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GREAT BRITAIN AFTER DEVOLUTION**

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FOR ENGLAND**

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ABSTRACT

TERRITORY AND POLITICS IN IRELAND AND GREAT BRITAIN AFTER DEVOLUTION

This paper focuses primarily on the experience of devolution in the United Kingdom. Reflecting on a number of theories that have been posited as explanations of the current reality of British territorial politics, the author draws on Schopenhauer's fable of the porcupines in order to reconcile the twin characteristics of renovation and revolution. The paper points to the political need to achieve a sense of cohesion, in order to secure the existence of a British identity in the face of challenges such as nationalism and the European Union. The paper concludes with the paradox of the Northern Irish situation in the broader context of British-Irish relations.

IMPLICATIONS OF DEVOLUTION FOR ENGLAND

This paper outlines devolutionary moves within England and Cornwall, and the implications of the government white paper. The eight regional development agencies with their associated regional chambers are briefly described, as is the weak challenge so far posed by elected mayors. The presentation suggests that such a quasi-federal England could fit well into a broadened British-Irish Council.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Arthur Aughey is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Ulster at Jordanstown. He has published widely in the fields of British politics, the politics of Northern Ireland and conservative political thought. His recent books include *Nationalism, devolution and the challenge to the United Kingdom State* (Pluto, 2001); *The conservative political tradition in Britain and the United States* (Pinter, 1992); and *Under siege: Ulster unionism and the Anglo-Irish Agreement* (Blackstaff, 1989). He is currently researching the politics of contemporary Englishness and has just completed a study of the art of political lying in Northern Ireland.

Simon Partridge is an independent political analyst based in London. He has written extensively about British-Irish relations and devolutionary issues. He is author of the pamphlets *Beyond nationalism in these islands* (1996) and *The British union state: imperial hangover or flexible citizens' home?* (Catalyst, 1999). He is editor of *Building a new Britain: an alternative approach to devolution and local governance in the UK* (City Region Campaign, 1996) and co-author of *Nordic co-operation: a possible model for British-Irish relations* (Finnish Institute, London, 1997).

TERRITORY AND POLITICS IN IRELAND AND GREAT BRITAIN AFTER DEVOLUTION

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INTRODUCTION

I will reverse the priority in the title of this paper and speak first of Great Britain and then only briefly of Ireland. In what follows I try to establish a frame of reference on the theme of renovation or revolution. I will approach this by identifying three theses on the consequences of devolution. I will suggest, by way of Schopenhauer's fable of the porcupines, how we might relate these views; I will consider some subtle interpretations of post-devolution politics; and finally—and very briefly—I will look at the condition of Ireland.

MODIFICATION OF CIRCUMSTANCE

Michael Oakeshott once remarked that the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 was a modification of Russian circumstances. There was, no doubt, an element of outrageous playfulness in Oakeshott's remark. However, the questions he raised are serious ones. They are questions of historical perspective. To what extent do particular events radically modify circumstances? Or to what extent is the radical modification of circumstances more apparent than real? What Oakeshott proposed was an historical rule of thumb; the further one gets from an event the more likely one is to notice continuities rather than discontinuities. That may be a controversial proposition but the respective claims of continuity and discontinuity already inform judgments of the devolutionary programme of new Labour since 1997. Three may be noted: Tom Nairn's Ukania thesis, the constitutional revolution thesis, and the (relative) continuity thesis.

Tom Nairn's Ukania thesis

This familiar thesis (Nairn, 2000) proposes that we are witnessing today the final act of a script that might be called *Four nations and a (British) funeral*. The United Kingdom lacks an idea of the “people” appropriate to modern day democratic sensibilities. This is its Habsburgian—or multi-national—problem in a nutshell. On the one hand, a multi-national union like the United Kingdom is on dangerous ground if allegiance is entirely preserved by its component national identities. However, on the other hand, its multi-nationality character is contradicted by an exclusive allegiance to a transcendent, institutional identity like Westminster.

It is argued that it is this paradox which the Union can no longer find a workable solution to, just as the Habsburgs failed to do.

As JGA Pocock (2000) recently argued, Nairn promotes a simple message: “modification must mean liquidation”. There is an interesting coincidence here which, in his Marxist days, Nairn would have said is *no* coincidence. His left republicanism makes common cause with the English toryism of Simon Heffer (1999). And what makes it no coincidence is that both are nationalist perspectives; there is a common wish that the “English cease being British”.

When one reads Nairn one is reminded of what Humphrey Lyttleton once said to a journalist when he was asked about where modern jazz was going: “If I knew where it was going it would be there already”. The title of Nairn's recent book *After Britain* implies that he knows where Britain is going because it *is* there already. However, the *Ukania* thesis now lacks much of the attraction it once had and even Nairn seems to have backed away from it.

Constitutional revolution thesis

David Marquand and John Tomaney (2000), for example, have written of Labour having instituted “a veritable constitutional revolution” since 1997. This was the revolution promised by Gordon Brown in 1992: “not just tidying up our constitution but transforming it”. The revolution involves, as Brown stated it, transferring sovereignty from the crown to the people, a rather different take on old Labour's objective of a massive shift of power from the few to the many. There is a large literature that is premised on this thesis and, like all such premises, that literature has been critical as to how far the revolution has still to go.

Continuity thesis

Third, there is the (relative) continuity thesis. The most sustained explication of this thesis can be found in the commentaries on devolution by Sir Malcolm Rifkind. While acknowledging the radicalism of the government's reforms, he has argued that the “whole history of the British constitution has been of a gradual evolution of constitutional change to meet new requirements” (Rifkind, 1998). Devolution is just a further stage in that evolution and, while one should acknowledge its significance, one should not be too impressed by its novelty.

Recovery and transformation

One cannot rule out the possibility that, despite the unpersuasiveness of his historicism, events may prove Nairn to be right. However, I focus mainly on the last two views. They differ in their interpretation of the modification of British circumstances. Yet, in their different ways both of them—one critically, the other positively—imply the adaptive qualities of the old to the new and of the new to the old.

This is something of which Oakeshott (1991) also famously wrote. A tradition of behaviour like, as he put it, the “so-called British Constitution”, means that nothing “that ever belonged to it is completely lost; we are always swerving back to recover and make something topical out of even its remotest moments: and nothing for long remains unmodified”. The changes in territorial politics in Great Britain may well reflect that pattern and there has been a notable engagement—for differing rea-

sons—to understand devolution as a recovery of an ideal as well as a democratic transformation of that ideal.

Recovery *and* transformation—how might this be explained? Schopenhauer's fable of the porcupines may help.

A FABLE OF PORCUPINES

A number of porcupines, Schopenhauer (1892) wrote, huddled together for warmth on a cold day but as they pricked one another they were forced to disperse. The cold drove them together again and the process was repeated. After many turns of huddling and dispersing they discovered that a comfortable relationship involved maintaining a little distance from one another. It is only when we discover a moderate distance, Schopenhauer believed, that life becomes tolerable; our mutual needs can be reasonably satisfied and, as far as possible, we can avoid pricking one another. Interestingly, Schopenhauer used an English expression to describe this condition: “keep your distance”. There is a political ideal here.

Of course, for most of recent history one porcupine—England—was much larger than the others, and to some it looked as if there was only one porcupine. Sometimes, on both the left and the right of politics in the 20th century, the distinctive characters of the individual porcupines appeared irrelevant to issues of collective or individual need. The history of the UK, as Rifkind put it, is the history of a partnership rather than of absorption, “albeit a partnership of unequals”. The distance kept in this partnership has been explored by political scientists such as Richard Rose (1982) and Jim Bulpitt (1983).

Doing justice to what is distinctive and to what is common in territorial management has always been a delicate enterprise, for national identity is a very prickly subject and, as Norman Davies (1999) has shown us, is not all that well understood by 85% of the population of the UK.

The fable of the porcupines suggests that relationships within the isles are always changing. In renovating their relationship, in modifying the distance between their quills, the national porcupines are capable of recovering a former sense of their relative autonomy without sacrificing their solidarity.

INTERPRETATIONS OF POST-DEVOLUTION POLITICS

Unitary and union state

A coherent statement of something like this understanding can be found in a paper produced by James Mitchell and Graham Leicester for the Scottish Council Foundation in 1999 (Mitchell and Leicester, 1999). What has changed under devolution, they argue, is a strengthening of the democratic credentials of the nations in UK affairs, “rather than the creation out of nothing of an additional tier of government”. Pursuing a theme prominent in Mitchell's previous work (such as Mitchell, 1990),

this paper makes the distinction between the UK as a unitary state and the UK as a union state. If the UK is seen as a unitary state then devolution is a major disruption of territorial politics. However if it is seen as a union state then devolution “does not break with tradition but simply recognises the “less than perfect” integration within the state in a new and pragmatic way”.

There has been sufficient ambiguity about the practice of territorial politics for either to be claimed. Conservative politics in the 1980s, of course, stressed the former rather than the latter. However, on the basis of taking the UK as a union state, Mitchell and Leicester provide a persuasive assessment of contemporary practical relationships between levels of governance in the UK and between a devolved UK and the European Union. They certainly see this understanding as a way of reconciling the theses of revolution and continuity (and I tend to agree with them). The recovery of the idea of the union state, then, best assimilates the transformation of constitutional practice.

This means forging a new common citizenship within the shared space of the UK, where degrees of national identity need not conflict with the achievement of multi-national purposes. It means securing, as Kevin Morgan (2001) has argued, territorial diversity without widening territorial disparity. That is a tall order. What does it mean in practice? I think it means this.

Cohesion is no longer to be achieved by what Nevil Johnson (1977) once called “self-administration”, i.e. within the bureaucratic arenas of the Scottish and Welsh Offices, or directly through the Northern Ireland Office. Cohesion can only now be achieved politically, within the democratic arena of assemblies and parliaments and adjusted on the basis of popular politics. This now involves an open process of public and institutional negotiation. It requires real political stamina to prevent the porcupines rolling away from one another altogether.

Two complementary challenges present themselves: nationalism and the European Union. Schopenhauer thought that a porcupine of some heat would prefer to remain outside the huddle, neither pricking nor being pricked. The Scots, for example, may come to feel that life outside the Union would not be the cold house some have predicted. The EU represents a larger huddle of porcupines in which Scotland and even Wales might feel able to *re-contract*, securing not only their independence but also a compensatory solidarity against the cold winds of globalisation. Not everyone, however, is fatalistic about either prospect.

Britain as relationships

In a stimulating recent article, Lindsay Paterson (2002) argues that we may be at a genuinely confusing moment in history. In a review of attitude surveys and empirical evidence, he proposes like Mitchell and Leicester—and to some extent, like Oakeshott—that devolution is as much a renovation as a radical departure for Scotland and, to a lesser extent, for Wales.

Though he does not write of porcupines, there is a certain porcupinal association in his conclusion that Britishness may best be understood “as a set of relationships”. The old constitution is certainly changing but “there is really no reason to believe that Britain as a set of relationships among people is anywhere close to disintegrating”. As Sir Ernest Barker put it 75 years ago, territorial politics in Great Britain is a question of degree (Barker, 1927).

Today the degrees of Welshness and Scottishness are waxing and the degree of Britishness is waning. Yet the polling evidence suggests that, for most people, the prickliness of national difference continues to make territorial politics in Great Britain interesting while the solidarity born of respecting those differences continues to make it worthwhile, for now at least. And what of Ireland?

THE IRISH QUESTION

The Northern Ireland problem may be understood not as a question of degree but as a question of absolutes (or as Edna Longley replied to me: “A question of degree *masquarading* as a question of absolutes”). The Belfast Agreement may be understood as yet another attempt to achieve the transformation of politics from absolute (either/or/potentially violent) to degree (both/and/ inclusive and democratic). Its object is to change relationships within Northern Ireland, within the island of Ireland and between the islands.

I end with a brief and rather ironic conclusion. Unionist and nationalist porcupines within Northern Ireland—despite being compelled to live and now govern together—continue to prick one another insufferably. They cohabit uncomfortably and their prickliness frequently irritates their larger neighbours. However, the British and Irish porcupines have achieved a suitable Schopenhauerian accommodation with one another either at the level of Dublin-London or at the level of Dublin-Edinburgh and Dublin-Cardiff.

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IMPLICATIONS OF DEVOLUTION FOR ENGLAND

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INTRODUCTION

England—or more accurately England and the Duchy of Cornwall without Greater London, which already has its own city region assembly—already has a significant structure of regionally devolved governance. Map 1 shows the eight official regions—North East, North West, Yorkshire & Humberside, West Midlands, East Midlands, South West (includes Cornwall), South East, and Eastern—which form the basis for the present tripartite structure. The shaded area in the south eastern area or Home Counties represents “Roseland” (Region of south east England) which I believe is often confused with England as a whole. Table 1 reveals the considerable population and economic product of most of the regions—half of them having populations bigger than the Republic of Ireland (3.8m) or Scotland (5.1m).

The major item of non-identifiable public expenditure (i.e. which cannot be disaggregated by country and region) is that of defence, worth over £24 billion in 1996. Some in Scotland and Wales have argued that this disproportionately benefits southern England and redresses the balance of public expenditure between Scotland and Wales and the regions of England. However, it is hard to see how this argument can be applied to the North East, North West, Yorkshire & Humberside and the South West. Those with greater “voice” already receive the highest public expenditure per head. This is not likely to go unnoticed for long.

Table 1: Population, GDP and identifiable public expenditure for countries and regions of the UK

	Population (millions)	(%UK)	GDP	Public Exp.
Scotland*	5.1	(8.8)	10,614	4,826
Wales*	2.9	(5)	8,900	4,620
Northern Ireland*	1.7	(2.8)	8,690	5,484
North East	2.6	(4.5)	9,071	3,814
North West	6.9	(11.8)	9,719	3,578
Yorkshire & Humberside	5.0	(8.6)	9,585	3,322
East Midlands	4.1	(7)	10,096	3,101
West Midlands	5.3	(9.1)	10,016	3,278
Eastern	5.3	(9)	10,363	2,999
London*	7.0	(12)	15,077	4,228
South East	7.8	(13)	11,455	2,975
South West	4.8	(8.2)	10,141	3,144

Note: an asterisk indicates an existing devolved assembly. GDP is for 1996, source: Office for National Statistics. Public expenditure is for 1995, source: Public Expenditure: Statistical Analyses 1998-99—Cm 3901. Figures are £ per head and are the latest available. Populations, source: ONS, www.statistics.gov.uk. The regions are those of the English Regional Development Agencies (see Map 1).



Map 1: The countries, regions and Crown dependencies of the British-Irish Isles

NEW ADMINISTRATIVE ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE REGIONS

These regional offices started life before new Labour came to power. The Tory government with Michael Heseltine as minister at the Department of Environment realised that after the riots on Merseyside there was a need for greater co-ordination of the main Whitehall departments if the underlying issues were to be addressed. This meant greater co-ordination of the Home Office, Trade and Industry, Environment and Transport, Education and Training, and Arts and Heritage (now Culture, Media

and Sport) in their regional capacity. The Government Offices of the Regions (GORs) were born, the only difference being that Labour merged the office for Merseyside with that for the North West. There is also a Government Office for Greater London, which serves this unique city region alongside its development agency and slim-line assembly of 25 members led by an elected mayor.

What Labour has added to the GORs since April 1999 are a series of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), business-led and focusing on economic development and some aspects of training (there has been some turf war here with Education). These are modelled on the existing Development Agencies for Scotland and Wales and are not unlike the industrial development authorities in both parts of Ireland. These have been given a boost by Gordon Brown since 1 April 2002 through an extra £500m. This gives the RDAs a total spend of £1.7bn and more flexibility on how each one spends its money. The downside is that there are some pretty strict targets coming from the Treasury and the DTI. This ambivalence about letting go of central control is rather typical of the devolution process so far in England.

Supervising the RDAs—outside Greater London—are what is formally called a Regional Chamber, though several of these have already rechristened themselves assemblies. The Chambers are indirectly elected bodies formed with the agreement of the secretary of state and made up of predominantly local councillors with some participation from other social partners, like higher education and the voluntary sector. They are usually around 50-60 in number.

It is worth noting, as in Wales (see Osmond, 2002), that the considerable non-governmental or civil society sector has rapidly reorganised itself into regional networks to take account of this new political framework. This is evidence of the “pull effect” of the new regional structures and their capacity for “region building”. This suggests that in regions where there might not be much natural affinity—the traditional rivalry between Liverpool and Manchester being a good example—a sense of commonality will develop over time. Indeed, the North West seems to be gelling remarkably quickly and no doubt will interact with Ireland over common Irish Sea maritime issues and transport links to Scandinavia, the Baltic and elsewhere.

Parallel to these official structures there now exists a series of Constitutional Conventions (CCs) modelled on the Scottish one which did so much preparatory work on what a devolved Scots parliament would look like. These now exist in: North East, Yorkshire, North West, West Midlands, South West, plus an embryonic one in the East.

The CCs are broad-based and cross-party—even including some Tories. Most if not all are chaired by Church of England bishops, thus providing a non-partisan focus. Some of their plans for slim-line assemblies—more akin to London than to Scotland or Wales—are quite well advanced (particularly the North East, North West and Yorkshire), and include proposals for a civic forum to run alongside the assembly, as is the case in Belfast, Edinburgh and London. These campaigns are co-ordinated by a body called the Campaign for the English Regions, which

launched in 1999 and is appropriately based in Newcastle (see Campaign for the English Regions, 2002).

BBC ENGLISH REGIONAL DEVOLUTION SURVEY

An interesting snapshot of attitudes in England towards devolution was provided by a recent poll commissioned by the BBC involving representative telephone interviews of 2,650 people in England between 1 and 10 March 2002 (BBC, 2002).

The pie chart in figure 1, “England’s New Tribes”, seems to indicate that there is little basis for an English nationalist backlash, which some had feared would be the response to devolution for the Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish. Only 27% see themselves as English, with a larger proportion of 36% seeing themselves as identified with a provincial region, while a further 22% see themselves as British, 13% as cosmopolitan (identifying themselves with Europe or the world), and 2% as Other—though I think we have to be careful in seeing these senses of identity as as exclusive, as a simple look at the pie chart implies. What seems beyond dispute is the heterogeneous nature of contemporary England, though some historians, including the influential Linda Colley, contrary to predominant Irish political imagination, would maintain it was ever thus. As she put it, “Nor, emphatically, is it the case that a growing sense of Britishness after 1707 completely displaced and crowded out other loyalties” (Colley, 1992: 372).

Figure 2 shows perceived comparisons of the power of the English regions with Scotland, Wales and London (the actual question was “Thinking of the strength of voice your region has in Parliament, and the amount of Government funding it receives, do you think that it is better or worse off than the following areas of the United Kingdom?”). This indicates that regional sentiment is driven more by re-

Figure 1: England's new tribes

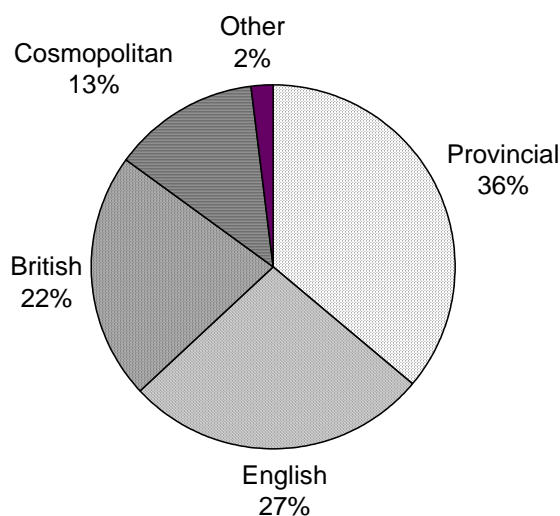


Figure 2: Perception of power of own region in relation to Scotland, Wales and London

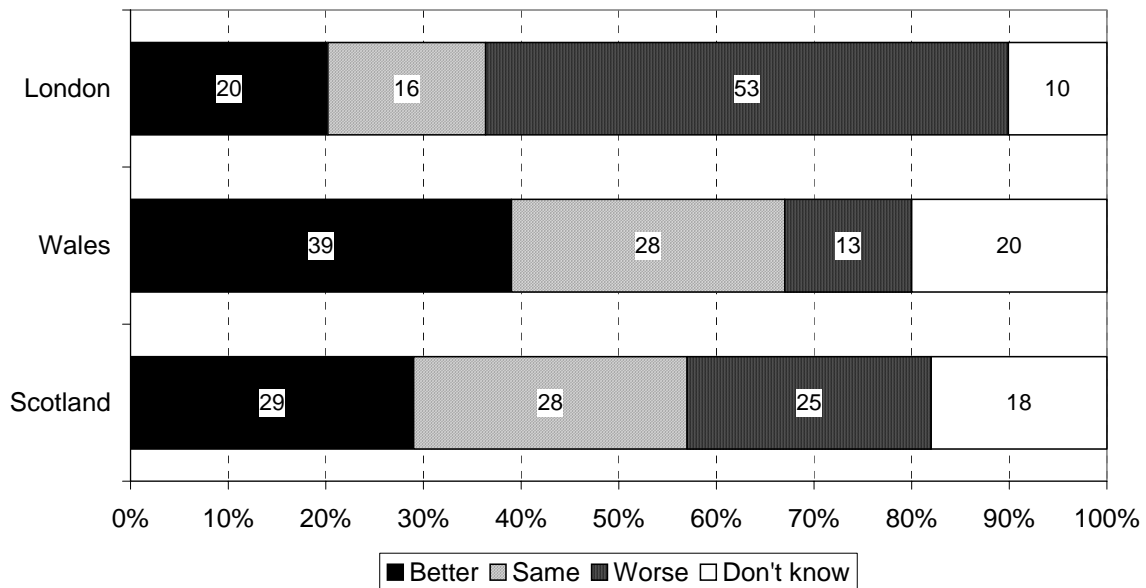
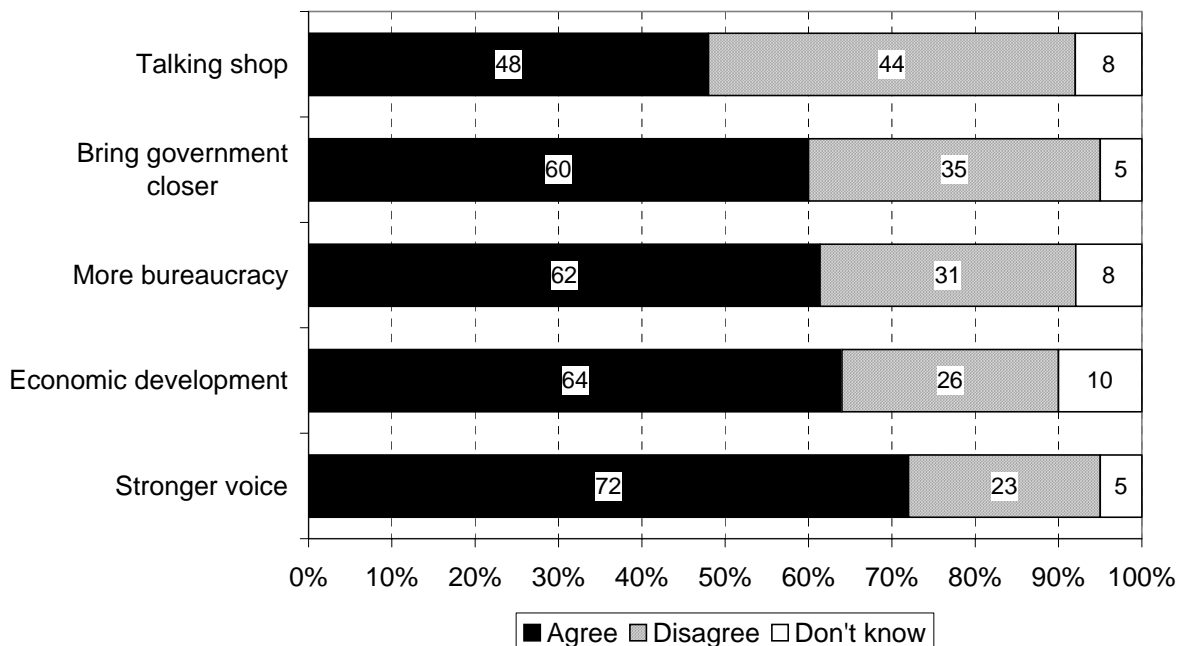
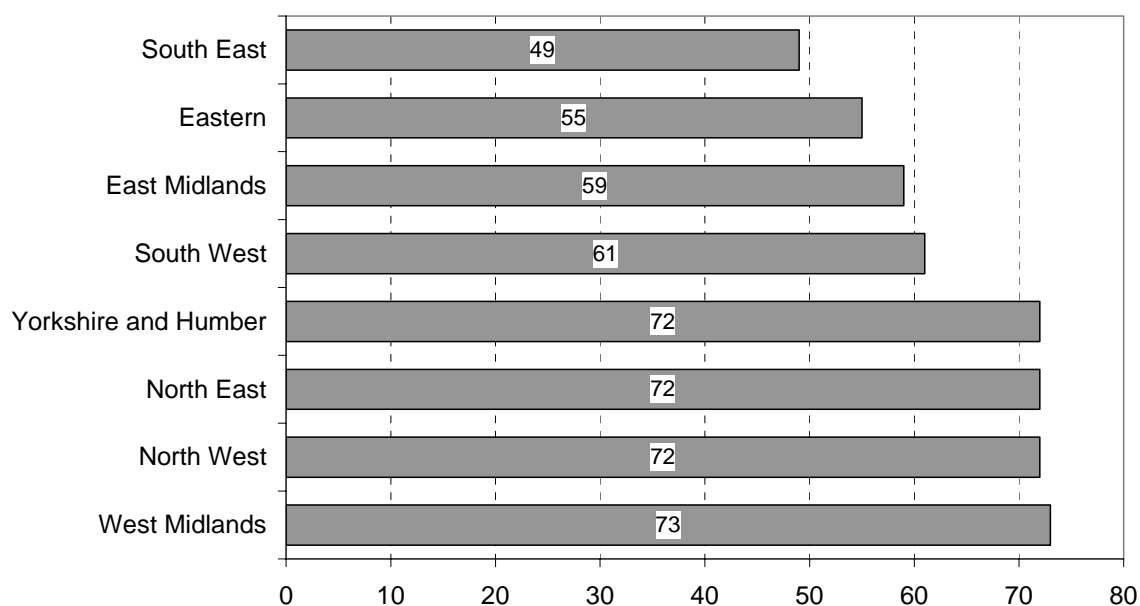


Figure 3: Perceived nature of regional assembly



sentiment of London metropolitan power (the North East was the exception seeing itself as worse off than Scotland). Only as regards London do a majority 53% in the regions feel they are worse off. To misquote Douglas Hyde, London is the place most can hate while probably wanting to emulate!

Figure 3 shows two major reasons why people would support a regional assembly: 72% believe it would give them “a stronger voice at Westminster and Brussels”, while 64% believe it would “improve the economic development of the region”. The other questions dealt with whether a regional assembly would result in “more bureaucracy and red tape”, whether it would “bring government closer to the people”

Figure 4: Support for a regional assembly

or whether it would “become a talking shop for politicians and be a waste of money”.

Figure 4 shows the degree of support for the creation of an elected assembly in different regions. As one might expect support is generally stronger the further away one goes from London. The North East, North West, Yorkshire and Humber, and West Midlands all show support running around 72%. This drops down to 49% when one gets to the South East.¹

THE FUTURE

In my *Catalyst* think tank pamphlet written at the end of 1998 (Partridge, 1999), I predicted that new Labour had started an “assembly escalator”. While it has stopped and started in England several times since then, that still seems the essence of the new constitutional logic if a tolerable, though non-symmetrical, stability is to be achieved.

The formal next steps were spelt out in the government white paper published in May 2002. As a straw in the wind a green paper on planning published in early 2002 proposed transferring planning powers of county councils to the regional level. England seems to be moving towards regional government by incremental

¹See my paper based on the presentation I gave to the 10th Freudstadt Symposium “Region and Nation in the British Irish Islands: Innovations and New Institutions from a European Perspective” on 1 July 2000 (Partridge, 2000). This sets out the elusive nature of “Englishness” (as opposed to the Metropolitan Home Counties) and suggests that a “regional” perspective, if one likes somewhat reminiscent of the old Angle/Saxon heptarchy, is more likely to reflect its inherent diversity, while fitting more readily into a balanced, devolved Council of the Isles and, if it comes, a more federal EU.

steps. Furthermore, the Arts Council of England (also a product of the Tory years) has recently set up a series of regional councils based on the GOR areas.

These step-by-step developments fall into the renovation rather revolution mould.

At one point it looked as though the provision for mayors—reputedly favoured by Blair—might cut across moves for regional devolution. Powerful mayors in, say, Liverpool and Manchester might have seriously weakened a North West region. However, of seven referendums held between December 2001 and January 2002 only one produced a positive result. This challenge seems to be losing its momentum. Its local “presidentialism” runs against the grain of English local government.

In the south and south west the existing county councils might provide a stumbling block to elected assemblies. The Tories seem to be turning themselves into the champions of the historic counties, proposing them as electoral constituencies for a reformed House of Lords which they want to be largely elected, outflanking Labour. I presume that if new Labour is returned around 2005 the new constitutional settlement will be a *fait accompli* to which any future Tory government will have to adjust. The presence of some Tories in the embryonic assemblies suggests that such pragmatic adjustment is already under way.

There is evidence from the BBC poll which shows that despite the general enthusiasm for elected assemblies there are reservations about creating more politicians and bureaucrats (which is why new Labour has introduced the linkage to unitary local authorities) and about the possibility of paying more local taxes.

We should also not forget Prime Minister Blair’s own ambivalence about the whole devolution project, which was in many ways a legacy of John Smith and with which he has had to live. His presidential style and the devolutionary thrust stand in considerable tension if not antagonism. A recent cartoon in the Guardian Society supplement rather neatly illustrates this. An irate Blair berates a hapless minister: “Why aren’t all the Regional Development Agencies in London where I can keep an eye on them?” (Guardian Society, 202b).

Overall, devolution in England is likely to proceed in a “rolling fashion”, as has happened in Spain, the state most comparable to the UK in Europe. There the 17 “autonomous communities” have drawn down somewhat different powers in negotiation with the central Spanish government—Catalonia and the Basque country having very extensive autonomy. As we have seen, the process in England is likely to start in the North East and North West, with the south eastern area being the last.

COUNCIL OF THE ISLES

Let me end by pointing out that one aspect of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement might have an external “pull” on the English regions—that is the Strand Three provision for a British-Irish Council (BIC) or Council of the Isles, if it achieves a higher profile. The Council found room not only for Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and

the Crown dependencies, alongside the Republic; it also recognised that there might be representation from elsewhere in the UK—"if appropriate". I take this to be a prescient reference to the English regions.

A recent recruitment ad for the North West Regional Assembly (NWRA) declared itself in ambitious terms thus: "The NWRA has declared its intention to become an elected Regional Government for the North West at the earliest opportunity—as a region of 6.9m people, it has a population bigger than that of 4 EU member states" (Guardian Society, 2002a).

Should the BIC turn its attention to discussing the Irish Sea, or Sellafield, as well it might, then it is hard to imagine the North West being kept outside the door for too long. The English "peripheries" may well discover they have much in common with the other "peripheries" in our Islands of the North East Atlantic—and vice versa—as we enter a more multi-polar political landscape within our Isles. The balance between the periphery and "Roseland" is likely to be considerably evened up.

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