



## Territorial Politics, Devolution and Spatial Planning in the UK: Results, Prospects, Lessons

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**To cite this article:** Claire Colomb & John Tomaney (2015): Territorial Politics, Devolution and Spatial Planning in the UK: Results, Prospects, Lessons, Planning Practice & Research, DOI: [10.1080/02697459.2015.1081337](https://doi.org/10.1080/02697459.2015.1081337)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02697459.2015.1081337>



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Published online: 12 Oct 2015.



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## PRACTICE REVIEW

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# Territorial Politics, Devolution and Spatial Planning in the UK: Results, Prospects, Lessons

CLAIRE COLOMB & JOHN TOMANEY

**Abstract** *This article critically analyses the debates which have unfolded in the aftermath of the Scottish independence referendum of 18 September 2014 concerning the constitutional arrangements of the UK as a plurinational state and the internal governmental structure of England. The debates unfolding in the UK reflect and illustrate two central themes in planning, territorial development and public policy. First, they highlight the contested distribution of power across multiple layers of government in states with an inherited centralized pattern of governance that are now facing strengthening regionalist and nationalist claims. Second, they illustrate the linked growth in the demand for new governance and strategic planning arrangements in large metropolitan areas with fragmented administrative and institutional boundaries. The article first discusses what the outcome of the Scottish referendum (and its aftermath) means for planning in Scotland. It then turns to the debates on devolution in the rest of UK which were stoked in the wake of the referendum, looking at the planning implications of further devolution in Northern Ireland and Wales, and at the possible consequences of the various options currently being aired to solve the 'English question'. Finally, ongoing debates on decentralization to regions and city-regions in England are briefly considered.*

**Keywords:** devolution; decentralization; spatial planning; UK; England; Scotland; Wales; Northern Ireland; regionalism; sub-state nationalism; city-regions; strategic planning

### **Introduction: Planning and the Constitutional Debates on Devolution and Decentralization in the UK in the Aftermath of the Scottish Independence Referendum**

Far from settling the constitutional future of the UK, as some had hoped, the rejection of independence by voters in the Scottish referendum on 18 September 2014 (by 55–45% with a record turnout of just under 85% of eligible voters) has been accompanied by renewed debates about the constitutional arrangements of this plurinational state. It has also brought back to the forefront of the political

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agenda the unsolved, complex question of the internal governmental structure of England. The last-minute promises made by the three main UK political parties for an extended package of devolution measures to Scotland in order to entice voters to vote ‘no’,<sup>1</sup> were followed, the day after the referendum, by a declaration from the UK Prime Minister David Cameron linking the Scottish question to the need for constitutional reforms in England (Wintour, 2014a), focusing on more devolution to cities, city-regions or regions, on the one hand, and on changes to the operation of the UK Parliament, on the other. A complicated and confusing picture has emerged of complex demands for various forms of devolution at different scales, often bundled together in public and media debates in the tense atmosphere of the pre-referendum weeks.

The aim of this paper is to reflect on those debates and what they mean for the future of territorial development policies and spatial planning in the UK. The debates unfolding in the UK, briefly analysed here for the benefit of an international audience, have relevance for other countries (Katz, 2014). They reflect and illustrate two central themes in planning, territorial development and public policy. First, we are concerned with the contested distribution of power across multiple layers of government in states characterized by an inherited centralized pattern of governance and that now face emerging (or strengthening) regionalist and nationalist claims. Second, we identify the demand for new governance and strategic planning arrangements in large metropolitan areas with fragmented administrative and institutional boundaries as a facet of broader devolutionary processes. Both themes have become major topics of political debate in various European countries (and beyond) over the past decade. Countries such as Spain, Belgium and Italy have been confronted with a strengthening of sub-state nationalist and regionalist movements, whose arguments related to the ‘politics of territorial solidarity’ (Béland & Lecours, 2008), to territorial justice, spatial redistribution and the planning and financing of large-scale infrastructure have gained new ground (Colomb *et al.*, 2014). In parallel, across European and North American countries with mature but fragmented forms of local government, there have been recurring debates about, and various experiments with, new forms of metropolitan and city-regional governance to tackle the challenges posed by the urbanization patterns of the past decades and underpin the competitiveness of national economies via support to dynamic cities and regions. Both sets of debates have been taking place, in recent years, in the context of the austerity politics and reforms carried out by central governments following the 2008 global recession.

Planning as a state activity (understood here in a broad sense) and as a form of public policy is closely bound with debates on constitutional arrangements and the need for evolving multi-level governance structures in changing states. It is also closely bound with long-standing debates on the transformation of the central and local state in territorial management in a post-Fordist or post-Keynesian era. In the UK context, reform of the governance of planning has been loosely (and incoherently) connected with the objective of ‘rebalancing’ the ‘national’ economy, that is, among other things, encouraging growth outside London and the South-East of England (Pike *et al.*, 2015). With the objective of balanced territorial development in mind, it is crucial to consider whether new

constitutional and governance arrangements would improve the ‘internal governance of uneven development’ (Pike & Tomaney, 2009) both *between* and *within* the nations of the UK. The paper first discusses what the outcome of the Scottish referendum (and its aftermath) means for planning in Scotland. It then turns to the debates on devolution in the rest of UK which were stoked in the wake of the referendum, looking at the planning implications of further devolution in Northern Ireland and Wales, and at the implications of the various options currently being aired to solve the ‘English question’.<sup>2</sup> Finally, ongoing debates on decentralization to regions and city-regions in England are considered. In the conclusion, we reflect about the significance of the developments analysed in the UK in their European and international context.

### **What the Outcome of the Referendum Means for Planning in Scotland**

The final outcome of the referendum on Scottish independence reflected the most likely outcome predicted not just by pollsters, but also by long-standing analysts of Scottish society who had noted that a majority of Scots, in social surveys carried out over several years, displayed a consistent preference for a ‘devo-max’ type of settlement (i.e. implying the largest amount of devolved power consistent with remaining in the UK) – a path which was not offered as an option in the referendum (McCrone, 2014). Many undecided voters thus asked themselves, until the last moment, which of the two options offered to them would most likely secure the type of settlement they most wished to see. The hastily made promises for more devolution made by the three main UK parties shortly before the vote, when an opinion poll showed that the predicted gap between the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ votes had significantly narrowed, is likely to have influenced the choice made by many of those voters.<sup>3</sup>

Since the Scotland Act of 1998, which brought about extensive devolution for Scotland, the Scottish Parliament has full responsibility for spatial planning and related fields such as transport and local government. The reforms introduced by the first two Scottish Governments (a coalition between Labour and Liberal-Democrats) until 2010, mainly through the *Planning etc. (Scotland) Act 2006*, echoed many of the planning reforms passed in England at the same time by the then New Labour government (Nadin, 2007; Lloyd & Peel, 2009). From 2010 onwards, the newly elected UK coalition government (Conservative-Liberal Democrat) set out to reform the planning system through the 2011 *Localism Act* which dismantled many of New Labour’s spatial planning initiatives (Davoudi, 2011; Haughton & Allmendinger, 2012; Rozee, 2014). Following the electoral victory of the Scottish National Party (SNP, a left-of-centre nationalist party) in the Scottish Parliamentary election in 2011, a divergence between the planning policy agendas of the Scottish and UK Governments became more apparent (Tomaney & Colomb, 2013).

Spatial planning in Scotland acquired a relatively high profile on the political agenda of the SNP government post-2011. While similarities remained in the respective planning discourses of the English and Scottish Governments in the post-recession era – e.g. the emphasis on ‘sustainable economic growth’ and calls for more efficiency in development management (the system and processes

of planning control and permission) – the Scottish Government exhibited a clear belief in the value of planning as a positive means of steering spatial development, in stark contrast to the dominant political discourse of the UK governing coalition. The strategic and visionary element of planning was seen as supporting the SNP’s vision of an independent, prosperous, low carbon Scotland (ibid.). In recent years, there has, however, been some debate about the extent of this divergence and distinctiveness (Keating, 2005; Allmendinger, 2006; Clifford & Morphet, 2015; Morphet & Clifford, 2014), but evidence suggests that the devolution arrangements of the late 1990s in the UK have allowed greater experimentation to occur in planning strategies and delivery styles, i.e. have generated a diversity of ‘spatial plannings’ between and within the nations of the UK, highlighting ‘distinctiveness in territorial management in the broader sense’ (Haughton *et al.*, 2009, p. 12; see also Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 2006; Allmendinger & Haughton, 2010).

Following the ‘no’ vote in the Scottish referendum, what trajectory of change has been identifiable in the Scottish planning agenda? The 3rd National Planning Framework (NPF3) for Scotland, which was published just before the referendum in the summer of 2014 following an extensive consultation process, included a positive vision for the territory of Scotland (Scottish Government, 2014). It was presented as the spatial expression of the SNP government’s Economic Strategy (Scottish Government, 2010), setting out a 20–30 year vision for development and investment across Scotland. It aimed to support ‘sustainable economic growth’ and the transition to a low-carbon economy, emphasizing the need to balance economic growth with the conservation of natural assets, the stewardship of natural resources and the development of renewable energy. Additionally, themes of social, regional and inter-generational equity figured prominently as policy objectives in the NPF and in the Scottish Government’s Economic Strategy in ways that were absent in the UK coalition Government’s National Planning Policy Framework for England (DCLG, 2012; Tomaney & Colomb, 2013).

Scottish Planning Policy and the NPF are seen as instruments to guide planning decisions in a range of sectors such as economic development, regeneration, energy, environment, climate change, transport and digital infrastructure. Their success will be linked to their capacity to influence the investment decisions of the Scottish Government, public agencies, local planning authorities and private investors, as well as to the financing capacity of the Scottish Government.<sup>4</sup> The Scottish Government’s room for manoeuvre has been limited by its inability to borrow directly on capital markets to fund infrastructure projects. Additionally, while many of the levers that could assist the NPF implementation are in the hands of the Scottish Parliament, the UK Parliament at Westminster retains competence in some key policy areas, such as taxation, energy and airports, which are fundamental levers in shaping the territorial and spatial development of any territory. Energy policy and the regulation of energy grids and markets are not a devolved matter: this is a source of contention between the Scottish and UK Governments because of the SNP’s rejection of nuclear power and strong support for the development of renewable energy.

In the negotiations over a post-referendum devolution package for Scotland, energy and taxation powers therefore appear to be central themes which will

influence the implementation of the Scottish Government's future planning agenda. A commission was set up immediately after the referendum to prepare proposals for more devolution to Scotland and delivered its final report in a short timeframe (Smith Commission, 2014). The commission proposed *inter alia* that the Scottish Parliament should have power to set income tax rates and bands; receive a proportion of the VAT raised in Scotland; have control over air passenger duty levied in Scottish airports, over the licensing of onshore oil and gas extraction underlying Scotland and over a number of welfare benefits, in particular housing benefits. The Smith Commission offered limited new powers for borrowing to the Scottish Government.<sup>5</sup> It also proposed that the Scottish Parliament should obtain responsibility for the management of, and the revenue generated from, the Crown Estate's economic assets in Scotland (seabed, urban assets, rural estates, mineral and fishing rights, and the Scottish foreshore), suggesting that 'responsibility for the management of those assets will be further devolved to local authority areas such as Orkney, Shetland, Na h-Eilean Siar or other areas who seek such responsibilities' (ibid., p. 16). This is one of the few references to 'devolution downwards' within Scotland, something welcome by those who have argued that the devolution process post-1999 has led to a 'creeping centralization' and excessive centralism in Scottish governance (McGarvey, 2014).

Nicola Sturgeon, who became the SNP leader and Scotland's First Minister in the aftermath of the referendum, welcomed the Smith proposals but argued they were not bold enough for the Scottish Government to create jobs and reduce social inequality, because the Scottish Parliament does not have control over, for example, the minimum wage and national insurance contributions (Brooks, 2014). The Smith proposals offer neither 'devo-max' nor 'near federalism' (Keating, 2014a), and if judged according to whether they give the Scottish Parliament the powers needed to foster growth and social cohesion, may be inadequate (Keating, 2014b). A command paper was published by the UK Government in January 2015 setting out the draft legislation which would enact some of the commitments made in the Smith Commission's report (HM Government, 2015). The UK general election of May 2015 gave the Conservative Party a small overall majority of seats in the Westminster Parliament, ending the coalition with the Liberal-Democrats, which suffered dramatic losses. In Scotland, the election marked a sweeping, spectacular victory for the SNP, which won 56 of the 59 Scottish seats, in most cases at the expense of the Labour Party.<sup>6</sup> This means that the SNP is the third largest party in the UK House of Commons. Following the election, the Conservative government spelled out its proposed *Scotland Bill*, which broadly reflects the Smith Commission proposals. The SNP's electoral victory led the Scottish First Minister to claim that the proposed Bill was not going far enough and to demand more substantial powers to be devolved to Scotland (Brooks, 2015).

In terms of planning policy, the first signs sent by the UK Conservative government following the 2015 election point towards the continuation of an agenda combining a pro-development relaxation of planning policies with the further pursuit of the localism and decentralization agenda initiated in 2010 (further discussed below). In 2016, a parliamentary election will take place in Scotland. If the SNP maintains its discourse and agenda as 'left-of-centre' – with a firmly

social-democratic outlook on the role of the state – and if it confirms its electoral success, the divergence in attitude to planning as a state activity between England and Scotland will continue to be noticeable, in spite of a shared concern to streamline development planning and housing delivery apparent in the policy discourse of both the UK and Scottish Governments.<sup>7</sup> In July 2015, the Scottish Government launched an informal consultation on what a fairer Scotland should look like in 2030, including a reference to the principle of territorial cohesion or spatial justice, not named as such but defined as ‘where you are born, where you live, or who you are doesn’t stop you having the opportunity to reach your full potential’ (Scottish Government, 2015). As noted by the Director of the RTPi Scotland, planning plays a key role in supporting that agenda, as it ‘can support improvements in health, in the quality of service provision, in community safety, in local facilities, in providing affordable housing, in community engagement and empowerment, and in working to maximize the potential of places’ (McLaren, 2015, np).

Since the referendum, the key areas of planning-related activities of the Scottish Government have included energy policy (including a ban on fracking for shale gas), the *Community Empowerment Bill* (passed in June 2015, see Scottish Parliament, 2015a), and land reform – a sensitive and contentious issue which was put on hold prior to the referendum. The *Land Reform (Scotland) Bill* was introduced to the Scottish Parliament on 22 June 2015 (The Economist, 2015; Wightman, 2015a, 2015b; Scottish Parliament, 2015b). It includes proposals that are strongly opposed by the Conservatives and large land owners (of which it has been estimated 432 control half of the privately owned land in Scotland), such as powers to force the sale of private land to community groups and improvements in both the common good land regime and ‘right to roam’ arrangements.

### **The UK Constitutional Debate and its Implications for Planning in the Other Nations of the UK**

Shortly before the referendum, the three main party leaders did not only promise more devolution to Scotland, but also pledged to deliver ‘home rule within the UK’ beyond Scotland (as stated by the former prime minister Gordon Brown), in order to appease politicians and voters from Northern Ireland, Wales and England (Henley, 2014; Wintour, 2014b). Several politicians called for a UK ‘constitutional convention’ to open a broad debate about the transformation of the ‘Westminster model’ and of the ‘state of unions’ (Mitchell, 2010) which emerged from the ad hoc, incremental process of asymmetric devolution initiated by New Labour in the late 1990s.<sup>8</sup> The ‘absence of devolution in England (other than the Mayor and Assembly in London), Scottish legislative devolution, the Welsh Assembly with modest primary legislative powers, and the consociational institutions of Northern Ireland reflect and entrench long established asymmetries’ (ibid., p. 86) which are now being widely questioned.

The post-conflict conditions of Northern Ireland (NI), where the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 brought an end to three decades of violence, give events there a particular dynamic. In the aftermath of the Scottish referendum,

attention was on the protracted negotiation of a ‘Stormont Agreement’ between the various parties in the NI and UK Governments (Boland, 2014; HM Government, 2014). This agreement, following months of deadlock which threatened the power-sharing arrangements born out of the peace process, partly focused on the implementation of the UK Government’s desired welfare and financial cuts (Birrell, 2015), but included other significant aspects such as the devolution of responsibility for the raising of corporation tax – a power which even Scotland lacks – ostensibly allowing NI to compete (or cooperate) with the Republic of Ireland for mobile investment. This agreement, which proved fragile, was heavily contested at the time of writing (McDonald, 2015; Morrow, 2015) and had even raised the prospect of a (temporary) suspension of the devolved government in Belfast and the possible withdrawal of the proposal to devolve corporation tax (McDonnell, 2015).

Alongside these developments, an equally contentious reform of the NI local government and planning system involved the reduction in the number of local authorities and the devolution of powers from the NI Executive to 11 new district councils which took effect on 1 April 2015 (NI DoE, 2015; Tilley, 2015). This includes planning (including local development plan-making and development management); area-based urban regeneration and community development. The NI Executive retains responsibility for ‘regionally significant’ planning applications. The context for these changes was a system in which local authorities were stripped of a wide range of powers in the late 1960s (including planning) and only had a consultative role. According to the *Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991*, local plan preparation, development control and enforcement were in the hands of the NI Department of the Environment. But the effort to reform the system has been slow and fraught. The devolution of planning powers to NI local authorities is a challenging process which requires capacity building and a ‘culture change’ (Blackman, 2015). Additionally, a proposed *Northern Ireland Planning Bill* was withdrawn by the Planning Minister Mark Durkan in late 2013 (Sell, 2013), although some of the aborted Bill’s provisions were implemented through administrative action. A draft *Strategic Planning Policy Statement for NI* was consulted upon in 2014 (NI DoE, 2014) and was due to be published in its final form in 2015.

In Wales, where public support for independence reportedly dipped to a low point (3%) in the aftermath of the Scottish referendum, but where a significant part of the population supports more devolution to the Welsh National Assembly (Morris, 2014), the nationalist party Plaid Cymru has called for Wales to receive the same powers as Scotland (in the event of further powers being devolved to Scotland) (Plaid Cymru, 2014). While *The Government of Wales Act 2006* enhanced the Welsh Assembly’s powers, Wales has a ‘conferred powers’ model which differs from Scotland and Northern Ireland, which have a ‘reserved powers’ model. In the former, the Welsh National Assembly has specific powers granted to it by the UK Parliament; in the latter, powers are held by the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly unless they are specifically reserved to the UK Parliament. The Commission on Devolution in Wales (2014) advocated a ‘reserved powers’ model for Wales, which would offer more clarity, consistency and equity across the devolved nations of the UK. It also supported



the devolution of certain tax and borrowing powers and specific planning powers to allow the Welsh Assembly to manage Welsh natural resources more effectively. It recommended, in particular, that all energy planning consents (non-renewable and renewable) below 350 MW should be devolved; and that the UK Government should have a statutory duty to take account of Welsh planning policies when exercising its retained responsibilities for larger projects. Other proposals relate to the devolution of regulatory powers over transport including ports, rail, buses and taxis; possible elements of social protection (e.g. housing) and control over the Crown Estate – all of them relevant for planning policy.

Several (although not all) of these proposals were taken on board in the plans proposed by the UK Government in its command paper of February 2015 (Wales Office, 2015). Following the May 2015 general election, the new Conservative government's priorities included plans to grant new powers to the Welsh Assembly in the fields of energy, transport and the running of elections. These were criticized by Plaid Cymru as very limited in comparison to the powers devolved (or planned to be) to Scotland (BBC News, 2015). A draft version of the new Wales Bill was announced for the end of 2015.

A significant part of planning competences has already been devolved to the Welsh Government, which has a duty under the *Government of Wales Act 2006* to promote sustainable development. The first Wales Spatial Plan was approved in 2004 and updated in 2008. The Welsh Government introduced the *Planning (Wales) Bill* to the National Assembly in October 2014 to propose a reform of the planning system. The *Planning (Wales) Act* was approved by the Welsh Assembly in May 2015, and has been described as the foundation for a 'renaissance of strategic planning' in Wales (Morris, 2015). The Act foresees the preparation of a National Development Framework by 2018 (which will replace the Wales Spatial Plan) and the introduction of Strategic Development Plans for some parts of the country to tackle larger-than-local cross-boundary issues (e.g. in Cardiff and Swansea), in addition to existing Local Development Plans. In combination with two other pieces of legislation – the *Environment (Wales) Bill* and the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*, the Welsh planning system is being geared towards supporting the sustainable use, management and development of Welsh resources, as the country is likely to be strongly affected by the impacts of climate change. A reform of local government has also been under discussion, to reduce the number of local authorities from 22 to 8.

On the day after the Scottish referendum in September 2014, David Cameron tied his declaration about further devolution for Scotland to the English question, more specifically the 'West Lothian' question.<sup>9</sup> The Conservatives proposed restricting the rights of Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish MPs in the UK Parliament to vote on matters relevant for England only (an approach labelled 'English votes for English laws').<sup>10</sup> The context for this proposal was signs of stirring English nationalism (Jeffery *et al.*, 2014; Kenny, 2014) and the rise in popularity of the populist UK Independence Party. An additional motivation was the Conservatives' attempt to compromise the Labour Party, which has on occasion relied on the votes of Scottish MPs to enact its 'English legislation' in the UK Parliament.

While all political parties now recognize that the West Lothian question needs to be addressed, there is no agreement on how to do this, as each seeks to defend

its party interest and partisan advantage (McAngus, 2014). The ‘English question’ could hypothetically be solved through the creation of an English Parliament, but this option is not currently favoured by mainstream parties nor by English voters.<sup>11</sup> The Conservatives wish to give English (or English and Welsh) MPs an exclusive right to pass laws that affect the two countries through various proposals which would amend the functioning of the House of Commons (Wintour, 2014c), something Labour is unwilling to do. The debate about the English question has thus been characterized by ‘political tactics’ and little concern for principles of democratic representation (Jeffery, 2015). The practical effect of ‘English votes for English laws’ would potentially make it more difficult for the Labour party to achieve the necessary share of votes in the Houses of Parliament to pass legislation concerning England. In the planning field, this means that a continuation of the reforms launched in 2010 would be likely, and that this would limit, in England, the prospects for the return of regional strategic planning or an explicit national redistributive urban and regional policy.

While ‘English votes for English laws’ would appear, on the surface, to promise an answer to the pressure from public opinion in England (Jeffery *et al.*, 2014), it would most likely not address public concerns – wide across and within all the constituent units of the UK, including England – that power has become too remote from voters’ daily concerns (Garlick, 2014) and too centred on the economic and territorial interest of the population of London and the South-East of England. Partly in response to this problem, David Cameron in his post-referendum speech raised the possibility of devolution to big cities in England and in the process (re)opening the possibility of devolution *within* England.

The bundling together by senior politicians and by many media commentators of the question of further devolution to constituent *nations* of the UK with that of the devolution of powers to *cities* and/or *regions* reveals unresolved tensions between different types and scales of devolution or decentralization which are incommensurable. No amount of ‘devolution to city-regions’ can act as ersatz substitute for a full debate on the relationship between the four constituent nations of the UK. The word ‘devolution’ typically has been used in recent political discourse with a lack of precision regarding its meaning. Political scientists working on federal systems have long developed typologies to clarify the difference between different types of ‘devolution’ or ‘decentralization’. Decentralization means that power is shared between tiers of government and that lower tier units – such as regions, provinces or municipalities – exercise some form of self-governance. The kind and amount of autonomy exercised by lower tiers vary across and within states along administrative, fiscal and political axes (Rodden, 2004; Treisman, 2007). The issue of the appropriate scale of decentralization within England brings together complex demands for economic functionality, policy efficiency, urban and regional identity and democratic legitimacy.

### **Answering the ‘English Question’ through Decentralization to City-regions and Cities?**

In this context, the UK coalition government formed in 2010 proposed decentralization to city-regions, an agenda pursued by the Conservative government

re-elected in 2015. The idea of city-regions as focus for decentralization measures is not new and is part of long-standing debates about the reform of local government in England and the lack of congruence between existing governance arrangements and functional economic areas in metropolitan areas, but has gained momentum in the context of the Scottish referendum. A variety of think tanks, ad hoc commissions and politicians advocated the decentralization of powers to (large) cities and metropolitan areas in England (DBIS, 2012; Clark & Clark, 2014; IPPR North, 2014; Policy Network, 2014; Rogers, 2014; RSA, 2014a; Centre for Cities, 2014a, 2014b). Underpinning this advocacy are a set of claims about the economic role of cities, the value of metropolitan-scale planning and local government cooperation processes and the effectiveness of enhanced local decision-making, notably in the form of a directly elected ‘metro-mayor’ (Glaeser, 2012; Barber, 2013; Katz & Bradley, 2014). A growing and largely unchallenged consensus has developed around these proposals in the UK context, although a variety of approaches and models have been advocated. There is no consensus in the international literature on metropolitan governance as to which model offers the best return in terms of efficiency in policy delivery, economic dividends and strategic planning (Nelson & Foster, 1999). In OECD countries, a wide variety of governance arrangements has been used over the past decades to deal with the city-regional question (OECD, 2006). Since a formal process of local government reorganization (e.g. by abolition and amalgamation) is a politically sensitive option – in the UK and elsewhere – cooperative arrangements through inter-municipal joint authorities are often favoured. In England, outside of London there are now five combined authorities and 15 directly elected local authority (municipal) mayors (Cabinet Office, 2014).

The most significant development in this context was the signing of the ‘Greater Manchester Agreement’ between the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the leaders of 10 local councils in Greater Manchester on 3 November 2014 (Jenkins, 2015). This proposed the establishment of a directly elected mayor for Greater Manchester, with the power, among other things, to create a statutory spatial development plan for the city-region which will include provisions for employment land, housing and infrastructure to 2033 (HM Treasury & GMCA, 2014). The plan will be prepared jointly, but adopted individually by local councils, which began a consultation on the plan in 2014 (AGMA, 2014; Geoghegan, 2014a). This power will be accompanied by a consolidated and devolved transport budget, bus franchising powers and a £300 million Housing Investment Fund. This agreement signals the return of statutory spatial planning in England which was abolished by the coalition government in 2010 (except in London, where there continues to be a *London Plan*). The Greater Manchester Agreement needs to be set in the context of the longer term development of the ‘Manchester Model’ and is the culmination of gradual initiatives which started with the formation of the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities in 1986 (Tomaney & McCarthy, 2015).

The ‘Manchester Model’ is now frequently presented as a set of governance arrangements and mode of economic development to which other city-regions should aspire (The Economist, 2013a, 2013b; Geoghegan, 2014b). Notably, at a time when politicians nationally have presented planning as an inhibitor of

growth, the ‘Manchester Model’ appears to provide the framework for the development of strategic spatial planning, which is given a central status in economic strategy. The concentration of political attention on Manchester reflects a belief among policy elites that only Manchester has the potential to act as a northern growth pole to rival London (McDermott, 2015). The Royal Society of Arts, for instance, argues against a one-size fits all solution, proposing a ‘selective’ devolution to ‘ready and able’ city-regions like Manchester which have already been successful in running their own affairs at a strategic scale, while other metropolitan areas ‘will need to wait until their economic performance, potential and governance structures lend themselves to devolution’ (RSA, 2014b, p. 9). This thinking is apparent in the UK Government’s preference to establish bespoke (or idiosyncratic) ‘devolution deals’ with a small number of city-regions (Policy Network, 2014). This pragmatic, deal-making and discretionary approach to devolution has the potential to create a complex, multi-speed system in England, which combined with processes of central government funding allocation could reshape and accentuate patterns of uneven economic development. From a spatial planning and territorial cohesion perspective, the current debates about decentralization to city-regions in England consequently have to be critically examined within the broader context of two related trends: the ‘localist’ agenda of the central government and the impacts of its austerity politics on local authorities; the abolition of the regional scale of economic governance and spatial planning and the subsequent tension between decentralization and territorial cohesion in a divided England (Pike *et al.*, 2015; Tomaney & McCarthy, 2015).

#### *Localism, Austerity and the Prospects for Devolution in England*

The prospects for devolution in England lie at the intersection of the politics of ‘localism’ and austerity. Localism and the ‘Big Society’ were buzzwords in the early days of the UK coalition government in 2010 (Swain & Baden, 2012). Both terms were vaguely defined, but rhetorically signalled a reduced role for the state in the management of urban and regional change and a shift of power from the central state beyond local authorities to ‘local communities’ (DCLG, 2010). In planning terms, the apparatus of spatial planning established by the previous Labour government in the form of Regional Development Agencies and Regional Spatial Strategies was abolished by the incoming government (Haughton & Allmendinger, 2012; Rozee, 2014). Newly instituted non-statutory local enterprise partnerships in theory brought together public and private actors at a local scale in order to promote local economic growth (Pike *et al.*, 2015). This ‘downscaling’ of planning has been accompanied by concerns over the system’s ability to achieve broader and longer term spatial objectives (Baker & Wong, 2013; Boddy & Hickman, 2013; Gallent *et al.*, 2013). In the 2011 *Localism Act* the coalition government stipulated a formal ‘Duty to Cooperate’ for local authorities to work with their neighbours in the preparation of their development plans. In parallel, a new tier of ‘neighbourhood planning’ was introduced to give the possibility to local residents to prepare a plan for a designed area (DCLG, 2014; Locality, 2015). Underlying these approaches is the assumption that a proliferation of local and neighbourhood plans and their attendant

spillovers can be resolved through cooperative and voluntaristic means. In 2015, tensions had become apparent within the Conservative government's agenda between, on the one hand, the promise to take the decentralization and localism agenda further (by giving more power to local authorities and local communities over the control of development), and on the other, the imposition of top-down pressures for local authorities to accept new developments at all costs and release land for housing (HM Treasury, 2015; Wintour & Mason, 2015).

The localism agenda of the Conservative government has thus been shaped by pervasive traditions of centralism in UK governance, and has additionally been conditioned by austerity politics, in the context of a country – England – which has the most centrally controlled system of public finance of any major OECD country (RSA, 2014b). Only seven per cent of all the taxes paid by local residents and businesses is retained by local councils (LFC, 2013). Local authorities, especially in northern England, are faced with drastic cuts of central government funding allocation but retain significant statutory responsibilities for local services. One consequence among many is the rapid downsizing of many local planning departments in spite of new tasks (e.g. the 'Duty to Cooperate' mentioned above). According to the leader of Newcastle City Council, continued reductions in council budgets means 'there will be nothing left for government to devolve to' (quoted in Harris, 2014).

The Manchester experience points to a form of decentralization of powers and resources based on combinations of local authorities which negotiate deals with the central government. This contrasts with decentralization and local government reforms in many of the UK's European neighbours, such as France – with 36,000 municipalities a country with extreme municipal fragmentation. The French reforms, which started in the 1960s, have combined a degree of top-down imposition by central government with a bottom-up process of voluntary cooperation between neighbouring local authorities against the backdrop of increasing fiscal autonomy offered to all local authorities across the country. Just under 50% of the income of municipal governments in France comes from locally levied taxes (OFL, 2014). The emerging English city-regional arrangements thus exhibit a crucial difference with the French model, in which inter-municipal groupings and metropolitan cooperation entities are endowed with a share of local taxes and are thus potentially able to act as a territorially equalizing force. This takes place within the context of a nation-wide system of horizontal and vertical equalization aiming at 'supporting structurally disadvantaged local authorities while maintaining an incentive for authorities to carry out proactive local development policies' (OFL, 2014, p. 191). The current debates on decentralization to city-regions in England thus cannot be separated from debates on fiscal decentralization and a significant increase in tax raising powers for local councils.

### *Scales of Economic Governance and Spatial Planning & the Question of Territorial Cohesion in a Divided England*

At present, city-regions and combined authorities are the main options being promoted by the three main UK parties to fill in the 'missing middle' (Shaw & Greenhalgh, 2010) in English sub-national governance. A few voices have

stressed that an aggregation of ad hoc city-regions is not enough to do so, and have called for directly and proportionally elected regional parliaments ‘with big constituencies forcing members to “think regionally” and devolved powers over transport, regional development, a single police force, strategic healthcare, the environment and tourism’ (Henley, 2014, np). However, there is little public support and political appetite to reconsider the option of either functional regionalism (through regional agencies such as the defunct RDAs) or political regionalism (through elected regional assemblies with powers comparable to regions in neighbouring European countries).<sup>12</sup> In planning terms, this raises the question whether decentralization to a selected few city-regions, without the development of broader regional territorial and economic development strategies, may fuel the creation of an archipelago of dynamic metropolitan areas surrounded by a hinterland of small towns and rural areas struggling with issues of demographic and economic decline (Waite *et al.*, 2013). This question has been raised in other national contexts in the framework of the post-Keynesian transformation of the role of the central state in the management of territorial and regional inequalities. In many European countries, the state has shifted its priorities from regional development policies aimed at assisting lagging areas or declining regions to interventions aimed at improving the performance of (already) dynamic cities and regions (Brenner, 2004; Crouch & Le Galès, 2012), leading to a multiplication of the scales of economic governance and spatial planning (Harrison, 2012). The ‘champion city’ approach of the main UK parties is thus not unique: ‘advancing favoured places within their national territories has become one of the few forms of substantive economic policy left to national governments within European and global competition regimes’ (Crouch & Le Galès, 2012, p. 417).

There is, however, a clear tension between this approach and the pursuit of more even levels of economic development across the national territory – i.e. territorial cohesion. For particular policy issues and societal risks that need to be addressed through a pooling of resources, size matters. This is not just the case for social security and welfare issues, as Gordon Brown stressed in the powerful speech made a few days prior to the Scottish referendum.<sup>13</sup> The most pressing planning issues in England – a North–South divide that is neither sustainable for the residents of the ‘North’ nor for the residents of the overheated South-East; a chronic shortage of affordable, adequate housing for significant parts of the English population; the threat of climate change, resource depletion and natural disasters such as flooding; the needed improvements in transport infrastructure – all demand strategic planning at a scale that may be higher than the city or city-region. Some degree of higher level adjudication is important to reconcile conflicting territorial interests in order to secure key infrastructure, amenities or housing developments across the territory.

In that regard the experience of highly decentralized nations with unsettled regionalist/nationalist claims, like Belgium, is enlightening. It shows that spatial planning can become a means of strengthening the cultural and political boundaries between regions and communities, unless strong mechanisms for inter-regional co-operation and/or redistribution are put in place (Tomaney & Colomb, 2014), as exemplified in the disputes between Flanders and the Brussels

Capital Region (Boussauw *et al.*, 2013). The Belgian case might be rather extreme, but it raises broader questions concerning redistributive and spatial justice across the national territory. In the current UK devolution and decentralization debates, scarcely any attention has been paid to these issues by the main Westminster parties. Yet as ad hoc and uneven processes of devolution at various scales continue, these considerations will matter. Decentralization by itself 'is not a panacea for automatic growth and development', and debates about it cannot avoid the central question of 'what decentralisation is for and what it is hoping to achieve' (O'Brien & Pike, 2014).

There is a debate waiting in the wings about how to reconcile the need to devolve power and resources to regional or local authorities and communities with some (socially and politically agreed) form of social equity across the components of the national territory.<sup>14</sup> Proliferating localism will not provide an answer to this question (Toynbee, 2014). As with any rescaling of government and governance, 'there is the potential for a radical reworking of the distribution of winners and losers in both societal and spatial terms, which may be progressive or it may be regressive' (Haughton *et al.*, 2009, p. 10). The question becomes under what conditions does 'localism' work, i.e. which other reforms and solidarity mechanisms or forms of regional policy should accompany it. Local tax raising powers might not be enough to return growth to parts of Northern England when such an unequal, persistent geography of regional development exist within the UK and England. This is backed by recent reviews of international experiences of regional devolution which show that there is

limited evidence that any economic dividend of devolution has emerged yet, but this remains difficult to discern because the likely effects are overridden by the role of national economic growth in decisively shaping the pattern of spatial disparities and in determining the scope and effects of spatial economic policy and decentralisation. (Pike *et al.*, 2012, p. 25)

### **Results, Prospects, Lessons**

Public and political debates in the UK in the aftermath of the Scottish referendum have recurrently, and confusingly, mixed two questions which should be dealt with separately, if in parallel: the question of constitutional change, i.e. devolution to, and relationship between the four nations of the UK, and the internal decentralization of power to cities and regions in England (and in each of the other devolved nations). The UK case, in spite of its idiosyncracies (e.g. the absence of a written constitution), can be placed into a comparative perspective if analysed within the context of the two broader themes referred to in the introduction. First, developments in the UK echo those taking place in states where historical patterns of centralization have been gradually challenged through waves of decentralization, the outcome of which remains contested, in particular those with 'asymmetrical devolution' (such as Spain). The different planning agendas which seem to have emerged in the devolved administrations of such states (Colomb *et al.*, 2014) are both an expression of potential policy divergence

arising from decentralization and devolution, as well as one of the levers used by regional governments in their claims for distinctiveness in territorial management policies and in their agenda for greater devolution or independence. Second, the debates surrounding city-regional governance in areas with fragmented administrative and institutional boundaries, while not new, have taken a new resonance in the context of the austerity politics witnessed in many countries of the global North post-2008, which have accelerated the demise of forms of inter-regional redistribution and territorial equalization put in place in the post-war era. A particular feature of the UK case is the search of solutions to these challenges through uncoordinated, ad hoc deal-making between the central government and particular cities, which seems especially likely to produce unintended (and thus contested) consequences.

Planners, geographers and political scientists have a specific contribution to make to both sets of debates, by throwing light on the potential implications of different models of state restructuring, devolution and decentralization from a spatial development and territorial cohesion perspective. Politicians tend to view such reconfigurations in a different way, by first asking themselves what the implications would be for their electoral prospects or that of their party. Planners and geographers should therefore encourage contemporary political debates to move beyond the political interests tied up with existing administrative boundaries and ask what appropriate scales of governance, decision-making and cooperation are needed to address particular policy issues and objectives for the greatest good of the greatest number – scales that should ideally also be ones of democratic accountability. Yet in an era when localism is heralded as a solution to solve a wide range of development problems, strategic spatial planning is ‘neither regarded as a proper mechanism for policy coordination and creating synergies nor as an effective means for policy delivery and strategic thinking about the future’ (Waterhout *et al.*, 2013, p. 145). Any discussion on constitutional change and decentralization in the UK (and elsewhere) should therefore be seized by planners and anyone concerned with local and regional development as an opportunity to push forward a more positive vision of the role of planning (Ellis & Henderson, 2014) that is desperately needed in the current political context.

## Notes

1. The Conservative Party, Labour Party and Liberal-Democrats.
2. Debates on devolution and decentralization in the UK are ongoing, and the facts reported in this paper were correct as of the end of July 2015. For up-to-date analyses, see the blog of the ESRC Centre on Constitutional Change: <http://www.centreonconstitutionalchange.ac.uk/blog>.
3. A week before the referendum, the leaders of the three main UK parties (all in favour of the continuation of the Union between Scotland and the rest of the UK), agreed on a pledge for the fast-track preparation of a new *Scotland Bill* which would be ready for introduction to the UK Parliament after the May 2015 general election, and would grant more powers relating to income tax and housing benefit if Scotland voted ‘no’ to independence (Carrell & Mason, 2014).
4. NPF3 contains 14 large-scale national developments, including airport enhancements, carbon capture and storage schemes, offshore infrastructure for renewable energy and grid infrastructure improvements.
5. The financial grant from the UK Government to Scotland would continue to be determined via the so-called Barnett formula (Shepherd, 2014), adjusted when powers are transferred. The report specifies



- that neither the UK Government nor the Scottish Government should gain or lose financially as a consequence of devolving a specific power; however this issue remains politically contentious and technically complex (Keating, 2015).
6. The SNP (as well as the Green Party) saw a surge in new memberships in the aftermath of the Scottish referendum.
  7. A summary of the UK parties' planning agenda in their electoral manifestos for the May 2015 general election is available at <http://www.rtpi.org.uk/briefing-room/general-election-2015/what-the-political-parties-say/>.
  8. For an overview of the extent of the devolution process in each nation of the UK, see Centre for Cities, 2014c.
  9. So named after a Member of Parliament (MP) for West Lothian (one of the 32 council areas of Scotland), Tam Dalyell, asked in a debate on devolution to Scotland and Wales on 14 November 1977 why an MP from Scotland should be free to vote on English legislation at Westminster but no English MP could vote on Scottish matters which would be controlled in the Scottish Parliament. See Carrell, 2014.
  10. Shortly after the May 2015 election, the Conservative government made proposals to implement 'English votes for English laws' through changes to the standing orders of the House of Commons rather than a new bill. This was heavily contested by many MPs across parties and at the time of writing (end of July 2015), the decision on the proposal was subject to further debates.
  11. This would have to be accompanied by the formalization of a federal structure for the UK and would involve far-reaching changes in its institutions and political culture, e.g. a written constitution setting out what are the competences of different tiers of government; a second chamber representing the federal units (or an intergovernmental conference); and a mechanism for fiscal equalization between the four nations, i.e. sharing resources in some defined fields (Keating, 2014c). As noted by various commentators, such a form of federalism would not work in the UK because one of the federal units, England, with 85 per cent of the population, is significantly bigger than the others, meaning that its parliament and government would be much stronger and richer. Another proposal made by Gordon Brown was to turn the House of Lords into a chamber of the nations and regions of the UK.
  12. The latter option was parked in 2004 following the rejection by referendum of an elected assembly for the North-East of England (Tomaney, 2002a, 2002b, 2006; Keating, 2006; Rallings & Thrasher, 2006; Shaw & Robinson, 2007).
  13. 'We forget the uniquely progressive set of decisions agreed by Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland in the 20th century to pool and share all our risks and resources so that whatever your nationality, you have equal social and economic rights of citizenship in the UK' (Brown, 2014, np).
  14. See for example the principle of 'equivalent living conditions' throughout the territory embedded in the German constitution.

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