

Social citizenship in an age of welfare regionalism

The state of the social union

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Nevin Economic 'Research Institute, 10 May 2023

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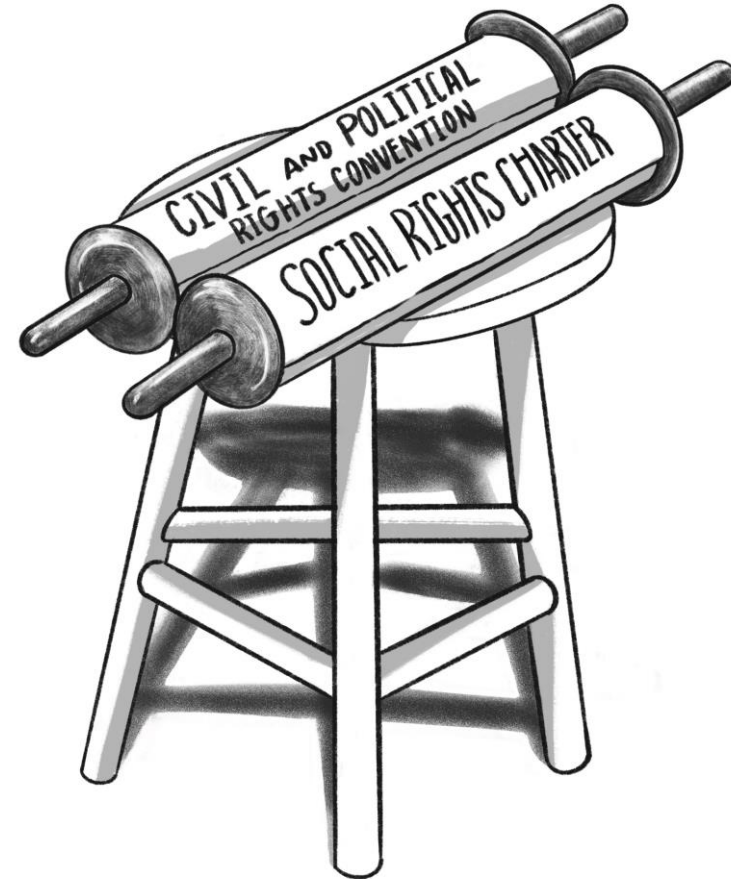


Illustrations: Hannah Miller

Social citizenship

A 'guaranteed minimum' of goods and services to be enjoyed by the citizen, as of right

TH Marshall



Hannah Miller



The social union

‘The pooling of common funds at a UK level which are then expended on the basis of need, on a UK-wide basis.’

House of Lords Constitution Committee

Social citizenship in the 2010s: UK level



Hannah Miller

HM Treasury
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Local housing allowance cut (private tenants)

'Bedroom tax' (social tenants)

Benefit cap introduced

Benefit cap lowered

Contributory employment and support allowance

All in this together?





After 2012: the changing
social union

Constitutional change

Scotland:

- Social security reserved in 1998 devolution settlement
- Scotland Act 2016 (Pt 3) devolves about 15% of system (in expenditure terms)

Constitutional change?

Northern Ireland:

- Social security devolved in 1920 devolution settlement, and remains devolved in subsequent settlements
- But strong tradition that system mirrors that in Great Britain
- This convention comes under pressure after 2012

A socio-legal study of social citizenship

Analysis of developments in social security and constitutional law and policy

Two waves of interviews (2014-15 and 2020) with politicians and officials in Northern Ireland and Scotland

What is the relationship between social security and constitutional developments?





New payments at devolved level

Scotland

Disability assistance
Carer's assistance
Scottish child payment
Best start grant/foods
Funeral support payment
Scottish welfare fund
Winter heating assistance
Mitigation of 'bedroom tax' – and benefit cap?

Northern Ireland

Welfare supplementary payments compensate for loss due to:

- Social sector size criteria
- Benefit cap
- DLA → PIP transition
- Time limiting of contrib. ESA

Discretionary support scheme



The vision

- Social security is itself a human right and essential to the realisation of other human rights
- Respect for the dignity of individuals is to be at the heart of the Scottish social security system
- the Scottish social security system is to contribute to reducing poverty in Scotland
- Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018

The vision?

The purpose of this Article is to enable the Department to make payments to persons who suffer financial disadvantage as a result of the changes to social security benefits and tax credits contained in this Order, the Welfare Reform and Work (Northern Ireland) Order 2016 and the Welfare Reform Act 2012.

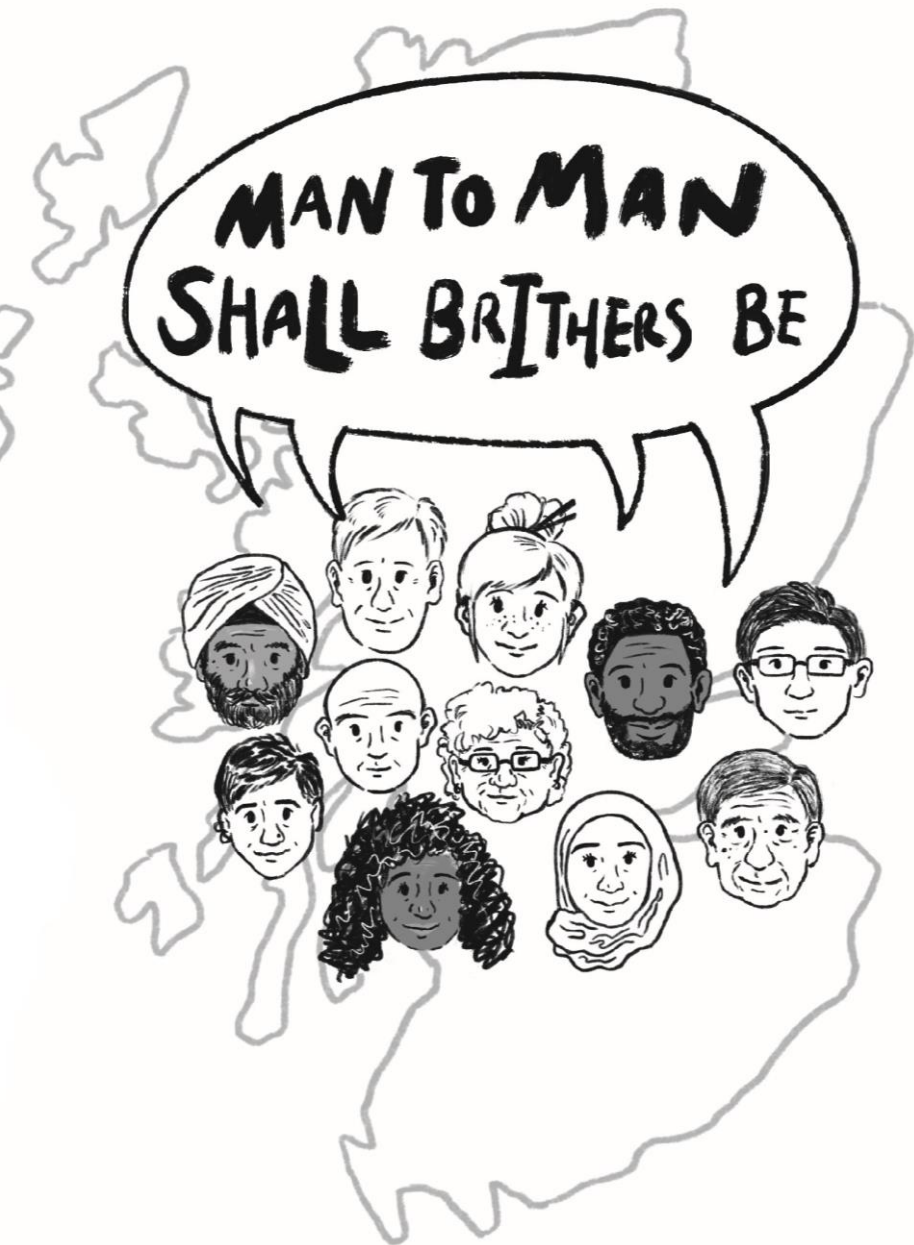
- Welfare Reform (NI) Order 2015



NI: pragmatic considerations

- ‘The desire isn’t to be different. The desire is to have something which is appropriate ... because we do have unique circumstances’ (unionist politician)
- ‘We don’t actually have a housing market that enables people to downsize’ (neutral politician)
- Deprivation brings risk of ‘breakdowns in society ... unrest and that’s the last thing we need here’ (official)





Scotland: ideological considerations

- 'This idea of the common weal and the good of the people and looking after people, it has been part of the Scottish psyche for so long ... we've always had a left of centre outlook on life' (nationalist politician)
- 'We are on a journey and I actually think the more we say it, the more we become it... fake it until you make it' (unionist politician)
- 'Scottish Nats have got a very clear view about what they want and the idea of a Fairer Scotland ... a political party which has debated the idea around social welfare and which is creating forums for discussion around social welfare. There's none of that in Northern Ireland' (NI official)

Questions of 'fairness'

'The [Welfare Reform] Bill says to the taxpayer, "Your hard-earned money must be spent responsibly" ... Taxpayers ... are constantly being asked to pay in taxes towards support for others. That is fair, but we have a responsibility to ensure that taxpayers too are properly supported' (Iain Duncan Smith)

'If you can't be arsed to get out of your bed ... you don't get paid' (neutral politician, NI)

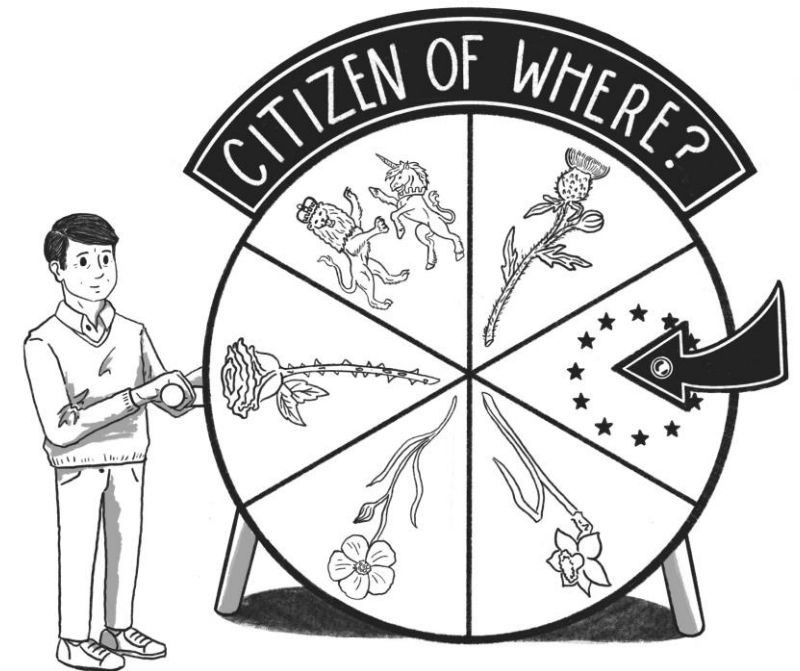
'People have an entitlement to benefit support that comes from the contract that is there between the government and the citizen, that it is something that we collectively all contribute to... in order that it is there for us, should we ever need it' (nationalist politician, Scotland)



Welfare unionism and nationalism

‘Doing social security right has the potential to be one of the strongest arguments for Scottish independence this Government has yet been able to manifest [and] a headline argument in future debates around the constitutional question, if we can demonstrate that we can do it’ (Scotland official)

‘I think being a nationalist means you’re more likely to be a member of a left of centre party, which means you’re more likely to be opposed to elements of welfare reform, but I don’t think they’re necessarily linked in the sense of a constitutional question’ (NI politician, unionist)



Hannah Miller

So what *is*
the state of
the social
union?



‘We can be that little bit more generous if we wish to. I think that probably will suffice to address perhaps the most outrageous problems ... I think the general expectation is a shared one across our country, and I think it will remain so’ (Scotland politician, unionist)

‘There is no longer a single UK welfare state, that’s not the situation. ... All social security provisions will eventually end up in the Scottish Parliament’ (Scotland politician, nationalist)

‘The only purpose of having devolution is to do things to meet the needs of the people that you represent. ..there’s a contradiction if you’re saying that you want devolution, but you want to be the same as everywhere else.’ (NI politician, nationalist)



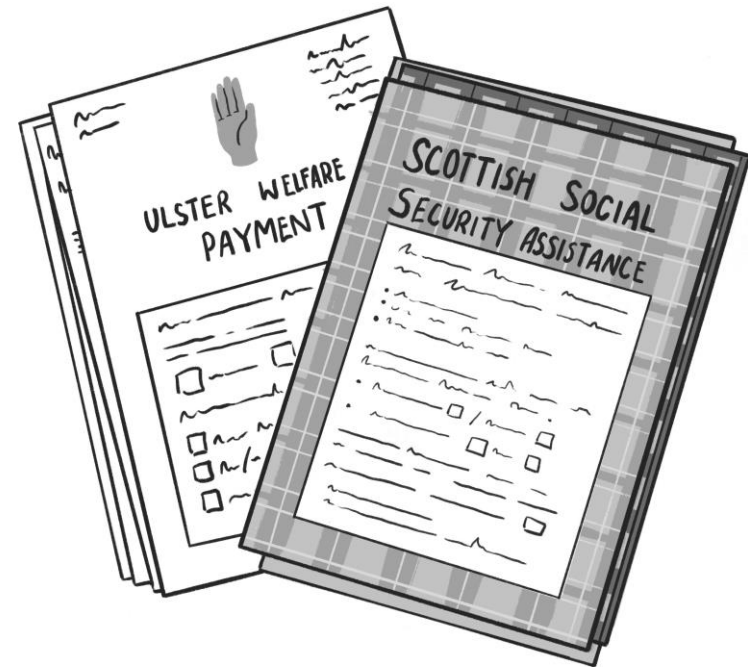
Future prospects

Northern Ireland

- Supplementary payments introduced as a 'temporary' measure – but a taboo has been broken
- Political fragmentation and financial/administrative capacity mean UK system remains starting point

Scotland

- Immediate challenge remains 'safe and secure transition'
- Clearer vision, but limits to powers and issues with interconnectedness of devolved/UK systems





Future prospects: update

Northern Ireland

- Review of discretionary support and review of welfare mitigations call for additional investment in social security
- No Assembly/Executive in place to act on recommendations
- Department for Communities budget cut by 15% (April 2023)

Scotland

- Government faces own budgetary challenges – new First Minister cool on universal provision (eg school meals)
- But hints at further increases to Scottish child payment and ‘bold’ changes to taxation

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