication of an asymmetrical devolution which gives different sets of powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is to make more complex the central government of England. Some Whitehall ministries are effectively England-only ministries now (like the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister or the Department of Health). Others are UK-only (like the Treasury or the Ministry of Defence), while others still have a mixed set of functions, some England-only, some England and Wales, some Britain-wide, some UK-wide.

It is not clear yet that all Whitehall ministries have adapted to these new territorial complexities, and in particular to the English-regional elements of Whitehall activity which flow from Whitehall down to the Government Offices for the Regions, the Regional Development Agencies, or to quangos organised at regional or local level. The inability of (some) ministries to track their expenditures in the English regions which was noted above is one marker of failure in Whitehall to think through the implications of regionalisation. The need for a more systematic 'mainstreaming' of England and English regional issues in Whitehall is clear.

Political Parties and Devolution

Much attention has been given to the need for political parties to adapt themselves to constitutional change such as devolution or the equivalent reforms carried out recently in other West European states like Spain, France and Italy. Such reforms challenge parties to

rethink their organisational structure, the way they choose candidates for public office, the messages they present to territorial as compared to statewide electorates, and so on.

Of the three Britain-wide parties in the UK, the Liberal Democrats have had to undergo the least adaptation, as the party was already organised on a federal basis. The Conservatives in Scotland at least seem to detached themselves from many of the preoccupations of the party in England and Westminster, and developed a distinctive Scottish identity. Preliminary evidence on the Labour party suggests the following:

- That the component parties in Scotland and Wales have more discretion in policy formulation and candidate selection than the image of controlling party HQ in London would suggest
- That candidacy in the Labour Party for election to the Scottish Parliament or Welsh Assembly has as much career weight as candidacy for Westminster. Unlike some other countries like Germany or the USA, it does not seem that a career in devolved politics will be seen as preparation and stepping stone for a career in Westminster.

Business and Devolution

The adaptation of business groups like the CBI and the Chambers of Commerce to devolution has been less far-reaching. There is a continued centralist mentality focused on UK-level decision-making in London. Only in Scotland is there a sense of regional business community and there, and to a lesser extent in Wales, there is some appreciation of the better access to government that 'proximity' brings.

More generally though business groups are sceptical that devolution is in their interest, fearing more 'red tape'. This attitude has formed once of the strongest forces of drag on the progress of English devolution. There are also somewhat paradoxical concerns about the commitment expressed in the devolution process across the UK to greater stakeholder participation and consultation. Businesses fear consultation 'overload' and that they have insufficient capacity to respond to more open devolved government (or to put it differently: business was largely satisfied by the privileged access it had to pre-devolution UK government and sees devolution as bringing a set of less privileged relationships).

Public Attitudes, Devolution and National Identity

Our key questions here are:

- a) how do people in different parts of the UK assess the existence and performance of the new devolved institutions
- b) do people identify themselves differently as a result of devolution? Does a common sense of Britishness still unite people from different parts of the UK or have more exclusive national (English, Scottish etc) identities become more important?

Views on Devolution in Scotland and Wales

So far as the public in Scotland and Wales is concerned, devolution is here to stay. A half of Scots, and over six in ten in Wales favour the constitutional option of devolution; support for either a return to the pre-devolution situation or for independence is much lower. Tables One and Two below show changes in constitutional preferences in Wales and Scotland since 1997.

Table One – Constitutional Preferences in Wales 1997-2003

Constitutional Preference	1997	1999	2001	2003
Independence	14.1	9.6	12.3	13.9
Scottish-style Parliament	19.6	29.9	38.8	37.8
Current Welsh Assembly	26.8	35.3	25.5	27.1
No devolution	39.5	25.3	24.0	21.1

Source: ESRC-funded surveys

Table Two - Constitutional Preferences in Scotland 1999-2003

Constitutional Preference	1999	2001	2003
Independence	24	27	22
Parliament	54	53	52
No devolution	18	16	24

Source: ICM

Since 1997 support for devolution has increased in Wales, but with a growing preference for a more powerful, Scottish-style Parliament over the current National Assembly, and remained largely stable in Scotland. In Wales the proportion who would rather there were no devolution at all has fallen significantly and in Scotland fluctuated around the 20% mark. Support for independence remains lower in Wales (at around 12-13%) than it is in Scotland (at around 25%), but broadly stable in both countries. Devolution has not increased separatist sentiment as some feared.

But despite this situation of support for devolution – and despite the new sets of policies the devolved institutions have introduced - so far the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly are seen to have had only a limited impact. When asked about changes since 1997 in areas such as education, the NHS and the general standard of living, only a minority think things have improved (Table Three), though it has to be said that much smaller minorities think things have got worse. And only a quarter think the parliament has made a ‘real positive difference to life in Scotland and been a success so far’. Again fewer think the parliament has made things worse. The biggest group thinks the Parliament has made no real difference (Table Four).

Table Three – Did things get better?

% saying standards have improved	Scotland 2001	Wales 2001
In the NHS	23	24
In education	27	30
In the general standard of living	30	31

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey; Welsh Life and Times Survey

Table Four – Attitudes to Scottish devolution

	2003 %
The parliament has made a real positive difference to life in Scotland, been a success so far	24
The parliament has made little positive difference to life in Scotland, been a disappointment so far	48
The parliament has made no positive difference to life in Scotland, been a failure so far	12
The parliament has had a negative impact on life in Scotland, should be scrapped	12

Source: Populus/The Times, Feb 2003

The relatively small proportions who think things have improved since 1997 partly reflect a view that the UK government continues to pull the strings in Scotland and Wales. Despite devolution, around six in ten in both countries think Westminster has the most influence over the way in which their countries are run.

In contrast, the public's preference would be for their own devolved body to have the most say over the way in which their country is run. This is particularly true in Scotland, where three-quarters would rather the parliament exerted the most influence (compared with just over a half in Wales).

... and Northern Ireland ...

The issues in Northern Ireland are rather different. Northern Ireland politics has remained turbulent since the signing of the Belfast Agreement which launched devolution there and has led to successive suspensions of the operation of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The latest suspension has been in force since October 2002, despite a renewed attempt to pull together a package of measures to unlock suspension prior to the November 2003 Northern Ireland election.

But public attitudes on devolution are, against this background, surprisingly positive. There is general approval of the idea of devolution (though with uncertainty as to whether the delivery of public services had improved). Catholics are generally more positive than Protestants, but outright negative views on devolution are rare (Table Five).

Table Five: And how good a job do you think the Assembly and Executive did in the day-to-day running of Northern Ireland. Would you say?

	Catholic	Protestant	No religion	All
A good job	56	29	33	41
Neither a good nor a bad job	33	50	42	42
Or a bad job	6	15	13	11
Don't know	6	6	13	7

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2002

40% felt that devolution has made a difference by giving people more say, with only 8% feeling they had less say. A clear majority in all communities feel the Northern Ireland Assembly should have an even fuller role in the government of Northern Ireland, reflecting similar feelings as in Scotland and Wales about the dominance of Westminster. Devolution has considerable public support.

Table Six: From what you have seen and heard so far, do you think that having a Northern Ireland Assembly is giving people....

	Catholic	Protestant	No Religion	All
	%	%	%	%
More say in how N Ireland is governed	51	31	37	40
Less say	3	12	8	8
Or, is it making no difference	39	50	40	44
(Don't know)	7	7	15	8

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2001

Support for long-term membership of the UK has fallen from 69% to 50% since 1989 (though still has overwhelming if declining support among Protestants). Support has halved to 15% among Catholics since 1989. Support for a united Ireland has *not* taken up the slack, with figures even among Catholics flatlining since 1989 at around 50%.

The most popular constitutional option is, as in Wales, for a fuller form of devolution on the model of the Scottish Parliament (i.e. with both legislative and taxation powers). 47% of Protestants favour this option, 14% of Catholics and 31% overall. The current, more limited model of devolution attracts the support of a further 12%. The total 43% support for devolution is twice that for a united Ireland and over three times that for direct rule from Westminster. It seems that more than any other option the people of Northern Ireland want effective devolved government.

Table Seven: Responses to the full range of constitutional options 2001 (%)

	Protestant	Catholic	NoReligion	All
Northern Ireland should become independent	8	13	11	10
Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK a) with its own elected parliament which has law-making <u>and</u> taxation powers	47	14	26	31
Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK b) with its own elected assembly which has limited law-making powers only	18	4	14	12
Northern Ireland should remain part of the UK without an elected Assembly	17	8	14	13
Northern Ireland should unify with the Republic of Ireland	1	49	8	21
Don't know	9	13	27	13

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times survey 2001

... and England

By far the majority of people in England still support Scotland and Wales' membership of the UK. That level of support has fallen by a small margin since devolution, but there has clearly been no 'English backlash' to the introduction of devolution in Scotland and Wales. However support in England for Northern Irish unification with the Republic of Ireland remains at over 50% and risen by around 5% since 1997.

The evidence that devolution elsewhere may have strengthened support for an English form of devolution is mixed. There appears to be little support for an English Parliament. And government's policy on the introduction of Elected Regional Assemblies has passed most members of the public by; the low levels of awareness that result are typically reflected in large proportions of 'don't know' or 'undecided' responses in survey results.

The 'soundings' conducted by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in 2002-03 on whether and if yes, in which English regions referendums on the introduction of Elected Regional Assemblies should be held led to significant new public opinion research being commissioned. This research confirmed the problem of low awareness, but also that there seems to be support in all English regions for holding referendums, and that there would be 'yes' majorities in all regions if referendums were held. The strongest pro-Assembly majorities were in the three northern regions – North East, North West and Yorkshire and the Humber – chosen in May 2003 to go ahead to referendums. Support for regional devolution appears to reflect the view that Westminster and Whitehall are remote from and neglect concerns in the regions.

Britishness

It appears that adherence to 'Britishness' has weakened somewhat in England and Scotland in the wake of devolution, with a growing proportion in each country preferring to identify themselves as English (up from 34% to 43%) or Scottish (up from 72% to 77%) than British since 1997. There is no such clear pattern in Wales. In Northern Ireland there is a steady pattern of sharp polarisation. More than 60% of Catholics identify themselves as Irish, not British, and more than 70% of Protestants as British.

However, identities are not exclusive, as survey questions using the 'Moreno' scale (inspired by a Spanish sociologist) show. This scale is now a much-used tool for identity analysis and asks not whether people feel, for example, Scottish or British, but gives five options: Scottish, not British; more Scottish than British; equally Scottish and British; more British than Scottish; or British, not Scottish. As Table Eight shows, the Scottish, Welsh and English all have multiple identities, with a majority in each group having some element of British identity: in Scotland 60%, Wales 73% and England 75%. In sum, while devolution may not have strengthened adherence to Britishness, it has certainly not eroded it sufficiently to threaten the cohesion of the UK Union.

Table Eight – 'Moreno' national identity in Great Britain, 2001

	%				
	X not British	More x than British	Equally x and British	More British than x	British not x
Scotland	36	30	24	3	3
Wales	23	22	29	11	11
England	17	13	42	9	11

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes survey 2001

What did the 2003 devolved elections tell us about devolution?

The elections held in Scotland and Wales in May 2003 and, after two postponements, in Northern Ireland in November provided a comprehensive test of public opinion on devolution. The headline results present a mixed picture. A Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition was returned in Scotland on a significantly reduced majority. Labour won a narrow outright victory in Wales and formed a single-party government. And in Northern Ireland there was a

polarisation which left Revd Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionists (DUP) as the leading Unionist party and Sinn Féin (SF) as the leading Nationalist party. The DUP's refusal to countenance cooperation with SF in governing Northern Ireland means that the election did not provide a basis for lifting the suspension of devolution in Northern Ireland.

Low Turnout in Scotland and Wales

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Scottish and Welsh elections was the fall in turnout, from 58.8% in Scotland in 1999 to 49.4% in 2003, and from 46.4% to 38.2% in Wales. There were two main reasons for the fall in turnout.

- The main political parties in each nation were felt not to have presented distinctive manifestoes, resulting in lacklustre election campaigns that failed to capture the public imagination. In addition the ongoing concerns in Scotland about the overruns in the budget for the new Scottish Parliament building helped produce a general sense of disillusionment with the party-political establishment.
- There was a perception in both nations – as reported above - that the Parliament/Assembly had not made much difference to voters' lives. By contrast, government at Westminster was felt to have more and indeed *too much* influence. Table Nine makes this point in the Welsh case by contrasting public views about which institution *does*, and which *ought to* have most influence over the way Wales is run. Because of the perception that Westminster still does have most influence – and there is much the same pattern of survey evidence for Scotland - many voters were of the view that little was at stake in the 2003 devolved elections, and that their vote was not important enough for them to make the trip to the polling booth.

Table Nine – Most influence over 'the way Wales is run'

	2001		2003	
	Does have most influence	Ought to have most influence	Does have most influence	Ought to have most influence
Welsh Assembly	17	56	22	56
UK Government	64	26	58	29
Local councils	16	17	15	14
European Union	3	1	5	1

Source: Welsh Life and Times Survey 2001, 2003

Election outcomes in Scotland and Wales

The combination of low turnout and disillusionment with the establishment parties helped open up the field for 'non-establishment' parties and produced a remarkable set of results in Scotland (Table Ten). Both Labour, the leading party of government in the 1999-2003, and the Scottish National Party, the leading party of opposition lost ground. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats held steady. The Scottish Socialists, the Greens and a number of Independents – in part facilitated by an electoral system designed to be more proportional than first-past-the-post - took up the slack to establish a 'rainbow parliament'. The Lab-Lib majority in the Parliament has been cut from seventeen to just five, but this should be enough for stable government through to the next scheduled election in 2007 because the opposition in Parliament is now more fragmented.

Wales did not see the same level of success of smaller parties, with just one Independent gaining election. And Labour did better than in Scotland, boosting its share of the vote from 37.6% to 40.0%. Largely because the electoral system is less proportional in its outcomes in Wales than Scotland, Labour was able to win exactly half the seats in the Assembly with that 40%. Since the Presiding Officer (in Westminster terms, the Speaker) of the Assembly is a) provided by the opposition and b) does not vote in divisions, Labour has an overall majority of just one seat. As Rhodri Morgan made clear directly after the election Labour will need 'iron discipline' to make that majority work. So far it has.

The biggest story in Wales was the poor performance of Plaid Cymru, the party of Welsh nationalism. It slumped to 21.2% from 30% in 1999, emerging with only one more seat than the Conservatives, who managed a modest recovery. The Liberal Democrats trod water.

Table Ten – The 2003 Election in Scotland (including change from 1999)

Party	Constituency vote %	Regional vote %	Constituency seats	Regional seats	Total seats
Conservative	16.6 (+1.0)	15.5 (+0.1)	3 (+3)	15 (-3)	18 (=)
Green	--	6.9 (+3.3)	--	7 (+6)	7 (+6)
Labour	34.6 (-4.2)	29.3 (-4.3)	46 (-7)	4 (+1)	50 (-6)
Liberal Democrats	15.4 (+1.1)	11.8 (-0.6)	13 (+1)	4 (-1)	17 (=)
Scottish National Party	23.8 (-4.9)	20.9 (-6.4)	9 (-2)	18 (-10)	27 (-12)
Scottish Socialists Party	6.2 (+5.2)	6.7 (+4.7)	0 (=)	6 (+5)	6 (+5)
Others	3.4 (+1.7)	8.9 (+3.3)	2 (+1)	2 (+2)	4 (+3)
Totals	100	100	73	56	129

Source: Electoral Commission

Table Eleven - The 2003 Election in Wales (including change from 1999)

Party	Constituency vote %	Regional vote %	Constituency seats	Regional seats	Total seats
Conservative	19.9 (+4.1)	19.2 (+2.7)	1 (=)	10 (+2)	11 (+2)
Labour	40.0 (+2.4)	36.6 (+1.2)	30 (+3)	0 (-1)	30 (+2)
Liberal Democrats	14.1 (+0.7)	12.7 (+0.2)	3 (=)	3 (=)	6 (=)
Plaid Cymru	21.2 (-7.2)	19.7 (-10.8)	5 (-4)	7 (-1)	12 (-5)
Others	4.8 (+0.1)	11.8 (+6.7)	1 (+1)	0 (=)	1 (+1)
Totals	100	100	40	20	60

Source: Electoral Commission

Northern Ireland

The election in Northern Ireland was finally held on 29 November 2003 and was shaped by the failure during 2003 to make significant steps in the peace process, in particular the decommissioning of IRA arms. A failed attempt to choreograph a breakthrough in October added to the general sense of malaise. The result in electoral terms was the erosion of the political centre. Cross-community parties like Alliance and the Women's Coalition lost heavily. But the moderate voices of Unionism (David Trimble's Ulster Unionist Party) and Nationalism (the Social Democratic and Labour Party) were also outflanked by more strident voices as the election fragmented into separate battles for supremacy in the Unionist and Nationalist communities.

Accordingly, the big winners in an election which saw turnout fall by 6.8% to 63.1% were the DUP and SF. Arguably the single transferable vote system used for Northern Ireland Assembly elections encourages this kind of within-community polarisation. The DUP emerged as the biggest party with 25.7% of the vote and 30 seats, ten more than in 1998 (and its seat tally rose in January 2004 to 33 following the defection of three members of Trimble's UUP). The UUP held its vote share, but emerged with one seat less (now four seats less) than in 1998. SF easily won the Nationalist electoral battle scoring 23.5% of the vote and 24 seats to SDLP's 17.0% and 18 seats.

Under the terms of the 1998 Belfast Agreement a recalled Assembly would have to elect a government jointly led by DUP and SF. But DUP refuses all cooperation in the Assembly with SF. It also seeks a fundamental renegotiation of the 1998 Agreement, while SF, UUP and SDLP are each strongly committed to the institutional status quo. For as long as these conditions hold it seems that direct rule from Westminster will have to continue, though a formal Review of the Belfast Agreement announced for February 2004 may open up other options.

Table Twelve – the 2003 Election in Northern Ireland

Party	First Preference Votes		
	Votes	%	Seats
Democratic Unionist Party	177944	25.7	30 (33)*
Ulster Unionist Party	156931	22.7	27 (24)*
Social Democratic and Labour Party	117547	16.98	18
Sinn Féin	162758	23.5	24
Alliance	25372	3.68	6
UK Unionist Party	5700	0.82	1
Progressive Unionist Party	8032	1.16	1
Independent**	6158	0.88	1
Northern Ireland Women's Coalition	5785	0.83	0
Others	25801	3.70	0
Total	692028		108

* Jeffrey Donaldson, Arlene Foster and Norah Beare left the UUP to join the DUP on 5 January 2004

** Dr Kieran Deeny (West Tyrone) ran on a single issue: the retention of acute hospital services in Omagh, Co. Tyrone and topped the poll in the constituency.

Commentary

By the Programme Director, Professor Charlie Jeffery

Devolution has bedded in remarkably smoothly. But it remains a fractured project, a collection of separate initiatives which lacks an overarching sense of purpose. Enid Blyton might have called it 'The Mystery of the Missing Centre'. UK Government in Westminster and Whitehall has been slow, complacent even, in thinking through devolution. No other decentralised system has been conceived and operated with such little conscious attention to statewide coordination of government activity. This is an omission that will become a problem when the current benign climate of Labour dominance and budgetary growth fades.

That devolution lacks a compass is shown in the questions of policy variation and economic disparity. How much of each should we have in a common state? The initial instinct was to let the various devolved flowers bloom. There is some concern in Whitehall now to set limits, at least on economic disparities, at least for the English regions. There needs to be more concern, not (necessarily) in reducing differences between territories but in establishing where the outside limits to difference should lie.

Devolution changes the content of UK citizenship. Being a citizen post-devolution can mean that the state – UK-level or in its devolved incarnations – provides different standards and services for you in different places. Of course it also did before, but on a smaller scale in both theory and practice. What has been lacking since devolution is a restatement of what the minimum level of state provision is that should be available to all on equal terms no matter where anyone lives.

There are plenty of indications that people want such minimum standards: concerns over 'post-code lotteries', a sense that the 'north-south divide' is a problem, the iconography (if not the practice) of the 'national' health service. Some of the most potent indications surround the terminology of 'need' which pervade UK territorial finance debates. Special needs in one place that require compensation also require some kind of tacit or explicit consent in other, less 'needy' places that compensation will be given. There is a veiled assumption in the idea of need about UK-wide solidarity. It needs to be unveiled so that an open and sensible debate can be had about who gets what and why, and about why everyone should in some fields of state activity get the same from the state across the UK.

There are some pointers in public opinion about a UK-wide capacity to create a sustainable trade-off between solidarity and variation. People in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland seem to think they get too much government from the centre, and too little scope for making decisions closer to home. Much the same could be said of the debate on English regional devolution. At the same time though – with exceptions in Northern Ireland – people combine a strengthening sense of (sub-UK) national identity with continuingly strong attachments to some idea of Britishness.

Devolution in all these senses – relations between governments, outputs of the state, public attitudes – is not about 'either-or' questions, but 'both-and' equations. But no government in the UK – in Westminster or beyond – has put much effort into defining the UK-level and UK-wide dimensions of any of these equations. Without such efforts devolution runs the danger of drifting into a centrifugal dynamic. And that is not what it was meant to be for.

This paper was collated by Charlie Jeffery, Director of the Economic and Social Research Council's Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme, from findings drawn from research across the 35 projects in the Programme.

The Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme was set up by ESRC in 2000 to explore the series of devolution reforms which have established new political institutions in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, London and the other English regions since 1997. It has commissioned 35 projects around the UK to carry out top-class academic research and to contribute to the policy debates surrounding devolution.

For more information see the Programme website at www.devolution.ac.uk or contact the Programme Director, Professor Charlie Jeffery at ESRC Devolution Programme, Institute for German Studies, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT. Tel 0121 414 2992, fax 0121 414 2992, email devolution@bham.ac.uk.