



Book Review: Devolution and Localism in England by David M. Smith and Enid Wistrich

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Tracing the development of decentralisation policies through regional policies up to and including the 2010 General Election and the radical shift away from regionalism to localism by the new Coalition Government thereafter, the authors consider some of the key policies of the incumbent Coalition Government such as City Regions and Localism. This book is a much-needed contribution to the debate about the UK's constitutional future, writes Richard Berry.

Devolution and Localism in England. David M. Smith and Enid Wistrich.
Ashgate. 2014.

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In *Devolution and Localism in England*, [David M. Smith](#) and [Enid Wistrich](#) address an issue that has risen quickly up the political agenda recently, in the wake of the Scottish independence referendum. From being a relatively marginal concern just a matter of weeks ago, sub-national government in England has become the subject of one of the most important debates in British politics today.

The question Smith and Wistrich set out to answer is straightforward, although the answer is not. What does devolution in England look like? It is perhaps unfortunate that the book was written before the independence referendum took place, as this prevents the authors from engaging directly in the debate about England's devolution settlement, which David Cameron has insisted must be decided alongside any new powers for Scotland. However, we might also be thankful that, unaffected by the emotional turmoil of the campaign and its aftermath, Smith and Wistrich are able to present an objective and dispassionate account of the history and potential of English devolution.

The book is primarily about *regional* government, which can and has been conceived in a number of ways. The research on which it is based is a series of interviews with public, private and voluntary sector representatives in various regional political institutions, such as the former Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). *Local* government is discussed at some length, especially as it became a stronger focus for Coalition government reforms, but serves mainly to help the authors define their main object of study. As in their summary of interviewees' views on the role of regional government:

"They listed a range of functions which in their view must be performed at a level somewhere between the national and the local because they are too broad and too strategically important to be left to lower level bodies... At the same time, the functions required a subtlety of knowledge generally outside the competence of national governments."

The book's chapters can be divided into two distinct parts: before and after. This is inevitable, given that the author's research was conducted either side of the 2010 election, which heralded radical change in regional governance. The early chapters focus on the structures which started to come into being under John Major's Conservative government in the 1990s, and were subsequently developed and bolstered by Labour. These include the RDAs, as well as Government Offices for the Regions, Regional Assemblies, Local and Multi-Area Agreements, Strategic Leaders Boards and Economic Prosperity Boards.



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In Chapter Four, there is a marked shift in language, reflecting the sweeping changes introduced by the Coalition government that saw most regional institutions and strategies abolished. Words like *death*, *demise* and *attack* appear, as well as the near-ubiquitous *abolition*. There is one striking quote from an interviewee who, speaking of the Coalition, says, ‘the word region is a poison as far as they are concerned’ (p.46). Forced into an abrupt change of focus, Smith and Wistrich use the second half of the book to discuss Coalition reforms centred on the sub-regional level, including the introduction of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and City Deals.

Arguably, the authors could have made done more to draw out the major themes of their work. Multiple possibilities spring to mind: the democratic aspects of regional governance, financial aspects, relations with central and local government, or the role of regional elites. All of these issues recur throughout, but none is given the sustained focus to allow for in-depth analysis. The book’s chapters have only loose, overlapping themes.

The partial exception to this is the issue of regional identity, which is the main topic of Chapter Three. However, the insights from this discussion are limited because of Smith and Wistrich’s strict adherence to an unhelpful anonymity rule. The book confirms the jobs of quoted interviewees (for example, ‘RDA director’), but not which part of the country they are based in. This prevents the authors calling on real-world examples to support their arguments, and gives the book a dry and abstract tone. For instance, Yorkshire is widely believed to have a strong regional identity, but the authors write just thirteen words about the idea of a Yorkshire identity, introducing a quote from a (non-Yorkshire) businessman who makes only a passing reference to the region (p.34).

It would have been preferable to maintain anonymity by concealing interviewees’ jobs – information which is useful, but unnecessary – and revealing their geographical location. At times the reader is left to guess about which places are being discussed. One quote on fiscal devolution is attributed to a ‘Core City Mayor’; given that this can only be one of two people – Liverpool’s Joe Anderson or Bristol’s George Ferguson – the mystery is distracting (p.71). Meanwhile there are several references to a specific county that has a particularly strong desire for devolution among local leaders. It seems inconceivable this could be anywhere but Cornwall, although that is never made explicit:

Respondents from one county in particular were convinced of its distinctiveness and firmly believed that its inhabitants shared the identity of a common historical and cultural view which could underpin

| *its status as a region. (p.41)*

Towards the end of the book, Smith and Wistrich allow some of their own opinions about devolution to emerge. This is welcome. There is a defence of the record of RDAs, and a hint that they should be re-established (p.112). The notion that cities and sub-regions should compete with each other for economic gain is questioned (p.108). There is particular criticism of Whitehall's inconsistency with regards to its localism agenda:

| *The lack of clarity about the distribution of power and responsibilities between the various levels of government and governance exhibited by some present government actions also tends to conflict with the Localism message. Arbitrary policy interventions on specific issues undermine certainty and seriously damage credibility and morale. (p.95)*

Devolution and Localism in England is a much-needed contribution to the debate about the UK's constitutional future. Despite some stylistic choices that may reduce the accessibility of the book for a general audience, it should be required reading for all those opining on the 'English question', to learn from the best practice of previous attempts at devolution, and avoid the pitfalls.

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