Standing Up for the Nations? Devolution and the Changing Territorial Role of Backbench MPs with Constituencies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, 1992–2019

Jack Sheldon

Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

*Correspondence: js2395@cam.ac.uk

Abstract

At UK general elections, parties and candidates standing in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales give prominence to pledges to act on behalf of those territories. This article examines how far and in what ways MPs with constituencies in those parts of the UK actually seek to give representation to these territorial units once elected. A typology of forms of substantive parliamentary representation of sub-state units such as these is outlined, and results of a content analysis of Commons contributions by backbench MPs between 1992 and 2019 are presented. It is found that MPs from the parts of the UK with devolved legislatures focus extensively on the sub-state territorial level and that these MPs have adapted their representational styles to the changed institutional context following devolution. These findings have important implications for how we think about the roles of MPs from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales in the post-devolution context.

Keywords: Devolution, Backbenchers, Representation, House of Commons, Territorial Politics

1. Introduction

A body of scholarship has identified trends across multi-level democracies towards ‘reterritorialisation’ of party competition and ‘denationalisation’ of electoral outcomes, as the particular concerns of sub-state territorial units have become a more prominent focus for citizens and political elites (Swenden and Maddens, 2009, p. 4; Detterbeck, 2012, p. 4). The UK is an archetypal case, with the different territories of the four-part Union comprising increasingly distinct...
electoral spheres (Awan-Scully, 2018). At general elections, parties and candidates standing in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales give prominence to pledges to act on behalf of those areas in parliament. In 2019, the Scottish National Party’s manifesto stated that ‘SNP MPs will always stand up for Scotland’ (Scottish National Party, 2019, p. 2), Labour’s Welsh manifesto was titled Standing Up for Wales (Welsh Labour, 2019) and the Democratic Unionist Party promised to ‘speak up for Northern Ireland at Westminster’ (Democratic Unionist Party, 2019, p. 4). Meanwhile, in 2015, 2017 and 2019, different parties secured the most votes and seats in each of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. These trends have led one leading analyst to ask whether we are witnessing ‘the end of British party politics’, even suggesting that ‘in some respects the House of Commons increasingly resembles the European Parliament—whose members are all democratically chosen but from a disconnected series of separate national electoral contests’ (Awan-Scully, 2018, p. 14).

This article asks how far and in what ways MPs actually seek to give representation to the UK’s component territories within spoken contributions in the House of Commons. Existing studies of how far MPs with constituencies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales adopt a sub-state territorial focus overwhelmingly pre-date the introduction of devolved legislatures in these territories, and consequent changes to party and electoral politics (Judge and Finlayson, 1975; Keating, 1975, 1978; Mishler and Mughan, 1978; Mishler, 1983). This is a significant oversight. Investigating how far MPs from the devolved parts of the UK focus on their sub-state units in the Commons can offer important insights into the post-devolution roles of these MPs, and more widely the extent to which politics in those areas is integrated into that of the wider UK.

The article makes two principal contributions. First, it outlines a typology of different forms of substantive parliamentary representation of sub-state territorial units. Second, it presents results of a quantitative content analysis of 2,371 parliamentary contributions by backbench MPs with constituencies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, between 1992 and 2019. A comparative approach is taken, examining how far and in what ways MPs engage in sub-state territorial representation across parliamentary terms, institutional contexts, territorial units and party affiliations. Although the UK is a distinctive case, given the extent of asymmetry in the size and institutional status of its territorial units, there is potential to inform the design and generate hypotheses for future studies on the sub-state territorial roles of members of legislatures in other multi-level political systems.

2. Territorial representation in Parliaments

The overwhelming focus of existing literature on territorial representation in parliaments is the ‘constituency link’ between MPs and voters in their electoral
districts, on whom they depend for re-election (Cain et al., 1987; Norton and Wood, 1993). This article is instead concerned with representation of the primary constituent units of federal and devolved political systems. In comparative perspective, various terminology is used to describe these, including ‘states’, ‘provinces’, ‘regions’ and ‘territories’ (Watts, 1996, pp. 10–12). Most literature on parliamentary representation of such sub-state units focuses on upper chambers, which typically include a specific category of territorial representatives in federal and devolved polities (Watts, 1996; Russell, 2001). The UK is unusual having no territorially based second chamber, despite calls since the introduction of devolution to turn the House of Lords into a ‘Senate of the Nations and Regions’ (Russell, 2018). Under the first past the post electoral system, the House of Commons also contains no members with electoral mandates covering entire sub-state territorial units, unlike lower chambers in some multi-level polities that use forms of proportional representation.1

Although the UK parliament contains no members explicitly labelled as territorial representatives, research in the 1970s and 1980s did find MPs with constituencies in Scotland and Wales were focused disproportionately on sub-state dimensions (Judge and Finlayson, 1975; Keating, 1975, 1978; Mishler and Mughan, 1978; Mishler, 1983). This included raising matters specific to Scotland and Wales in questions and speeches (Judge and Finlayson, 1975; Mishler, 1983), calling for distinctive policies for these areas (Keating, 1978) and participating primarily in standing committees that dealt with territorially specific legislation (Mishler and Mughan, 1978). One study found 47% of questions asked by Scottish backbenchers related solely to ‘Scottish affairs’ during the short 1974 parliament (Judge and Finlayson, 1975, p. 282).2 There was no equivalent research on the territorial orientations of English MPs, but it was assumed England’s majority status within the Union meant its MPs felt no need to give that territorial level explicit representation. There was also no systematic research on the territorial orientations of MPs from Northern Ireland but by the mid-1970s they formed a clearly separate group from MPs belonging to the main Britain-wide parties, elected on platforms grounded in the distinctive context of that territory’s politics (Awan-Scully, 2018).

Academics considered how the role of Scottish and Welsh MPs might be impacted if the 1974–1979 Labour government’s devolution proposals were implemented. One prediction was these MPs could struggle to find a role (Mishler and

---

1For example, members of the Swiss National Council are elected in multi-member constituencies corresponding to the 26 cantons, and under Germany’s mixed member proportional system list members are elected at the Land level.

2This figure is not directly comparable to the rates of territorial claim-making reported in this article due to use of a different methodology and sampling strategy.
Mughan, 1978), or even become ‘increasingly redundant’ (Keating, 1978, p. 429), though Judge and Finlayson (1975, p. 290) forecast Scottish MPs would continue to engage with the Scottish dimension to policy to some extent as they would still have an electoral incentive to ‘prove their “Scottishness”.’ When devolved institutions were eventually established, with the first election to the Northern Ireland Assembly held in 1998 and then those to the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales in 1999, implications for MPs were considered less than they had been in the 1970s. One exception is Paun (2008, p. 214), who found some evidence of ‘underemployment’ of Scottish and Welsh MPs in a content analysis of parliamentary questions asked between 2001 and 2007 and a survey about constituency work conducted in 2004. Paun (2008, p. 217) indicated his findings could be specific to the political context at the time of his study—devolution was in its infancy, Labour were in government at all levels across Great Britain and that party also held the clear majority of Scottish and Welsh parliamentary seats. These conditions have since changed markedly, with different parties leading the UK government and each devolved government since 2010, and the pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP) having the large majority of Scottish MPs since 2015.

Following Pitkin (1967), political scientists distinguish between ‘descriptive’ and ‘substantive’ representation. This article is concerned with representational activities undertaken by members of legislatures that relate to sub-state territories and therefore with substantive representation. The definition of substantive sub-state territorial representation used in this paper is parliamentary activities that explicitly seek to advance the interests, policy priorities and/or recognition of culture and identity of the sub-state territorial unit within which a member’s constituency is located. Research on representation has recently taken a constructivist turn, influenced by Saward (2010, p. 39), who argues that representation involves presenting ‘claims’ to ‘represent or to know what represents’ the interests of particular groups. Saward (2010, p. 77) argues that such ‘claims’ are inherently contestable: no set of interests ‘are transparent, beyond representation, evident enough to be “read off” their appearance or their behavior’. These insights are especially pertinent to the context of sub-state territorial representation, where there are often competing narratives about the interests, policy priorities, cultures and identities of particular territories. The approach taken in this article is consistent with this understanding of the process of representation. No attempt is made to identify how well the interests or policy priorities of sub-state territories are represented. Instead, the emphasis is on the input side of representation—how far MPs seek to advance the interests, policy priorities and/or recognition of culture and identity of sub-state territories as they see them, within parliamentary contributions.
3. Typology of forms of claim to represent sub-state territories

Claims to represent sub-state territories can be broken down into four categories, in terms of which features of the sub-state territory are the explicit focus of representation. These exemplify more precisely what sub-state territorial representation encompasses, and significantly inform the empirical analysis that follows. These were initially devised based on the author’s informal impression of the dynamics of sub-state territorial representation, then tested and refined through an initial pilot analysis, which confirmed these categories captured the main strands of sub-state territorial claim-making. The typology is informed predominantly by the UK context, but it is intended that it could also be applicable to other multi-level polities. The categories are not mutually exclusive: an MP may, for example, claim to represent both material interests and sub-state political institutions within a single contribution.

3.1 Claims to represent material interests

This comprises claims a policy will result in tangible beneficial outcomes, specific to a particular sub-state unit. This includes pitches for investment, infrastructure projects and additional funding for sub-state institutions that it is claimed will benefit the territorial unit. The category also includes references to purported environmental or social benefits specific to the territorial unit, and perceived injustices in a territorial unit’s treatment vis-à-vis other territories.

Examples:

David Hanson (Labour; Delyn, Wales): Does the Secretary of State accept that, according to the Government’s own estimates, the abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board will take £250 million out of national rural economies and hit 14,000 workers in Wales? (DEFRA questions, 24 January 2013, HC Deb vol. 557, col. 445)

Margaret Ritchie (SDLP; South Down, Northern Ireland): The Northern Ireland agri-food industry depends on exports. With the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in China this week, what further steps will the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills take in accessing new market opportunities for British and Northern Ireland exports? (BIS questions, 10 November 2015, HC Deb vol. 602, col. 211)

3.2 Claims to represent public opinion

Opinion within a member’s territorial unit can be invoked in support or opposition to a policy or course of action. The basis for claims in this category can
include election and/or referendum results, opinion poll findings or a claim-maker’s own judgement of public opinion in their home territory.

Examples:

Jonathan Edwards (Plaid Cymru; Carmarthen East and Dinefwr, Wales): We believe that unfinished business with the devolution settlement remains, which will come as no surprise to colleagues. Polls in Wales agree with us that criminal justice and policing should be devolved, as should broadcasting and financial powers. (Westminster Hall, 6 September 2011, HC Deb vol. 532, col. 46WH).

Ian Blackford (SNP; Ross, Skye and Lochaber, Scotland): Westminster is in chaos, but in Scotland we stand united. Scotland voted overwhelmingly to remain, and we will not allow our country to be dragged out of the European Union or brought down by this Tory Government. (PMQs, 16 January 2019, HC Deb vol. 652, col. 1156).

3.3 Claims to represent culture and/or identity

These are grounded in a belief in the importance of recognising and promoting the distinct culture and/or identity of the territory. Examples include attempts to secure protections for languages (in the UK, primarily the Welsh language) and symbols associated with an area, or support for recognising an important event or individual in a territory’s history.

Examples:

Hywel Williams (Plaid Cymru; Caernarfon, Wales): Cultural and linguistic diversity are to be greatly valued, so I welcome the Secretary of State’s comments on the Welsh language, but may I press him to ensure that opportunities to learn Welsh are available not only in the so-called Welsh-speaking areas, but throughout the country? (Home Office questions, 4 February 2002, HC Deb vol. 379, col. 589)

Sandra Osborne (Labour; Ayr, Scotland): Burns captured the soul of Scotland, and his name is entitled to the respect of posterity. He may have died a poor man, but he has immeasurably enriched the world. On this day, we do not remember a departed memory, but honour a living, life-enhancing presence. When Scotland forgets Burns, history will forget Scotland. It would be to our eternal shame if we ever allowed that to happen. (Westminster Hall, 25 January 2005, HC Deb vol. 430, col. 22WH)
3.4 Claims to represent sub-state political institutions

This can be broken down into three sub-categories. The first relates to the policy positions of sub-state institutions. This includes MPs acting as champions of the sub-state executive in their area by making reference to its policy stances and/or achievements, and in some instances calling for action from central government on its behalf. Cases where MPs criticise the policies and/or performance of sub-state executives are also coded within this category. MPs also sometimes act as champions and critics of the positions of sub-state legislatures, for instance where there has been a vote or committee report at sub-state level on an issue that is being discussed in the Commons. The second sub-category comprises calls for engagement between central and sub-state politicians, such as asking a central government minister to have a meeting with their sub-state counterpart about a particular issue. Finally, the third sub-category relates to sub-state institutional arrangements. This includes calling for the powers of sub-state legislatures to be extended, and seeking to defend them against perceived attempts to curtail their autonomy.

Examples:

David Burnside (UUP; South Antrim, Northern Ireland): Will the right hon. Lady seek a case study from the devolved Stormont Department responsible for agriculture and read it carefully to learn the lessons from the more effective, efficient and competent handling of the foot and mouth crisis evident in Northern Ireland? (DEFRA questions, 28 June 2001, HC Deb vol. 370, col. 766)

David Linden (SNP; Glasgow East, Scotland): Does the Minister agree that the devastating effect of free-movement restrictions will have a colossal impact on small businesses in Shettleston and in Scotland as a whole, and will he support the calls from the Scottish Trades Union Congress for immigration to be devolved to Scotland? (BEIS questions, 1 May 2018, vol. 640, col. 134–135).

4. Expectations

Numerous socio-cultural, institutional and political variables can be expected to impact on the dynamics of territorial claim-making by members of central legislatures. Those discussed in this section are not exhaustive, but anticipated to be among the most important in the UK context. In the absence of a large body of existing empirical research in this area on which to draw, identifying these informed decisions on what information to record in the dataset, and which variables to conduct comparisons across when analysing the results. Several of these
contextual factors suggest a larger proportion of contributions in later parliaments in the sample (from around 2010–2015 onwards) can be expected to include a territorial claim compared with the initial parliaments following the introduction of devolution.

Changes to institutional arrangements at sub-state level can be expected to have a significant impact on the dynamics of territorial claim-making at the centre. In the UK, it is anticipated that the introduction of devolution during the 1997–2001 parliament will have led to a reduction in claims to represent material interests, culture and identity, since many issues within these categories no longer fall within Westminster’s responsibility. However, it is expected that this will be countered by the emergence of claims to represent sub-state political institutions. There are strong grounds for believing this will be especially prevalent where different parties are in government at Westminster and in a devolved area, as under these conditions MPs belonging to the party in government at devolved level have stronger incentives to use the House of Commons to advance the interests and policy positions of the devolved administration. The rate at which claims to represent sub-state political institutions are made is therefore expected to rise from the 2010–2015 parliament onwards, from when different parties led the UK government and each devolved government.

The type of political party an MP belongs is also expected to be influential in determining the frequency with which sub-state territorial claims are made. Advancing territorial interests is usually a foundational goal for parties that contest elections in only one territorial unit within a state, and they typically stand on election platforms reflecting that (Türsan, 1998). Claims to represent sub-state territories are therefore expected to form a greater proportion of the parliamentary contributions of MPs from parties that contest elections in only one territorial unit, compared with those competing across Great Britain.³ The proportion of MPs belonging to parties competing in only one territorial unit rose substantially after the major change in the composition of Scottish representation in the House of Commons from 2015, when the SNP won 56 of the 59 seats having previously held just six. There are hence grounds to anticipate that the extent of territorial claim-making will have increased at that point.

Relatedly, MPs from parties that contest elections across different territorial units can be expected to be more focused on the sub-state territorial level where sub-state nationalist parties are prominent competitors, since in these circumstances there is an electoral incentive to demonstrate engagement with the sub-

³‘GB-wide parties’ rather than ‘UK-wide parties’ is used to reflect the fact that Labour and the Liberal Democrats do not stand candidates in Northern Ireland. The Conservatives do stand candidates in Northern Ireland, but none were successful in securing election to the House of Commons during the period covered by this study.
state territorial level. There is evidence of this being true in terms of election platforms and party organisational structures, and good reason for believing that this will also be reflected in activities in the legislature (Swenden and Maddens, 2009; Detterbeck, 2012). It is hence anticipated that the increased prominence of the SNP as electoral competitors for the main Britain-wide parties in Scottish constituencies over the time period of the study, and especially from 2014 onwards, will also have driven Labour and the Conservative MPs who represent Scottish constituencies towards a greater focus on Scottish matters in the later parliaments included in the sample.

Parliamentary contributions are not made in isolation from the wider political agenda. It is therefore anticipated that claims to represent sub-state territories will form a greater proportion of parliamentary contributions at times when issues with a strong sub-state territorial dimension are of especially high salience. This leads to an expectation that there would be a particular emphasis on sub-state territorial issues during the period around devolution’s introduction in the 1997–2001 parliament and then from the 2010–2015 parliament onwards, when the Scottish independence referendum, followed by the EU membership referendum and its aftermath, meant that sub-state territorial politics was often high up the political agenda.

5. Data and methods

To measure patterns of sub-state territorial representation, 2,371 parliamentary contributions made by backbench MPs with constituencies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales between 1992 and 2019 were analysed. Contributions by English MPs were not included. The extent to which and ways in which MPs seek to give representation to England as a unit has become an interesting question in itself, given increased popular identification with Englishness (Henderson and Wyn Jones, 2021) and discussion around the merits of ‘English votes for English laws’ in the House of Commons, which was introduced in 2015 before being repealed in 2021 (Gover and Kenny, 2018). However, meaningful comparison between patterns of sub-state territorial representation by English MPs and those from the UK’s other component parts is precluded by England’s majority status within the Union, and the absence of English devolved institutions equivalent to...
those in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. It was hence decided to restrict this study to the three territories with groups of MPs that form small minorities of the Commons membership as a whole, and which now have devolved legislatures and executives.

The sample of parliamentary contributions consisted of 1,488 oral questions asked on the floor of the House of Commons and 883 opening speeches in debates held in the Commons’ second debating chamber, Westminster Hall. These are relatively cost-free activities, which comprise only a small portion of a typical backbench MP’s workload. However, they are important devices for MPs to signal engagement with particular issues to the public and the media, and to seek responses from ministers (Bates et al., 2018; Thomas and Frier, 2018). MPs have a high degree of individual autonomy over what matters to raise, so contributions can be expected to offer a more reliable indication of the extent to which MPs perform substantive representation of sub-state territories than other parliamentary activities such as debates on government legislation and participation in committees, where individual MPs have less agenda control. The sampled oral questions comprised all asked by backbenchers with constituencies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales at 96 sessions of Prime Minister’s Questions and a total of 168 sessions of questions to ministers from the government departments with remits covering agriculture and the environment, business and industry, culture and heritage, and home affairs. These departments were chosen to include policy areas with different territorial contexts, in terms of the extent to which there are divergent territorial interests across the UK and to which they include devolved competences. Stratified random sampling was used to select the specific question time sessions. Within each parliament from 1992–1997 to 2017–2019, a complete list of the relevant question time sessions was compiled, and a randomisation tool used to choose which to analyse. The speeches from Westminster Hall debates were all of those made to open a debate by backbench MPs with

5 The names of three of these departments and the precise remits of all of them changed over the period of the study, but core responsibilities remained similar. The departments included are: 1992–2001 Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; 2007–2009 Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform; 2009–2016 Business, Innovation and Skills; 2016–2019 Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; 1997–2017 Culture, Media and Sport; 2017–2019 Digital, Culture, Media and Sport; 2001–2019 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; 1992–2019 Home Office; 1992–1997 National Heritage and 1992–2007 Trade and Industry.

6 This comprised 12 30-min PMQs sessions and six 30–60 min departmental questions sessions for each of the four departments included in the sample, for each parliament from 1997–2001 to 2017–2019. For the 1992–1997 parliament, 24 15-min PMQs sessions were included, alongside the six departmental questions sessions per department. The randomisation tool used was https://www.randomizer.org/, a web-based application produced by the Social Psychology Network, last accessed 6 September 2021.
constituencies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales during the sessions immediately following and preceding general elections in each parliament from 2001–2005 until 2017–2019. Westminster Hall debates were not introduced until 1999. In the 1997–2001 parliament, all opening speeches of Westminster Hall debates by backbench MPs with constituencies in the devolved territories made following the introduction of this procedure were included. These strategies did not result in an entirely random sample of contributions, so it is not possible to speak definitively of the proportion of contributions by MPs from the devolved territories that include a sub-state territorial claim across Commons contributions as a whole. However, the size of the sample and the variety of procedural devices and policy areas covered means that this is sufficient to offer useful indications of the dynamics of sub-state territorial representation, and to draw comparisons over time and between groups of MPs from different territories and parties.

Each oral question and opening speech of a Westminster Hall debate included in the sample was read and analysed. Where a contribution met the criteria of explicitly seeking to advance the interests, policy priorities and/or recognition of culture and identity of the sub-state territorial unit within which a member’s constituency is located it was coded as containing a sub-state territorial claim. Contributions containing a sub-state territorial claim were additionally coded within one or more of the four categories from the typology—material interests, public opinion, culture and/or identity and sub-state political institutions. A reliability check was performed by recoding 137 contributions from the 2010–2015 and 2015–2017 parliaments, 5.8% of the sample. The results were compared with the previous coding, finding an agreement rate of 97.1% on whether or not a contribution was coded as containing a territorial claim, and an agreement rate of 94.6% on which of the four categories of sub-state territorial representation these claims were coded within. The Cohen’s kappa coefficient, a standard measure for calculating agreement when checking reliability in content analysis, was 0.94 for identifying territorial claims and 0.88 for assignment to the four categories, suggesting a very high level of agreement. Discrepancies identified through the reliability check were reviewed and adjustments made to the original coding to ensure consistency. This can only be an indicator of the reliability of the coding scheme as employed by this author, not necessarily of its reliability where it applied by others. Nevertheless, these results give sufficient confidence that the coding scheme was applied consistently across the sample.

The sample for the reliability check comprised two sessions per parliament of each of the question time sessions in the full sample, and a sample of Westminster Hall debates from the beginning and end of each parliament. This totalled 86 oral questions and 51 Westminster Hall debates.
6. Results

6.1 Overall patterns of sub-state territorial claim-making

Over one-third of the sampled contributions were coded as containing a sub-state territorial representative claim (see Supplementary Table S1). This confirms backbench MPs with constituencies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales frequently refer to the sub-state territorial level in the House of Commons. Although not a new finding, it is notable that this is still true following devolution. The proportion of coded contributions to include a territorial claim actually rose across the sampled period, with only one parliament—2005–2010—where the proportion was not higher than the previous parliament (see Figure 1). Whereas in 1997–2001 around one-quarter of sampled contributions included a territorial claim, by 2017–2019 this figure was almost four in ten. This suggests that MPs from the devolved parts of the UK have adapted their territorial roles to the changed institutional context, rather than becoming ‘redundant’ as had been suggested as a possible consequence of devolution by some scholars in the 1970s (Keating, 1978, p. 429).

A similar steady increase in the proportion of contributions to include a territorial claim, interrupted only in 2005–2010, is evident across both categories of parliamentary business. This strengthens confidence the results capture overall trends in the extent to which backbenchers from the non-English parts of the UK seek to represent their sub-state territories in spoken parliamentary contributions. The main reason for the consistently higher rate of territorial claim-making in Westminster Hall debates than oral questions is likely to be that the Westminster Hall speeches were considerably longer than individual oral questions, so MPs had more time to include an explicit territorial claim.

Figure 1. Proportion of coded contributions to include a territorial claim by category of business and parliament (%).
The oral questions can be broken down into those asked at PMQs, and at the
departmental question time sessions in the sample. Territorial claims by back-
benchers from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are most frequent at ques-
tion time sessions relating to culture and heritage, and agriculture and the
environment (see Supplementary Table S3). On one level this is unsurprising,
since these policy fields contain a high concentration of issues with a sub-state
territorial dimension. Nevertheless, it is notable that contrary to expectations the
rate of territorial claim-making in these areas has increased despite many key
competences in these fields now being controlled by the devolved legislatures.
One factor behind the high rates of claim-making in the last two parliaments in
the sample could be the salience of issues relating to the implementation of
Brexit, which somewhat complicated the distinction between devolved and re-
served powers, although this cannot explain the comparatively high levels of terri-
torial claim-making that were already evident in these question time sessions
during the 2010–2015 parliament. There is a spike in the proportion of PMQs’
contributions to include a territorial claim over the final two parliaments in the
sample, from 19% in 2010–2015 to 36% in 2017–2019 (see Figure 2). Since
PMQs is the highest profile regular parliamentary event, and the main oppor-
tunity to raise an issue with the head of government on the floor of the Commons,
this can be interpreted as an indicator of increased political salience of issues re-
lating to the UK’s sub-state territories. The timing of this spike is in line with the
expectation that the context of the Scottish independence referendum, and then
Brexit, would drive an increase in territorial claims. Another plausible factor is
the status of the SNP as the third largest party in the Commons from 2015, which

---

**Figure 2.** Proportion of coded contributions at Prime Minister’s Questions to include a territorial
claim in each parliament (%).
meant that their Westminster leader had the opportunity to ask two questions at every PMQs for the first time (Arnott and Kelly, 2018).

6.2 Territorial claim-making by area

Backbenchers from Northern Ireland made sub-state territorial claims in 54% of sampled contributions, considerably more often than their colleagues from Scotland and Wales, who did so 33% and 30% of the time, respectively (see Supplementary Table S4). This is not unexpected, since the majority of MPs with constituencies in Northern Ireland over this period were members of parties that do not compete elsewhere in the UK, elected on platforms grounded in the distinctive politics of that territory. In contrast, the large majority of MPs returned from Scottish and Welsh constituencies across the period have been members of Britain-wide parties. Another likely factor is that the context of the peace process, and later controversies over outstanding matters relating to the legacy of the Troubles, have meant that issues with a strong sub-state territorial dimension have remained a major focus for MPs from Northern Ireland throughout the period of the study. After peaking at 75% in 2001–2005 and 2005–2010, the rate at which MPs with constituencies in Northern Ireland made territorial claims then decreased across the remaining parliaments up to 2017–2019, when 44% of contributions by Northern Ireland MPs included a territorial claim. Particular caution should be exercised in interpreting the Northern Ireland data, as the sample size is relatively small due to the lower number of MPs returned from that territory. Nevertheless, it is plausible that this partly reflects the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2007, after being suspended in 2002, which reduced the number of Northern Ireland matters decided at Westminster compared with the preceding period (Birrell, 2007).

The trend over time suggests the overall increase in the proportion of coded contributions to include a territorial claim was driven primarily by a growing rate of territorial claims among MPs with constituencies in Scotland (see Figure 3). Only 17% of contributions in my sample by Scottish backbenchers included a territorial claim in 1997–2001, but this figure more than doubled to 42% by 2017–2019, indicating a step change in the extent to which Scottish MPs have a distinctive representational focus. This increase has accelerated since 2010, in line with expectations, suggesting the growing disconnection between Scottish electoral politics and that elsewhere in Britain identified by scholars such as Awan-Scully (2018) has indeed had knock-on effects for the extent to which MPs with Scottish constituencies are focused on the sub-state territorial level. The large expansion in the SNP parliamentary group from 2015 does not itself appear to have been the decisive factor driving this—the upwards trend was already in motion in
2010–2015, before the expansion in the number of SNP MPs, and continued in 2017–2019 when the number of SNP MPs fell from 56 to 35.

In 1997–2001 and 2001–2005, and again in 2010–2015, Welsh backbenchers made territorial claims in a greater proportion of their contributions than their Scottish counterparts. However, the increase in territorial claim-making among Scottish backbenchers from 2010 to 2019 was not replicated among Welsh backbenchers. This may reflect the different political context, with the intense constitutional debates that have come to dominate Scottish politics not having been replicated to the same extent in Wales, and Plaid Cymru not achieving the same electoral success as the SNP. Another possible factor is reform of the Welsh devolution arrangements, which resulted in less overlap of responsibilities between Westminster and the devolved legislature from 2011 onwards, reducing the formal involvement of MPs in Welsh affairs (Wyn Jones and Scully, 2012).

6.3 Territorial claim-making by political party

As expected, MPs from parties standing candidates in only one part of the UK make territorial claims at a greater rate than their colleagues from parties that compete across Great Britain (see Supplementary Table S5). Over half the contributions by DUP, Plaid Cymru, SDLP and UUP MPs included a territorial claim, while this was true of 40% of SNP contributions. It may seem surprising that this SNP figure is lower than these other parties. One possible explanation is that the larger size of their group after 2015 allowed them to diversify their focus to include contributing on more issues that did not have a particular sub-state dimension to them than was possible for other parties that compete in just one part of the UK, and hence resulted in them being drawn into UK-wide politics to a greater extent than they had been previously. Arnott and Kelly (2018, pp. 137–138) note how...
SNP MPs elected in 2015 campaigned on a number of reserved issues, including opposing changes to pension arrangements for women born in the 1950s and extending UK military action in Syria.

Over the period of the study, there was some convergence in the rate of territorial claim-making between parties competing in only one part of the UK and those competing across Britain (see Figure 4), with a spike in territorial claims among members of GB-wide parties from 2010. This supports the expectation that the salience of issues relating to territorial politics during the 2010s, and in the Scottish context the need for GB-wide parties to compete electorally with the SNP, would lead backbenchers from these parties to place a stronger emphasis on the sub-state territorial level. One consequence of this trend is increased potential for MPs from across different territories and types of party to coalesce around certain issues and present a common sub-state territorial perspective, as happened on several occasions during the parliamentary debates on the implementation of Brexit from 2016 onwards.

The data on the rate of territorial claim-making by backbench MPs from the three main GB-wide parties can be broken down into groups of those with constituencies in Scotland and those with constituencies in Wales (see Supplementary Table S6). In the early years of devolution, the difference between Scottish and Welsh MPs on this measure was modest, especially for the Labour Party which accounted for the large majority of these MPs at that time. However, at the end of the sampled period, in 2017–2019, Scottish Conservative and Scottish Labour MPs made territorial claims at a comparatively high rate—53% and 45% of coded contributions, respectively—whereas these parties’ Welsh MPs made territorial claims at a much lower rate, in each case below 30%. This lends further support to the suggestion that the context of political competition in Scotland during the later parliaments in the sample contributed to a particularly

**Figure 4.** Proportion of coded contributions to include a territorial claim by MPs from all Britain-wide parties and all sub-state parties, and by parliament (%).
increased focus on the sub-state territorial level among Scottish backbenchers from GB-wide parties.

6.4 Territorial claim-making by category of sub-state territorial claim

Figure 5 shows the proportion of contributions in my sample coded within each of the four categories of territorial claim in the typology set out above, in each parliament. Two forms of claim are clearly most prevalent—claims to represent material interests were identified in 23% of the analysed contributions, and claims to represent sub-state political institutions in 20% (see Supplementary Table S7). Claims to represent culture and/or identity and public opinion were much less frequent, being identified respectively in 4% and 3% of sampled contributions. It should be emphasised that the coding scheme required the particular form of sub-state territorial representation to be explicitly invoked. In practice, MPs’ understandings of the culture and/or identity of their territory, and of the state of public opinion in their territory, can be expected to inform the decision to focus on the sub-state territorial level, even where it is material interests and/or issues relating to sub-state political institutions that are explicitly raised.

A notable trend over the parliaments for which data have been collected is the emergence of a significant number of claims to represent sub-state political institutions. Claims in this category began to be identified from 1997 to 2001, and were included within 20% of coded contributions by backbench MPs with constituencies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales by 2001–2005. The proportion of contributions to include a sub-state political institutional claim has been consistently greater than one in five of the overall sample since 2010, suggesting that as was expected this type of behaviour has become more common since different parties have been in government at UK and devolved levels.

Figure 5. Proportion of coded contributions to include each form of territorial representation by parliament (%).
Increased representation of sub-state political institutions in the House of Commons speaks to how the post-devolution role of MPs with constituencies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales has developed. Opportunities to engage in some activities associated with the sub-state territorial sphere at Westminster documented by scholars writing prior to devolution, such as scrutiny of legislation specific to the sub-state territories, have diminished. However, sub-state territorial MPs have increasingly filled this gap by acting as champions and critics of the devolved institutions in their territories, calling for engagement between central and devolved institutions, and raising matters related to the devolution arrangements themselves.

7. Conclusion and discussion

Contrary to some previous expectations, the sub-state territorial area has remained a core representational focus for MPs with constituencies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales since devolution. These MPs continue to devote a substantial proportion of their spoken parliamentary activities to seeking to stand up for their territorial areas. The results reported here indicate that the proportion of their spoken contribution that include a claim to represent their sub-state territories has in fact increased since the introduction of devolution, and especially since 2010. This suggests MPs from these areas have adapted their representational roles to the changed institutional context rather than retreating from a territorial focus as responsibility for large swathes of public policy in their home territories was progressively ceded to the devolved institutions. Territorial claim-making is an important feature of the parliamentary work not just of members of sub-state nationalist and regionalist parties such as the SNP and DUP, but also that of many Scottish and Welsh backbenchers from the main GB-wide parties.

The findings indicate that contemporary MPs with constituencies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales often act as de facto territorial representatives, with roles akin to those of members of many second chambers in federal and devolved systems around the world, seeking to use their mandates at the centre to advance the perceived material, cultural and institutional interests of their sub-state territorial units. This mode of representation should receive greater recognition than it has to date in discussions of the roles of members of the House of Commons. In existing accounts the different political and institutional contexts within which the substantial minority of members of the House of Commons that represent seats in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales operate are often barely acknowledged (Searing, 1994; Shephard and Simson
Caird, 2018). Although geographical representation is widely considered an important aspect of the role of a backbench MP, the focus is invariably the electoral constituency. More than 20 years after the introduction of devolution and the UK’s transition to a constitution often described as ‘quasi-federal’ (Bogdanor, 1999a), it is overdue for its impact on what MPs do to be taken into account. Scholarship on inter-institutional relations in the UK, which has tended to focus on direct interactions between governments (Swenden and McEwen, 2014; Hunt and Minto, 2017), might also give greater acknowledgement to the role performed by MPs in the House of Commons. The contributions of sympathetic MPs on the floor of the House of Commons can be an additional route for devolved governments and parliaments to relate their preferences to the political centre.

This article cannot speak to the consequences for public policy of frequent territorial claim-making. However, given the influence backbenchers are able to exercise within the UK ‘parliamentary state’ (Russell and Cowley, 2016), it would be surprising if territorially focused behaviour did not have implications for policy and the distribution of resources. Existing scholarship suggests this may well be especially so when this mode is adopted by groups of MPs from within the governing party (King, 1976; Russell and Cowley, 2018), as was frequently the case with the Scottish Conservative MPs elected in 2017. There are good reasons to expect that the interpretation of the needs and interests of sub-state territorial areas adopted by government supporters such as these would have a particularly significant impact on ministers, who must respond on a daily basis to questions and Westminster Hall debates of the type included in this analysis.

With debates around the future of the UK Union continuing to intensify following Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic, the results reported here suggest that the extent to which MPs with constituencies in these areas focus on the sub-state territorial level could increase yet further in the coming years. While elected to a UK House of Commons, if current trends continue MPs with constituencies in each of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales will form ever more separate groups of representatives, focused on different issues and responding to different domestic political contexts. This raises questions about whether we could be witnessing not just the ‘end of British party politics’, as previously suggested by Awan-Scully (2018), but the end of British parliamentary politics too. That would be a development with far-reaching consequences for the UK polity.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at Parliamentary Affairs online.
Funding

This work was supported by an Economic and Social Research Council PhD studentship [project reference 2112476].

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Michael Kenny, Ruxandra Serban and the two anonymous referees for their feedback on earlier drafts of this manuscript. He would also like to thank Peter Sloman and attendees at the PSA Parliaments specialist group annual conference 2021 for valuable discussions about the results of the content analysis data presented in this article.

References

Arnott, M. and Kelly, R. (2018) ‘Small Parties and Law-Making’. In Leston-Bandeira, C. and Thompson, L. (eds) Exploring Parliament, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 131–140.

Awan-Scully, R. (2018) The End of British Party Politics? London, Biteback.

Bates, S., Kerr, P. and Serban, R. (2018) ‘Questioning the Government’. In Leston-Bandeira, C. and Thompson, L. (eds) Exploring Parliament, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 174–186.

Birrell, D. (2007) ‘Northern Ireland Business in Parliament: The Impact of the Suspension of Devolution in 2002’, Parliamentary Affairs, 60, 297–312.

Bogdanor, V. (1999) ‘Devolution: Decentralisation or Disintegration?’, The Political Quarterly, 70, 185–194.

Cain, B., Ferejohn, J. A. and Fiorina, M. (1987) The Personal Vote: Constituency Service and Electoral Independence, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

Democratic Unionist Party (2019) Let’s Get the UK Moving AGAIN, Belfast, Democratic Unionist Party.

Detterbeck, K. (2012) Multi-Level Party Politics in Western Europe, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

Gover, D. and Kenny, M. (2018) ‘Answering the West Lothian Question? A Critical Assessment of “English Votes for English Laws” in the UK Parliament’, Parliamentary Affairs, 71, 760–782.

Henderson, A. and Wyn Jones, R. (2021) Englishness: The Political Force Transforming Britain, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Hunt, J. and Minto, R. (2017) ‘Between Intergovernmental Relations and Paradiplomacy: Wales and the Brexit of the Regions’, The British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 19, 647–662.
Judge, D. and Finlayson, D. A. (1975) ‘Scottish Members of Parliament: Problems of Devolution’, Parliamentary Affairs, 28, 278–292.

Keating, M. (1975) ‘The Role of the Scottish M.P. in the Scottish Political System, in the United Kingdom Political System and the Relationship between the Two.’ Unpublished PhD thesis, Glasgow College of Technology.

Keating, M. (1978) ‘Parliamentary Behaviour as a Test of Scottish Integration into the United Kingdom’, Legislative Studies Quarterly, 3, 409–430.

King, A. (1976) ‘Modes of Executive–Legislative Relations: Great Britain, France, and West Germany’, Legislative Studies Quarterly, 1, 11–36.

Mishler, W. (1983) ‘Scotching Nationalism in the British Parliament: Crosscutting Cleavages among MPs’, Legislative Studies Quarterly, 8, 5–28.

Mishler, W. and Mughan, A. (1978) ‘Representing the Celtic Fringe: Devolution and Legislative Behavior in Scotland and Wales’, Legislative Studies Quarterly, 3, 377–408.

Norton, P. and Wood, D. M. (1993) Back from Westminster: British Members of Parliament and Their Constituents. Lexington, KY, University Press of Kentucky.

Paun, A. (2008) ‘Lost Souls in the Lobbies? Backbenchers from Scotland and Wales in Post-Devolution Westminster’. In Trench, A. (ed.) The State of the Nations 2008. Exeter, Imprint Academic, pp. 197–220.

Pitkin, H. F. (1967) The Concept of Representation, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press.

Russell, M. (2001) ‘The Territorial Role of Second Chambers’, The Journal of Legislative Studies, 7, 105–118.

Russell, M. (2018) ‘Attempts to Change the British House of Lords into a Second Chamber of the Nations and Regions: Explaining a History of Failed Reforms’, Perspectives on Federalism, 10, 268–299.

Russell, M. and Cowley, P. (2016) ‘The Policy Power of the Westminster Parliament: The “Parliamentary State” and the Empirical Evidence’, Governance, 29, 121–137.

Russell, M. and Cowley, P. (2018) ‘Modes of UK Executive–Legislative Relations Revisited’, The Political Quarterly, 89, 18–28.

Saward, M. (2010) The Representative Claim. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Scottish National Party. (2019) Stronger for Scotland, Edinburgh, Scottish National Party.

Searing, D. D. (1994) Westminster’s World: Understanding Political Roles, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

Shephard, M. and Simson Caird, J. (2018) ‘The Role of a Backbench MP’. In Leston-Bandeira, C. and Thompson, L. (eds) Exploring Parliament, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 187–195.

Swenden, W. and Maddens, B. (2009) ‘Territorial Party Politics in Western Europe: A Framework for Analysis’. In Swenden, W. and Maddens, B. (eds) Territorial Party Politics in Western Europe, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–30.
Swenden, W. and McEwen, N. (2014) ‘UK Devolution in the Shadow of Hierarchy? Intergovernmental Relations and Party Politics’, *Comparative European Politics*, 12, 488–509.

Thomas, P. E. J. and Frier, S. (2018) ‘Campaigning to Change Law and Policy’. In Leston-Bandeira, C. and Thompson, L. (eds) *Exploring Parliament*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 111–121.

Thompson, L. (2020) *The End of the Small Party? Change UK and the Challenges of Parliamentary Politics*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.

Türsan, H. (1998) ‘Introduction: Ethnoregionalist Parties as Ethnic Entrepreneurs’. In De Winter, L. and Türsan, H. (eds) *Regionalist Parties in Western Europe*, London, Routledge, pp. 1–16.

Watts, R. L. (1996) *Comparing Federal Systems in the 1990s*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press.

Welsh Labour. (2019) *Standing up for Wales. Welsh Labour Manifesto 2019*. Cardiff, Welsh Government.

Wyn Jones, R. and Scully, R. (2012) *Wales Says Yes: Devolution and the 2011 Welsh Referendum*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press.