

There is a strong case for the introduction of an elected tier of English regional government

By Democratic Audit UK

*Should there be an English Parliament? Or should the English regions – closer in size to the other constituent parts of the United Kingdom – instead enjoy self-government over elements of government economic and social policy? **Vittorio Trevitt** argues that such a development would be good for democracy and good for England.*



Manchester – the subject of much discussion about devolution (Credit: Trevor Cummings, CC BY 2.0)

One of the most worrying political developments in recent years has been the rise in public discontent over the “[Westminster Bubble](#),” a feeling shared by people across the country that politicians are cut off from their needs and concerns, and represent no one else’s interests [but their own](#). Such a widespread feeling amongst the electorate has the risk of alienating more and more people from the democratic process altogether, a dire scenario that can only be prevented by ensuring that people feel that the system is working on their behalf.

One option for dealing with this worrying trend could be the adoption of elected regional governments across England, with powers to pass legislation solely for the benefit of the people living within the various regions. Such a system already exists in a number of countries like Spain and America, with administrative regions having autonomy over issues such as [finance](#) and [education](#), while here in the United Kingdom, there exist elected assemblies for the people of [Wales](#), [Scotland](#), [Northern Ireland](#), and [Greater London](#). Giving people in each of the English regions the opportunity to elect governments close to home, and possibly more exposed to their particular needs and concerns, could have the beneficial effect of enhancing people’s faith in democracy through the realisation of practical measures addressing the bread and butter concerns of households across England as a whole.

In economic policy, regional governments in England could be given the power to manage their own finances and set their own budgets. This would enable them to devise economic policies different to those pursued by central government, if they feel that such policies are not in the best interests of the communities they represent. In Scotland, for example, the SNP government has sought to pursue a more expansionary economic strategy than that of the Coalition Government, finding alternative means of financing public services. This has included levying a 10% tax on properties worth between £250,000 and £1 million, with the intention of earmarking the additional

revenue for the construction of [new](#) health and educational facilities.

Regional governments could also utilise their powers of tax collection to finance their own anti-poverty initiatives, as various provinces and territories in Canada have done [in recent years](#), and could also be given control over those aspects of the educational system related to personal costs. In Scotland, upfront tuition fees were [scrapped](#) back in 2001, while in Germany state governments under the control of the opposition [Greens](#) and the [Social Democratic Party](#) (the junior partner in the ruling [Grand Coalition](#)) have in recent years also abolished fees for higher education. Like in those countries, regions in England could be given the right to reduce or even remove fees at universities within their administrative boundaries. Regional governments could apply the same principle to healthcare, liberalising entitlement to free dental care and free prescriptions and abolishing NHS parking charges in their regions.

Regional governments could also be given the right to set their own minimum wage rates, reflecting regional differences in the cost of living. This would give regions the opportunity to increase their minimum wages to the living wage level calculated by the Living Wage Commission as [£7.65 an hour outside London](#), a policy development that could go some way towards alleviating the problem of poverty pay in Britain.

One advantage of the regional government model is that it enables parties of a different political hue to that of the national government to put its own ideas and policies into practice, thereby enabling them to bring about change on a more local level. Not only does this enable such parties to present themselves as viable alternatives to an incumbent administration, but they can also demonstrate to voters the kind of change they can bring about on a national level if given the opportunity. In Malaysia, where the National Front has governed the country [since 1957](#), various state governments led by the opposition People's Alliance have been credited with providing [good economic management](#) and various [social welfare programmes](#), and in the [2013 general election](#) came within a whisker of achieving victory. In South Africa, where national politics has been dominated by the African National Congress [since 1994](#), the opposition [Democratic Alliance-controlled Western Cape province](#) has been touted as having the highest level of access to basic services such as flush toilets and water, while ranking the highest out of the country's nine provinces in areas like financial management and accountability.

Closer to home, governments that have led Wales and Scotland since devolution was introduced [in 1999](#) have used their powers to implement a raft of landmark social reforms. In Scotland, these have included laudable initiatives such as [land reform](#), [universal nursery education](#), and [free personal care for elderly people](#). In Wales, governments there have been no less pioneering, with the implementation of such measures as [free prescriptions](#) and [free breakfasts in schools](#).

The record of the Scottish and Welsh assemblies in the field of social reform not only demonstrates the benefits that devolution has brought, but it also shows how regional governments can be instigators of radical social change.

Taking into account the social and economic benefits that regional governments can bring to the people of England, there is, therefore, a strong case for their establishment. The fact that Nick Clegg has recently endorsed proposals by the [IPPR](#) to bestow more powers to English regions as a means of boosting the economic potential of underperforming English cities demonstrates that there exists support for greater devolution in England amongst politicians in Westminster. The establishment of elected regional governments in England, therefore, may not remain distant ideals, but could be distinct possibilities in the near future.

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