

# How should 'political England' be recognised?

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By democraticaudit

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In the newly published IPPR pamphlet *The Dog That Finally Barked: England as an Emerging Political Community*, Richard Wyn Jones and Guy Lodge demonstrate, to anyone's satisfaction, that there is such a thing as English identity and that it has a political component. **Lewis Baston** examines the arguments around the recognition of England as a political entity.

Perhaps their most surprising finding was that in comparative context, England has a stronger sense of identity in terms of the standard 'Moreno scale' than Bavaria, Galicia, Vienna or even Wales. Only Scotland and Catalonia (of areas surveyed) were stronger sub-state units of identity. The research found that only about a quarter of English respondents were happy with the constitutional status quo, although there was no consensus about an alternative and the question demonstrated some of the qualities of an issue that is ill-formed in the public mind, for example a strong effect from the wording of the poll question.



*England's Green and Pleasant Land (Credit: 'Disappointed Bee – again', CC by 2.0)*

The most widely-canvassed solution to the emerging English question is to set aside a category of England-only legislation at Westminster and then establish a system of 'English Votes for English Laws' (EVEL for short), taking voting rights on such questions away from MPs representing seats in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Conservative thinking has largely revolved around some form of EVEL.

A Westminster parliament with EVEL will be a peculiar beast at the level of procedure, governance and policy, and whether EVEL is workable is very doubtful. Much has already been written about this elsewhere.

Given that a UK government would administer England, EVEL would be almost entirely negative in nature. Its significance would be in vetoing proposals emanating from the UK government when there is a difference in the majority party in the UK and England. The chances of reaching a consensus, or even evolving a workable convention, on managing a parliament with differing English and UK majorities seem remote. There may be agreement in principle that there should be a positive Englishness based on nationhood rather than just a sense of grievance, but the mechanics of EVEL would embed negativity and complaint into the political definition of Englishness.

Weaker forms of EVEL may be workable, such as interpolating an English Grand Committee into the legislative procedure but leaving the final determination to the Commons. The author of this suggestion Malcolm Rifkind, suggested trying to embed a convention that the English committee would not be overruled but this is perhaps problematic. It could be made difficult and politically costly but not impossible for the Commons to overrule the English, by something like the Parliament Act procedure to overrule the Lords. At the IPPR seminar John Denham made the interesting, gradualist suggestion that once an elected Lords is in place, scrutiny of England-only Bills could be given to the peers elected from England.

However, these 'lesser EVELs' would do even less to answer the inchoate English desire for some sort of national institution of its own. It is startling that 27 per cent of the English said that the EU was the institution with most influence over how England is governed, which on the face of it is blatantly wrong. But 'EU' is probably just a synecdoche for 'institutions and forces which we do not feel we control, and do not understand very well' – a symbol of a democratic deficit that is felt in England but not confined to that country. Representative institutions in Scotland and Wales seem to have reduced this sense of disconnection there.

Wyn Jones's research makes it clear that regionalism does not address the English question. It emerged as an unpopular choice in the opinion surveys, with only 9 per cent overall in England saying their preferred option was regional assemblies, against 20 per cent for an English parliament, 24 per cent for the status quo and 34 per cent for EVEL. England itself is a significant political unit. If the greater EVEL is unworkable, and the lesser EVEL does not answer the question, and there is no popular support for regionalism, one is left either holding out against political Englishness or ending up in the – perhaps surprising – position of supporting an English Parliament.

The politics, economics and media of the UK is dominated by London and the South East of England. A risk of an English Parliament is that a state or sub-state Parliament that is effectively Greater Surrey would be even worse than the Greater England that the UK would become without Scotland. An English Parliament elected by proportional representation, like its analogues in the other three UK nations, would be a different matter. It would be quite likely to be more plural and progressive than the UK state we have now. While FPTP tends to lead to Conservative domination of England in terms of seats (although New Labour managed three comfortable overall majorities in English seats), it is less clear in votes. In 2010 the Conservatives won 39.6 per cent of the vote, probably not enough for a majority under PR. A PR English parliament would also offer the chance of representation for non-racial English nationalism from parties like UKIP and the English Democrats, as well as for the Liberal Democrats and Labour (particularly) to develop identifiably English policy programmes.

A Parliament with its own English leadership and symbols, distinct from the UK and the suffocating pomp and dreariness of Westminster, could actually be a productive and liberating enterprise. As well as PR, and real devolution of power to the English Parliament comparable to, but not necessarily identical to, Scotland's current powers, I would make the modest proposal of making sure that the English Parliament is not based in London or the South. An English parliament should also come with a mission to decentralise power, rather than gather power to itself (as the Scottish Parliament has sometimes done). This could involve strong local government, city regions, and perhaps regional devolution within administrative England where there is demand, as there seems to be in Kernow most of all.

An English Parliament may be a complicated enterprise, but Wyn Jones and Lodge have shown that Englishness is not only complicated but worthy of being recognised in political institutions. Besides, the timetable may be much shorter than most people like to think. The IPPR's valuable study is a start to a process that needs to be followed up.

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