

Devolution and Social Citizenship:

A future for a unified welfare state?



Presented at BSA conference on Citizenship and Belonging, University of Nottingham, 25 March 2013

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Introduction: social citizenship

- **Social citizenship** entails the rights necessary for an individual to enjoy “a modicum of **economic welfare and security**... and to **live the life of a civilised being** according to the standards prevailing in the society” (Marshall)
- These rights are closely associated with the **welfare state**, including the public **health, education and social security** systems.
- **Social rights** emerge from exercise of **civil and political rights** AND ensure individuals are in a position to participate as civil and political citizens.
- Exercise of social rights depends on **solidarity** within a **sharing community**, typically consisting of the **nation state** (Taylor-Gooby)
- The **UK welfare state** has played a role in cementing a **common identity** within the **plurinational state** (Keating).
- **Devolution** calls into question whether the **sharing community** and the **welfare state** will continue to exist at national level, or whether **fragmentation** will occur (Greer/Mätzke).

Context: devolution

- The government’s **preferred option** for the governance of Northern Ireland since 1921; return to devolution part of the region’s **peace settlement**.
- Response to demands for **political citizenship** at **sub-national level** in Scotland and Wales (Mooney and Williams).
- Social security is **not devolved** to Scotland or Wales; it is **devolved** to Northern Ireland, but the **parity principle** prevents significant **policy divergence** (Bradshaw).
- Other aspects of social policy are devolved—**divergence** in **higher education** fees, **prescription** charges and **personal care**.

Decentralising forces

- As **regional political citizenship** and **divergence in social policy** become established, the devolved regions may become the logical locus of the **sharing community** (Greer and Mätzke).
- **Welfare nationalism**: Scotland and Wales claimed to have a stronger sense of **solidarity** than England (Mooney and Williams)
- **Hostility** to coalition government’s **welfare reform** project (Hansard).
- **Parity of output** (level of benefit payments) does not result in **parity of outcome** for claimants in regions where cost of living is higher (Evason)
- Claims that the **Barnett Formula** and shared **social security system** result in some regions receiving more than their **fair share** of public spending (Jeffery).
- **Equality of opportunity** legislation a possible driver if interpreted differently by different administrations, or if Westminster fails to address equality concerns (Simpson).



The heads of the UK’s devolved administrations in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. (Image: MSN)



Image: Murdo Macleod, www.guardian.co.uk

Obstacles to decentralisation

- Limited **revenue raising powers** at devolved level mean Westminster can wield considerable influence even over devolved functions (McLean et al).
- Central influence particularly strong in **social security**, where regions with **lower revenues** have **higher expenditure** (Livingstone & Morison).
- Citizens subject to a **common tax system** should enjoy the **same standard of services** (Hansard).
- **Public opinion** remains in favour of a **shared social citizenship** with a **common standard of services** (Trench).
- **Utilitarian** argument that **risk** should be **shared** among the **largest community** possible (Hansard).
- Concern that **fragmenting** social citizenship may lead to a **race to the bottom** in service provision (Peterson).

Conclusions / issues for research

- **Devolution** is associated chiefly with the fulfilment of demands **political citizenship** at regional level and with the search for a **political solution** to the **conflict** in Northern Ireland.
- The **impact on social citizenship** may not have been fully considered.
- Some **divergence** can be observed in devolved areas of **social policy**, but this opportunity has not existed in the crucial field of **social security**.
- A stronger sense of **solidarity** in devolved regions and opposition to the UK government’s **welfare reform** may create **pressure for change**.
- **Northern Ireland** may face pressure to take a **different approach** if social security policy does not comply with the **public sector equality duty**, but is constrained by the **parity principle**.
- Change in **Northern Ireland** may influence events in Wales, where the **devolution settlement is more fluid**, and Scotland, where **renegotiation** may follow the **referendum on independence**.

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This poster draws on research completed for PhD research project entitled ‘Social security, equality and devolution: a future for parity?’ under the supervision of Grainne McKeever and Ann Marie Gray at the University of Ulster (School of Law/Social Sciences Research Graduate School). Thanks to Amaia Alvarez Berastegi, Una Foy and Anthony McKeown (UU) for feedback.

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