Governance, politics and political economy – England’s questions after Brexit

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**ABSTRACT**

In the aftermath of Brexit there is frequent reference to an ascendant ‘English nationalism’ in British politics. This article challenges the conceptual and empirical adequacy of this epithet. It provides a rather different characterization of developing trends within English national consciousness, and the main dynamics animating it in recent years, pointing to the emergence of a number of distinct English ‘imaginaries’ at both popular and elite levels. It examines how England became an object of concern in debates about devolution to other parts of the UK, and in the context of attempts by successive governments to develop a functional model of subnational government within England. It also explores the implications of the contrasting understandings of English devolution that prevail within the British party system.

**KEYWORDS**

English nationalism; UK devolution; regional government; Brexit

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**INTRODUCTION**

In the aftermath of the Referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union (EU), held in June 2016, there has been an extended debate about an ascendant ‘English nationalism’, and its political and constitutional ramifications (Esler, 2021). Both the conceptual and empirical adequacy of this characterization of the national outlook of the English merit a deeper and more critical discussion than has hitherto occurred. In this article I identify some of the key assumptions underpinning much of this discourse on English nationalism, and their attendant weaknesses. I then proceed to develop a rather different characterization of developing trends within English national consciousness, and the main dynamics animating it in recent years, pointing to the emergence of a number of distinct English ‘imaginaries’ at both popular and elite levels. And I delineate a number of different ways in which England has emerged as a more salient and contested imagined community (Anderson, 2016), as well as a more delineated focus of political discourse and, increasingly, as a putative site for institutional reform.

Since 2014, two major referendums – on Scottish independence and the UK’s membership of the EU – have brought questions about what the English may want, in constitutional terms, and how they view the growing strains upon the UK’s territorial constitution, into the heart of British politics. The presumption of a good deal of recent political commentary is that these events have
triggered a discernibly nationalist shift within the English mindset at both elite and popular levels (Hudson, 2019; O’Toole, 2018). Such a characterization, however, rests upon a conceptually problematic and empirically inadequate understanding of politics of national identity in this particular context.

In this article I seek to examine some of the different ways in which England has become a more discernible focus in popular consciousness and an object of concern in the context of debates about the implications of the introduction of devolution to other parts of the UK, and attempts by successive governments to develop a functional model of territorial government within England. While for the most part I stress the distinct nature and timbre of these developments in the national consciousness, I also point to some striking points of overlap and connection between them.

**BEYOND ‘ENGLISH NATIONALISM’**

A number of influential explanations and accounts of the Brexit vote have deployed the idea of ‘English nationalism’ to characterize the outlook which the Vote Leave campaign is said to have mobilized (Esler, 2021; Moore, 2017). This term was employed by some commentators in relation to a burgeoning seam of Eurosceptic sentiment (Welling, 2012), and became a more familiar theme in political commentary around the time that the Conservative Party under David Cameron was widely accused of whipping up this sentiment in the aftermath of the Scottish Referendum, and during the election campaign of 2015. Some scholars have evinced scepticism about the idea that a discernible form of political nationalism has gained ground among the English, because they saw either little evidence that feelings and expressions of nationhood spilled beyond the cultural sphere and very little of the ‘othering’ or sense of political struggle which has typified modern nationalist movements (English, 2011). Since the EU Referendum, however, such scepticism is less commonly aired.

But while reference to a rising sense of English nationalism has become very familiar since 2016, this concept remains elusive and ill-defined in much current discourse. Some authors consciously opt to avoid using this precise formulation, preferring instead to employ different – though related – terms such as ‘English nationhood’ (Kenny, 2014; Thompson, 2019) or ‘Englishness’ (Aughey, 2007; Henderson & Wyn Jones, 2021) in order to denote a historically rooted pattern of national feeling, and – in some cases – to avoid characterizing national sentiment in this case with reference to universal theories about modern nationalism. A number of historians see nationalism in this context as an ancient cultural force, reflecting a wider historiography that identifies England as one of the earliest nations to emerge in the Western world (Black, 2018). While others, in contrast, see its emergence as a product of a more recent rebellion against the UK’s membership of the EU (Welling, 2012) or, more broadly, as a function of the melancholia and nostalgia associated with its post–imperial pathologies (Gilroy, 2008). A rich and multifaceted debate about the contours, character and chronology of English nationalism has engaged professional historians for the last two decades (Kumar, 2009); in the social sciences, by contrast, the literature devoted to it remains more fractured and less developed in both conceptual and empirical terms.

There are three particular reasons why political analysts should be wary about the assumption that the conventional image of English nationalism offers an adequate characterization of shifts in national consciousness in this context. The first of these is a debilitating tendency to depict the national outlook in a fixed, and often essentialist, fashion, defined in terms of a culturally encoded propensity for nostalgia, melancholia or some other pathological form of illusion (O’Toole, 2018). A closely related, second assumption is that this form of patriotic identification necessarily determines a certain kind of – populist or conservative – political outlook or affiliation. Yet, the extensive scholarly literature devoted to the political implications and uses of nationalism stresses the multiplicity and contested character of the cultural features and political implications derived
from various articulations and expressions of nationality (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). And a body of empirical research, including various polling studies, reports evidence of the variety of political loyalties associated with English national identity (McCrone, 2020). Third, the characterization of an impulse towards a more nationalist mindset among the English in recent years is largely blind to the different domains in which national feelings are generated, performed and contested, and the variety of political levels at which it may be operative.

With these weaknesses in mind, I develop a rather different account of the various kinds of English imaginary that have developed in the recent period, paying particular attention to some of the ways in which England has been framed as a putative political community and depicted as an increasingly salient institutional unit within the UK polity. I consider, in particular, debates about when a greater sense of English identity began to emerge at the popular level, and juxtapose this dynamic with the quite different visions of England that infused high politics at Westminster in the period after devolution, and which are more closely associated with constitutional and institutional questions. Issues of domestic governance – in terms of both England’s place in the wider Union and also the challenges associated with subnational devolution – are increasingly prominent themes in current political discourse. It is imperative, I suggest, for analysts to attend to the different ways in which England as a political community is emerging in politics and political culture, and the difficulties this poses for territorial politics and constitutional policy in the current moment. Brexit and, more recently, Covid-19 have brought to the fore different, contesting ideas about devolution in relation to this part of the UK. This article examines the various causes of the growing focus upon England and the national identity of its people in contemporary politics, but warns against the conventional stereotype of an illiberal, majoritarian nationalism. It offers a broad account of the different, underlying causes of English nationalism and the variety of ways in which England and its feelings of national identity have moved into the political foreground.

REGIONAL INEQUALITIES AND POLITICAL DISENCHANTMENT

The development of a sense of discontent linked to the increasingly divergent economic fortunes of different parts of England in the wake of the financial and banking crises of 2007–08 has been highlighted by a growing body of academic commentary (Collier, 2019; McKay, 2019). There is an ongoing debate among social scientists about whether it is economic or culturally rooted resentments that are the principal drivers of this disaffection, and also about its causal impact upon the political outlook and electoral behaviour of individual citizens (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Los et al., 2017).

Less attention in this literature has been paid to the mechanisms that condition how feelings about spatial inequality are politically mobilized and discursively constructed. Indeed, the precise role of nationalist sentiments in this area remains somewhat elusive. Given the extensive evidence that those most disenchanted with mainstream politics in this period, who lived in England, were also most likely to identify with a sense of English – rather than British – patriotism (Henderson & Wyn Jones, 2021), a more careful, and less caricatured, conception of the role of national feeling is especially important in this case.

This geographically rooted pattern of discontent, which was most apparent in smaller towns, less prosperous cities and rural hinterlands, was not confined to England. Various studies have identified a broadly similar trend in non-metropolitan opinion across many Western countries since 2007–08 (Algan et al., 2018). Some analysis has illuminated the connections between rising economic inequalities among core and peripheral regions in European countries and the growth of political resentment (Carrascal et al., 2020). But the causal dynamics and transmission mechanisms mediating the relationship between economic inequality and populist politics remain opaque in much of this literature, and so too the role and character of forms of nationalist sentiments.
in relation to critical views of the political and governing systems. For the most part political science has tended to see expressions of nationalism as extraneous or second-order elements within an outlook that is more typically characterized as populist or culturally conservative in character (Guiso et al., 2017).

Some political analysis has identified a growing geographical bifurcation between distinctive cultural and political mentalities in the English context (Jennings & Stoker, 2017), and noted the different national imaginaries that appear to correlate with the cultural–political outlooks of ‘left behind’ areas and more metropolitan ones – with the latter more likely to harbour support for multicultural Britishness. And it has been widely observed that the disaffection of many parts of non-metropolitan England has its roots in the divergent economic fortunes of its regions, a pattern that became established over several decades but was accentuated in the 1990s. In that decade, London’s productivity increased much faster than that of the rest of the country, but former industrial areas in the North, Midlands and Wales had already fallen behind the South East, leaving the UK one of the most unbalanced economies, in spatial terms, within the Western world (McCann, 2016).

In the wake of the financial and banking crises of 2007–08, and the stark regional disparities that characterized the subsequent recovery, the feeling that the central state, and the party elites contesting control of it, were indifferent to the fate of many of the country’s less successful places, became especially salient (JRF and UK in a Changing Europe, 2019). The character and political implications of this mood began to break the surface of politics some years prior to the Brexit vote. Worries about working-class alienation from politics were a preoccupation of politicians and government from the mid-2000s onwards (Evans & Chzhen, 2017; Hayhurst, 2020).

The calcification of a sense of disenchantment was an important backdrop to the decision of a large majority of those who live outside London and its nearby commuter towns to vote against membership of the EU (Foa & Wilmot, 2019). It figured again in the General Election of late 2019, as Boris Johnson’s Conservative Party made delivering Brexit central to its political appeal, and proceeded to win a swathe of former Labour seats in the Midlands and North of England (Surridge, 2020). An important strand of feeling in these different areas coalesced around the view that they have long been peripheral to the priorities and outlook of Britain’s policymakers and political parties (Collier, 2019). This sense of collective neglect was pricked too by disquiet over the state’s perceived largesse towards other parts of the UK – with Scotland much more prominent in English thinking than other parts of the UK. An identification with Englishness, therefore, became an important element within a larger structure of feeling, but it also functioned, in the terms set out by McCrone (2020), as a filter through which a variety of other political questions were perceived by a large number of people living in non-metropolitan areas. These currents of sentiment in the period running up to the Brexit ‘moment’ have been overlooked in those characterizations of English nationalism which focus almost entirely upon the motivations and thinking of elite political actors as ‘producers’ of nationalist ideas.

They did figure in some of the commentary on the UK Independence Party’s (UKIP) following its significant rise in popularity, after 2012 (Ford & Sobolewska, 2018; Hayton, 2016). UKIP in these years was focused upon ‘the political mobilization of a particular strain of English national identity – one which is particularly appealing to culturally conservative and political disaffected English voters’ (Ford & Sobolewska, 2018, p. 159). Robert Ford and Maria Sobolewska identify the emergence of a culturally conservative and politically disaffected pool of English voters successfully targeted by UKIP’s appeal as a sense of English identity became ‘more popular with older respondents, the working class, those with no formal qualifications and those in the lowest income quartile’ (Ford & Sobolewska, 2018, p. 163). Despite its name, and traditionalist Anglo-British ethos, UKIP was increasingly inclined in this period to use English symbolism and references, and went out if its way to identify with potential grievance on issues such as territorial
UKIP appealed in other parts of Britain as well – notably in Wales – and was at times riven by sharp internal tensions about whether its English–nationalist turn crowded out an older idiom of pan-British nationalism (Trumm, Milazzo and Townsley, 2020).

Various polling studies conducted in these years (Henderson et al., 2017) shed light on an important feature of the outlook of the discontented voters who identified, in terms of their national identity, as English. This was a greater sense of disgruntlement with the constitutional status quo than most of their fellow English citizens, and strong support for the very broad idea of some form of redress for England within the wider territorial constitution. Polls also revealed a lack of consensus about what sorts of institutional reform this would entail, with the surveys conducted by the Future of England team reporting that those who felt predominantly or exclusively ‘English’ were more inclined to feel most aggrieved at the way England is currently treated, and most in favour of a greater degree of recognition for it within the structures of British governance. Given that many of this group had previously been, or were soon to become, Conservative Party voters, the growing appeal of the idea of political reform in relation to England in this period is notable.

While a good deal of political commentary has tended to depict Brexit as a populist revolt, evidence of significant levels of political discontent among both ‘left-behind’ communities and more affluent shire-dwellers points to the need for a more widely angled understanding of its causes (UK in a Changing Europe, 2021). Indeed, for a proper historical understanding of this phenomenon, we should look back still further and consider the emergence of a debate about working-class political apathy and alienation within Labour circles from the early 2000s, and the growing tendency for protest votes, in local and European elections, for anti-system parties, such as the British National Party (BNP) (John et al., 2006). Then, too, opposition to the priorities of metropolitan policymakers was, in parts of left-behind England, shrouded in nationalist rhetoric and symbolism.

In this regard, an intriguing – and latterly forgotten – episode in the story of rising working-class discontent in England was the Referendum on regional government held in the North Eastern region in 2004. Offered the opportunity to provide consent for a proposed new model of regional government, a large majority (77.9%) of those who voted chose to register their disapproval, despite the widespread assumption that this Labour-voting area was very likely to support this model of decentralized government. The campaign leading up to this poll also served notice of the potential for a populist campaigning pitch to those who felt overlooked in political and policy terms. Subsequent analyses of these voting outcomes highlight the impact of the anti-politics message promoted by the Leave campaign (Rallings & Thrasher, 2006; Tickell et al., 2005). This episode sheds an interesting light on growing scepticism in some of Labour’s political heartlands about the party’s preferences and inclinations. A range of different polls from the mid-late 2000s showed a strong correlation between Euroscepticism and a propensity to identify primarily as ‘English’ (Henderson & Wyn Jones, 2021; though for a sceptical view, see Mycock, 2016), and noted that this national sentiment was especially strong in non-metropolitan areas.

The EU Referendum of 2016 represented the next opportunity for this increasingly disaffected constituency to exercise a direct influence on England’s political and constitutional direction. And while this result was determined as well by the votes of an even larger number of more affluent citizens from Southern counties and the Midlands, citizens of poorer regions and ‘left-behind’ communities turned out to vote to leave the UK to an extent that confounded the expectations of most political pundits (The Electoral Commission, 2016). In these areas, and also in some of the more prosperous shires, a sense of frustration at the priorities and policies of the political establishment, and an attachment to the ethos of the English nation – as well as the particular impact of the immigration issue and the campaign run by the Vote Leave campaign – helped detach many Tory and Labour voters from the pro-European ethos of the main parties’
leaderships. The majority of English towns in former industrial regions, and many of those located in coastal areas, voted overwhelmingly in favour of Brexit.

The term ‘English nationalism’ was widely employed as a blanket characterization of an emergent form of ethno-national consciousness. But many of those wielding this concept have been insensitive to the variety of concerns and ideas that are expressed through reference to English identity and have tended to overlook important geographical and demographic variations in its strength. Polemical denunciations of English nationalism also often overlook the consistent polling evidence which shows that most people in this context identify as both English and British, and a clear majority remains in favour of the continuance of the domestic Union, when asked directly about it. It is especially important to grasp the diverse range of expressions of English identity, and the different ways in which these have been politically articulated. The populist–nationalist English imaginary has emerged at the same time as – and is in tension with – other political modalities and expressions of English nationhood since the mid-1990s, and with an enduring seam of distinctly cultural nationalism (Kenny, 2014).

Various studies identified the emergence in this period of alternative cultural and political ideas of England, which have been characterized variously as (small ‘c’) conservative in kind, perpetuating older notions of English character (Mandler, 2006) and visions of enduring cultural tradition. And some have chronicled the development of liberal (or cosmopolitan) variants of English identity (Kenny, 2014), which are more common in metropolitan locations.

Separately, a small number of campaigners and advocates have together made the case for England as a neglected democratic space, depicting the English as a nation that needs to free itself from its occlusion by the antiquated British state (a view that takes inspiration from the work of Scottish intellectual Tom Nairn; Kenny & Wellings, 2019). This idea has been advanced, in particular, by Barnett (2016) who sees Brexit as a symptom of the denial of opportunities for self-determination available to the English. And it finds echoes with a handful of politicians and intellectuals from different points of the political spectrum who have lamented the ingrained tendency to overlook the case for English self-determination (Field, 2017).

When these different political and cultural forms of English nationalism are brought more clearly into focus, it becomes apparent that various, competing expressions of Englishness as a form of cultural identity, and different ideas about England as a site of putative political community, have percolated into the public discourse over the last decade. And these have become associated with, and appropriated by, a variety of distinctive political narratives and ideas. These range from Brexiteer visions of the Anglo-British state freeing itself from the imperial control of the EU (Hannan, 2013) to ideas of England as a greener, less consumerist and more locally democratic polity (Kingsnorth, 2009), and incorporate various other perspectives between these opposing poles.

However, as a prospective site of political community and a potential institutional entity, England has become more visible for quite different reasons as well. This has happened both as a result of changes to the system of UK governance arising from the devolution reforms introduced by the Labour government after 1997, and due to an enduring concern, at the heart of British politics, about the need to build a legitimate and coherent form of subnational administration within England. These dynamics are considered in depth below.

**DEVOLUTION AND THE ENGLISH**

In constitutional terms, the ingrained idea that England is the core territory of the Union state undergirded the presumption that the many advantages conferred by this status have long been assumed to underpin popular acquiescence to the anomalies and asymmetries associated with the ways in which the governance of the UK works (Hazell, 2006). Those who have puzzled over the possibility of creating a delineated set of English institutions or distinct form of national–political
representation within a federal structure have long encountered the objection that there is no way of doing so that does not fatally undermine the stability of the Union (Kendle, 1989).

The devolution reforms introduced by the first Tony Blair government, at the close of the last century, were strongly conditioned by these assumptions. However, 20 years after the reforms were introduced, they have become more questionable. A growing number of the English have become convinced that the current system of territorial governance may put its people at a disadvantage compared with other parts of the UK, a feeling cross-cut by the view of many residents of former industrial regions that too much wealth, power and investment are centred upon London and the South East (Berry, 2018; Tomaney, 2016; Tomaney & Ward, 2000).

The idea that it has turned out to be an unfinished process, not a single event, has become a well-worn cliché applied to devolution. What is less remarked upon is that with each subsequent turn of the ratchet of further reform, as new powers have been given to these different administrations, the position of England as an object of state administration has also altered – by an unnoticed process of ‘subtraction’, as Keating (2021) puts it, not by conscious design. In the years following these reforms, this inadvertent consequence was noted only by a small band of observers, and drew little wider interest. Latterly, a number of campaigners have noted the ingrained unwillingness or inability of state actors to speak directly to the increasingly prominent, but officially unrecognized, position of England in British governance (Denham & Young, 2018). The habit among politicians and bureaucrats at the centre of conflating England with the entire country continued unabated during these years, but over time has been subjected to challenge by the devolved administrations and a small band of critics. The gradual discovery by elite politicians and administrators that they were now directly responsible for England’s governance in a growing number of policy areas has been disorientating and occasionally painful (Kettle, 2020). And one of the most striking political consequences of the Covid-19 crisis has been the revelation that in key policy areas the writ of the UK’s Prime Minister runs in England alone (Kenny et al., 2021).

These issues were, until recently, noises off at Westminster and Whitehall, and both continued to operate on the basis that these changes mattered only to the territories where they were directly applied. This illusion was perpetuated too because, in various ways, English administration was still sufficiently intertwined with that of other parts of the country, and each department in Whitehall assumed a complicated and variable set of territorial responsibilities (Gallagher, 2018). Little consideration was given to the emerging reality that the UK’s government was also de facto the governing authority for England and the guardian of its national interest separately from its role in relation to the entire polity. One of the arenas where this discrepancy first became apparent was in the field of inter-governmental relations – the system of formal, high-level consultations between the UK and devolved governments which emerged fitfully in the years after devolution (McEwen et al., 2012). In this setting, the ‘dual hatted’ nature of the British state’s role – where it was supposed to act both as guardian of the UK’s interest and de facto representative of England – has over time generated considerable criticism from officials and politicians in devolved areas, and indeed from English nationalists (Jones, 2018).

The abiding assumption too was that the operation of the devolved institutions, and the terms of the reformed Union, were of little interest to the English majority, widely held to be indifferent to such issues (Hazell, 2006). However, during the course of the first decade of the new century this notion began to look more questionable. Some academic experts looked for signs of an English backlash in the immediate aftermath of the devolution reforms, and, finding few tremors in the polling data they analysed, declared that no such dynamic was in play (Curtice & Heath, 2001). Yet, there were signs, only a few years later, of an increasingly resentful aspect to English feelings about the Union. For a start, the devolution of key public services, such as health and education, enabled – often simplistic – comparisons between levels of public provision in the devolved territories with England, an issue that surfaced when the Labour government increased
prescription charges for drugs that were provided free in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2009 (BBC, 2009).

There was a growing recognition, fuelled by some media commentary, that these policy differences were connected to varying levels of funding for the different territorial parts of the state. It was this issue, more than any other, that punctured Anglo indifference to devolution elsewhere. Old resentments about the perceived fiscal burdens of Union were reignited by the perception that a more generous social and welfare settlement was apparently available to the Scots. This complaint also reflected a structural feature of these new arrangements which allocated to Scotland and Wales responsibilities for spending on services, but did not entrust them with powers to raise the revenues which enabled it (McLean, 2018).

Some polling – most notably The Future of England series (Henderson et al., 2017) – reported a pattern of rising irritation on this score. This issue began to surface in media coverage and high politics in the early 2000s, and moved further up the agenda after the financial and banking crises of 2007–08. Conservative MPs agitated about the Barnett formula (Kirkaldy, 2014), and Labour representatives in Northern constituencies were sometimes vocal about the feeling that they were treated poorly in relation to Scotland and London. Within the Conservative Party more generally, the idea that devolution had created an unsustainable degree of imbalance across the country became a widely held view in the first decade of the new century (Kenny & Lodge, 2010).

Separately, an old concern resurfaced in this period: the question of whether MPs from outside England were disproportionately influential at the political centre. This issue came to the fore when Scottish MP John Reid was made Secretary of State for Health in 2003, even though this was now a devolved responsibility in Scotland. Talk of a ‘Scottish Raj’ at Westminster under the Labour governments led by Blair and Gordon Brown percolated into the media in the early 2000s (BBC, 2005). And this issue was given particular salience when it became clear that MPs from outside England could play a determining role on legislative matters that only applied within its borders. The passage of contentious Bills on sensitive issues, including the introduction of university tuition fee payments and reforms to England’s hospitals, in this manner, in 2003 and 2004, generated considerable disquiet across the political spectrum, and was extensively condemned in Conservative parts of the media (Lodge & Russell, 2006). In combination, these issues may well have helped foster what some commentators have termed a heightened sense of ‘devo-anxiety’ in this period (Henderson & Wyn Jones, 2018; Jeffery et al., 2016). Importantly, too, these complaints were woven into a wider fabric of national grievance among a number of different English publics.

The belief spread – primarily among Conservatives – that Labour’s reforms of the late 1990s had created a more fractured and unbalanced Union, and generated the conditions in which English grievance might provide an opportunity for nationalist political mobilization. After Cameron became party leader, the policy review process he instigated – in the form of a ‘Democracy Task Force’ – included a specific project focused upon the so-called West Lothian question. This maintained that the potential which devolution had created for English ennui needed to be addressed, not overlooked, by those worried about the future of the Union. And it proposed various reforms to the legislative process to ensure that English MPs were able to give their explicit consent to Bills applying to England only (Conservative Democracy Taskforce, 2008). This approach reflected the underlying belief that this issue – which arose as a result of the asymmetries of New Labour’s model of devolution – needed to be nullified so that English consent for the UK’s constitutional order was not put in jeopardy.

Greater awareness of these questions, and disquiet about England’s position within the increasingly devolved Union, emerged as themes within political discourse in the years prior to the Scottish Referendum of 2014. This momentous poll had its own powerful impact upon popular feelings about the Anglo-Scottish Union, south of the border. The campaign leading
up to the vote was viewed with considerable interest, with many Westminster politicians and London-based pundits expressing their aversion to the prospect of independence. And in the final fraught days of the campaign, the devolution ‘vow’ made by the leaders of the three main parties in British politics generated a negative response from various Conservative MPs who received numerous complaints from their constituents about the perceived benefits being conferred upon the Scots (The Guardian, 2014).

Cameron judged that English discontent was of such a level that it now needed to be addressed. In the immediate aftermath of his relieved announcement of the result, he declared that ‘the millions of voices of England must also be heard’ (2014), a response that was dismissed as reckless by his critics, but was, for the most part, a reflection of worries in his party about the appeal of UKIP to increasingly restive Tory voters. For the UK’s prime minister to speak so directly to a sense of English neglect, and to intimate that this was a matter of constitutional significance, was itself a striking moment in the history of the UK’s territorial politics.

An appreciation of these shifting cross-currents of English sentiment in the decade leading up to the Brexit vote leads to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics and character of political Englishness, and undermines some of the simplistic characterizations of English nationalism that are in currency. A more widely angled appraisal of patterns of national sentiment, across a longer time period, supports the idea of a growing desire to renegotiate the terms of a union about which many of the English are only just beginning to become aware, rather than a concerted desire to break free from it. At the same time, a plurality of English voters remain broadly comfortable with the multinational Union – though irritated by aspects of its territorial governance. And in some former industrial regions there were signs that a strengthening of county and regional affiliations created new opportunities for political mobilization (Mycock, 2016). Contra simplistic ideas about a rising tide of English nationalism, the most striking development in terms of the national identity of its people in this period is a growing bifurcation in the forms of patriotic identification – between a growing minority of those who identify primarily as ‘English’ (not British) and those who see their national identities in terms of a multicultural form of Britishness.

How these dynamics shape the ways in which the English respond to the constitutional questions that are now coming to the surface after Brexit is becoming an increasingly important political question. Polling for the British Election Study in late 2019 showed that over 22% of English Conservative voters were in favour of Scottish independence, a figure which rises to nearly 28% in the ‘red wall’ seats won by Johnson in December of that year (Fieldhouse et al., 2020). This level of support has in fact been pretty stable in the last few years, according to The Future of England surveys. The fairly consistent pattern of the last decade has been that a clear majority of English voters, when asked directly, express support for the continuation of the Union – although commitment to Northern Ireland remaining in it has over time declined (Fitzpatrick, 2020). In recent years, different polls have reported that for many Conservative supporters of Brexit, achieving this ambition takes precedence over the goal of keeping the Union together, and these findings may well provide tangible signs of a strain of English nationalism taking a sharper political form. The Future of England polling series, and other polling studies, report clear correlations between English identification and support for Brexit (Henderson & Wyn Jones, 2018, 2021).

REIMAGINING ENGLAND: PERSPECTIVES IN BRITISH POLITICS

The main forms of English identity and outlook that have emerged at the popular level in the last 20 years have developed without concerted political leadership or much intellectual support. There has been a greater focus in cultural and academic quarters on – and occasional public debates about – the nature and implications of English identity and culture (Aughey, 2007;
Kumar, 2009), but these have generally been responding to perceived shifts in identity at the popular level or framed as warnings about changes that politicians need to engage. There has been a notable lack of intellectually rooted ‘nation-building’ in the English context, compared with other nationalist projects – including those in Scotland and Wales.

At the same time, however, a growing focus upon the specific circumstances of England and its territorial parts has become more discernible within high politics and central government. In these domains, England as a territorial unit has also begun to emerge as a prominent focus of political discourse. And this has been an especially important backdrop to an emerging debate about the organization and nature of territorial government within its borders, which is discussed more fully below.

Following New Labour’s devolution reforms, and subsequent extensions of the powers of the devolved administrations, the position of the English within the constitutional order attracted growing attention on the Conservative wing of British politics (Aughey, 2016). Over time, the anomalous position of the largest people within an increasingly unbalanced, multinational Union has come to be seen as a structural weakness in these political circles. It was among Conservative intellectuals that claims about the alleged occlusion of England’s heritage and traditions were most commonly made in the immediate aftermath of devolution (Scruton, 2006), and these arguments also referenced a wider set of cultural and policy changes which were deemed to be antithetical to core (Anglo)British traditions (Hitchens, 2000).

For many Tory MPs, the vast majority of who represented constituencies in England, looking at the Union through Anglo-centric spectacles was a natural, and politically necessary, habit. A handful of backbenchers during these years articulated heterodox ideas about how to represent England and rebalance the Union (Gamble, 2016; Redwood, 1999). However, in key respects the Conservatives blended their rising concerns about England with a traditional unionist outlook (Gover & Kenny, 2018).

Arraigned against this view is an entirely different geographical imaginary, which tends to conceive of the English region as a focus for reformed governance and place-rooted identity, and is often sceptical of the notion that England is the site of a shared national identity (outside the realms of culture and sport) or collective interest. This perspective, which has taken root most deeply in the Labour Party – and rests upon a long tradition of labour movement culture and thought – sees the very idea of Englishness as a fiction which is typically framed in terms of idealized and nostalgic images of the landscapes and traditions of Southern England (Howkins, 2003). On this view, the fault lines of power and identity within the country run between the industrial/post-industrial North and the wealthier South Eastern region. This powerful and entrenched regional dualism shaped the political imagination and policy thinking of significant parts of the Labour Party during the early 2000s (Denham, 2018). Some of its adherents see the region as the encompassing expression of a medley of other attachments to locality, place and city (Niven, 2019).

This dichotomy is not always clear cut. A number of commentators and some politicians have argued that attention be paid to both of these levels (Mycock, 2016). Equally, the regionalist focus has at times been openly challenged within Labour’s ranks, for instance by those arguing for the importance of a more concerted engagement with those parts of England that do not fit into the Northern and Southern archetypes (Radice, 1992). And this perspective has some Conservative adherents, including those, such as Lord Michael Heseltine (UK Government, 2012), who have long been concerned about inequalities in economic growth between the South East and the Northern English regions.

But it is also the case that each of these imaginaries is more firmly placed within the collective thinking of both main political parties – Labour and the Conservatives – and has been accentuated by the dynamics of partisan competition between them. A deep resistance to imagining or analysing England as a single unit of analysis is a hallmark of the regionalist perspective, as is a
disposition to regard talk of an English demos or assertions about the need to engage with Englishness as either reactionary or illusory in character, or both (Mason, 2015; Robinson, 2016). Progressive political regionalists typically depict Britishness as an overarching, civic form of patriotism which is seen as encompassing for all the regions and nations of the UK – and is implicitly drawn against other forms of nationalism (Ashford, 2020).

The divide between these geographical imaginaries is offset by other cross-cutting disagreements in relation to devolution policy. Figures from both parties have advocated a more locally rooted vision of decentralization, and these arguments have at times been presented as commensurable with, and in opposition to, a focus upon regional institutions and national-level devolution.

Overall, however, these two contending geographical perspectives on English devolution have done much to structure, and divide, elite-level political thinking about England’s governance during the last two decades. And they have shaped understandings of what exactly devolution in the English context means. For proponents of the first view, the unanswered ‘English question’ is one of the most important constitutional anomalies and institutional weaknesses of the Union state, and the diffusion of this perspective in politics is the main reason that, in political terms, England has become more visible and salient in this period.

For regionalists, on the other hand, the idea that England should be seen as on a constitutional par with the other historic nations within the UK is mistaken. Its adherents tend to focus on the fault lines within England’s divided regional geography and have supplied arguments for decentralization which are often couched in more technocratic and functional terms. Both perspectives have become more entrenched in British politics since devolution, and each has powerful and influential proponents in politics and public life. They have proved increasingly hard to reconcile as they have become closely associated with the two main political parties in an increasingly polarized environment. And they sustain contending visions about the status and character of England as a political community, and the model of government it is said to require.

THE ELUSIVE MIDDLE LAYER

The growing emphasis in popular consciousness upon what it means to be English, and the emergence of a more politically resonant form of Englishness, on the one hand, and a growing debate about its place within the post-devolved Union, on the other, have in different ways sustained a growing focus upon the question of territorial government within England. A separate imperative – a growing concern within the British party system about the depth and political implications of worsening economic inequality between its poorer and wealthier regions – has also played a key role in bringing this issue to the fore. The question of how, and at what geographical scale, a tier of territorial government should be constructed, between local authorities and central state, has been a central focus of British government since the 1960s.

In the current period, the two distinct spatial imaginaries, described above, have done much to shape competing ideas of how decentralized governance might be constituted within England. But the residual centralism of the British political mindset, and the difficulties Westminster politicians encounter when they seek to balance central imperatives against demands for greater local control over resources and decision-making, have been significant constraints upon policy thinking in this area. One consequence of these factors has been, as Sandford (2020) shows, a recurrent tendency to conceive English devolved leadership in terms of charismatic figures with a relatively minimal set of delegated powers who should play largely informal, ‘generative’ roles – such as attracting investment to cities and city-regions. And this tendency has been reinforced by the lack of consensus in British politics about where the boundaries of ‘subnational’ economic units lie (Tomaney, 2016).
Politicians with a distinctly regionalist mindset envisaged the development of a middle tier of coordinating institutions as a new way of meeting the goals associated with regional policy in earlier decades (Martin et al., 2015), as government prioritized boosting growth in those regions that had fallen furthest behind London and the South East. New Labour introduced a suite of regional development agencies (RDAs) and established new government offices in all of England’s regions. RDAs were designed primarily to engage local business elites and promote more regionally focused strategies in areas such as skills. And the government offices reflected an ingrained assumption about the need to ensure central control over regional strategy, as well as a recognition of the inability of the central state to develop and coordinate detailed development plans for different parts of the country (Sandford, 2005).

The Conservatives rejected Labour’s model of regional administration as bureaucratic and top-down in character, and channelled popular scepticism about the artificial character of the regional jurisdictions upon which it was based. But the Tory Party found it difficult to evolve a coherent alternative model of middle-layer devolution when it entered office. The Coalition government, after 2010, and its Conservative successor, homed in on the case for devolution to smaller, and more definable, ‘city-regions’ – although there was an ongoing debate about the appropriate scale and jurisdictional boundaries for devolution. The Coalition also introduced new, non-statutory bodies to promote regional economic growth – local enterprise partnerships – with significantly reduced remits compared with the RDAs, and reduced funding (Rossiter & Price, 2013).

Following the conversion of Chancellor George Osborne to the regionalist argument that the UK’s leading cities outside London were significantly under-powered, in terms of central investment and support, compared with second-tier cities elsewhere, the government focused on a major programme of improving transport connections between some of the main Northern cities. This resulted in the establishment of the ‘Northern Powerhouse’, a new programme for infrastructure development in the North of England (Cox, 2016).

Negotiations were already under way over a new city-regional authority in Manchester, encompassing the 10 boroughs of Greater Manchester, and these resulted in the establishment of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA). In May 2017, mayoral elections were held for a new series of combined authorities, each accorded statutory status and a suite of bespoke responsibilities agreed by central government. The GMCA was in some ways an exemplar for this new set of bilateral deals between central government and different groups of local authorities, but it was also an exception, given the more extensive and significant responsibilities it was awarded, including for health and social care. At Osborne’s behest, the office of directly elected mayor was regarded as a non-negotiable element of these deals, despite the considerable resistance this device elicited in local political circles.

Innovative as this new model was, in essence it reflected the logic of administrative delegation, not legislative devolution, and only the most modest forms of fiscal decentralization were contemplated in relation to it – primarily through a pilot scheme launched in 2019 that offered five authorities the chance to retain 100% of local business rates (Sandford, 2017). In some parts of the country negotiations foundered due to disagreements among the various local authorities involved, or because of an unwillingness to accept the preconditions set by government. At the time of writing, just under half of England’s population resides within a combined authority area.

While these new leaders and the authorities they lead still lack salience in the public mind in several areas, some of these authorities are gradually becoming entrenched features of a new sub-national administrative landscape in England, along with the London mayoralty. In several other cases, turf wars with existing layers of local government have arisen, and the lack of coherence of the jurisdiction and economic geographies of some newly established combined authorities have created difficult political and policy challenges.

Some of the underlying issues and concerns underpinning these reforms have been in play for several decades. The question of how territorial government within England should be
institutionalized has been closely intertwined with the desire of central government, from the 1980s to the mid-2000s, to modernize and streamline local government and achieve greater efficiency in its delivery of key services. Despite bold promises about the speed and scope with which it would introduce new mezzanine-level government across England, the Johnson government was, in late 2020, forced to jettison its ambition to announce a comprehensive plan for reform as the implications of the changes to local government (including the abolition of district councils where new unitaries were to be created) were fiercely contested by many local Conservative parties.

In historical terms, this was merely the latest of a recurrent set of attempts to devise a new, middle administrative layer within England. One thread runs throughout the fluctuating views taken at the top of government on this issue: the ingrained reluctance of the centre as a whole, and HM Treasury in particular, to entrust this layer of government with responsibilities and powers that it might exercise without central oversight and control. Regional devolution has repeatedly been justified with reference to economic growth and regeneration, while local government has come to be seen by politicians at Westminster primarily in relation to the efficient delivery of services. Considerations of self-determination, the redistribution of power and civic capacity have been, at best, secondary in the thinking that has infused reforms to different levels of government in England (Tomaney, 2016).

The difficulties which the centre has faced in establishing a functioning, mezzanine layer of government in England, at the same time as devolution was established for the outer parts of the UK, has accentuated existing imbalances within the wider system of territorial government. Equally, the dysfunctions associated with Whitehall centralism have been reinforced in these years by the heavy reliance of administrations – centrally and locally – on the outsourcing of public services to corporate providers, and the diffusion of various arm’s-length quangos tasked with regulating and overseeing public service delivery (Lee, 2013). The lack of clearly articulated connections between the responsibilities of elected authorities and the medley of actors commissioned to deliver and regulate services has created a complicated and opaque system in much of England, where lines of accountability and control are often unclear. And the increasingly fragmented manner in which key services, such as health, have been organized means that, from the citizen perspective, public service bureaucracies have in the last two decades become harder to navigate and more remote in character (Dayan, 2016). These changes may also have accentuated a growing sense of alienation and lack of control among the populace at large.

The opaque and highly centralized character of England’s public administration has been laid bare at the very same moment as resentment at the perceived hoarding of power and the metropolitan preferences of its political and economic elites has grown. And in a period when questions about belonging, identity and self-determination were working their way into the heart of political life, the disconnection that a growing number of English people felt from their form of government, and the difficulties they have in seeing their own local and national identities reflected within its structures, have contributed to popular disenchantment.

Since the election of a new UK government, in December 2019, committed to the loosely defined goal of ‘levelling up’ some of Britain’s poorer regions, and the subsequent onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, questions about the importance and nature of subnational government in England have become even more pressing, and politically fraught. The debate triggered by the aspiration to ‘level up’ has led to a closer focus on whether a more developed layer of devolved government needs to be in place to deliver and oversee the priorities established by the centre. Then, as the Johnson government adopted a regional approach to lockdown in the context of the pandemic, during 2020 significant friction and some open conflict emerged with several Northern ‘metro’ mayors. This episode triggered a renewed focus on the nature of devolution in the English context and the highly asymmetrical character of the power relationship between centre and locality in it (Harris, 2020; Kenny & Sheldon, 2020). Despite the political drama generated by
the stand-off between mayors such as Andy Burnham (Manchester) and Steve Rotherham (Liverpool) and the Johnson government in 2020, the structural weakness of the position of these metro mayors, compared with government in London, meant that there was little subsequent political follow-up in Westminster, and no institutional change resulting from this episode.

CONCLUSIONS

Twenty years after the momentous reforms introduced by the first Blair government, the UK’s territorial constitution faces a number of overlapping crises. This is most obviously the case in relation to growing support for independence in Scotland and uncertainties over the implications for Northern Ireland of the Withdrawal Agreement which the UK signed with the EU in late 2019.

However, questions about how England is governed, and its place in a creaking Union, are also rising up the political agenda. And whereas much political commentary identifies an illiberal nationalism in the largest national grouping in the UK as the prime culprit for recent forms of political disruption, there is a growing need to understand the different, underlying issues and challenges to which English nationalism is a response, and to attend to the variety of ways in which England and its feelings of national identity have moved into the political foreground. Even if the British state does manage to navigate the crises breaking in Scotland and Northern Ireland, the increasingly incongruous position of England within the changing governing structures of the UK is now an unavoidable challenge for its guardians.

English questions are becoming increasingly hard to avoid because of the development – charted above – of more self-conscious feelings of nationhood, some of which have a directly political resonance – and because England has emerged as a much more salient focus of debate and policy concern in high politics. The emergence of a potent set of English imaginaries – a broad dynamic that is not best captured through the notion of an illiberal, majoritarian nationalism – has pushed to the fore some difficult political and constitutional questions, none of which are easy for the existing systems of government and politics in the UK to process.

An important implication of this analysis is that any future attempt to devise a model of English devolution may well, if it is to acquire legitimacy, have to accommodate the contrasting preferences of two very different groups. One of these is made up of people who feel that England as a whole needs some form of representation and protection within the UK’s constitutional order. And the other is composed of those – who often identify with multicultural Britishness – who feel much more strongly that the real problem that needs to be addressed within England is about the imbalance between London and its outlying territories, and who are often wary about institutional and political claims made in terms of English identity (Niven, 2019).

British politicians have been endemically reluctant to accept that English devolution is itself one of the constitutional priorities facing the UK, and unable to agree whether decentralization in this context means passing powers to authorities at regional or city level, or giving greater recognition at the national level to English interests and identity – or some combination of both. And while a small number of critics denounce what they see as a deliberate attempt to erase the idea of England as a political community, there are in fact now a number of distinct and, in some ways, rivalrous ideas – in high politics, and in the wider culture – about England’s status as a political community and governed space. And there is little immediate prospect of a political consensus being forged around any one of them.

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