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The Polycentric State: New Spaces of Empowerment and Engagement?

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Abstract

New Labour claims to have radically reformed territorial governance structures in the UK by devolving political power to the Celtic nations and London, begetting the most enduring legacy of the first Blair government. More recently it has sought to extend its devolution agenda by embracing city-regionalism and the new localism, ostensibly to create new spaces of empowerment and engagement. But devolution is not the whole story of New Labour's attitude to power. On the contrary, this article argues that New Labour is a modern Janus because its commitment to devolving power, so clear in principle, is more equivocal in practice. Drawing on these three devolution narratives, the article concludes by assessing the implications for the current debate about relational versus territorial readings of place politics.

Key Words: Territorial politics, devolution, city-regions, new localism

JEL Codes: H77, P25, P26

1. Introduction

When the history of New Labour comes to be written one of the main challenges will be to explain its Janus-faced attitude to power. By devolving power to the Celtic nations and London, New Labour claims to have introduced a truly significant reform of the territorial structure of governance, allowing the UK to jettison its image as the most centralised state in the European Union. What is more, if current proposals for devolving power to city-regions, local authorities and neighbourhood communities are ever realised, then it can rightly claim to have done more than any other government to build the foundations of a polycentric state in the UK. This can be defined as a state where there are multiple centres of democratic deliberation, where pluralism informs the warp and weft of everyday political life and where decision-making is part of a lattice-like structure of lateral connections, all of which is far removed from the centralised, hierarchical, London-centric state that dominated the political life of the UK throughout the 20th century.

But devolution is not the whole story of New Labour's attitude to power. The truth of the matter is more complex because, in office, New Labour has shown itself to be something of a modern Janus: while it is formally committed to devolving power, as evidenced by its track record in London and the Celtic nations, it is at the same time pathologically obsessed with control. Be it the party, the government, the Commons, the Lords, the media, local government or indeed the devolved administrations themselves, New Labour seems congenitally bent on manipulating outcomes to such an extent that its commitment to devolving power, so clear in principle, seems more equivocal in practice.

Although devolution tends to dominate the debate about constitutional reform in the UK, creating the impression of a robust polycentric state in the making, the sobering truth is that

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3 political power is highly concentrated when key decisions are made. If the most significant
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5 power of the state is the capacity to wage war, then the UK can be said to have a presidential
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7 political system in all but name. Nothing better illustrates this stark constitutional fact than the
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9 exercise of foreign policy - particularly the UK's role in the invasion of Iraq and its equally
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11 disturbing stance on the Israel/Lebanon war, where it was the only country to support the US in
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13 refusing to call an immediate ceasefire - a decision for which the prime minister was
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15 personally responsible.
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22 One of the many casualties of these conflicts was parliamentary democracy itself. In the case
23
24 of the Israel/Lebanon war, prosecuted during the summer of 2006 when parliament was in
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26 recess, more than 100 Labour MPs implored the government to recall parliament so that they
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28 could perform one of their key functions, namely to hold the executive to account. Being
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30 powerless to recall itself in times of crisis was disconcerting, but the greatest ignominy was the
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32 realisation that the prime minister could declare war and peace without any reference to
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34 parliament.
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41 The source of this presidential power is the 'royal prerogative', the archaic system whereby
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43 crucial powers are exercised by the prime minister even though they nominally rest with the
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45 crown. If foreign policy is the most egregious example of this presidential style of politics, one
46
47 could add many others, like the momentous occasion when the prime minister announced that
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49 Britain will go nuclear 'with a vengeance' even before his own energy policy review had
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51 reported. Chastened by these experiences, one Labour Party critic has gone so far as to argue
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53 that 'power is now more centralised in Britain than at any time since the second world war'
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55 (Meacher, 2006). Other Labour critics were driven to ask 'what was the point of the Glorious
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3 Revolution if even in the 21st century parliament cannot choose when and how it should meet?’
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5 (Trickett, 2006).
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10 The fact that momentous decisions could be taken with little or no reference to parliament
11 provides a damning indictment of the shallow nature of democratic renewal after three
12 successive New Labour election victories. If the polycentric state is about the creation of new
13 spaces of empowerment, it clearly needs to include the *centre* as well as the devolved
14 territories because, on the basis of recent political history, parliament is a space which urgently
15 needs to be empowered, or re-empowered to be precise. Although the following sections are
16 largely devoted to the politics of devolution beyond the centre, this does not mean that central
17 government, Westminster and Whitehall, is not part of the polycentric state. The 'provincial'
18 focus of this article reflects the fact that, surprising though it seems, central government
19 remains largely unaffected by devolution to date. With the failure to transform the Lords into a
20 largely elected second chamber went the vision of it fulfilling a quasi-federal role by
21 representing the nations and regions of the UK (Hazell, 2004). Ironically, a democratic second
22 chamber might have prevented the cash-for-peerages scandal which plagued the end of the
23 Blair premiership.
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46 Like foreign policy and nuclear energy, the cash-for-peerages scandal underlines one of the
47 central themes of this article, which is that devolution needs to be situated first and foremost in
48 the debate about democratic renewal. What makes this debate more urgent than ever is the
49 advent of what Colin Crouch calls *post-democracy*, which refers to an atrophied democracy
50 where 'many citizens have been reduced to the role of manipulated, passive, rare participants'
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52 (Crouch, 2004:21).
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6 Since devolution takes many forms, progressive as well as reactionary, we cannot assume it is
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8 a wholly benign force in the world. To explore the unfolding reality of devolution in the UK
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10 this article asks whether devolved governance has created, or is likely to create, new spaces of
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12 empowerment and engagement? This question is posed in the context of three different
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14 devolved spaces: the spaces of *actually existing devolution* in London and the Celtic nations;
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16 the proposed spaces of *city-regionalism* in England; and the proposed spaces of the *new*
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18 *localism*, which is also called 'double devolution' because it supposedly entails devolving
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20 power to and from the town hall.
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27 Having explored the politics of devolution in three different spatial contexts, the article
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29 concludes by drawing out the implications of this analysis for current debates about *relational*
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31 versus *territorial* readings of place. Far from being purely theoretical or academic in nature,
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33 the outcome of these debates carries important political implications for the way we think
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35 about (and engage with) territorially-based institutions.
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40 **2. Spaces of Actually Existing Devolution: The Promise and the Practice**

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42 The long-standing claims and counter-claims about devolution are no longer part of an abstract
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44 debate because, with the advent of devolved administrations in London and the Celtic nations,
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46 there is now a concrete political reality to which we can refer. For good or ill the practical
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48 experiences of these devolved administrations (DAs) will influence the future debate as to
49
50 what form(s) devolution will assume in the UK in the 21st century. In this section the primary
51
52 aim is to offer a critical assessment, albeit a painfully condensed one, of what has been
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54 achieved to date in the light of the original prospectus for devolution in each territory. Though
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56 the point attracts surprisingly little attention, it is worth saying that the underlying rationale for
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3 devolution was far from uniform across the territories, and this may help to explain the
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5 different ways in which the DAs are perceived and judged in Scotland, Wales and London.
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10 *The Rationale for Democratic Devolution*

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15 Although Scotland and Wales were the pioneers of *democratic* devolution in the UK, building
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17 on decades of administrative devolution, the rationales for a Scottish Parliament and a National
18
19 Assembly were decidedly different. Many arguments were advanced for a Scottish Parliament,
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21 but the campaign was first and foremost predicated on a 'claim of right' from a historic nation
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23 seeking to regain part of its lost statehood. But other arguments were important too, and these
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25 had a differential appeal to different sections of Scottish society. In very simple terms,
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27 arguments focusing on *process* - like the need for more open, democratic and participative
28
29 governance - tended to resonate most with the elites in Scotland. On the other hand, arguments
30
31 about policy *outputs* - like the need to improve the quality of public welfare - naturally had a
32
33 wider appeal. Coming as it did after eighteen years of Conservative rule, which spawned the
34
35 emotive issue of the poll tax, many Scots were persuaded to support devolution in the 1997
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37 referendum as a way of preventing 'the imposition of unwanted policies' from Westminster and
38
39 Whitehall (Mitchell, 2004: 17).
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49 Of the two Celtic nations, Scotland had mobilised the stronger cross-party support in favour of
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51 democratic devolution, and much of the credit for this must go to the Scottish Constitutional
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53 Convention, a broad-based civic movement which caught the imagination of people beyond the
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55 narrow and self-referential world of party politics. Although Scotland and Wales are generally
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57 bracketed together in historical accounts of devolution, the differences are at least as
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59 compelling as the similarities. The mindset of the Labour Party - the dominant party in both
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3 countries and therefore the principal political vehicle for delivering devolution - was totally
4 different, a fact that coloured the referendum result as well as the longer term trajectory of
5
6 post-devolution politics (Taylor and Thomson, 1999; Morgan and Mungham, 2000).
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12 The ideology of one-partyism, born of prolonged electoral hegemony, pervaded the Wales
13 Labour Party and this more than anything else persuaded its officials that it had no need to
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15 forge pacts or alliances with others, be they political parties or social movements. This helps to
16
17 explain why Wales had no cross-party equivalent to the SCC, which helped to build a wider
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19 constituency for the cause of democratic devolution in Scotland. What further distinguished the
20
21 two Celtic countries was that a Scottish Parliament was seen as a 'claim of right' from a historic
22
23 nation whereas in Wales the Labour Party tried to smuggle an Assembly into being as part of
24
25 its proposals for local government reform because it feared that appeals to nationhood might
26
27 compromise its British credentials and inadvertently play into the hands of Plaid Cymru, the
28
29 nationalist party. The ideology of one-partyism explains the refusal to work with others, and a
30
31 reluctance to campaign openly on the Welsh national question led to what has been called the
32
33 'smuggler's road to devolution', all of which helps to explain why the Welsh referendum result
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35 was so much closer than the Scottish result (Morgan and Mungham, 2000:15).
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46 In contrast to the Scottish 'claim of right' the Welsh rationale for democratic devolution had a
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48 political and an economic dimension: to create a stronger 'voice' for Wales in the corridors of
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50 power in London and Brussels and to secure an economic dividend from more devolved
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52 powers (Welsh Office, 1997). The economic accent of the Welsh devolution campaign helps us
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54 to understand why economic development policy remains so much more politicised in Wales
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56 than in the other devolved territories. It also helps to explain why so many non-economic
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3 policy domains, like health, education and culture for example, tend to be framed and
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5 evaluated in terms of their economic impact (Morgan, 2006).
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10 The main rationale for democratic devolution in London was different again, concerned as it
11 was to right the wrong of 1986, when the Thatcher government had unceremoniously
12 abolished the Greater London Council. Here the overriding rationale was to redress the
13 'democratic deficit' by creating a democratically elected city-wide authority headed by a strong
14 executive mayor who could provide firm leadership for 'a great capital city in the new
15 Millennium' (DETR, 1997: para.1.09).
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27 Whatever their differences the common denominator in each case was the hope and belief that
28 democratic devolution would enable these newly empowered spaces to fashion more open and
29 accountable systems of governance through which such spaces could better address their
30 respective problems, one of which was popular alienation from the political process itself.
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39 *The Devolution Settlements in Scotland, Wales and London*

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43 If the rationale for democratic devolution varied across the three territories, the actual
44 devolution settlements varied even more. With primary legislative power together with a tax-
45 varying power, the Scottish settlement was by far the most significant of the three. Bolstering
46 Scotland's constitutional package of powers was a financial settlement from central
47 government that remains the envy of every part of the UK, which paradoxically renders
48 Scotland vulnerable in the new post-devolution landscape. Although the Scottish Parliament
49 has used these powers to develop some policies that are distinctively different to Blair's
50 Westminster government, as we shall see presently, these are the exceptions to the rule that
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3 parallel policies have been the order of the day, which is perhaps not surprising with Labour in
4 office in London and Edinburgh (Mitchell, 2003).
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10 If the predicted divergence between London and Edinburgh failed to materialise, at least to
11 date, the devolution settlement has triggered smouldering resentment in England, especially
12 within the Conservative Party, where one of the key issues is the celebrated *West Lothian*
13 question - that is, the ability of Scottish MPs to vote on Westminster matters and the inability
14 of Westminster MPs to vote on Scottish matters. The clearest sign of this resentment at
15 Westminster has been the progress of the Parliament (Participation of Members of the House
16 of Commons) Bill, which would enact 'English Votes for English Laws'. The bill was given its
17 third reading in April 2006 and now lies dormant, having achieved its aim of publicising the
18 perceived unfairness of the devolution settlement (Constitution Unit, 2006).
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34 The weaker demand for devolution in Wales, evidenced in the wafer-thin referendum vote for
35 an Assembly, resulted in a much weaker devolution settlement, with no primary legislative
36 power and no fiscal power. Here lies the great paradox of Welsh devolution: more is expected
37 of the National Assembly for Wales in economic development terms, even though it has fewer
38 constitutional powers than the Scottish Parliament. Despite the profound limitations of the
39 (original) settlement, the Assembly acquired powers that were considered worth having, not
40 least the power to spend its allocated budget according to its own priorities and the power to
41 regulate quangos. The latter was a resonant issue in Wales because the Conservatives had
42 controversially used the public appointments process to extend their influence through the
43 unelected quango state after failing to win election through the ballot box (Morgan and
44 Mungham, 2000). Nevertheless, these powers could not conceal the shortcomings of the initial
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3 devolution settlement, which one constitutional expert claimed were incompatible with the
4 dispersal of power that devolution is intended to achieve (Bogdanor, 1999).
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10 Famously described as 'a process not an event', devolution has been a highly protean political
11 project in Wales in recent years. Such were the limitations of the original settlement that new
12 demands quickly emerged for parity with Scotland, and this pressure secured the Government
13 of Wales Act 2006, which established a new road map for Wales to eventually acquire
14 legislative powers on the Scottish model.
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24 London, too, could in future vindicate the claim that devolution is 'a process not an event'
25 because the original constitutional settlement for the capital was the weakest and most
26 constraining of the three. At the heart of this settlement was the newly created Greater London
27 Authority (GLA), which consists of a directly-elected executive mayor and a directly-elected
28 assembly to scrutinise the mayor's proposals and actions. Although the GLA was given a very
29 limited tax-raising power (in the form of a council tax precept on the boroughs), its general
30 governing powers were modest even by the standards of the National Assembly for Wales. The
31 sheer novelty of the London settlement, where the mayor became the UK's first directly-
32 elected executive politician, should not obscure the fact that it has profound limitations. As it
33 currently stands the GLA has few powers, limited resources and it shares the governance of
34 London with 32 boroughs and the City of London whose collective budget dwarfs its own net
35 budget. Far from being an accident, however, this fragile and unsustainable state of affairs was
36 a conscious design. Since a more powerful settlement was perceived to be a threat to central
37 government powers, 'Whitehall departments worked hard to ensure the powers granted to the
38 GLA would remain limited' (Travers, 2004:59).
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3 As in Wales, the original devolution settlement in London is being modified in a process of
4 learning-by-doing. Although central government has began to extend the powers available to
5 the London mayor, critics insist that this process needs to go a lot further if the capital is to get
6 the leadership it needs. For some critics a new devolution settlement needs to be agreed for
7 London, including full transfer of powers in transport, police, economic development, fire and
8 planning services; more power to shape borough decision-making; and, the most sensitive
9 issue of all, more devolution of tax-raising power to the mayor (Travers, 2004). Although there
10 is no clear consensus as to the way forward for London governance, it is already clear that the
11 status quo is not a viable option for the future.
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27 *The Practice of Actually Existing Devolution*

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32 New political cultures cannot be fashioned overnight, and it is premature to form definitive
33 judgements about the institutions of actually existing devolution when the DAs have barely
34 finished their second terms. Nevertheless, 6-7 years is surely long enough for us to venture
35 some provisional judgements about the DAs and what (if anything) they have achieved in
36 terms of their processes and outputs.
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46 As regards process indicators, the picture is more mixed than devolutionists may care to admit.
47 On the positive side there seems to be broad agreement that, in a remarkably short space of
48 time, the DAs have helped to fashion more open, transparent and accountable systems of
49 governance in their respective territories (Trench, 2004; Chaney, 2006). This argument clearly
50 carries more weight when applied to Scotland and Wales than to London, where the GLA is
51 only one small part of a complex and bewildering governance system which has been aptly
52 described as 'a rococo layering of government departments, regional offices, appointed boards
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3 (and their London sub-divisions), city-wide elected government, joint committees, the 32
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5 boroughs and the City of London' (Travers, 2004:185).
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10 Advocates hoped that, by creating institutions that were territorially more proximate to their
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12 populations and which operated in a more open and inclusive style, democratic devolution
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14 would encourage citizens to re-connect with the political process by encouraging greater
15
16 electoral participation for example. However, these hopes were seriously misplaced if the early
17
18 electoral evidence is anything to go by. Indeed, far from helping to reverse the decline in
19
20 electoral participation, democratic devolution 'appeared to have made its own distinctive
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22 contribution to the trend towards disengagement' (Curtice, 2004:218).
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29 Electoral participation in the devolved elections in Scotland and Wales in 2003 was just 49%
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31 and 38% respectively, significantly lower than the inaugural elections in 1999. London fared
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33 even worse, with turnout as low as 35% in its first devolved election in 2000. The sharpest
34
35 differences in turnout were in age, with younger people much less likely to vote than older
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37 people, fuelling the charge that the 'youth of today' are uninterested in and disengaged from
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39 politics, a highly questionable conclusion which conflates political activity and voting
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41 behaviour (Power Commission, 2006).
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48 In both Scotland and Wales it seems that the DAs are perceived to have less influence over the
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50 quality of life than the UK government, though more recent evidence suggests that this may be
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52 changing. Paradoxically, public attitudes to the DAs in Scotland and Wales were becoming
53
54 more positive despite lower turnout between 1999 and 2003, a trend which suggests that
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56 antipathy to democratic devolution was not a substantial factor in explaining electoral
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58 participation (Wyn Jones and Scully, 2004). In Wales the largest bloc of opinion wishes to see
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3 devolution extended further, believing that 'Wales should remain part of the UK, with its own
4 elected parliament which has law-making and taxation powers' (Electoral Commission,
5
6 2006b). For its part the Scottish Parliament is perceived to be highly trusted and accessible and
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8 it is 'seen as having more integrity than the UK Parliament' (Electoral Commission, 2006a). In
9
10 both countries, however, there continues to be a great deal of ignorance about the DAs,
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12 especially regarding their remit, their powers and their politicians.
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20 Although we should not belittle the problem of poor electoral participation in the new spaces
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22 of democratic devolution, two qualifications need to be made about conventional
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24 interpretations of devolved electoral behaviour. First, this needs to be seen as part of a much
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26 wider process of apparent decline in voter engagement in modern democracies, particularly in
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28 the case of 'second-order' elections (Wattenberg, 2002; Franklin, 2004; Jeffery and Hough,
29
30 2003). Second, and more importantly, political engagement should not be narrowly identified
31
32 with - and reduced to - electoral participation. In the case of Wales, for example, democratic
33
34 devolution has opened up the political process to a wide array of social, economic and
35
36 environmental partnerships, amounting to some 2000 in all, with as many as 40,000 'seats' in
37
38 total (Bristow et al, 2003). But the single most significant change in participation has been the
39
40 *engendering* of political culture: having been governed by a gerontocracy for decades, the 1999
41
42 Assembly election produced the second highest proportion (46%) of women elected to a
43
44 national body in Europe, a figure that increased to 50% at the 2003 election (Osmond, 2004).
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46 Far from being a purely symbolic gesture, the dramatic infusion of female politicians had the
47
48 effect of elevating a whole series of issues - like equal pay, domestic violence and childcare for
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50 example - up the political agenda in Wales (Chaney, 2006).
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3 But to what extent have the new processes produced new or better policy outputs? The short
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5 answer is that the DAs have arguably done enough to justify their existence, a view shared by
6
7 the Constitution Unit, which found 'solid support for their existence' (Trench, 2004:7). Even in
8
9 London, where the GLA has struggled to establish itself in the capital's Byzantine governance
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11 system, it managed to fire the public imagination more than any other DA when it successfully
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13 introduced the congestion charge. Even critics concede that the congestion charge would
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15 probably not have been introduced without the audacity of Ken Livingstone, the mayor,
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17 because it was perceived as too much of a risk for a risk-averse central government. Since its
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19 introduction in 2003 up to 70,000 fewer cars travel into central London ever year, creating
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21 more demand for buses, which in 2004 carried 6 million passengers, the highest for forty years.
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23 These transport policy dividends, and the plans for water conservation, air quality, local food,
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25 affordable housing and better waste management, are part and parcel of the mayor's goal of
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27 transforming London into a 'sustainable world city' (GLA, 2004). If transport witnessed the
28
29 mayor's biggest success, it was also the stage of his biggest defeat. In 2001-02 Livingstone
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31 unsuccessfully took the government to court over its plans for a public-private partnership on
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33 the London Underground. The idea that the 'voice of London' could trump central government
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35 was a triumph of hope over experience because, when faced with a UK government committed
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37 to a particular policy outcome, 'sub-national governments can only negotiate marginal
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39 victories' (Sandford, 2004:159).
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50 The least powerful of the DAs, the GLA has nevertheless received the most publicity on
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52 account of the colourful persona of the mayor and because of the metropolitan provincialism of
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54 the London-based media. However, the Scottish Parliament can also lay claim to a number of
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56 substantive policy outputs that constitute 'devolution dividends' for the people directly affected.
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58 The most notable dividends are to be found in the areas of social inclusion (such as free
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3 personal care for the elderly and opposition to student top-up fees) and social citizenship (such
4 as a freedom of information policy that is more robust than the English version and a
5 pioneering school food policy that set new benchmarks for other nations and regions in the
6 UK). These substantive policy outcomes sprang from policy divergences that reflected the fact
7 that Scotland continues to embrace the social democratic values that New Labour seems to be
8 diluting in England (Keating, 2005). However, the extent of policy divergence in Scotland
9 should not be overdone. Indeed, with the exception of the above examples, policies north of
10 the border have tended to follow an incremental, path-dependent trajectory inherited from the
11 pre-devolutionary era (Mitchell, 2004).
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27 Path-dependency, and how to break its prosaic but powerful grip, has been a major problem for
28 the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG). Having evolved out of the Welsh Office, which was
29 a policy-taker rather than a policy-maker, the WAG inherited neither the competence nor the
30 confidence to design policies that diverged from the Whitehall template (Morgan and
31 Mungham, 2000). Nevertheless, over the course of two terms a minority Labour government
32 has sought to make a difference across a broad front, especially in terms of economic renewal,
33 health and sustainable development. On the economic front, where devolution dividends were
34 widely anticipated, the picture has been at best mixed. The best results have been associated
35 with employment, the issue on which the Labour government decided to fight the 2007
36 election. Launching the campaign the First Minister said that 'a full employment society has
37 been re-created over the past nine years' (Livingstone, 2006). While the growth rate of jobs
38 created has indeed been above the UK average, critics point to the quality of the jobs, which
39 may explain why Welsh wages remain stuck at the foot of the UK pay league. There is also a
40 real debate as to whether the WAG can actually claim credit for job growth in health and
41 education, sectors fuelled by large scale public spending driven by the UK Treasury.
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6 But other policy innovations are less contested, particularly the new public health strategy with
7
8 its accent on preventing illness rather than merely treating it; a more creative public
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10 procurement policy, for which the WAG has won professional awards for its pioneering work;
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12 and efforts to weave sustainable development principles into its policies and activities, as
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14 required by section 121 of the Government of Wales Act, which for the first time in the EU
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16 legally required a government to promote sustainability. While all these can justly claim to be
17
18 new policy outputs, as there was no precedent in the pre-devolution era, it would be premature
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20 to say they have had a positive public welfare impact because their timescales are necessarily
21
22 long term (Morgan, 2006a). Much the same can be said of the most distinctive policy
23
24 innovation of all, namely the incredibly ambitious attempt to fashion a citizen-centred model
25
26 of public services that is radically different to New Labour's consumerist model. The origins of
27
28 the citizen-centred model lie in the celebrated 'Clear Red Water' speech in which the First
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30 Minister, Rhodri Morgan, said:
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39 'our commitment to equality leads directly to a model of the relationship between the
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41 government and the individual which regards that individual as a citizen rather than as
42
43 a consumer. Approaches which prioritise choice over equality of outcome rest, in the
44
45 end, upon a market approach to public services, in which individual economic actors
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47 pursue their own best interests with little regard for wider considerations' (Morgan,
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50 2002)
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55 Although this citizen-centred model certainly poses a major challenge to New Labour's
56
57 consumerist model, the key question is whether it can deliver high quality public services, a
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59 question that will have to be answered during the third term of the Assembly according to a
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3 review which said the citizen-centred model was bold but challenging, a real test of small
4
5 country governance capacity (Beecham, 2006).
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10 Looking at the three spaces of actually existing devolution, the evidence seems to suggest that,
11
12 notwithstanding the limits of empowerment and engagement, none of the devolved territories
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14 would substitute the new governance arrangements for a return to Whitehall government.
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16 Where does this leave the devolution project in the UK today? According to one constitutional
17
18 expert the devolution project contains at least two items of 'unfinished business', namely the
19
20 absence of any significant measure of devolution in England outside London and the
21
22 minimalist response to devolution in central government, where the machinery of Westminster
23
24 and Whitehall seems impervious to the fitful rise of the polycentric state (Hazell, 2004)ⁱ.
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30 **3. City-Region Narratives: City-centric or Polycentric Spaces?**

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33 If regional devolution is a matter of 'unfinished business' for orthodox devolutionists, it is a
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35 failed and exhausted model for those who believe that cities, and their regional hinterlands,
36
37 should be the sub-national locus of devolved power. The rise of the city-region as a spatial
38
39 narrative in the UK is little short of remarkable because, in a very short space of time, it has
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41 been propelled from the marginalia of the London-based think-tanks to the top of New
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43 Labour's political agenda (Parr, 2005). Nor is this a purely British phenomenon because 'there
44
45 is a growing international corpus of work that seems intent on privileging the 'city-region' as a
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47 spatial-analytical category' (Ward and Jonas, 2004:2134)ⁱⁱ. In the UK context, however, the
48
49 most pertinent questions would seem to be why city-regions and why now?
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56 As regards the 'why now' question there seems little doubt that the city-region concept filled
57
58 the vacuum created by the resounding defeat of the orthodox model of devolution for England,
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60 based as it was on Elected Regional Assemblies (ERAs). This model, championed at the

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3 highest levels of government by John Prescott, the Deputy Prime Minister, imploded in 2004
4 when scarcely 1 in 10 electors voted for it in a referendum in the North East - the English
5 region which was believed to be most receptive to the ERA model (Rallings and Thrasher,
6 2006). Strictly speaking this was a personal defeat for Prescott rather than the government as a
7 whole because a number of ministers, including the Prime Minister himself, had never been
8 committed to the ERA model of devolution and they privately welcomed the referendum result
9 as an opportunity to press for alternative models.
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22 This was the vacuum into which the city-region concept was pressed from a number of
23 different quarters, showing that the 'city-region lobby' is not a homogenous entity with a single
24 political agenda. On the contrary the politics of city-regionalism in the UK are complicated by
25 the fact that the concept has multiple sponsors, each of which has its own political agenda.
26 Three sponsors merit special attention because they are arguably the most influential, the
27 Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), the Core Cities Group and some influential
28 London-based think-tanks. Let us briefly examine each sponsor before addressing the key
29 issues in the emerging city-region debate.
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43 Until the referendum defeat in 2004 the *regional* dimension of devolution and development
44 was the top political priority for John Prescott, a principled position he had championed long
45 before New Labour came to office in 1997 (Mawson, 1998; Morgan, 2006a). However, the
46 departments he headed, DETR and ODPM, also had a brief for cities as well as regions, and
47 this urban focus grew progressively more important after the launch of the 'Urban Renaissance'
48 white paper in 2000. This city-centric agenda assumed even more significance in ODPM
49 following the defeat of the regional agenda in the 2004 referendum, with the result that the
50 department became the chief ambassador for cities (or rather for the 'core cities' of England)
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3 within central government. The central message of this new city-centric agenda was aptly
4 captured in one of the most influential reports ever published under the auspices of the ODPM,
5
6 the title of which - *Our Cities Are Back: competitive cities make prosperous regions and*
7
8 *sustainable communities* - said it all. Far from being the sclerotic entities they were once
9
10 deemed to be, cities are now being asked to play an awesome array of roles, the most important
11
12 of which were: to be the 'powerhouses' of the knowledge economy; to be the 'drivers' of
13
14 regional and national economies; and to help the government to meet its commitment to reduce
15
16 the persistent gap in growth rates between the regions (ODPM et al, 2004).
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24 Significantly, the ODPM report was co-authored by the Treasury, the DTI, the English
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26 Regional Development Agencies and the Core Cities Group, an unprecedented pot-pourri of
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28 public bodies with different spatial briefs, all of which helps to explain why the main sub-
29
30 national spatial scales - regional, urban and local - feature so prominently in the title (ODPM,
31
32 2004). However, following the defeat of the orthodox regional agenda, there was more reason
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34 to give the city-centric agenda a wider, more inclusive spatial focus and the city-region concept
35
36 was a convenient way to marry the urban and the regional, two agendas that had hitherto
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38 evolved in distinct policy communities with little or no communion.
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46 Although ODPM has been the chief ambassador for cities and city-regions within Whitehall, it
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48 no longer has the field to itself. In recent years the Treasury has taken a keen interest in the role
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50 that cities and regions can play in boosting the UK's economic growth, especially its poor
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52 productivity (HM Treasury 2001; 2006). Just as regional planning was enrolled into a national
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54 economic growth strategy in the 1960s, so cities and regions are being enlisted for a similar
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56 purpose today. As we will see, however, the Treasury may not be as committed to city-regions
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3 as some other Whitehall departments, underlining the simple but important point that central
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5 government is not a single, undifferentiated actor.
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10 If central government departments had their own reasons for sponsoring a city-region agenda
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12 from 'above' as it were, the Core Cities had reason enough to sponsor it from 'below'. Formed
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14 in 1995 the Core Cities sought to raise the profile of England's provincial cities in the corridors
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16 of power, hoping to counter the systemic influence which London and its regional hinterland
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18 seemed to exert on policy-makers. In 2002 the Core Cities invited the government to establish
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20 and lead a high level group to help them to become 'drivers of growth for their regions'. This
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22 was duly constituted as the Core Cities Working Group with a brief 'to enable the major
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24 regional cities to fulfil their potential as drivers of the urban renaissance and the economic
25
26 competitiveness of their regions and thereby strengthen the national economy's capacity for
27
28 growth' (ODPM et al, 2004). The eight Core Cities - Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool,
29
30 Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield - have no doubt raised their profile over the
31
32 past decade, and brought their city-region agenda to Westminster and Whitehall in the process,
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34 but they have certainly not devalued the hegemony of London and southern England in the
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36 corridors of political power (Morgan, 2006a).
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46 The final sponsor of the city-region concept that deserves attention is the metropolitan think-
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48 tank network that has an influence in central government way beyond what its size might
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50 suggest. Within this network the most prominent think-tanks are the New Local Government
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52 Network, the Institute for Public Policy Research and the Work Foundation, all of which have
53
54 produced influential reports extolling the role of cities and city-regions (NLGN, 2005;
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56 Marshall and Finch, 2006; Jones et al, 2006). Of the three the NLGN has been the most active
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58 in this field, having convened a City Regions Commission to examine the principles for 'a new
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2
3 settlement for English city and regional governance' following the failure of the ERA model of
4
5 devolution. Though primarily focused on the economic case for city-regions, particularly the
6
7 role they (are assumed to) play in boosting UK competitiveness, the NLGN report also argues
8
9 that city-regionalism could form the next step of local government reform, floating the idea
10
11 that 'elected city-region mayors are not impossible either' (NLGN, 2005). When distilled the
12
13 core message of all three think-tanks is essentially the same: city-regions could generate a net
14
15 economic dividend if only central government was bold enough to empower them by
16
17 devolving a range of powers to this new scale of governance. In some variants of this argument
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19 heroic assumptions are made about the positive association between political leadership and
20
21 economic growth, fuelling the charge that 'city-regions look more like articles of faith than
22
23 articles of fact' (Gonzalez et al, 2006:316).
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32 Though still in its infancy the city-region debate seems likely to revolve around the following
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34 issues:

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38 • *Economic reductionism*: a vast corpus of the literature, and this is especially
39
40 true of the think-tanks, treats the city-region as a largely one-dimensional
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42 concept; that is, as a vehicle for economic boosterism. To the extent that other
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44 sectors (like transport, skills, housing and spatial planning) are invoked at all,
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46 they are deemed to have a secondary status because they are enrolled in support
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48 of the economic drive. In simple terms, they have value or significance only to
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50 the extent that they serve the primary purpose of promoting economic growth.
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55 • *City-centric growth*: it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that the principal
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57 beneficiaries of city-region growth will be the core areas of the cities given that
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59 the 'spread effects' tend to be weak. This spatial bias is likely to raise alarm bells
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3 in other parts of the region, especially in rural areas, where there will be fears
4
5 that urban politicians are seeking to enlist the resources of the region for the
6
7 benefit of the city
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- 10 • *City-centric governance*: the city-centric bias assumes a political form with the
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12 proposed elected city-region mayors, which raises the spectre (for non-urban
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14 areas) that the urban electorate could elect a leader whose writ would extend
15
16 beyond the jurisdiction of the city
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- 19 • *Spatial disparities*: although some proponents see city-regions as a means of
20
21 redressing the North-South divide, this is a profoundly superficial argument
22
23 because there are no mechanisms to mobilise the resources, public and private,
24
25 that would be necessary to discriminate in favour of the North (Morgan, 2006a;
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27 Gonzalez et al, 2006).
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34 Some proponents of city-regionalism are more alive to these problems than others. A good
35
36 example here is the work of Harding, Marvin and Robson, who were commissioned by the
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38 ODPM to produce a framework for city-regions following the collapse of the regional model
39
40 of devolution. Though broadly supportive of the concept, their analysis calls for 'a sensitive
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42 city-regional perspective on strategic planning' rather than a narrowly economic strategy and,
43
44 given the experimental nature of the exercise, it ought to be trialled in Leeds and Manchester,
45
46 the northern cities with the greatest developmental potential and the only candidates likely to
47
48 act as 'a counterweight to the Greater South East growth axis'. As regards governance
49
50 structures the authors insist that these have to be driven from below rather than imposed from
51
52 the top and, in the short term, these should aim to create semi-statutory partnership
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54 arrangements - in transport, economic development, skills, housing, cultural services and the
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56 like - to which powers could eventually be devolved. In contrast to the strident advocacy of the
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3 think-tanks, these authors emphasise the limits of their proposals, freely conceding that a 'key
4 limitation we ran into in the study was as much about knowledge as commitment. Put starkly,
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6 we simply do not know enough, currently, about the functioning of individual City-Regions,
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8 the interaction between City-Regions and the implications that would follow from such an
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10 understanding about appropriate policy responses' (Harding et al, 2006:39).
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17 The knowledge deficit concerning city-regions did not prevent central government from using
18 the concept to inform The Northern Way, its flagship programme to regenerate the three
19 northern English regions. In fact, this programme highlights some of the problems associated
20 with the city-region concept, not least the inordinate focus on the urban core of the city-region,
21
22 which coincides with the places that are already doing well. Nor was this a programme that
23
24 emerged from the demands of local and regional actors in the North; on the contrary this city-
25
26 centric programme was largely driven from the top by one particular Whitehall department,
27
28 John Prescott's ODPM. Equally significant are the wider implications for spatial inequalities in
29
30 the UK because, following the new city-regional policy trend, 'the Northern Way has
31
32 reinforced the view that rather than focusing on regional disparities, government policy should
33
34 focus on urban competitiveness' (Gonzalez, 2006:26).
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46 Although city-regionalism has been gaining ground as the new model of devolution and
47 development in England, will it retain its popularity in the post-Blair era? If Gordon Brown
48 becomes the next Prime Minister the views of his chief adviser, Ed Balls, may be a telling
49
50 factor. The idea that elected city-region mayors are the best alternative to regional governance
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52 structures, an idea most strongly associated with the IPPR think-tank, persuaded Balls to write
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54 a rebuttal in which he and his Treasury colleagues bluntly said:
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3 'We are deeply sceptical about the case for city-region government writ large - and
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5 believe it is false to suggest a choice has to be made between new powers for cities on
6
7 the one hand, and the current structure of regional and local economic decision-making
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9 on the other' (Balls et al, 2006:16)
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15 Though not opposed to city-regionalism per se Balls argues that devolution, if it is to serve a
16
17 progressive cause, demands 'a regional approach which guarantees all citizens, whether
18
19 resident in 'city regions' or the 'rest of the regions', are included and engaged'. Significantly,
20
21 perhaps, there was also the reminder that the ERA legislation remained on the statute book,
22
23 'capable of being triggered and the question put at a time in the future' (Balls et al, 2006:29).
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29 Whatever form devolution assumes in the post-Blair era it is clear that the successful model
30
31 will have to mobilise the support of a new political coalition, including a new Prime Minister.
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33 At the moment an evolutionary regional model seems to be the favoured choice in the
34
35 Treasury, while the main redoubt of city-regionalism seems to be the Department of
36
37 Communities and Local Government, which inherited many of the functions of Prescott's old
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39 ODPM empire. Either way, the governance of England's cities and regions will continue to be
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41 determined by Westminster and Whitehall, such is the centralised nature of political power in
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43 Britain's largest nation. .
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For Peer Review Only

4. The New Localism: Spaces of Empowerment and Engagement?

If the regional and city-regional models of devolution are largely animated by economic development considerations, the *new localism* originally emerged in the context of public service reform and local government modernisation (Filkin et al, 2000; Corry and Stoker, 2002). While the regional and city-regional models are concerned to empower institutions, the new localism avowedly aims to empower individuals as well as institutions at the local level. However, one of the many problems with the term is that there is no consensus as to what it means, and this 'flexibility' is one reason why all the main political parties in the UK have declared themselves in favour of some variant of 'localism' in recent years.

Rival interpretations of new localism are not confined to ritual disputes between the parties. On the contrary, deep ideological differences are also evident at the highest levels of government, reflecting the divisions between the neo-liberal and social democratic factions inside the Labour Party - with the former wanting to devolve power to individuals as consumers in quasi-markets, and the latter preferring to treat individuals as citizens who are part of a community of users of public services. Far from being just a territorial matter, this debate involves some of the biggest binary disputes in contemporary politics - like the state/market, public/private and collective/individual disputes.

The notion of devolving power to individuals in their capacity as consumers was first introduced into the UK as part of the Thatcherite offensive against the public domain. Two common threads ran through the Conservative public service reforms. The first involved the separation of the purchaser function from the provider function so as to foster a 'contract culture' in each public service, part of an audacious strategy to create quasi-markets within the state sector. The second was the reduction or removal of local government involvement in the

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3 new governance arrangements, thus adding to the centralisation of power, a perverse outcome
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5 of a strategy ostensibly designed to devolve power. But this was not designed to be devolution
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7 to lower territorial tiers within the state, rather it was to be devolution beyond the state. This
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9 radically new, neo-liberal model of devolution was first articulated by William Waldergrave,
10
11 the Conservative minister in charge of the Citizen's Charter:
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17 'The key point in this argument is not whether those who run our public services are
18
19 elected, but whether they are producer-responsive or consumer-responsive. Services are
20
21 not necessarily made to respond to the public by giving citizens a democratic voice in
22
23 their make-up. They can be made responsive by giving the public choices'
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26 (Waldergrave, 1993).
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32 This is indeed the key point. The clear implication of Waldergrave's argument is that the
33
34 traditional democratic mechanism of accountability (the ballot box) had been made redundant
35
36 by the advent of new market-based mechanisms of accountability as embodied in the Citizen's
37
38 Charter, an oxymoron if ever there was one. The most egregious aspect of this new model of
39
40 devolution was that it extolled the market over the ballot box, reducing the multi-faceted
41
42 citizen to a one-dimensional consumer. In short this was a brazen attempt to substitute
43
44 consumerism for citizenship in the name of devolution (Morgan and Mungham, 2000).
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51 Aside from foreign policy the issue of public service reform is undoubtedly the deepest
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53 ideological fissure within the Labour Party. Putting it simply, the pro-Blair faction is deeply
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55 attracted to this consumerist model of devolution, which is why it champions choice, diversity
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57 and pluralism in the design and delivery of public services. In contrast, the pro-Brown faction
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59 has been more concerned with equity considerations, which pre-disposes it to centrally-
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3 controlled solutions in the name of equality. Devolution creates new problems for the welfare
4 state, not least because greater diversity can lead to greater inequalities - one reason why
5 traditional socialists and social democrats are once again singing the praises of the centralist
6 state (Walker, 2002b).
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15 These stylised ideological divisions are perhaps too coarse and caricatured to do justice to the
16 changing political realities inside the Labour Party, not least because the Brown faction is also
17 committed to a form of new localism - or 'constrained discretion' in the felicitous words of
18 Brown's chief adviser (Balls, 2002a). All governments, says Balls, are tempted to use
19 command and control techniques to deliver their key reforms, but this was no longer possible
20 because:
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32 'in today's complex world, it is simply not possible to run economic policy or deliver
33 strong public services using the old, top-down, one-size fits all solutions. Excessive
34 centralisation saps moral at local level. It destroys innovation and experimentation...We
35 are devolving power to those best placed to make decisions to deliver agreed goals and
36 standards. But we have to be careful to strike a balance, particularly in public services
37 such as health and education, between encouraging local flexibility and rewarding
38 success on the one hand and our firm commitment to tackling inequalities in provision
39 and preventing two-tierism in public service delivery' (Balls, 2002b:6).
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53 Although Brown is often derided as an unreconstructed centralist by the pro-Blair faction, the
54 truth of the matter is somewhat more nuanced. The Brown faction is above all committed to
55 what it calls 'constrained discretion', which means that it is committed to devolving power - to
56 national institutions like the Bank of England, to regional institutions like the RDAs and to
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3 local authorities - so long as they are able and willing to meet centrally-determined goals and
4 standards. This is what really separates the Brown and Blair factions. The former wants public
5 services to be designed and delivered through central-local state partnerships, where the local
6 authority earns its autonomy by meeting the targets set by the centre, which is a highly
7 attenuated form of devolution within the state. In contrast, the latter is committed to a neo-
8 liberal model based on consumer choice, even though there are serious doubts as to whether
9 the public has the requisite information to exercise choice or indeed whether it actually wants
10 more choice.
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24 Whatever their differences, all political parties seem to have recognised that the central-local
25 government relationship is so dangerously skewed towards centralism, especially in England,
26 that local authorities have become de facto agents of Whitehall. Creeping centralisation under
27 successive post-war administrations has fashioned a local government institution that lacks
28 power, resources and local engagement. It was to address the problem of an emasculated local
29 government and a disengaged public that David Miliband coined the term 'double devolution'
30 to refer to the devolution of power from central to local government and through the latter to
31 citizens and communities. Miliband, the first cabinet minister for communities and local
32 government, and Labour's most imaginative thinker, argues that freedom without power makes
33 a mockery of devolution. Hence, if the 20th century was about enhancing personal freedom,
34 'the mission for the 21st century must be to spread power to citizens both to act individually
35 and collectively' (Miliband, 2006). Miliband's successor also claims to be committed to the
36 cause of 'devolution to and from the town hall' (Kelly, 2006).
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58 Some of these ideas were incorporated into the 2006 White Paper on local government in
59 England, which focused on new local governance arrangements to promote 'strong and
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3 prosperous communities'. Centrally inspired performance indicators were to be slashed from
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5 1,200 to 200; local authorities were given new incentives to develop stronger executive
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7 leadership, including directly elected mayors; more than 20 public bodies and agencies were
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9 assigned a duty to cooperate with local councils to deliver stronger Local Area Agreements;
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11 new Multi-Area Agreements were to be designed for councils that wished to work across local
12
13 authority boundaries, a fillip to city-regionalism; and local people are to be given the power to
14
15 petition overview and scrutiny committees on any issue and, where they desire it, to be
16
17 engaged as co-producers in the design and delivery of services (DCLG, 2006). Although most
18
19 local government leaders gave it a cautious welcome, the White Paper fell far short of being a
20
21 'new settlement' between central and local government for one very simple reason - it was
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23 published ahead of four major government reviews of local government finance, transport,
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25 housing and planning, and skills, each of which carries enormous implications for local
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27 government. Without knowing if these powers would be devolved to local government, the
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29 White Paper was described as being 'like Hamlet without the prince' (Timmins, 2006).
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39 The local government establishment prides itself on its democratic mandate, the one thing that
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41 sets it apart from all the other actors at the sub-national level. But the town hall can be as
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43 remote from local people as Whitehall, and there is nothing inherently benign in local decision-
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45 making, which can be 'capricious, short term and selfish' (Walker, 2002a). This is one of the
46
47 reasons why there continues to be a good deal of scepticism in central government about local
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49 government's capacity to engage with, and deliver to, its local citizens. However, if local
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51 government has been more responsive to its national masters than to its local citizens, this is
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53 partly because the regulatory framework is skewed that way, with 80% of local government
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55 reporting activity done for the benefit of central government and just 20% for local benefit
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60 (Kelly, 2006; Mulgan and Bury, 2006; Stoker, 2005).

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6 The longer term prospects for the new localism can be interpreted in two different ways. On
7
8 the pessimistic side it has to be said that the central-local government relationship looks as
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10 asymmetrical as ever, with control over local government funding, priority setting and
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12 performance assessment all firmly in the hands of central government, leaving the local level
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14 anything but empowered (LGA, 2003; Sullivan, 2007). On the optimistic side, by contrast,
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16 there is a growing recognition that the centralised command and control strategy is subject to
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18 diminishing returns, leaving the central state unable to effect progressive change without the
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20 active involvement of empowered local authorities and engaged local citizens (Corry and
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22 Stoker, 2002; LGA, 2006).
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30 Whatever its political fate, the 'local realm' is not the simple, undifferentiated realm it is
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32 assumed to be in some variants of new localism. The local space of the local authority, for
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34 example, is being reconfigured and rescaled like never before. On one side it is being stretched
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36 outwards as a result of central government pressures to collaborate with others to achieve
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38 economies of scale and deliver savings to meet the Gershon targets for public sector efficiency.
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40 On the other side its internal space is becoming ever more differentiated as citizen groups are
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42 encouraged to assume more control over their neighbourhoods, a process that could spell more
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44 inequality if it gives a stronger political voice to citizens who are best able to use that facility
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46 to demand more from the local authority in the name of double devolution. This brings us back
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48 to the classic conundrum of devolution: how to sustain a tolerable marriage between
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50 democracy and equality, two equally important values that carry different social and spatial
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52 implications.
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5. New Political Spaces: Bounded *and* Porous, Territorial *and* Relational

A polycentric state is beginning to emerge in the UK, albeit in a tentative, uneven and contested fashion, and its clearest expressions are to be found in London and the Celtic nations, where devolved governments have been established. But that is not the end of the matter. Whatever their shortcomings the debates about city-regionalism, new localism and double devolution suggest that the pressures to devolve power are far from exhausted, signalling that territorial politics will become *more*, rather than less, important in 21st century Britain. Although this would seem to be an unexceptional comment, indeed a statement of the obvious, the continuing significance of territory - how it is constituted, by whom and in whose interests - has disconcerted theorists, old and new. For example, modernist theories of capitalist development assumed that territorial allegiances were cultural residues of a pre-modern age, primordial features of society that would dissolve once modernisation got underway in earnest, allowing political activity to be organised around functional issues like class, rather than territorial issues like nation or region (Rokkan and Unwin, 1982; Keating, 1998; Morgan, 2001).

If territory was written out of the early modernist scripts of development, something analogous is happening today, with post-modern geographers arguing for a relational and non-territorial reading of place because 'globalisation and the general rise of a society of transnational flows and networks no longer allow a conceptualisation of place politics in terms of spatially bound processes and institutions' (Amin, 2004:33). The problem with the mainstream view, according to this perspective, is that it continues to conceptualise cities and regions as 'territorial entities'. But in relational terms 'cities and regions come with no automatic promise of territorial or systematic integrity, since they are made through the spatiality of flow, juxtaposition, porosity and relational connectivity' (Amin, 2004:34). This relational reading contains a trenchant

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3 criticism of the mainstream territorial approach to devolutionist politics, which is said to be
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5 'grounded in an imaginary of the region as a space of intimacy, shared history or shared
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7 identity, and community of interest or fate. These have become the motivating cultural reasons
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9 for a politics of local regard and local defence to be delivered through devolution' (Amin,
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11 2004:37).
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17 Based on a topological rather than geometric view of space - that is to say a view of space that
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19 abstracts from physical distance and focuses on connections and nodes in networks - the
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21 relational perspective offers a powerful antidote to the notion that places act as 'agents' or
22
23 constitute the 'hearth of an unproblematic collectivity' (Massey, 2004:17). However, this
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25 perspective is not without its critics. The criticisms include Sayer's realist critique of the
26
27 topological conception, which he believes obscures 'the difference that space makes' (Sayer,
28
29 2003:13), and Lovering's political critique of the relational turn as a symptom of the 'new
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31 imperial geography' (Lovering, 2006). From the standpoint of this article, however, there are
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33 two other problems with the relational perspective. In the first place it is a caricature of the
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35 mainstream view of cities and regions; by juxtaposing relational and territorial readings of
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37 place, as though they are mutually exclusive, it creates a binary division that is wholly
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39 unwarranted. Second, like its modernist forbears, it leaves the impression that territorial
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41 political affinities are antediluvian, parochial or even reactionaryⁱⁱⁱ.
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51 A less caricatured and more discriminating view of territorially-based politics would insist that
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53 it is a wholly contingent question as to whether regionalism, for example, assumes a
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55 progressive or a reactionary form. The devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and
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57 London may be spatially bound institutions, but they also constitute new spaces of deliberative
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59 democracy that have rendered public debate more open, more diverse and more cosmopolitan.
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3 They have helped to foster multiple rather than singular identities within their respective
4 territories and, beyond their territories, they have engaged like never before with global
5 networks of development, especially in Africa, proving that these newly empowered, but
6 bounded political institutions are seeking to extend the spatial scope of beneficence beyond
7 their immediate populations to include distant and different others (Smith, 1998). For all its
8 shortcomings, the internal debate within the newly devolved territories suggests that
9 devolution can help to fashion a universalistic ethic of care rather than a particularistic ethic
10 confined to the 'near and dear' within the newly devolved political borders. What this
11 suggests, in short, is that the caricatured regional imaginary conjured up in the relational
12 critique of territorially-based politics is not merely theoretically questionable, but politically
13 emasculating.
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32 To overcome the debilitating binary division between territorial and relational geography we
33 need to recognise that political space is bounded *and* porous: *bounded* because politicians are
34 held to account through the territorially-defined ballot box, a prosaic but important reason why
35 we should not be so dismissive of territorial politics; *porous* because people have multiple
36 identities and they are becoming ever more mobile, spawning communities of relational
37 connectivity that transcend territorial boundaries.
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48 If relational readings of devolution construe it as a backward-looking attempt to conserve
49 regional identities that are closed and exclusionary, others see it as part of a forward-looking
50 process that is helping to fashion a new constitution for an old country. On this reading the UK
51 is engaged in a process, apparently unique in the democratic world, of codifying an unwritten
52 constitution, the cornerstone of which is the Human Rights Act. Democratic devolution means
53 that this new constitution will be a quasi-federal one because, so far as the Celtic nations are
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3 concerned, Westminster is now primarily concerned with foreign affairs, defence and macro-
4 economic policy, since most other policies are devolved. Devolution, on this reading, is
5
6 'introducing the federal spirit into the British state for the first time' (Bogdanor, 2003).
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8 Congenitally suspicious of territorial politics, especially nationalism, large swaths of the left
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10 are also unsure what to make of constitutional reform, though notable exceptions have argued
11
12 that such reform is central to the creation of a genuinely modern polity (Barnett, 1997; Nairn,
13
14 2002; 2006). The polity that is emerging in the UK is part and parcel of a EU system of multi-
15
16 level governance, where national states no longer enjoy a monopoly of political power.
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18 Although they remain the most important political actors in the multi-level polity, national
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20 states have to share their authority with supra-national and sub-national actors whose support
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22 needs to be secured, not commandeered (Hooghe and Marks, 2001). Shared competences in
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24 the multi-level polity make it more and more difficult to assess the performance of these
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26 political levels.
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36 Assessing the newly devolved spaces in the UK ultimately comes down to a *political*
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38 judgement rather than a desiccated cost-benefit analysis. If one is concerned about the
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40 coarsening of political debate in the UK, about the atrophied nature of parliamentary
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42 democracy and the fact that there are too few forums for democratic deliberation, then one
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44 might be inclined to support devolution to Scotland, Wales and London as a step towards a
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46 more pluralist politics. Mounting a defence of democratic devolution does not mean pulling
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48 one's punches about its shortcomings. On the contrary, some of these shortcomings were
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50 highlighted in section two, like the limited nature of political empowerment in London and
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52 Wales, the poor public engagement as measured by electoral turnout and the fact that
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54 devolution dividends are not more readily apparent to the public.
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3 Although there have been devolution dividends, it is difficult to discern a clear 'economic
4 dividend' at this point. This is less surprising than we may think because the 'dirty little secret'
5 about devolution is that the international evidence base for the supposed 'economic dividend' is
6 at best ambiguous and at worst absent (Morgan, 2006a; Rodriguez-Pose and Gill, 2005). Yet
7 the regional model of devolution was expressly sold to the English regions as a means of
8 delivering an economic dividend, a message that failed to persuade. It was also sold as a means
9 of redressing the democratic deficit that exists in the English regions as a result of the
10 unplanned and unaccountable growth of public bodies, spawning a regional tier that continues
11 to flourish. After the referendum defeat there is no longer 'a coherent narrative of what the
12 regional tier is for within the governance of England' (Tomaney, 2006). It is for this reason that
13 England is said to be 'the gaping hole in the devolution settlement, and the space where
14 everything is still to play for' (Hazell, 2004:263).

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34 City-regionalists are today making the same claims about an 'economic dividend' as English
35 regional campaigners made in the 1990s, except that the city-region is substituted for the
36 region. The gung-ho wing of city-regionalism, for whom an elected city-region mayor is the
37 key to unlocking growth, may end up as disappointed as their regionalist forbears because,
38 even if city-region mayors were to emerge in England's provincial cities - an unlikely but not
39 impossible scenario, it is wholly unrealistic to expect this single political innovation to deliver
40 an economic dividend. City-regionalism in England may have inadvertently undermined itself
41 by framing its cause in such narrow economic terms. The inordinate emphasis on economic
42 growth fosters a zero-sum mentality about winners and losers, fuelling suspicions that city-
43 regionalism is merely a flag of convenience for a city-centric agenda. A wider frame of
44 reference - like the creation of a strategic planning area for the joint management of transport,
45 housing and waste, for example - would allow more scope for building a positive sum game

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3 among participants. In other words there is more scope for collaborative engagement and, more
4 importantly, for getting ahead together, if the exercise was animated by sustainable
5 development and polycentric planning rather than competitive city-regionalism (Ravetz, 2000;
6 Gonzalez, 2006; Morgan, 2006c).
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15 In contrast to city-regionalism the debates about new localism and double devolution seek to
16 connect devolved governance with a broad quality of life agenda; under the new proposals for
17 England, the empowerment of local government will be conditional on its engagement with,
18 and accountability to, the citizens and communities it serves. The formal realm of local politics
19 is often deemed to be more accessible to citizens than other realms on account of its spatial
20 proximity to voters, prompting some theorists to argue that there is 'considerable scope for
21 evading the problems of post-democracy at local level' (Crouch, 2004:114).
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34 But there are two problems with this conception. First, spatial proximity can easily morph into
35 spatial fetishism, where the 'local' realm is perceived to be a benign realm of positive attributes
36 juxtaposed to a 'global' realm that is the converse. As we saw in the last section, however, the
37 formal realm of local politics can be remote and inaccessible despite its physical proximity.
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39 Second, while local victories are not without significance, they are part of a realm that is
40 nested in (and subject to) a spatial hierarchy of power, which is why the local needs to be
41 defended globally and why, therefore, 'we can never ever be purely 'local' beings, no matter
42 how hard we try' (Harvey, 1996:353). To illustrate this point we need only think of some of the
43 barriers facing local food campaigns, not the least of which are EU procurement regulations
44 and WTO trade rules (Morgan et al, 2006).
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3 All the devolution debates considered here - actually existing devolution, city-regionalism and
4 new localism - raise unnerving questions about the implications of devolving power to sub-
5 national territorial entities. A polycentric state raises in a particularly acute form the issue of
6 territorial rivalry, for example, an issue which is managed behind closed doors in a centralised
7 state. If territorial rivalry is to be contained within tolerable limits, and if the UK is to preserve
8 its geo-political shape as a multi-national state, a new and more robust system of territorial
9 justice will have to be fashioned on the basis of social need (Morgan, 2006a; 2006b).
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22 The social and spatial inter-dependences that sustained the UK in the pre-devolution era were
23 rarely if ever openly articulated, so much so that they remained below the surface of the public
24 realm, part of the subterranean political world of a country that took a perverse delight in its
25 unwritten constitution, even though the latter was really the perfect symbol for a secretive and
26 archaic state. In the polycentric state, however, this won't do. On the contrary, these social and
27 spatial bonds will have to be affirmed in an open and deliberative fashion, otherwise the
28 territorial integrity of the UK is under a greater threat than we realise. In today's febrile
29 political climate, where the 'war on terror' paradoxically fosters the very existential insecurity it
30 is ostensibly designed to quell, it becomes ever more important to affirm social and spatial
31 solidarities at home and abroad. Therein lies the road to real security.
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59 ⁱ Whitehall and Westminster may be forced to take a more active interest in devolution following the May 2007
60 elections because the Scottish National Party – which is formally committed to taking Scotland out of the UK –
emerged as the largest party and formed a minority government, signalling that territorial politics is far from a
thing of the past.

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ⁱⁱ The OECD has also joined the chorus in favour of city-regions. In a recent territorial review of Newcastle and the North East, it called for ‘an elected city-region body with its own finances’ even though there is very little local support for this form of devolution in the region.

ⁱⁱⁱ To be fair, Ash Amin freely concedes that his argument runs the risk of caricaturing the politics of regional devolution in the UK.

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