

Devolution revolution? Assessing central-local relationships in England's devolution deals



Much recent debate has been generated by the priorities of the newly-elected metro-mayors and their implications for the sub-national governance of England. But the broader question is: will they lead to longer-term change in relationships between central and local government? [Mark Sandford](#), [Sarah Ayres](#), and [Matthew Flinders](#) argue that, although not radical, England's devolution deals may contain the seeds of change.

The recent devolution initiatives within England provide an opportunity to reassess the relevance of Jim Bulpitt's 1983 book, *Territory and Power in the United Kingdom*. This provided a then-novel portrait of UK territorial political relations. For Bulpitt, the UK central state had long favoured what he called the 'central autonomy model' of territorial relations. He saw central government's priority as keeping its distance from local and parochial matters; and in turn, expecting that local governments will not usurp their authority and attempt to challenge the centre's role. He coined the term 'dual polity' to describe the parallel roles adopted by centre and localities.

Since Bulpitt wrote, central attitudes to local government in England have become more readily interventionist. In that context, the initiatives towards devolution of power in the mid-2010s are of interest. In England, 'devolution deals' have been accepted by eight areas, mostly pan-urban in character. These have consisted of the transfer of certain powers, budgets, and consultation rights, and (in most cases) the creation of new 'combined authorities' with a directly-elected mayor at their head.

A good deal of commentary has focused on whether this devolution is 'real'. Does it constitute a challenge to the 'central autonomy' model of relations? Some commentators have suggested that the changes offer the prospect of increased local autonomy, whilst others have dismissed the policy as centralist in character. Drawing on data from three academic research projects, we assessed whether there was evidence of such a shift to date. Does the way in which English devolution has been negotiated and delivered show that central-local relations are changing?

The findings indicated that the 'territorial management code' in England remains largely the same as the historical norm. In Bulpitt's terms, the central autonomy model continues to dominate. Deals have been negotiated in private between civil servants and small groups of local elites. Central government has remained tight-lipped about its policy priorities, dampening the ability of localities to take the initiative. Localities are required to develop business cases for the handling of devolved powers, and to evaluate them against the terms of the 'devolution deal'. Through the terms and conditions of devolution, central autonomy is retained in place. Even when some devolution deals collapsed following stakeholder and public disquiet, the government did not deviate from this approach. This insistence on control is visible in the current impasse over arrangements in Yorkshire, where there is strong interest in a pan-Yorkshire deal involving 22 local authorities, but the government is focused on city region-based deals centred on Sheffield and Leeds.

Bulpitt also noted the prevalence of 'court politics', focused on a small number of decision-making individuals. The slowing of devolution policy following the departure from government of its chief architect, George Osborne, bears out the continued importance of this dimension of territorial management.

But there are also hints that the central autonomy model is not as dominant as it once was. The government has not used its political resources as assiduously as it might have done. Local participants in negotiations reported genuine interest from civil servants in devolving power and encouraging local initiative: one stated that the government was 'desperate' to conclude deals. This is quite different from what a central autonomy model would imply. Central autonomy also assumes a 'bureaucratic machine', via which the centre dominates the 'periphery'. This is visible in the deals' requirements for central oversight, but there is a constrained capacity for this to happen.

Central government's governing strategy – to reaffirm its control over territorial relations – is largely hands-on. But again, there are signs of change. The democratic mandate of elected mayors is a source of unpredictability: it could import political conflict into a system of governance much of which is designed around broad stakeholder consensus. In the longer term this could presage the evolution of English territorial relationships towards Bulpitt's 'capital city bargaining model', involving local actors' "interference in the centre's affairs but often in a cooperative fashion". This depends on whether metro-mayors can take the opportunity to establish themselves as significant political players, both in the institutional and cultural dimensions of English governance.

In summary, Bulpitt's framework allows us to look at the attitudes and priorities made evident during the devolution deal negotiations; and to use these to suggest how metro-mayors might be able to extend and entrench their positions in the political landscape. It holds out the possibility that they could drive longer-term change in central-local relations: though this is very much contingent on the tacit permission of central government.

Note: the above draws an article titled '[Territory, Power, Statecraft: Understanding English Devolution](#)' recently published in [Regional Studies](#). The article is based on the following research projects: The [Political Studies Association's](#) Research Commission, chaired by [Sarah Ayres](#) (University of Bristol) to [examine the role of 'informal governance' on devolution to England's cities](#). The second, an ESRC project that focused on English regional governance in order to test the utility of different models of citizens assemblies vis-à-vis constitutional policy-making led by [Matthew Flinders](#) (University of Sheffield). The third consists of [a literature review and analysis](#) conducted by Mark Sandford for the House of Commons Library.

About the Authors



Mark Sandford is a Senior Research Analyst at the House of Commons Library.



Sarah Ayres is Reader in Public Policy and Governance at the University of Bristol.



Matthew Flinders is Professor of Politics and Founding Director of the Sir Bernard Crick Centre for the Public Understanding of Politics at the University of Sheffield.