

Understanding and Shaping Regions - territorial politics, regionalism and federalism

Authors: David M. Smith, Emeritus Professor of Sociology,
Middlesex University, London.

Enid Wistrich, Visiting Professor of Political Science,
Middlesex University, London.

Introduction

In this paper we will discuss the developing ideas about regional government and governance in England in the context of federal movements in the EU and in the UK as a whole. Our argument is that England, unlike the other 'nations' of the UK, has so far lost out on the development of democratic regional government with devolved powers and has instead gradually acquired a top-down system of regional governance. Only now are renewed attempts being made to democratise the process and these are likely to be indirect, via modifications to the system of national and local government rather than through a democratically elected devolved system of regional government.

The EU, nation states and regions

The EU and Nation States

The independent nation state emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the unit of sovereign government in Europe. It rests on the assumption that there is an accepted overall identity within each state, although it allows for some diversity of identities, often seen in different languages, dialects and culture, and which usually derive from the past history of its varied parts. The current orthodoxy argues that globalisation of the economy, the media and culture will lead to a gradual decline in importance of the nation state (O'Brien, 1992; Ohmae, 1993; Brenner, 1999) but, if so, this may also impact upon regional cultures and identities. At the world level, the EU has evolved since the Treaty of Rome into a world regional economic and political organisation with a quasi-federal form (Jenkins and Sofos, 1996) which has modified the powers of its member nation states. Despite this, however, they continue to predominate within the EU political structure.

Nation States and their regions

Within each European nation state there are regions and localities which form its economic and social structure. Some derive from areas which were once autonomous political units, others from areas originating from former empires which have since been brought into the nation state and which retain distinctive cultural features, while yet others may simply relate to geographic areas or to regions of economic development. The differences between these regions or areas may be substantial where they relate to language, religion and culture, but others can be culturally homogenous with the wider society yet differ in economic patterns of activity and development.

The accommodation of such differences, especially where there is strong local pressure, is often secured through adaptations to the system of government producing different degrees of devolved powers to the regions. In Belgium, for example, the strong Flemish identity of the majority of the population in Flanders is reflected in a strongly federal form of government (Ceuppens and Foblets, 2007) leaving central government with very limited powers. In Wales in the UK, where the second largest political party is the Welsh nationalist party (Plaid Cymru), there is now an elected Assembly with limited devolved powers and this had led to a Welsh language revival with compulsory teaching of Welsh in all schools (Loughlin, 2007). On the other hand, in Poland which has a strongly centralist system of government, local pressure groups in Silesia have tended to concentrate their campaigns on greater support for their Silesian cultural and linguistic distinctiveness rather than outright political autonomy (Wodz, 2007).

In some countries which had previously been highly centralised, regional government has become an established and important level of the overall government structure. France has had a model of centralist hierarchical government since the Napoleonic age, but has subsequently introduced a regional structure in which the regions have become coalitions of the established *departements*. First set up in 1956 to undertake government planning functions, new legislation introduced in 1982 empowered 22 elected regional councils with functions which included economic development, territorial planning and some aspects of transport, health and education. These councils now have Regional Prefects and play a key role in planning, including the drawing up of contracts with central government. In 2003, a constitutional law described France as a republic with decentralised organisation and adopted the (EU) principle of subsidiarity to define the relationship between the national state and other levels of government (Loughlin, 2008).

Federalism and Regions

The developments in France which have moved against the practice of highly centralised government can be traced to the ideas of past French theorists. Proudhon in the nineteenth century provided the origin of theories of 'integral'

federalism when he criticised the 'organised' nationality of uniformity and loyalty to a central state, and contrasted it with 'spontaneous' ties between local communities and their territory and culture (Levi, 2008). His ideas were followed in the 1930s by federalist thinkers in France like Robert Aron, Alexandre Marc and Denis de Rougement who proposed a federalist society based on the principles of autonomy, co-operation, participation and subsidiarity (Levi, 2008). A "Europe of the Regions" was also proposed with substantial decentralisation of power to the regions including functions in the welfare services. In Italy also ideas of integral federalism were pursued. Olivetti wanted to see the creation of communities of 75,000 -150,000 people at the centre of citizen participation in political life.

However, the consequences of the world war of 1939 - 45 and the need to rebuild European economies and defensive capacities supported the continuation of the power of the nation state. The emphasis after 1945 was on further economic reconstruction and development, building national welfare systems, and moves towards the creation of a European federation of nation states which would prevent future wars between European countries.

The case of the United Kingdom.

Nations within a Nation State

The United Kingdom is constituted as a state comprising four 'nations' associated with the four geographical regions of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland where each has a recognisable history and identity. Distinctive characteristics have evolved during their historical development, such as the Celtic languages (Welsh, Gaelic in the highlands of Scotland, and Irish), religion (both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism in N. Ireland and Scotland and nonconformist Protestantism in Wales), as well as such distinctive cultural features as the Welsh Eisteddfod and the Scottish kilt and bagpipes, even if some of these have been claimed to be more recently 'manufactured' traditions (Trevor-Roper, 1983; Morgan, 1983). Northern Ireland is somewhat more complicated (McCall 2002) with historically very deep religious and political divides but core values are still discernable at least within each part of the population.

Federalism in the United Kingdom

The dominant nation within the UK is England which has 84% of the UK population of sixty-one millions and contributes 85% of the total gross domestic product. In the UK Parliament of 646 MPs, 529 represent English constituencies, 59 Scottish, 40 Welsh, with 18 from Northern Ireland. The question of a degree of self government for these distinctive 'regions' in Britain emerged in the late nineteenth century as part of a wider discussion of the relationship of Britain to its

colonial Empire and ways in which the colonies could be effectively governed. Among the forms of government discussed was an imperial federation together with federal forms of government in the colonies, and included home rule for Ireland. The Imperial Federation League was established in 1884 to promote “the permanent unity of the Empire by some form of federation” but its proposed scheme for a Council of Empire comprised of the self governing colonies was rejected in 1893 by Gladstone, the then British Prime Minister. An Imperial Parliament and a federal government was again proposed in 1910 by Lionel Curtis of the ‘Round Table’ Unit, but by the end of the first world war this proposal was superseded by the movement from Empire to Commonwealth.

Federalism within Britain had also been proposed by Joseph Chamberlain in the 1880s as a possible solution to the movement in Ireland for political independence, and was later promoted by both Winston Churchill and Lloyd George in 1912 in the form of a scheme for national parliaments in Ireland, Wales and Scotland and regional assemblies in England, all within an Imperial Parliament (Burgess 2007). However the continuing struggle for Irish independence which was achieved in 1920 with the Government of Ireland Act ended the movement for a federal structure in the UK.

Federalism within Britain has never reappeared as a proposal for an overall government structure but its influence has remained and has most recently been seen in the development of measures of self government within the UK in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Act setting up a Scottish Parliament was passed in 1998 and the first Parliament was elected a year later. It possesses legislative powers in relation to education, health, local government and the environment, and may vary basic rates of UK income tax and business rates. Wales has had a Welsh Secretary of State and Welsh Office since 1964 and there is a strong Welsh Nationalist Party (Plaid Cymru). A referendum in 1979 rejected devolution of powers to a Welsh Authority, and another one twenty years later resulted in a very narrow victory (by 50.3%) for a Welsh National Assembly which was duly elected in 1999. The powers of the Assembly are fewer than those of the Scottish Parliament as it may not enact primary legislation or raise taxes, but it can pass secondary legislation and statutory instruments. One important issue in Wales is the Welsh language and the Welsh Executive has powers to make its teaching compulsory in Welsh schools. After a period of intense armed struggle in Northern Ireland with Sinn Fein, which wanted union with the Republic, in 1998 Northern Ireland settled for its own Regional Assembly and an Executive Committee with a First Minister capable of agreeing executive and legislative policy proposals (Meehan, 2002).

However, while three distinctive constituent regions (‘nations’) of the UK now exercise measures of self government, the dominant ‘nation’, England, has retained the traditional political structure, and the ‘English Question’ is unresolved (Hazell, 2006, Gamble, 2006, Jeffery 2007, Hazell, 2008). How the question might be resolved is unclear. At the English ‘national’ level various

solutions have been proposed: an English parliament; an English committee for English business within the Westminster Parliament; the House of Lords replaced by a second chamber representing devolved authorities? Whether any of these possible constitutional solutions would be acceptable to the English people is another question. The traditional view has been that English public opinion has remained substantially committed to the unitary state (Harvie, 1991) with a tendency for many English not to clearly distinguish between English and British identity (McCrone, 2002, Bechhofer and McCrone, 2008), although others (Wilson and Stapleton, 2006) argue that devolution in the other constituent 'nations' may intensify the distinction between national/territorial and state structures and this might lead to a "consequent de-coupling of cultural and civic identities." In any case, England is far too big to constitute a region in the same sense as Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. So, the anomaly remains that while the other regions ('nations') of the UK have coherent regional political structures, England, which is by far the largest in terms of geography, population and size of the economy, has no democratic structure between the level of the British Parliament and that of local government. If English regional government is to in any way mirror that of the other 'nations' then regional bodies need to be accountable to the people in their areas (Henig, 2006; Roberts and Baker, 2006).

Recent Developments in regional and local government in England.

England remains under the authority of powers granted directly to the Westminster Parliament for the exercise of its functions. Its central government is based in London and elected local authorities are empowered by national laws. Since the 1990s there has been substantial and continuing consideration of developments in regional government. The most substantial debate has been about the possibility of regional governments within England which could parallel, at least in some respects, the changes implemented for Wales and Scotland.

The next step was intended to be a more democratic structure for English regional government outside London through a system of elected Regional Assemblies. A White Paper of 2002 entitled "Your region your choice: revitalising the English Regions" pointed out that the English regions were "virtually the only regions within the EU which do not have some form of democratic governance" (para 12) and put forward proposals for elected assemblies for the English Regions, with a unitary structure of local authorities at local level. It was decided to put these proposals to a referendum vote in 2004 in one area, and the North East Region was chosen because it was believed that there was evidence of strong regional pride there. The result, however, was a resounding defeat – on a substantial turnout of 48%, 78% voted against and only 22% for the proposal. Unsurprisingly, the government decided not to go ahead with any further referendums. Subsequent reflection and analysis has suggested that the negative vote was influenced more by a distrust of 'more politicians', and fears about the limited functions and powers proposed for the Assemblies as well as

their cost (Harding et al. 2006) rather than by an active rejection of more democratic regional government.

The failure of this first attempt to establish a democratic form of regional government in England has led to considerable rethinking and a plethora of government studies on British and English governance. The constitutional framework, the forms of government and the participation of citizens were all aspects of these enquiries and resulting changes since 2004. The reforms were concerned with the role of central government and of government Ministers in the regions and their responsibility to Parliament, regional structures, powers and organisation, and the development of 'city regions' composed of local authorities working together.

First, the role of central government was established with the setting up of Regional Development Agencies for the English regions with Boards of Directors drawn from both local government and the private sector. Instead of directly elected Assemblies, new non-elected Regional Assemblies were created whose membership was made up of 70% local councillors & 30% other stakeholders within the region, and whose responsibilities were restricted to the consultation with and scrutiny of the Regional Development Agencies where lay the main power. The only exception to this was London where both a Mayor and an elected Assembly exist. The non-elected Regional Assemblies are themselves to be abolished by 2010, to be replaced by Regional Leaders Forums. Then in 2007 Regional Ministers were appointed by the government, one for each region, with the purpose of providing 'strategic direction' for their regions, acting as a voice for citizens' views, answering questions on the work of regional bodies like the Regional Development Agencies and coordinating the work of local authorities in each area. In 2008, a Council of Regional Ministers was set up to discuss regional and local economies. It was followed very shortly afterwards by the establishment of eight Regional Select Committees of Parliament, one for each of the regions to examine their work, as well as a Regional Grand Committee to hold Regional Ministers to account.

The role and participation of local authorities in this work was furthered in 2007 by the promotion of the formation of 'city regions' (not unlike the French model) and by the newly created role of Multi-Area Agreements. The latter are voluntary partnerships between local authorities which have been granted certain limited powers for the purpose of co-ordinating economic development. By 2009, ten MAAs have been agreed, each with a varying composition and degrees of cooperation within their areas. One example of an MAA is that of the Greater Manchester area which involves 10 local authorities covering a population of 2.6 million people. Other MAAs include fewer local authorities and a smaller number of people. The latest development is to propose renaming the MAAs "Economic Prosperity Boards." These will work closely with Regional Development Agencies. A proposed new law, to be presented in 2009, will devolve decision making to regions and to local areas. Other organisations which have come into

some MAAs as partners include Chambers of Commerce, Business Link, the Environment Agency, the Housing Corporation, and the Highways Agency. Within the MAAs, a Leaders' Group may be important in decision making, or a Joint Committee. Cooperation based on consensus is the key to their operation and the resulting policy has to be within the context of the Regional Economic Strategies of the Regional Development Agencies.

Conclusions

These latest proposals for the English regions, while they focus on the creation of a federal structure of effective and responsible regional government, have only a limited amount to say about more democratically elected government at the regional level. The appointment of Regional Ministers, the Council of Regional Ministers and the Regional Select Committees of Parliament, will give stronger central Parliamentary supervision of regional agendas with a more openly 'democratic' structure. At regional level itself, the Regional Assemblies are due to be replaced by 2010 by Regional Leaders' Forums. These bodies will still include leaders of local authorities within the region but will have much smaller membership. Similarly, the creation of Economic Prosperity Boards and the development into 'city regions' will be firmly tied to elected local authorities within each region. However, the democratic element at regional level will remain indirect, originating either from above or below.

The experience of a negative popular vote in 2004 against an elected Regional Assembly in the NE region has, for the present, prevented any more substantial movement towards direct democracy at the regional level, and restricted popular participation to indirect decision making through Parliament and local authorities. The well established English method of proceeding gradually from practical experience may in time stimulate the interest and involvement of people in the regions and prompt a demand for greater democratic responsibility within an English federal framework. Whether the present Government can sell its current ideas to the English electorate is an empirical question. Also, time may be running out, since a general election is due fairly soon and the opposition Conservative party recently announced that it wanted to do away with the regional level of Government altogether.

In any case, it will not resolve the wider constitutional issues of English national representation, the West Lothian question etc. At the moment the English regions continue to be governed centrally by a UK parliament containing Scottish, Welsh and Irish MPs, while the rest of the UK experiences various degrees of regional ('national') identity and authority. However, it does raise the possibility of a more coherent and somewhat more democratic regional structure for the largest population and geographical area within the UK which can match those of the other constituent 'nations'.

Bibliographic References

Bechhofer and McCrone (2008) *Talking the Talk: national identity in England and Scotland*, British Social Attitudes: the 24th report, National centre for Social Research, Sage.

Brenner, N. (1999) "Globalisation as re-territorialisation: the rescaling of urban governance in the EU" *Urban Studies* Vol. 36

Burgess, M. (2007) "The British Tradition of Federalism: nature, meaning and significance" in S.Henig (ed) *Federalism and the British*, London, Federal Trust.

Ceuppens, B and Foblets, M-C (2007) "The Flemish Case : a Monolingual region in a Multilingual Federal State. " in D. M. Smith and E. B. Wistrich (eds) *Regional Identity and Diversity in Europe*, London, Federal Trust.

Crick, B. (1991) (ed) *National Identities, the Constitution of the UK Conference, Papers*, Blackwell, Oxford.

Gamble, A. (2006) "The constitutional revolution in the U.K." *Publius*, Vol. 36 No. 1.

Hardill, I., Bennenworth, P., Baker, M. and Budd, L. (eds) (2006) *The Rise of the English Regions*, Oxon, Routledge.

Harding, A., Coombes, M., Jeffery, C. and Tomaney, J. (2006) *English Regional Governance in 2004*, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

Harvie, C. (1991) English Regionalism: the dog that never barked', in B. Crick (ed) (1991) *National Identities, the Constitution of the UK*.

Hazell, R. (ed) (2006) *The English Question*, Manchester, Manchester University Press. See also Hazel, R. (2006) *The English Question*, London, The Constitution Unit, UCL.

Hazell, R. (2008) "The English Question", *Public Administration*, Vol. 86 No.1, March.

Henig, S. (2006) (ed) *Federalism and the British*, London, Federal Trust.

Henig, S. (2006) *Modernising British Government: constitutional challenges and federal solutions*, Federal Trust, London.

Henig, S. (2002) (ed) *Modernising Britain- central, devolved, federal?* London, Federal Trust

- Hobsbawm, E. and Ranger, T. (eds) *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press.
- Jeffery, C (2007) "The unfinished business of devolution", *Public Policy and Administration*, Vol. 22: No.1.
- Jenkins, B and Sofos, S. (eds) (1996) *Nations and Identity in Contemporary Europe*, London, Routledge.
- Levi, L (2008) *Federalist Thinking*, University Press of America.
- Loughlin, J. (2007) "The Welsh Case: cultural diversity of a nation with devolved powers in a unitary state", in D.M. Smith and E. B. Wistrich (eds) *Regional Identity and Diversity in Europe*, London, Federal Trust.
- Loughlin, J. (2008) "The slow emergence of the French regions", *Policy and Politics* Vol. 36: No. 4.
- Meehan E. (2002) "Making a difference or more of the same? Devolution in N. Ireland" in Henig, S. (ed) *Modernising Britain- central, devolved, federal?* London, Federal Trust.
- Morgan, P. (1983) "From a Death to a View: the hunt for the Welsh past in the Romantic period," in Hobsbawm, E. and Ranger, T. (eds) *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press.
- McCall, C. (2002) "The protean British Identity in Britain and N.Ireland" *Soundings : a journal of politics and culture* Vol.18 pp 154-68.
- McCron, D. (2002) "Who do you say you are? Making sense of national identities in modern Britain", *Ethnicities*, 2 (3), 2002, pages 301-20.
- O'Brien, R. (1992) *Global Financial Integration: the end of geography*, London, Pinter.
- Ohmae, K. (1993) *The end of the nation state*, London, Free Press.
- Roberts, P. and Baker, M. (2006) "Regions and Regional Identity" in Hardill, I., Benneworth, P., Baker, M. and Budd, L. (eds) (2006) *The Rise of the English Regions*, Oxon, Routledge.
- Smith, D. M. and Wistrich, E. B. (eds) *Regional Identity and Diversity in Europe*, London, Federal Trust.

Trevor Roper, H. (1983) "The Invention of Tradition: the Highland tradition in Scotland," in Hobsbawm, E. and Ranger, T. (eds) *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press.

Wilson, J. and Stapleton, K. (2006) *Devolution and Identity*, Ashgate publishers, Aldershot

Wodz, K. (2007) "The Silesian Case: Silesian Identity in a region of the Polish state" in D. M. Smith and E. B. Wistrich (eds) *Regional Identity and Diversity in Europe*, London, Federal Trust.

Authors:

David M. Smith,
Emeritus Professor of Sociology,
Visiting Professor, Centre for Social Policy Research,
Middlesex University, London.
davidsmithhbo@hotmail.com

Enid Wistrich,
Visiting Professor in Political Science
Centre for Social Policy Research,
Middlesex University, London.
enid.wistrich@blueyonder.co.uk