

# The prospect of greater regional and city devolution raises the spectre of the “Manchester Withington Question”

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The Government’s plans for a “Northern Powerhouse” and the associated moves towards greater policy autonomy for Greater Manchester are combining to create a potential situation where MPs in Manchester and areas which may also in future enjoy similar powers can vote on matters which don’t effect their constituents. This, argue **Andy Mycock** and **Arianna Giovannini** represents the advent of the “Manchester Withington Question” – a deliberate echo of the “West Lothian Question”, which the government’s new English Votes for English Laws reform seeks to answer.*



Morning in Withington (Credit: [chiptooth](#), CC BY 2.0)

Reform of the constitutional architecture of the UK state over the past two decades has adhered to a conservative orthodoxy based on an enduring belief in the British Political Tradition whereby the redistribution of power has been negotiated between state and sub-state national and regional elites rather than with the British people. As a result, the process of devolution has proven largely unplanned, piecemeal, and pragmatic, an open-ended process that lacks clarity in terms of its purpose, procedure, or extent. The introduction of English Votes for English Laws (EVEL) conforms to this approach, as does the current government’s programme of devolution within England.

Proponents of EVEL argue it has been devised as a means to address the so-called ‘West Lothian’ Question whose principal anomaly concerns voting asymmetries within the House of Commons whereby MPs from outside of England are able to vote on matters that affect only England, while MPs from England are unable to vote on matters that have been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. The case for EVEL appears to be founded upon the view that the natural equilibrium, long understood to successfully balance the parliamentary constitution of Westminster, has been profoundly undermined by unequal and unfair

programmes of devolution undertaken by successive UK governments. It is contended that EVEL will rebalance UK multi-national governance and restore constitutional stability by limiting votes on parliamentary bills in Westminster that relate to England alone to English constituency MPs. This will in effect allow Westminster to act as parliament both to the UK and England.

However, the extension of bespoke, elite-controlled reform to England is likely to fuel constitutional instability across the UK state, further Anglicising the House of Commons (and by association the House of Lords) while also necessitating a further reordering of the UK civil service. Moreover, EVEL does not engage with on-going reforms in the other nations of the UK *nor* within England, appearing designed to operate in parallel, rather than in tandem, with other policies such as devolution to England's cities and regions and the wider Northern Powerhouse agenda. EVEL's singular focus on the constitutional anomaly related to the current imbalanced representation of England's national voice within the UK means it overlooks the way that English national, regional, and local policy-making and governance are interconnected.

Crucially, current approaches to devolution via bespoke city regions and other territorial deals will create asymmetries in policy remit amongst MPs in different parts of England that resemble the very 'West Lothian Question' that EVEL is supposed to put to rest. For example, the development of 'Devo-Manc' over the past year or so has devolved responsibility for some or all provision of health, social care, employment and training, and transport to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. As a result, the MPs in Greater Manchester, such as Jeff Smith who was elected for the first time in the Manchester Withington constituency, will no longer be directly responsible, accountable or able to influence formulation and delivery for these areas in Westminster. Mr Smith will however be able to continue to vote on some or all of these policy areas in other English MPs constituencies where responsibility has not yet been devolved. As such, many of the anomalies associated with the 'West Lothian Question' could be reproduced within England through what might be described as the 'Manchester Withington Question'.

Some argue against the proposition that the 'West Lothian Question' could be replicated within England. Perhaps contrary to what many members of the public believe, it is pointed out that all of the powers so far devolved in England belong to and are mandated by the executive branch of the UK government and are not the product of new legislation introduced via votes in the House of Commons. It is argued that as EVEL only applies to matters that are voted on in the House of Commons, it doesn't apply to government and executive decisions. This point has merit but understates somewhat the interconnections and overlaps between parliamentary bills and government/executive decision-making. For instance, there is an explicit relationship between the current Cities and Local Devolution Bill, whose passage through Westminster would be affected by the introduction of EVEL, and the government's on-going programme of English devolution.

[Mark Sandford](#) has argued that, unlike the devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, English city-regions have not yet been given sufficient powers to pass either primary or secondary legislation. Put simply, there will be no 'Mancunian laws' designed and implemented by the Greater Manchester directly-elected mayor or the cabinet comprised of the ten council leaders of the combined authority. Sanford rightly notes that – at present – asymmetric regional devolution would therefore not lead to any restrictions on MPs' ability to vote on English-only matters in the House of Commons.

This situation would however be altered if the UK government devolved powers to allow regional variation in taxation rates and fiscal policy-making. Recent policy announcements indicate that the government is willing to countenance regional and local asymmetry in taxation. The devolution of responsibilities to set and collect business rates in England announced in October 2015 will allow local authorities to cut these rates while only elected mayors in London, Manchester, Sheffield and other city-regions will be allowed to increase them. It is likely that as further fiscal powers are devolved, demands from local and regional for secondary legislation powers will gain currency.

However, there is more to the 'Manchester Withington Question' in reality than that issue of parliamentary principle. It is likely the 'Manchester Withington Question' will encourage deterioration of relations between MPs within the

House of Commons as asymmetries in the remit and influence of English elected-representatives intensify. Resentments will coalesce on questions of funding and resource allocation, policy design and delivery, and the coherence and uniformity of welfare and other public services. National, regional, and local cleavages within and between union-wide political parties will also escalate and solidify. MPs will be increasingly placed in a position where they must compete for authority and influence with newly-empowered local-regional elites. The Greater Manchester city-deals provide a good snapshot of this nascent 'politics of new English regionalism', with some Labour MPs publicly raising concerns about the [process](#), [transparency](#) and [democratic-accountability](#) of 'Devo-Manc'.

Emerging arenas of contestation will likely be driven by territorialism and identity that will redefine the tone and tenor of political debate both within the House of Commons and in local constituencies. However, the 'Manchester Withington Question' is likely to prove even more complex than its 'West Lothian' counterpart. The Conservative government is currently in the process of agreeing uneven and bespoke deals across England with no consistency in the nature or extent of the devolution of powers. This means that English MPs will have their responsibilities cauterised to differing extents, further undermining the national consistency of EVEL. The government's urgency in introducing EVEL denies England the time afforded Scotland to debate and vote on its constitutional future. The lack of a strategic and coherent vision of the extent of devolution across the UK and within England is therefore likely to not only increase competition and conflict between an ever more Anglicised Westminster and the other nations of the UK but also with English regions and localities.

So, behold the Manchester Withington Question. It will require an answer.

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*Note: this post represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our comments policy before posting.*

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