

Any more re-centralising actions taken by Boris Johnson in response to the 2021 elections may be the seeds of his downfall



The Prime Minister's poll approval ratings improved from a very low point when he introduced local vaccination programmes rather than when he introduced centralised test and trace and PPE approaches. [Janice Morphet](#) writes that Boris Johnson should learn from this, and other recent developments, in offering more devolution.

The elections held across Great Britain in May 2021, may come to be recognised as a marker on the road to further recentralisation of the UK state. Despite the introduction of devolved delivery in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland in 1999, particularly in those matters agreed by the UK with the EU, the UK is still defined as one of the most centralised states amongst its members by the OECD. This has been despite a gradual extension of devolved powers through legislation since then. In London, similar powers over finance for transport, police, regeneration and housing were devolved to a directly elected Mayor in 1999. Other large English city conurbations were promised the same kind of devolved powers through Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCA) and these have been gradually established.

However, by 2014, it was already possible to see the beginning of the rowing back of these devolved powers in the nations, for instance through the [Wales Bill discussions in 2014](#), while the new MCAs were each established outside a local authority framework and mayors had control over small and specific 'deal' funding rather than the whole budget as in London. The coincidence of the pandemic and Brexit has seen further pressures on the Mayor of London's budget and powers, the removal of powers to the devolved administrations in the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and United Kingdom Single Market Act 2020, and a [centralisation of the management of the pandemic](#), leaving local authorities to pick up the pieces with little or no additional funding. Are these one-off occurrences or can we see them as part of a broader process of re-centralising the UK state to Westminster and Whitehall? Have the elections in May 2021 given us any further insights on the likely direction of travel for more devolution or a return to centralisation?

Looking back since 1999, it is possible to see that the introduction of devolution, supported by EU treaty commitments to subsidiarity, was regarded as an opportunity to demonstrate compliance while meeting long-held political promises to Scotland and Wales. The subsidiarity principles also enabled confidence to be placed in the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland. However, these newly devolved powers and institutions of Parliaments and Assembly and the creation of First Ministers were never included within the UK constitution. Further, all the new institutions that were established after 1999, such as the inter-ministerial council, were [never established in an operational way](#). The British Irish Council met regularly, but attendance by the UK Government and no identified ministerial attendance from England meant that [relationships strengthened between the rest of its members](#). The results of devolution for England, including Ministerial jurisdiction and the Prime Minister's authority when speaking for England or the UK was only really understood in the 2020 pandemic as media outlets tried to understand the differences in powers between the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales which were seen in sharp distinction to the directly elected mayors in England. Now, when the Prime Minister is exercising his powers for England alone, [this is made clear](#).

Within England, the devolution promises were never fulfilled. The expectation of directly elected mayors for functional economic areas running MCAs were each implemented by a specific statutory instrument and the powers of each mayor have to be delegated by the constituent local authorities. The mayors have no major implementation budgets and are instead reliant on funding granted by central government through growth deals or specific initiatives such as housing and 5G in the West Midlands. English local authorities were also promised more devolution of power in the 2019 Queen's speech. Since 2011, successive governments have been removing funding from English local authorities such as the revenue support grant and making many smaller councils dependent on specific and time limited funding. From 2012, local authorities had been encouraged to make bids to become combined authorities. However, although incentives have been offered, the politics of this kind of reorganisation at the local level have come about by financial concerns as in the merger of West Somerset and Taunton and in the creation of new unitary councils in Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire. Other councils have proposed their own reorganisations such as Dorset, where two authorities that were reorganised into unitary councils in 1996 decided to merge with a third to create a larger unitary of Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole, with the remaining part of Dorset becoming another new unitary council. Other councils work together with common administrations. The incentives to reorganise local authorities in Cumbria, Lancashire, North Yorkshire and Somerset appear to have resulted in a standoff between county and district council led options. While funding inducements have been offered by the government, delays waiting for the next set of elections or the proposed devolution white paper have led to stasis.

However, it appears that a government-led approach to increased English devolution is now being abandoned. Shortly before the 2021 local elections, the government [announced](#) that there would no longer be a devolution white paper and there would instead be a Bill on 'levelling up'. It was unclear what this would mean; the timing was also too short, when councils were in election campaigning mode, to do much to respond to this change in direction. When the results of the elections came in, it was clear that having a mayor of a combined authority, who stood up to the PM in representing their local areas, led to a clean sweep of electoral success for Andy Burnham across the ten authorities and flying in the face of recent Conservative Party electoral success across the north of England. While the Conservative Party may have won council and parliamentary seats across the former Labour 'red wall' area, the election victory of the mayor of Greater Manchester could not be more convincing. The same was the case in West and South Yorkshire and Liverpool. Of 13 mayors of MCAs, 11 of these are in Labour control after these elections – with losses in the West of England and Cambridge and Peterborough not anticipated by the Conservative party. There were also losses in staunch Conservative strongholds in the south east – perhaps as a direct response to centralised imposition of housing targets in these areas that were unwelcome to voters.

The parliamentary elections in Scotland and Wales also produced results that were not encouraging the PM to introduce further devolution, both as a consequence of the leadership of their respective First Ministers. In Scotland, there was a record turnout vote while there is a parliamentary majority for introducing another referendum on independence. In Wales, the First Minister Mark Drakeford equalled the best results ever by the Labour party in Wales. In response to the victories, the PM immediately called a summit with the First Ministers to discuss the management of the pandemic on a UK-wide basis, leaving many to wonder why the leaders were not meeting on a regular basis in any event.

So where do the 2021 elections leave the UK in relation to more or less devolution? We already have some pointers to the direction of travel. The [Dunlop Report](#) on bringing the union back together, commissioned as one of the last acts of Theresa May as PM, has been published with a number of recommendations. The Union secretariat in No.10 has been disbanded and a new second Permanent Secretary for the union had been appointed in the Cabinet Office. The Cabinet Secretary has been relieved of his Northern Ireland duties and is now focusing on the union, spending some time each week in an office in Glasgow. There are some uncertainties about when or if the devolved powers removed through the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 such as transport, environment, and agriculture will be returned. The Queen's Speech 2021 appears to have included more areas within a UK scope in its legislative programme. While the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales now have an electoral mandate for their priorities, they no longer have the EU treaty subsidiarity protocols behind them to guarantee their powers over devolved decision making and expenditure. In the 2021 budget, the Chancellor [announced](#) that funding for all projects in the Shared Prosperity Fund to replace the EU Structural Funds and for levelling up would be sanctioned and approved by the Treasury and not devolved for local determination as before. This has followed on the undermining of devolved powers through for the deals for all parts of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland since 2014. With a large parliamentary majority, Boris Johnson could simply propose to remove powers permanently rather than to expand them.

The same is the case in England for MCAs and local authorities. The PM will be unlikely to give further powers and funding to Labour-controlled MCAs. At the local level, the towns fund has already demonstrated the PM's preferred approach to pork barrel politics where local authorities supporting the PM's party are more likely to receive funding rather than on the basis of published criteria. There is still a [legal challenge](#) being pursued by a local authority about these decisions made earlier in 2021. The proposals in the [Planning for the Future](#) White Paper include more centralised targets, collection and distribution of developer contributions and allocation of land uses. While local authorities have been undertaking more to make themselves financially self-sufficient, it is always open to the PM to reduce their powers and funding through Parliament.

Yet, the pressure for independence and the dismay of southern Conservative MPs could lead to more change. Some, including former PM [Gordon Brown](#) and former First Minister of Wales [Carwyn Jones](#) have been arguing for a new UK federal constitution. This would allow some level of independence within a UK state. There could also be reform of the House of Lords to reflect this and a new English Assembly to allow representatives to meet together as in the rest of the UK. There have also been [other arguments](#) for intra-parliamentary committees and arrangements. Would this approach be enough to stem the tide of the arguments for independence? While the PM's funding preferences to Conservative seats in England may win votes, it seems that this narrative is not convincing longstanding voters in the south. The next few years will see these issues heightened in public debate and any more re-centralising actions taken by the PM as a response to the 2021 elections might be the seeds of his downfall in the longer term. The PM's poll approval ratings improved from a very low point when he introduced local vaccination programmes rather than when he introduced centralised test and trace and PPE approaches. Will he learn from this in offering more devolution or will his apparent preference for controlling the state from the centre continue?

Note: the above draws on the author's latest book, [The Impact of COVID-19 on Devolution](#) (Bristol University Press, 2021)

About the Author



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