



BRITISH  
ACADEMY

CarnegieUK  
TRUST  
CHANGING MINDS • CHANGING LIVES

---

# The future of the political parties in England

**BALLOT PAPER**  
OPEN AND RETURN IMMEDIATELY  
DO NOT DELAY.  
(See enclosed instructions)

**BALLOT PAPER**  
OPEN AND RETURN IMMEDIATELY  
DO NOT DELAY.  
(See enclosed instructions)

## THE POLITICAL PARTIES IN ENGLAND: AFFILIATION, IDENTITY AND DEVOLUTION: REFLECTIONS FROM THE LABOUR AND CONSERVATIVE PARTY CONFERENCES 2016

Devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland since 1999 has not been complemented by similar measures for England. England has arguably become more centralised since 1999 as local government has been weakened and attempts to establish regional government outside of London were abandoned following the 2004 referendum on this issue in the North East of England. Consequently, England has continued to be governed from Westminster, which is both the UK and English parliament.

In recent years, there has been evidence to suggest growing discontent among English people about their place within the Union<sup>1</sup>, and about the centralised and London-centric nature of the United Kingdom political system. In response, the Conservative-led governments since 2010 have introduced two sets of reforms: devolution to English city-regions, and also English Votes for English Laws (EVEL) at Westminster. Having been a firmly anti-devolutionary party in the 1990s, the Conservative-led governments since 2010 have been responsible for an acceleration of the devolution process across the UK. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have all received additional powers, including over taxation and welfare, while May 2017 saw the election of six metro mayors who have received some powers via bespoke “devolution deals”.

In Autumn 2016 the British Academy, as part of the Governing England project, held fringe events at the Labour and Conservative Party conferences to discuss the approach of both the Conservative and Labour Party to various aspects of devolution. This paper summarises the key insights from these two events, and considers the similarities and differences between how the two parties have responded to pressure to reform how England is governed. This article puts the party conference events within the broader context of issues of changing identity and political party affiliation, the rationale for devolution, the impact of devolution on England, the place of England within the UK Parliament through the policy of English Votes for English Laws, arguments for and against an English Parliament, and whether English parties are necessary to better take account of changed identities from devolution.

## THE POLITICS OF DEVOLUTION AND IDENTITY

The 1997-2010 Labour Government implemented a radical devolution agenda. New directly elected institutions were created in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London. Having dominated the early years of devolution, Labour has, in recent years, been overtaken on this issue with devolution to Scotland driven by the Scottish National Party and Conservative-led governments, while it is a Conservative government that has pressed ahead with devolution within England. Labour has not been in power to implement devolution, but neither has it made devolution a priority from opposition.

Since 2010, each of the nations that make up the UK have been dominated by a different party or parties: Conservatives in England, the Scottish National Party in Scotland and the Labour Party in Wales. This gave rise to questions about whether the British party system was fragmenting along territorial lines, although the revival of both the Conservatives and Labour in Scotland in 2017 makes this picture less clear cut. Northern Ireland remains a separate entity with its own parties, but following the June 2017 general election the government’s majority rests on its ‘confidence and supply agreement’ with the Democratic Unionist Party, which will ensure that Westminster cannot ignore the voice of Northern Ireland, or at least its unionist community.

Increasingly, English voters have begun to report feeling concern with devolution-related matters such as the West Lothian Question<sup>2</sup> and the Barnett formula<sup>3</sup> and polling data has shown support for measures which seek to address these issues<sup>4</sup>.

Identity remains an important and changing issue in politics. Studies have demonstrated a correlation between ‘values’ and voting intention<sup>5</sup>, with those who report themselves as feeling ‘English’ were more likely to vote for Britain to Leave the European Union in 2016<sup>6</sup>.

Ahead of the general election of 2017, Rt Hon Professor John Denham identified that voters who identify more strongly as English are more likely to report that they would vote for the Conservative Party<sup>7</sup>, indicating that identity is impacting on politics, and that different parties have adapted to this with different levels of success.

## IDENTITY AND AFFILIATION

Identity has long affected party affiliation, but the identities which have previously underpinned political party support are changing<sup>8</sup>. At the Labour Party conference fringe event in 2016, Professor Denham noted that, as work-based identity has eroded, national identity has to some extent replaced this. Professor Denham cautioned that the reliance of the Labour Party on the traditional and community aspects of heavy industry, such as people working together and attending church together, risked not capturing this change in identity. Conservative former MP James Wharton also raised the issue of identity and party affiliation. Mr Wharton spoke of meeting voters in the North East “with Conservative values and concerns” whom he saw as natural Conservative Party voters but who vote for the Labour party “because that is what they have always done” and “that is their identity”. He asserted that identity is therefore “an incredibly powerful political tool”.

John Denham expressed his fear that the Labour party has yet to adequately represent those who feel English and must ‘take people as they find them’ rather than seeking a national identity which the party finds more palatable but which is not shared by voters.

## CULTURE AND IDENTITY: IS ENGLAND BECOMING MORE ENGLISH?

Polling has shown that increasing numbers of people consider themselves to be English rather than British, with YouGov reporting a 5 percent decrease in those who consider themselves British in a year<sup>9</sup>. The factors which have caused this rise of English identity have been disputed: while some have cited the post-1997 devolution settlements<sup>10</sup> to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as having both undermined British identity and given rise to English identity, Professor Michael Kenny noted that English identity was developing and becoming stronger before this. Professor Kenny cited the example of the 1996 UEFA European Football Championship in England, “the first moment when English football fans turned up holding the flag of St George”, in contrast to the 1966 Football World Cup in England, where supporters flew the Union flag.

Professor Kenny identified that multiple factors are behind the increasing profile and assertiveness of English identity. Globalisation has been important, as has greater insecurity and a sense of political alienation, while the United Kingdom Independence Party was described as having played a role in channelling this new and more political Englishness. The success of UKIP in the decade leading up to the EU referendum in 2016 was assisted by “liberals and people in public authorities” being “uncomfortable with Englishness”, allowing populist parties such as UKIP to stoke a feeling of grievance.

However, not all panellists agreed that English identity is important to voters. Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck, Labour MP for South Shields, stated that people in the North East of England did not talk about Englishness and were not interested in it.

## DEVOLUTION: A MORE ACCESSIBLE POLITICS

Across both the Labour and Conservative Party events, panellists agreed that many voters felt remote from political decision making. In setting out her support for devolution, Ms Alison McGovern, Labour MP for Wirral South, referred to having grown up on Merseyside where “it always seemed that power was somewhere else”. She contrasted her feeling that, 250 miles away in London, “people with influence were being heard in Whitehall” with her perception that “nobody really cared about or listened to us here [on Merseyside]”. Mrs Lewell-Buck echoed concerns that the public had been excluded from the political process, but felt that recent devolution “backroom deals” were no more inclusive, stressing that political exclusion is not only an issue of geography. Mrs Lewell-Buck felt that public involvement in devolution is vital as it will fail if it is perceived to be another layer of bureaucracy, a talking shop, or a transfer of power from one remote body to another. It was for this reason, she felt, that the North East had rejected the proposed regional assembly in 2004 and, later, a devolution deal as there were ‘few powers and little money’.

The purposes, and model, for devolution in England attracted cross-party agreement. In addition to the democratic aspect, both Labour MP Alison McGovern and Conservative James Wharton agreed on the importance of devolution for economic growth. Both expressed support for the city-centric devolution model, with McGovern expressing support for “city led devolution” as “the best way to drive the economy forward”.

## DEVOLUTION WITHIN ENGLAND

Devolution within the United Kingdom has left England as an exception, with no parliament or regional assemblies of its own. Opinions differed at the two events about the best way forward for England. Generally, at the Labour Party event, panellists felt that the devolution which the Blair Government began was the starting point, and that further devolution should proceed along this line with England enjoying greater freedoms in future. One discussion focused on where devolution should be continued to, whether to an English Parliament (John Denham’s position) or, as Alison McGovern MP felt, that powers must be devolved further within England so that “city regions, counties and towns” are empowered as they are “economic areas that have a strong sense of identity”.

In contrast, the representatives from the Conservative Party focused more on the importance of maintaining the Union of nations within the United Kingdom, for which the ‘Union Parliament’ was felt to be key. Rt Hon John Redwood MP favoured the UK constitutional arrangement prior to the changes implemented by the Labour Government under Tony Blair. Devolution, Redwood argued, has weakened central government and given more power to the EU, the nations and the regions, making the UK “less stable, less fair and less balanced”. The introduction of English Votes for English Laws by then-Prime Minister David Cameron was an attempt to address the West Lothian Question while maintaining consent for the UK Parliament.

## ENGLAND WITHIN THE UNION – ENGLISH VOTES FOR ENGLISH LAWS

The place of England within the Union has increased in political salience since the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014. However, English voters have not tended to engage with constitutional questions of this sort and some recent data has shown that English voters are generally content with the current arrangement whereby England’s laws are made in the UK Parliament<sup>11</sup>, though other data indicates greater public support for change<sup>12</sup>.

English Votes on English Laws (EVEL) provides that bills or clauses of bills that apply only to England (or England and Wales) require the consent of English (or English and Welsh) MPs. The House as a whole also gets to vote on all legislation – so this is a form of EVEL that does not go far enough for those who would wish to remove the non-English influence on English legislation altogether.

Different amounts of devolution had, Mr Redwood felt, led to “England beginning to have a sense of injustice”. Thus, in implementing English Votes on English Laws the Conservative Government adopted a policy which attempted to provide some “recognition of England and Englishness in the body politic”. By seeking to reflect England’s distinct status and interests within the existing institution of the UK Parliament, the Conservative Party has sought to answer the West Lothian Question in a way that does not weaken the Union, it was argued.

English Votes on English Laws was described by Rt Hon John Redwood MP as allowing Members of Parliament to represent their constituency within the “Parliament of the Union” with a “subsidiary job” to represent their [English] constituency on English matters, which are now considered and voted on separately through the EVEL procedures. Maintaining the current Parliamentary arrangement is cheaper than establishing a new body and is felt to avoid conflict and “battles for control” between two competing parliaments.

While the Conservative Party implemented English Votes for English Laws, the Labour Party has tended to be opposed to it<sup>13</sup>. The Labour policy of opposition to EVEL was supported by Mrs Lewell-Buck as she felt EVEL has created a “two-tier House of Commons” with an “us-and-them mentality”. Mrs Lewell-Buck feels that she was elected to serve “not only my constituents but also the UK Parliament” and thus has “a responsibility to the United Kingdom as a whole”.

While concerns have been raised regarding the complexity of English Votes for English Laws, attendees felt EVEL has fulfilled its ‘veto’ function thus far. English MPs have a veto and therefore cannot be forced to adopt a policy by non-English MPs, but English MPs cannot propose a law or measure themselves without the agreement of Parliament as a whole. Professor Kenny felt that the Government has the balance ‘broadly right’ and to go further may place the balance within Parliament at risk. Professor Kenny felt that EVEL allows all MPs to be equal at the third reading of every bill which is “absolutely the right way to go”. However, for England to be fully represented as a separate nation, Professor Kenny suggested that England must be given a ‘voice’, such as an English Affairs Select Committee, which gives English voters and politicians a forum to discuss English-specific concerns. A more radical alternative, which creates a political ‘space’ for English-specific issues, is to establish an English Parliament.



## AN ENGLISH PARLIAMENT

The debate around England's place in the Union is not only a question of political administration and the exercise of power, but also one of identity. Arguments for an English Parliament have attempted to address an increasingly assertive English identity which has not found full political expression elsewhere, although some question the importance of this issue. Opinion polling data shows that only around 20-25% of the population express support for an English Parliament<sup>14</sup> and Mrs Lewell-Buck felt that most people are not passionate about constitutional issues or English identity, but are concerned with a more equitable distribution of money and resources.

Both the Labour and Conservative parties support the 'Union Parliament'. This support results, in part, from concerns regarding the size and potential dominance of one member nation of the United Kingdom: England. Conservative James Wharton felt that the devolution policy begun by Labour had failed to address the issue of imbalance caused by 85% of the population of the United Kingdom being in England. England, he felt, does not require an English Parliament because it has disproportionate influence over "the Government of the Union" due to its population and the number of MPs elected for English constituencies (533 out of 650). His suggested solution was to attempt to ensure balance between the four nations of the UK via reform of Parliament. Wharton sees English Votes for English Laws as one part of the answer, but an incomplete part. In his view, these concerns are best addressed through devolution "to areas, agreed by those areas...on a range of powers that are currently held centrally".

Concern over the potential dominance of England crosses party lines and was echoed by Alison McGovern MP. Ms McGovern shared James Wharton's concerns regarding the dominance of England, and her solution is similar in that she advocates devolution bypassing an English Parliament in order that more political power could be held at the level of the City region.

The Labour Party contains a range of opinion on the question of an English Parliament. Professor Denham has advocated the 'basic democratic principle' that English voters are able to elect MPs who can "take the same legislative decisions on health, universities and schools as people directly elected in Scotland and Wales". Support for this principle has not been universal within the Party, and some Labour figures have previously taken the approach that "the best answer to the West Lothian question is to stop asking it"<sup>15</sup>. However, if English identity becomes more important and more assertive, an answer may need to be found to better capture this. Currently, it appears that English voters are content to maintain the current Parliamentary arrangement, if, as has happened so far, the English majority party is the same as the UK majority party. The result of the June 2017 general election has the potential to upset this relationship as the



Conservative Party (at the time of writing) is dependent on Scottish and Northern Irish MPs to ensure its continuance in Government, though the Conservatives also have a majority of English MPs (Conservative 297, Labour 227, Liberal Democrat 8, Green Party 1)<sup>16</sup>.

## TOWARDS A NEW PARTY SYSTEM?

A logical consequence of support for an English Parliament is support for English-specific political parties. Professor Denham has expressed support for a federal Labour Party with English, Scottish and Welsh Parties in order to speak on English, Scottish and Welsh issues. An English Labour Party could then, in his view, potentially support radical devolution within England and 'speak for' the areas below the national level.

Professor Denham felt that an English Labour Party could be the solution as it would be better placed to capture the changed and changing identity of voters. Speakers agreed that the Labour Party has tended to focus on the Union Parliament, and now should look beyond Parliament to empower those who feel remote from political power. Professor Denham made the most radical proposal by calling for "the power to make legislation" to be devolved within England.

After the devolved elections of 2016, the Conservatives are now the main opposition in both Scotland and Wales, perhaps justifying their recent use of the full title of The Conservative and Unionist Party. Following the June 2017 general election both major parties gained seats in Scotland at the expense of the Scottish National Party, although the nationalist party won a majority of Scottish seats once more. Likewise, while Labour made gains in England, the Conservatives again won over half of English seats. The divergence between the political outcomes of the four nations may have started to reverse.

## CONCLUSION

Devolution to the nations within the United Kingdom has led to greater concern being given to constitutional questions around how the United Kingdom is governed. These constitutional questions have arisen at a time when English national identity is becoming stronger and more assertive, while traditional identities and affiliations are decreasing. The political parties have been impacted by these changes while also playing roles in shaping them. Both Labour and the Conservative parties have broadly supported devolution, while both have emphasised the importance of the UK Parliament. While the 2015 general election, and the rise of the SNP, led to a fragmented party system in which different parties dominate in each of the four nations, the 2017 general election indicates that the picture is not yet settled in the long term.

Professor Kenny felt that one element was missing from discussion around devolution and identity is an answer to the question “what is the UK?”. Within that, Professor Kenny called for consideration to be given to how to maintain the Union with a stronger and more assertive English identity within it. He felt that answers need to consider the ‘direction of travel’ and how loose the union can be. Professor Denham stressed the need for nation building, the telling of stories which bind people together. These, he feels, have to embrace people as they are, not as others wish them to be as an ‘off the shelf’ English identity is neither available nor useful.

The issue of devolution is a varied one for the political parties in England. Changing identities and affiliations present challenges to both parties, while devolution within England offers the chance for renewal. Victories in the metro mayor races in Greater Manchester and the Liverpool City Region will allow Labour the chance to govern after polling 800,000 fewer votes than the Conservatives in the June 2017 general election. The victory of Conservative Party mayors in the West Midlands and Tees Valley demonstrate that devolution within England offers each party the chance to gain office in areas which are traditional strongholds for their opponents.

**Martin Rogers**

July 2017.



## REFERENCES

- 1 Professor Michael Kenny. 2015. English identity is not just UKIP's version. Available at: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/this-other-england/>.
- 2 The West Lothian Question refers to imbalance between the voting rights in the House of Commons of MPs from Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland constituencies and those of MPs from English constituencies following devolution. for example, Scottish MPs may vote on England-only education policy while Scottish education policy is made at the Scottish Parliament
- 3 The Barnett formula is a way of assigning public spending that has resulted in different nations receiving different levels of public spending per head in the United Kingdom
- 4 Professor John Curtice. 2015. How Popular is EVEL?. Available at: <http://blog.whatscotlandthinks.org/2015/09/how-popular-is-evel/>.
- 5 Professor Eric Kaufmann. 2016. It's NOT the economy, stupid: Brexit as a story of personal values. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/personal-values-brexit-vote/>.
- 6 Professor Michael Kenny. 2017. After Brexit: the English question. Available at: <http://www.britac.ac.uk/after-brexit-english-question>.
- 7 Professor Rt Hon John Denham. 2017. How English identity politics will shape the 2017 general election. Available at: <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/june2017/2017/04/how-english-identity-politics-will-shape-2017-general-election>.
- 8 Professor Anthony Heath, Professor Mike Savage and Nicki Senior. 2013. British Social Attitudes 30. Available at: [http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/38459/bsa30\\_social\\_class\\_final.pdf#page=2](http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/38459/bsa30_social_class_final.pdf#page=2).
- 9 Matthew Smith. 2017. What makes a person English, according to the English. Available at: <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2017/01/24/what-makes-person-english-according-english/>.
- 10 Professor Richard Wyn Jones, Professor Ailsa Henderson, Professor Daniel Wincott. 2012. The dog that finally barked: England as an emerging political community. Available at: <http://www.ippr.org/publications/the-dog-that-finally-barked-england-as-an-emerging-political-community>.
- 11 Professor John Curtice. 2016. British Social Attitudes 33: Politics. Available at: <http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-33/politics.aspx>.
- 12 Professor Charlie Jeffery. 2015. Taking England Seriously: the 2014 Future of England Survey. Available at: <http://www.centreonconstitutionalchange.ac.uk/blog/taking-england-seriously-2014-future-england-survey>.
- 13 Professor Charlie Jeffery. 2015. Where does the Labour party stand on English votes for English laws?. Available at: <http://www.centreonconstitutionalchange.ac.uk/blog/where-does-labour-party-stand-english-votes-english-laws>.
- 14 Professor John Curtice. 2016. British Social Attitudes 33: Politics. Available at: <http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-33/politics.aspx>.
- 15 Professor Rt Hon John Denham. 2016. Labour faces an English question that simply won't go away. Available at: <http://labourlist.org/2016/11/john-denham-an-english-question-that-wont-go-away/>.
- 16 June 2017 general election result. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2017/results/england>

# Participants

## *The Future of the Labour Party in a Devolved England after Brexit in association with IPPR:*

- **Rt Hon Professor John Denham**,  
University of Winchester
- **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck MP**,  
Member of Parliament for South Shields
- **Ms Alison McGovern MP**,  
Member of Parliament for Wirral South
- **Mr Ed Cox, Director**,  
IPPR North.

## *The Future of the Conservative Party in a devolved England in association with Conservative Home:*

- **Rt Hon John Redwood**, Member of Parliament for Wokingham
- **Mr James Wharton**, former Member of Parliament for Stockton South and Parliamentary Under-Secretary in the Department for International Development, former minister for the Northern Powerhouse
- **Professor Michael Kenny**, Cambridge University, formerly of Queen Mary University of London.
- **Mr Mark Wallace**, Conservative Home

# About Governing England

## **Governing England is a multi-disciplinary programme which seeks to address a number of issues concerning the government and governance of England.**

The project is a two-year programme being overseen by the British Academy public policy team. It is exploring the developing constitutional and governance settlement in England, how citizens relate to their institutions, what changing devolution settlements in England may mean for the future of the Union, and how English identity is evolving.

To conclude the programme the Academy will publish 'Governing England: Understanding English institutions and identity in a devolving UK' in July 2018. This book will be co-authored by some of the UK's leading academics and commentators. It will set out the context for the current devolution settlement in England against a backdrop of previous attempts at local government reorganisation, changing political sentiment, and potential implications for the future of the UK.

## **Themes of the programme:**

- England in the UK Parliament
- Whitehall as government of England and the UK
- England in a changing fiscal union
- English regions, city regions and mayors
- The future of the political parties
- England and the English

The British Academy has, through the roundtables examined in this publication, engaged with representatives of the new combined authorities, council leaders, academics, journalists, business and trades union representatives, MPs, Peers and civil servants. We are disseminating our findings with government, and through this work hope to better inform the development of this policy area and ensure crucial public policy questions in this arena are adequately addressed. Roundtables were held as part of this series of work in Newcastle upon Tyne, Sheffield, Bristol, Winchester and Cambridge.

The project is co-chaired by Professor Iain McLean FBA FRSE and Professor Michael Kenny. Members of the working group include Professor John Curtice FBA FRSE FRSA, Professor Jim Gallagher, Professor Meg Russell, Rt Hon Professor John Denham and Guy Lodge.



BRITISH  
ACADEMY

*for the humanities and social sciences*

The British Academy is the UK's national body for the humanities and social sciences – the study of peoples, cultures and societies, past, present and future. We have three principal roles: as an independent Fellowship of world-leading scholars and researchers; a Funding Body that supports new research, nationally and internationally; and a Forum for debate and engagement – a voice that champions the humanities and social sciences.

The British Academy  
10 - 11 Carlton House Terrace  
London SW1Y 5AH  
+44 (0)20 7969 5200

[www.britishacademy.ac.uk](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk)  
Registered Charity:  
Number 233176

 [britac\\_news](https://twitter.com/britac_news)  
 [TheBritishAcademy](https://www.facebook.com/TheBritishAcademy)  
 [Britacfilm](https://www.youtube.com/Britacfilm)  
 [BritishAcademy](https://www.soundcloud.com/BritishAcademy)