



Is An English Backlash Emerging?

Reactions to devolution ten years on

John Curtice

February 2010

© ippr 2010

Institute for Public Policy Research

Challenging ideas – Changing policy

About ippr

The Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) is the UK's leading progressive think tank, producing cutting-edge research and innovative policy ideas for a just, democratic and sustainable world.

Since 1988, we have been at the forefront of progressive debate and policymaking in the UK. Through our independent research and analysis we define new agendas for change and provide practical solutions to challenges across the full range of public policy issues.

With offices in both London and Newcastle, we ensure our outlook is as broad-based as possible, while our Global Change programme extends our partnerships and influence beyond the UK, giving us a truly world-class reputation for high quality research.

ippr, 30-32 Southampton Street, London WC2E 7RA. Tel: +44 (0)20 7470 6100 E: info@ippr.org
www.ippr.org. Registered Charity No. 800065

This paper was first published in February 2010. © ippr 2010

About the author

John Curtice is a Research Consultant to the National Centre for Social Research and Professor of Politics at Strathclyde University.

Acknowledgements

This paper is published as part of ippr's 'Answering the English Question' project, which is kindly funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. Previous publications from this project include *The English Question: The view from Westminster* by Michael Kenny and Guy Lodge, www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=724, and *More than One English Question* by Michael Kenny and Guy Lodge, www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=667. A final report will be published in early 2010.

The author would like to express his thanks to colleagues on the British Social Attitudes survey for their help and encouragement. The cost of including the questions reported here on the 2008 and 2009 surveys was funded by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) from its own resources. Previous waves of survey work were funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, the Leverhulme Trust, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and NatCen. The views expressed here are solely the responsibility of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of any of the funding organisations or of ippr.

Further details about British Social Attitudes can be found at www.natcen.ac.uk/natcen/pages/or_socialattitudes.htm#bsa

Introduction

The introduction of devolution in Scotland and Wales was probably the most radical of the set of constitutional reforms implemented in the early years of Tony Blair's government. The change meant that most decisions about Scotland's domestic affairs would now be decided by the country's own parliament in Edinburgh, while the Welsh Assembly acquired responsibility for administering key public services in Wales, albeit within the framework of laws decided by Westminster.

Yet for some of its critics there was a large and potentially dangerous hole in the devolution settlement – England. Labour originally had it mind to introduce elected regional assemblies in England. However, this idea eventually bit the dust when the Government's proposal to establish an elected assembly in the North East was defeated in a referendum in November 2004. In practice England has, for the most part, continued to be governed by the UK Government and Parliament in much the same manner as before. Scottish and Welsh MPs still have a say – and potentially a decisive say – in its affairs. At the same time Scotland and Wales continue to enjoy the higher level of government spending per head that has long been a feature of UK public expenditure. Such obvious unfairness, it has been argued, is bound, eventually, to generate an English 'backlash'.

The British Social Attitudes survey, an annual high quality social survey conducted by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) (Park *et al* 2010) has taken a close interest in how public opinion in England has developed following the advent of devolution in Scotland and Wales. During the course of the last decade it has regularly asked people in England about their national identity, how they would like their country to be governed, and how they feel about the distribution of public spending. If devolution to Scotland and Wales were indeed generating an English 'backlash', we might anticipate that increasingly people in England would say they felt 'English' rather than 'British', would want to have devolution for themselves, and would resent the higher levels of public spending per head enjoyed by Scotland and Wales.

In the early years of devolution, however, there was little sign of such developments (Curtice and Seyd 2001, Curtice and Sandford 2004, Curtice 2006). Over half consistently said they were happy for England to continue to be run from Westminster. No more than one in four said that Scotland received more than its fair share of public spending. While it is true that from 1999 onwards more people than before were inclined to say they were 'English' rather than 'British', this did not seem to have signalled the beginning of a continuous secular trend. Just as importantly, there was little sign that those who said they were 'English' rather than 'British' were markedly more likely to favour the creation of distinctively English political institutions. Apparently, for most of its adherents a sense of English national identity was not something they felt required political expression.

But when British Social Attitudes revisited the topic once again in 2007 there was a striking new development (Curtice 2009). Since 2003 the proportion of people who felt that Scotland secured more than its fair share of public spending had increased from a quarter to a third. It seemed as though, finally, the considerable elite-level debate about the distribution of public expenditure across the UK (McLean *et al* 2008) was beginning to make an impact on public opinion. At the same time there were also tentative signs that support for an English Parliament might be becoming more closely linked to feeling English rather than British – the first sign perhaps that a form of English nationalism was beginning to emerge among the general public.

In light of these developments the 2008 and 2009 British Social Attitudes surveys revisited the topic once more. It again asked people about their national identity, their attitudes towards devolution and their perceptions of the distribution of public expenditure across the UK. In this short report we reveal what this latest research has uncovered about the state of English public opinion on devolution.

National identity

The British Social Attitudes survey ascertains people’s sense of national identity as follows:

Please say which, if any, of the words on this card describes the way you think of yourself. Please choose as many or as few as apply.

The options presented to respondents are:

British, English, European, Irish, Northern Irish, Scottish, Ulster, Welsh and other answer

Most include British or English in their set of choices. Indeed, typically just over a third or so choose both – a sign that many people do not see a sharp distinction between them. Still, to acquire some sense of which identity matters most, those who initially claim adherence to more than one identity are also asked:

And if you had to choose, which one best describes the way you think of yourself?

Table 1 shows the long-term trends in this ‘forced choice’ national identity, which combines the responses of those that only choose one identity in the first place with the responses of those who after further probing say which one identity best describes themselves. Thus the table focuses on those who choose either ‘British’ or ‘English’.

It can be seen that between 1997 and 1999 the proportion choosing English increased from 33 per cent to 44 per cent. While that 1999 level has not subsequently been consistently maintained, it has never returned to the relatively low levels obtained in 1997 and earlier. Thus the advent of devolution apparently had a marked one-off impact on the pattern of national identity in England.

Table 1. Trends in forced choice national identity, England, 1992–2009

Year	1992	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
British	63	58	55	51	44	47	44	51	48	51	48	39	47	45	46
English	31	34	33	37	44	41	43	37	38	38	40	47	39	41	41
Base	2125	1019	3150	2695	2718	2887	2761	2897	3709	2684	3643	3666	3517	3880	2917

Base: respondents living in England. Answers others than ‘British’ or ‘English’ not shown

Sources: 1992 and 1997: British Election Studies; 1996, 1998–2009: British Social Attitudes

Nevertheless, it remains the case that there is little sign of any further significant growth in English national identity. At 41 per cent the 2008 and 2009 readings are exactly in line with the average of all of the previous readings between 1999 and 2007. Meanwhile, although it may be the case that people have become more willing to express a sense of English identity (Kenny and Lodge 2009, Kenny and Lodge forthcoming), it is still the case that, when forced to choose, slightly more people say they are British rather than English. Here at least there continues to be relatively little sign that devolution has induced a growing English ‘backlash’.

Governing England

One of the important features of the debate about devolution in England during the last decade has been that more than one form of devolution has been proposed. On the one hand some, including at one time the Labour Party, have argued in favour of a form of

regional devolution in which each of the regions of England would have its own elected regional assembly with responsibility for administering services and for making strategic planning decisions for their part of the country. On the other hand, others, such as the Campaign for an English Parliament, have argued that the whole of England should have its own devolved parliament, with powers similar to those enjoyed by the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh. This is clearly the more radical of the two options, and the one that would seem more likely to be supported by those who feel that England is a nation that is just as deserving of the right of self-government as any other part of the United Kingdom.

Table 2. Constitutional preferences for England, 1999–2009

With all the changes going on in the way different parts of Great Britain are run, which of the following do you think would be best for England?

Year	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
England governed as it is now, with laws made by the UK parliament	62	54	57	56	50	53	54	54	57	51	49
Each region of England to have its own assembly that runs services like health*	15	18	23	20	26	21	20	18	14	15	15
England as whole to have its own new parliament with law-making powers	18	19	16	17	18	21	18	21	17	26	29
<i>Base</i>	2718	1928	2761	2897	3709	2684	1794	928	859	982	980

* In 2004–6 the second option read ‘that makes decisions about the region’s economy, planning and housing’. The 2003 survey carried both versions of this option and demonstrated that the difference of wording did not make a material difference to the pattern of response. The figures quoted for 2003 are those for the two versions combined.

Base: respondents living in England

Source: British Social Attitudes

Table 2 shows the answers that have been obtained when people in England have been asked to choose between these two options together with the status quo. As we can see, typically just over half have said that they prefer to maintain the status quo. However, we can also see a potentially important change in the most recent data. Support for the status quo has fallen below 50 per cent, albeit only just, for the first time. More importantly, at 29 per cent, support for the idea of an English Parliament is now considerably higher than it has ever been before. It would seem that now that the idea of elected regional assemblies has fallen off the political agenda, the demand for devolution in England is beginning to coalesce around the potentially more radical and more ‘nationalist’ solution of an English Parliament.

If this increased support for an English Parliament is the product of a newly formed English nationalism, then we might expect it to have occurred particularly strongly among those who primarily feel English rather than British. Table 3 shows, however, that support for the idea has grown among those who feel British – by as much as nine points over the last decade (from 14 to 23 per cent) – as well as those who feel English. On this evidence it would seem the idea of an English Parliament is capable of appealing well beyond the ranks of those who might be regarded as ‘English nationalists’.

Nevertheless, the increase in support for the idea of an English Parliament has, at 13 points (from 21 to 34 per cent), been a little higher among those who feel English than it has been among those who feel British. The fall in support for the status quo has been a little higher too among those who feel English. To that degree the tentative signs that we first uncovered

in 2007 (Curtice 2009), indicating that support for the idea of an English Parliament may be becoming linked a little more to adherence to a English national identity, would seem – tentatively again – to have been confirmed by our more recent figures.

Table 3. Constitutional preferences for England by forced choice national identity, England 1999, 2003, 2008 and 2009

	1999		2003		2008		2009	
	British	English	British	English	British	English	British	English
Which would be best for England?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
England governed as it is now, with laws made by the UK parliament	67	60	52	49	56	45	58	45
Each region of England to have its own assembly that runs services like health	14	15	27	24	14	16	12	17
England as whole to have its own new parliament with law-making powers	14	21	16	23	22	34	23	34
<i>Base</i>	1186	1208	1785	1447	435	428	427	436

Base: respondents living in England

Source: British Social Attitudes

Finance

The clearest piece of evidence in the 2007 British Social Attitudes survey that suggested that some form of an English ‘backlash’ might finally be beginning to emerge arose in respect of attitudes towards the distribution of public expenditure. British Social Attitudes has tapped the degree of discontent about the terms of the current financial settlement by asking people in England if they feel that Scotland gets its fair share of public spending, or if they believe it secures more or less than its fair share. Note that in contrast to the practice that has been adopted by many opinion polls when they address this issue, the British Social Attitudes survey does not advise its respondents of the difference between the level of public spending per head in Scotland and that in England. This helps to ensure that the survey taps into whatever discontent really exists among the public instead of obtaining instant reactions to pieces of information of which many people may be unaware.

Table 4. Attitudes in England towards the financial relationship between England and Scotland, 2000–9

Year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2007	2008	2009
Compared with other parts of the UK, Scotland’s share of government spending is...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
... much more than its fair share	8	9	9	9	16	21	18
... little more than its fair share	13	15	15	13	16	20	22
... pretty much its fair share	42	44	44	45	38	33	30
... a little less than its fair share	10	8	8	8	6	3	4
... much less than its fair share	1	1	1	1	1	*	*
Don’t know	25	23	22	25	22	23	25
<i>Base</i>	1928	2761	2897	1917	859	982	980

Base: respondents living in England

Source: British Social Attitudes

Table 4 shows the responses that the survey question asked by the British Social Attitudes survey has received over recent years. As noted earlier, between 2000 and 2003 the proportion saying that Scotland secured more than its fair share of spending was consistently around a quarter, but when the subject was revisited in 2007 that proportion had increased to nearly a third. The latest figures for 2008 and 2009 show there has been yet another increase, such that 40 per cent now feel that Scotland receives more than its fair share. For the first time this group outnumbers all those who believe that Scotland gets either its fair share or less than its fair share. There can now be little doubt that discontent with the territorial distribution of public expenditure across the UK has grown substantially in England in recent years.

However, the evidence on whether or not perceptions of the fairness of the distribution of public expenditure have become linked more closely with people's sense of national identity is less clear. As Table 5 shows, when devolution was first introduced those who said they were English were no more likely than those who said they were British to feel that Scotland secured more than its fair share of spending. Thereafter a gap had apparently begun to open up. By 2008 as many as half of those who said they were English felt that Scotland secured more than its fair share of public spending, compared with only just over a third of those who said they were British. However, in 2009 the gap disappeared once more. So while resentment about Scotland's share of public spending certainly seems to have grown, it is still far from clear that it is being fuelled by a growing sense of English nationalism.

Table 5. Perceptions of Scotland's share of spending, by forced choice national identity, England, 2000, 2003, 2008 and 2009

Year	2000		2003		2008		2009	
	British %	English %	British %	English %	British %	English %	British %	English %
Compared with other parts of UK, Scotland's share of govt spending is ...								
... more than fair	22	23	19	26	37	50	42	43
... pretty much fair	43	42	46	45	38	30	30	30
... less than fair	10	11	8	8	3	2	3	4
<i>Base</i>	877	822	898	760	435	428	427	436

Base: respondents living in England

Source: British Social Attitudes

Nevertheless, as we can see from Table 6, there is some suggestion that dissatisfaction with the status quo and support for the idea of an English Parliament have become more closely linked with feelings of discontent with Scotland's share of public spending. During the first few years of devolution the attitudes of those who thought that Scotland secured more than its fair share of spending towards how England should be governed were little different from those who felt that Scotland received no more than its fair share. Now they are 12 points more likely to favour the idea of an English Parliament. Having an English Parliament may be beginning to be regarded as a means of defending England's interests within the Union.

Conclusion

Public opinion in England seems at last to be beginning to react to the introduction of devolution in Scotland and Wales. The most obvious form that this reaction has taken is increased discontent with Scotland's share of public spending. The differences in spending between Scotland and England may long predate the current devolution settlement, but the

Table 6. Constitutional preferences for England, by perceptions of Scotland's share of spending, England, 2000, 2003, 2008 and 2009

Perceptions of Scotland's share of spending	2000		2003		2008		2009	
	More than fair	Fair or less than	More than fair	Fair or less than	More than fair	Fair or less than	More than fair	Fair or less than
Which would be best for England?	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
England governed as it is now, with laws made by the UK Parliament	54	57	52	57	46	57	45	54
Each region of England to have its own assembly that runs services like health	17	19	24	24	16	18	13	18
England as whole to have its own new parliament with law-making powers	26	20	19	17	35	23	37	25
<i>Base</i>	<i>400</i>	<i>1012</i>	<i>418</i>	<i>985</i>	<i>411</i>	<i>342</i>	<i>401</i>	<i>326</i>

Base: respondents living in England

Source: British Social Attitudes

creation of separate institutions in Scotland and Wales did give a new impetus to the elite-level critique of how Scotland and Wales are funded. Now it seems that critique is finally beginning to have an impact, even if it is a point of view that under half of people in England endorse. Meanwhile, although equally still very much a minority taste, it seems that the idea of an English Parliament may be gathering some support too.

Perhaps just as interesting is the tentative evidence we have uncovered of a more subtle change. In England public attitudes towards devolution may be beginning to be linked a little more to people's sense of national identity and their views about how well Scotland is funded. Support for the idea of an English Parliament may be beginning to find some roots in English national identity and perceptions of England's material interests. If this trend continues too, then politicians may indeed no longer be able to assume that it is safe to ignore England in the devolution debate.

References

- Curtice J (2006) 'What the People Say – If anything', in Hazell, R. (ed.) *The English Question*, Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Curtice J (2009), 'Is there an English Backlash? Reactions to Devolution', in Park A, Curtice J, Thomson K, Phillips M, and Clery E (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 25th Report*, London: Sage
- Curtice J and Seyd B (2001) 'Is devolution strengthening or weakening the UK?', in Park A, Curtice J, Thomson K, Jarvis L and Bromley C (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 18th Report. Public policy, Social ties*, London: Sage
- Curtice J and Sandford M (2004) 'Does England want Devolution too?', in Park A, Curtice J, Thomson K, Bromley C and Phillips M (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 21st Report*, London: Sage
- Kenny M and Lodge G (2009) 'More than one English question', in Perryman M (ed.) *Breaking up Britain: Four Nations after a Union*, London: Lawrence & Wishart
- Kenny M and Lodge G (forthcoming) *English Questions*, London: Institute for Public Policy Research
- McLean I, Lodge G and Schmucker K (2008) *Fair Shares? Barnett and the Politics of Public Expenditure*, London: Institute for Public Policy Research.
www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=619
- Park A, Curtice J, Thomson K, Phillips M, and Clery E (eds) (2010) *British Social Attitudes: The 26th Report*, London: Sage