

## Answering the English Question(s)

Recent reforms of the constitutional architecture of the UK state have been founded on and adhered to an established orthodoxy based on an enduring belief in the British Political Tradition. Devolution has thus proven largely unplanned, piecemeal, and pragmatic, taking the shape of an open-ended process, whilst lacking clarity in terms of its purpose, procedure, or extent. Successive Westminster governments have thus proven unable or unwilling to state whether the ultimate aim of devolution is to promote equality in terms of constitutional relations or to underline difference between the constituent nations and regions of the UK (Giovannini and Mycock, 2015). The UK is a multi-national state created by a series of unions. The resonance of nationhood and nationalism in defining constitutional relations has thus ensured that political debate has often been located at a national level. However, asymmetries in devolution across the nations and regions of the UK have created an explicitly quasi-federal state increasingly defined by constitutional instability that threatens its very existence. This sense that the end of the UK is nigh were heightened considerably by the Scottish independence referendum campaign and vote in 2014 and tensions emanating from the decision of leave the European Union. The main Westminster political parties have thus become increasingly reactive, defensive, and sporadic in the design of devolution policy in face of ever-more strident sub-state manifestations of secessionist nationalism outside of England.

The status of England has proven increasingly contentious and problematic in terms of the framing and layering democratic citizenship and political identity within a multi-national UK state. For many, England has been deliberately peripheralised or even overlooked by successive reforming governments in favour of the UK's other constituent nations. England has thus been framed as 'the hole in the middle' of the devolution process, the last 'colony' of a post-imperial UK state whose national aspirations have been cynically silenced and thwarted by anti-English liberal metropolitan elites.

Political and public interest in the so-called 'English Question' has intensified over the past two decades or so, thus entangling issues of constitutional reform in England with a growing recognition and resonance of English national identity and culture. The 'English Question' has however never been singular and in fact relates to the simultaneous and interconnected decentralisation of government to from Westminster to England at both a national and regional-local level (Mycock, 2016a). The 'English Question' thus pertains to a wider set of issues related to finding

an appropriate form of national democratic representation and governance for England which is balanced in the context of devolution both within the multi-national UK state and across the English regions and localities.

At a national level, the introduction of English Votes for English Laws (EVEL) has been strongly associated with the Conservative Party who, since the late 1990s, have promoted intra-Westminster reform as a means to address at least part of the so-called 'West Lothian Question'. The principle constitutional anomaly that EVEL seeks to address is whether MPs from outside of England, sitting in the House of Commons of the United Kingdom, should be able to vote on matters that affect only England, while MPs from England are unable to vote on matters that have been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. The introduction of EVEL sought to provide MPs representing constituencies in England (or England and Wales) with the opportunity to veto certain legislative provisions that apply only in that part of the UK. EVEL was introduced by the Conservative government in October 2015 and used for the first time in the House of Commons in January 2016.


Answering the 'English Question' has also focused on the devolution of Westminster powers within England. Since the summer of 2014, two

interconnected and overlapping political projects - the so-called 'Northern Powerhouse' and regional-local devolution via a series of 'city-region deals' - have sought to redress regional economic imbalances, empower local authorities, and enhance political leadership via the introduction of 'metro-mayors'. While the Northern Powerhouse agenda has largely focused on developing transport and other infrastructure across the north of England to stimulate economic activity, Westminster has also sought to cajole local councils—most notably those in Greater Manchester - to form a patchwork of amalgamated combined authorities to collaborate in public service planning and delivery.

The following article assesses the impact of current attempts to answer the 'English Question(s)'. It will assess whether England constitutional reforms undertaken in Westminster, especially the introduction of English Votes for English Laws (EVEL) and regional-local devolution initiatives, have facilitated a distinctive national 'voice'.

### Enhancing an English national 'voice'

The proposition that England has emerged as a nascent but identifiable 'political community' has gained considerable traction among a small but growing number of academics, politicians and media commentators. Advocates argue that English nation-

 The following article assesses the impact of current attempts to answer the 'English Question(s)'.

nal identity has become more politically and publicly salient, this in part being reflective of a growing discontent with England's current constitutional position within the Union. Such claims have been founded on a growing body of research, particularly the Future of England (FoE) surveys, which indicate that English national identity is gradually superseding its British counterpart both in relative and absolute expressions of popular affiliation (see Wyn-Jones et al., 2012; Wyn-Jones et al., 2013; Jeffrey et al., 2014). Furthermore, it is argued that English national identity has become increasingly politicised in its form and expression in response to a range of grievances about inequalities associated with devolution within the UK, European Union (EU) membership, and the scale and impact of immigration. These shifts in public attitudes have encouraged mainstream Union-wide political parties to engage rhetorically with England as a distinct national political entity and design policies that appeal predominantly or exclusively to the English electorate (Kenny, 2014; Mycock and Hayton, 2014).

However, the reported intensification of English national identity – and the correlative necessity to reform Westminster to provide national political expression for England – may well be overstated. Indeed, FoE surveys indicate that popular attachment with discrete forms of Englishness has fluctuated over the past decade or so and even declined. Furthermore, longitudinal studies undertaken as part of the British Social Attitudes survey, utilising different methodologies to the FoE studies, indicate a broad stability and balance in public affiliation with English and British identities since 1999 (see Curtice, 2013). Critically, such studies have not sought to test the absolute or relative strength of regional identities in England when compared to English and British identities or to acknowledge complexity and diversity in how the public understands and frames sub-national local and regional affiliations (see Giovannini, 2016).

The introduction of EVEL has – as yet – failed to significantly clarify or increase the resonance of English national policy-making since its implementation (see Gover and Kenny, 2016). This is in part due to its infrequent operationalisation in the House of Commons in the first year after its introduction, being certified to be applied to parliamentary bills on only nine occasions. The introduction of EVEL has however exacerbated calls to reify England as a distinct national political community – either by encouraging further Anglicisation of the parliament and civil service of the UK state, or through the creation of a discrete English parliament (see, for example, Denham, 2016; Gover and Kenny, 2016).

Such calls reflect a widely-held view that EVEL has been primarily implemented to address a constitutional anomaly related to a perceived imbalance in the representation of England's national 'voice' within the UK parliament. However, demands for a more explicit English national political resonance within West-

minster should be treated with caution. There is scant evidence that shifts in attitudinal surveys on national identity in England directly correlate into political or popular support for the reform of the UK's constitutional architecture to further strengthen a discrete, unified and monochrome English national 'voice'. Moreover, calls for the increased territorialisation of politics in the UK are not confined to the nations of the UK, and are starting to gain relevance also across the regions and localities of England (Giovannini, 2016).

This, in turn, prompts reflection on what is meant by 'English national voice' and whether England does really have a singular national 'voice'. Debates about the politicisation of English nationhood often overlook regional and local dimensions of English identity which indicate that 'the voice of England' is layered and plural. Moreover, the implementation of EVEL has rarely been viewed within a more expansive lens that recognises the duality of the 'English Question' in terms of issues of national and regional-local governance in England. Survey evidence identifies high levels of support for variants of EVEL when compared to the maintenance of the status quo, an English parliament, or regional assemblies. Such research suggests that a majority of English citizens see themselves as Anglo-British in identity terms and are thus happy to support reforms that reflect the hybridity of Westminster both as a UK and – to a lesser extent – an English parliament. There lacks however any substantial evidence that English citizens seek a discrete national parliament or that they wish to further extensively reform Westminster to alter its principal function as the UK parliament.

An evidence gap also exists in terms of assessing the attitudes of English citizens on matters of constitutional reform in terms of plural and multi-layered forms of governance in England. Existing research has typically forced respondents to choose one from a range of options (usually the status quo, intra-Westminster reform, an English parliament, and some form of regional assembly). Evidence from these studies indicates that most respondents support reform of Westminster as per EVEL, with few supporters for any regional options offered. This approach reflects the current view of the UK government with regards to the governance of England by segregating national and regional reforms rather than acknowledging their concurrent and overlapping implementation. Put simply, reform of national and regional-local governance in England is not an 'either/or' choice. The extent of support for regional-local may well have been under-estimated though. For example, a survey undertaken in 2014 indicated that 28% of respondents supported the proposition that local or regional institutions should have more influence over governance in England, compared with 30% supporting an English Parliament or a reformed Westminster (Cox and Jeffrey, 2014). Regional variations also exist regarding preferences on how England should be governed, with stronger support for local and regional devolution in the North of England where

strong sub-national identities exist (Jeffrey et al., 2014; Eichhorn et al., 2015).

The demand for the political recognition of English regional-local voices has though proven more difficult to realise in terms of governmental structures than those which reside at a national level. This has been reflected in the current 'devolution deals' agenda which has stimulated instability, competition and conflict between the regions and localities of England. Such tensions have often proved to centre on growing political and public concerns about the lack of correlation between existing regional-local cultural and political institutions and identities and emergent Westminster-ordained combined authority regional polities. Moreover, asymmetric approaches to English regional-local devolution in terms of powers devolved have encouraged the reproduction of anomalies associated with the 'West Lothian Question' within England - the so-called 'Manchester Withington Question' (Giovannini and Mycock, 2015).

The concurrent introduction of EVEL and regional-local devolution has not provided a suitable solution to the much-needed reorganisation of the governance of England and its place within the Union. Indeed the bespoke and uncoordinated approach to constitutional reform in England has fuelled rather than quelled instability and uncertainty about the future cohesion and longevity of the UK state. This, in part, has proven a product of politicians and policy-makers inability or unwillingness to provide a clear and coherent vision of the form, purpose, and extent of devolution across the nations of the UK and within England.

The introduction of EVEL appears to seek to reify England as a monochrome and homogeneous national territorial, political and social entity while also intensifying the gradual 'Anglicisation' of the House of Commons. This approach appears to overlook the need to be sensitive to and representative of the territorial (UK state-wide and English national, regional and local) nuances, vies and needs associated with English nationhood. There is an urgent need to grasp the challenges of synchronising reforms within Westminster to enhance England's national 'voice' with the fundamental changes to regional-local political representation and policy-making within England. Policy-makers in Westminster urgently need to adopt approaches to constitutional reform that are sensitive to demands for recognition of English local and regional 'voices' as well as a national 'voice'. Crucially, this requires a consideration of how and in what ways EVEL develops in conjunction with devolution of power within England (and in the other national constituencies of the UK) to find sustainable answers to the 'English Questions'.

#### Concluding Thoughts: Answering the English Question(s)

Recent constitutional reforms have further entrenched nationality in shaping policy both at UK state and sub-state levels. England is thus increasingly framed and understood in national terms as a homogeneous, political and territorial unit. However,

the nationalisation of English politics and policy-making, exemplified via the introduction of EVEL, has so far failed to explicitly take account of or connect with reform of governmental arrangements within England. Moreover, proponents of the nationalisation of English politics have often failed to acknowledge the importance and potential political capital of existing and emergent local and regional territorial polities shaped and underpinned by distinctive cultural, historical, and economic identities. However, a durable constitutional settlement for England and the rest of the UK requires policy-makers to move beyond narrow nationally-framed approaches between the four nations of the UK and 'think territorially'.

EVEL is likely to bring some much-needed clarity to English national policy-making while also refining further the party political vernacular of England. In its current form, EVEL is however unlikely to fundamentally nationalise electoral politics in England or reorientate significantly the civic relationship between English citizens and the House of Commons. In particular, the contested and porous nature of what might be deemed 'England-only' legislation and the emergence of new polities within England will likely make it difficult for political parties to frame manifesto pledges and policies in discretely English national terms. Indeed, EVEL may well intensify challenges to the political authority and identity of the main Westminster-based Unionist parties as it becomes more established, particularly in the context of English identity politics.

Current approaches to 'answering the English Question(s)' highlight a continued faith in piecemeal but disconnected devolution to and within England which will further undermine the stability of the UK by creating new constitutional anomalies. It is likely that the elections for the inaugural 'metro-mayors' in May 2017 will coalesce and politicise local and regional disparities and resentments within England on issues of funding and resources, policy design and delivery, and the coherence and uniformity of welfare and other public services. This could encourage greater and more divisive competition amongst English MPs which might affect how EVEL operates. Moreover, MPs will be increasingly placed in a position where they must compete for authority and influence with emergent local-regional elites, thus potentially encouraging new arenas of contestation both within and between political parties driven by the politics of territorialism and identity.

*See next page for references.*



#### About the author:

Dr. Andrew Mycock is a Reader in Politics at the University of Huddersfield. He co-founded the Academy for British and Irish Studies at the University, and was appointed as a Fellow of the Higher Education Authority in 2011.

## References: Answering the English Question(s)

- E. Cox and C. Jeffrey, *The Future of England: The Local Dimension*, London, IPPR, 2014.
- J. Curtice, *What Does England Want?* Edinburgh: ScottishCen Social Research, 2013.
- J. Denham, 'Labour faces an English question that simply won't go away', *LabourList*, 16 November, 2016, <http://labourlist.org/2016/11/john-denham-an-english-question-that-wont-go-away/>
- J. Eichhorn, D. Eichhorn, R. Parry, et al., *England and the Process of Constitutional Change*, Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 2015.
- A. Giovannini, 'Towards a 'New English Regionalism' in the North? The Case of Yorkshire First', *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 87, no. 4, 2016, pp. 590–600.
- A. Giovannini and A. Mycock, 'Behold the Manchester Withington question', *OxPol*, 12 November 2015, <http://blog.politics.ox.ac.uk/behold-the-manchester-withington-question/>
- D. Gover and M. Kenny, *Finding the good in EVEL: An evaluation of 'English Votes for English Laws' in the House of Commons*, Edinburgh, Centre on Constitutional Change, 2016.
- C. Jeffrey, R. Wyn Jones, A. Henderson, *Taking England Seriously: The New English Politics*, Edinburgh: ESRC Scottish Centre on Constitutional Change, 2014.
- M. Kenny, *The Politics of English Nationhood*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- A. Mycock, 'The politics of England', *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 87, no. 4, 2016a, pp. 534–545.
- A. Mycock and R. Hayton, 'The party politics of Englishness', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2014, pp. 251–72.
- R. Wyn Jones, G. Lodge, A. Henderson and D. Wincott, *The Dog That Finally Barked: England as an Emerging Political Community*, London, IPPR, 2012.
- R. Wyn Jones, G. Lodge, C. Jeffery, G. Gottfried, R. Scully and A. Henderson, *England and Its Two Unions: Anatomy of a Nation and Its Discontents*, London, IPPR, 2013.

## Scotland after Brexit



### SUCCESSFUL BPS SEMINAR WITH SCOTLAND'S MINISTER FOR EUROPE

What future awaits Scotland in Europe, as Britain prepares to leave the EU? This was the chief question on the agenda, as the British Politics Society on 16 February invited its members and friends to a timely seminar with Scotland's Minister for Europe, Dr Alasdair Allan. Dr Allan has been an MSP for the Scottish National Party since 2007, representing the constituency of the Western Isles.

The event was held against the backdrop of the British government's newly published White Paper, which presents the UK's overall strategy for its exit from and future partnership with the EU. In his talk, Dr Allan reflected on Scotland's relationship with Norway and the EU historically as well as Scottish responses to the referendum result last year. He also outlined possible scenarios for Scotland's future relationship with the EU, highlighting proposals in the Scottish Government's 'Scotland's Place in Europe' paper.

Much to the audience's delight, Dr Allan delivered the opening part of his speech in fluent Norwegian.

The seminar took place at the Social Science faculty (Eilert Sundt's hus) at the University of Oslo, Blindern. It was opened by BPS board member Øivind Bratberg. Board member Kristin Haugevik led the subsequent Q & A session.

Dr Allan and BPS member John Todd were also guests in NRK Urix the same evening.

### Membership 2017

Membership in BPS is open to individuals and institutions. As a member, you receive subscription to four editions of British Politics review, invitation to all events organised by the society and the right to vote at our annual general meeting.

Our membership comes into force as soon as the membership fee, 200 NOK for 2017, has been registered at our account 6094 05 67788

If you have any questions about membership, please do not hesitate to contact us by e-mail at:

[mail@britishpoliticssociety.no](mailto:mail@britishpoliticssociety.no)

### Forthcoming edition of British Politics Review

How do the British commemorate the past? In the spring edition of British Politics Review, we raise this question under the heading of "Heritage Britain", taking the anniversary of the Battle of Passchendaele during World War 1 as our rather sombre point of departure. What characterises commemorations of past events in Britain – such as the many battles fought by British soldiers during the Great War – and to what extent is the past used (or abused) for political purposes now? Moreover, what is the status for the so-called "heritage industry" in Britain per 2017?

**The spring edition of British Politics Review is due to arrive in May 2017.**