

The evolution and abolition of regional governance in England

By Øivind Bratberg

Subnational dilemma. Change of government should mean a change in the order of things, an opportunity to draw a line upon the incumbent government and set in motion an alternative plan.



Øivind Bratberg is a post doctoral Research Fellow at the Dept of Political Science, University of Oslo and scholarly responsible of British Politics Society, Norway.

Nowhere is this view of political transition clearer than in majority-based political systems, where Britain has conventionally been the ideal type. A basic tenet of this model is that victory at the election implies a mandate for change.

The 2010 election did not yield an outright majority to any party and therefore confused some of the preconditions of the Westminster model. One could be excused for thinking that a culture of negotiation might seep in. Yet, as the last year has shown, in all areas where agreement has been reached between the two parties of the coalition, the government operates as majority governments do: implementing its programme with little in the way.

One field where change has been radical is in the structure for territorial government; more precisely, regional government in England. To consider the scale of change within this domain we need to scroll back to 1997 and the beginning of the New Labour era.

Developing a regional level of government combined several of the stated ambitions of the Blair government: it would strengthen democracy by opening the political process for input from below, while also enhancing the coordinating capacity of central government. Moreover, a regional structure for England also was seen as an appropriate response to the creation of a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly, without treating the English colossus as a whole.

The historical backdrop was a patchwork of different territorial denominations used by public administration. Amazingly for a modern state of its size, Britain had no uniform regional structures. Civil servants, whether dealing with energy supply, infrastructure or food security would now have a range of different and unofficial regional entities to relate to. John Major's government made the first step to unify the patchwork in creating the Government Offices for the Regions in 1994, establishing nine English regions (plus Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) and co-locating the regional outposts

of various government agencies. These regions would also be the entities for EU funding of regional development.

Labour's approach represented expansion from this structure. A first initiative was the creation of Regional Development Agencies, accountable to central government but composed of representatives from local government, business and the voluntary sector. Their primary task would be to support regional development by strategic planning and by allocating public funding. A second step was the launch of Regional Assemblies, which would advise the Regional Development Agencies. Initially composed of local councillors, the Assemblies were intended to draw upon direct election once the process had matured.

While the ambition of elected Assemblies was quietly put to rest following a resounding rejection in a referendum in the North East region, other developments accelerated once Gordon Brown's succeeded Tony Blair in 2007. Strengthening the regional level in England was a tangible part of Brown's programme for government. An immediate consequence was the appointment of regional ministers for each of England's nine regions, developing on a form of territorial representation which was already well-known from the existence of Scottish and Welsh secretaries.

The new regional ministers had few defined tasks and no precedence to lean upon. Two ministries - the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Department for Communities and Local Government - shared responsibility for them, and the position was typically combined with another job in government. Their relationship to the regional institutions was not well defined: ministers were supposed to

represent the region in central government but also to advise and coordinate work at the regional level on behalf of London. However, despite the vagueness of the job description, regional ministers themselves found the work to be rather rewarding. The pragmatic adaptation was that of an informal regional leader, coordinating planning in the region while also operating as its watchdog in central government. Regional ministers provided a channel from regions to London, and in the strangely centralised system of the Westminster model it was a voice that worked quite well.

Nevertheless, Labour was the only party that had warmed to the regional project. What has unfolded since the change of government is an instructive example of the swing of the pendulum that a majority model of government permits. The Regional Development Agencies have been abolished, to be replaced by a form of local enterprise partnerships. More unexpectedly, the Government Offices which were the Conservatives' own creation, have also been scrapped. Here, the replacement is a re-emergence of the patchwork approach where different parts of central government define their regional jurisdictions. Finally, regional ministers have also been abolished.

The demolition of regional institutions was part of a broader wiping out of government agencies in the autumn of 2010. Conservative criticism of the Regional Development Agencies stated that they were costly to run and yielded little in return for the investment; Liberal Democrats could add that they were not conducive to democracy from below, since accountability and funding continued to run from the centre.

Yet in debating what should come instead, the government is faced with some difficult priorities. Coordination and planning for the regions will have to reappear in some way or another and will not necessarily be more rational or less resourceful than before. Relevant areas include industrial policy, energy, infrastructure, health and education. Moreover, not only the administrative argument but also that of democracy suggests some form of regional government. In few countries is a regional level considered a luxury. In a country accounting for a 51 million population, its absence is exceptional.

The capacity for policy change, to return to the outset of this article, has obvious strengths in providing government with supreme legislative power to implement its plan. Yet, the logic could easily make destruction of the predecessors' favoured projects an ambition in its own right. Is the fate of regional governance in England a case in point?



Building blocks. The regional entities of England alongside Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.