

Book Review

Devolution and Localism in England

David M. Smith and Enid Wistrich
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In the autumn of 2015 the first Chancellor of a Conservative Government to address a Conservative Party Conference in 18 years, George Osborne, famously, or notoriously, proclaimed that England was in the midst of a devolution revolution. The devolution revolution is now the cornerstone of the government's attempts to re-balance the economy. Growth and City Deals (agreed between Whitehall and local levels of Government), Enterprise Zones, Neighbourhood Planning areas and the government's commitment to fiscal decentralisation have signalled potentially the biggest decentralisation of power, responsibility and finance in living memory. Illustrating the ambiguity in these new arrangements, there is some debate in relation to the financial potency of these new provisions, compared with the previous era of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). While the allocation of direct funding under devolution deals is certainly dwarfed by the Single Pot under the repealed RDAs, this is more than made up for with the £26 billion Business Rate receipts decentralised to local authorities under the Business Rate Retention Scheme. However, the equalisation of these receipts between local authorities is less straightforward in the lead up to the full roll-out of the scheme in 2020 where an area-based division between winners and losers is likely.

These changes have taken place against the backdrop of austerity and an unprecedented reduction in centrally allocated local government funding (the centrally administered Revenue Support Grant will be phased out by 2020). In response to this situation, cities up and down the country have been pitching, negotiating and agreeing devolution deals that will set out the road map for their own futures. Increasingly, towns, cities and counties are expected to stand on their own two feet and run and fund their own public services and local economic development strategies.

Immediately, this signals divergence between the rhetoric of devolution and localism and the reality of its administrative delivery on the ground. One of the main contradictions running throughout the devolution and localism debate is the emphasis placed on neighbouring local authorities (and neighbourhoods) working together (amidst the fuzzy boundaries of scalar devolution), not least as a means for trying to make meagre resources go further. Yet, this is seen in contrast to the imperative for local authorities to compete with one another for limited financial resources, such as local business rates, in order to pay for the enhanced responsibilities implicit in devolution and localism.

This dynamic and contested situation, compounded by the recent independence referendum in Scotland in the popular imagination, and the less well known (but no less influential) cross-party Smith Commission on further devolution powers to Scotland makes any attempt to survey the landscape of devolution and localism in England fraught with the dangers of passing time and events. The fear is that any such effort is rendered irrelevant before it is published. It is tempting to aim this accusation at *Devolution and Localism in England* by David M. Smith and Enid Wistrich which ends its empirical investigation during the first flowerings of the sub-regional Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) in the early part of the decade. However, to do so would be a disservice to a well-reasoned and argued book that lays a conceptual and historical foundation for the discussion of devolution and localism in England.

Early on (pages 2-5) the authors define devolution, equating it with decentralisation and contrasting it with federalism, where ultimate power is still held by Westminster under the English brand of devolution - this is welcomed. Similarly, the authors devote an entire chapter (Chapter 6) to the evolution and pragmatic reality of localism. However, despite conceding on page 58 that there is considerable ambiguity in the meaning and practice of localism in England, the book would have benefited from an earlier conceptual treatment of localism (and its synergy - or lack thereof - with devolution). Ideally this would have taken place in the first chapter, in order to provide a conceptual framework for the rest of the book. This would have also provided an opportunity for the authors to deal with some of the ambiguities and broad creative chaos currently held in English devolution and localism, with both terms regularly used interchangeably but holding different meanings and scales of relevance - for instance, between that strand of devolution that emphasises the increasing powers of communities, such as Neighbourhood Development Plans, and the different strand that emphasises devolution at the city-region scale.

However, an alternative perspective would be that the book was published at just the right point and provides a staging post in time when the previous model of centralised government provision (one of the most centralised in the world) and the New Labour emphasis on regionalism began to break down in favour of an embryonic stage of devolution and localism. Indeed, in a relatively short period of time the traditions of central and local government have been torn-up in favour of a plethora of new policy instruments ranging from Neighbourhood Planning, a new wave of Enterprise Zones and the previously mentioned City, Growth and Devolution Deals. However, further illustrating the continuing subservience to Westminster and ambiguous nature of devolution and localism, in contrast to federal forms of government (characterised by a separation of power from the state), central government continues to specify the composition and funding conditions for many of these deal-based instruments. Exacerbating this issue, there has been very little emphasis given to the implications for local service delivery or the views of those stakeholders in the public, private and third sectors tasked with managing the fallout of these sudden changes.

It is therefore timely that Smith and Wistrich chose to engage regional elites to understand the progress of devolution in England, particularly how successive governments have tried to engage English people in sub-national democratic processes while dealing with the realities of governance. The authors trace the historical development of decentralisation through regional policies up to and including the general election in 2010 (touching on the watershed 2007 Sub National Review and 2008 White Paper - Communities in Control - which heralded the advent of New Localism) and the subsequent radical shift away from regionalism to localism since 2010.

In a relatively short book it is laudable that the authors provide such a careful grounding in some of the basic terminology of devolution and localism. More importantly, they begin to explain the myriad and overlapping institutional arrangements that have adapted and changed in meaning as new directions in devolution and localism have been considered over time. The main empirical sections of the book can be split into two parts, the end of the New Labour Government project and the first flowerings of the Coalition Government project in the aftermath of the 2010 general election. Firstly, Smith and Wistrich consider decentralisation and governance in England and the UK before questioning whether there is a role for English Regional Governance. They then consider English region and sub-regional institutions within issues of regional and sub-regional identity and engagement in Chapter 3. They argue that in order to make policy relevant to local concerns, it must be coherent with what 'local' means to local people. Their main finding, from interviews, is that there is an inverse relationship between the existence of local identity (more likely at the neighbourhood, town and city scale) and the practical ability to deliver economic and strategic planning (even the sub-region was seen as too small). This reflected an earlier finding in Chapter 2 that indicated the necessity of a regional institutional set-up (and local authorities working together) for planning, transport and infrastructure.

The second part begins with an appraisal of Coalition Government policy and the death of the regions. The authors then consider the centrality of cities since 2010 under the Coalition Government, the concept of the city region and the subsequent focus on economic growth and the devolution of powers. However, the authors do not delve too far into the pragmatic reality of this situation (perhaps because of its emerging focus). For instance, while cities and their hinterlands may have been the key policy discourse, the reality was that Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) were a patchwork quilt of regions, counties and ad hoc and incoherent amalgams - rather than a reflection of real economic geographies (it can be argued that the passage of time has already seen LEPs marginalised by combined authorities and similar working arrangements).

The final section provides a critical reflection of localism and the pragmatics of good governance in England. It is in this section that Smith and Wistrich provide a useful discussion of the contradictions inherent in these new localist approaches, highlighting in particular the inability to achieve consistent levels of economic development and security in finance to support these untried arrangements. This suggests some underlying tensions in the contemporary devolution and localism agenda; is it fair to devolve power (and blame) to locations that cannot wield it? The authors conclude their book by arguing that devolution in England, as yet, appears to lack any consistent framework within which it is to be applied. This final point is difficult to refute, except to follow this up by arguing that this is perhaps the new reality of entrepreneurial local government and public service provision in England.

An easy criticism of the book would be to challenge it for lacking a robust grounding in academic literature and not picking out some of the central implications within the empirical research. However, when the book is viewed in totality this omission is a key strength (notwithstanding the need for a greater conceptual discussion of devolution and localism in Chapter 1) because it replaces academic debate with the practitioner's viewpoint. So often ignored, this approach provides a coalface account of what devolution and localism means to those on the ground and the opportunities and challenges faced by regional and local political, administrative, business and voluntary sector actors and stakeholders. A particular strength of the book is the open voice given to local government officers and public and third sector workers who are regularly

maligned as inefficient, but rarely get the opportunity to put their own views forward in defence.

Although, Smith and Wistrich provide a justification for not revealing the case study locations, maintaining that confidentiality leads to greater candour and forthright opinion, it is impossible, and therefore a distraction, not to spend a great deal of time trying to second guess which locations are under investigation. A similar methodological outcome could have been achieved by maintaining job title confidentiality, but disclosing which locations were under investigation. At the opposite end of the methodological spectrum, after taking so much care to maintain confidentiality in relation to the location of research there is little discussion in relation to selection of the elite stakeholders and the connotations and ambiguities in the term 'elite.' This deficit could be improved by referencing some of the research by Aberbach and Rachman (2002), Harvey (2011) and McGuinness et al. (2015) in relation to conducting and analysing elite research interviews.

Overall, *Devolution and Localism in England* provides an initial grounding for anyone researching the progress of devolution of governance in England. Encouragingly, due to the time frame of analysis, the book also recalls an era when devolution was a central pillar of Labour Party discourse, sadly lacking in the current period. However, due to the vigorous rate of change in the research area the book is already in need of a second edition. It is certainly a victim of its subject matter, as the current Conservative Government continues to re-draw the boundaries of the decentralisation and devolution debate in England. Yet, this also presents an opportunity for the authors and the relevant academic community as it demonstrates the continued salience and volatility of the subject area, the need for critical oversight and the requirement for alternative perspectives to the current Conservative hegemony in order to counterbalance a one-sided debate. Perhaps a second edition could reflect on the period following the empirical research in order to probe some of the contradictions involved in devolution and localism. For instance, it would be interesting to reflect on the rhetorical demand for local authorities to work together at the sub-regional scale (and its necessity if planning, transport, infrastructure and economic development is to be managed strategically), and the entrepreneurial reality of local authorities having to potentially compete with one another for financial resources, for instance business rates, at the same scale.

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