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Northern England has a well-established and widely acknowledged sense of itself, and the past four decades has seen the region develop deep grievances about British economic policy-making. Roy Hattersley argued in 2000 that English regional devolution had consequently become inevitable, and a leader in The Guardian endorsed this three years later. Before 1970 the financial and service economy of the metropolitan South seemed able to co-exist to mutual benefit with the manufacturing and mining of the North, and most other parts of the UK, but throughout north-western Europe such fusions have come under great stress since then. In England the deputy prime minister John Prescott became a determined if not particularly effective champion of several Northern initiatives, including a campaign for regional assemblies. No popular supportive groupings emerged in response, so of three referendums planned to cover the whole region only that in the north-east actually occurred. In November 2004 slightly less than half the electorate voted ‘no’ in every district. Overall only 22 per cent voted ‘yes’. A potential break with centuries of English constitutional history thus became the dampest of squibs: this was evidently not an issue that the overwhelming majority comprehended, much less cared about. Afterwards, The Scotsman summed up the general feeling that ‘devolution in England is dead, if not forever, certainly for a generation’.

In contrast, elsewhere within the UK and its neighbouring dependencies, Scotland and Wales had demanded and won devolution and Scots today discuss separation; Northern Ireland is slowly working out its own tortured version; the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands have exploited their anomalous constitutional status to the full; and even the conjuration of London accepted a regional administration thrust upon it by government. Belgium, it should be noted, became temporarily ungovernable in 2007 owing to similar tensions. Northern England thus stands out in apparently preferring a system of local councils too small and weak to plan strategically or exert influence nationally, and members of parliament who show no collective regional awareness or commitment. This situation provides an excellent opportunity to investigate the practicalities and limits of regional identity within a long-standing nation state by analysing selected general election results since 1950. The intention is to reveal attitudes to the North’s sense of its place within the nation, and thereby to use statistical evidence to buttress a long-term study of cultural attitudes within Northern England, aspects of which have already been published. For many


3. The Westmorland Gazette, for instance, reported ‘an impassioned speech’ by him to 250 people in Kendal, 23 April 2004. The Guardian reported several months later on his spending ‘three days on the campaign trail pushing his pet project’, 15 October 2004.


5. The Scotsman, 6 November 2004.


8. The dates show either key turning points or illuminate periods of consistent voting, with the emphasis on the devolutionary years. The election of 1945 was highly unusual, so results from 1950 stand for the period of Labour ascendancy; 1951 recorded the highest ever Labour vote but saw a Conservative victory; 1959 is from the solid period of Butskellite consensus; 1983 and 1997 saw huge swings and changes of government; 2005 records Labour in decline, but still winning.

people the locality and the region have the greatest day-to-day cultural reality, so understanding identity requires engagement with them even though nations, or potential nations, are easier to research. This remains a much-neglected aspect of academic history within the UK.

This investigation will also contribute to the extensive enquiries over the last few decades into the general nature of group identities in the modern world, following the final abandonment of Victorian notions of racial origins of nationalism. Specifically, this study engages with 'othering', the sense of difference, and often fear, which has become widely accepted as the root of many identities. Colley's important study of Britishness is particularly relevant here. This concept has limited explanatory power, however, since such analyses usually raise the question of how, why and when hostile groups first began to perceive themselves as separate, competing collective entities to which individuals were prepared to commit to the point of death. Moreover, while the drama of war, rebellion and discord understandably form the obvious point of entry to many investigations, identities that persist need a purchase during peaceful times as well. Northern England provides a perfect case study for investigating such issues, especially as it also forms a potentially disaffected part of England, a much more solid and historic identity than that of Britain.

There is no assumption here that the apparent passivity of the North is somehow incorrect, but it must not be seen as inevitable either. If Ireland and Scotland can be taken seriously as independent political entities then it has at least the same potential, especially within the European Union. The North covers the geographical heart of Great Britain, from Scotland to a line at or south of the Mersey and Humber rivers. Where that line runs is disputed, but here we largely follow that created fortuitously by the sequence of short-lived metropolitan counties enacted by central government in 1972, since they were devised specifically to define areas of obvious common economic interest. A regional population of approximately 14 million people is a third more than in the recently devolved UK 'nations' combined, and is nearly equal to the Netherlands. It is physically about half as big as Scotland, and larger than Wales and Northern Ireland combined. It contributes significantly to British industrial production and exports, although less than previously.

Finally, the UK as a whole forms a distinctive and under-used environment for comparative internal study. Even in the early 1960s the grandest version of that multi-layered and very diverse identity called Britishness, as a concept of an active, unifying and global force, was not quite dead. Yet, in a new millennium, it is both unclear and debatable what being British means for the bulk of the people to whom that term used to be fairly unthinkingly applied. There is even doubt as to how many residents would now include themselves within it, while devolution and the recent reforms of the House of Lords have shown that this is one of the most weakly entrenched constitutional settlements in the world. Outside Ireland political change has been largely evolutionary in character since the seventeenth century, which implies enough enduring consensus to contain, and even to harness to constructive effect, those centrifugal forces of group rivalry that clearly remained active within it. The lack of either a large peace-time standing army or an armed national police force has reinforced this tendency. Even so, tactics used to redefine constitutional relationships over the twentieth century ranged from successful armed rebellion, in Ireland, to the use of existing but neglected powers in the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. Thus, while the UK remains a diverse collection of individual, pragmatic unions of varying completeness under what was originally the English crown, it also continues to be divided along quite different lines by religion, class and language, as well as emerging ethnic differences due to immigration. Many internal forces therefore exist which can disrupt apparently coherent regions or form unifying bonds across potential geographical divisions.

**Northern voting patterns, 1950–2005**

General election votes may seem a crude analytical device but they do record actual and self-aware choices, whereas people's stated beliefs may conflict with what they do, individually and collectively. Modern UK elections have operated within a simple and unchanging system of first-past-the-post voting among a few serious candidates, in which voters generally select the candidate that they really want to win. If a first preference cannot win, they may vote tactically against another they oppose strongly, but such action was rarely apparent in the North and still

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10. This essay grew from an unpublished contribution to the conference which produced S. Caunce, E. Marsden, S. Sidney-Smith and J.K. Walton (eds), Reclaiming Britishness (Manchester, 2004).
generally indicates a basic preference for left or right. Of course, no tenable conclusions could be drawn unless significant and enduring patterns emerged from Tables 1, 2 and 3, but they are evident there. Moreover, overt nationalism is only a ghost in this particular analysis; the evident satisfaction with the pre-existing party system is still among the most significant, if least spectacular, outcomes. If new parties emerged successfully in Scotland and Wales they could also have done so here, especially as the North had previously played a large part in establishing both the Independent Labour Party and the Labour Party.

Since 1945 overall Northern voting patterns can be seen (in Table 4.1) to have changed both internally and relative to national trends. The assumption held by many that, shortly after its rise, the Labour Party achieved near-total control of Northern politics is immediately shown to be wrong. Even with Labour recording its highest ever total votes, the Conservatives held 35 per cent of Northern seats in 1950, equivalent to 54 per cent of the Northern Labour total, and in 1951 the figures were 39 per cent and 66 per cent respectively. The North did prefer Labour, but this was no one-party region and Conservatives could hope to increase their share. Indeed, British politics then constituted a genuine national system on the mainland with all three major parties fighting seriously in all regions, and nationalists and radical parties of both left and right barely registering even in local government. By 1997, in contrast, national voting patterns indicate fragmentation into several regional systems. Within the North, what had been a false stereotype of universal Labour dominance became reality, despite a general perception that class-based politics was collapsing. Building a parliamentary majority, and even more a real governmental mandate, thus became a much more complex business, though news organisations today deal only in national swings.


Tables 4.2 and 4.3 reveal the internal complexity within the regional voting pattern, primarily by comparing the short-lived metropolitan counties of 1972 to each other and collectively to the rural North and other areas. Labour, predictably, always proved strongest in the large cities, the industrial towns and the coalfields, but only the last were overwhelmingly Labour throughout. Wigan, for instance, has always elected a Labour MP since 1918, but textile towns have a long tradition of three-party politics. The election of 1951 saw Liverpool represented by five Conservative members and four Labour; Manchester was the reverse; and Newcastle had three Labour and one Conservative. In 1959 Manchester remained the same, but the Conservatives had seven seats in Liverpool to Labour’s three and Newcastle was evenly split. Northern rural areas, in contrast, have persistently shared a national cross-class identity based on a sense of difference from the towns, or even exploitation by them. The urge to vote Conservative was more powerful in this group than the expected Labour reflex generally was elsewhere, although it could be masked where small industrial or mining settlements outvoted a thinly scattered agricultural population. The suburbs have been the most difficult group to classify over time, but they had a clear tendency at first to vote Conservative where they were dominated by the middle class, a not insignificant category given the entrepreneurial nature of Northern economic development until recently. It had been a wealthy Northerner, Sir Robert Peel, after all, who turned the old Tory party into the modern Conservatives and maintained their nationwide appeal.

The elections of 1983 and 1997 receive special attention here as disasters for Labour and for the Conservatives respectively, in which waverers clearly switched allegiance away from the unpopular party en masse, revealing the underlying bedrock of political geography, to left and right, beneath the more malleable upper layers. The brief emergence of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in the 1983 election also illustrates that the system was not inherently closed. Its impact exaggerated the Northern Conservative vote, with four victories in Greater Manchester apparently resulting entirely from strong SDP/Liberal Party Alliance showings. However, this increases the significance of the fact that Liverpool elected five Labour MPs and one Alliance, and Manchester four Labour and one Conservative, while Newcastle was entirely Labour. Merseyside and Greater Manchester counties together elected twenty-four Labour members, fifteen Conservatives and one Alliance, with Tyne and Wear electing twelve Labour members to one Conservative.

In contrast, many of Labour’s English victories outside the North were concentrated in inner London, with the industrial Midlands giving Thatcher many surprising wins. South of a line drawn from the Mersey, around Staffordshire and Derbyshire and then up to the Humber, but disregarding Greater London and West Midlands metropolitan county, Labour won just Ipswich, Bristol South and Leicester West, together with Thurrock on the Greater London border. By 1997 it still held only a handful of southern constituencies, almost all urban and completely isolated. Thus, the Thatcherite revolution alienated the North as much as Scotland or Wales, where Labour also dominated, but whereas this alienation initiated a transformation of their politics, the North opted for more of the same. Within England, Labour during these years became more reliant on Northern votes than ever before, though London and the West Midlands prevented the English party being owned entirely by the North.

In 1997 the national political pendulum swung to the opposite extreme, and the Alliance’s collapse after 1983 also reasserted, and must have stemmed from, a preference for conventional politics. The Northern Conservative tally reduced from a poor 44 to a disastrous 14, while Labour won 132 seats in the region. The Liberals seized agricultural Berwick-upon-Tweed, where Scottish influence was very strong, as well as four traditionally Conservative urban seats. The election of 2001 proved that the surge of anti-Conservatism was no short-term protest vote, and the patterns established in 1997 thus persisted in their essentials down to 2005. Even among apparently rural seats a third contained enough non-agricultural votes to go, and stay, Labour. The remaining rump, a large share of the northern landscape which contained only a tiny and self-evidently atypical fraction of its population, constituted a diagonal swathe of diehard Conservatism running from the Humber to the western and central Scottish border, leaving Hull and its suburbs as a Labour island. Two seats in the most salubrious parts of Manchester’s Cheshire commuter fringe represented all the Conservatives retained elsewhere, and one other such preferred Liberal to Labour.

In areas where devolution campaigns took root, in contrast, enough rural electors also abandoned the Conservatives to deny them any Scottish seats in 1997. It was no protest vote, for only Galloway and Upper Nithsdale returned in 2001, and then by just 74 votes. One seat in this vicinity (boundaries were then redrawn) remained the only Conservative toehold north of the border after the 2010 election. Rural areas are usually portrayed as the repository of traditional values and identity, so this pattern has more significance than mere counting indicates. In Scotland such former Conservative seats created the nationalist and Liberal pressure on two-party politics which provided a platform solid enough to bring a vote on devolution. Welsh Conservatism always had less success in rural areas, so the situation there was more complex, but the nationalist core was rural.

17. Random examples are Bolton North East. Conservative vote of 19,632 defeated Labour’s 17,189, because of an Alliance vote of 8,831; Bradford North, Conservative vote of 16,094 beat Labour’s 14,492 because of an Alliance vote of 11,962 plus 4,018 for Independent Labour. Both rapidly returned to Labour.
18. Stockport, Conservative vote of 18,517 defeated Labour’s 12,731 because of an Alliance vote of 12,129. Bolton West, Bury North and Manchester Withington were similar.
19. The Forest of Dean might seem rural but was a remnant mining area.
20. It would be instructive to research the regional membership and activity of the Countryside Alliance.
Nationally in 1997 Labour won an overwhelming victory in all the major
conurbations as well as gaining the suburbs and mixed constituencies that included
small towns and some industry. Wigan might have delivered a record majority of
22,643, but the tenacity of such Northern loyalty, and its significance, was
somewhat obscured to a party that could now win seats in all parts of the UK except
Northern Ireland. The voting system exaggerated the electorate’s change of heart,
of course, but clear, absolute Conservative majorities emerged only in Huntingdon
(the then Prime Minister’s seat), Hampshire North East and Kensington and
Chelsea. There were bare absolute majorities in another 13 constituencies, all in the
heartland except Staffordshire South and Sutton Coldfield. Conservatives retained
a more widespread local government presence, gained representation in the
new devolved institutions and even won the European elections when turnout
fell right away, but outside southern England general support for them had
dropped below the threshold that delivers parliamentary representation
proportionate to votes. On the other hand, it maintained a broad geographical base
for recovery if the party could reconnect to popular concerns.

Under William Hague the Conservative revival strategy did not achieve this:
subsequent by-elections, especially that in Hartlepool, proved not only that there
was indeed no hope among the working class but also that the individualistic
Conservative vision of a national development strategy, overtly focused on the
metropolis, had persuaded very few others to return. Even though
Conservatives remained the party of business, its public agenda was summed up
by John Major’s Orwell derived image of an old lady riding a bicycle to church
past a village green. This identified it overwhelmingly with the home counties
and rural England, and Peel’s work had been undone. Outside south-eastern

England it was only agricultural constituencies that maintained a presence in
Parliament, thus shadowing the stereotyped concept of Englishness traditionally
propounded by Heritage publications just as the North now also played up to
traditional misrepresentations of itself. The generalised but limited national
swing against the Conservatives was thus turned into a rout by strong and
persistent nationalist and regional trends.

The new and lasting dominance of Labour in the North that emerged in 1997
was not due to short-term factors, therefore, but rather to a commitment that was
atypical even when compared with other erstwhile heartlands. Indeed, after the
2005 election, when enthusiasm for Labour was visibly waning in national terms
and the invasion of Iraq had detached some convinced supporters, the
concentration of committed Labour voters in general terms, but particularly in
the North, is indicated by the fact that the 30 safest seats in Parliament were all
held by Labour, and 23 of them were Northern, compared to 6 where nationalists
were challenging. Taking the 100 safest seats, 83 were Labour, and 53 of those
were Northern, while extending the survey as far as the 150 safest seats, 106 were
Labour and 64 of those were Northern.24 Despite this, no distinctive collective
voice for Northern Labour constituencies resulted as it did in Scotland and Wales
when devolutionary pressure built up, and overt Northern regionalism would
certainly have alienated the other conurbations, especially London. Indeed,
Northern English Labour seats provided havens for government ministers,
including Tony Blair, who in December 1999 explicitly denied that the North had
a regional case to make.25

The extent of Northern passivity was amply demonstrated by two contrasting
episodes in the 2001 general election. First, Arthur Scargill had launched the
Socialist Labour Party in 1996, avowedly to challenge Labour over its new
attitudes. Though it was never a regional party in either intention or impact, the
lasting bitterness in Yorkshire coalfield seats might have been expected to
challenge existing loyalties most effectively there. However, in Barnsley East and
M Mexborough it received just 722 votes, in Don Valley 466, and in Wakefield 634.26
Meanwhile, across the Pennines, Conservative renegade Shaun Woodward was
imposed by the Labour leadership at the last minute on St Helens South, and won
there despite an almost total mismatch of origins, personal lifestyle and previous
beliefs with this extremely introverted, working-class and ex-mining

21. Bare majorities were secured in Ayr and South Down; Chesham and Amersham; Horsham; New
Forest West; Ruislip Northwood; Staffordshire South; Surrey East; Surrey Heath; Sutton Coldfield; and
Wokingham.
22. The larger constituencies are the clearer divisions become. Thus, European elections in 1994 elected one
Conservative and no Liberals north of a line running due west from the Wash to Wales, and only two more
Conservatives east of London, with none in the metropolis. The remainder of their seats lay in south-central
and south-east England, where Labour had only one seat, compared to 53 elsewhere. For local elections,
only a handful of councils threw a near-monolithic character, such as Gedling (in Nottinghamshire), with 80
Labour councillors, 4 Liberals and 2 Conservatives, or Brentwood Forest (Berkshire), with 39 Conservatives
to 1 Labour. In Eden (Cumbria), 34 of 37 councillors called themselves Independent (plus an Independent
Conservative). In East Yorkshire, 20 Conservatives faced 7 representatives of the other major parties, 10
Independents, and 6 others.
23. In 1992 the north Midlands were roughly equally divided between the two main parties, with no Liberals.
In 1997 the industrial areas won solidly Labour, with a patchwork of 7 Conservative seats in rural
ranches. Lincolnshire was divided equally along predictable rural/urban lines, but its Conservative members all sit
for southern constituencies. The Times, 9 October 1975, quoted Harold Macmillan regretting the loss of
national acceptability, from Stewart, Path to devolution, p. 225.
25. Reported in The Independent and The Times, 8 December 1999. The Yorkshire Post and The Northern Echo
tested the claim with decision, 7 December 1999.
26. Nationally it polled only about 3% in the seats it contested.
constituency. Only the significantly renamed British National Party ever created an image as a possible Northern mould-breaker, but it is important to recognise how very limited and localised its gains were even within local government before it suffered a severe rebuff in 2010.

Perhaps such attitudes derived from the lesson of the SDP experiment, which showed that splitting the Labour vote could create a Conservative majority out of a low share of the popular vote. In any case, the alienation produced by Labour’s self-evident unwillingness to change Thatcherite policies on the decline of the old Northern economic base led only to falling turnouts in parliamentary elections. Disaffection did lead to more turbulence in local politics, however. In Sheffield, erstwhile heart of the ‘People’s Republic of South Yorkshire’, the city council in 2010 consists of 44 Liberal Democrats, 36 Labour, 3 Green and 1 Independent. Moreover, the leader of the Liberal Democrats in the coalition government represented Sheffield Hallam.

Labour thus safely neglected Northern concerns over many years in search of nationwide appeal, despite the growing centrality of the region to its ability to survive should that appeal dwindle. Threatening the Conservatives on their home ground seemed more strategically important; nationalist parties also had to be dealt with; and manufacturing seemed outdated and largely irrelevant to the party’s leaders. The North was thus co-opted into underpinning a project aimed at building a national majority which offered it very little directly, which it might theoretically have wrecked but never did, and which it therefore could not even influence.

Northern identity

The imaginary lines drawn on maps between Scotland, Wales and Northern England have thus proved very real and persistent for people, despite obvious shared experiences and interests that spanned them. The North’s notoriously indefinable southern edge also reflects a cultural reality in that Northerners show no desire to define and retire behind it. Growing ethnic diversity means that those residents who do not feel rooted in Northern England as a region often prefer alternative identities that may well be only conditionally British, weakening any possible arguments about incipient nationhood. The Yorkshire Post, however, wrote in 1999 that Yorkshire has ‘a strong sense of regional identity ... It isn’t nationalist. There never was a king of olde Yorkshire after all.

But the identity is real. It has shaped Yorkshire and its people in unique ways. And still does. Such a statement, coupled to the North’s passive political character, must turn our attention to issues of realisation and expression. Arthur Conan Doyle famously pointed out that a dog that sleeps through a burglary may indicate something more significant about the nature of the crime than one that predictably barks its head off. The North forms a most determinedly non-barking dog, for, when its preferred political party departed from its traditional policies, the North’s involvement with it was so strong that the expected dramatic protest was heavily muted despite the very real detrimental consequences of the new direction. Indeed, political quiescence persisted despite the apparent rewards of investment and self-determination that protest brought elsewhere. Scotland raises so little interest in most of the North that this overriding Northern sense of Englishness cannot be written off as just an exercise in ‘othering’. The Northern regional version of that more general identity therefore forms a more difficult and interesting cultural construct which exists within a dynamic system, conditioned by a long historical process, whose many components interact constantly with each other. Explaining such cultural patterns definitively is notoriously hard, but some elements of causation can be teased out from all this, especially by comparing the probable agents with those suggested by Stewart for Scotland.

The localism of Northerners is a persistent theme of most cultural analyses and must form the essential starting point in explaining why northern identity does not cohere across the region, or at any level higher than the county. Even the compact new metropolitan counties of 1972 failed utterly to engage their inhabitants, despite the undoubted economic logic underlying their creation. In fact, people consciously rejected that logic owing to a fear of being subsumed into units that swallowed up or broke down those units with which they identified. Locality is very real for most individuals in such areas, even though for most modern intellectuals this feels anachronistic. To someone who lives in or very near the place where they and their relatives spent their whole childhood, who has not gone away to university, and who has a stable core group of friends who speak with a common accent and share many attitudes, identity is usually accepted unconsciously as a ready-made pattern.

Localism in this setting did not lead to fragmentation, however, but rather to a willing and successful involvement as localities in national and global relationships dealing with all aspects of life, political, trading, industrial and

30. Stewart, Path to devolution, pp. 225–32.
31. Rodgers, 'Manchester: metropolitan planning' shows the depth, extent and consequences of such tensions throughout the twentieth century.
sporting. The region, especially one that spanned several counties, felt largely irrelevant, a feeling reinforced by strong, close economic linkages with parts of the Midlands and north Wales. The Victorian economic system of market co-ordination that the region’s entrepreneurs consciously promoted had undercut any practical need for regulation and definition other than that offered by the national parliament. As a result, the regional elites that emerged across the North recognised the existence of some kind of Northern cultural unity, but otherwise never developed those lasting social mechanisms that make people become formally committed to a common enterprise, as opposed to acting in similar but apparently uncoordinated ways, and copying each other when it suited. Even the Co-operative Movement was based around the same network principle.

Many of the national elite clearly perceived Northern culture as a spoiled version of Englishness, moreover, rather than something of its own with its own virtues. Northerners have long recognised and lived with this, and it rarely made a direct impact on their lives before the Thatcherite assault on their economic base. New regional grievances then arose, but we have seen that even they did not transmogrify this region into a nascent nation, any more than the Scots, Welsh and Irish had ever let their ancient nationalisms decay into mere regionalism, however useful a British overlay may have sometimes been to them. Identity thus evidently does need history, institutions and cultural underpinning to give it purchase within the real world. These factors can certainly be manipulated and given or denied significance, but there must be something of substance with which to work.

Selecting a capital in which to base regional institutions is a prime example of the problems of creating a coherent Northern region. None of the Northern industrial cities stands out as Cardiff does in Wales, despite that city’s relatively recent growth to importance. None has ever exercised any political authority outside their own immediate boundaries either, and Manchester, Newcastle and Liverpool all actually had a substantial part of their own, apparently cohesive, urban area managed by a twin ‘city’ administration. As regards Manchester and Newcastle, although Salford and Gateshead had few facilities or other real indicators of genuine autonomy, such as Bradford had in relation to Leeds, for instance, their independence was rooted in history and they retain local loyalty even now. No Northern city has ever been prepared to accept leadership from any other.

Thus, the region had no universities until the late nineteenth century, but, once the idea caught hold, all the cities wanted their own, with none able to rise above the group and form a natural social and educational centre for an elite.32

The cities in general terms never achieved a social and cultural status as separate entities in line with their economic and demographic strength. The integration of high-order urban functions between them is almost non-existent, and London has actually always exercised the highest in ways the North could accept.33 The recent loss of Manchester’s twentieth-century Northern media supremacy destroyed the one dimension where a tangible Northern primacy did seem possible, but most of the newspapers published there were really always London-based, and those that were not aspired to achieve that goal.34 Granada Television ultimately also shared the same value system. Finally, no historic centre outside the major cities had enough cultural status to gain wide acceptance by them all as a compromise candidate. York might seem a possibility, but even in medieval times its influence was almost entirely restricted to Yorkshire.

The asymmetrical fragmentation of the urban pattern means that collective Northern influence, however threatening in appearance in the nineteenth century, actually has no reality.35 Southern England has one tight-knit conurbation standing at the functional heart of the southern quarter of the UK, which achieved its dominance for very practical, and still important, reasons. Nationally it monopolises most high-order functions in a way that has few parallels around the world. It is the leading port, the financial and commercial centre, the centre of national government and justice, the religious centre in practice, the media centre and has the main airports. In Scotland, the Central Belt, and especially Greater Glasgow, is only marginally more dispersed, and its dominance over Scotland is more complete and obvious even if the administration is in Edinburgh. In contrast to both, the old Northern industrial complexes remain as five separate conurbations, although four are contiguous and closely linked. Hull forms a further substantial city and a major port that complements and competes with Liverpool.

Devolution rouses far more divisive fears than hopes within such a system. The highly visible displaying of Northumberland flags over the past three decades may apparently echo Scottish campaigns for constitutional change, but the referendum result of 2004 showed that it merely reflected particularly intense localism.36 The potential gains from devolution of any kind for any one place are

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34. R. Waterhouse, The other Fleet Street (Altrincham, 2004).


unclear, but the overwhelming preponderance of the Mersey–Humber corridor within the whole North is obvious to all. The linguistic and cultural divide between the far north and Lancashire and Yorkshire is deep and reinforces this.37 Within the north-west the obvious dominance resulting from the enormous populations of the Merseyside and Greater Manchester city-regions frightens the rest, especially in what is now Cumbria. Yorkshire’s rural areas have similarly always resented the superior economic status of the old central and southern West Riding. Given the enormous social and economic problems of the old industrial belt, fears of neglect felt elsewhere cannot be dismissed. Effective intra-regional or sub-regional alliances that can gain lasting general commitment in any policy area remain therefore just a dream. Development bodies like Yorkshire Forward exist, but few have heard of them, or know anything about their structures, or feel any civic involvement, as there is no popular right to observe and approve their actions.

In this setting other things that might provide fuel for nationalism also do not do so, especially as there is a kind of diffidence and self-deprecation that lurks behind the apparent assertiveness of the North. Thus, Northern English speech patterns are, like the urban pattern, diverse. Lancashire and Yorkshire speak differently from each other as well as from the counties near the Scottish border, even if far less noticeably to outsiders.38 No single respected version of a possible standard Northern speech has emerged even within one of these sub-regions, so the elite have expressed local superiority by moving towards Received Pronunciation. Dialects and associated accents are still robust and form a focus of much interest and pride, but paradoxically they are also generally accepted as markers of lower status.39 The ‘guides’ to Northern speech that are now widely sold are all clearly humorous and nothing else.40 Dialect literature exists, but as a distinct minority interest. In Northern universities the locally born manual and

clerical workers, and many local students, speak Northern English, but it largely fizzes out somewhere in the middle ranks, and most of the academics and higher management speak Standard English. In Belgium, for instance, language continually provides the detonator that sets off disunity between different economic and cultural zones, but here it leads to very little real action.

Burns has played an enormous symbolic role for Scottish unity, and Wordsworth is another internationally acclaimed poet, with Daffodils possibly the most popular and recognised poem in England. However, he is seen as either an Englishman or as a defender of a rural Lakeland against the industrial North, and so not relevant to the whole North as a region. Similarly, Lakeland attracts tourists from all over the world, including southern England, and it is universally praised for its scenery and views, yet here again its very attractions form an honorary opt-out from Northerness as it is generally perceived. This is even more remarkable given the plentiful evidence of its own industrial past, especially extensive mineral extraction. In contrast, L.S. Lowry has maintained a Northern identity as an artist while acquiring an international reputation, but the portrait of the North conveyed by this success is very stylised and perpetuates the standard image of ugliness and squalor.

In modern popular culture the evident huge and creative regional interest in music has produced little that celebrates the North — indeed, George Harrison’s Only a Northern Song has an interesting title and words from this point of view. Similarly, Mike Harding’s highly successful Rochdale Cowboy was even more affectionately self-mocking about the disjunction between local and global culture. Gerry Marsden’s Ferry Cross the Mersey and Lindisfarne’s Fig on the Tyne were simply celebrations of local community strength. The bedrock of Northern culture has always been, and continues to be, ordinary life, and surviving it in good shape, rather than the spirit of Braveheart or Flower of Scotland.41 Thus, the Lancashire Hotpots were a surprise hit at the 2009 Glastonbury Festival, since previously

few people had heard of [them] and those who had thought it was just four blokes having a bit of a laugh in their spare time ... Bernard Thresher [a band member] admits he gave them three months before the jokes would start to wear thin. But somehow singing about sat navs, chippy teas, emos and pints of mild has won them fans not just across Lancashire

37. Tyne Tees Television was the last ITV station, apart from the Midlands-based ATV, to take up Coronation Street. Graham Turner, The North country (London, 1967), p. 408.


40. For instance, D. Dutton, Lancashire or not: a guide to the Lancashire dialect (London, 1978). Illustrations were provided by Bill ‘Did’ Heys, the famous cartoonist who specializes in effacing northern stereotypes, notably The Chippy, an Everyday Saga in the Life of a Clog Dancing Folk, which ran in Private Eye and then The Listener between 1967 and 1986.

41. V. Williamson, ‘Regional identity: a gendered heritage? Reading women in 1990s fiction’, in S. Caunce, J. Marsden, S. Sidney Smith and J. E. Walton (eds), Re-creating Britishness (Manchester, 2004), pp. 168–83. This was true even in the hands of a writer like Arnold Bennett, if we stretch the northern boundary a little.
but the length and breadth of the country – and it has even caught on in the celebrity world.42

Peter Kay also maintains this tradition in very comedy based on everyday existence, a Northern strength, which could be said to differentiate the immensely successful Coronation Street most clearly from its rival EastEnders.43 In December 2010 it reached its fiftieth anniversary and was the longest-running drama of its type still transmitted. While some post-war film[s] apparently set in the North have achieved recognition the theme that runs through almost all, down to Billy Elliot, is that achieving cultural aspirations means moving out, probably to London. Billy Liar showed those who stay as essentially too scared to seize opportunities they desperately desired.

Conclusion

The political North of today is in practice moving away from self-assertion. The faceless business corporations and quangos that have come to dominate modern public life (even if the Coalition government is dismantling a good number of the latter) have no local or regional commitment, and few of their senior staff have strong connections with the locality they operate in, or expect to stay there for a significant portion of their lives. Localism no longer forms an adequate base for connecting with new general business opportunities, and the resources of the region are managed from outside with little concern for local consequences. Local politics now certainly attracts few who could be called established leaders with the connections and influence to drive communities forward over a long period. The old desire for local recognition seems inadequate now as the main reward for such activity. Moreover, widespread if unfocused dissatisfaction with the region’s current status is offset in practice by the benefits of living within a rich country. While the quality of life is often perceived as having declined in intangible ways, Northerners mostly enjoy far higher purely material living standards than its ‘glory days’ actually delivered to their ancestors. No real and widespread sense of desperation therefore exists.

The consequence of all this is that, far from gaining autonomy and respect in the revolutionary decades, Northern England in 2010 has probably never had less of either. Much of this analysis has used categories that have essentially lost anything but historical meaning during the period under study, with the transformation of both the economy and the local government framework. Today it is generally characterised as a backward-looking problem area, appealing for protection from the very economic forces that once brought it success, and it receives little attention except at flashpoints over ethnic tensions. Its preferred relationship to the rest of the nation remains much as it always was, and if the general election of 2010, with its slogan of ‘a new politics’, may seem to have put an end to the distinctive patterns described above, this is very debatable. The election occurred after this analysis was completed so no detailed treatment has been attempted, but in the hypothetical new Northern parliament there would be 104 Labour MPs (40 per cent of all Labour representation) to 43 Conservatives and 11 Liberal Democrats. This forms a Labour preponderance similar to that in Wales but less than in Scotland.44 The conurbations, where most of the people live, remained very solidly Labour and many Conservative victories (though not all) owed at least something to a limited revival of traditional three-party politics reminiscent of 1983 outside them. Only 15 Northern seats produced an overall Conservative majority, most of them their perpetual strongholds.

Those really dissatisfied with Labour thus have not turned to nationalism of any kind, and only marginally to the Conservatives. In terms of seats won, nationalisms of all kinds actually did very poorly in 2010 right across the mainland, with only nine MPs returned. Indeed, what emerges most sharply is a huge divide in political outlook between all the conurbations, including London outside the wealthy zones, and the rest of the country. That seems very dangerous for national cohesiveness in a time of fierce government retrenchment, but regionalism still seems unlikely to flourish as a result. Identity will surely alter, but no sharp break with past patterns is likely, and we can only wait to see how it will happen.


43. The Guardian, 13 February 2010, devoted the cover of its weekly television guide to a cartoon representation of EastEnders, characterising it as a mass of smirking and violent personal confrontations with one lonely figure in a corner offering an irrelevant cup of tea.