The English Question

Regional Perspectives on a Fractured Nation

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ABSTRACT

England remains the 'gaping hole in the devolution settlement'. Debate about how England as a whole should engage with devolution overlooks how regionally fractured England is in terms of culture, society and economic fortunes. The discourse of 'North-South divide' underscores this unevenness. But it is also used to support an often unreflected assumption – by government and regional campaigners - that devolution to the (northern) regions will bring an 'economic dividend'. Equally, assumptions about the capacity of regional devolution to overcome the 'democratic deficit' and introduce more effective need a more nuanced evaluation, not least with regard to the (paradoxical) reluctance of a devolving central government to release the levers of power. The English devolution project does though

promise to undermine the Anglocentric narrative of Britishness and open the way to a radically different notion of Britishness as a culturally diverse and politically devolved polity.

INTRODUCTION

Should we attach any significance to the fact that many UK citizens seem to be confused as to the name of their country? In one of the most controversial revisionist histories of the UK, Norman Davies argues that it is significant when people are not familiar with the basic parameters of the state in which they live, when they do not know what it is called, when they fail to distinguish between the parts and the whole, and when they have never grasped the most elementary facts of its development. Confusion reigns on every hand, claims Davies, and it is not confined to the old Anglocentric habit of using 'England' as a shorthand for the British Isles or United Kingdom as a whole. The scale of the problem only begins to emerge, he says, 'when one observes the inability of prominent authorities to present the history of our Isles in accurate and unambiguous terms' (DAVIES, 2000a). Here Davies is referring to mainstream histories of the UK which begin with the astonishing claim that 'Britain is an island'.

Described as 'a dangerous book' by one conservative reviewer *The Isles* firmly aligns itself with a revisionist school of historians – like Linda Colley, Hugh Kearney, Rees Davies and Keith Robbins – which aims to correct what it sees as the Anglocentric bias by putting Britain back into *British* history. This project has clearly been aided and abetted by the advent of democratic devolution, the process through which the Celtic nations are seeking to recalibrate their national identities within the UK, leaving many people in England a little confused and unnerved about this 'identity thing'. When a people accounts for 85% of a

country's population, and when its nationality has never been compromised by a larger neighbour, then national identity is like health, something that is taken for granted until it is threatened. Democratic devolution may have been instigated by the Celtic minority, but the implications are just as profound for England and the idea of 'Britishness'. If the renaissance of national identity in Celtic Britain is incompatible with the traditional, London-centric notion of Britishness, it is not necessarily inimical to a devolved and pluralistic British polity.

The great conundrum of asymmetric devolution of course is England, which is rightly characterized as 'the gaping hole in the devolution settlement' (HAZELL, 2000). It is clearly no coincidence that we are now witnessing a burgeoning new literature on Englishness and Britishness, much of it tinged with a sense foreboding. In one of the more popular texts a prominent Englishman notes, with evident pride, that the English have not hitherto sought to define themselves because there was no *need* to do so. But was it necessary to do so now? His answer is unequivocal: this is something 'that the English can no longer avoid' (PAXMAN, 1998). Much of this literature assumes that the 'English Question' refers to the way in which 'England' decides to engage with constitutional change, and particularly with devolution. Framing the question in *national* terms, however, may not be the best way to understand the manifold landscapes of culture and society, still less the divergent economic fortunes, which constitute the fractured character of England today. Indeed, this article suggests that a *regional* perspective may be a better way to understand, and explain, the diverse reactions to devolution within England.

To this end the article begins with a discussion of the North-South Divide, arguably the main fissure running through the country, and one of the keys to understanding the uneven political interest in devolution in England today. Far more than a purely economic phenomenon, the North-South Divide insinuates itself into practically every indicator of well-being, including the greatest inequalities of all – namely the morbidity and mortality data.

Having looked at the structures of uneven development, the next section addresses one of the most controversial questions in the whole devolution literature: is there an 'economic dividend' to devolution? Although this is tacitly assumed in much of the literature, especially the advocacy literature, the interplay between devolution and development is rarely examined as explicitly as it should be. The discussion therefore shifts the focus from the economic to the political realm by examining the dialectic between devolution and democracy. The political rationale for devolution tends to be cast in terms of redressing the 'democratic deficit' at the regional level, but this tends to ignore the potential threats to local democracy as some powers, like planning for example, are transferred from the local to the regional realm. The final section addresses the implications of English devolution for received notions of Britishness. If Britain is to have a viable and progressive future I argue that Anglocentric notions of Britishness have to be jettisoned in favour of a notion of Britishness which is synonymous with a devolved and multicultural polity. More speculatively, I also argue that the richer political diversity of the Isles makes a devolved Britain a more congenial context for the English regions which opt for devolution than a resurgent England.

THE NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE: ENGLAND, WHICH ENGLAND?

The stereotyped North-South divide – consisting of a prosperous and burgeoning south juxtaposed to a deprived and declining north – has its economic origins in the collapse of the imperial spatial division of labour in inter-war Britain. Up until then the external success of British capitalism was internally correlated with a spatial division of labour in which the booming heavy industries were largely concentrated in the north of England, Scotland and Wales, or 'outer Britain' as these areas were significantly dubbed between the wars. Inter-war

Britain was distinctive for many reasons, not least because it was the last time we witnessed large scale migration in this country, from the north and west to the south, and because of the stark contrast between over-development in Greater London and under-development in the north.

What makes the patterns and processes of inter-war Britain worth noting today is that they shaped the official mindset of politicians, planners and policy-makers for generations, particularly with respect to the diagnosis of the 'regional problem' and its post-war solution. Nothing symbolised the new thinking better than the BARLOW REPORT (1940), which had been commissioned to examine the problems associated with the prevailing distribution of the industrial population, a report which created the intellectual framework for post-war regional policy for some thirty years after the war. At the heart of this pioneering report was the argument that over- and under-development were two sides of the same coin and the solution should be sought in containing growth in Greater London and inducing it to migrate to the depressed areas of 'outer Britain'.

The Barlow diagnosis spawned the 'donor-recipient' model of post-war regional policy, in which prosperous regions like the South East and West Midlands would effectively donate surplus growth, in the form of branch-plants, to recipient regions in the north and west, a model which began to unravel when the donor regions began to suffer their own unemployment problems. These new structural constraints persuaded the Callaghan government to dilute regional policy as discreetly as possible, a move which was endorsed with alacrity by Thatcherism (MORGAN, 1986).

Ever since the high point of regional policy spending in the mid-1970s successive governments, Conservative and New Labour, have been at pains to belittle the North-South Divide. Mrs Thatcher dismissed it as a media invention, as well she might because the Tories had little to lose in the north. More recently, and more surprising perhaps, Tony Blair has also

tried to dismiss it - on the grounds that it is a simplistic notion which ignores disparities *within* regions (although there is no logical reason to dismiss inter-regional inequalities simply because intra-regional disparities also exist). Other Labour politicians, like John Prescott, Stephen Byers, and Peter Mandelson for example, are less disposed to dismiss the Divide – partly because they represent northern seats and partly because they feel that the north is becoming structurally de-coupled from the 'knowledge-based economy' in the south (MANDELSON, 2001).

One of the reasons why the North-South Divide is often dismissed today is because regional unemployment rates, the traditional index of the 'regional problem' since the inter-war period, have seemingly converged in recent years. But, as a vast corpus of robust research has shown, official unemployment is no longer as important a guide to the health of the labour market as it once was, and certainly not as important as the 'economically inactive', an index which covers conditions like premature retirement and long-term limiting illness (GREEN and OWEN, 1998; GLYN and ERDEM, 1999; FOTHERGILL, 2001; ROWTHORN, 1999). In 1997, for example, the number of men in the 25-64 age group who were classified as inactive was more than double the number classified as unemployed. The contrasts between north and south as regards inactivity are enormous in this age range, with some 30% without a formal job in the northern regions compared to less than 12% in the south (GLYN and ERDEM, 1999).

Surveying the evidence in his Kalecki Memorial Lecture, Bob Rowthorn shows that the North-South Divide is still very much with us as regards patterns of employment, unemployment and non-employment, and he attributes it to deep structural shifts in the British economy, principally to weak employment growth, a falling share of manufacturing in total employment and a shift in the locus of economic activity away from the larger urban

conurbations. But the central issue, according to Rowthorn, is not how we got where we are, but where do we go from here? To this key question he offers the following answer:

> There is a serious job scarcity in the North and there are only two genuine ways to eliminate it. One is to move potential workers to jobs elsewhere. The other is to create new jobs in the North. Education is an important component of either policy. If the sole aim is to move northern workers into southern jobs, better education must be combined with a relaxation of housing and other restrictions in the South. If the sole aim is to encourage development of the North, education must still be provided, but restrictions in the South should be retained or even tightened. If people can migrate easily into the South, better education in the North may simply encourage emigration and do little to revive the local economy. In the event, some mixture of the two policies may be required, combining revival of the depressed areas with emigration to remove some of their surplus population. This is probably the most realistic option. To rely entirely on emigration as the solution would involve a scale of population movement which is technically feasible but politically unacceptable. To rely entirely on a revival in the North would require an implausible turnaround in its economic fortunes. The danger in the present situation is that emigration from the North will be inadequate to remove the area's surplus population, whilst the local economy will remain too weak to absorb those who are left behind. The North would then become Britain's Mezzogiorno, absorbing mounting funds from the central government and generating growing resentment in more prosperous areas (Rowthorn, 1999).

Rowthorn's prescription is worth quoting at length because it neatly captures (one version of) the contemporary conundrum of economic development in England: should the government

relax housing restrictions to encourage labour to move south or should it tighten development controls to induce capital to move north?

The southern development lobby takes issue with this analysis ostensibly because it is based on the antiquated logic of the Barlow era, which assumed a nationally contained economy in which investment could be controlled in the south and channelled to the north. In an era of globalisation, it argues, this intra-national trade-off is less likely because, if they are denied a location in the south, today's investment projects are likely to shift to a core region in mainland Europe rather than a peripheral region in the north of England – in which case such investments are lost to the UK as a whole.

This was the reasoning of the Crow Report (CROW, 1999) on housing in the south-east, a report which quite consciously sought to bury the mindset of the Barlow Report. The Crow Report was the result of a public examination of the demand for new housing in the south east. Government estimates had suggested that 1.1 million new homes would be required by 2016, a figure disputed by the South East Regional Planning Authority (SERPLAN), which argued that no more than 800,000 new homes should be built, otherwise the programme would be unsustainable (MURDOCH, 1999; 2000). Published in October 1999 the Crow Report rejected the more modest figure of SERPLAN and backed the Government's 1.1 million estimate (CROW, 1999).

What makes the Crow Report so significant from an English perspective is that it introduces a radically different spatial framework in which to assess the desirability of regulatory controls: if the Barlow Report was predicated on a national economic framework, the Crow Report was decidedly European. Steered towards a pro-growth perspective by the Government Office for the South East, the Crow Report boldly announced that housing provision should serve the economy rather than the environment, and therefore it should be sufficient to maintain the momentum of economic growth in the south east, the key

assumption on which everything else was predicated. To justify its pro-growth stance the Report reminds the reader that the south east might appear to be a high growth *domestic* region, but it was a mere thirtieth in the EU regional growth league.

Like the fifth Heathrow terminal, the Crow Report is a symbolic testament to the fact that economic growth in the south east will be fuelled rather than frustrated by New Labour: in other words, there is no cause, neither sustainability in the south nor deprivation in the north, which can compete with the allure of economic growth in the upper echelons of New Labour, certainly so far as the most powerful Downing Street duo are concerned.

Although New Labour has launched an impressive array of regional initiatives in England, as discussed below, this new regional policy package should not conceal the most important fact of all – namely that in economic terms the North-South Divide is actually growing. A recently published 'competitiveness index' for the UK shows that the three best performing regions – London, South East and Eastern – have widened their lead over the three worst by over 30% since 1997, and the gap between London and the North East has grown by more than 35% (BROWN, 2001; HUGGINS, 2001).

None of this will come as a surprise to the economic development fraternity within regional studies. For many years the sterling efforts of Doreen Massey and her colleagues at the Open University, and John Goddard and his colleagues at CURDS, have been highlighting the deep structures of economic inequality between north and south. The spatially differentiated structures of income and employment are symptomatic of even deeper and more intractable inequalities which flow from the fact that the UK's core developmental assets – senior corporate functions, public and private R&D resources, higher level skills, new firm formation, venture capital funds, innovation networks and power circuits to name a few – are heavily biased towards southern England (MASSEY, 1984; MASSEY and ALLEN, 1988; ALLEN et al, 1998; AMIN and GODDARD, 1986).

But the southern-centric bias of development has a more systemic, if less direct effect on the UK's spatial economy. As the UK's most over-developed region, the south east is the chief source of inflationary pressures, hence UK monetary policy tends to be calibrated to the over-heated conditions in this core region rather than the 'under-heated' conditions in the less developed regions of the north and the west. In a celebrated public relations gaffe the Governor of the Bank of England, Eddie George, actually conceded this point when, asked if job loss in the north was an acceptable price to pay for the control of inflation in the south, he was reported to have said 'yes, I suppose in a sense I am'.

Given the profound southern-centric bias to economic development in the UK it is comical in the extreme to think that New Labour's modest regional policy package can in any way reverse the North-South Divide. On the contrary, the new regional policy could well exacerbate rather than alleviate spatial imbalances because it is primarily designed to raise the economic potential of all regions rather than improve the north relative to the south. But these fears will not deter poor regions like the North from prosecuting their campaign for a directly elected regional assembly, a campaign predicated on the belief that there is an *economic* dividend to political devolution. Because this assumption plays such a pivotal role in the case for democratic devolution in the English regions it needs to be examined in more detail.

DEVOLUTION AND DEVELOPMENT: IS THERE AN ECONOMIC DIVIDEND?

The notion that political devolution carries an 'economic dividend' resonates deeply with regional devolutionists in England, even though it is rarely articulated explicitly. This perception has been shaped by a number of narratives, two in particular.

Firstly, there is a long established and deeply held belief in the poorer English regions that the Celtic nations have secured tangible economic benefits from administrative devolution, particularly from their territorial ministers and their regional development agencies. In this narrative, what we might call the 'Celtic narrative' for shorthand purposes, the poorer English regions looked with envy as the Celtic nations were able to use their devolved governance systems to mobilise more substantial incentive packages, based on regional selective assistance, which gave them an edge in attracting foreign direct investment. Nor was it simply a matter of finance. The creation of regional development agencies in 1976, that is 23 years before such agencies were established in England, enabled Scotland and Wales to offer investors lower transaction costs because Scottish Enterprise and the Welsh Development Agencies acted as 'one stop shops' for all corporate inquiries, a potentially important asset in locational tournaments.While these benefits were real enough, it is perhaps understandable if they were exaggerated by the less well-endowed English regions. During the career of the WDA, for example, Wales became *poorer* not richer, so much so that its GDP per capita is currently just 80% of the UK average, a chastening reminder of the limits to what a development agency can accomplish on its own account. On the other hand, the economic situation in Wales would almost certainly have been a good deal worse in the absence of the WDA (MORGAN, 1997).

Secondly, as English authorities have become more conscious of institutional diversity in Europe, through their dealings with EU Structural Funds and through their political involvement in the EU Committee of the Regions, they have been struck by their own shortcomings, in particular by the fact that the most innovative regions in Europe enjoy (among many other things) a measure of political devolution. Although this varies from country to country, being most pronounced in federal countries like Germany, this facility was perceived to have given these regions the potential to pursue more robust developmental

strategies than was possible in unitary states, where there was little or no institutional capacity for collective action at the regional level (CROUCH and MARQUAND, 1989; WIEHLER and STUMM, 1995; RODRIGUEZ-POSE, 1996). In a variant of this narrative, the 'innovative region' narrative, particular attention is drawn to a region's institutional networks for learning, innovation and development, networks which facilitate trust, reciprocity and knowledge transfer (AMIN, 1999; STORPER, 1997; MORGAN, 1997; COOKE and MORGAN, 1998; MASKELL et al, 1998; MORGAN and HENDERSON, 2002). Although this narrative neither isolates nor extols the role of regional government per se in the cocktail of factors associated with innovative regions, this is precisely what some advocates of regional government in England have done when they speak of the 'economic imperative' for political devolution (EUROPEAN DIALOGUE, 1993; MURPHY and CABORN, 1996).

If these ideas were somehow 'in the air' in the early 1990s they were given a more tangible political expression by the new regional policy coalition which assembled around John Prescott, the main champion of English devolution in the Labour Party. The vehicle for drafting Labour's new regional policy, and above all for making an *economic* case for regional devolution in England, was the Regional Policy Commission – and it was stroke of genius to persuade Bruce Millan to chair it because, as the former EU Commissioner for Regional Policy, Millan had enormous cachet, especially at the sub-national level in England.

The Millan Commission, as it was astutely called, sought to address a number of anxieties in England's sub-national economic development community. For example there was the deeply held view that regional policy was far too centralised, too top-down in design and delivery, and that this needed to be complemented by a bottom-up perspective. There was a need to placate the English regions, many of which felt aggrieved and disadvantaged as we have seen by the development agencies in the Celtic nations. Finally there was a vague, but nevertheless widely shared view that the English regions would get a better deal from the EU

Structural Funds if they had a more coherent voice. To try to resolve these problems the Millan Commission came up with a number of key recommendations, the most significant of which were: first, to make the case for regional development agencies to be part of regional policy in England; second, to make the case for having a development agency in each region rather than in assisted area regions; third, to make the case for indirectly elected regional chambers to steer the development agencies and to render them accountable to the regions (REGIONAL POLICY COMMISSION, 1996; MAWSON, 1998; HARDING et al, 1999).

If the Regional Policy Commission was primarily responsible for designing Labour's new regional policy in opposition, the Prescott-Caborn team at the DETR was largely responsible for delivering it in government. Although other parts of Whitehall, like DTI and DfEE for example, were also responsible for certain aspects of the new regional policy agenda, they were not as committed to the devolution of power as the DETR team, a situation which triggered some bitter turf wars within central government, where there is no settled consensus about devolution.

In office the Prescott-Caborn team perpetuated the notion of an 'economic dividend' in the political vocabulary which they used to market England's new regional development agencies (RDAs). The official rationale for creating RDAs was that they were necessary to address 'the economic deficit in the English regions', a reference to the fact that GDP per capita had fallen in every English region between 1992-1995 and that in all but two regions it was below the EU average (DETR, 1997; CABORN, 1999). Prescott and Caborn were painfully aware of the spectre at the feast – in the short term the RDAs would add to a burgeoning 'democratic deficit' in the English regions, leaving the new agencies open to the charge of being centrally-controlled quangos which were in, but not of, the regions where they operated. In the Prescott-Caborn scenario, however, the 'democratic deficit' was a transitionary problem, to be tackled in the short-term through the formation of voluntary

Regional Chambers and, in the longer term, through the statutory powers of directly-elected Regional Assemblies if there was sufficient popular demand (HARDING et al, 1999).

Of the twin deficits the 'economic deficit' was always going to be the most difficult for the RDAs to redress. From the outset their main problem has been the chronic disjunction between their powers (which are modest) and their tasks (which are awesome). Raising the level of regional economic prosperity, as measured by GDP per capita, is no easy task, especially when the RDAs control less than 1% of public expenditure in their respective regions (GROOM, 1999). Miniscule budgets, modest powers and a raft of responsibilities, straddling economic development, social regeneration, rural renewal, environmental enhancement and possibly planning if the government gets its way, suggest that that the RDAs may be over-extending themselves.

Not surprisingly, this alarming gap between powers and tasks, between rhetoric and reality in other words, triggered a backlash from the business-led RDA boards, many of whom complained that what was on offer to them was unworkable and therefore unacceptable. Their initial opposition was focused on two particular issues. First and foremost, it was felt that the RDAs did not have the tools to do the job: the 11 different 'stovepipe' funding streams, with a number of detailed strings attached, were at variance with the key issues identified in the regional economic strategies. Second, the RDAs were perceived as creatures of the DETR, rather than of a government which claimed to be 'joined-up' at the centre, and therefore they could not influence the other agencies that were vital to the delivery of their strategies. Barely four months after they were operational, the RDA chairmen – all of whom are men – decided to mobilise their collective influence to press ministers for a number of key reforms, the most pressing of which were the following:

- Prioritisation across government and, more particularly, for RDA strategies to be assessed as a package
- Flexibility within and between financial years, maximum delegations and no more than three separate funding streams
- A single block grant within two years
- An early discussion with ministers on reform of the Barnett formula
- Flexibility to devise new, innovative financial instruments to lever in new private sector investment
- Learning and Skills Councils funding to be routed through RDAs and a significant leading role on Europe, and
- A review of outputs and assessment methods in key departmental streams (HALL, 2000).

With the notable exception of the Barnett formula, the government conceded ground on many of these points in a move which heralded a new alliance between John Prescott, the traditional standard bearer of English devolution, and Gordon Brown, who began to think that the RDAs might have a useful role to play in his campaign to raise the woefully low levels of productivity in the UK economy (HM TREASURY, 2001).

Not since the 'regional planning' experiment of the 1960s has a British government sought to establish such a positive correlation between devolution and development. The ambassadors of Labour's new regional policy make great claims on behalf of the *constitutional* attributes of this policy. Let us to take two recent examples to illustrate the thinking at the heart of the new regional policy:

> History has taught us that prescriptive, top-down strategies, with Whitehall 'picking winners', does little to combat regional imbalances. What we need therefore are policies which empower communities so they can determine their own future…A new regional policy which offers flexibility and local ownership, and which actively promotes partnership working and 'joined-up' policies, must be a priority for Labour. But to succeed it demands a culture change, with the regions looking more to what they can achieve for themselves rather than a dependence on the largesse of central government (CABORN, 2000).
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> Our new regional policy is based on two principles – it aims to strengthen the essential building blocks of growth – innovation, skills, the development of enterprise – by exploiting the indigenous strengths in each region and city. And it is bottom-up not top-down, with national government enabling powerful regional and local initiatives to work by providing the necessary flexibility and resources. National government does not have all the answers – it never could. We need strategic decision-making and accountability at the regional and local level' (BALLS, 2000).

As someone who has advocated some of these things, in particular the need for a more devolved approach which would respect local knowledge and local needs on the one hand and afford parity of esteem to welfare *and* innovation on the other (MORGAN, 1997a), I have some sympathy for these underlying principles. In practice, however, there are two major shortcomings with the new regional policy. First, by treating all regions in a broadly uniform manner, it does little to address the problems of the assisted area regions in England, particularly the shortage of jobs (RSA, 2001). Second, the new regional policy narrative elides the disturbing fact that, contrary to the claims about devolution, there is a huge

asymmetry between power and responsibility, with the latter being devolved way ahead of the former.

In other words it is not credible to claim, as Caborn and Balls try to claim, that Labour's new regional policy is creating 'empowered communities' which have the capacity to 'determine their own future'. The ambassadors of the new regional policy are as anxious to play *up* the responsibility of the region as they are to play *down* the responsibility of central government, a regressive message which tends to be obscured by the progressive-sounding mantra of 'bottom-up not top-down'. In contrast to this crude and tendentious argument, in which 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' initiatives are juxtaposed as mutually exclusive options, we need to insist that effective regional policy needs to draw on both: that is to say it needs 'top-down' initiatives (which mobilise resources from central government and create enabling conditions) to be allied to and complemented with 'bottom-up' initiatives (which seek to empower local knowledge).

If the English regions hope to redress the economic deficit with the more innovative EU regions they would do well to remember that the latter not only enjoy a wider array of constitutional powers at the *regional* level but, more importantly if less perceptively, they are also embedded in a *national* environment which offers stronger enabling conditions for economic development and social well-being (COOKE and MORGAN, 1998). The parlous condition of the public services in the UK, where health and transport are literally mired in crisis, highlights the absence of the systemic enabling conditions which are taken for granted in the more developed regions. In the case of the transport infrastructure, for example, the government's own independent advisers have established that the UK has spent £30 billion less than the EU average over the last twenty years, yielding 'a transport network starved of investment for half a century' (COMMISSION FOR INTEGRATED TRANSPORT, 2001). This is part of a much wider problem, the demise of the public realm, a problem caused

largely by successive governments reducing public investment to the point where a new post-war low was reached in 1999, when gross public investment fell to just 1.6% of GDP (INSTITUTE FOR FISCAL STUDIES, 2001). The demise of the public realm denudes all regions, especially the poorer ones which are more dependent on the public sector for income and employment, and the new regional policy is powerless to redress this systemic problem. No amount of regional devolution, be it RDAs or Regional Assemblies, will solve this problem either (although in the following section I want to suggest that Regional Assemblies might help to foster a more progressive political debate about the public realm).

Although the public realm is a significant part of the fabric of all regional economies, it is not clear whether economic success can be attributed to regional government because the relationship between devolution and development is highly ambiguous. Given the political significance of this question one might expect to find an enormous evidence base here, but there is not one. So far as the key theme of this section is concerned – the supposed 'economic dividend' of devolution – one of the best treatments of the subject recommends a healthy dose of scepticism because:

> many arguments simply ascribe the contributions of a wide range of other agencies to the presence of regional governments. What regional governments deliver in support of economic innovation can be, and often are, provided as effectively by government at other levels, by non-elected public agencies, by the market, by hybrid public-private organisations and by informal inter-organisational networking arrangements. Advocates of the economic case for regional government also risk falling into the trap of ascribing strong economic performance at sub-national level to democratic institutions when the real explanation may lie in a unique regional combination of

> supply side, technological, behavioural, cultural and scale factors (EVANS and HARDING, 1997; HARDING et al, 1996).

In contrast to the advocacy literature (EUROPEAN DIALOGUE, 1993; MURPHY and CABORN, 1996), here we have a sober analysis of the supposed economic dividend which concludes by saying that while regional institutional capacity is indeed important to economic performance, the specific link between regional government and regional economic success is 'highly contingent'. A strikingly similar point emerged from a study of devolution and development in Wales, which concluded by saying:

> The advent of democratic devolution in Wales may have rendered the policy-making process more transparent and more inclusive, formally at least, and these attributes may raise the quality of political debate about development. But this is not to say that a political innovation like the Assembly will, of itself, do anything positive for the economic prospects of Wales in the twenty-first century. Democracy may be an intrinsically good thing, but its implications for economic development are more ambiguous than we may care to admit (MORGAN and REES, 2001).

These conclusions will do nothing to deter the campaign for devolution in England, a campaign predicated on the belief that Regional Assemblies will redress the economic and democratic deficits in the English regions. If the Assemblies help to galvanise their regional economies, mobilising resources which were hitherto untapped and ill-organised for example, then they could well have a positive role to play in regional economic renewal, but there is nothing pre-ordained about such a benign outcome. There is certainly no justification for

saying that regional devolution in England is ‘compelling on both economic and democratic grounds’ (QUIN, 2002).

This brings us to the following paradox: even if we assume that devolution produces an economic dividend in the English regions, this will do nothing to ease, still less resolve, the North-South Divide in England. To claim, as the government claims, that it is addressing the divide through the creation of RDAs is nonsense because RDAs have been established in every region rather than just in the northern regions – and treating unequals equally is hardly a recipe for promoting equality. If we assume that devolution has a benign effect across the board, then the south-east region, with its vastly superior economic advantages, might acquire the regional institutional capacity which it has manifestly lacked in the past to *sustain* higher rates of growth (MURRAY, 1988; ALLEN et al, 1998), with the result that it becomes even more decoupled from the North. This scenario is perfectly compatible with regions like the north-east improving their own economic position through devolution, but this would be progress measured in absolute terms not progress relative to the regions of the South.

Ultimately, of course, this question of regional inequalities is not a regional question at all: rather it is a question for the UK as an evolving community of nations and regions, and above all a question for central government, the UK’s highest political authority. Because the UK has been governed for so long by an over-centralised, London-centric system, the public debate about inequality, social and spatial, has been almost entirely shaped by the balance of forces at Westminster and Whitehall. This could change dramatically *if* the English regions hosted their own directly elected Assemblies, and *if* these bodies were able to instigate a new debate - about regenerating their regions, their immediate interest, but also about the public realm in the UK, which affects their longer term interest. In this way we can begin to imagine new possibilities emerging from the interplay of devolution and development, but they are just that – possibilities.

DEVOLUTION AND DEMOCRACY: BEYOND THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT?

If the economic case for devolution is at best ambiguous, the democratic case would seem to be more compelling, but this too is contested. Although the campaign for democratic devolution in Scotland and Wales was largely fuelled by the nationalist demands of stateless nations, it was also driven by a popular urge to redress a burgeoning democratic deficit within 'quangoland', that bewildering array of unelected public bodies which had little *local* accountability. This problem was especially acute in Wales, where a series of scandals had fostered the impression that quangos were a law unto themselves and in need of robust democratic scrutiny (MORGAN and MUNGHAM, 2000).

Of all the reasons which have been adduced to justify regional government in England the democratic scrutiny argument tends to be the most prominent. For example, in its 'white paper' on elected regional government the Campaign for the English Regions (CFER) claimed there was 'a pressing need to inject a degree of democracy into regional and sub-regional quangos as concern continues to grow about the democratic deficit evident at regional level' (CFER, 2002). The scale of this problem, according to CFER, showed no sign of diminishing because:

- Its own analysis had shown that in an 'average' region the major regional bodies spend £1.3 billion, employ 2,893 people and incur over £62 million on running costs alone
- In Yorkshire and the Humber it is estimated that there are 40 regional and sub-regional quangos, a figure which rises to nearer 70 in the North East

- There is no universal body of law or statute providing for public access to information about quangos
- There is an urgent need to simplify the regional map in England, not least because the relationship between the three key regional bodies (Government Office, RDA and Regional Chamber) is 'a mystery to most people' (CFER, 2002).

Running alongside this argument for more *democratic* governance in the English regions, and all too often confused with it, is the separate demand for more *effective* governance. One of the most forceful advocates of this argument is the CBI, which is anything but an advocate of regional government. Surveying the performance of the English RDAs it said:

> The regional map of players is highly confusing and a number of new players have been created. On the whole the various organisations have had poor records on working together. There is no greater deterrent to business participation than public sector turf wars and 'silo' mentalities that get in the way of sensible, strategic decision-making (CBI, 2001).

In much of the literature on English devolution, especially the advocacy literature, it is tacitly assumed that 'sensible, strategic decision-making' is synonymous with democratic decision-making structures, a problematical assumption which does not deter the political campaign. Regional government, it is argued, would deliver democracy, accountability *and* efficiency to a chaotic and unelected regional tier – a tier which already exists and which has evolved in an ad hoc manner (DAVIS and STEWART, 1993; STRAW, 1995; DETR, 2000). Although this is a widely held perception within regionalist circles, it is certainly not shared by all pro-devolution strands of opinion. Indeed, in some perspectives regional government is deemed to

be a threat to democracy given the potential for the upward transfer of functions from local government (COMMISSION FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY, 1995; TINDALE, 1996). In this perspective regional government signals a creeping form of 'centralism' in the sense that 'genuine decentralisation should be to local government, not to regional government' (JONES, 1988). However, not all pro-local perspectives are anti-regional in principle, and one of these strands poses some extremely pertinent questions:

> There is a danger of a new regional elite being developed, with minimum involvement in strategy development by the wider community, particularly those who are disadvantaged and excluded. There is also the issue of the hierarchy of the strategies. Are regional strategies going to draw power up away from local authorities or devolve power downwards from central government? Are large, powerful interests going to dominate the strategy-making process? So, for example, there is growing evidence that regional economic strategies and business interests dominate over sustainability strategies and environmental interests. What happens when one lot of policy-makers ignores the recommendation of another?…And finally, if our aim is regional institutional capacity building, how do we ensure that the partnership bodies that develop these strategies are democratic and effective institutions?' (DUNGEY and NEWMAN, 2000).

There is no better illustration of the conflicts identified here than the highly controversial Planning Green Paper which the government released in late 2001, just a week before Christmas! (DTLR, 2001). The most incendiary points in the Green Paper were: the decision to abolish county structure plans and transfer these local government powers to the regional level; the regional level also to determine housing provision; and central government to

decide on large infrastructure projects, a move designed to end planning sagas like the fifth terminal at Heathrow, the longest and most expensive inquiry in history.

The new planning proposals, which only apply to England, provoked radically different responses. A Local Government Association spokesperson said the decision to transfer county planning powers to 'an unelected, remote and increasingly bureaucratic regional government (sic) will not strike much of a chord with the public'. A Friends of the Earth officer attacked the decision to limit and accelerate planning inquiries, saying 'the government has caved in to the demands of developers and the CBI' and the Green Paper is 'one of the biggest blows to environmental protection and democracy in the last 50 years'. In stark contrast, the CBI was delighted with the new proposals because, in its view, the 'current planning system undermines UK competitiveness and discourages firms from expanding here' (BROWN, 2001c). These early skirmishes around the Green Paper suggest there may be some real substance to the fears in the English planning community to the effect that 'central government priorities for regeneration and growth will be channelled into the regions in ways that will bypass or override regional and local planning authorities' (MURDOCH and TEWDWR-JONES, 1999). And in this respect planning experts are alarmed that Stephen Byers, the Secretary of State at the DTLR, reserved judgement on the third runway at Heathrow, even though this had been ruled out of the question by the public inquiry. In other words a third runway could eventually be approved by a backdoor procedure: apart from being an environmental disaster for London this would signal the end of 'an orderly or representative system of planning in this country' (HALL, 2001).

Regional government would not of itself resolve these conflicts between economic development and environmental integrity in England, but it would render the decision-making process at the regional level more transparent, more democratic and more credible than it is currently. What exercises Tony Blair and his inner sanctum, however, is not the democratic

deficit but the 'delivery deficit' in the public services - and this is fast becoming the main criterion by which they judge the relevance and urgency of regional devolution in England (BROWN, 2001a). Although a sound criterion in principle, the problem is that one cannot know the answer to this conundrum without the practical experience of regional government.

With the publication of the White Paper on elected regional government in England this practical experience could be with us sooner than we think. According to CFER the White Paper needed to be informed by five key principles:

- **A multi-speed approach** that allows those regions that wish to progress towards elected regional government to do so ahead of those regions that are not ready or willing to do so
- **A flexible approach** that allows variation in structures and powers, albeit within an overall template
- **A participative approach** with a requirement for regional stakeholders to be involved in shaping the details of the proposals for their particular region
- **An evolutionary approach** with the ambition for 'joined-up government' given priority
- **An inclusive approach** that emphasises the need for regional governments to be exemplars in inclusive and participatory democracy so as to re-engage English citizens with their own governance (CFER, 2002).

At least in outline, the White Paper meets most of the CFER aspirations. This kind of model of of regional government thus seems set to win out over the other options which have been canvassed from time to time, like elected city mayors and city-regions, as a solution to 'the English question' (HARDING, 2000; STOKER, 2000). City-regions would raise more

questions than answers, while city mayors, which could easily co-exist with regional government, are a specific response to a debate about the modernisation of local government (SANDFORD and MCQUAIL, 2001).

If the most compelling reasons for elected Regional Assemblies are to create more democratic *and* more effective governance structures in the English regions, there is also a wider rationale which tends to get lost in the prosaic debate about boundaries, functions and powers. This wider rationale is the pressing need for deeper, more deliberative forms of democracy at all spatial scales to render structures of power more transparent and more accountable to people as a matter of routine (BARNETT, 1997). If the enabling structures of democratic devolution are confined to the Celtic nations, then England, which constitutes 85% of the UK population, has no reason to identify with this potentially transformative political project.

Of course the constitutional changes that are underway in the UK today can be interpreted in radically different ways, and there is no shortage of narratives seeking to do so. On the right of the political spectrum, for example, devolution has been conceived as a *dysfunctional* force which spells 'the death of Britain' (REDWOOD, 1999), while on the left the 'new regionalism' in England has been construed in *functionalist* terms as 'a scalar fix' to regulate the crisis tendencies of capitalism (JONES, 2001). In less apocalyptic terms a cyber-debate has also sought to deconstruct the meaning of New Labour's programme of constitutional reform, and here Tom Nairn has launched a coruscating assault on the timidity of it all. A self-avowed civic nationalist, Nairn's critique was twofold: first, that Blair, like Thatcher before him, was perpetuating a 'non-revolution from above' since the reforms were too modest to amount to anything significant; and second, that the silence of Britain's 'dominant nationality', the English, was the biggest impediment to progressive constitutional change (NAIRN, 2001; see also NAIRN, 2002).

As one of the respondents I suggested that Tom Nairn had possibly under-estimated the potential for change here. As regards the first point he exaggerates the extent to which 'the centre' – whether it be Number 10, the Cabinet or Whitehall – can successfully manage the country from above. No matter how modest the constitutional reforms have been to date, and they are very modest indeed, they have nevertheless created new political spaces in which new voices are beginning to be heard, at least in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London. Far from being an arcane 'chattering classes' issue I argued that democratic devolution is helping to rejuvenate the public realm, citing the fact that the Scottish Parliament had begun to craft a far more progressive agenda than anything seen at Westminster with respect to personal care for the elderly, student tuition fees and freedom of information for example. But what about Blair's lukewarm attitude to devolution? The fact that the Prime Minister originally had no *intention* of extending English devolution beyond RDAs and Regional Chambers speaks volumes for the protean political environment in which we live today, an environment in which elite motives are rarely a good guide to political outcomes.

As regards the second point I felt that Nairn had, once again, under-estimated the potential for changing the status quo because of the terms in which he framed 'the English question'. The problem of the 'dominant nationality' need not be an incubus on progressive constitutional change if we frame the issue in terms of English *regionalism* rather than English *nationalism* because the former, being a more civic-minded political phenomenon, is far more compatible with the spirit of a devolved and pluralist British polity than an English parliament sporting the banner of St George (MORGAN, 2001b).

But Tom Nairn was absolutely right to raise questions about New Labour's commitment to democratic renewal through constitutional change. Time and again the government has shown itself to be Janus-faced on this issue: committed to devolving power in

principle, it has been profoundly circumspect about doing so in practice (BARNETT, 1999; MORGAN and MUNGHAM, 2000). This might seem a harsh judgement on a government which has been mid-wife to four devolved administrations; but alongside those very real achievements one has to set the abortive attempts to control the leadership elections in London and Wales, the gutting of the freedom of information bill, the effective sacking of Elizabeth Filkin, the independent parliamentary standards commissioner, and a proposal to reform the Lords which put patronage before democracy, a proposal which saw the government being outflanked in the democratic stakes by the Tories.

At the very least this suggests an ambivalent attitude to devolving power; so much so that one cannot assume that the government will campaign vigorously for regional government in England no matter what the commitments in the White Paper. The strongest card of the sceptics in government is the claim that there is simply no demand for devolution in the English regions beyond the self-referential ranks of the afficionados. While the government may relax some of the pre-conditions it once attached to directly elected assemblies in England, it will insist on a regional referendum to ascertain the level of public support – and winning a referendum may be more difficult than pro-devolution campaigners realise, not least because it involves creating a new tier of politicians when this profession has plummeted in the public's esteem. Indeed, winning a referendum would seem to be the biggest barrier to the formation of regional government in England.

The prospects for regional government in England now depend less on state-sponsored 'regionalism from above' (the top-down process which spawned Integrated Regional Offices under the Tories and RDAs under New Labour for example) and more on civic-minded 'regionalism from below' (the bottom-up struggle to render regional structures more democratic and more accountable through Regional Chambers and, possibly, through Regional Assemblies). Although the former had a largely uniform effect on England (with the

notable exception of London), the latter could produce a profoundly asymmetric form of governance if some regions decide to embrace the Assembly option while others reject it, further fracturing Britain's largest nation and creating a new type of democratic deficit.

RE-IMAGINING BRITISHNESS: MULTIPLE IDENTITIES AND THE ENGLISH QUESTION

While strong regional identity can help to mobilise support for regional government, it does not seem to be essential. The *Economist* poll of March 1999 showed clear support for regional government in London and the North East, with lower levels of support elsewhere; though large majorities in every English region agreed with the proposition that Regional Assemblies 'would look after regional interests better than central government'. Another interesting feature of this poll was the finding that 49 per cent of English respondents 'most identify with' their standard region, while only 41 per cent 'most identify with' England. A BBC poll in late 2000 found that regions farthest from London were most likely to support Regional Assemblies (SANDFORD and MCQUAIL, 2001).

Regions are constituted in complex and multiple ways, principally through a loose amalgam of historical legacy, political action, cultural specificity, ethnicity and spatialized social relations: the key point here being that territorial borders and cultural identities are socially constructed rather than pre-given, primordial phenomena (ROKKAN and URWIN, 1982; KEATING, 1998; ALLEN et al, 1998; TOMANEY and WARD, 2000). This suggests that the perennial criticism of English regionalism, that 'regions' in England are 'artificial' creations with no historical pedigree, is less damning than it appears, not least because the vast majority of regional governments in the EU today consist of 'artificial' regions which

subsequently developed varying degrees of regional identity, often in response to rapidly changing contextual conditions.

Certainly there is no lack of contextual change in post-devolution Britain. But as Britain strains to reinvent itself internally, with respect to its nations and regions, and strives to reposition itself externally, by seeking to become a core member of the EU, an exclusive focus on regional or national identity runs the risk of missing a larger point. And the larger point is this: if the British Isles wants to re-imagine a progressive future for itself, then the meaning of 'Britishness' should be understood first and foremost as an expression of *multiple identities*, in which citizens share a common sense of citizenship, rather than the desiccated, mono-cultural conceptions of identity which populate Anglocentric narratives of 'Britishness'.

Significantly, the concept of multiple identities is the central concept of *The Isles*, where Norman Davies tries to give the concept a human face by dedicating the book to his grandfather, who was 'English by birth, Welsh by conviction, Lancastrian by choice, British by chance' (DAVIES, 2000). Unfortunately, this socially inclusive conception of cultural diversity does not meet with universal approval, especially when it involves non-white sections of society. For example, the hysterical reaction to the Runnymede report (on the future of ethnic Britain) shows that the self-selecting multiple identities of Britain's ethnic minorities are anathema to those right wing circles which remain wedded to the Anglocentric narrative (RUNNYMEDE, 2000).

Just as some ethnic communities choose to identify themselves as British rather than English, some English regions seem to be more closely attuned to the idea of a regionally devolved Britain than a nationally resurgent England. This would appear to be the case in the North East, which is variously described as 'a semi-detached part of England' and 'a British rather than English region' (TOMANEY and WARD, 2000), 'England's foreign country

within' (TAYLOR, 1993) and 'Britain's Mezzogiorno' (ROWTHORN, 1999). Here is the poorest region in England. Among other things it nurses a deep sense of economic injustice; it feels politically marginalised by, and alienated from London; it prides itself on a strong regional identity; but recently it is said to be suffering 'post-devolution blues' as a result of unfavourable comparisons with Scotland (PIKE, 2001). If the North East becomes the first region (outside London) to embrace regional government then this bold move will owe less to mono-causal factors like regional identity and more to the fact that a complex cocktail of factors had persuaded a voting majority that a Regional Assembly could be an investment and not just a cost, an investment in a more effective and more accountable system of governance, certainly something more hopeful than the status quo. Even if it does trigger a more robust bottom-up dynamic in the region, this would not devalue the need for more supportive top-down initiatives from national and supra-national levels (ie London and Brussels). This brings us to the biggest challenge in post-devolution Britain: how to strike a judicious balance between subsidiarity and solidarity or more specifically how to secure the holy grail of a devolved polity, namely equality-in-diversity (MORGAN, 2001a).

What the plight of the North East also illustrates is the inter-dependence between a specific regional identity, which is unique and particular, and the larger identities which derive from being English, British and European at the same time, a multiple identity which allows it to make legitimate claims on the wider community, especially the *national* community, because 'solidarity in the Union begins at home' (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 1996).

The demise of the Anglocentric narrative of Britishness has been hastened by the fact that it naturally alienated the communities which it marginalised – the national communities of Celtic Britain, the regional communities of northern England and the ethnic minority communities in general. In short, the mono-cultural stereotype peddled by Anglocentrism is

'the principal enemy for anyone seeking a place for all the peoples and all the cultures which have thrived in these Isles over the centuries' (DAVIES, 2000b). To embrace the concept of multiple identity, whatever its colour, creed or accent, is perhaps the most important pre-condition for re-imagining another way of being British. Among other things this would require us to jettison the traditional notion of Britishness, with its mono-cultural and southern-centric English axes, and craft a radically different notion of Britishness as a culturally diverse and politically devolved polity. The greater diversity of the Isles might provide a more propitious environment in which to pursue this project than a purely English context, where there is less of a precedent to encourage and nurture devolved bodies. If a regionally devolved polity does eventually emerge in England, this will be due, in part at least, to the external stimuli of its British hinterland, a fitting epitaph for Anglocentric narratives of Britishness.

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