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**The UK devolution process: new challenges and unsolved questions
The case of the North of England**

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Abstract –

The aim of this paper is to analyse the devolution process, its meaning and its developments in the UK twelve years after its initiation in 1997. Then light will be shed on its conundrums and unsolved questions, focussing on the case of the North of England and in particular on the North East, to explore what has been done and tried, what went wrong, and to sketch hypotheses for the possible future(s) of devolution in the area, and in England.

1. Devolution: a process, not just a policy.

Devolution is a concept entailing manifold meanings and implications. According to the literal sense of the word, stemming from the Latin *devolvo*, it means to ‘move’, to ‘transfer’ or to ‘roll down’ something from the top towards the bottom. The political declination of such term implies, thus, the transfer of some powers from the centre, by its own decision, towards the ‘peripheral’ or lower levels of government. More specifically, following Bogdanor’s (1999: 2) definition, devolution involves «the transfer to a subordinate elected body, on a geographical basis, of functions [either legislative, executive or administrative] at present exercised by ministers and Parliament».

On the one hand, such an acknowledgment echoes the general trend under which most of the European countries have recently initiated a process of decentralisation of powers, usually in favour of regional or sub-national levels of government, following the principle of subsidiarity. From this angle, UK devolution can be regarded as a ‘non exceptional’ policy, in what it trails the main trajectory of the European *aménagement du territoire*.

On the other hand, what makes devolution one of the most innovative policies introduced at Westminster over the past century relates to the fact that the UK has long been one of the most centralised democracies of Western Europe (Bogdanor, 2001) and has been generally considered a highly stable and consolidated state (Bradbury, 2008). Key to these assumptions are the principle of Westminster Parliament supremacy – the mainstay of the UK state, and the central feature of its otherwise very flexible constitution – together with an all British political ability to deal with the manifold territorial diversities of the state within the (standardising) frame of a single (and uncontested) central government. The ground-breaking character of devolution lies in the fact that its initiation in 1997 did not coincide with the mere introduction of a Bill into Parliament, but rather it significantly shook and transformed the basis for political representation and territorial government of the UK. Even though devolution has led to the creation of elected bodies (in the form of Parliaments or

Assemblies¹) *subordinate* to Westminster, for the first time after the Act of Union of 1707 this latter is no longer the only Parliament within the UK, representing *all* of its territory and people. Devolution, therefore, can be considered a pioneering policy because it has opened the way for the most radical constitutional reform to be introduced in an intrinsically unitary state such as the UK. In seeking to square the supremacy of Westminster with the grant of *ad hoc* self-government dealing with domestic affairs to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the city of London, devolution has changed and challenged the very foundation of a state that grew and developed through centuries by relying on and revolving around one supreme and omnicompetent Parliament, managing unilaterally *from the centre* the powers and the affairs of a very large, composite and diverse country. Devolution, hence, allows for political acknowledgment and voice to the territorial diversities of the UK. For the first time since 1707, the various identities of the component nations of United Kingdom can enjoy direct expression through territorially-tailored institutions, giving political recognition to the multinational basis of the UK state. However, this occurs without compromising or questioning – at least on the paper – the supremacy of Westminster. ‘Reserved matters’ (such as foreign affairs and defence) are firmly retained by the centre. Moreover, Westminster holds also the essential faculty to be able to dissolve any of the devolved institutions. Nevertheless, especially in relation to this last statement, what must be underlined is the potential gap between constitutional assessments and political practice – between the ‘double nature’ of devolution as a policy *and* as a process whose final settlements are difficult to foresee and rigidly plan. For it is within constitutional theory only that the supremacy of Westminster (enshrined in its power to alter the devolution settlements unilaterally) is fully preserved, while *in practice* the new devolved institutions retain a key power over which the centre does not hold any supremacy: because they were all born out of referendary approval, and therefore accountable to and sustained by the direct will of the electorate they represent, it would be very difficult to dissolve these elected bodies if this does not coincide with the will of *their* people (see Bogdanor, 1999).

Hence, devolution seems to put under the spotlight the key connection between constitutional doctrine and political ascendancy, as the former runs the risk of becoming an empty shell when is not filled by the latter. This acknowledgment deeply challenges the traditions of the basis of the UK state, opening up for new and largely unforeseeable ways for

¹ In accordance to the New Labour Manifesto, and subsequent to referendary approval, the first Blair-led government sought soon after its election in 1997 for the establishment of Parliaments in Scotland and Northern Ireland, a National Assembly in Wales, and an Assembly led by a directly elected Mayor for London.

it to deal with territorial government through a ‘newborn’ and more bottom-up ingrained governance for the country.

Devolution can thus be defined as a ‘policy in becoming’, a process initiated over 10 years ago, in 1997, by a newly elected government with a strong vision for modernising the UK. What it will lead to – from federalism to independence, or to a stronger union – cannot be clearly forecast through constitutional engineering, but will rather depend on the political choices of the UK peoples and on the extent to which they will keep on willing to be united. What is peculiar to UK devolution is not its nature as a policy aiming at decentralising powers towards the bottom, but rather the way in which it triggers in for a political expression and recognition of territorial differences in a way unprecedented within a strongly centralised and centralising state such as the United Kingdom.

2. A look into the process: devolution, twelve years on.

The initiation of the devolution process has critically shed light on the complex political geography of a changing UK state. When elected in 1997, the (by then *New*) Labour party aim was that of modernising a country bearing the marks of eighteen years of a Conservative government that simply refused to deal with any idea of territorial difference/distinctiveness within the UK. In 1979 both Scotland and Wales had firmly turned down in a referendum the half-hearted and largely inconsistent proposal for devolution put forward by the minority Labour government led by James Callaghan. To some commentators and political circles, the referendary rejection was tantamount to a lack of interest and will for self-government in Scotland and Wales, and was thus a reason enough to dismiss the whole idea of devolution. Nevertheless, the long period of centralist decision-making and total denial of the Celtic fringes’ distinctiveness experienced under Mrs Thatcher’s government had the side effect of triggering and fuelling a more conscious sense of territorial and political identity in the ‘British peripheries’, and especially in Scotland² (see McCrone, 2001). This was due to a combination of critical factors, among which stood a sense of democratic deficit increasingly perceived in Scotland and Wales throughout the years. As a matter of fact, the period between 1979 and 1997 was characterised by the long lasting presence of a «geographically one-sided government» (Bogdanor, 1999: 194), elected and sustained by a mainly English³ electorate

² Because the peculiarities, the unique traits and the tortuous history of the ‘Irish Question’ would require an in-depth coverage to be justly portrayed, the case of Northern Ireland’s devolution will not be dealt with in this paper.

³ Although ‘internally fractured’, as we will shortly see.

and increasingly unreceptive to the voices of Scotland and Wales. While ('middle') England clearly swung to the Right throughout the 80s, Scotland and Wales never followed such a trend and remained firmly loyal to the Labour Party. These diverging political attitudes generated a deep democratic fracture running through the country, marking with political tints the borders between the nations composing the UK. If in 1979 the proposals for devolution were brought into Parliament by a vacillating Labour government (mainly as a way to controvert a 'nationalist wave' started in the 1960s, and by the need of being supported by the Liberal Democrats in order to survive the lack of majority in Parliament) during the years of opposition attitudes and ideas considerably changed within the Party. Despite the harsh referendary rejection, devolution did not disappear from the political agenda. Rather, within twenty years it had deeply ingrained itself within the political discourse both at the bottom and at the top of the political spectrum. In Scotland and Wales, devolution became increasingly perceived as the best answer to stem any possible further tide of hyper-centralism (and Thatcherism). At the same time, at the centre, the Labour Party increasingly committed itself to it. Opening a dialogue with the Constitutional Conventions and other grassroots organisations⁴ gathering the voices of Scottish and Welsh civil societies, Labour managed to make a consistent case for devolution, and to bring such a policy up to the top of the party's political agenda.

At the time of 1997 general election, the UK had thus become a profoundly divided country. Rather than supply a recipe for strengthening the union, eighteen years of strident centralism had instead deepened the cleavages running through Britain, leading to a widespread sense that Westminster politics wasn't anymore able to represent the voices of the whole country. Devolution provided a suitable answer to such a problematic issue, because it allowed for a political recognition of territorial differences without compromising (at least in principle) the framework of a *United Kingdom*.

New Labour's plan for devolution sought to follow this tenet by developing an asymmetrical model of powers dispersal. Following referendary approval, what was brought to Parliament wasn't a single devolution Bill, legislating on matter for the whole country. Instead separate Bills were passed at Westminster for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the city of London, in an attempt to set up *ad hoc* institutions enshrining each territory's distinctive character.

⁴ In this sense, the Scottish Constitutional Convention was certainly the most prolific organisation. Bringing together the Labour and Liberal with other minority parties and a wide range of other representatives (i.e. trades unions, women's movement, local councils, the churches, etc.) it created a proactive forum for discussion that gave shape to key policy documents, setting the stage for 1997 devolution reforms.

Scotland has been granted legislative devolution, the strongest form within the UK, while Wales enjoys executive/administrative devolution, retaining powers of secondary legislation and having a National Assembly, rather than a Parliament as for Scotland. Ten years of devolution have had the effect of instilling a new way of policy-making and thinking in the two nations. Both had developed stronger political voices and a political (sub) system of their own, able to deal with national interests within their own elected bodies, but also to build a stronger voice for their nations at Westminster. In this sense, devolution has certainly helped to enhance the 'national self-confidence' of these two territories within the UK political arena. In this respect, the issue of nationalism can be regarded as one of the most complex variable in the devolution settlement. As a matter of fact, Scotland is currently led by the Scottish National Party, which managed to take over Labour's position as leading party by a very thin majority of 47 to 46 seats won (but with a net gain of + 24 seats)⁵. Nevertheless, despite being the main claim of the SNP, independence doesn't seem to be around the corner. In fact, many factors seemed to have influenced the 2003 Scottish election, and the general growing shade of unpopularity chasing the Labour Party (especially following Blair's decisions on war) played a key role in lowering the party profile among the Scottish electorate. Leaving aside the complicated details of 2007 electoral results, what is important to underline here is how the Nationalists' victory was not to be ascribed to a genuine will for independence, threatening the unity of the UK, instilled by devolution. In Scotland (and in Wales too) devolution has had the effect of creating new, evolving political forums alternative to Westminster. These certainly transpose to the political scene the complexities and controversies of the new-borne political systems of Scotland and Wales, with their internal struggles, uncertainties and unexpected outcomes, as they develop and settle through time. Devolution, we shall remember, is not a mere policy, but a process. The political events taking place in Scotland and Wales are thus unpredictable to some extent, as they unfold according to the new standards of the new institutions of 'new'⁶ nations. Devolution is a 'policy in becoming' that has profoundly changed the tenets of UK territorial government, both at the centre and at the bottom. It is still settling and tweaking, as a sort of 'quiet (political) earthquake' that hasn't undermined the union, but is nevertheless profoundly reshaping the political geography of the UK. In this sense, devolution is still an 'unfinished business' (Jeffrey, 2007): the stability of the UK has not yet been directly challenged, but is

⁵ For a full account on Scottish Elections, see www.scottish.parliament.uk/MSP/elections

⁶ This is not because they are new-borne nations, but rather because it is only through devolution that their *status as nations* has received political acknowledgment.

not even guaranteed, especially under the present conditions of a piecemeal approach to devolution.

3. Asymmetrical devolution: the two sides of a coin.

The devolution plan has been conceived as «a project of the parts, not of the whole» (Jeffery, 2007: 93) and is strictly asymmetrical in nature. On the one hand, this has allowed for political recognition of the territorial differentiations within the UK in an *ad hoc* manner, dealing with them case by case. Such an approach has certainly had the positive effect of instilling a sense of widespread consent towards both the new devolved institutions and devolution as a means for raising the political voices of the UK peripheries (Curtice, 2006). As argued so far, asymmetry has in this sense brought in a more democratic, territorially based political *modus operandi*. On the other hand, though, there is a flipside to asymmetry, in what it also puts under the spotlight the discrepancies underlying the lack of a UK-wide and concerted approach to devolution. For the biggest paradox of UK devolution is England's exclusion within it. Despite being the largest nation⁷ of the union, England is the gaping-hole in the devolution settlement (Morgan, 2002) and many argue how finding a way to accommodate England within a post-devolution UK and thus answering the 'English Question' is key to the success and the future of the *whole* devolution project (Bogdanor, 1999; Bryant, 2006; Hazell, 2006; Jeffery, 2007; Morgan, 2002).

In short, while three of the four constituent nations of the UK have been granted measures of self-government, the largest and by some way 'dominant' one, England, is the only part of the country still under the sole jurisdiction of Westminster, with no other democratic structure between the central and the local levels of government, lacking directly elected institutions of her own. Such an acknowledgment opens up for questions of democratic and political representation for England, epitomised by the twofold need to rebalance its place within the Union and to find a 'devolution formula' for its own (Hazell, 2006). These are the very mainstays of the 'English Question', and only a closer look at England can help us in providing clues to its conundrums.

⁷ In figures, England has around 84% of the UK's population and accounts for around 85% of the country's GDP.

4. What's wrong with England?

The problematic character of devolution in/for England is underpinned by questions related both to its (debatable) status as 'nation' and to the existing (composite) structure of its regional government.

The first point conveys issues of identity and its relationship to territory and politics. As mentioned, the cases of Scotland and Wales illustrate how devolution, in order to work, necessitates the presence of a 'bottom-up' demand for it, strictly linked to the 'sense of belonging' of a people to a territory (a nation in these cases) with its own distinctive traits, longing for political recognition. To this respect, England represents a case apart. To put it briefly, nowadays, it would be very contentious to argue for the existence of *one*, strong and unifying English identity. This 'loss of meaning' is related to the close relationship between 'Englishness' and 'Britishness': mostly as a consequence of the Empire's dissolution, the weakening of the concept of Britishness has somehow shattered the very foundations of Englishness (Taylor, 1991), bringing to the surface the more and complex and internally fractured character of contemporary England (Morgan, 2002). Especially throughout the 1980s, and in the wake of the hyper-centralist approach to territorial government experience during the Thatcher years, Englishness has somehow increasingly been perceived as an 'exclusive identity' (of the centre), marginalising those outside London and its surroundings – the place where power and institution had long been concentrated before devolution. This has had an impact in reinforcing the roots and the narrative sustaining what is probably the main cleavage running through England: the 'North-South divide'⁸ (Morgan, 2002). This fracture rests on economic, political and cultural roots and provides a watershed from which two distinct, opposing and geographically split sets of English identities spring. All these clues seem to point on how the 'fractured' nature of Englishness reflects upon the complexities of English devolution. If territorial and political identity are key to devolution, in the case of England the 'national' dimension wouldn't fit the purpose, and the most likely scale on which such a relationship could find a workable expression would appear to be the regional one (Hazell, 2006; Tomaney, 1999). English regions may be to some respect perceived as 'artificial entities'⁹, yet they can be considered the best scale for English devolution, and especially since the 1990s the issue of a regional layer of government has been widely

⁸ In short, this rests on a notion of a deprived and disadvantaged North, especially in contrast with the wealthier regions of the South, revolving around the strong economic spindle of London, shedding light on the spatially differentiated nature and structure of England.

⁹ For example, their borders' definition is still mainly reflecting the outcome of a purely administrative measure (the creation of Standard Statistical Regions).

discussed both in academia and within policy circles (Jones and MacLeod 1999, 2001 and 2004; Tomaney and Mitchell, 1999; Hazell, 2006). Nevertheless, English regionalism is (to rephrase a quote) “still not barking” (Harvie, 1991)¹⁰ and is characterised by a very uneven presence of different degrees of regional identity and ‘regional sentiments’ throughout the English territory¹¹.

To complicate the picture, at present English regional government amounts to a series of non-elected institutions, such as Government Offices for the Regions (GOs)¹², Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and Regional Chambers¹³ (or Assemblies, as they have emphatically renamed themselves). None of these provide a parallel to the new institutions implemented in Scotland and Wales following devolution, as they are not directly accountable to a regional electorate and, in fact, are one way or another (directly, or in terms of budgets or power extent) largely dependant on the central government (Bryant, 2006; Tomaney, 2004). RDAs and Regional Chambers were thought to be the first stone laid on the path towards English regional devolution. But in practice, together with GOs, they at best provide a mild form of administrative devolution, with no political or democratic endorsements. According to the White Paper “Your Region Your Choice”, published by the government in 2002, the second step in this direction would have been that of establishing directly elected assemblies in those regions where a support for such institutions existed. English devolution, hence, was to unfold not at the same time for all of the regions, but rather in a gradual way, region by region, according to popular demand. This latter had to be tested via referendary approval.

The procedure for the setting up of regional assemblies was further complicated by an additional compulsory clause: the regional electorate had also to vote in favour of a unitary structure of local authorities at local level¹⁴. And still, the issue was far from being settled. The complexity of the route towards democratic governance for the English regions did in fact mirror a widespread feeling of division and uncertainties that began to surface within the Labour Party at this stage. The only main political figure openly endorsing the cause and

¹⁰ London, of course, is the only exception to the rule within England.

¹¹ Also in this case, the North-South Divide provides a sound line of division, as – with the exception of Cornwall within the South-West region – the northern regions appear to detain a stronger and more developed sense of identity.

¹² GOs were instituted in 1994 by the Major government to coordinate the regional implementation of central government policies (focussing on nine areas, each sponsored by a ministry). Through time they have grown in size and importance, but still are led by the centre, and do not represent a form of consistent political devolution to the regions.

¹³ RDAs were established in April 1999, to act as strategic drivers for regional economic development. Their leadership is appointed by the government and they are mainly business-led and oriented. They are wholly dependant on central government for their budgets and, in practice, they are very slimline bodies. Following government’s recommendation, each RDA was to be made accountable to an unelected (and voluntary) Regional Chamber/Assembly comprising local authority councillors and representatives from business, trade unions and voluntary sector organisations.

¹⁴ This in many cases would have meant the abolition of some overlapping structures of local government – a concept quite alien to the average elector.

fighting for it was the Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott. Following the results of a soundings test commissioned by his department, a decision was made to hold referendums only in the three northern regions (North-East, North-West and Yorkshire and Humberside). These were estimated to be the places with a stronger demand for self-government¹⁵, and therefore taken as the ideal setting for a sound and easy ‘yes’ victory. According to the ODPM plan, such an outcome would have set a spectacular precedent for English political devolution and would have possibly generated ‘spill-over effect’, spreading enthusiasm and support towards democratic assemblies also in the other, more reluctant regions. But this was not to be, and an overview on the case of the Northern regions can help us to shed light on the uneven and still incomplete path of English devolution.

4. What happened up North? The North-East experience and some general reflections

The North of England represents a peculiar territorial entity, with distinctive characters of its own and has been referred to as ‘England’s foreign country within’ (Taylor, 1993). Enshrined and championed within the North-South divide discourse as a ‘single entity’, this ‘North’ is actually *one* and *many*. Without entering the details of such a complex theme¹⁶, may here suffice to note how the ODPM decision on the regional assemblies referendums somehow reflected these acknowledgments, and ‘the North’ was chosen to represent the bulwark of English devolution. Its three component regions emerged as the most likely candidates for a successful referendum in the surveys commissioned by the ODPM, but the final choice did also draw upon the assumption that the Northern regions retained a higher degree of regional identity, in the form of a strong attachment and pride of the people to their homelands mixed with specific territorial cultures and a political inclination to the left¹⁷. This was particular true in the case of the North-East, a very distinctive region in terms of strong basis and patterns of identity: historical (with its background as a land beyond the direct control of London), economic (as a landmark for heavy industry during the industrial revolution, and recently as the poorest region of England), but also cultural (with its working class roots, its traditional attachment to the Labour movement and, in religious terms, to Methodism; with a dialect and an accent so strong and distinct to sound as a language of its own to a foreign ear; with a capital city, Newcastle, and a name attached to its population, the

¹⁵ Even though is not clear on which basis this assumption rested, as the sounding test was later to be judged by external commentators as ‘risible’ in terms of methodology and samples.

¹⁶ For more in-depth accounts see, for example: Jewell, 1994; Russell, 2004; Shields, 1992; Taylor, 1993.

¹⁷ This is true in general terms, whether the ‘industrial North’ – which is where the majority of population live – is certainly a Labour stronghold, while the ‘rural North’ shows some Conservative traits.

Geordies), and geographical (because of its remoteness from London and its vicinity to Scotland; but also because the NE is one of the few English regions with boundaries making sense to its inhabitants). Moreover, in political terms, a sense of awareness towards the benefits of self-government seemed to have developed throughout the region since and the beginning of the devolution process. Looking at their Scottish neighbours with admiration for their achievements and taking inspiration from them, a NE Constitutional Convention (NECC) was set up in 1999 – providing an exemplar soon emulated by the other two northern regions. Such a ‘domino effect’ under the lead of the NE was hoped to be reproduced in the regional assemblies’ referendums in the NW and Y&H.

Drawing on all of these factors, the ODPM decided for the first referendum to be held in the NE on the 4th of November 2004. Despite the initial strong optimism, expressed by the ODPM team but also by a burgeoning in academic literature of texts supporting the cause (see, for example: McLeod and Jones, 2001; Tomaney 1999; Tomaney and Mitchell, 1999), a few weeks before the set date confusion and doubts began to surface. First came the postponement of the dates for NW and Y&H referendum. Officially due to an issue over a failing in post ballots votes, rumours about an actual lack of popular consent (and, indeed, of interest) in the regions began to spread. Moreover, even though it started to gather only three months before the referendum, the tones and slogans of the NE ‘No’ Campaign seemed to catch on quickly among the electorate.

What was thought to be an easy battle for a NE regional assembly turned out in a harsh defeat, as on the 4th of November the regional electorate firmly rejected it by 77.9% to 22.1%, with a turnout of 47.7%. Such a spectacular fiasco brutally halted the ODPM project for regional devolution. The other two referendums were rapidly cancelled, and soon silence fell on the regional assemblies issue among all of the former enthusiasts. But what had been the causes for a fiasco of such proportions? Trying to answer this question could provide a good angle from which explore the problems related to English regional devolution and, possibly, could serve as a basis for sketching hypotheses on its future(s).

The first consideration on the matter is that the presence of a rooted regional identity might not necessarily translate into a strong demand for directly elected assemblies – especially whether these are perceived by the public as ‘alien’ entities with little direct powers to offer. This acknowledgment rests on two bases, closely linked to the questions underpinning English regional devolution posed in the previous section. The first is related to issues of identity, while the second is more of a political nature. As the case of the NE illustrates, even in a region with clearly distinctive traits regional identity cannot be taken for granted, and has

not to be implicitly understood as having direct political translation. The NE electorate might feel itself as 'regionally distinct', but factors such as a general lack of information on the matter outside the 'elite circles' (NECC, academia, etc.), the perception that the assembly would have had little impact, and a growing sense of distrust and scepticism towards the political class, can be considered significant elements in creating a gap between identity feeling (coming from the bottom) and political expectations (from the centre). This cleavage was amplified by the complicated referendary process referred to earlier, and critically by a lack of a strong political regional leadership to direct and concert the political voice of the region and, indeed, the whole idea of an assembly for the NE. At the centre, apart from John Prescott, no other Minister directly supported the cause or showed any willingness to devolve real powers to the assemblies. Indeed, the package proposed by the government offered very limited functions to the regions. Moreover, such a lukewarm commitment of the central government was to be read by the public as disinterest towards both the assemblies and the northern regions. All of these factors seemed to have conjured up opposition to the cause of regional devolution, providing a fatal formula against it.

Above all, the main fallacy appears to lie in the ODPM undervaluation of the need for a *real* – rather than just roughly estimated – demand for regional assemblies coming from the bottom in the northern regions. The case of Scotland's path towards devolution, with the 1979 fiasco and the 1997 triumph, should have been taken as a valuable precedent to understand the key relevance of a dialogue on self-government between 'the top' and 'the bottom' in order to achieve a working devolution project. But probably the English regions (and their regionalism) are still conceived by the centre as merely administrative units, easy to be 'manoeuvred' from Westminster and Whitehall and not too much (or, better, *not enough*) problematic. Certainly, as yet, they do not have achieved a 'political status' even minimally comparable to that of Scotland and Wales.

The NE case seem thus to illustrate how the plan for regional devolution in the northern regions did not succeed not because of the absence of 'self-confidence' from the bottom. Rather, the main flaw was a lack of confidence towards a project *for the North* that was for the most part conceived and planned in London, from the centre, by a tepidly committed government, largely as a result of the strains of a single Ministry and, critically, without opening any real process of concertation or consultation with the regions.

Political devolution (whether to the nations or to the regions) cannot work, it seems, in the absence of such prerequisites, and above all cannot be imposed from above within a

framework that links it to referendary approval. Consent from the bottom has to be built, not taken for granted – a view which central government seems unable to acknowledge.

Concluding notes

Devolution is a process that has profoundly challenged and changed the basis of the UK state, introducing a new attitude to territorial government able to accommodate ‘differences’ within the frame of a *United Kingdom*.

However to a large extent beneficial, the government’s piecemeal and asymmetric approach to devolution has also generated a series of conundrums epitomised by the ‘English Question’. Twelve years after the initiation of the process, England’s weigh in the union is still unbalanced, its position unclear, and regional devolution has so far been abortive. As yet, English regions stand hushed between the central and local layer of government as administrative (and to some extent ‘redundant’) entities providing at best a functional form of regionalism, without a political voice of their own, and lacking any kind of direct representation. The prospect of directly elected regional governments is far from being delivered, and is mainly overshadowed by an attitude for ‘regionalised centralism’ predominating among the government’s ranks.

The case of the NE (largely mirrored in the whole North of England) provides clues on how devolution cannot be imposed from above following a hesitant plan, especially to a generally reticent regional electorate, simply capitalising on the supposed direct translation of regional identities into political will for self-government. The NE referendum failure has put a halt to the project of elected regional assemblies, at least for the time being, and within the policy agenda of the present government. As Hazell (2006) suggests, the only plausible solution to the English Question may be the regional assemblies’ option. The dilemma, though, is that, no matter how desirable, this latter are *not yet genuinely desired*. Devolution to the English regions, it seems, will unfold only when a plan for it will stem jointly from the will of both the central government and the regions.

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