

## **COVID-19 and English Devolution**

The Covid-19 crisis has exposed in a drastic manner the issues that underpin territorial relations across and within the UK. In England, where devolution is still in a half-baked affair, the pandemic has thrown into even sharper relief the long-standing tensions in central-local relations between Westminster and regional and local authorities.

Over-centralisation in England is not a new story. Research has shown that we are one of the most centralised nations in the developed world and the strong concentration of power in London is the root cause of growing regional inequalities across the country ([Raikes, Giovannini & Getzel, 2019](#)). Now the pandemic has taken the challenge to a whole new level, laying bare the failings of our centralised system of governance.

Over the past months, Westminster has almost instinctively entered in ‘top down command and control’ mode – centralising even further decision making in the face of the stark regional differences in the spread and impact of Covid-19, without making any use of, and often snubbing, devolved and local government institutions in England. This approach has also gone hand in hand with further withdrawn of financial support to the local state, on top of a decade of austerity ([Johns, 2020](#)).

And yet, central responses to the crisis have been poor and often contradictory. The appalling management and distribution of PPE, the continued delays in the sharing of data on infection rates, the quickly-withdrawn promise made to local authorities to “spend whatever it takes” to respond to the pandemic, and the case of the Leicester lockdown clearly show that decisions imposed by the centre on local authorities do not necessarily work and can have negative effects on local communities.

On their part, local leaders have been very vocal from the start and challenged central government on this position – refusing, in some cases, to implement national policies, and demanding more powers and a seat at the table where decisions are made. But, beyond rhetoric, central government has essentially ignored calls from metro mayors and council leaders. The recent announcement by the Prime Minister that new powers will be given to local authorities to enforce measures to tackle the spread of Covid-19 is a case in point ([BBC News, 2020](#)). In principle, empowering local government is a positive step. But, in practice, it is hard not to take this message with caution, as it remains unclear what the terms and conditions of this ‘new deal’ are. Many local leaders – with the mayor of Leicester, whose requests to ease the lockdown in some areas of the city were ignored just the day before the announcement, in the front line – have asked for clarifications, just to be told that while the powers come with immediate effect, regulations will be published only next week.

Local leaders are right to be wary of the Prime Minister bearing gifts. Considering the difficult financial position of local authorities in England, and with data on infection rates still delayed and missing, there is a real risk this new strategy could turn into yet another cunning plan to shift responsibility – and, indeed, blame if anything went wrong – onto the local state and away from Westminster. This would be disastrous for local democracy, the economy and, most importantly, could negatively affect people in their everyday lives. And yet, it is a very plausible scenario.

Much of this imbalance in central-local relations in England is rooted in the power-hoarding nature of the Westminster model and in the British political tradition ([Richard and Smith, 2016](#)). In practice, this means that the local state has never been fully controlled by local government, and central government has a strong hold over it. Indeed, on paper local government in England need not exist at all ([Davies and Giovannini, 2020](#)). This strongly centralised model of sub-national governance has impacted on, and moulded, the process of devolution in the larger nation of the UK and helps to explain its piecemeal and dysfunctional nature.

While in the other nations of the UK political devolution was introduced over 20 years ago, in England the process has developed in fits and starts over the same period of time and remains unfinished. With a patchwork of devolution deals matched by a local state depleted by austerity and now bearing the brunt of a pandemic, devolution in England amounts at best to some form of ‘centralised decentralisation’, which builds on a rhetoric of local empowerment whilst essentially leaving all the levers of power in the hands of ministers in London ([Giovannini, 2016](#)). Again, this difference in the form devolution has taken across the UK has become even starker in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst the leaders of the devolved administrations have been able to stand their ground and develop their own policy approaches to manage the crisis, metro mayor and local leader do not enjoy the same leverage and find themselves between a rock and a hard place. They want to be able to do what’s best for the communities they serve, but don’t have the powers to achieve this. So they demand more clout, but the government doesn’t listen – because it doesn’t have to.

In the run up to the 2019 election, Boris Johnson pledged to “do devolution properly” in England. The English Devolution Bill expected in the autumn should be the fulfilment of this promise. However, while many have called for the Bill to open the way to a more inclusive, bottom-up system where devolution of substantial power and funding is be made available to all areas ([Raikes, Giovannini & Getzel, 2019](#); [Raikes, 2020](#); [UK2070 Commission, 2020](#)), recent debates suggest that reforms might amount, once again, to old wine in new bottles. The speech (now unavailable on the government website!) from the Local Government minister delivered on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July essentially laid the foundations of the new Bill – positing that council mergers will be the price to pay for local areas that want to get a new devolution deal. A reorganisation of local government into unitaries with more strings attached to devolution would be quite the opposite of what the PM minister vowed.

If all communities are to bounce back from the current crisis and thrive, local leaders should be in the driving seat rather than at the back of the room. And if the government is serious about its commitment to ‘level up’ the country, then it should re-invest the local state with the resources, power and trust it needs and deserves. However, while we’ve learnt the hard way from the pandemic that Westminster does not necessarily know best, so far central government has shown very little willingness to embrace the spirit of institutional re-invention and radical redistribution of power that would be needed to ‘build back better’.

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