

The state of the social union

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Social rights, citizenship and the welfare state
Socio-Legal Studies Association conference 2021



Trajectories in social citizenship

- Reduced generosity of working age social security
- Stiffened behavioural conditionality
- Increased emphasis on labour market participation as route to economic welfare
- Growing role for devolved (and local) tiers of government in definition and operationalisation of social rights



The emerging devolved welfare states

- Devolved competences dominated by social policy from 1998
- Northern Ireland – social security devolved since 1920, but law and policy shaped by parity convention
- Scotland – almost no role in social security until some competences devolved 2016
- Wales – devolved powers comparable to local government in England
- England – local government responsible for discretionary support

Divergence in social security post-2012

The legislative landscape

England/Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Welfare Reform Act 2012	Welfare Reform Act 2012	Welfare Reform (NI) Order 2015
Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016	Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016	Welfare Reform and Work (NI) Order 2016
	Welfare Funds (Scotland) Act 2015	Welfare Supplementary Payments Regulations (NI) 2016 [and subsequent]
	Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 [and Regulations]	

Divergence in social security post-2012

Northern Ireland	Both	Scotland
<p>Supplementary payment to smooth transition DLA → PIP/support appeals</p> <p>Supplementary payment to mitigate benefit cap</p>	<p>Different payment patterns for universal credit</p> <p>Mitigation of under-occupancy penalty for social tenants</p>	<p>Social security principles and charter</p> <p>New payments to low-income children</p> <p>More generous carer benefits</p> <p>Currently legislating for devolved disability benefits</p>



What's driving divergence?

Northern Ireland: pragmatic argument dominates

- Some ideological hostility to 'Tory austerity'
- Perceived disproportionate impact of reforms on NI
 - More economic inactivity, disability and under-occupancy
 - Austerity pursued with insufficient regard to impact on claimants and devolved countries

There is a level of unfairness to what was introduced, because it wouldn't have taken a genius to work out the Northern Ireland specific issues.

Welfare reform...was the wrong way round. The Conservatives announced how much they wanted to save and then created policies to try to fit that... it was just about savings, it was part of austerity so it wasn't, it wasn't to spend the money elsewhere.

It's almost like now we can look back and go we told you so... it wasn't going to work for Northern Ireland... unfortunately I don't think that the Northern Ireland voices at Westminster were heard loudly enough.

What's driving divergence?

Scotland: a different ideological vision

- Political coalescence around guiding principles and a rights-based approach to social security
- Link to vision of Scotland as a more social democratic society?

It was returning it to be a system based on dignity and respect... the perception we had was that they were trying to stop people getting benefits but the whole basis of Scottish social security system is that it was a right.

I'm sitting here... talking about dignity, respect, culture, whole different ethos, much more compassion, much more empathy. All fine words, and I think it will happen, but... you can't legislate for culture. It's something you have to embed within an organisation. We'll have to wait and see what happens, but I'm encouraged.

I'm not sure there is a vision... we have these clichés... individuals have to be treated with dignity and respect, all really important, but actually... what is our vision for what social security should look like? I'm not sure that there is that big picture thinking.

The power of political leadership

Scotland: fake it 'til you make it?

We definitely have a different attitude to how we want to our citizens to be able to thrive in Scotland.

[There is an] overall commitment to alleviate child poverty... There's a particular First Minister, I think, has a particular interest in children... which I think has driven some of it.



There's a pretty strong feeling of unity... across all parties, in relation to [the social security principles] - even the Conservatives.

It has been great to have the SNP in particular portray... Scotland in the terms they do as a progressive Left-centre Scotland... It does make a difference because most nationalist forces around the world are quite reactionary... To have them very explicitly not is a huge boon to Scotland, and it has definitely helped.

The power of political leadership

Northern Ireland: forging a vision in a fragmented polity

The character of politics in the North is too often that if you start without a vision, then you will end up without a vision

We have certainly seen it from [the Scottish Government] side as well, in dealing with colleagues in Northern Ireland. You say, "What's your position?" "We don't have one and we're not going to have one because there's just no chance of, you know, anything being agreed."

What we have in Stormont is not a normal democratic system where a party is in government. We are in a five party mandatory coalition... It's like you've been asked to ride a bicycle with square wheels, no brakes but yet you're expected to win the Tour de France.

It was an independent group [that came up with the welfare reform mitigations] and I think it'd be useful to do something similar this time... there needs to be a group in place to shape and inform what the ongoing mitigation should look like... It takes you out of the political arena a wee bit and gives you that kind of independent evidence that you're looking for.

What is the state of the social union?

There's a UK welfare state, but it's not a single welfare state. I talk about the shared space of social security rather than the UK social security system.

There's obviously a slight concern, when you devolve something away, the argument is you're slicing up a bit more the union [but] at the moment we are devolving these powers and de facto we're leaving them almost identical to what's happening in England



It's probably not enough of the powers for [a Scottish welfare state]. I think our ministers would argue that we get some of the full levers of power, and it becomes a bit of a sticking plaster over a system that they would see as not particularly fit for purpose or working.

It doesn't change the basic parameters... but having slightly different nuances... I think the welfare state [is something] that the UK can be rightly proud of.

As questions arise about whether it is union or unity or independence... more and more people decide well, what is the cost benefits analysis or what is the financial risk and welfare is going to be more and more part of that equation.

Thank you!

M Simpson, *Social citizenship in an age of welfare regionalism: the state of the social union* (working title)

New book from Hart, 2022

<https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/en/persons/mark-simpson>