

Devolution, Public Attitudes and National Identity

Devolution and Britishness

There has been periodic debate about the impact of the devolution reforms on shared attachments to an overarching British identity across the UK. ‘Britishness’ as a self-description chosen by people across the UK is indeed in decline (Table 1). Though the trends and data points are uneven it is clear that fewer people in Great Britain choose a British over their ‘local’ national identity now compared with a decade ago, or in the 1970s. Parallel data on ‘pride’ in Britain have also fallen.

Table 1 Trends in National Identity in Great Britain

	1974	1978-9	1991-2	1996-7	1999	2001	2003
England							
English			31	34	44	43	38
British			63	59	44	44	48
Scotland							
Scottish	65	56	72	72	77	77	72
British	31	38	25	20	17	16	20
Wales							
Welsh		59		63	57	57	60
British		34		26	31	31	27

Sources: Election and Referendum Studies, British Social Attitudes, Scottish Social Attitudes, ESRC surveys

It is less easy to say devolution is the cause. Much more significant are longer term generational effects which act across Great Britain; younger people have not acquired the same strength of attachment to Britain that older generations did in their youth – in part shaped by empire and war – and have retained. Devolution is perhaps more a reflection of declining Britishness than a cause of it, though the more recent shift in patterns in England between British and English identities may well have reflect the introduction of devolution in Scotland and Wales: the advent of devolution there may have encouraged people in England to distinguish Britishness and Englishness more clearly, reducing the level of British identification.

There is a different pattern in Northern Ireland where Britishness is a sharply held identity among Protestants while the overwhelming majority of Catholics see themselves as Irish. Neither pattern of identification has been challenged by (attempted) devolution in Northern Ireland. Britishness and Irishness continue to be claimed by the respective Protestant and Catholic communities with undiminished vigour.

Table 1 presents only a partial perspective on questions of identity. It is based on a question which forces survey respondents to choose between either English/Scottish/Welsh *or* British. People are often comfortable, however, with more than one identity. A technique popularised by the Spanish sociologist Luis Moreno allows us to capture how people combine different identities (Table 2).

Table 2: Trends in Moreno National Identity in Great Britain 1997-2003

	1997	1999	2001	2003
England				
English not British	7	17	17	17
More English than British	17	15	13	19

Equally English and British	45	34	42	31
More British than English	14	11	9	13
British not English	9	14	11	10
Scotland				
Scottish not British	23	32	36	31
More Scottish than British	38	35	30	34
Equally Scottish and British	27	22	24	22
More British than Scottish	4	3	3	4
British not Scottish	4	4	3	4
Wales				
Welsh not British	17	17	24	21
More Welsh than British	26	19	23	27
Equally Welsh and British	34	37	28	29
More British than Welsh	10	8	11	8
British not Welsh	12	14	11	9

Sources: British Social Attitudes Survey, Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, Wales Life and Times Survey, ESRC surveys.

The Moreno figures show that large majorities in all parts of Great Britain claim some level of Britishness: around three-quarters of the English and Welsh and around two-thirds of Scots. But there are shifts in balance, with a sharper sense of Englishness emerging and, less markedly, movement in the same direction in Scotland and Wales, each at the expense of strength of attachment to Britishness.

National Identity and Constitutional Preference

It would be easy to read these data pessimistically and see in them a prospect of the disintegration of the UK. Such a reading would be at the very least over-stated. Weakening Britishness does not equate to a weakening of attachments to the UK state. Though ‘Scottish/Welsh not British’ identifiers in Scotland and Wales are more likely to favour independence than the other categories on the Moreno scale, even among that group opinion on independence is split in Scotland and a minority option in Wales (Table 3). Only in Northern Ireland do non-British identifiers – i.e. Irish-identifying Catholics – express by a clear majority a preference for leaving the UK.

Table 3 Moreno Identities and Constitutional Preference in Scotland and Wales 2003

Constitutional Preference	National Identity				
	Scottish not British	More Scottish than British	Equally Scottish and British	More British than Scottish	British not Scottish
Scotland					
Independence	47	22	8	5	10
Devolution	41	63	62	66	68
No Devolution	5	10	26	23	21
	Welsh not British	More Welsh than British	Equally Welsh and British	More British than Welsh	British not Welsh
Independence	27	11	11	7	6
Parliament	40	44	31	38	22
Assembly	18	25	28	31	29
No Devolution	11	14	28	21	39

Sources: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, Wales Life and Times Survey

The attitudes of the English to the constitutional options of the non-English nations in the UK are also important. Over-excited fears at the time of devolution that there would be an English backlash against the ‘privileges’ of devolution outside England have not come to pass (a majority of the English continues to feel that the government of England by Westminster is

appropriate for them). Even those in England who, on the Moreno scale, have come to prioritise their Englishness are not notably more likely to favour Scottish independence than the English who continue to claim a primarily or exclusively British self-identification.

In fact English preferences on constitutional options for Scotland and Wales (Table 4) are remarkably similar to those expressed by people in Scotland and Wales. There are though some underlying concerns: 60% of English respondents to our 2003 survey were concerned about the ‘West Lothian Question’ (when Scottish MPs vote on English legislation in matters devolved in Scotland to the Scottish Parliament), and 75% that the Scottish Parliament did not raise enough of its own taxes. However in both cases bare majorities of the Scots felt the same: there may be some iniquities in the devolution settlement, but they do not (yet) form lines of division between the English and the rest.

Table 4 Attitudes in England on how Scotland and Wales should be governed

Scotland	1997	1999	2001	2003
Independence	14	24	19	17
Devolution	55	54	60	60
No devolution	23	13	11	13
Wales				
Independence	13	20	17	16
Parliament	37	34	39	37
Assembly	18	22	19	20
No devolution	25	15	14	15

Sources: British Election Study 1997, British Social Attitudes Survey

Shared Values vs. Policy Variation

The absence of such territorial lines of division may seem surprising given that (whether due to devolution or longer term factors) overarching attachments to a shared British identity have weakened somewhat while component national identities have sharpened somewhat. But national identity may not be the only factor at play in structuring relations between the component parts of the UK. As Gordon Brown has repeatedly argued, ‘Britishness’ is also a reflection of shared values. Our surveys provide some support for that claim.

On a range of questions asked in both Scotland and England on underlying social values (e.g. the role of the state) and concrete policy issues (e.g. student tuition fees) only in two areas have there been persistent and notable national differences: the Scots are significantly more supportive of comprehensive education and somewhat more inclined to think we do not support the unemployed well enough. Otherwise there are only limited and largely trendless differences in values and policy preferences, also where the questions have been extended to the other UK nations (Table 5).

Table 5 ‘Ordinary people do not get a fair share of the nation’s wealth’

% agreeing in	1999	2001	2003
Scotland	58	61	54
England	60	58	60
Wales	61	61	59
Northern Ireland	62	55	59

Sources: British Social Attitudes Survey, Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, Wales Life and Times Survey, Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, ESRC surveys

Equally, there appears to be only limited appetite for policy variation. Table 6 appears to imply a preference for common standards, a little more so in England than in Scotland and

Wales. As yet we lack a time series of data on these questions, so cannot say whether these preferences for common standards are rising, falling or stable. But what they appear to show, even in broad outline, is a continuing preference for sharing risks in a UK-wide framework, even though one of the obvious and logical outcomes of devolution is to open up greater possibilities for variation in policy standards between different parts of the UK.

Table 6 Attitudes to Policy Variation in Great Britain (2003)

	Same everywhere	Allowed to vary
England		
Standards in health, schools, roads, police	66	33
Scotland		
Standards in health, schools, roads, police	59	40
Level of unemployment benefit	56	42
University tuition fees	56	40
Wales		
Standards in health, schools, roads, police	55	44
Level of unemployment benefit	57	41
University tuition fees	58	40
NHS prescription charges	63	37

Sources: British Social Attitudes Survey, Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, Wales Life and Times Survey