



The English Question: The View from Westminster

What do our MPs think of 'The English Question' 10 years after Devolution?

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Introduction

Ten years on from the introduction of Labour's historic devolution settlement for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in the absence of any equivalent set of reforms for England, ippr has conducted a survey of MPs to find out if they think that England is losing out as a result of these changes, as many people have claimed.

Here we report some of the main findings of this survey and interpret their significance for ongoing debates about the constitutional position of England, the future of the Union and the question of whether English identity deserves greater recognition within our public culture. Full details of the survey can be found in the appendix.

These findings will also provide one of a number of data sources that will feed into a major report on English national identity and the politics of England that ippr will be publishing early in 2010, entitled *English Questions* (by Michael Kenny and Guy Lodge). ippr is grateful to the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust for supporting our work in this area.¹

Main Findings

- The overwhelming majority of MPs believe that it is time to reform the way that England is governed. Keeping things as they are is the least favoured option of MPs, attracting slightly less support than the radical option of establishing an English Parliament. However, while there is a clear mandate for reform on this issue within the House of Commons, opinion is divided over what to do.
- MPs, unsurprisingly, tend to think about issues relating to the governance and constitutional position of England through the lens of their own party's interest. Thus, most Conservative MPs favour 'English votes for English Laws' while the great majority of Labour members oppose this measure. Conversely a significant number of Labour MPs still support the introduction of a form of regional government within England, which no Conservative MP favours. Given the importance of these issues, we need our politicians to engage with these major questions in a more independent and less self-interested fashion. There is a real danger that reform will be blocked by party self-interest.
- The one area in which there is overwhelming support among MPs from across the political divide is in relation to the levels of funding received by the constituent nations of the United Kingdom. A significant majority of MPs believe that the current system is unfair.

¹ See also 'More than one English Question' by Michael Kenny and Guy Lodge which was also published as part of the JRCT-funded research. <http://www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=667>

- The survey finds that of the main three parties it is Conservative MPs who are the least supportive of the ‘localism’ agenda. Despite the emphasis that the Conservative Party leadership has placed on localism, far fewer Conservative MPs than Labour MPs believe that empowering local government would help address the democratic deficit in England. And even fewer Conservative MPs believe that localism will be implemented in the future. This suggests that this flagship policy for Cameron’s Conservatives has shallow roots within the party at large.
- MPs appear to favour doing more to give English identity greater recognition and profile. Far more MPs support making St George’s Day a public holiday than oppose it. Labour MPs in particular support doing more in this area, which suggests that the Government, which has conspicuously neglected to engage with Englishness, is out of tune with opinion in its own party.
- The majority of MPs believe that Scotland will never become independent.

Is England losing out after devolution?

40% of MPs agreed that England had lost out because of devolution to the other nations of the United Kingdom, compared to 38% who disagreed. 50% of those who agreed with this view were Conservative MPs and 28% were Labour MPs.

Analysis: This response suggests that a significant number of our MPs have come to the view that asymmetric devolution has created inequities between the nations of the United Kingdom. While this is more typically a Conservative view, it should not go unnoticed that a sizeable minority of Labour MPs also agrees with this judgement (though we observe that of those who did not think that England was losing out, 71% were Labour MPs).

Options for reforming the way England is governed

Different reform options for the so-called ‘English Question’ have been put forward in the last few years. We asked MPs which, if any, of these proposals they favour.

- The proposition that ‘England should be governed as it is now’ elicited a strikingly small amount of support from the current cohort of MPs (10%). Slightly more MPs (11%) support the very radical idea of an English Parliament than indicate support for the status quo.
- The so-called ‘English Votes for English Laws’ proposal which is favoured by some leading Conservatives, is the preference of 30% of respondents. Of those in favour of this measure, the overwhelming majority are Conservative

MPs (71%), with very few Labour MPs (6%) or Liberal Democrat MPs (6%) inclined to support it.

- Devolved regional government in England - an idea that has been proposed by both the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties – was the most popular preference, with 43% of MPs favouring it, the majority of which were Labour MPs (74%). Not one single Conservative MP supported the introduction of regional government.
- The idea of giving more powers to local government in England is rhetorically supported by all the main parties, and is particularly associated with the pro-localism measures proposed by David Cameron. 39% of respondents favoured this proposal but, strikingly, this option is less enthusiastically supported by Conservative MPs as an answer to the ‘English Question’. Among those favouring this proposal, 51% are Labour MPs compared to 24% of Conservative MPs.

Analysis: There is a clear consensus among MPs in favour of the need to reform the way in which England is governed, with only 10% of respondents supporting the status quo: indeed this option received the least level of support from MPs. But there is marked disagreement along party lines about which reforms MPs support. ‘English Votes for English Laws’ is the clear preference of Conservative MPs, while devolved regional government in England is the choice of most Labour MPs (despite the significant setback this idea received in the wake of the overwhelming No vote registered in the North-East referendum on regional government held in 2004). The strength of support for the notion of giving more power to local government in England among Labour MPs is significant, and so too is the relative lack of enthusiasm among current Conservative MPs for one of David Cameron’s flagship policies.

MPs were also asked to consider the likelihood of each of these proposals being implemented within the next twenty years:

- A parliament for England: only 4% of respondents saw this as likely to come about.
- English Votes for English Laws: 44% of MPs (among whom 52% are Conservative and 20% Labour) believe that this will be implemented.
- Devolved regional government in England: despite the fact that most MPs favoured this option, only 21% of MPs actually think that it will be implemented. The overwhelming majority (67%) are Labour MPs.

- More powers for local government in England: 43% of MPs believe that there will be reform in this area. Among this group 59% are Labour and only 22% Conservative.

Analysis: MPs' expectations in terms of reforms to the governance of England are conditioned by the policy position advocated by their own party.

Most Conservative MPs expect 'English votes for English laws' to be introduced which is broadly in line with recent developments within their party. A version of 'English votes for English laws' was recommended by Kenneth Clarke's Democracy Taskforce in 2008, while William Hague reiterated the party's commitment to reform in this area at their 2009 party conference, suggesting that should the Conservatives win power they will proceed with this reform.² We also note that many more Labour MPs (20%) believe that this policy will be implemented than actually support it (6%). And far fewer Labour MPs believe that regional government will happen than those who support this reform.

The responses to the question about more powers for local government are more surprising. Only one in five (22%) of Conservative MPs believes that this flagship Cameron policy will be implemented in the next two decades.

The West Lothian Question

MPs were asked whether they believed that Scottish MPs should not be allowed to vote on legislation that only affects England, a reference to the constitutional anomaly known as the West Lothian Question. 38% of MPs agreed that Scottish MPs should be barred from voting on English matters, of whom the overwhelming majority were Conservative MPs (67%). Indeed, not a single Conservative MP disagreed with the notion of barring Scottish MPs from voting on English legislation. 47%, however, disagreed with this proposition, of whom the clear majority were Labour MPs (80%).

Analysis: Predictably MPs divide along lines determined by their party's interest in their perception of the so-called 'West Lothian' question. Since the Conservatives have a weak electoral base in Scotland and Wales – returning just 4 MPs at the 2005 General Election - they have little to lose from a reform which would restrict the voting rights of non-English MPs. In contrast the Labour Party, which won a total of 69 seats in Scotland and Wales at the 2005 General Election, would be much more

² See

http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/10/William_Hague_Let_us_join_together_in_bringing_change_to_our_country.aspx

seriously affected by any reform this area. Political expediency rather than constitutional principle appears to determine party attitudes to this vexed issue.

The Barnett formula and the distribution of public money across the UK

MPs were asked whether they thought that the different levels of funding received by the nations of the United Kingdom was fair. A clear majority of MPs (62%) said that the current distribution of funding was unfair. Among those who thought it was unfair 33% were Conservatives and 40% were Labour MPs. Only 29% of MPs felt the distribution of funding was fair, of these just 6% were Conservatives.

Analysis: The response to this question adds further support to the need to reform the system for funding the devolved administrations, a view increasingly shared by the public. The level of party consensus among those MPs who believe the current distribution to be unfair is striking.

MPs were asked whether Wales and Scotland should be given more tax-raising powers in order to pay for more of the public services for which they are responsible. 42% of MPs agreed with this idea and 40% disagreed. The number of respondents agreeing with this measure included the same number of Labour and Conservative MPs.

Analysis: Though opinion is divided on granting greater fiscal powers to the devolved institutions, it is interesting to note that advocates of reform exist in all the main parties. This should especially assist with the reform agenda in Scotland, where there is a stronger case for devolving additional powers over taxation to the Scottish Parliament.

Greater recognition for Englishness

MPs were also asked some questions relating to the cultural position and recognition of English identity, including whether:

- *'God Save the Queen' should be replaced by a specifically English anthem when English sporting teams compete. A surprising one in four respondents agreed with this idea, with 28% undecided, and 47% opposed. Among those in agreement 50% were Labour and 21% were Conservative MPs.*

- *St George's Day should be a public holiday in England. 44% of MPs agreed with this proposal (of whom just over 50% were Labour) while only 24% disagreed.*

Analysis: These are surprising and important findings. A quarter of the current cohort of MPs would consider replacing 'God Save the Queen' with an English national anthem to mark occasions when English sporting teams compete, and almost twice as many MPs agree rather than disagree with the idea of making St George's Day (23rd April) a public holiday in England. This suggests that MPs are increasingly attuned to the growth of an independent sense of 'Englishness' in the last decade. These responses suggest that many Labour MPs believe that government should do much more in relation to this phenomenon.

The end of the Union?

MPs were asked whether and when they thought that Scotland could become independent. A clear majority (58%) of respondents indicated that they believe this will never happen.

Analysis: Most MPs at Westminster are confident that the SNP will not be successful in its bid to make Scotland independent. Given the success of the SNP since 2007 and the difficulties that Labour has had in Scotland until recently, this confidence in the future integrity of the UK is striking.

Appendix

As part of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust-funded project 'The English Question' the Institute for Public Policy Research sent a questionnaire survey to all MPs in 2009 to gauge the views of our elected representatives on this issue. The survey was originally sent out to all MPs in May, with reminder notices going out over the summer.

Response rate

In total 114 replies were received, representing a response rate of 17.64%, which is in line with similar surveys which seek to reflect the views of MPs.³ Moreover, the responses we received broadly reflect the current party and gender composition of the House of Commons.

³ For example commercial polling companies regularly survey MPs on a range of policy areas and aim for a similar response rate.

Party composition:

Party composition	House of Commons 2005 general election (%)	Our survey (%)
Labour	54	49
Conservative	30	28
Liberal Democrat	10	16
Other	6	7

Gender:

Gender	House of Commons 2005 election (%)	Our survey (%)
Men	80	85
Women	20	15

Results

Do you agree that England has lost out because of devolution to Scotland and Wales? (114 MPs answered this question)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Total no. of responses	19	27	24	26	18	114
Total as %	16.67%	23.68%	21.05%	22.81%	15.79%	100%

Do you agree that England has lost out because of devolution to Scotland and Wales? (% of responses for each option by party) (114 MPs answered this question)

Party	Agree % (no.)	Neither agree or disagree % (no.)	Disagree % (no.)
Labour	28.26% (13)	50% (12)	70.45% (31)
Conservative	50% (23)	29.16% (7)	4.54% (2)
Lib Dem	15.2% (7)	12.5% (3)	18.18% (8)
Other	6.52% (3)	8.3% (2)	6.8 % (3)
Total	100% (46)	100% (24)	100% (44)

A number of options have been put forward as potential answers to the 'English question'. Please indicate which, if any, of these proposals you support. (114 MPs answered this question)

	Labour (no. of responses)	Conservative (no. of responses)	Lib Dem (no. of responses)	Other (no. of responses)	Total number of responses for each option	Total Support %
A Parliament for England	3	1	3	5	12	10.53%
English votes on English laws	2	24	2	6	34	29.82%
Devolved regional government	36	0	12	1	49	42.98%
More powers for local government	23	11	11	0	45	39.47%
England should be governed as it is now	8	3	0	0	11	9.65%
None of the above	2	1	1	1	5	4.39%

Which of these options do you think are likely to be implemented in the next 20 years?

(114 MPs answered this question)

	Labour (no. of responses)	Conservative (no. of responses)	Lib Dem (no. of responses)	Other (no. of responses)	Total number of responses for each option	Total %
A Parliament for England	1	1	2	1	5	4.39%
English votes on English laws	10	26	8	3	50	43.86%
Devolved regional government	16	0	6	2	24	21.05%
More powers for local government	29	11	9	0	49	42.98%

Do you agree that Scottish MPs should no longer be allowed to vote on English legislation? (114 MPs answered this question)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total no. of responses	25	18	17	23	31
Total as %	21.93%	15.79%	14.91%	20.18%	27.19%

Do you agree that Scottish MPs should no longer be allowed to vote on English legislation? (% of responses for each option by party) (114 MPs answered this question)

Party	Agree % (no.)	Neither agree nor disagree % (no.)	Disagree % (no.)
Labour	9.3% (4)	52.94% (9)	79.63% (43)
Conservative	67.44% (29)	17.64% (3)	0% (0)
Lib Dem	6.97% (3)	23.52% (4)	20.37% (11)
Other	16.27% (7)	5.88% (1)	0% (0)
Total	100% (43)	100% (17)	100% (54)

Do you think that the different levels of funding received by Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England are fair/unfair/don't know (113 people answered this question)

	Fair (no.)	Unfair (no.)	Don't know (no.)	Total
Labour	24	28	4	56
Conservative	2	23	6	31
Lib Dem	7	11	0	18
Others	0	8	0	8
Total	33	70	10	113
Total as %	29.2%	61.95%	8.85%	100%

Now that Scotland has its own Parliament, and Wales its own Assembly, should both pay for the services they are responsible for from taxes collected in their own country? (113 MPs answered this question)

Party	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Labour	5	12	9	21	9	56
Conservative	5	12	6	5	3	31
Lib Dem	2	9	4	1	2	18
Others	2	1	1	2	2	8
Total	14	34	20	29	16	113
Total as %	12.39%	30.09%	17.7%	25.66%	14.16%	100%

Should 'God save the Queen' be replaced by a specifically English national anthem when England sporting teams compete?(113 MPs answered this question)

Party	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Labour	6	8	18	13	11	56
Conservative	2	4	7	9	9	31
Lib Dem	2	2	5	7	2	18
Other	4	0	2	0	2	8
Total	14	14	32	29	24	113
Total as %	12.39%	12.39%	28.32%	25.66%	21.24%	

Should St George's Day be a public holiday in England? (113 MPs answered this question)

Party	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Labour	5	21	19	6	5	56
Conservative	3	9	9	4	6	31
Lib Dem	2	4	6	5	1	18
Other	5	1	2	0	0	8
Total	15	35	36	15	12	113
Total as %	13.27%	30.97%	31.86%	13.27%	10.62%	

Do you think that Scotland will become independent in less than five years; in less than twenty years; in less than fifty years; in at least fifty years; never; don't know (114 MPs answered this question)

	In less than 5 years	In less than 20 years	In less than 50 years	In at least 50 years	Never	Don't know
Total	1	17	5	2	66	23
Total as %	0.88%	14.91%	4.39%	1.75%	57.89%	20.18%