Multi Level Governance: Scotland, England, Wales, Northern Ireland in Europe

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Sub-National Governance in England

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Introduction: the Fragmented Nature of Sub-National Governance in England

"The emergence of multi-level governance challenges much of our traditional understanding of how the state operates, what determines its capacities, what its contingencies are, and ultimately of the organisation of democratic and accountable government" (Peters and Pierre 2001, p 131).

This discussion is concerned with sub-national governance in England. It will suggest that the most striking characteristic of English sub-national governance is its fragmentary and incoherent nature, embracing regions (if they can still be said to exist), city-regions (which are subject to a number of different definitions) and local government (which itself is sub-divided from place to place into metropolitan, non-metropolitan, unitary and two-tier systems, with a range of differing political management arrangements). This pattern of sub-national provision has grown ever-more varied, subject to *ad hoc* initiatives, and with no overall rationale. It will be argued that - in contrast to other parts of the United Kingdom - there is currently no political incentive to address the nature of English sub-national governance. Hence there is little likelihood that the pattern of governance depicted here will change, unless new factors are brought into play. Some of these are suggested at the end of this paper.

Governing England

"*England is the gaping hole in the devolution settlement*" (Hazell 2006, p 38)

Discussing the governance of England as a whole is problematic in a number of senses (Fenwick et al 2009). First, there is no dedicated national assembly or parliament exclusively charged with the governance of England; this role is subsumed within the constitutional responsibilities of the United Kingdom parliament. This did not seem so odd when Scotland and Wales were similarly subject to central governance from Westminster (the relationship with Northern Ireland was always different) but effective devolved governance in Scotland and Wales now places the English anomaly into sharp relief. Secondly, there is no mainstream political discourse which embraces debates about the governance of England. If such debate exists at all, it is seen as a marginal and somewhat quaint discussion on the periphery of polite politics. Thirdly, the collapse of the efforts under New Labour to establish an elected tier of English regional governance means that such debates have effectively been shelved, as there is no political incentive for English parties to address them. Fourthly, successive waves of local government reorganisation in England have continually shifted attention toward the local and away from any concern with the national (English) picture.

Further, discussion of English governance continues to have a complex, confused and unresolved relationship with discussions of Britishness. It is simple to separate, conceptually and politically, the idea of Scottish or Welsh from the idea of British, although of course not everyone would choose to do so. Attempting to separate English from British is much more difficult, not least because of the terminological ease with which the two are substituted, either through ignorance (especially from outside the UK) or through deliberate political obfuscation. This too makes it difficult to address English governance as a discrete topic.

Hazell (2006, p 37) noted that the United Kingdom is a union "...that works in practice but not in theory". Although the first part of this assertion has come under some serious pressure in recent years, the statement remains a succinct way to introduce the difficult question of English governance. It is recognised that governance, broadly defined, includes networks, markets and new relationships of power following the neo-liberal reforms of the 1980s onward (Bevir 2011). However in the following discussion 'governance' will be taken to denote the largely institutional arrangements in place in England – arrangements for which the narrow term 'government' would be insufficient.

Whatever Happened to the English Regions?

The Government Offices for the English Regions were established in 1994, and during the subsequent New Labour years (1997-2010) the Government Offices reflected very much the presence of central Government in the region. Regional stakeholders may have wished the emphasis to be the other way round – a regional presence within Government – but there was never really any ambiguity about the role of the Government Offices: they were Government out-there in the region. The Government Offices were abolished by the UK coalition government and disappeared in 2011. Yet there are several strands to disentangle within this deceptively simple picture. During the New Labour period the pattern of English regional governance was complex and reflected a number of competing political and policy interests.

First, the Government Offices were not the only important element. In the eight Regions outside London there were also (non-elected) Regional Assemblies, with members largely appointed by local councils. Although these occupied a low-profile in terms of public recognition and, politically, their disappearance was relatively uncontroversial, they formed part of a significant regional infrastructure that has now been removed.

Secondly, there was a continuing debate about whether new forms of Regional Assembly based on direct election could provide a basis – for the first time – for democratic regional governance. This was not in fact a new debate. Previous enquiries into local government, including the Redcliffe Maud Report (Royal Commission on Local Government in England 1969) had to an extent considered this, but it never became a political priority. Under New Labour, the debate acquired a higher profile but to a large degree this was played out within the Labour Party, with the greatest enthusiasm being displayed by John Prescott and the party interests associated with him rather than by Blair himself. When the first and only referendum on whether to establish an elected Regional Assembly was held in North East England in 2004, and heavily defeated, the debate about establishing democratic English regional governance effectively ended, and for now it is not on the political agenda.

Thirdly, and of fundamental relevance to any debate about English governance, the coalition that took power in 2010 not only abolished Government Offices for the Regions, it also abolished regions themselves in any meaningful sense. English regions still persist for some official purposes including

serving as a basis for production of statistical analyses of government data, but they do not exist as part of a pattern of governance and have no formal part in any administrative structure. They are now akin, if anything, to the (elected) English metropolitan counties that were dissolved in 1986, along with their service responsibilities and powers, but which still feature in statistical summaries and breakdowns.

Fourthly, in addition to the abolition of Government Offices in the regions under the coalition, the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) were wound up. This has placed the responsibility for attracting investment and securing regeneration very much on the shoulders of local councils (a process given some spurious rationalisation by government as part of its emphasis on 'localism' which is briefly addressed below). This has significant implications for regional development in England as a whole. In North East England specifically it raises the question of competitive disadvantage in comparison with Scotland's commitment to attract investment and its associated infrastructure. The North East of England faces the regional problem of competition with Scotland more acutely that other English regions simply because of its location. Indeed North East England simultaneously perceives itself as geographically and politically remote from UK central government and now vulnerable to successful competition from north of the border too.

Fifthly - in the public sector - the remaining public sector regional associations are voluntary rather than statutory, and have no formal powers or responsibilities. In North-East England, for example, the Association of North-East Councils (ANEC) is a cross-party body and maintains a fairly active presence in articulating the regional voice of local councils. Indeed, ANEC is the remaining public sector grouping of its kind in the region. Its members are involved in governance in their local areas but the association is not itself part of the governance framework.

Under present conditions, then, the *region* may not look like a promising basis for rethinking English sub-national governance in any intelligible sense. The essential barrier is that all debates around English regions are now far removed from the political reality of the three main English parties. There is no political incentive for policy makers to address the vacuum of English regional governance because it offers no political premium whatsoever.

Yet there is no doubt that social and economic factors including output, poverty and productivity vary substantially from one English region to another and have done so for a very long time (IPPR/NEFC 2012). It is hard therefore to sustain a position wherein regions 'don't matter' as an element of English civil and political society. Clearly they do, but their definition and status seem fraught with difficulty in the minds of central government. There is one exception, however, and that is London.

The unique case of London-as-region has persisted, conceptually and operationally. London has its own directly- elected regional assembly and a directly-elected mayor. Its governance structures and its powers are clearly established in relation to central government and in relation to individual London boroughs (four of which also have their own directly elected mayors). The point is frequently overlooked that the structures of London regional government provide a ready model for regional governance throughout England. Yet the rationale and structures of London regional governance have not been applied to other English regions: central government does not apply the same reasoning to other parts of England.

City Regions

"In the mid-2000s, 'city region' suddenly became a popular idea within the national ministry charged with local government, housing and planning responsibilities in England. It was not a new concept, as it had been argued for (and rejected) as a basis for reorganizing local government back in the 1960s" (Healy 2009, p 837).

There has been some attention, under both New Labour and the Coalition, to the *city-region*, a broad conception that potentially forms part of English sub-national government. The many variations of meaning and terminology attaching to city region belong more happily to debates amongst urban geographers, but here the term 'city region' will be taken to mean something geographically less than the region, and more than the current units of local government. It may have some correspondence with the former metropolitan county areas, but the fit would be highly imperfect. Economically, it may denote travel-to-work areas or more sophisticated definitions of areas of economic activity. It certainly implies some level of geographic and economic coherence rather than simply denoting an administrative boundary.

Healey (2009) has made the important point that city regions, as well as describing functional economic zones or spatial planning areas, also invoke essentially imagined concepts of time and place. Looked at in this way, different actors can read different meanings into their own constructs of a city region. It is what we imagine it to be. Healy adds that the city region may denote relations and qualities that are not necessarily compatible, for instance between relations of history and identity, production or citizenship. The significant point for the present discussion is that if the city region can be constructed in a number of different ways, for a number of different stakeholders, and if this can also vary over time, then the city region may not be a comfortable site for the stable realities of governance.

Even if one were to take a simple view of a city region as, say, a travel-to-work area with an overall economic coherence then the problem immediately encountered is that there is no existing governance model for such an area - although, as discussed in the following section of the paper, the 'metro mayor' has been advanced as a way of filling precisely this gap.

English Local Government: Managers or Mayors?

"Local government owes its existence to the geographical area whose interests it represents and for whose well being it is responsible..." (ODPM 2005 p 7)

Structures

"*Today, England has 353 principal authorities. Some of these are single unitary authorities, others operate in tiers of district and county councils. The number of different councils doing similar things remains costly and confusing. For many, the range of different systems is baffling too. Scotland and Wales, on the other hand, both have a system of single unitary authorities with clear accountability and responsibilities".* (Heseltine, 2012, p 30).

English local government is complicated, and it has no coherence or guiding rationale. It has developed incrementally, through successive reorganisations and in accordance with political considerations at central and local level. There is a variety of different organisational structures.

- London has its own structure of boroughs together with an elected London-wide assembly and a London-wide elected mayor.

- The local government reorganisation of 1995-1998 created 'unitary' councils in some parts of England previously administered by two-tier structures. This partial reorganisation was the result of a contentious process of review, with initial recommendations scrapped and revisited, followed by a lengthy process of local horse-trading. Forty-six unitary councils were in place by April 1998 (Fenwick and Bailey, 1998). This had some newsworthy results – the establishment of the tiny unitary council, and county, of Rutland for instance – but overall the government held back from advancing the unitary principle for all of England's councils. This was rationalised on the grounds that different parts of England have different needs for their preferred form of local governance, but, if this is a convincing reason, it is striking that it was not applied to Scotland or Wales.

- The further reorganisation of 2008-2009 revisited the question of whether a two-tier structure of county and district councils with distinct responsibilities would persist, at least in selected areas. A new review process, following an 'invitation to reorganise' (DCLG 2006) created single-tier councils as the only elective authority for some areas. The invitation to reorganise had invited proposals for new unitary local authorities based partly on the premise that "...local government in two-tier areas faces additional challenges that can make it harder to achieve that strong leadership and clear accountability which communities need" (DCLG 2006, p 5). From 2009, this created some geographically large single-tier councils, including Northumberland, Durham, Cornwall, Shropshire and Wiltshire. Others – such as Cumbria or North Yorkshire – retained a two-tier system of county and district councils. The basis for different decisions in different areas was not always immediately apparent (see Elcock, Fenwick and McMillan 2010).

- In the main conurbations, including West Yorkshire, Tyne and Wear, and Merseyside, metropolitan borough councils remain responsible for the whole range of services in a single-tier system, the elected council for the metropolitan county area having been abolished, as noted above, in 1986.

- In some non-metropolitan former counties – Cleveland and Humberside for example – the county authorities were abolished in a separate reorganisation in 1996, again leaving a single (non-metropolitan) tier of administration. There was a prevailing narrative, not least from central government, that these names did not represent real *places* with real public recognition (although Cleveland, if not Humberside, was certainly a name and place of historical importance).

- Finally, throughout the whole system, parish or town councils may or may not exist to administer some limited local services.

Of course, this system makes no sense at all, and no government would design such an incoherent set of arrangements from the start. There has been an incremental move toward a single tier of local government, but central government has resisted the application of this system to England as whole. At present, perhaps mercifully, further structural reorganisation is not a political priority.

Central policy toward local government in England has carried two messages, not always compatible. There has been the encouragement for councils to 'think big', for instance in the creation of large unitary councils, the move toward city regions, joint procurement for the larger regional area; shared services and local collaborations with public and private partners. Equally, there has been a

clear message to 'think small', for instance in relation to 'localism', neighbourhood, local 'place' as the key basis for identification; and enhancing community government. These dual pressures featured in New Labour and Coalition periods of government alike.

Heseltine (2012, p 54) recommended that all local authorities in England work toward unitary status, but, significantly, they should also seek opportunities to set up combined authorities with other councils, as well as with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). This would be a simplification of governance. It would not of course address the problem of centralisation in the English system. Much depends on the size of the proposed unitary authority. Indeed, replacing a two-tier system with a unitary council might increase centralisation further. Much would depend on its scale.

Alongside considerations of organisational structure, there are several recurring themes in central government policy toward English local government. These may be more important than matters of structure alone. Three significant themes can be identified here.

Partnership

"Partnership arrangements such as those underpinning Local or Multi-Area Agreements in England, Improvement Agreements in Wales and Single Outcome Agreements in Scotland can bring huge benefits for local citizens, but can also obfuscate responsibilities and decision-making". (Committee on Standards in Public Life 2008, p 15)

During the New Labour years, partnership became a key part of English local governance. It was much more than the encouragement of local authorities to work with other agencies: partnership was built-in to the emergent patterns of local governance during this period. From 2008, Local Area Agreements (LAAs) linked to the new regime of Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) were accompanied by stronger Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs). Partnership was the formalised basis for joint working and strategic commissioning. For local authorities during these years LSPs were an essential vehicle for achieving strategic objectives, and partnership working was closely linked to the performance measures introduced under New Labour. Very significant parts of New Labour policy at local level, including Sure Start, Action Zones for Employment, New Deal for Communities and Community Safety were predicated upon institutionalised partnership working.

Under the coalition, partnership remains but its emphasis has changed considerably. The abolition of centrally-defined government performance indicators removed the basis for much of the work of LSPs. In contrast, the current LEPs place a considerable importance on private sector involvement and leadership. Although it can be argued that partnership in the New Labour years represented the maintenance of bureaucratic hierarchy rather than true co-governance (Fenwick, Johnston Miller and McTavish 2012), under the coalition the argument has shifted ground. The relevant debate is around how far an ostensible withdrawal of central prescription in fact denotes an increased centralism, given that local autonomy is so closely circumscribed from the centre.

Public Participation

Another recurring theme in debates about English local government has been the extent to which reform (including successive reorganisations) may enhance public participation. The perceived problem is a lack of public engagement. This concern has been evident from at least the 1980s and the focus of that era upon the public service 'consumer', a 'responsive' local government and a rediscovery of a 'public service orientation' (eg, Clarke and Stewart 1985, Gyford 1991, Pollitt 1990).

The depiction of the citizen as a consumer of local services reflected the political narrative of the time, an individualised notion of participation within a market transaction. Following the general election of 1997, public participation was re-asserted as a core component of the rhetoric of public service modernisation and it remained so throughout the New Labour years, whether presented as Community Engagement, Community Empowerment or (in the final stages of New Labour) Citizen Governance. Again, the emphasis upon the citizen as a participant in, rather than merely a consumer of, local public services reflected the political discourse of the time (Fenwick and McMillan 2012).

Specific initiatives – including local authority public panels, neighbourhood forums, consultation exercises and community representation on local partnerships – reflect this prevailing interest in participation. The local councillor was re-cast as community leader. Governance would take place at neighbourhood level (see Griggs and Roberts 2012 for a critical discussion). The impact of all this on local governance was to emphasise localised forms of consultation and decision-making, linked to notions of 'place' and identity. Yet there was, again, some of the familiar tension between thinking big and thinking small. The large unitary county councils created in 2009, no longer having a smaller district council with which to work, were propelled toward creating a localised focus for their 'belonging communities' and for local areas with which people might identify before they could be expected to tackle the question of participation.

Political Management

Although structural reorganisation of English local government is no longer a political priority, political management - the question of how local authorities are managed and led - remains a very live topic. The Local Government Act 2000 offered local authorities in England and Wales three options for reforming their political management arrangements. These were a directly-elected mayor with a cabinet, a directly-elected mayor with a city manager (since removed from the statute book), or a council leader and cabinet. Smaller local authorities with populations of less than 75,000 people were permitted 'other arrangements'. The Government advanced the argument that new systems of executive leadership would improve co-ordination of the council's services, provide a clear focus for managing relationships with the various organisations now involved in partnerships, streamline decision-making and enhance accountability. In the case of the elected mayor, it was envisaged that local leaders would for the first time possess proven public legitimacy through a direct mandate provided at the ballot box.

The initial group of elected mayors took office in 2002, but only in eleven local councils (excluding the London mayor, a post governed by different legislation, and with different powers). The overwhelming majority of councils in England, and all councils in Wales, opted not to adopt the executive mayor form of leadership. The council leader (chosen by other councillors) and cabinet became the norm, in place of the old committee structures inherited from the nineteenth century.

Yet the mayoral debate persists. Several summary points can be made about the strange case of the English mayor and the part it now plays in sub-national governance.

First, the main political parties have continued to argue the merits of directly elected mayors and to encourage adoption of this form of local leadership even though there is scant evidence of public enthusiasm. Central government apparently continues to see the elected mayor as an

answer to the problem of local leadership. While the 2000 act had created provision for elected mayors subject to local referendum, further legislation in 2007 made adoption of the mayoral system easier by allowing its adoption through simple council resolution. Additionally, the coalition organised referendums in ten of England's largest cities in 2012 on whether to establish a mayoral system: in only one case, Bristol, was there an affirmative vote. Two councils which did have a mayoral system have now abandoned it. Thus in 2013 there are still only fifteen directly elected mayors in England, including Bristol. (This total excludes the London Mayor).

Secondly, the mayor was initially envisaged as an answer not only to local leadership, but specifically to the problem of city leadership. Positive images were conjured up of the mayors of the world's great cities. The centrally-prescribed referendums of 2012 reinforced the prospect of the mayor as heroic urban leader. Yet it is striking that of the very few places opting initially for the directly elected mayor, none were in England's big cities. The positive referendum votes were in relatively small municipalities where there had been some perceived problem with local events or local governance. The big cities of Leicester and Liverpool did opt for the mayoral system in 2010 and 2012 respectively, but this was by council resolution not popular vote.

Thirdly, the mayor can be seen as bringing together political and managerial leadership in a way hitherto unknown in British political life. If the mayor truly occupies the summit of decision-making and leadership in both senses, the role of the Chief Executive and Chief Officers inevitably changes. In UK terms the mayor becomes a unique figure, potentially exercising governance and leadership functions previously diffused across the committee-based decision-making structures of local government (Elcock and Fenwick, 2012). This makes the nature of the elected mayoralty a significant and interesting experiment for the UK overall, even if, in the public's eyes, it has not yet proven attractive.

Debate continues about the future of elected mayors in England, pursued with a vigour that is surprising given the lack of any obvious public interest: for commentaries on current debates relating to directly elected mayors, see Copus (2013), Fenwick (2013), Hambleton (2013), and Marsh (2013). The question of 'metro mayors' for areas larger than current local government units, linked to city-regions or other formulations of urban conurbation, has some current support, recommended for instance by the 'Warwick Commission' (2012, p 9) for the governance of the "functioning economic area". The Heseltine report on growth also recommends (2012, p 57) that provision be created for mayors to be elected for combined local authority areas, revisiting a strand of thinking that has always been present in discussions of English elected mayors. Both recommendations involve a relationship between local leadership and place. This is addressed directly by Hambleton and Howard (2012) who argue for a renewed focus on 'place-based leadership'. It is suggested that there are "three realms of place-based leadership reflecting different sources of legitimacy", ie political leadership (including elected mayors), managerial/professional leadership and community/business leadership (Hambleton and Howard 2012, p 9). Their argument is that the overlap of these realms may generate genuine innovation in leadership, something unlikely to be delivered by conventional government rhetoric to 'do more with less'.

The final point to be made about English local government is to note the emphasis of both the current coalition and the preceding Labour administration on 'localism'. This intriguing term ultimately denotes a stance more than a concrete policy and it has shifted meaning during the past decade. Prior to the formation of the coalition, localism was used to refer to decentralised decision-making, more informed local decisions, enhanced democratic engagement and local renewal (Aspden and Birch 2005, p 11). This drew from a body of existing academic work (eg Corry and

Stoker 2002). In current local government policy it is easier to define what localism is not rather than what it is. It is invoked in particular as an alternative to the previous centrally-prescribed performance indicators of New Labour. It is also presented, some would hope and others fear, as an alternative to the regional planning infrastructure. The Localism Act 2011 did give some concrete form to aspects of localism (see also Lowndes and Pratchett 2012). The legislation, enacted at a time when English local government was subject to unprecedented central government financial restrictions, contained provision for community groups to take over the running of council services as willing providers, and for 'armchair auditors' (instead of performance indicators) to assess local performance. The 2011 Act also abolished the Standards Board, it set up the referendums on establishing elected mayors discussed above, and it gave local authorities a general power of competence for the first time. This final provision is potentially of considerable importance. However, given the national political and economic context, it has yet to make any striking impact.

Sub-National Governance in England: Unanswered Questions

In other parts of the UK, the establishment of a devolved national administration has been closely linked to the assertion of national and cultural identity. Sub-national governance is not just a matter of structures; it is - more importantly - a question of the identity which gave rise to those devolved administrations in the first place. Even where the nature and affiliation of such an identity is bitterly contested, as most obviously in the case of Northern Ireland, there is nonetheless unanimity that identity in itself is important. In England, no such sub-national identities are a significant influence on governance or policy.

This is not to say that English regional identities do not exist. It is in the North East of England that reference to regional identity has tended to be perceived as strongest and it is no accident that this region was the site of the only referendum on establishing a regional assembly. Yet many arguments about North Eastern regional devolution arose from internal strands of debate within the Labour Party in its heartland and, in the post-New Labour environment, these debates are no longer rehearsed in the same way. If they re-emerge, it will likely be through different channels. A distinct regional identity has also been asserted in Cornwall. Indeed, unlike anywhere else in England, Cornish identity may be expressed as a national rather than regional identity if the premise is accepted that Cornwall is not truly part of England at all. Both North East England and Cornwall are geographically remote from the location of central UK government – so far as it is possible to be remote in English terms anyway - and this is no doubt relevant. But in neither case does such an identity reflect a popular electoral or social force strong enough to exert influence over political and policy decisions about governance. In this context, questions about English sub-national governance are not only unanswered, they largely remain unasked.

Sub-National Governance and Economic Growth

"...the North and its constituent economic areas need much greater autonomy over the drivers and the proceeds of growth. City regions and their hinterlands need greater control over the decisions that can drive economic growth. They need to be able to control their own budgets and raise their own revenues in line with their aspirations. Failure on either point will perpetuate the downward spiral of decline and dependency on central government subsidy to prop up economic weakness and the unemployment and poverty that results from it." (IPPR/NEFC 2012, p 7)

The words above are about 'the North' as a whole – a considerably wider area than the previously defined Government regions – but the overall point is potentially applicable to English regions overall: the emphasis is upon devolvement of powers in relation to economic growth, more localised forms of revenue generation, and the importance of the city-region.

If regional identity and social movements do not provide any prospect for advancing sub-national governance in England, it may be that economic factors and the search for growth represent an opportunity for reinventing the regional and the local. It is relevant to note that private sector associations, including the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), continue to operate on a defined regional basis even though the regional infrastructure of the public sector has now been dismantled by central government. Clearly significant parts of private industry consider the maintenance of a regional organisation to be necessary even where central government does not.

A number of incentives for growth have been established under the Coalition. The 'Enterprise Zones' of an earlier Conservative era have been resurrected; a Regional Growth Fund is in operation until 2015, compensating to a limited degree for the abolition of the former RDAs; and 'City Deals' in selected English cities provide some additional powers to attract investment, with an expectation of greater collaboration with other providers, including other local councils – such 'Deals' were initially advanced alongside the referendums in the largest English cities on whether to adopt the elected executive mayoral system of governance, but the Deals have persisted even in the absence of affirmative votes for mayors. So there are indeed policy initiatives around growth in England, although these are no longer couched in the regionalist language of the New Labour years.

The principal instrument of local growth is intended to be the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). There are 39 LEPs, covering the whole of the territory of England. At least half the members have to come from the private sector which also has to chair the LEP. The LEP areas are meant to relate to functional economic areas. These areas do not necessarily correspond to the boundaries of any existing (or former) political units of governance, although some do align to counties or groups of counties. Indeed some LEP boundaries overlap. Institutionally, the LEP can be seen as a successor to the RDA, although the LEP is private-sector led, is not funded to anywhere near the same extent as the former RDA, and it can treat some previously major areas of activity – notably, tourism – as entirely discretionary. Heseltine (2012, p 40) notes that "...LEPs simply do not...have the authority or resource to transform their locality in the way our economy needs". He advocates a beefed-up role for a better-resourced LEP plus new Local Growth Teams of civil servants, supporting and developing the strategic role of groups of LEPs. Such teams could be seen as a faint echo of the role performed by the former Government Offices in the regions.

Consistent with the Heseltine report (2012), an independent review commissioned by the North East LEP, and led by Andrew Adonis, is due to report in March 2013. This enquiry, largely comprising private industry leaders and academics, is focussing specifically upon the North East economy. Its findings are to be reported to the Deputy Prime Minister. Adonis is quoted as saying "we need significant devolution to the regions and for that to take the form of control over major budgets..." and that "my review will have a very strong message to central government that it needs to devolve serious powers and budgets if it wants the regions to take charge of their destiny" (Pearson, 2013, p 11). This, considered alongside the Heseltine report, is significant. It means that political elites from both main parties, along with business elites, are now actively arguing the case for regional devolution and regional control of budgets in the interests of economic growth. This is a very different regional agenda from the failed attempt to establish an elected regional assembly in 2004 – but it is a regional agenda, and an active one, nonetheless.

Conclusions

Hazell (2006 p 39) uses the example of Spain to suggest that "...asymmetrical devolution, confined initially to the historic nations, can spread over time to other regions that initially showed no interest".

Whether this might apply to England over time cannot be known, but at present English governance is – from an analytical or policy perspective – deeply problematic. As discussed, there is no distinct institutional framework for the governance of England as a whole as, constitutionally, the UK government subsumes within it the governance of England. This in itself differentiates England from the other component parts of the UK and it is an important difference. At sub-national level within England, there is no formal regional dimension of governance. Such regional dimensions as may have existed have evaporated since 2010. At local government level, a number of different structures and political management arrangements obtain, varying from one area to another, for political reasons: single-tier or two-tier local government; metropolitan or non-metropolitan local councils; council leaders or mayors. Within this mix, England remains one of the most highly centralised countries in Europe. Living, say, in the unitary council area of Darlington in northern England with its population of approximately 100,000 people, the next formal tier of legal administration (although with no elected authority corresponding to its boundaries) is that of England and Wales (population approximately 56,000,000). Beyond the local council area in Darlington and its modest population, the next level of democratic elected governance is that of the UK as a whole (population approximately 63,000,000). In European terms this is quite strikingly odd.

By international standards - indeed, by the standards of the rest of the UK - England is highly centralised, and with the withering away of a regional dimension the current trend is toward greater centralisation. The rhetoric of localism has been accompanied by significant removal of financial resources at local level which undermines any opportunities to advance localism in practice. Yet, although problematic for the purposes of analysis, this pattern of sub-national governance is not politically problematic for government. It is not a live issue in political or policy terms in England. There are no significant English urban or regional movements demanding autonomy or devolution.

In this context, is there a possible agenda for the advancement of active English sub-national governance? A number of possibilities can be suggested:

- The demand for growth, including from the political Right, may be starting to embrace the realisation that there are local and regional ways to achieve it (or even that there are only local and regional ways to achieve it). There are indications that private industry takes this view and that the demise of the regional development infrastructure is being seen to have a negative impact. The message that political and business elites in England are taking the region seriously is evident in the report from Lord Heseltine (2012) and is likely to be reinforced in the forthcoming report from Lord Adonis.

- The intensification of political debate as the referendum on Scottish independence draws closer may stimulate, for the first time, a wider discussion of governance south of the border: arguments about self-determination and devolution may come to be familiar terms of debate to English audiences and, perhaps more significantly, to English political elites.

- The continuing interest of all main political parties in England in new forms of local governance around elected mayors, including mayors for wider geographic areas than the current units of local government, may generate approaches to governance which come to resonate with local perceptions. Although current mayoral options have not met with public approval this does not exhaust the possibility that forms of governance may emerge which may win public endorsement, especially if driven from the local level rather than being presented as a series of choices from the government.

Despite the experience of recent years, these elements may yet serve to place English sub-national governance, in some form, on the political and policy agenda and thus provide the basis for a new sub-national governance settlement in England.

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