



DG Undeb Sy'n Newid UK's Changing Union

Forum 4

The English Question

Macdonald Hotel, Manchester, 18-19 October 2013

A report on the proceedings

John Osmond, Institute of Welsh Affairs

At the outset the Forum considered the evidence for the current politicisation of English identity as a distinctive force within UK politics. Extensive polling has asserted that Englishness, ahead of Britishness, has become the dominant identity of people in England. Further, the polling has shown that English identifiers are concerned about a perceived unfairness of devolution, especially in relation to Scotland, and are also strongly Euro-sceptic. What is striking is that these attitudes are uniformly held across England, both geographically and socially (there is a partial exception of London where affiliation to Britishness is still relatively strong, probably due to its metropolitan and multi-cultural character). It was suggested the political class in Westminster struggles to get to grips with these attitudes or to understand their significance. Yet they raise fundamental issues for the future of the UK. The Forum was invited to address four inter-related questions:

- What are the problems around Englishness and how are they related?
- Is there a viable constitutional answer to them which is politically plausible?
- How might this be achieved?
- What are the implications for the rest of the UK?

Most agreed that devolution has influenced people in England by leading them to unpack a previous conflation of Englishness with Britishness in their identity. In addition it was felt that the recession has accentuated a sense of grievance in England about the benefits the Scots are seen to have derived as a result of devolution. As one participant said:

“English consciousness is being driven by concrete differences between Scotland and England that are arising as a result of the policies of the Scottish Government on university fees, free prescriptions, and free personal care for the elderly. They’ve been given a good deal of publicity and generated a response from people who otherwise do not have much interest in politics.”

It was suggested that English perceptions about the distinctiveness of their identity took off somewhere around 2007-08, a period that marked the onset of the recession. As another participant said:

“Without the recession I doubt whether devolution would have had the impact on England that it has”.

A further coincidence was that at about the same time an SNP government was installed at Holyrood and a Scottish politician became Prime Minister in Downing Street:

“The spike in English consciousness in 2007 coincided with the accession of Gordon Brown to the premiership, completing the sense of a Scottish Raj running Britain. The first wave in the rise of Englishness took place in the 1990s when the St George’s Cross habitually replaced the Union Jack at soccer matches in England. Europe was central to this phenomenon. The demise of Anglo-Britishness is at the heart of all of this and is a long-range process. It’s not all a question of being articulated against an external other. It’s more about the emergence of a complex dual identity – Englishness plus Britishness. How is England to be recognised within the framework of an overarching UK?”

Responding to this question the Forum was presented with a varying menu of policy possibilities, from no change to English independence, as set out in the following matrix:

<i>No Response</i>	It can be argued that the salience of English distinctiveness is being exaggerated. Theoretically the West Lothian question is an issue at Westminster, but the English just have to accept it as the price of union.
<i>Adaptation</i>	‘English votes for English laws’: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soft approach: a non-binding, Committee vote in the House of Commons– as proposed by the Mackay Commission • Hard approach: binding plenary vote in the House of Commons - which would require Reserved Powers for Wales, plus reform of the Barnett formula • Stormont discount – further reduction in MPs from Wales/ Scotland
<i>Executive Whitehall response</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minister/Secretary of State for England (what powers?) • Greater clarity between English and UK roles of other Ministers in UK Cabinet
<i>New structures</i>	Options include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regionalism - regional assemblies or city regions within England • English Parliament – implying a federal UK • English independence

One participant at the Forum persistently made the case for an English Parliament, arguing that this was the majority view when the issues were raised on the doorstep. Despite its name, the rise of UKIP was further evidence of this sentiment, yet the mainstream politicians were reluctant to respond:

“The Westminster parties are in denial about the demands emanating from England. For instance, they refuse to countenance an English manifesto, yet are quite happy to see separate manifestos for Wales and Scotland.”

However, the general view at the Forum was that an English Parliament was difficult to envisage since it would have to work alongside a UK Parliament dominated by English MPs. As another participant said:

“The British way is to evolve rather than impose some grand scheme, always acknowledging the essential asymmetry in the system.”

This implied amending procedures at Westminster to take greater account of English interests by implementing some form of ‘English votes for English laws’, as recommended by the Mackay Commission. Many felt this would be a workable solution, although some questioned how visible it would be in answering the English question. As one queried, “Would it be seen as a parliamentary fix?”

There was a good deal of discussion around the prospects for some form of regionalism as an alternative answer to the need for greater representation of English interests. However, there was uncertainty about which regions might develop. Could they be based on the existing county structures or should they be linked to the nine English planning regions that provided the boundaries for the former Regional Development Agencies abolished in 2012? Alternatively, could they be formed from the city region structure that was emerging in places like Manchester and Leeds? It was argued that times had changed since the failed referendum on regional government for North East England in 2004, for the following reasons:

- What was offered the North East was not devolution but the creation of a glorified county council, in effect a reorganisation of local government. In addition, as one participant said, “It was seen as a retirement home for clapped-out Labour politicians”.
- The referendum was held on the North-East and not for the North of England as a whole.
- The Labour Government was divided on the proposal, with Tony Blair lukewarm at best.
- Today there’s growing interest in what Scotland has been able to make of its devolved powers.

It was argued that regional government could also address fundamental economic imbalances within England, especially between the North and the overheated South East:

“Some form of constitutionally reinforced fiscal federalism within England could be an answer to serious distortions in the distribution of spending on health and education across the country. It could also open access to regional bond markets for borrowing for major infrastructure investment. There used to be this kind of regional economic decentralisation, with the former regional Development Agencies. There used also to be regional stock exchanges and the Bank of England had regional agents. We need to rebuild these institutions and consider utilising the House of Lords as a regional chamber to balance the interests and demands of the new structure.”

It was thought that if regionalism does develop in England it will be a gradual, asymmetric, and opportunistic process, probably starting with a handful of city regions. As one Welsh participant put it:

“You can imagine how some form of executive or administrative devolution in England could be a starting point for further development. After all, this is what happened in Wales. We started with the Welsh Office, which led to an executive Assembly, which has now acquired full legislative powers. You can imagine that some form of regionalism in England would set up a democratic deficit which could lead to democratic accountability.”

Against these views, however, it was argued that regionalism would not answer the fundamental point that it was England, as England that was demanding representation. Attention was drawn to polling, reported in the background paper prepared for the Forum, in which regional assemblies attracted little support. While 33 per cent were in favour of ‘English votes for English laws’ support, and 18 per cent supported an English Parliament, a proposal for elected regional Assemblies was only backed by 8 per cent. While there appeared little opposition to English regionalism in principle it was a project with few champions, a point conceded by a north of England participant who said:

“One reason regionalism or devolution for the north of England has failed to gain traction is that we don’t have a nationalist party to push it, as with Plaid Cymru in Wales and the SNP in Scotland. But a Northern Party could be created following the 2015 general election.”

On the various other options for addressing the English problem it was noted that the response from Westminster was almost total silence, if not indifference. The proposals made by the Mackay Commission had been buried in long grass, while there had been no movement on various schemes for reforming the House of Lords. In general, there was little willingness at Westminster to consider any constitutional change, certainly before the Scottish referendum was resolved. As one participant observed:

“There’s a growing disconnect between ordinary people and the governing élite in Westminster, a class that accepts as common sense a British pro-European stance, while much of the electorate is veering in opposite directions. One of the problems of coalition governments is that they can see eye to eye on bread and butter issues like education and the economy relatively easily, but find constitutional

questions much more difficult since they raise party interests more directly.”

It was observed that although the present moment was the right time to address the English question, before a major problem arises, there was no appetite to do so. At Westminster opposition to Britain’s membership of the EU had overtaken worries about England. It was widely agreed amongst participants at the Forum that it would probably take a crisis for this to change, one that could arise from a number of looming eventualities:

- The Scottish referendum in September 2014, whichever way it goes, and the role of Scottish and Welsh MPs at Westminster.
- Labour winning at the next general election in 2015, but failing to achieve a majority in England.
- The proposed EU referendum in 2017 and the prospect of British exit.

It was argued that a Yes vote in the 2014 referendum could have varying impacts on England. On the one hand, the removal of Scottish MPs would transform it much more emphatically into an English chamber, thereby substantially decreasing the need for changes to its procedures to recognise a distinctive English voice. On the other hand, a Yes vote would not remove the English problem, but rather change its nature. As one participant put it:

“We would be stuck with a permanent Conservative majority coming from the south of England. This would increase pressure for devolution within England to allow the north its own voice.”

In the more likely event of a No vote - if present opinion polls are to be believed - the lack of a distinctive English voice within UK institutions would continue to arouse controversy. As one participant put it:

“A No vote would place us in the position that Gladstone would have occupied if he had had his way in the 1880s – contemplating the prospect of devolution all round.”

Such a scenario could be accompanied by the likelihood of the Scottish Parliament acquiring significant additional powers over income tax and control of welfare policy. As another participant speculated:

“Changes are on the table for Scotland, following a No vote – some form of Devo Plus – and for Wales following the Silk Commission. After 2017 a UK Chancellor will not be able to set income tax rates for the whole of the UK, certainly not for Scotland. That means fiscal devolution for England will be on the table. And surely, associating tax with spending levels goes to the heart of policy-making?”

The forum was told that one possible outcome of the 2015 general election that would certainly project England to centre stage would be if it results in Labour winning in the UK as a whole, but failing to gain a majority in England. This is by no means an unlikely prospect and if it were to happen there would be an

immediate constitutional crisis. The Conservatives would be bound to argue that Labour had no mandate to rule England.

Labour's weakness in these circumstances would be increased if it has no policy for English representation. It was pointed out that Labour is the only party that has substantial representation in Scotland, England and Wales. Yet Labour's current project of describing itself as a 'one nation' party appears to have very little territorial dimension. Instead, the focus of its message is on social justice across the class divide to achieve a concept of 'one nation' of the kind first articulated by Disraeli in the 19th Century. It was suggested that if Labour fails to develop a positive territorial agenda for England it risks the fate that befell the Conservatives in Scotland in the 1990s:

"The Conservatives adopted a highly negative approach to Scottish autonomy with the result that they lost support and seats and still show few signs of recovery. The result is that Conservatism and the centre right is largely marginalised in Scottish politics. The same could happen to Labour and the centre left in England if Labour doesn't develop a narrative around Englishness."

Meanwhile, the Conservatives have their own dilemmas, in particular with their proposed referendum in 2017 on Britain's membership of the EU. As it was argued:

"UKIP is the main force in England tapping into English sentiment. In the process they are imposing a new pressure from the right on the Conservatives. The Conservative Party's attitudes to the two unions have altered markedly. A century ago the primary issue for the party would have been the integrity of the UK. Now, however, the priority for many of its members is to leave the EU, with the British union being a secondary issue. In this sense the unionist party is no longer unionist."

There was further speculation that different views in England and Scotland about EU membership could be fundamentally destabilising for the union:

"One can imagine circumstances in which Scotland votes by 55 to 45 per cent to stay in the UK in September 2014. That could well be followed by a EU referendum in which Scotland opts to stay in but is dragged out by English votes. That would then immediately re-open the Scottish question."

It was emphasised that the interplay between the Scottish and EU referendums could cause some unionist minded Scottish voters an acute dilemma in September 2014:

"British exit from the EU, or the real threat of it, would put a lot of people in Scotland in a difficult place. Many would be presented with an unpalatable choice: to leave the EU unwillingly, or to stay inside the EU as part of an independent Scotland."

An alternative perspective on this dilemma had a more positive outlook. As another participant argued:

“A Yes vote in the Scottish referendum will create an opportunity for progressive forces across the UK. It would mean the end of Cameron – the Prime Minister who presided over the disintegration of his country. It would provide an opportunity for Miliband in co-operation with the Lib Dems. The core of the United Kingdom system is rotten – we have had corruption in our media, in Parliament with MPs’ expenses, in the banks, and we retain an unelected House of Lords. The system is not functioning. An independent Scotland can provide the key to a progressive future for the whole of the UK.

“The Scots independence movement is not anti-English. We want to see a strong, prosperous and successful England that can address social and economic imbalances, especially between the north and south. Scotland’s union is with England, not Britain. Opinion polls show that most Scots support English votes for English laws. An English dimension takes us back to an older union. We need a new framework for considering the future of relationships within the British Isles, one that includes the Republic of Ireland. Something along the lines of the Nordic Union would be a better way to sustain our relationships rather than the straitjacket of the current union that was constructed 300 years ago.”

A further view was expressed that Scottish secession would inevitably cause the dissolution of the United Kingdom, with a question mark then hanging over the future of Wales and Northern Ireland. However, it was felt by others that a more likely scenario following the Scottish referendum is that the UK as a whole will have to continue to come to terms with devolution and especially what it will mean for England. It was argued that a new union would need to be constructed according to a consistent set of principles. These were articulated in the following terms

“First, you need to distinguish between the concepts of Home Rule and decentralisation. Home Rule applies to the nations within the United Kingdom. For England that means Westminster is the English Parliament and we need to find better ways of acknowledging the fact that the bulk of its members represent the 85 per cent of the population that are English – by implementing some version of the Mackay Commission proposals.

“Secondly, decentralisation - which is good for the economies of Scotland and Wales - should also be applied to England. There is nothing wrong with asymmetry. There should be a fiscal as well as an administrative element to decentralisation, involving taxing authority around property taxes.”

It was further suggested that a new settlement for the UK along these lines would require the creation of a constitutional convention to take it forward. There were few other conclusions to the Forum except to say there was general agreement that there is little appetite amongst the main parties at Westminster for addressing the

English question. Certainly, consideration of it has been deferred until at least beyond the Scottish referendum in September 2014. There was further agreement that it would probably take a crisis of some kind to push it on to the political agenda. But there was a worry that once such a moment is reached none of the current solutions being canvassed would prove adequate. That probably explains why many participants at the forum found the arguments that had been deployed across 24 hours had left them feeling uncomfortable about where the future might lead. As one reflected, “There are so many variables and so many different pressures I can’t see a way through to where we are going to settle. I now have a more informed anxiety.”