



Devolution and the May 2007 local election results in the UK

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The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is often presented in academic literature as a unitary system, in contrast to the federalism of the United States, Canada and Australia. The dominant political tradition has been unitary since 1707, but there is also a tradition of devolution from London, which is either overlooked or discounted. This tradition has been strongly reasserted during the New Labour government of Tony Blair elected in 1997, often to the concern of the English majority of the population and political and bureaucratic forces centred on London.

In fact the British Isles have always had a degree of devolution since the Norman conquest of 1066 and were considerably more decentralised before that. It was not until the Union of the Crowns in 1603 that Great Britain was established, and the Scottish parliament continued until 1707, when it was absorbed into a British parliament. Legislation specific to Ireland and Scotland continued into the present, passed by the Westminster parliament but mainly debated by Scottish and Irish politicians.

Most of Ireland became independent in 1921, leaving only six counties of Ulster as a source of discontent and friction, but with an assembly into modern times.¹ As one of his last achievements, Tony Blair was able to bring together the forces of the Democratic Unionist Party of Ian Paisley and the Sinn Féin of Gerry Adams—previously implacable opponents. Northern Ireland elections were held in March 2007 and the Northern Ireland Assembly was restored on 8 May. A four-party Executive is led by Paisley as First Minister and former IRA leader Martin McGuinness as deputy First Minister.

Since the establishment of the Republic of Ireland, party politics in Northern Ireland has differed from the rest of the UK. Irish unity is now less urgent, as both the Irish Republic and the United Kingdom are members of the European Union. Trade and people move freely across borders, which are not controlled or even visible in many places. Ireland has enjoyed an EU-funded boom which makes its people as prosperous as those in the North. It has also liberated itself from many of the controls of the Catholic Church, which were anathema to Northern Protestants. Very few voters in

¹ The Northern Irish parliament at Stormont existed from 1921 until 1974, and then again from 1999 (though it was suspended for much of the latter period).

Great Britain care what happens in Ireland and most are glad to see the problem resolved. The importance of Northern Ireland was that it was always held up as a horrible example of what would happen if power were devolved to Scotland and Wales. Furthermore, Scotland and Wales had never voted the same way as England, being overwhelmingly Liberal in the 19th century and Labour in the 20th. This raised the spectre of one-party government, which had existed under the Ulster Unionists for a generation and had its obvious faults.

Support for devolved institutions in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales has not been accompanied by a similar desire for decentralisation in England. So strong is the English desire for unity that a referendum on devolution to the North-East was soundly defeated by a huge majority, despite the support of all local parties, the media, business and the unions. Devolution within England was seen by the Blair government as answering complaints that Scotland and Wales were getting special treatment. In the event only London got effective devolution under an elected Mayor (Ken Livingstone) who Blair and New Labour did everything to defeat.

By 2007, then, there were several different levels of devolution in the United Kingdom. In England, reformed local authorities ruled over an average of 100 000 people, with powers in education, health, housing and many other matters close to the voters. Although much stronger than their Australian equivalents, they were always subject to central government control and funding. Under Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, they had been drastically redistributed. Under Tony Blair they were largely redistributed back again, often on county boundaries that had existed since the Middle Ages. Wales and Scotland also had important local authorities as did Northern Ireland. But these were less all-embracing than the English equivalent as they came within the responsibility of devolved legislatures.

The elections held on 3 May 2007 were thus held at two levels; devolved legislatures in Scotland and Wales and local authorities in England and Scotland (but not in Wales or Northern Ireland). Elections for the Mayor of London and the London Assembly are not due until 2008. The 2007 elections were held along party lines except in some rural areas such as Cornwall where Independents still control local authorities. But the party systems are not identical nor are results necessarily a guide to the general

election expected in two years time under a new Labour prime minister. In many local authorities there is no overall control and various alliances are necessarily formed.

In Scotland the Labour and the secessionist Scottish National Party (SNP) were closely tied, with the SNP in the lead by one seat. The Liberal Democrats won the same number of seats as the Conservatives and other members elected to the 129-seat parliament included two Greens but no longer any Scottish Socialists. Eventually, the SNP formed a minority government. In Wales Labour is the largest party, but has formed a minority government, being unable to negotiate a coalition either with nationalists (Plaid Cymru) or with the Liberal Democrats. These are completely different configurations from that in England. But even there the Liberal Democrats now control more councils than Labour, while the Conservatives are much further ahead than is likely in a general election (especially as no elections were held in London).

Apart from the different party systems in the three nations, the Scottish and Welsh legislatures are elected through a system of proportional representation, as is the Northern Irish parliament. Scotland and Wales use a mixed-member proportional (MMP) system², while Northern Ireland uses the single-transferable vote (STV). In all three cases the object has been to prevent one-party domination and the decimation of other parties, as commonly occurs in the traditional British first-past-the post system. In England, on the other hand, local elections led to Conservative landslides, the virtual extinction of Labour in southern England and the failure of the Conservatives to save much in the north. The local strength of the Liberal Democrats is undoubtedly greater than it would be in a general election—which is one reason why they have always favoured a system of proportional representation. The Scottish and Welsh systems are based on a combination of members elected in individual constituencies and members elected from party lists in multi-member electoral regions. This greatly assists the Conservatives but not enough to pull them up from the bottom of the heap. But a one-party Labour government is also avoided, with the party no longer able to provide a clear majority as in the past.

² Confusingly MMP is called the 'Additional Member System' in Scotland and Wales.

One controversial decision was to hold the Scottish local government election on the same day as the election for the Scottish parliament. STV was being used for the local government election for the first time, while MMP was used for the parliamentary election. Voter confusion led to a high number of informal votes in the parliamentary election (seven per cent according to the BBC) and an independent inquiry has been set up by the Electoral Commission. Poor ballot paper design may be partly to blame, with many voters giving both their votes to regional party lists rather than giving one vote to a constituency candidate and one to a regional list.

Not only is the United Kingdom now devolved, but there is substantial variation in party support in the different legislatures. The Welsh-speaking area of western Wales is now completely controlled by the nationalist Plaid Cymru, although Plaid also won list seats in all of the regions. This modifies their previous inability to break out of the Welsh-speaking area. In Scotland language is scarcely an issue, although the nationalists won the Gaelic-speaking Western Isles from Labour. But they have made big inroads into Conservative and Labour followings in rural areas to the northeast, in the major cities of Dundee and Aberdeen, and have one seat in the largest city, Glasgow. But in the national capital of Edinburgh the SNP has, rather strangely, failed to make much progress. Labour remains the party of Glasgow and the industrial areas and the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats of rural areas.

In England secessionist nationalism has no need to raise its head and extreme parties such as the British National Party or the UK Independence Party made little impression. The BNP might have done better if London had voted but its only significant gains were in an industrial suburb of Birmingham, which has been voting for racist candidates since the 1960s. The major, and striking, rift is between the north and the south, as it was 150 years ago when Elizabeth Gaskell wrote *North and South* as a reminder to her middle-class readers that industrial England was very unique. The Conservatives have a foothold in some Lancashire textile towns such as Burnley and Blackburn, where racial issues around Pakistani Muslims have been important. But they failed to win a single seat in Manchester. Most major cities in the north remain Labour controlled, though there were some serious losses to the Liberals in Hull, Sheffield, Newcastle and Liverpool, once impregnable working-class strongholds.

If the Conservatives are irrelevant over much of Scotland, Wales and the North, Labour has become irrelevant in most of the booming South. Outside of London their control was mainly limited to Reading and the two 'new towns' of Harlow and Stevenage. This is the area that swung most dramatically to New Labour in 1997 and remained predominantly loyal in the next two elections. In many rural parts of England, the Conservatives lost to the Liberals. But this was less the case in this year. Southern England is truly prosperous, which still cannot be said for much of the United Kingdom despite great improvements and full employment. On the local results Labour cannot possibly be returned at the next general election. But that is some way off and the Conservatives have still to make up the ground they lost in the 1990s in the aftermath of Thatcher.

Bigger questions, such as whether the United Kingdom will break up, are a bit more exciting than whether Liverpool is controlled by the Liberal Democrats. Wales has already been promised constitutional changes, raising its Assembly to the level of a parliament with status and powers equivalent to Scotland. The English made it clear in the North East that they did not want legislative devolution and they are unlikely to get it under a Conservative government, even if they change their minds. Some Conservatives would not resist Scottish or even Welsh independence, as it would greatly reduce Labour support at the national level. However, as with Quebec since the 1970s, neither is likely to vote for complete independence at a referendum, nor be offered it on any other basis. As with the division of Ireland, the European Union makes formal independence less relevant.

The party system will remain more fluid and less duopolistic, which can only cause a loosening up of partisan thinking. Thirty years ago, few would have expected the degree of devolution that Britain now has, nor would they have accepted proportional representation. Things have moved a long way from the simple majoritarianism traditionally associated with the 'Westminster model'.

