Where stands the Union now?

Lessons from the 2007 Scottish Parliament election

By John Curtice

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Executive summary

Scotland

Despite the Scottish National Party (SNP)'s success in the 2007 Scottish Parliament election, there is no evidence that support for independence has increased in recent years. Indeed, since the 2007 Scottish Parliamentary elections support for independence seems to have fallen to its lowest level since 1997.

When Scots are simply asked whether they support or oppose 'independence' plenty of polls find that over half do so. But it is not clear what people understand by 'independence' when asked about it in this way – whether they mean autonomy within the UK or a state separate from the rest of the UK. When offered a range of different constitutional options – the status quo, more powers, or independence – typically only around three in ten people in Scotland say they want independence. There is, however, considerable support for giving the Scottish Parliament more powers.

Although support for the SNP increased in 2007 by 9.1 points on the constituency vote and 10.2 points on the regional one, the *overall* increase in support for pro-independence parties (SNP, Greens, Solidarity and Scottish Socialist Party) was just 2.9 and 2.8 points respectively. While support for independence has not increased, those who already favoured independence were much more willing to back the SNP. In 2003 only half of those who favour independence voted for the SNP; in 2007 three quarters did so.

Scottish voters have consistently been more willing to say they would vote for the SNP in a devolved election than they would in a Westminster contest. The opposite is true for Labour. The creation of Scottish Parliament elections has thus thrown the SNP an electoral lifeline – but this has been true ever since 1999.

Jack McConnell and the Labour-led Scottish Executive were not significantly less popular in 2007 than in 2003. What was different about 2007 was that the SNP was led by a far more charismatic leader in Alex Salmond, while the UK Labour government was much less popular.

England

Many commentators have been waiting for an English 'backlash' against an asymmetric devolution settlement that leaves England out. But the levels of support uncovered in polls for either English 'independence' or an English parliament within the Union depends on how the question is posed. For example, some polls show that while around half appear to support 'independence', nearly thee-quarters oppose the 'end of the Union'. Equally, while some recent polls have found more than 50 per cent support for an English Parliament, when given a choice between the status quo, regional assemblies and an English Parliament the results are again different. A little over half opt for the status quo, while the rest split quite evenly between the two other options. It is not clear that support for some form of devolution in England has increased.

People in England do, however, appear to want resolution of the 'West Lothian' question (that is, the fact that Scottish MPs can vote on laws that apply only to England while English MPs cannot vote in Scottish legislation). However, the level of awareness and concern about either this issue or the higher level of public spending in Scotland does not seem, as yet at least, to be very high.

Conclusion

The election of the SNP in Scotland does not signal any new desire to end the Union. But the apparent wish in Scotland for the Scottish Parliament to have more powers, together with the potential for discontent in England about the anomalies of devolution, means that the potential for tension between the two countries clearly exists.

1. Introduction

It was not meant to happen. Giving Scotland her own devolved parliament was supposed to help cement her place in the Union while maintaining Labour's hegemony within the country itself. But on 3 May 2007, in just the third election to the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish National Party (SNP), advocates of independence for Scotland, outpolled Labour and seized the reins of power in Edinburgh.

Surely there could not be any stronger signal that, exactly 300 years after it was created, the Union of England and Scotland is now in danger of falling apart? Scotland, it appears, wants to go its own way. And now that England has seen just how little gratitude people in Scotland demonstrate for the advantages and privileges that a devolved parliament has given them, perhaps it will simply be inclined to say, 'good riddance'.

This paper assesses the validity of this picture. It uses currently available survey evidence to assess the apparent implications of the election for the health of the Union. Does the SNP's 'victory' really signify that Scotland now wishes to leave the Union? Just how did Labour in Scotland come to lose an election for the first time in 50 years? And how resentful does England appear to be of recent developments north of the border? We address these questions in two parts. First, we examine how public opinion has developed in Scotland since the advent of devolution. We then turn to assess what evidence there is of an English backlash.

2. Scotland

Support for independence

It is easy to find evidence that most people in Scotland apparently favour independence. For example, in October 2006, as the parties were gearing up for the following year's campaign, just over half those surveyed by an ICM poll for *The Scotsman* newspaper said that they would vote in favour of independence in a referendum. This poll was but one of many conducted in the run-up to the 300th anniversary of the Union in January 2007 to suggest that the days of the Union were finally numbered so far as Scottish public opinion was concerned.

However, as Table 1 shows, this was far from being the first time that such a result had been obtained. The same question was asked by the same polling company on a regular basis in the run-up to the first Scottish Parliament election in 1999. In every one of half a dozen surveys conducted in Scotland in the second half of 1998, around half of those polled said they would vote in favour of independence. And while support for independence as evinced by this question melted away in the heat of the 1999 election campaign, it was almost back up to the halfway mark again just a few months afterwards. In short, when they are simply asked whether they are for or against it, people in Scotland have long been inclined to say they are in favour of independence.

But what do respondents understand by the term 'independence' when asked about it in this way? The wording of the question certainly does not give them any indication about what it is intended to mean. In responding affirmatively some respondents may well be indicating that they want Scotland to be an independent state, separate from the rest of the United Kingdom. But perhaps others simply mean that Scotland should have a reasonable degree of autonomy and not be run from London.

As soon as we look at the pattern of responses to survey questions that do give some indication of what might be meant by independence we uncover a rather different pattern of answers. Table 2 shows one such example, in which YouGov regularly invited respondents to say whether in a referendum they would vote in favour of Scotland becoming

Table 1. Trends in support for independence in Scotland 1998-2007

In a referendum on independence for Scotland, how would you vote?
I agree that Scotland should become an independent country
I do not agree that Scotland should become an independent country

	1998							
	Jun (1)	Jun (2)	Jul	Sep (1)	Sep (2)	Nov		
Agree	52%	56%	49%	51%	48%	49%		
Disagree	41%	35%	44%	38%	37%	3%		
	1999							
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr (1)	Apr (2)	Apr (3)	May (1)	May (2)
Agree	49%	44%	42%	47%	41%	41%	39%	38%
Disagree	42%	47%	47%	44%	48%	46%	48%	50%
	Jan 2000	Feb 2001	Oct 2006	Feb 2007	Mar 2007	Apr 2007		
Agree	47%	45%	51%	46%	38%	33%		
Disagree	43%	49%	39%	44%	44%	46%		

Source: ICM, except Mar and Apr 2007, Market Research UK

Table 2. Support for devolution vs. independence 2003-7*

	Apr 2003	Apr 2005	Nov 2006	Mar 2007	Apr 2007
In favour of retaining present Scottish Parliament	55%	46%	50%	51%	53%
In favour of a completely separate state outside the UK	29%	35%	31%	28%	25%

*When asked: *If there were a referendum on whether to retain the Scottish Parliament and Executive in more or less their current form, or to establish Scotland as a completely separate state outside the United Kingdom but inside the European Union, how would you vote?*

Source: YouGov

Table 3. Constitutional preferences, 1997–2007

	May '97	Sep '97	'99	'00	'01	'02	'03	'04	'05	'06	'07
Scotland should ...											
be independent, separate from UK and EU or separate from UK but part of EU	28%	37%	28%	30%	27%	30%	26%	32%	35%	30%	23%
remain part of UK with its own elected Parliament which has some taxation powers	44%	32%	50%	47%	54%	44%	48%	40%	38%	47%	55%
remain part of the UK with its own elected Parliament which has no taxation powers	10%	9%	8%	8%	6%	8%	7%	5%	6%	7%	8%
remain part of the UK without an elected parliament	18%	17%	10%	12%	9%	12%	13%	17%	14%	9%	10%

Note: The two independence options, one where Scotland remains within the European Union (EU), and one where it does not, were offered to respondents separately. The first row of the table shows the combined total choosing either option.

Source: Scottish Election Study 1997; Scottish Referendum Study 1997; Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 1999-2007; Data for 2007 are provisional.

separate from the rest of the UK or to retain the existing devolved institutions. Here we find that on the various occasions on which this question has been asked only around three in ten Scots have said they would vote for independence rather than devolution – with support no higher at the time of the 2007 election than it had been four years earlier.

Arguably, however, the wording of the YouGov question is also problematic. Some respondents might have been misled into thinking that Scotland would lose its existing parliament if the country were to leave the UK. Meanwhile, independence is described using the language of separation, which may well sound less attractive than simply becoming independent. Nevertheless, an academic time series of people's constitutional preferences that asks respondents in Scotland to choose between a range of options whose wording is intended to be as even and neutral as possible, paints a picture that is much closer to that suggested by Table 2 than that indicated by Table 1. As Table 3 shows, this time series suggests that ever since the 1997 general election typically around three in ten people have said that they favour independence. It also confirms that there is no consistent evidence of a long-term increase in that figure – signs of an apparent increase in support for independence in 2004 and 2005 were reversed in 2006 and 2007[1].

So it is far from clear that a majority of people in Scotland support independence[2]. When asked to choose between independence and a range of other options only around three in ten back independence. Despite using very differently worded questions, none of the three time series we have examined demonstrate that support for independence was any higher at the time of the 2007 election than it was on the occasion of the first two devolved elections. Indeed we should note that the 2007 reading in Table 3, taken in the weeks immediately after the election, suggests that support for independence has fallen to its lowest level in a decade. Equally both Table 1 and Table 2 suggest that support for independence fell away during the course of the run-up to the 2007 election, just as it evidently did in 1999[3]. Far from securing victory on the back of a rising tide of support for independence, the SNP seems, paradoxically, to have won the May 2007 election in the face of a drop in support for its flagship policy.

Support for independence is, then, only a minority view in Scotland, just as it has been ever since before devolution was introduced. True, that minority is a substantial one. But the SNP 'victory' in 2007 does not herald any increase in the size of that minority. Rather that victory seems to have been secured against the backdrop of a decline in support for independence over the course of the election campaign.

1. The 2007 Scottish Social Attitudes figures quoted here are based on an interim version of the data released at the end of October 2007. This contains interviews with 1,299 respondents conducted between May and August 2007. A later version will be based on 1,500 interviews undertaken through to the end of October.
2. When on the eve of the 2007 election ICM posed a question that closely mimicked the wording of the actual question that the SNP propose to put in a referendum, just 35 per cent said that they agreed, while 55 per cent disagreed. The proposition put to respondents was, 'The Scottish Parliament should negotiate a new settlement with the British government so that Scotland becomes a sovereign and independent state'.
3. Though we should note that the last two readings in Table 1 do not come from an ICM survey and thus their lower level of support for independence may be an artefact of a methodological difference.

More devolution?

This does not necessarily mean that the current devolution settlement represents the 'settled will' of the Scottish people. The fact that in some instances at least around half of people in Scotland say that they would back independence certainly suggests there might well be an appetite for considerable autonomy, including, perhaps, more than is offered by the current settlement. Table 4 presents evidence which suggests that people in Scotland apparently would like their current Parliament to be more powerful than it is at present (see also Bromley *et al* 2006, Given and Ormston 2007, Ormston and Sharp 2007, and Curtice, forthcoming). On both occasions during the 2007 campaign that Populus asked the questions detailed in that table, over half those surveyed agreed that Scotland should remain within the UK but that the Scottish Parliament should be more powerful. Moreover, pitted against this option less than three in ten wanted independence (support for which fell away during the campaign on this measure too).

However, it might be argued that the wording of this question is too favourable to the 'more powers' option, as opposed to independence. Perhaps, for example, if independence had been described as giving the Scottish Parliament 'the power to run all of Scotland's affairs', it would have proved more popular and the 'more powers' option less so. The question only invites people to back the 'current situation' if they think it is working well, and not if they simply think it provides the Parliament with adequate powers. Indeed when a week before the 2007 election YouGov asked a differently worded question, just 38 per cent said that they would vote in a referendum, 'in favour of retaining the Scottish Parliament but giving it greater powers'[4]. As many as 25 per cent said they would vote 'in favour of retaining the Scottish Parliament with its existing powers', although again just 23 per cent were 'in favour of a completely separate state outside the UK'.

The Populus question may, then, have exaggerated the level of demand for a more powerful parliament. Nevertheless, there still does appear to be substantial support for amending the current devolution settlement within the framework of the Union. So there is at least some pressure north of the border to change yet further the terms of Scotland's membership of the Union.

Why did the SNP win?

Despite this pressure, the state of public opinion on the constitutional question as we have described it so far hardly seems to constitute propitious circumstances for an SNP electoral victory. To explain why the SNP won the 2007 election despite the lack of any increased support for independence, we need to look a little more closely at the election result itself, and at the link between support for independence and willingness to vote for the SNP.

First, the SNP 'victory' was limited: the party secured just 32 per cent of the constituency vote and only 31 per cent of the list vote. This may have been more than that secured by any other individual party – but it is no more than the level of support we might expect anyway for a pro-independence party given that usually around three in ten voters in Scotland apparently favour independence. It could be argued that the SNP won simply because the unionist vote was split between three fairly large parties, while the independence vote was heavily concentrated in just one.

The SNP is not the only political party in Scotland to favour independence. Both the parties that made a dramatic breakthrough into the Holyrood chamber in 2003, the Scottish Socialist Party and the Greens, also want Scotland to leave the United Kingdom. Indeed SNP spokespersons took refuge in that fact after their own party's own disappointing result in 2003. While support for the SNP fell in 2003 compared with the first devolved election in 1999, support for other parties in favour of independence had increased.

Table 4. Devolution, more powers and independence

Thinking now about the position of Scotland within the United Kingdom and the role and powers of the Scottish Parliament, which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

	Mar '07	Apr '07
Too much power has already been devolved to Scotland from Westminster	6%	4%
The current situation with a devolved parliament in Scotland works well	12%	13%
Scotland should remain in the UK, but the Scottish Parliament should have more power to run affairs in Scotland	52%	56%
Scotland should be a fully independent state, separate from the rest of the UK	27%	21%

Source: Populus

4. This seems to include support for greater taxation powers. In its March 2007 poll YouGov found that 60 per cent agreed that the Scottish Parliament should be given 'greater power to raise its own revenues', though it should be noted that the question made no mention of the possible consequences of such a move for the level of taxation.

The SNP argued that the key statistics of the 2003 election were not that SNP support had fallen by 4.9 points on the constituency vote and 6.5 in the regional contest, but rather that support for the pro-independence parties combined had increased by 0.5 and 1.4 points respectively on the two ballots.

In 2007 support for the SNP increased, but the vote for both the Greens and the remnants of the SSP (now split into two parties, the SSP and Solidarity) declined. If we pursue the same logic as that espoused by SNP spokespersons in 2003, the apparent increase in support for independence in the ballot box looks markedly less dramatic. While support for the SNP increased by 9.1 points on the constituency vote and 10.2 points on the regional one, the overall increase in support for pro-independence parties was just 2.9 and 2.8 points respectively. Such figures hardly suggest that a dramatic transformation of public opinion has occurred in Scotland over the last four years.

But of course this is to presume that people only vote for the SNP if they favour independence – and vice versa. This is not necessarily the case. In 2003, for example, the Scottish Social Attitudes survey found that only just over half (51 per cent) of those who backed independence voted for the SNP on the list vote. This implies that there was plenty of scope for the SNP to increase its support, even in the absence of any rise in support for independence at all.

As Table 5 shows, this is precisely what happened in 2007. Among supporters of independence, support for the SNP rose from a half to three quarters. The key to the SNP's success in 2007 lay not in persuading more people of the merits of independence, but rather in persuading those who already supported independence of the merits of voting for the SNP.

However, support for the SNP did not increase only among those in favour of independence. It also rose by eight points among the much larger group of people who support devolution. Whereas in 2003 those who favoured devolution constituted just 37 per cent of those who backed the SNP on the list vote, in 2007 they comprised no less than 45 per cent of SNP list voters. Correspondingly, the proportion of the SNP list vote that came from backers of independence fell from 56 per cent to 48 per cent. The SNP won in 2007 not only because it pulled in more support from those who support independence but also because it increased its appeal to those who favour devolution.

Together these two patterns explain why it was possible for the SNP to win the 2007 election in the absence of any increase in support for independence. Indeed it should not come as any surprise that the overall level of support for the SNP is not necessarily tied to the popularity of independence. After all, it has long been apparent that the level of SNP support can differ among the same group of survey respondents depending on whether they are being asked how they would vote in a Scottish Parliament election or whom they would support in a Westminster contest. Ever since people were first asked in opinion polls in 1998 how they would vote in a Scottish Parliament election, they have consistently been more willing to say they would vote for the SNP in a devolved election than they would in an election to the House of Commons.

This difference was confirmed in two polls conducted by YouGov in January 2007 (no poll published subsequently in the run-up to the 2007 election ascertained Westminster as well as Holyrood vote intention). In the first of these polls 33 per cent said they would vote for the SNP in a Scottish Parliament election (the figure was the same on both ballots) while only 27 per cent said they would do so in a Westminster contest. In the second poll 35 per cent reckoned they would back the SNP in the Holyrood constituency vote and 32 per cent in the regional vote, while just 28 per cent indicated support for the party at Westminster.

Similarly, when the post-election Scottish Social Attitudes survey asked its respondents how they would have voted if a Westminster election had been held in May 2007, just 22 per

Table 5. List vote by constitutional preference 2007 and change since 2003

	Constitutional preference		
	Independence	Devolution	No Scottish Parliament
SNP	76 (+25)	23 (+8)	4 (-5)
Labour	11 (-10)	41 (+6)	32 (+12)
Conservative	3 (-1)	13 (-3)	40 (-11)
Liberal Democrat	4 (-3)	17 (-1)	14 (+2)
Others	6 (-11)	7 (-11)	10 (+2)

Note: Main cell entries show percentage of those who voted for that party. Figures in brackets show the change in that percentage since 2003.
Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Surveys 2003 and 2007. Data for 2007 are provisional.

cent indicated they would have backed the SNP whereas no fewer than 40 per cent said they would have voted Labour. In that survey both those who said they favoured independence (of whom 62 per cent said they would have voted SNP) and those who preferred devolution (12 per cent) were much less likely to say they would have supported the SNP in a UK general election.

We can therefore be sure that if it had been a House of Commons election that had been held on 3 May 2007, Labour would not have trailed the SNP. The SNP's 'historic victory' depended on the fact that what was at stake was Holyrood, not Westminster. The fact that the SNP finds it easier to prosper at Scottish Parliament elections than in elections to the House of Commons means that while devolution may not so far have increased support for independence, it has provided the principal advocates of that cause, the SNP, with an electoral lifeline. It seems as though in a Scottish election voters are more likely to ask themselves which party is best for Scotland in particular rather than, as in a Westminster election, who is best for Britain as a whole. In asking themselves the former question some decide that the answer is the party that labels itself 'Scotland's party', the SNP, rather than the party in power in London, Labour (see also Paterson *et al* 2001, Curtice 2001, Curtice 2005). In this respect at least devolution has placed a new strain on the Union.

So one crucial reason why Labour lost the Scottish Parliament election in 2007 goes back to the very beginning of devolution. It has never been as popular a choice for Holyrood as it has for Westminster. In the 1997 and 2001 Westminster elections Labour won 46 per cent and 43 per cent of the vote in Scotland respectively. In contrast it won just 39 per cent and 35 per cent on the constituency vote in the 1999 and 2003 Scottish Parliament elections and even less, 34 per cent and 29 per cent, on the regional list vote.

At least the 1999 and 2003 elections were fought against the backdrop of a popular UK Labour government at Westminster. As a result, Labour's comparative lack of support in the Scottish parliamentary elections did not imperil its ability to emerge as the largest party in Holyrood. However, in 2007 things were very different. The party was unpopular; it had been consistently behind the Conservatives in the British polls for 12 months. In Scotland the proportion saying they would vote Labour in a Westminster election was, according to the two YouGov polls conducted in January 2007 at least, now no more than 34–35 per cent – even lower than the 40 per cent level to which the party had fallen in the 2005 Westminster election[5]. Under these less favourable circumstances, Labour's persistently lower level of popularity for Holyrood clearly could threaten its ability to win a Scottish Parliament election.

Meanwhile, there is no evidence that in 2007 either the then-First Minister, Labour's Jack McConnell, or the Labour-led Scottish Executive were significantly more unpopular than they had been four years earlier. Indeed, according to YouGov, if anything, the opposite was true (see Table 6). In 2003 more than half told YouGov that they were dissatisfied with Jack McConnell's performance as First Minister. In 2007

Table 6. Evaluations of the First Minister and the Scottish Executive 2003-7

Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with Jack McConnell as Scotland's First Minister?

	Apr 2003	Nov 2006	Mar 2007	Apr 2007
Satisfied	29%	31%	30%	30%
Dissatisfied	54%	48%	50%	49%
Don't know	17%	21%	21%	22%

Do you approve of the Scottish Executive's record to date?

	Apr 2003	Nov 2006	Mar 2007	Apr 2007
Approve	30%	35%	34%	32%
Disapprove	51%	41%	39%	41%
Don't know	19%	24%	28%	27%

Source: YouGov

5. The Scottish Social Attitudes figure of 40 per cent was obtained after the 3 May 2007 election, at which point, following the announcement of Tony Blair's resignation date, Labour's popularity at Westminster began to recover. This may help account for the somewhat higher level of Westminster support for the party in that survey than in the earlier YouGov surveys. Even so, it should be borne in mind that the party's 2005 tally of 40 per cent was the lowest in any UK general election since 1992. The 40 per cent figure recorded by the 2007 survey is still below the 42 per cent who said they would have voted Labour in a UK general election in 2003, let alone the 48 per cent who gave that response in 1999.

slightly under half expressed that view. Equally, when the Scottish Social Attitudes survey asked respondents to give Jack McConnell a mark out of 10 for his performance as First Minister, at 4.9 his average score was only slightly down on his 2003 score of 5.0.

At the same time (again, see Table 6) in 2003 half of YouGov's respondents were dissatisfied with the record of the Scottish Executive, whereas in 2007 only around two in five were. It is possible that the wording of this last question evinced attitudes towards the Executive as an institution rather than its current political composition, and that the lower level of satisfaction in 2007 thus reflects greater faith in the institution rather than in Labour's performance in running it. Nevertheless, there is nothing here to suggest that Labour's defeat in 2007 can simply be attributed to increased unhappiness with its performance in office in Edinburgh.

However, in 2007, Labour was facing a much more popular SNP leader, Alex Salmond, who was popular in a way that in 2003 his predecessor, John Swinney, was not. When asked in 2003 how good a First Minister John Swinney would be, Scottish Social Attitudes respondents gave an average score of just 3.9; in contrast Alex Salmond's average score in 2007 was 5.9.

When during the 2007 campaign polls asked who would make the best First Minister Alex Salmond consistently emerged as more popular than Jack McConnell. In 2003 in contrast Mr McConnell was clearly more popular than Mr Swinney, who often trailed the Conservative and Liberal Democrat leaders in popularity let alone McConnell. So while Jack McConnell himself may not have been regarded significantly less favourably than four years previously, what had proved sufficient to stave off a weak challenge in 2003, was perhaps found wanting when set against the more serious challenge posed by Alex Salmond.

So the SNP 'victory' in the 2007 election does not signify any increased demand from people in Scotland to secure independence. That cause is supported by a substantial minority, but that minority is no bigger now than it was four or eight years ago. Indeed, support for independence seems to have fallen during the course of the 2007 election campaign.

The foundations of the SNP's success in 2007 lie in three different developments. The first is longstanding – ever since devolution started the SNP has consistently been a more popular choice for Holyrood than it has for Westminster, while the opposite is true of Labour. In establishing an elected Scottish Parliament Labour appears unwittingly to have created an institution in which the SNP is better able to prosper. The second development is that the SNP posed a more effective challenge to Labour than it did in 2003, as exemplified by the popularity of its charismatic leader, Alex Salmond. The SNP may not have persuaded people of the merits of independence, but does seem to have persuaded them of its ability to govern Scotland. This enabled the SNP to secure both a much higher level of support among those who already supported independence and a crucial extra batch of votes from those who preferred devolution. Meanwhile, the final development is the unpopularity of the UK Labour government at Westminster – in stark contrast to 1999 and 2003. This of course has nothing to do with the state of the Union at all.

3. England

Does England want constitutional change?

Whatever might account for the SNP's 'victory', the advent of a nationalist administration north of the border might still provoke a reaction in England. After all, whatever might appear to Scots themselves to be the limitations of devolution, they do now enjoy a measure of self-government that England does not. Because of this asymmetry, ever since the creation of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly in 1999, critics of devolution have warned that it would provoke an English backlash that could pose a far more potent threat to the future of the Union than developments north of the border (Dalyell 1977).

But is there any evidence of such a backlash? It is certainly possible to find polling evidence that apparently indicates considerable support in England for independence. In a poll conducted by ICM in November 2006 48 per cent said that they favoured 'England becoming an independent country from [sic] Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland', while only 43 per cent said they were opposed. In the same poll 59 per cent said that they approved of 'Scotland becoming an independent country'. Similarly, in a second ICM poll conducted at the time of the 300th anniversary of the Union in January 2007, 48 per cent said that they backed Scottish independence.

However, as in Scotland, the wording of survey questions is crucial. Express the question differently and you get very different results.

Thus in a Populus poll in England and Wales, conducted on the eve of the 2007 elections to the Scottish Parliament, 55 per cent of respondents rejected the proposition that 'Scotland should have full independence and no longer be part of Great Britain'. An Opinion Research Business poll conducted in January 2007 found that, after being advised that the end of the Union, 'would mean that Scotland became an independent country', almost three-quarters (73 per cent) of people in England said they would 'like the Union to continue' while just 16 per cent said they would

'like to see it come to an end'. Similarly, in a YouGov poll, also conducted in January 2007, only 28 per cent supported Scottish independence when told this meant that it would not just have 'a devolved parliament' but would be 'separate from the rest of the United Kingdom'. Once the meaning of independence is spelt out, or the issue begins to be framed in terms of separation, a rather different pattern of responses emerges.

But even if there is not any real demand in England to be rid of Scotland, there might still be tensions and concerns about the current settlement that might yet put pressure on the Union. One obvious possibility is that having seen the new parliament that Scotland now enjoys, England would like to have something similar.

However, what that 'something similar' might be comes in more than one form. One is some system of regional government, building on the unelected regional chambers and development agencies that have been created in each government region outside London, which of course already has its own elected mayor and assembly. This was the direction in which the current UK Labour government was headed until its proposal for an elected regional assembly was rejected by the voters of the North East of England in November 2004. The alternative possibility, more akin to the model in Scotland, is that England as a whole should have its own parliament, thereby putting it more on a par with the rest of the United Kingdom. This is the solution advocated by the Campaign for an English Parliament.

As in the case of independence, we can uncover some evidence of apparent support for an English Parliament. In the November 2006 ICM survey, more than two-thirds (68 per cent) said they would be in favour of 'the establishment of an English Parliament within the UK, with similar powers to those currently enjoyed by the Scottish Parliament'. The following January ICM found that 51 per cent believed that there should be 'a parliament for England only' given that 'there is now a Scottish Parliament, and devolved assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland', while just 41 per cent were opposed. Populus found in its survey carried out just before the 2007 elections to the Scottish Parliament that no fewer than 65 per cent of respondents in England and Wales agreed that, 'now that Scottish devolution is well established – and may be extended – England should now have its own parliament too'.

Question wording is again crucial. Table 7 shows the results that have been obtained in response to a question that has been asked regularly by the British Social Attitudes survey since the advent of Scottish and Welsh devolution in 1999. It asks respondents to choose between the three main options that have been proposed for England – the status quo, regional assemblies and an English Parliament. Every time this question has been asked, more than half have opted for leaving things as they are now, with support for change more or less evenly divided between regional assemblies and an English Parliament.

Nevertheless, as can be seen from the table, although support for the status quo was high in 1999 at 62 per cent, this figure has not subsequently been repeated. In any event, the fact that typically only just half of the population endorses the current arrangement hardly constitutes a resounding consensus in favour of the status quo. We might also note that support for an English Parliament reached its highest level yet on the most recent reading, while support for regional devolution seems to have fallen away somewhat. Of course this shift is just as likely to be a consequence of the defeat of the referendum in the North East in 2004 as it is an indication of a reaction to developments north of the border.

Table 7. Constitutional preferences for England, 1999-2006

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?

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
England should be governed as it is now, with laws made by the UK parliament	62%	54%	59%	56%	55%	52%	54%	54%
Each region of England to have its own assembly that runs services like health*	15%	18%	21%	20%	24%	21%	20%	17%
England as whole to have its own new parliament with law- making powers	18%	19%	13%	17%	16%	21%	18%	22%

Note: In 2004-2006 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.

Source: British Social Attitudes Surveys 1999-2006

Devolution's anomalies

Just as we found that people in Scotland might be prepared to stick with devolution but still want to see it 'improved', we should not assume that people in England could not envisage some useful changes being made while still being ruled from Westminster. Indeed much of the current debate about the alleged unfairness of the current asymmetric arrangements focuses not on the fact that Scotland has its own parliament while England does not, but rather on two specific anomalies. The first is that public spending per head is higher in Scotland than in England. This gap, of course, long predates devolution but it can now be portrayed as an arrangement whereby politicians in Scotland are at liberty to spend English taxpayers' money (Mclean and Macmillan 2003). The second is the famous West Lothian question – why should MPs from Scotland be able to vote on health and education in England when MPs from England can no longer vote about these matters in Scotland? Perhaps people in England would like Scotland's public spending advantage reduced and its MPs debarred from voting on 'English' laws?

At first glance, there certainly seems to be plenty of evidence that people in England are unhappy with the current financial arrangements. When in November 2006, ICM asked people in England, 'Government spending per head of population is higher in Scotland in England. Do you think this is justified or unjustified?', 60 per cent said it was unjustified. When in January 2007 ICM asked this question again, but with the rider 'with English taxes subsidising public spending in Scotland', 62 per cent said the position was unjustified. Meanwhile in April 2007 YouGov found that 68 per cent of people across Great Britain as a whole thought that it was unfair that 'Government spending per head in Scotland is currently about 20 per cent higher than in England, due to a formula agreed in the 1970s to address poverty in Scotland, yet Scots pay the same taxes as people in England'.

Yet all of these questions share one striking characteristic. Their authors felt it necessary to tell respondents in England that public spending in Scotland is higher than in England. This suggests a perception that perhaps people in England are not aware of the gap, and thus as a result it may not necessarily be a particular source of discontent at all. In any event, some of the wording of these questions would not necessarily be regarded as 'neutral'.

These doubts are confirmed when we look at the results of a question asked regularly in the early years of devolution by the British Social Attitudes survey (Curtice and Sandford 2004). Simply asked whether they thought that, 'compared with other parts of the UK Scotland's share of government spending' was more or less than fair, in 2003 just 22 per cent of people in England said it was more than fair. As many as 45 per cent said it was 'pretty much fair' (while 9 per cent thought it was less than fair). Nearly a quarter said they did not know – confirming the impression that the issue does not have high salience.

Unfortunately at present no more recent reading is available for this question, and thus we cannot rule out the possibility that awareness and thus resentment, has increased in the meantime, thanks perhaps to the complaints voiced by some newspapers and politicians. However, we should note that there were no signs of growing resentment over the course of the early years of devolution – responses were much the same in 2000, when the question was first asked, as they were in 2003 (Curtice 2006a, Curtice 2006b).[6] But the safest conclusion seems to be that while the current financial settlement appears to have the potential to cause resentment, low levels of awareness of the spending gap between Scotland and England mean it is far from clear that this potential has been realised.

But what of the West Lothian question? Here at least there seems to be little doubt about the position; people in England are doubtful that Scottish MPs should be voting on English laws. Thus the ICM poll conducted in November 2006 found that 62 per cent thought that Scottish MPs should not vote on 'laws that only affect people in England and Wales' now that 'MPs in the House of Commons representing Scottish seats are able to vote on laws that only affect people living in England and Wales, while MPs representing English seats do not have the right to vote on similar laws only affecting Scotland'. When ICM asked exactly the same question the following January this figure had fallen somewhat to 53 per cent but it was still over half, and the figure returned to 62 per cent once more in a subsequent ICM poll in December 2007. Meanwhile YouGov's January poll found that no less than 76 per cent of people across Great Britain as a whole regard the current settlement whereby 'English MPs cannot vote in matters that affect only Scotland' as unfair.

The British Social Attitudes survey has put the matter a little less bluntly (it is impossible to ask about the West Lothian question at all without including the discrepancy between the position of English and Scottish MPs in some way), but it has still obtained much the same result. In its 2003 survey, 60 per cent of respondents agreed that 'Now that Scotland has its own Parliament, Scottish MPs should no longer be able to vote in the House of Commons on laws that only affect England', while only 11 per cent actually disagreed.

6. Moreover, when in December 2007 ICM asked the same question that it had previously asked in November 2006, the proportion that said Scotland's share of spending was unjustified, at 63 per cent, was little different from the earlier figure of 60 per cent.

Very similar figures were obtained in 2000 and 2002. We should note that of those who did agree, nearly two-thirds simply 'agreed' rather than 'strongly agreed', so the resentment caused by the West Lothian question may not be particularly strong. Nevertheless, when put to people in England, the anomaly is clearly one they are inclined to query.

So just as people in Scotland might support devolution rather than independence but would still like the terms of the settlement changed, so England may not want devolution, let alone independence, for itself, but might still want the apparent anomalies created by the current settlement removed. The discrepancy posed by the West Lothian question clearly falls into that category, while the difference between the level of spending per head in England and that in Scotland could potentially do so even if it has not done so yet. This picture hardly merits the description 'backlash', but at the same time still suggests public opinion in England could pose some potential sources of strain on the Union.

4. Conclusion

The Union clearly emerges from this analysis in a much stronger position than we might have imagined from our opening paragraphs. The SNP's electoral success in May 2007 does not signal any long-term increase in support for independence, which remains a desire of only a minority. Labour's defeat seems to have had more to do with changed attitudes towards the Labour government at Westminster than any new developments north of the border. Meanwhile it seems that England remains relatively uninterested in devolution for itself, let alone independence.

Yet at the same time, there are clearly cracks in the foundations of the current constitutional settlement. Voters in Scotland seem to want the Scottish Parliament to be more powerful. Meanwhile people in England find having Scottish MPs voting on 'English' laws is a source of irritation at least. And if both these situations were to be addressed, the Union might still be intact, but Scotland and England would certainly look as though they were increasingly going their own separate ways.

Data sources

British Social Attitudes Surveys 1999-2006 details available from www.natcen.ac.uk

Scottish Election Study details available from www.scottishelectionstudy.org.uk

Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 1999-2007 details available from www.natcen.ac.uk

Scottish Referendum Study 1997 details available from www.natcen.ac.uk

Further details of the commercial polls cited in this paper can be found at the following websites:

ICM polls: www.icmresearch.co.uk

Populus polls: www.populuslimited.com

YouGov polls: www.yougov.com

ORB polls: www.opinion.co.uk

Market Research UK: polls were conducted for *The Herald* and can be found at www.theherald.co.uk

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