

REVIEW: ENGLISH REGIONS

Ross Bond

John Tomaney and John Mawson (eds.), **England: The State of the Regions**, Bristol: The Policy Press, 2002, ix+227pp, Hb ISBN 1 86134 376 0, £50, Pb ISBN 1 86134 375 2, £17.99.

It has been commonly said of the process of constitutional reform set in train by the current Labour government that devolution is 'a process not an event', and that this process would surely lead the people of England to reflect more closely upon their sense of who they are and how they would like to be governed. This is a book that develops such assertions from a specifically regional perspective, combining discussion of issues of general relevance to 'the English question' with more focused examinations of each of the country's eight regions. The book's structure – straightforward and appealing – sandwiches the region-specific contributions between the more general chapters. The regional approach is a welcome one, in part because it reflects the reality of a diverse nation, but more importantly because there has been a relative paucity of literature that examines English regions as distinct political, institutional or cultural units, and this book therefore represents a valuable addition to a comparatively small body of knowledge. It is also fitting that one of its editors (and its most prolific contributor), John Tomaney, is one of the few who have, for a considerable period, been attempting to address such questions, most obviously in relation to the North East of England.

In the introduction to the volume, Tomaney affirms the processual nature of constitutional change while also noting that the English have thus far demonstrated comparatively little interest in having their own devolved political institutions. For the reader, this provokes the following question: will the people of England discover or develop such enthusiasm for devolution,

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and if they do not – or if only some parts of England do – can the United Kingdom withstand the constitutional anomalies? Of course, one could reasonably argue that it is perfectly capable of doing so, and that the current political configuration can be sustained indefinitely. But, given the problems raised by the exclusion of England from the devolution settlement, one may also contend that in the short to medium term the 'process' of devolution, at least as it relates to England, is most likely to be resolved in one of three ways: through the introduction of elected English regional government, reform of the sphere of influence of Westminster MPs representing non-English constituencies, or, perhaps least likely of all, the establishment of an exclusively English parliament.

The book, as its title suggests, is strictly relevant only to the first of these possibilities, but it does not limit itself solely to the question of regional government. Being concerned as it is with the wider and more complex notion of governance, it thus takes the civic and political temperature of the English regions, measuring the growth of exclusively regional institutional structures and mindsets, as well as assessing the state of public interest and debate at a specifically regional scale. While such issues may not at first strike the Scottish reader as being of the utmost interest and relevance to those north of the border, quite aside from the value of updating our knowledge of our closest neighbour and political partner, the potential ramifications of future political reform in England suggest that Scots would do well to monitor closely any developments that could potentially lead to such reform.

While the specific examination of England and its regions is welcome, a stronger comparative element would have been beneficial. For example, it would have been instructive to learn more about how other formerly centralised states, especially in Europe, had gone, and continue to go about, ceding power to smaller political units based on national or regional boundaries. This is especially so given that there are comparable states – such as Spain and Germany – that contain the same combination of 'identity-rich' and 'identity-poor' nations and regions as is found in the United Kingdom. The ideal place for such analysis would have been Wendy Russell Barter's contribution, offering a research-based review of evidence relevant to the development of policy on regional government in England. Although this attempts to introduce a much-needed international dimension, this is insufficiently developed in terms of what lessons might be learned from other countries, other than through the rather bland conclusion that there are lots of

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different models of regional government and no obvious one for England to adopt.

Although Russell Barter emphasises that she writes in a personal capacity and not as a representative of government, it may be that her Whitehall location is related to the failure firmly to identify potential models for regional government given the current government's own historic vagueness on this issue. Tomaney's second contribution chronicles the changes and contradictions within government thinking and policy in relation to the regional question, and discharges a similar task in examining the emergence of regional institutional frameworks and civic campaigns for greater regional political autonomy. This serves to highlight the fact that while regionalism may be growing in prominence within government and (some) regional elites, its popular appeal – as measured by civic activity, public support and media interest – remains strictly limited in the majority of regions. Thus we are once more faced with the key question as to the extent to which a marked lack of public enthusiasm in many regions represents an insurmountable obstacle to the further development of regional governance and government.

This lack of enthusiasm is also generally evident in many of the region-specific chapters, notwithstanding some suspiciously positive poll evidence from the BBC, which seems to run counter to most informed opinion and other survey evidence. The book's introduction sets out a number of themes which each of these region-specific chapters should follow, and most cover these adequately. However, they also offer a wide variety of approaches and quality. An important issue here is that of intended audience. The worst of the chapters – those that get bogged down in the details of institutional structures and conflicts – run the risk of simply telling the regional 'expert' what (s)he already knows, while alienating the less knowledgeable but genuinely interested observer. The best provide valuable regional detail while also advancing novel arguments and addressing the big questions relating to regional governance and identity. A minor disappointment is the rather cursory treatment accorded to the North East which, we are rightly reminded, is likely to provide the key to the future of English regionalism and regional government. This may be because, in comparison to the other regions, much more has been written about the North East in the past, and Tomaney's chapter examining lack of co-ordination in English regional governance also focuses upon this region. Nevertheless, given its importance, a fuller discussion of what kind of powers a North East Assembly might expect to have, together with some statistical evidence to support the discussion about

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strength of regional identity and levels of support for regional government, would have been welcome.

The best of the closing chapters is McQuail and Sandford's examination of the key issues in the debate about English regional government. This contribution, contrary to some of the others in the book, does not shy away from tackling the big questions relating to the purpose, structure, powers, and means of election of regional government. One important point raised is the question of what regionalism should be for: is it a question of increasing the democratic legitimacy and accountability of governance, a means of ensuring greater administrative and technocratic efficiency, or should it have a more economic purpose, aiming to ameliorate inequalities in prosperity between regions? A related issue is whether the strength and locus of regional identity should have prominence over factors relating to efficiency and pragmatism. Those – such as this reviewer – with an interest in questions of territorial identity will want to weigh arguments about the necessity or desirability of establishing units of governance that are coincident with geographical units that 'mean' something to their inhabitants. From a Scottish or Welsh perspective, the temptation is to dismiss many of the English regions as artificial constructs, largely devoid of identity and thus unworthy of distinct political representation, but this line of thinking should be qualified in two important respects. First, we know that desire for self-government in Scotland was as much (if not more) related to political expectations as it was to sentiments of national identity (Brown et al 1999). Second, experience from other countries has shown that devolution can work even in 'artificial' regions. McQuail and Sandford point out that in countries like Spain such regions have been obliged to follow the lead of those with stronger identities and levels of support for devolution. Nevertheless, it remains a matter for some debate as to whether such a 'domino' effect would be inevitable in England and what would happen if some regions continued to resist change.

The concluding chapter examines the debate over regionalism in the wake of the publication of the government's White Paper on English devolution in May 2002. This chapter highlights the fact that, while this document is another symbolic example of New Labour's ostensible commitment to the devolution of power, in practice it does little to reduce the centralised control over policy and resources: the form of devolution being proposed is essentially administrative, entailing the regional delivery of a centrally-defined strategy. Thus, while English regionalism may have moved on somewhat since Christopher Harvie described it as 'the dog that never barked'

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(Harvie 1991), its contemporary nature and political destiny continue to be characterised by complexity and ambivalence at all levels from the powerful to the popular. Despite its flaws, **The State of the Regions** will be a helpful volume for those who want to keep abreast of the important issue that is the political future of England and its regions.

REFERENCES

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