

Book Review: Comparing Devolved Governance

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In *Comparing Devolved Governance*, **Derek Birrell** compares the separate governments and legislatures of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. **Akash Paun** finds that the author comprehensively and successfully describes and compares the three political systems that are too often discussed separately. However, the book does not quite amount to more than the sum of its (many and good) parts, and was frustrating for what it did not do, such as make the case for why the question of asymmetry is so important. This is nonetheless a useful and thorough reference work for students and researchers of devolution.



Comparing Devolved Governance. Derek Birrell. Palgrave Macmillan. May 2012.

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The creation of separate governments and legislatures in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast in 1999 set in train a historic experiment in which to test different public policies, constitutional arrangements and ways of governing. In *Comparing Devolved Governance*, Professor [Derek Birrell](#) of the University of Ulster focuses on the last and least explored of these issues: the question of governance, defined in broad terms as “all that pertains to public and governmental institutions, decision-making and provision” (p. 2). The book maps how the three devolution settlements function and draws attention to similarities, dissimilarities, and trends of convergence and divergence. Ultimately, it aspires “to question the continuing validity of describing devolution as *asymmetrical*” (p. 1) – a common descriptor used to emphasise the existence of significant structural differences between the three devolution settlements.



The book comprises eight thematic chapters, covering each major aspect of government, including the legislative process, role of parliamentary committees, local government system, and quango landscape. The first substantive chapter is on the “powers and resources” of the three devolved administrations. This is an area of clear differences in the original devolution settlements, as well as significant change since 1999. Most notable has been the evolution of devolution in Wales. The Welsh Assembly was once dismissed as “a glorified county council” with fragmented executive powers within narrow areas defined in Westminster legislation. Today, Cardiff Bay is home to a proper legislature, though still with a smaller range of powers than its two comparators, both of which have themselves moved further down the path of devolution, particularly in terms of fiscal powers for Scotland, and policing and criminal justice functions for Northern Ireland. Birrell paints an overall picture of growing convergence between the three countries, though with distinctive pressures in the three territories that may yet push towards further asymmetries.

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There is also an informative pair of chapters on the functioning of executive government and the civil service in the three devolved capitals. Here too Birrell finds that “the executives in each country can be seen as evolving with common characteristics” in the direction of a traditional UK model (p. 45). The original Welsh model – of fused legislature and executive – has been replaced by a conventional split between the two branches of government. And the sheer survival of devolution in Northern Ireland since 2007 after a five-year suspension brings Belfast more into line with Edinburgh and Cardiff.

Yet notable dissimilarities between the three systems remain. In Belfast, all parties sit together in Cabinet in a mandatory coalition. Ministers are also not bound by collective responsibility, which is highlighted as “one of the major differences in the operation of devolved government between Northern Ireland and Scotland and Wales” (p. 55). One consequence is the strength of individual departments in Belfast, whose “mini-Whitehall model” (p. 141) comprises powerful ministerial fiefdoms able to pursue relatively autonomous agendas. Wales and Scotland by contrast have sought to develop more unified executives, particularly in Edinburgh where departments were replaced by a single corporate structure bound by a shared set of strategic objectives.



The Scottish Government's Cabinet, May 2011. Credit: [Scottish Government](#) CC BY-NC 2.0

Northern Ireland also has a long-established separate civil service (the NICS), but Birrell argues that “this organisational difference has not produced major differences in key operational respects” (p. 163). The NICS has often followed UK practice, including in the development of Public Service Agreements (now scrapped in Whitehall) and in adherence to the core values of meritocracy and impartiality. Civil servants in Scotland and Wales remain part of a unified Home Civil Service alongside UK government officials, yet with a degree of devolved managerial autonomy. One innovative direction of reform has been towards a unified public service model, bringing together devolved officials with local government and wider public sector staff. This has been discussed in Scotland and Wales, yet Birrell argues that there has been “little progress” other than some joint training initiatives (p. 161).

Overall, the book does not quite amount to more than the sum of its (many and good) parts, partly because it gets bogged down by the weight of detail. For instance, a section on the quango landscape leaves the reader drowning in references to bodies like the Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency and Northern Ireland's Pig Production Committee (pp. 167-172) before eventually arriving at some important conclusions about common challenges faced by the three governments in rationalising the crowded field of arm's length bodies they inherited.

The book is also let down somewhat by poor proofreading. There are missed words, misspelt names, near-homophone errors (formally/formerly, adopt/adapt, ethnical/ethical), and a whole repeated paragraph in the final chapter.

I also found myself frustrated by what the book did not do. I would have liked an early exploration of factors that drive divergence or convergence, to provide a frame of reference for the rest of the book. Only in the conclusion does the author turn to this, with a brief discussion of factors such as policy learning between the devolved bodies, continued dominance of the UK government, and the common aspiration to build a 'new politics' of power-sharing and broader public participation. Countervailing drivers of divergence – such as the distinct party political systems – are noted but not really explored.

Nor does the author really make the case for *why* the question of asymmetry is so important. And this case could have been made, since the assumption that each of the three settlements is *sui generis* contributes to a lack of joined-up thinking in Westminster, Whitehall and wider public debate about the future of the UK and its peculiar territorial constitution – even as the Scottish referendum calls into question the very survival of the country.

This is nonetheless a useful and thorough reference work for students and researchers of devolution. This short review cannot do justice to the sheer quantity of information pulled into this relatively slim volume (277 pages). The author sets out with a clear intention – to describe and compare three political systems that are too often discussed separately – and completes this task comprehensively and successfully.

Akash Paun is a fellow of the Institute for Government, where he has worked since 2008. He currently leads the Institute's work on the challenges of coalition government and accountability arrangements in Whitehall, and has previously conducted research on parliamentary reform, candidate selection processes, and devolution in the UK. He formerly worked at the Constitution Unit, UCL. [Read more reviews by Akash.](#)

