

## **Political Parties - the glue that holds the UK together**

With almost a decade of devolution behind it, the United Kingdom has adapted remarkably well to major constitutional reform. Dire predictions that devolution would herald the 'death of Britain' have so far proved unfounded and British citizens appear to be settling comfortably into the new political framework. In a study of the implications of devolution on the unity and cohesion of the UK, researchers from the London School of Economics have concluded that this relatively smooth transition can be put down to the UK's main political parties. By acting as 'shock absorbers' between the demands of the nations and the unity of the state, they have become the glue that holds the United Kingdom together.

### **Method**

Focusing on the role of political parties in a multicultural and multinational democracy, researchers compared the British experience of devolution with similar processes in other European countries (Belgium, Italy, Spain). The findings were divided into three areas: 1) patterns of voting behaviour 2) the relationship between territorial politics and party democracy and 3) the development of the main national-level political parties in countries undergoing devolution and decentralisation reforms.

### **Key Findings**

The research provides an insight into how the effects of constitutional change have been filtered and mediated by the political parties. In their study into the major governing parties of Italy, Spain and the UK, researchers found a remarkable similarity in the responses of party leadership to constitutional reform at the state-wide level. They chose piecemeal, incremental changes to internal party management rather than wholesale organisation of party structures to mirror the reorganisation of the state. This pragmatic response suggests that decentralisation is unlikely to lead to the 'slippery slope' of disintegration mooted by the most pessimistic observers. Devolution is therefore unlikely to undermine the nation state as long as these state-wide parties maintain their dominant position in the institutions.

In their study of patterns of voting behaviour, researchers also established a clear link between the 'denationalisation' of the vote and devolution. In all four countries, voters have become more likely to vote differently in different territories within the state. This reverses the previous well established trend towards uniform patterns of voting behaviour throughout individual states and confirms that the demand for devolution is related to the increased political relevance of national minorities and cultural diversity, particularly in the larger states.

### **Impact**

The findings have been presented at conferences in the UK, the US, Sweden, Italy and Spain and in publications in high-profile academic journals. By suggesting that devolution and decentralisation is less threatening to the persistence of Western European nations than some had feared, the research may serve to increase political confidence in the process at Europe-wide level.

### **About the study**

Entitled "Devolution and Party Adaptation: the UK in Comparative Perspective", the research was carried out by Dr Jonathan Hopkin of the London School of Economics and Political Science, Ingrid van Biezen of the University of Birmingham and Catherine Fieschi of Demos.

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