



ALTERNATIVE ROUTES TO POWER

The Potential for Political Regionalism in England

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ABSTRACT

Thus far England has participated very little in the devolution debate, yet what happens in England will be crucial to the outcome of the devolution project. Now there are signs that England is about to become involved. The example of devolution to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland is one reason. Moves to European integration is another. There are new uncertainties about the nature of English identity and the options for constitutional change. Pressures are growing for democratic devolution to the English regions. At the same time these have to contend with inertia, Whitehall centralisation, and an English political culture focused almost exclusively on Westminster. Yet a timetable has been set for a referendum followed by elections to the first Regional Assembly, for North-East England, in 2004. Can England sleepwalk into devolution for its regions in the absence of a widespread debate? This Paper is based on a presentation made by the author to the 20th British-Bavarian seminar *Britain Today: Key Policy Challenges*, at Hohenkammer near Munich, July 2001.

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1. A SILENT REVOLUTION

In the last five years the United Kingdom has been through what can only be described as a constitutional revolution. A former Unitary State has been transformed into a Union State. Scotland now has its own directly elected Parliament that can pass its own laws, with powers equivalent to, or greater than, the Lander in Germany. Northern Ireland has its own legislative Assembly, and Wales has a National Assembly which before too long is also likely to acquire power over primary legislation.

All three institutions are responsible for spending decisions over most of the domestic concerns of their respective populations - health, education, economic development, social services, environment, planning, transport, agriculture, local government, housing, arts and culture. The Scottish Parliament has an annual budget of around £20 billion, and the National Assembly some £9 billion.

Yet all of this has come about with remarkably little debate in the United Kingdom as a whole. Of course, referendums were held in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland before devolution took place. But the debates were largely confined to those respective territories.

In England, which constitutes 85 per cent of the population of the United Kingdom, devolution has been hardly mentioned. Aside from the creation of the London Mayor and Assembly - which has more of the character of a change to local government - England has not participated in the devolution process. Nonetheless, in the long run, the changes are bound to have a substantial impact on how England is governed. As one constitutional commentator, Labour MP Tony Wright, has put it:

“The English have been the silent and uninvited guests at the devolutionary feast ... A striking feature of the devolution legislation has been its total neglect of the Union (and English) dimension”¹

And as Vernon Bogdanor, an Oxford political scientist, remarked:

¹ ‘England, whose England?’ in *The English Question*, Fabian Society, 2000

“England is hardly mentioned in the devolution legislation, and yet England is, in many respects, the key to the success of devolution.”²

This absence of England from the devolution debate needs some explaining. Bogdanor ascribed it, in part, to ‘the poverty of much of English constitutional thought in the previous century.’³ The weight of English numbers in the UK Parliament is another factor: 529 members out of 650. This means that, insofar as they reflect on these matters, many English people regard the United Kingdom Parliament at Westminster as simply an English Parliament.

In turn, and perhaps more fundamentally, England’s non-participation has had to do with the self-confident character of Englishness and English identity. Until very recently the English have had little cause to question their place in the world. Unlike the Scots or the Welsh, for example, for the English, Englishness and Britishness have been but two sides of the same coin. If Britishness has had a meaning beyond Englishness it has provided the English with a badge of identity in the wider world - a passport, a Navy, and an Empire that until a generation ago ruled large territories across the world and still lingers on in the form of the Commonwealth.

Today, however, there is a new uncertainty about what it means to be English. In 1998 the broadcaster Jeremy Paxman began a book on the identity of the English with the line:

“Once upon a time the English knew who they were.”⁴

A wide variety of factors have come together to create this new situation. Three can be highlighted:

(i) The Devolution Process

The first is the devolution process itself. Inevitably, the new political institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are causing the English to look at England in a new light.

² Vernon Bogdanor, *Devolution in the United Kingdom*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 265

³ Vernon Bogdanor *The English Constitution and Devolution*, *Political Quarterly* Vol 50 No 1, 1979

⁴ Jeremy Paxman, *The English: A Portrait of a People*, Michael Joseph, 1998, p. 1.

(ii) The European Union

Similarly, the emergence of the European Union is causing all the peoples of the United Kingdom to re-assess the way they are governed, but especially the English. Enoch Powell once described the English as ‘a Parliamentary nation’ the essence of which was undivided sovereignty. Membership of the European Union has changed this irrevocably. At the time the UK entered what was then the Common Market, in 1974, the leading Judge Lord Denning, Master of the Rolls, famously described the Accession Treaty as:

“ ... like an incoming tide. It flows into the estuaries and up the rivers. It cannot be held back.”⁵

On the day the Westminster Parliament approved the Single European Act, in November 1986 when Margaret Thatcher was at the height of her Premiership, Lord Denning wrote:

“For nearly 300 years our constitutional law has been based on the principle that Parliament was our supreme legislative authority. It alone could make, unmake or amend our laws. That sovereignty has now been ended. Its overthrow will be completed by Parliament itself today when it passes the European Communities (Amendment) Bill.”⁶

(iii) The Global Economy

A third dimension underlying the new English uncertainty about their place in the world is changes to the economy. Rapidly moving global trends are affecting the United Kingdom, and indeed all European countries, in profound ways. Jeremy Paxman put his finger on this aspect when he argued that a revived self-consciousness would not only be of psychic value for the English, but would serve an economic purpose as well:

“Those countries which do best in the world - the ones that are safe and prosperous - have a coherent sense of their own culture.”⁷

⁵ Quoted in Ferdinand Mount, *The British Constitution Now*, Heinemann, 1992, p.219.

⁶ Lord Denning, *Farewell to Our Sovereignty*, The Times, 3 November 1986.

⁷ Jeremy Paxman, *op. cit.*, p 23.

The emerging knowledge economy combined with the communications revolution and the global market are transforming the relationship between culture and politics. A society's distinctive cultural expression now plays directly into its economic success. This is part of what is driving the new political awareness in Scotland and Wales. It is beginning to catch on in England as well. As two leading advocates of English political regionalism, David Marquand and John Tomoney, have put it:

“... the evidence of continental Europe suggests that strong sub-national government is a necessary condition for more balanced forms of regional development in the emerging ‘knowledge economy’.”⁸

These three elements form part of the background to an English constitutional debate that is only now beginning to gather pace. The focus is being provided by a question the English have not had to face for many centuries, perhaps not since 1688: how are they to govern themselves? There are three broad possibilities:

1. Carry on much as they are at present, muddling through, and making only modest adjustments to take account of devolution to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
2. Create an English Parliament, to match the Scottish Parliament, and the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies.
3. Extend devolution to England itself, and create Assemblies in the English Regions.

There are difficulties with all three possibilities. Taken together they describe much of present uncertainty facing the English about who they are, their place in the world, and not least their relationship with the European Union.

⁸ David Marquand and John Tomoney, *Democratising England*, 2000, page 6.

2. ENGLISH CONSTITUTIONAL OPTIONS

(i) 'Muddling Through'

There is little doubt that many in the present Administration, politicians and civil servants alike, would prefer, perhaps even assume, that fundamental constitutional change for England is not required. After all, 'muddling through' is how Whitehall mandarins have traditionally dealt with intractable problems. For instance, in the run-up to the 1992 general election there was much speculation that it would result in a 'hung Parliament', with no party in overall control and the need for a coalition of some kind. Asked how he would deal with such an eventuality the then Head of the Civil Service, Sir Robin Butler, was reported as saying:

"If you have an unwritten constitution, you have to make it up as you go along."⁹

However, 'making it up' and 'muddling through' will prove an uncomfortable strategy in the new constitutional circumstances in which England finds itself. The wider context is being provided by the European Union. Leaving aside devolution to the Celtic fringe of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom remains the only large EU member-state which has not developed a democratic regional structure. Moreover, devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has created a dynamic which, as we shall see, is being cultivated by campaigns for comparable autonomy within the English Regions themselves. In 1999 Linda Colley, author of the influential *Britons: Forging the Nation* (1992) which traced the rise of the British nation-state between 1707 (the union with Scotland) and the 1830s, was invited by Tony Blair to Downing Street to lead a seminar on the impact of constitutional change on the future of British politics. In her presentation she emphasised that England could not be insulated from the changes underway:

"Any notion that devolution can occur in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland while the 80 per cent plus of the British population who live in England go on exactly as before, is plainly unrealistic."¹⁰

⁹ Quoted in *The Western Mail*, 2 May 1992

¹⁰ Quoted in John Morrison, *Reforming Britain: New Labour, New Constitution?*, Reuters/Pearson Education, 2001, p.118.

(ii) An English Parliament?

One English response, especially from some elements within the Conservative Party, has been to call for an English Parliament. In part this has been prompted by a tangle of issues known as the ‘West Lothian question’, named in the 1970s after the Scottish constituency of Labour MP Tam Dalyell who has never tired of raising the following conundrum: now that such matters as health and education are the legislative business of the Scottish Parliament, why should Scottish Westminster MPs continue to be able to vote health and education policy for England? After all, their English counterparts have no equivalent right to vote on health and education in Scotland.

However, given the size of England in relation to the other parts of the United Kingdom, the notion of an English Parliament would inevitably lead to political destabilisation, even the potential disintegration of the United Kingdom. There is no example anywhere in the world of a successful federal system in which one element outweighs the rest to such a large extent. An alternative approach has been simply to call for English votes on English laws in the existing House of Commons. This case has been made most notably by the former Conservative leader Williams Hague who described the aforesaid ‘West Lothian question’ as a “ticking time-bomb under the British constitution”.¹¹

Hague pointed out that the present situation where the Labour Government has a clear majority in all the constituent nations of the United Kingdom is unusual. More often that not past Labour Governments have relied on their plurality in Wales and Scotland to provide them with a majority at Westminster. What might happen some time in the future when such a Government imposed a deeply unpopular measure on, say education or transport, in England?

Hague said he was ‘unpersuaded’ by the case for an English Parliament, because it would overshadow Westminster and provide a focus for English nationalism, though he described the argument as “wholly respectable”. And he dismissed the alternative of English Regional Assemblies which he described as “an expensive exercise in fantasy politics”. Instead he opted for ‘English votes on English laws’ in which the Speaker in the House of Commons would designate Bill affecting England only and Scottish MPs would not vote.

¹¹ Speech to the Centre for Policy Studies, 15 July 1999

Of course, this solution omitted to mention Wales. Presumably under Hague's proposal we would be talking about 'England and Wales' Bills, so long as Wales had not acquired primary legislative powers. However, if this solution were implemented in a situation where Labour formed a government with a small overall majority but the Conservatives held a majority of English seats, this would effectively make Cabinet government unworkable. Unsurprisingly, the present Labour government has dismissed the idea of 'English votes on English laws' out of hand. Instead, within the House of Commons it has revived a Standing Committee on Regional Affairs to look at English matters, and beyond that is tentatively exploring the possibility of establishing English Regional Assemblies.

(iii) English Regionalism

The European Union has been an important factor in stimulating developments in the English regions. Until recently, the absence of clearly defined regional administrative structures meant the English regions were unable to take full advantage of the European Structural and Cohesion funds. Partly in recognition of this, in 1994 the Conservative Government under John Major established Government Offices in each of eight newly designated Regions to co-ordinate administration by the various Whitehall Departments. This was an important moment since, previously there had been no consistent regional pattern for the Whitehall administration of England.

The new Offices are each responsible for administering a single geographical area and some £6 billion of public expenditure. Though incremental, and essentially a pragmatic response to European realities, this development was highly controversial in Whitehall at the time. Indeed, it had to be driven through by Michael Heseltine, the pro-European Deputy Prime Minister, against intense political and bureaucratic opposition.

In a further incremental step, in 1999, Tony Blair's Labour Administration established eight Regional Development Agencies in the same territories. These are responsible for promoting economic development, especially the regeneration of the inner-cities. Alongside them 'Regional Chambers' were created, bringing together representatives from local authorities, business, trade unions, voluntary organisations and other regional interests. Compared with the Development Agencies in Wales and Scotland, the English Agencies have relatively small budgets - less than 1 per cent of government expenditure in their regions at the outset (see Table 1) - and are tightly controlled by central Whitehall Departments.

Table 1: Budgets of English Regional Bodies

	Government Office Budget	Regional Development Agency budget 2001-02	Regional Chamber budget	Population
North East	£530m	£173m	£860k	2.6m
North West	£1,044m	£277m	£545k	6.5m
Yorks & Humber	£532m	£222m	£1.5m	5.1m
East Midlands	£392m	£91m	£215k	4.2m
West Midlands	£915m	£159m	£30k	5.3m
South-West	£361m	£92m	£2.1m	4.9m
East of England	£405m	£60m	£0	5.3m
South-East	£530m	£102m	£1.2m	8m
London	£2,202m	£298m	-	7.1m
Total English Regions	£6,911m	£1,474	£6.44m	49m
excluding London	£4,709	£1,176m	£6.44m	41.9m

Source: Mark Sandford and Paul McQuail, *Unexplored Territory: Elected Regional Assemblies in England*, Constitution Unit, July 2001

Nevertheless, the combined impact of the regional Government Offices, the Regional Development Agencies, and the Regional Chambers - significantly more commonly known as 'Regional Assemblies' - has been to create an embryonic government administration for the English Regions, albeit one that is still tightly controlled from Whitehall. During 2000 the English Local Government Association undertook a Review of this emerging machinery which concluded:

“The regional agenda of the last three years has promoted more systematic consultation and partnership working. It has brought regional needs into focus. This could provide the basis for more decentralisation and devolution in the future. But the [inquiry] panel was struck by an inverse relationship between power and accountability of regional bodies. RDAs are the powerful centrepiece of the regional agenda in England; their accountability is widely seen as being more to Whitehall than to the region. The Government Offices are the regional arm, directly accountable to Whitehall. Regional chambers are weak bodies with few means to secure adoption of their views; but they are the most accountable players at regional level.”¹²

¹² Quoted in John Tomaney ‘The Regional Governance of England’ in Robert Hazell (Ed.) *The State and the Nations: The First year of Devolution in the United Kingdom*, Constitution Unit/ Imprint Academic, 2000, p.130.

3. THE REGIONAL CAMPAIGN

During 1999 the Campaign for the English Regions was launched to bring together regional campaigns that were springing up across the country. These include:

- The North East Constitutional Convention
- Campaign for Yorkshire
- West Midlands Constitutional Convention
- South West Constitutional Convention
- North West Constitutional Convention

Most of these organisations emerged towards the end of the 1990s, following the implementation of Scottish and Welsh devolution. An exception was the North East where the Campaign for a Northern Assembly has been in place since 1992. The names of the organisations reflects an aspiration to emulate the success of the Scottish Constitution Convention which during the 1990s brought together diverse Scottish interests to produce a consensus and draw up a detailed scheme for the Scottish Parliament. In the English case, however, they have not yet had time to put together the detailed work achieved by the Scottish Convention. The main energy behind the campaigns is different in the different locations. Hence in the North East it dissident elements within the Labour Party have been the driving force. In the West Midlands trade unions have taken the initiative. In the South West the Liberal Democrats have been prominent, while in the North West and Yorkshire local authorities have been more in evidence. However, all have attempted to gather support from a cross-section of civil society, including MPs, trade unionists and academic and cultural figures. In many cases Church leaders have taken a prominent role, again emulating the Scottish experience. For instance the North East Constitutional Convention is chaired by the Bishop of Durham and the North West Convention by the Bishop of Liverpool. Their primary aim, as articulated by the Campaign for the English Regions, is

“... to secure a commitment in the manifesto of the Labour Party and the other main parties to allow referendums on directly elected and representative regional governments in England in the term of the next Parliament.”¹³

¹³ See the CFER website: www.cfer.org.uk

The presence of these organisations has undoubtedly created a new point of pressure. They have been effective in mobilising support, especially amongst the local Press and media, which is reflected in public attitudes. Such opinion polling that has taken place on the issue has found the strongest support in London, the North East, the South West, and the West Midlands, as Table 2 shows. It was noteworthy in this poll that respondents in all the Regions, whether they supported an elected Assembly or not, agreed by large majorities that Assemblies would look after regional interests better than central government. Moreover, polls subsequently undertaken in individual Regions, especially in the North-East, have found support generally growing.

Table 2: Support for elected Regional Assemblies (March 1999)

	Support	Oppose
London	60	21
North East	51	29
South West	47	39
West Midlands	46	37
Eastern	43	42
Yorks/Humberside	42	42
North West	42	44
East Midlands	40	35
South East	37	47
All	45	38

Source: *The Economist*, 27 March 1999

However, a weakness the English regional campaigns all share is that they are not political in the sense of having a party focus that contests elections and power on a regional basis. In this they contrast vividly with Wales and Scotland where the

presence of nationalist political parties – Plaid Cymru and the SNP - has probably done more than anything else to emphasise national distinctiveness in the modern period. By contrast the regional movements in England tend to be top down, élite-driven constructions, rather than a representative voice of bottom-up protest and demand.

An exception is the campaign in the North-East. In the first instance, and in contrast to other parts of England, it has a strong sense of separation from the centralised polity. For instance, it was not until the late 17th Century that it was represented in Parliament. Its distance from London and closeness to Scotland has also been important. The Campaign for a Northern Assembly was the first of the English regional campaigns to be launched, in 1992. There is evidence, too, that in the North East the campaign is able to tap into a cultural dimension deeper than purely political demands. One example in the early part of 2001 was the ‘repatriation’, albeit temporary, of the Lindisfarne Gospels from the British Museum. Produced in the pre-Norman era during the golden age of the Kingdom of the North, there has long been resentment that these ancient scrolls are not permanently located in the Region of their origin. Exhibited for three months in the Lanark Gallery in Newcastle they were visited by 180,000 people.

4. CENTRALISATION OF ENGLISH POLITICAL CULTURE

There is no doubt, however, that the demand for devolution to the English Regions goes against the grain of British, or more accurately English, political culture as traditionally understood. The aspirations of the various regional English campaigns have to be set against the strength of the Whitehall and Westminster Establishment.

Since Cabinet government developed some three centuries ago, the way to reach the top positions in British politics has been to make a reputation in parliamentary debate at Westminster or in handling a central government department in Whitehall. And since political parties came to dominate the electoral process more than a century ago, the only way to have a chance of doing so starts with a party nomination in a winning constituency.

This centralisation has its roots in the way modern democracy evolved out of Court politics in London. There is an extraordinary continuity in the way the customs and manners of the British parliamentary style conform to the early aristocratic system where sovereignty flowed directly, not just symbolically, from the Monarch. One small example is the position of Chief Whip in the House of Commons. This is the office which is the key to party control in the House of Commons and the title, of course, is derived from fox hunting. The English aristocracy was always open and co-optive in style, one reason why it succeeded in avoiding the violent fate of many of its continental counterparts. Equally, Britain has never been through a revolution of the kind that created the popular, people-centred democracies of most continental states. Instead British institutions have been reformed by slow steps, in an incremental and pragmatic process that has disregarded any logical set of principles. This explains why there is no written constitution and why the British political process relies as much on convention as a legal framework.

Until the coming of the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales, high politics in Britain have focused exclusively on London. Localities and regions have had no voice. So far as England is concerned this is still the case. Few politicians who reach the top in Britain have experience of local or regional politics. In contrast with most European countries, leading British politicians have no need to first make a reputation at a local, constituency or regional level. So, for example, in recent decades there have been no leading figures in British politics with significant experience in local government.

The contrast with continental polities is quite stark. The Federal republic of Germany provides a striking example.¹⁴ In the half century of its life since 1949 it has had just seven Chancellors. Although the first two, Adenauer (1949-63) and Erhard (1963-66) were not without local or regional government experience - Adenauer as Mayor of Cologne (to which he was first elected in 1917), and Erhard briefly as Economics Minister in Bavaria just after World War II - the reputations of both, particularly of Erhard during the 1950s, were made at the national level. However, both had taken office in the federal government before there was time to build up positions in regional state politics. Thereafter career paths to the top of German politics have been different.

Erhard's successor, Kiesinger (1966-69), was plucked directly as Prime Minister of Baden-Württemberg to enter the Federal Chancellery. He gave way the Brandt (1969-74), who had been chosen as the SPD's Chancellor-candidate in 1961 and again in 1965 whilst serving as governing Mayor of West Berlin, essentially because of his success in that role. When power switched back to the CDU under Kohl (1982-98), it was to another former regional Prime Minister of Rhineland-Palatinate 1969-76. Kohl only who moved into national politics when he was chosen to lead his party's challenge for the Chancellery at the 1976 election. In due course Kohl gave way to the SPD's Schröder who won the 1998 federal election whilst serving as Prime Minister of Saxony.

Thus four of the last five German Chancellors were chosen for the top job largely because of their achievements in regional State politics. The fifth, the SPD's Chancellor from 1974-82 is only a partial exception. Schmidt made his first impact in federal politics as a defence expert in the Bundestag in the 1950s. However, he also served in the Hamburg State government in the 1960s.

To list this record is enough to make the contrast with contemporary British, or more accurately now, English politics. Not only is there no career path for ambitious politicians through the English regions, there is no significant regional organisation of the political parties either. If regional government is to come to Britain it must cut across this long tradition of the centralisation of English political culture in Westminster and Whitehall.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Michael Steed for drawing attention to this contrast between British and continental politics. See his article *Will Devolution Change British Parties?* in the journal *Representation*, Spring 1999.

5. MOVES TO REGIONAL ASSEMBLIES

There are signs that this may now happen and very soon. As with all constitutional developments in Britain it is likely to occur incrementally, in a piecemeal way, and without apparent regard for wider implications.

Some straws have been in the wind during the first half of 2001. There has been a strengthening of the Regional Offices and an entrenchment of their communication links with the main departments in Whitehall. The budgets of the Regional Development Agencies have been enhanced. The publication of a Department of Trade and Industry White Paper on *Enterprise, Skills and Innovation* was another indication in the prominent role it gave to regional policy. It noted that the UK is characterised by marked regional disparities and committed the government to ‘a new approach to regional policy’:

“Government must equip all regions and communities with the means to build on their own distinctive cultures, know-how and competitive advantages. This must be a bottom-up approach: the role of central Government must be to ensure that all regions and communities have the resources and capability to be winners. Strong regional policies have shown their worth in other European economies and in the USA” (para. 3.3).

At the same time, in a little-noticed announcement in March, £5 million a year was allocated to the Regional Chambers to spend on support and research staff to enhance their role of scrutinising the Government Offices and the Regional Development Agencies. During the general election campaign in May, the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, announced that the Government would publish a White Paper in the Autumn outlining its plans for the regions.¹⁵ And in the wake of the election Prescott was placed in charge of a new Cabinet Committee on the Nations and Regions.¹⁶ Although no mention was made of English devolution in the first Queen’s Speech following the election, the Press were heavily briefed to expect legislation in the next Queen’s Speech in November 2002.

It is expected that the legislation will provide for referendums in the English Regions to establish elected Assemblies, once the Regional Chambers have resolved that there is sufficient local demand to make the issue worth testing. It is likely that the North

¹⁵ Speech at Wakefield, 30 May 2001

¹⁶ Guardian 11 July 2001

East Chamber will move first, with the prospect of establishing the first English Regional Assembly in 2004, assuming a referendum is successful.

6. ENGLISH QUESTIONS

Although the politics of devolution are often described in terms of the identity politics of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, arguably the most dramatic questions of identity are now being posed within England. The English are having to decide what kind of nation they are. Questions focus on relations with continental Europe and the wider world and now within the British Isles itself. An older generation still cling to elements of an imperial past while the young find patriotism in relation to Englishness problematic. The English are ruled by a political class that is generally uncomfortable with the questions being posed. On the one hand the governing élite remain in thrall to the United States both economically and politically, certainly in terms of military intervention. On the other hand it is hesitant in its approach to European integration characterised by ambivalence around the single currency.

While notions of dual identity are clearly understood and felt within Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the matter is not so straightforward for the English. Being English and British, and even more, English and European, do not resonate so easily. More to the point, the idea of a dual identity internally within England, has even less meaning. Is it possible to be, say Geordie and English, Mancunian and English, Yorkshire and English, or even more stretched, Midlands or South-Eastern and English in the sense that we are talking about specific, separated structures of feeling? Yet here is posed the most dramatic question of all concerning the constitutional future of England and the United Kingdom as a whole. For if the instability of our emerging quasi-federal polity in the United Kingdom is to achieve a more even balance between the partners, then England will need itself to decentralise politically into its constituent regions.

As we have seen, moves are currently afoot to secure just this. However, what emerges may not be full-blown regionalism, in the sense of establishing strong Assemblies that move Britain decisively towards a new federal constitution. To achieve that would require radical change to institutions at the centre, in Whitehall and Westminster. In the first place full-blown English regionalism would involve a dismantling of many large Whitehall Departments, decentralising their functions and personnel to the Regions. The potential bureaucratic rearguard action against any such radical change in that direction can be imagined.

All federal constitutions have a forum at the centre where the component parts are represented - in the German case for example the Bundestrat. What could constitute

such a forum in Britain? The obvious answer is the House of Lords at Westminster. Yet all the reports and discussions in the present long-running debate around reforming the House of Lords have revealed a very small appetite indeed for transforming it into a chamber to represent the Regions and Nations of the United Kingdom.

A third question is this: what precise form might an Assembly that first emerges in one of the English Regions, most likely the North East, take? It was notable that in March 2001, the former Cabinet Minister and close confidant of the Prime Minister, Peter Mandelson, MP for Hartlepool, delivered a speech pressing the case for regional government. However, he did so in a way that suggested a local government approach. That is to say, he advocated a new Regional Chamber for the North East that would combine elected with appointed members.¹⁷

Fourthly, what would be the consequences of asymmetric devolution within England? That is to say, what would be the outcome if parts of England are provided with devolved Assemblies whilst other parts remain without them - the most likely scenario if English political regionalism goes ahead? As a Constitution Unit report has pointed out, this question impacts most directly on the centre:

“ ... a United Kingdom with certain functions devolved throughout the country is very different to one where the same functions have been devolved to only parts of the national territory. This fact is already visible in relation to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: while the whole of England remains under central control, those countries (15% of the UK’s population could be more easily ‘let go’.

The effects of partial devolution in England will vary depending on what model of assembly is selected. Generally speaking, the difficulties caused to the centre by asymmetry will be greater, the greater the powers devolved. But some issues will be raised by the existence of any devolved assembly. An assembly will give the region a greater political voice than regions without assemblies, and provide an alternative electoral mandate to that of Westminster. The Greater London Authority demonstrates that this function should not be underestimated, despite its very modest executive role. The establishment of even one directly elected assembly would require the construction of a framework for devolution

¹⁷ Peter Mandelson, *Regional Policy and the North East Economy*, speech at Hartlepool, 30 March 2001. The speech is carried in full on the Campaign for the English Regions’ website - www.cfer.org.uk

of resources for the whole of England. This would be a complex and controversial task in itself.”¹⁸

Finally, to return to the point made at the outset. There has been very little debate in England, either within the political parties or still less involving the wider public, on the merits or otherwise of regional devolution. Can it be that England, a centralised polity for most of the country since the time of the Normans, will stumble or ‘sleep walk’ into a federation without first having a national debate?

If such a debate were stimulated regional allegiances would be pitched against a single - English - national identity. The charm and perplexity of the English is that, probably, most of them would not be too much concerned about the outcome of the contest.

¹⁸ Mark Sandford and Paul McQuail, *Unexplored Territory: Elected Regional Assemblies in England*, Constitution Unit, July 2001, page 144.