

Brexit and devolution in England: what's at stake

*The debate on Brexit has spurred discussion about how the UK's exit from the EU could affect the devolved nations (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). But, writes **Arianna Giovannini**, the impact on England is also important to address, as the lack of a coherent devolution policy means that Brexit could have profound institutional, economic and political effects on the largest nation of the UK.*



Flag from York against Brexit rally. Picture: [Pete Lambert/\(CC BY-NC 2.0\) licence](#)

England is the nation that [returned the strongest vote for Brexit in 2016](#). And yet, unlike Scotland, Wales and to some extent Northern Ireland, England lacks any coherent system of political devolution either at national or regional/local level. In practice, this means that whilst the process of leaving the EU will have profound effects in England, there's no architecture in place that allows the sub-national/local dimension (either at institutional or popular level) to influence events.

Thus, in many respects, Brexit adds a new layer of complexity to the so-called '[English Question](#)'. So far, the devolution process in England has developed in fits and starts. From 2014 onwards the coalition and then Conservative governments have promoted devolution in the form of [partnership agreements](#) between the centre and combined authorities of local councils. However, this has given rise to a [patchwork of 'devolution deals'](#) that does not include all areas across England and is characterised by [substantial differences in terms of powers, funding and accountability](#). Whilst local authorities in England were reassured that more devolution was on the cards, the debate on Brexit has been the government's primary centre of attention for a while now. As a result, after the momentum gained under the lead of the former Chancellor George Osborne, Brexit has slowed down any policy development on the devolution front. Indeed, the current government lacks a 'devolution champion', and since Osborne left his office there's been no further impetus to develop a coherent devolution framework, providing a clear blueprint to empower localities and give them the leverage to play an active role and shape decisions in a post-Brexit scenario.

The fact that devolution in England still lacks a clear direction of travel is also fostering political and institutional fragmentation. On the one hand, some of the [new elected metro-mayors have started to raise their voice](#) and demand both [more powers to reduce the damage of leaving the EU](#) and a say over Brexit. The government, however, has not listened to any such appeals. On the other, areas that currently do not have any 'devo deal' are becoming more vocal and, in some cases, have started to ask for substantial forms of devolution – [challenging from the bottom up central government's approach to devolution](#).

Yorkshire is a case in point. Here local leaders have coalesced behind the idea of a '[One Yorkshire regional devo deal](#)' (as opposed to the city-regional ones preferred by Westminster) – presenting this as the most appropriate way to cater for the needs, and reflect the identity, of local communities and gain the levers needed to grow their local economy, especially in the aftermath of Brexit. Yet, once again, the centre has not been particularly receptive, and has so far [turned down local leaders' proposals](#). This suggests that Brexit, combined with central government's resistance to relinquish real powers downwards in England, has the potential to [widen existing centre-periphery divides](#) and/or foster new ones.

From a political economy perspective, the lack of a coherent devolution framework could add further problems as Brexit unfolds. Details on the [Shared Prosperity Fund promised by the Conservatives](#) in their manifesto to replace EU structural funding for the areas of the UK lagging behind, [have still failed to materialise](#). This is generating anxieties across the UK nations. But in England, the absence of devolved institutions across all localities adds further uncertainties as to who will be the recipient of such funding once in place. Earlier last week, there were [speculations that the Prosperity Fund could be distributed](#) through to Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) rather than through local councils – raising serious concerns at the local level.

On 4 March the government did announce a new [Stronger Towns Fund](#) to distribute £1bn over 7 years to areas in England with sluggish economic growth, plus an additional £600 million open for bids. Whilst this was presented as a means to address the gap that will emerge once EU funding will come to an end in 2020, some have read it as a mere '[Brexit bribe](#)' in view of the votes on Theresa May's Brexit deal. In addition, as [shown by Chris Huggins](#), evidence suggests that the Stronger Towns Fund does not come anywhere close existing levels of EU spending in England and some areas, such as Cornwall, are at risk of losing out disproportionately. The new fund also does not do much to reverse the [draconian cuts imposed by central government on local authorities since 2010](#). All this could foster not only further [interregional inequalities](#) but also alienation from politics among the 'left behind' communities that supported Brexit and (whilst perceiving Westminster as too distant) do not have any strong devolved institution to represent them.

If, as suggested in a recent article, the vote for Brexit could be read as '[the revenge of the places that don't matter](#)', the absence of a consistent devolution policy coupled with the economic and political tensions that will stem from UK's exit from the EU could create a toxic cocktail in England. One way to address this would be to embed a radical and coherent rethinking of central-local relations in England into the debate on Brexit, so as to finally address the English Question. However, looking at the current state of affairs, the government does not seem prepared to embark on such journey.

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