
The English Question

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Summary of Key Points

- Devolution to Scotland and Wales throws up related questions about the government of England. These fall into two broad kinds: giving England a stronger political voice; and devolving power within England.
- To rebalance the Union, England could find a stronger political voice through an English Parliament, or English votes on English laws.
- To devolve power within England, possible solutions include: regional government; city regions; stronger local government; elected mayors.
- The Conservatives have focused on rebalancing the Union, arguing for English votes on English laws, and reduced Scottish and Welsh representation at Westminster. They are opposed to regional government. Labour have focused on devolving power within England, strengthening the regional tier, but failed in their attempt to introduce elected regional assemblies.
- An English Parliament would create a federation of the four historic nations of the UK. Such a federation could not work because England would be too dominant. No heavyweight politicians have espoused it, and support for the idea remains flat.
- English votes on English laws does command mass support. It seems only logical and fair. But technically there is no such thing as an 'English law', and politically the difficulties are even greater. It would create two classes of MP, a parliament within a parliament, and could lead to political instability.
- Two partial solutions would help correct the underlying problem. The first would be to reduce the number of Scottish and Welsh MPs, to reflect their reduced role. The second would be proportional representation, which would help reduce Labour's exaggerated representation in Scotland and Wales.
- Most of the solutions to devolve more power within England are feasible, but unlikely to happen. Elected regional assemblies are dead for the time being. Strengthening local government, city regions and elected mayors are unlikely to make much headway. Administrative regionalism will continue to grow.
- Regional government in England is the only solution which offers an answer to both versions of the English Question. It could help to give England a louder voice within the Union; and it would help to decentralise the government of England. But defeat in the North East referendum has raised the bar. Any future proposals for elected regional assemblies would need to offer a stronger set of powers and functions, to show that they could make a difference.

Abstract

Devolution to Scotland and Wales throws up related questions about the government of England. Does England need to find its own separate political voice? Does England too need devolution? There is little demand for an English Parliament. 'English votes on English laws' commands more support, but would be impossible to implement in practice. Despite the setback of the North East referendum defeat, the future will see further development of regionalism in England. Regional government is the only institutional solution which could help to give England a louder voice, and also help to decentralise the government of England. But it is not inevitable. There is no logic in the process of devolution which requires the English to have devolution too.

What is the English Question?

The United Kingdom (UK) is a union of four nations which works in practice, but not in theory. Comparative federalism would suggest the union is highly unstable, with one nation, England, having almost 85 % of the UK's population. England dominates. The 'quasi-federal' solution, devolution for the smaller nations on the Celtic fringe, leaves the gaping question: what about England? Whenever devolution has been proposed, from the original attempts by Gladstone in the 1880s, to the time of Lloyd George a generation later, and Labour's first failed attempt in the 1970s, the English Question has emerged as its inevitable corollary. Should there not be home rule all round, with England being divided into smaller units? Does England need to find its own political voice?

The English Question is not a single question, but a portmanteau heading for a whole series of questions about the government of England. This briefing is about the political questions. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have a stronger political voice, thanks to their new elected assemblies. England and the English regions risk losing out, in the distribution of government funds, in competition for inward investment, in voting on English laws. Do the English care? Do the English want any devolution for themselves? And what should be the government's response? These lie at the heart of the political versions of the English Question.

England is the gaping hole in the devolution settlement. Some argue that devolution will not be complete, and the settlement will not stabilise, until the English Question has been solved. Others believe that England can be left out indefinitely, and devolution confined to the Celtic fringe. This briefing aims to explain the different formulations of the question, and to analyse one by one the range of different answers.

The English Question can be divided into the following groups of sub-questions:

Strengthening England's place in the Union

- 1) Does England need to find its own separate political voice, to rebalance the louder political voice accorded to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland?
- 2) Could this be supplied by: an English Parliament; 'English votes on English laws'; independence for England?

Decentralising the government of England

- 1) Does England too need devolution, to break from the excessive domination of the central government in London?
- 2) Can this best be supplied by elected regional assemblies; administrative regionalism; city regions; stronger local government; elected mayors?

Continuation of the status quo

Or do the English want none of the above, with no separate representation or political voice, and no share in devolution either?

These questions have come onto the political agenda as a result of devolution to Scotland and Wales. They are big issues, issues which will determine the future shape and nature of the UK as much as the future government of England. Devolution has already profoundly changed the UK's system of government, but it extends only to 15 % of the population. England with 85% of the population for the moment is left out. If the English ever choose to opt in, the choice they make will have huge consequences not only for the government of England but for the whole future of the Union.

Different versions of the English Question

Improving the government of England, or strengthening England's place in the Union?

The 'purely English' version of the English Question asks: how can we improve the government of England? Interest in regionalism as a possible solution goes back to Fawcett (1919) and Cole (1947) (Tomaney, 2006). It springs from longstanding concerns about the poor performance of many of England's regions, especially in the North; and the difficulties faced by central government in finding effective policy instruments and institutions to drive up regional economic performance. Successive governments, Labour in the 1970s and Conservative in the 1980s, had given up on local government as providing the solution, because of its lack of political will and lack of effective capacity. More and more functions were transferred from local government to centrally controlled public bodies, many operating on a larger scale at regional rather than local level. In 1994 the Conservative government led by John Major took regionalism a step further by bringing together the regional outposts of four central government departments into new Government Offices for the Regions, with common boundaries based on the Treasury's eight standard regions of the North East, North West, Yorkshire and Humberside, West Midlands, East Midlands, East Anglia, South East and South West.

The New Labour government's initial policy solutions in 1997-2001 strengthened these regional structures by further decentralisation to the new Government Offices for the Regions, and the creation in each region of Regional Development Agencies (modelled on the economic development agencies in Scotland and Wales), with regional chambers to scrutinise them. New Labour's second term (2001-2005) saw growing Treasury interest in regional economic productivity and performance, further growth of the Government Offices for the Regions, and the experiments with elected mayors and elected regional assemblies.

The 'UK version' of the English Question asks about England's place in the Union, and raises issues of political representation and political voice for the English post-

devolution. It is epitomised in calls for an English Parliament, or English votes on English laws. These calls are made in a wider, UK-level context, a call to rebalance the Union by strengthening the place of England following devolution to the smaller nations of the UK.

Is the English Question static or dynamic, an elite or mass level question?

Answers to the English Question can vary, depending on whether the question is asked of the general public or of political elites; and whether the respondent takes a static or dynamic view. There is as yet little awareness of these issues among the general public in England, giving rise to a static view: the English masses show little concern about devolution in Scotland and Wales, and no demand for devolution for themselves (Curtice 2001, 2006). In November 2004 that was dramatically confirmed by the No vote in the North East regional referendum, when the voters in the North East region rejected the Government's proposals for an elected regional assembly by four to one, despite strong campaigning by the Deputy Prime Minister in this solidly Labour region.

At elite levels there is greater awareness, more sense of the anomalies and the potential political dynamic unleashed by devolution. Countries like Spain show that asymmetrical devolution, confined initially to the historic nations, can spread over time to other regions which originally showed no interest. But there is a clear political divide, with Labour in favour of developing the regional tier of government, and the Conservatives strongly against. Instead the Conservatives favour English votes on English laws, and reducing Scottish and Welsh representation at Westminster.

What are the answers to the English Question?

In this next part we set out all the possible answers to the English Question, and evaluate them in terms of their feasibility and their probability. This last is gauged in terms of the support they have attracted among elites or the general public. Most are found seriously wanting in either their feasibility or their probability, and some in both. For those who regard the English Question as a quest for the Holy Grail with a magic solution to be discovered if only we search hard enough, this is profoundly disappointing. But the English Question does not necessarily have a magic solution. Like other big historical questions, it is a shorthand title for an intractable problem (or set of problems) which is not susceptible to an easy solution.

Nor can the English Question be answered purely in intellectual or logical terms. It is a political question, about the governance of England, and the answers must ultimately come from the English people. Academics can highlight the inconsistencies and instability inherent in an incomplete process of devolution, and lay out the range of possible solutions. But ultimately only the English people can say for how long they are willing to tolerate the anomalies thrown up by devolution, and whether they are ready to vote for change.

To summarise the conclusions, and to show how few of the solutions hold out much promise, it is helpful at this stage to set out a skeleton of the argument in the form of a table.

Table 1: Summary evaluation of institutional answers to the English Question

	Elite support	Mass support	Comments
Strengthen England's place in the Union			
English Parliament	Low	Low: 15 per cent in 2003 poll (Curtice, Table 6)	English Parliament would risk being as overburdened as Westminster, and equally remote
English votes on English laws	Conservative party policy in 2001 and 2005	60 per cent support in England, 50 per cent support in Scotland: Curtice, Table 7	Becomes live issue if UK government has small majority. Unlikely ever to be implemented by a Conservative government
English independence	Negligible	Negligible	Hard to envisage England unilaterally declaring independence from rest of UK
Decentralise government of England			
Elected regional assemblies	Labour party policy (1997 and 2001), and Liberal Democrat policy. Opposed by Conservatives	25 per cent in 2003 (Curtice Table 6): highest in North, lowest in South and East.	Little likelihood in near future following defeat in Nov 2004 referendum in North East. Powers proposed for elected Regional Assemblies were very weak
Administrative regionalism	Labour party policy	Little public knowledge or interest	Regional chambers exist, and powers and functions slowly growing
City regions	Low	Minimal	Need not cover whole of England
Revive local government	Politicians all pay lip service, no party has strong proposals	Public seem to share some of national politicians' mistrust in local government competence	High standards and national targets for public services militate against local autonomy
Elected Mayors	Low. Very little support among local councillors	High in opinion polls, less when tested in local referendums	Might also be linked to city regions

An English Parliament

An English Parliament would appear to be a neat solution to the fundamental asymmetry in the devolution arrangements. It would create a federation of the four historic nations of the UK, each with its parliament enjoying significant devolved powers. It is an idea which was considered by the Speaker's Conference on Devolution in 1919. More recently, it is the solution propounded by the Campaign for an English Parliament, a pressure group founded in the late 1990s in response to devolution in Scotland and Wales.¹ But it is one thing to create such a federation; quite another to make it work. The fundamental difficulty is the sheer size of England by comparison with the rest of the UK. England with four fifths of the population would be hugely dominant. On most domestic matters the English parliament would be more important than the Westminster parliament. No federation has operated successfully where one of the units is so dominant. Examples are the West Indies federation, in which Jamaica had more than half the population; the first Nigerian federation, and early Pakistan, where in both cases one of the states had more than half the population. In the post-war German federal constitution of 1949, Prussia was deliberately broken up into five or six different states to prevent it being disproportionately large and dominating the new Germany. Although all federations have some units much larger than others, as a general rule among existing federations no unit is greater than around one third of the whole, to avoid it dominating the rest. If this logic were accepted, England would need to be broken up into smaller units for a federal solution to work – something which is anathema to the Campaign for an English Parliament.

The Campaign for an English Parliament has remained stuck on the political fringe. It has attracted neither elite nor mass support. In the 1997 Parliament it attracted the interest of some backbench Conservative MPs, but no heavyweight politicians, have come out in support. Perhaps because of this lack of elite support, mass support for the idea of an English Parliament remains low and shows no sign of increasing. In the first five years of devolution, support for an English Parliament remained flat at between 16 and 19%, while support for regional assemblies crept upwards from 15 to 24 % (Curtice, 2006 6.1). An English Parliament is not seriously on the political agenda, and will never get onto the agenda unless serious politicians begin to espouse it.

English votes on English laws: Westminster as a proxy for an English parliament

By contrast, English votes on English laws does command some elite support and considerable mass support. Polling data consistently shows that between 50 and 60% of people in England agree that Scottish MPs should no longer be allowed to vote on English laws, now that Scotland has its own parliament (Curtice, 2006, 6.3). It seems only logical and fair, since English MPs can no longer vote on matters devolved to Scotland. Even a majority of Scots support restricting the voting rights of Scottish MPs in this way (Curtice 2001, p 234). But the difficulties of implementing such a policy seem insuperable, at both a technical and a political level.

¹ The Campaign is not a political party, but a voice for English nationalism: see their website www.thecep.org.uk. Political parties which support the creation of an English Parliament are the England First Party, www.efp.org.uk and the English Democrats Party, www.englishdemocrats.org.uk.

The technical difficulty is identifying those English laws on which only English MPs would be allowed to vote. Strictly speaking there is no such thing as an English law, in the sense of a Westminster statute which applies only to England. The territorial extent clauses in Westminster statutes typically extend to the United Kingdom, Great Britain or England and Wales. Many statutes vary in their territorial application in different parts of the Act (Hazell, 2005). In theory the Speaker could identify in advance those clauses or amendments which apply only to England, and rule that only English MPs could take part in those divisions (Hadfield, 2005). But the complexity and confusion resulting from excluding non-English MPs from some votes but not others in the same bill would be immense. Only with the introduction of electronic voting at Westminster would it become feasible, because that would enable the voting terminals of non-English MPs to be disabled or discounted in divisions in which they were deemed ineligible to vote.

If the technical difficulties are daunting, the political difficulties are even greater. Proponents of English votes on English laws tend to under-estimate just what a huge change would be involved. It would create two classes of MP, ending the traditional reciprocity whereby all members can vote on all matters. It would effectively create a parliament within a parliament (Hazell, 2000; Hazell, 2001; Russell and Lodge, 2006). And after close fought elections, the UK government might not be able to command a majority for its English business, leading to great political instability. These political difficulties cast serious doubt on the likelihood of English votes on English laws ever becoming political reality.

English votes on English laws would suddenly become a critical issue if (as may happen) after a future election Labour formed a government with a narrow majority, and depended on Scottish and Welsh MPs to get their legislation through. There would be talk of a constitutional crisis, but whether in reality it triggered a crisis would depend on the reaction of the English. Up to now the English have been willing to tolerate anomalies, as part of the statecraft of managing the Union. There has been a kind of rough justice at Westminster, from which the Scots and Welsh have suffered more in the past than the English (Russell and Lodge, 2006). Now the English are more likely to suffer rough justice, but only when the arithmetic at Westminster is very close. A close result would put the English to the test.

The Conservatives have fought two elections on 'English votes on English laws' (in 2001 and 2005), and have tried to arouse the English. The English have failed to respond. Although opinion polls show majority support for English votes on English laws, it is not a high salience issue. It would only become salient if the government used the votes of Scottish and Welsh MPs to force controversial or unpopular measures upon the English. Its salience would depend on how the media reported parliamentary votes upon the issue. In the 2001 Parliament the media reported only spasmodically on the contribution of non-English MPs to help carry controversial measures such as the ban on fox hunting and student tuition fees, highlighting it on some votes but ignoring it on others (Russell and Lodge, 2006). In a parliament where the government had a narrow majority the media might focus more consistently on the issue. But in a parliament with a slender majority it is harder to foresee the government introducing such measures in the first place and risking electoral unpopularity in middle England.

It is also hard to foresee the Conservatives campaigning on this issue with real conviction. They will know that English votes on English laws garnered them few votes in the 2001 and 2005 elections. And the more historic minded will be aware that this is a

strange *volte face* for the Conservative and Unionist party. If they seriously wanted to end the equal voting rights of all MPs, the Conservatives could no longer claim to be Unionist, but would have become an English party. An English party does not sound like a party of government. And if the Conservatives found themselves in government, would they go ahead and introduce English votes on English laws? A Conservative government with a majority at Westminster might find it more expedient to reduce the numbers of Scottish and Welsh MPs (see below) than to attempt the far more complicated task of trying to restrict their voting rights.

Two other possible answers to votes on English laws

What gives ‘English votes on English laws’ its political edge is the mismatch between territorial balance and party balance at Westminster, with Labour being disproportionately over-represented in Scotland and Wales. There are two other possible solutions which would help correct this mismatch between territorial and party balance. The first would be to reduce the number of Scottish and Welsh MPs to reflect their reduced role at Westminster post-devolution, as the Conservatives proposed in their 2005 manifesto. They were building on the precedent set during the Northern Ireland Parliament from 1922 to 1972, when the number of Northern Ireland MPs was reduced to 12, compared with their current representation of 18. If a similar discount of one third were applied to Scottish and Welsh representation, Scottish representation would be reduced to around 40 MPs at Westminster and Wales to around 22.² It would not eliminate the possibility of Scottish and Welsh MPs voting on English laws, but it would further reduce the likelihood of their votes being able to tip the balance.

The second solution is a more proportional voting system. The ‘first past the post’ voting system used for Westminster elections offers a bonus to parties whose support is geographically concentrated, and so tends to exaggerate the political differences between England and Scotland and Wales (Wyn Jones and Scully, 2006). A more proportional system would help to reduce Labour’s dominance in Scotland and Wales, and so reduce the differences between their level of political representation there and in England.

Independence for England

English independence is the third and most extreme institutional solution which would ensure the English have a louder political voice. If it is impossible to give the English a political voice within the Union, the argument goes, they need to break free from the Union and establish their own English state. The English Independence Party (formerly the English National Party) is in favour of England withdrawing both from the UK and the EU.³ It need not detain us long, because its support is vanishingly small. It commands zero support at elite level, and minimal support at mass level. It may offer a stark answer to the English Question, but it is not an answer any of the English seem willing to grasp.

² Discounted to a level of representation about a third below that for England. Scotland has 59 MPs from 2005, bringing Scottish representation into line with the English quota. Wales had 40 MPs in 2005, but if Welsh representation were brought into line with the English quota Wales would have around 33 MPs at Westminster.

³ www.englishindependenceparty.com They also support an English Parliament, as a step on the road towards independence.

If the English are denied a louder political voice, does English nationalism need some other outlet?

All England solutions hold no promise, and for the time being the English seem destined to be denied a louder political voice. Does English nationalism then need some other outlet? It has become commonplace even among supporters of devolution to view English identity and lack of national institutions as problematic, and to deplore the confusion of English with British (Crick, 1991). But this concern is itself confused, and misplaced.

Weak English nationalism has not necessarily been a problem. In some ways it has actually proved beneficial – England has not blocked devolution to the smaller nations of the UK. The English have been strong supporters of devolution to Scotland and Wales, with 50 to 60 per cent consistently supporting the creation of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly (Curtice 2006, Table 6.8). It undoubtedly helped the passage of the devolution legislation that there was no serious opposition to it in England, and it has also helped the bedding down of devolution that there has been no English backlash. If anything the English have become more relaxed: in England the modest opposition to devolution declined by 10 percentage points between 1997 and 2003 (Curtice 2006, Table 6.8).

It is not necessarily a problem that the English have a weak sense of national identity. It is certainly the case that English identity is closely interwoven with Britishness. On a forced choice question almost equal numbers say they are English (40 per cent), and British (50 per cent) (Curtice 2006, Table 6.9). And on the question about shared identities nearly two thirds say they are some mixture of English and British (Curtice 2006, Table 6.10). Commentators have bemoaned this confusion by the English of Englishness with Britishness. But in our history and in our institutions the two identities are closely intertwined, and cannot easily be unwoven.

Nor is there necessarily a mismatch between perception and reality. The political institutions to which the English owe loyalty are themselves a mixture of English and British. Westminster was originally the seat of the English Parliament and is now the home of the British Parliament. The English regard it as their parliament, and do not want a separate parliament (Curtice 2000 Table 8.15, Curtice 2006 Table 6.10). Most departments in Whitehall combine a mixture of English and British functions. There are no separate English departments, and no demand from the English to have a separate government of England.

Identity and institutions mirror each other. Englishness is commingled with Britishness in the English people's sense of identity, and in their political institutions. To combine Englishness with Britishness is not necessarily a sign of confusion. It is a reflection of reality (Aughay, 2006). We cannot readily disentangle Englishness from Britishness in our history or in our institutions. It is better to accept them for what they are, deeply intertwined, and allow the English to celebrate being English and British. Their political allegiance is to Westminster.

Institutional answers to decentralising the government of England

The next part considers the answers to the 'English' version of the English Question, which is about improving the government of England. The main institutional answers

include elected regional assemblies; administrative regionalism; city regions; strengthening local government; and elected Mayors.

As in the previous part, we shall assess each solution in terms of its elite support and mass support, its probability and feasibility. All the solutions are technically feasible. The real arguments revolve around their probability, and the extent to which they present satisfactory answers to the English Question. None is wholly satisfactory, but to anticipate the argument, the article concludes that regionalism is more probable, and offers a more satisfactory set of answers than any of the alternatives based upon local government.

Elected regional assemblies

At the elite level, elected regional assemblies have been supported by Labour and the Liberal Democrats, but opposed by the Conservatives and by the business community. Mass support has always been much harder to gauge, with some opinion surveys suggesting quite high levels of support (Jeffery 2005).

Then in November 2004 came the referendum result in the North East. The region had been chosen by the government as the most likely to vote Yes to a regional assembly because of its strong sense of regional identity, proximity to Scotland, remoteness from London, and long history as a Labour heartland. Yet the government's proposals for an elected regional assembly were decisively rejected by four to one, on a surprisingly high turnout of 48%. There were many possible reasons for the result (Rallings and Thrasher, 2005). The No campaign had argued that the assembly would mean more politicians, more bureaucracy, more council tax, at a time when politicians of all kinds are deeply unpopular. The assembly was dismissed as a mere talking shop because of its strategic role and lack of substantive powers. The Deputy Prime Minister appeared to be the sole champion of the policy, with many of his colleagues hanging back.

Following this decisive rejection, it might be assumed that elected regional assemblies are dead. They clearly are for the time being; but not necessarily for ever. In 1979 the people of Wales voted by four to one against the Labour government's plans for a Welsh Assembly, but in 1997 they narrowly reversed their decision, and the Assembly now seems firmly established. Could such a *volte face* happen with regional government in England? It all depends on the dynamics of devolution. The North East will continue to look enviously across the border at Scotland. Administrative regionalism seems likely to continue to grow. Whether further attempts will be made to introduce elected regional assemblies depends upon whether regional elites continue to espouse them, and whether mass opinion comes round to support them.

Under the government's proposals elected regional assemblies were to be slim, strategic bodies whose main functions would be economic development, strategic land use planning, transport strategy and housing investment. The functions were widely criticised as inadequate (Sandford 2002; Adams and Tomaney 2002), and it is not surprising that they were dismissed by the No campaigners as mere talking shops. If a future government were ever to resurrect the idea of elected regional assemblies it would have to demonstrate more convincingly that they had a set of powers and functions, and budgets to match, which could really make a difference.

Defeat of the 2004 proposals has raised the bar. Just as in Scotland and in Wales the government came forward with a stronger set of proposals in 1997 compared with 1979,⁴ so any future government would need to strengthen as well as repackage any new proposals for regional government. That would require a degree of leadership and collective commitment from the cabinet which was markedly absent in 2004. A future government might also think it wise to uncouple the threat of local government reorganisation from the creation of a new regional tier. Unitary local government does not need to be a precondition of regional government. France, Germany, Italy and Spain have all introduced a regional tier while retaining their two tier system of local government.

Administrative regionalism

If elected regional assemblies seem far, far away, administrative regionalism is strongly here and now. Administrative regionalism describes the growing array of unelected government bodies which operate at the regional level. A dense network of policy actors has gradually grown up in each region around the three main pillars of the Government Office, Regional Development Agency (RDA) and regional chamber. The Government Offices for the Regions have become the main regional outposts of central government, with representatives from nine government departments. The RDAs have seen big increases in their budgets for economic development since their creation in 1999. The regional chambers remain fledgling institutions, with modest staffs and budgets, but they provide a forum for local authority leaders to come together with business and the voluntary sector to discuss regional issues of growing importance, such as housing targets. From small beginnings these core regional institutions have grown significantly in terms of their powers, budgets, influence and effectiveness. Equally significant are the policy networks which have grown up around them. These fledgling regional institutions have begun to take on a life of their own, and to develop a capacity and focus for policy making, which suggests that 'bottom up' regionalism will continue, and continue to grow, despite the rejection of elected regional assemblies (Sandford 2005, 2006).

'Top down' regionalism also seems likely to continue, thanks to the growing interest of the Treasury in improving regional productivity and reducing the disparities in regional economic performance. Regionalism has permeated Whitehall's thinking, and the thinking of the business community. Business remains strongly opposed to elected regional assemblies, but has become supportive of RDAs and (to a lesser extent) the regional chambers in which they are represented among the social and economic partners. Regional chambers are defended by their members as 'partnership assemblies' in which the private and voluntary sector can do business together with local authority leaders. Many of them did not want to see elected assemblies, and will not regard it as a setback that they have been rejected. But it is a technocratic form of regionalism, played only by regional elites, in a way which is invisible to the general public.

This technocratic regional tier has shown an extraordinary degree of resilience, continuing slowly but steadily to grow despite any strong ideological or popular support. What are the reasons for 'creeping regionalism'? One is that regional government is the beneficiary by default of central government's deep mistrust of local government. This

⁴ By removing most of the override powers of the Secretary of State, increasing the powers of the Scottish Parliament, and changing the electoral system to PR, thus reducing the likelihood of Labour domination.

cuts across both major parties, Labour and Conservative. New functions will not be given to local government, and existing functions continue to be taken from them.

The regional tier is a 'greenfield site', with no deepset traditions, entrenched methods of working, or vested interest in the *status quo* (Sandford, 2005b). It has proved adept in adopting the policies, priorities and more fluid methods of working of New Labour. For a new government keen to co-ordinate social and environmental policies, the regional tier offers more opportunities for central government leverage and intervention, even if the consequence is a fragmented and chaotic system of regional governance (Pearce and Ayres, 2005).

New functions like housing investment and the fire service continue to be transferred to the regional level, albeit in an *ad hoc* and unplanned way. The only limits to this creeping regionalism are set by the increasing democratic deficit which accompanies it. Looking at the experience across Europe, Michael Keating has charted an inevitable progression from what he calls functional to political regionalism. Functional regionalism describes the regional machinery first created in the 1960s in connection with national planning and economic development, in which civil servants from central government developed regional plans in consultation with regional political and business elites. Political regionalism describes the elected regional assemblies which subsequently emerged in France and Italy, and post-Franco Spain, to take local political control of these technocratic structures. Keating has argued, based upon the European experience, that a tipping point will come when functional regionalism evolves into political regionalism, because the technocratic structures cannot go on as they are (Keating 2006). It is not wholly clear in this model whether the push will come from regional elites, who propose electoral legitimacy to give them more effective power; or from regional populations, who demand elections to cure the regional democratic deficit. But we cannot assume there is something inevitable about the shift from functional to political regionalism. The safer prediction for England must be that functional regionalism will continue for some time to come, and possibly for ever.

City regions and elected mayors

City regions, sometimes linked to elected mayors, have never quite made it on to the political agenda. They are written about to remind people of the importance of sub-regional economies, conurbations and travel to work areas, but no politician seriously propounds them as units of government. For a while city regions were touted by some academics as a possible alternative to regional assemblies, and linked to elected mayors (Harding, 2000; Stoker, 2000); but that faded away when no major city voted to have an elected mayor in the mayoral referendums of 2002.

The defeat of the proposals for elected regional assemblies has seen a revival of interest in city regions,⁵ but the underlying difficulties remain. They continue to be the construct of geographers and urban planners rather than politicians. They provide the basis for prescribing networks and policy co-ordination rather than new political institutions. Any new political institutions would require another round of local government reorganisation, which would be fiercely resisted. There is a risk of urban dominance,

⁵ Evidenced in the Commission on City Regions, established by the New Local Government Network in March 2005; the Core Cities Working Group of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, and the Northern Way initiative to link key cities in the northern regions of England.

with the cities and their leaders being perceived as neglecting the separate identities and interests of rural areas. Finally, some of the arguments advanced against city regions are similar to those advanced against regional assemblies: that they are essentially technocratic, of interest to elites not ordinary people, and at best a patchwork solution.

Strengthening local government

The main alternative to regionalism as a policy solution for excessive centralisation is to restore powers and functions to local government. Local government has become increasingly the creature of central government. The English structure of local government, with large county councils and smaller districts in rural areas, and unitary local authorities in most towns and cities, has been subjected to successive reorganisations since the 1970s which have left it battered and demoralised. There is no shortage of proposals for strengthening local government (Commission for Local Democracy 1995; House of Lords 1996; Local Government Information Unit 2002; Local Government Association 2004; Stoker 2005). What is lacking is any evidence of political will in central government to let go. Local government in turn has lowered its sights in recent years. They have recognised that New Labour did not usher in a brave new world for local government, but more of the same: more targets, more regulation, more central initiatives, tighter controls. Local government's wish list for greater freedoms is tightly bounded by the recognition that under New Labour as under the Conservatives, local government now dances to central government's tune.

This is not to ignore New Labour's own agenda for reviving local government, including elected mayors. The government further hopes to reinvigorate local government through the cabinet system (the alternative chosen by most local authorities instead of elected mayors, with executive roles given to half a dozen councillors instead of a single leader); the new power of general competence conferred by the Local Government Act 2000, to encourage greater enterprise; and strengthening the community leadership role. But the brief reference to local government in Labour's 2005 manifesto made brutally clear how conditional any new freedoms are: 'We will give councils further freedoms to deliver better local services, subject to minimum national standards, with even greater freedoms for top-performing local councils' (Labour Party, 2005 p106).

The fundamentals have not changed. Freedoms are to be earned, not given to local government. There is little recognition of local government as a sphere of government in its own right, and no talk of restoring the powers and functions lost to local government over the last 20 years. Further powers continue to be removed, some to the regional level. Strategic land use planning, previously a function of county councils through their structure plans, was given in 2004 to Regional Chambers which are to be the new regional planning bodies.

Regionalism remains the best answer to the English Question

It is time to evaluate our answers to the two versions of the English Question. Of those institutional solutions which might rebalance England's place in the Union, none survived. There is no demand for English independence. There is no demand yet for an English Parliament. There is broad support for English votes on English laws, but it is not a high salience issue, and it would be extraordinarily difficult to implement in practice.

Solutions to decentralise the government of England have included elected regional assemblies, administrative regionalism, city regions, elected mayors and strengthening local government. Most are perfectly feasible, but have question marks about their probability. Elected regional assemblies are dead for the time being. Strengthening local government, city regions and elected mayors seem unlikely to make much headway. But there is a further distinction worth making between regional government and local government, in terms of their capacity to answer the first version of the English Question. Strengthening local government, however desirable it may be in its own right, does not offer much in terms of rebalancing England's place in the Union. For that we have to look to one of the forms of regional government: functional regionalism, or better still elected regional assemblies.

Regional government in England is the only solution which offers an answer to both versions of the English Question. It could help to give England a louder voice within the Union; and it would help to decentralise the government of England. But it could only achieve the first aim, of giving England a louder voice, if there were elected assemblies with strong powers and functions. The stronger the better. The stronger the powers, the louder would be England's voice within the Union, because they would be a closer match for the much greater (although varying) powers given to the devolved assemblies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. And the stronger the powers, the greater would be the decentralisation of England. But the government's 2004 proposals for elected regional assemblies were about as weak as they could be.

But regionalism is not the complete answer

In one respect only would the 2004 proposals come close to rebalancing the regions of England with the smaller nations of the UK. The regional assemblies, based upon the Treasury's eight standard regions, would have served areas which are broadly similar in terms of population. The average population of the eight English regions is 6.1 million, slightly larger than Scotland's population of 5.1 million.

But in all other respects regional government in England can never match devolution in Scotland and Wales. Elected assemblies might emerge in some regions but not in others, so long as the policy remained one of devolution on demand. Even if every region eventually had an elected assembly, their leaders could never speak for England with a single voice. But representing populations of several million people, their leaders would have louder voices than any local government leader: they could become political figures on a par with the Mayor of London or the First Ministers in Scotland and Wales. But their powers would be an awful lot less.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have powers to make laws in their devolved assemblies, and substantial executive powers over major public services such as health, education, local government. English regional assemblies would have had no law making power, and no executive powers to speak of. The difference can be seen in terms of their budgets. The budget of the North East Assembly would have been thirty times smaller than those of the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales. The tiny budget reflects its strategic role, shorn of responsibility for any major public service. It would require a revolution in thinking about regional government for it to be granted responsibility for a major public service with a big budget such as health or education.

Such devolved responsibilities are not uncommon in the regions of Europe; but currently beyond the imagination of politicians in England.

How might regionalism develop in future?

How regionalism develops will depend on the further evolution of the regional structures now in place, and the dynamic forces now in play. The first dynamic can best be described as incremental change, a continuation of creeping regionalism. The Government Offices for the Regions will gradually become better recognised as a regional centre of political power. Local authorities having dealings with Whitehall will increasingly find they can do their business with the Government Office in the region. The Regional Director will become a higher profile figure, more like the *préfet*. The regional chamber will also develop a higher profile through its regional planning and housing responsibilities. The English will slowly become more aware of the regional tier, and of the power and influence exercised at the regional level.

Two factors could help to accelerate this process, and one to retard it. The first, top-down accelerator would be if the government decided to throw its weight more strongly behind regionalism (something which might happen under a Brown premiership). Regional chambers could absorb other regional forums, and scrutinise the Government Office as well as the Regional Development Agency (Sandford 2001, 2002). The government could decentralise more functions to the Government Offices for the Regions. They could renew the attempt to standardise the regional boundaries of departments and agencies which do not use the standard regions. And if they wanted to prepare for a renewed attempt to introduce elected regional assemblies, they could first introduce unitary local government across the whole of England, as the Conservatives did for Scotland and Wales in 1994, thus blunting the argument about regional government being an extra tier.

The second, bottom-up set of forces would be a more slow burning fuse. It would depend upon the constitutional conventions which sprang up in five of the English regions to make plans for elected regional assemblies not giving up following the defeat in the North East, but redoubling their efforts. Following the precedent of the Scottish Constitutional Convention, they might decide to come forward with their own proposals for a stronger set of powers and functions. They would need to be prepared for a seriously long march. In Scotland it took 18 years. And although the Scots may not have appreciated it at the time, the 18 years of Conservative rule at Westminster helped to fan the flames of devolution in Scotland. Another prolonged period of Conservative rule could similarly help to rekindle the cause of devolution in the northern regions of England.

Other forces could retard the process of regionalism or obstruct it altogether. Election of a Conservative government would stop the process, even if it stored up regional resentment to be exploited in the future. And even with a Labour government continuing in office, no one should under-estimate the forces of inertia in Whitehall, or the scepticism of many Labour ministers. First over the proposals for Regional Development Agencies, and then over Regional Assemblies, Whitehall departments and their ministers strenuously resisted the transfer of any significant functions or budgets. The line-up in any future government would be unlikely to be much different. To overcome departmental resistance would require a new Prime Minister to give a very different kind of lead.

Ultimately, only the English can answer the English Question

The English seem relaxed about devolution to Scotland and Wales, but they don't seem to want devolution for themselves, and they don't seem to mind centralisation in the government of England. They don't want an English Parliament, and they are not going to get English votes on English laws. But it is a dynamic and fluid situation, in which the most likely outcome is further development of regionalism in England.

This is not to suggest that the devolution dynamic is irresistible. There is no logic in the process of devolution which requires the English to have devolution too. England could remain a gaping hole in the devolution settlement without the system imploding. The devolution settlements already granted to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are not threatened by the lack of devolution in England. Asymmetry does not necessarily make the system unstable.

The UK has always been an asymmetrical state, a political union in which the different nations are embedded in the state in different ways. The English are part of that union tradition, which may help to explain why they are so relaxed about Scottish devolution. They are famously pragmatic, and will not seek uniformity for uniformity's sake. For that reason the campaign for an English Parliament seems unlikely to get anywhere. The English can live with untidiness, so long as it works.

Whether the system continues to work in English eyes will depend less on the Union question than on the England version of the English Question. Are the English still content with the arrangements for the government of England? Opinion polls have for some time suggested sharply rising levels of discontent, but there is little evidence that the English yet make a connection with their highly centralised system of government. Politicians begin to make a connection, and all parties pay lip service to the need for decentralisation, but find it extraordinarily difficult to implement once in government.

One of the obstacles is the expectation of equity. The English may not want uniformity in their system of government, but they do have high expectations of equity in the delivery of public services (Curtice 6.18, 2006 Table 9 in this volume). Pressure to deliver high quality public services is one of the drivers of centralisation: it leads politicians to impose national standards and national targets and national funding regimes. Politicians, media and the people of England are trapped in a media/political vortex where every failing in a public service leads to a media outcry which leads to a kneejerk political reaction of further centralisation.

England is now the most centralised of all the large countries in western Europe. Famously insular as well as pragmatic, the English remain unaware of that. They remain equally unaware of the creeping growth of the regional tier. As regionalism slowly becomes more visible, the regional question will come back onto the political agenda. Of all the institutional solutions we have analysed, regional government offers the best fit in terms of an answer to the English Question. But the English Question does not have to be answered. It is not an exam question, which the English are required to answer. It can remain unresolved for as long as the English want. Ultimately only the English can decide if they want to seek an answer to the English Question.

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