

Devolution and “the Irish Problem”

The Political System of the United Kingdom



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Intro

Devolution after 1997

Scotland

Wales

Ireland

England

Problems of Devolution

Conclusion

Current Events

- ▶ 800 years of Magna Charta
- ▶ EU referendum *not* to be held on May 5, 2016 (local elections)
- ▶ Four candidates for Labour leadership nominated (Burnham, Corbyn, Cooper, Kendall, election in August/September)

Today: Devolution

What is ...

1. Federalism?

Today: Devolution

What is ...

1. Federalism?
2. Devolution?

Today: Devolution

What is ...

1. Federalism?
2. Devolution?
 - ▶ Can be unilaterally revoked/alterd
 - ▶ Central government/parliament has supreme power
 - ▶ Not (necessarily) symmetric, different status for different sub-national units
 - ▶ Sub-national units not normally involved in central policy-making process

The Westminster Model: Unitarism

- ▶ A single, uniform power centre
- ▶ One parliament, one national government, one political will
- ▶ Local government and local politics, but no local (or regional) legislation (byelaws require central Act of Parliament and central approval)
- ▶ **Sovereignty undivided**

A more differentiated view: The Dual Polity Model

- ▶ Political, cultural etc. differences between centre (London) and periphery (all the rest)
- ▶ “High Politics” (e. g. defence, relations with outside world) vs. “Low Politics”
- ▶ Degree of autonomy granted to periphery in sphere of Low Politics
- ▶ **Domination from the centre**

Reality Check: One State, Four Nations

UK maybe a unitary, but never a *uniform* state (cf France after the Revolution)

- ▶ A “state of unions”
- ▶ Wales culturally different
- ▶ Separate Scottish institutions survived after 1707
 - ▶ Separate legal system and judiciary
 - ▶ Separate national church
 - ▶ Distinct university system
 - ▶ Relics of separate administration
- ▶ (Northern) Ireland a special case in many ways

Reality Check: One State, Four Nations

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- ▶ Administrative representation of periphery (government departments)
- ▶ Thatcher/Major government alienated periphery (esp. Scotland) → some demand for devolution, though no widespread support for independence
- ▶ Blair inherited devolution agenda and introduced radical and rather un-coordinated changes (built on existing differences)

Scottish Independence?

- ▶ Union of crowns (James VI, 1603); union of parliaments supported/managed by Scottish elites
- ▶ Disproportionate importance of Scotland within Britain
- ▶ Strong sense of national identity/pride, but little support for independence, moderate support for devolution during 1970s/80s
- ▶ Scotland dominated by Labour and LibDems; Conservative (and Unionist) party practically wiped out north of the border during 1980s
- ▶ Centre-left drive for devolution but not independence

What happened after 1997?

- ▶ Scottish parliament reconstituted in 1999, 129 members elected by AMS
- ▶ Lib-Lab coalitions 99-03 & 03-07; SNP minority government (with Green support) 2007-2011, SNP majority government 2011-16
- ▶ Legislation/responsibility over/for health, education, economic development, local government, law and order, social work & housing, agriculture, fisheries, forestry . . .
- ▶ Can increase/decrease basic tax rate by $\pm 3p$
- ▶ Scotland gets block grant from UK treasury

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- ▶ So far different allocation of funds: more welfare spending, better health care, university fee waiver

2015/2015

- ▶ Scotland voted against independence (55:45), but mobilisation has changed political landscape
 - ▶ Generational divide
 - ▶ Polarisation
- ▶ SNP
 - ▶ From nutty nationalists to dominant force on the left
 - ▶ Labour, LibDems wiped out in General Election 2015
 - ▶ Alex Salmond now in the House of Commons
- ▶ New referendum likely (within 10 years)?
- ▶ “Devo max” promise

Wales

- ▶ Conquered and colonised by England during the 13th century, legally absorbed into England during the 1500s
- ▶ *Cultural* revival during early 20th century, animosities against the English but no independence movement
- ▶ Welsh speaking population down from 50% around 1900 to maybe 20% today
- ▶ Ideological backlash against Thatcher/Major governments (miners' strike); old Labour stronghold

What happened after 1997

- ▶ Extremely slim majority in referendum, Welsh National Assembly since 1999
- ▶ Similar electoral system like Scotland
- ▶ Initially, no legislative or tax powers, no clear separation between government and assembly
- ▶ Government of Wales Act 2006:
 - ▶ Separation of Government and assembly
 - ▶ Possibility of transferring lower legislative powers to Assembly
 - ▶ “Measures” need approval from Westminster
- ▶ Referendum 2011: Assembly can “make laws on all matters in the 20 subject areas it has powers for” (2/3)
- ▶ 99-03 Lab minority/Lab-Lib; 03-07, 07-07 Lab minority, 07-11 Lab-PC, 11-16: Labour minority

Ireland

- ▶ Most complicated case of all
- ▶ English and Scottish colonisation, Catholic stronghold, Protestant settlements in the North
- ▶ 1800 Act of Union, but ongoing struggle for Home Rule/Independence
- ▶ Resistance amongst (Northern) Protestants → partition in 1920/21

Ireland



Source: Guiseppe Milo (CC), <https://flic.kr/p/pKTr3A>

Ireland

- ▶ Self-government for the North 1920-72; separate party system dominated by Protestant majority; discrimination against Catholics
- ▶ Catholic Civil rights movement during 1960s vs. Northern Irish government & protestant groups, deterioration
- ▶ Provisional IRA in 1969, British army called in, the “troubles” – civil war like situation
- ▶ Self-government suspended in 1972, IRA bombings on the British mainland

Peace Process

- ▶ Since 1980s, attempts by UK and Irish government to settle the problem
- ▶ Negotiations between UK government and Sinn Fein from mid-1990s, UK prepared to let Northern Ireland go

Peace Process

- ▶ 1998 Good Friday Agreement (Mitchell) between Ireland and UK
 - ▶ Northern Ireland's status to be decided by majority
 - ▶ Irish government gives up constitutional goal of unification
 - ▶ Ceasefire and eventual de-militarisation
 - ▶ Reform of Ulster Police force, release of prisoners who accepted peace-plan
 - ▶ Devolved assembly + government, STV and power-sharing (suspended several times)
 - ▶ Referenda in Northern Ireland and the Republic, creation of Anglo-Irish councils etc.
- ▶ Mixed record of the assembly, suspended most of the time and strengthening of DUP
- ▶ Northern Ireland (socially/economically) better off than any time in the 20th century

England

- ▶ Assembly for Greater London and directly elected Mayor
- ▶ English accept devolution, but don't want regional parliaments for themselves
- ▶ Attempt to set up regional assembly for North East failed
- ▶ Westminster Parliament decides for UK and England (by far largest part of UK)



Open questions/problems

1. Intergovernmental relations (Scotland/UK)
 - 1.1 Austerity/welfare
 - 1.2 Human Rights Act
 - 1.3 EU referendum
2. Attitudes on Devolution and the West Lothian Question (“English Votes”)
3. What’s the purpose of the UK? Are Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland even further away from the centre these days?
4. Ad-hoc asymmetries – is there a limit for constitutional tinkering?
5. Territorial policy variation (abortion in NI)
6. Conservatives *de facto* an English party; further territorial differentiation of party systems?

Conclusion

- ▶ UK never “unitary state of textbook myth”
- ▶ Radical constitutional changes introduced very casually after 1997
- ▶ Devolution accommodates political problems of the year (or decade)
- ▶ No long-term or joint-up plans – unintended consequences?
- ▶ There will be future developments and consequences – but which?

Class questions

- ▶ To what extent do you think that the reasons Davies suggests in the speech account for the comparatively weaker support for devolution in Wales? What other factors might explain this fact ?
- ▶ The speech articulates a clear desire that the Welsh Assembly will conduct politics in a different way. What does Ron Davies suggest should be the characteristics of this new style of politics?
- ▶ What is likely to happen in Scotland over the next decade?