Conference Proceedings

Does Devolution Add Value?

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During a couple of days in June 2003, around 50 academics, politicians and journalists gathered together in Barcelona to discuss issues on the theme of "Parties, Elections and Representation: Does Devolution Add Value?"[1] on the occasion of a seminar run jointly by the ESCR Devolution Programme[2] and the British Council[3] in collaboration with the European Centre for the Regions (EIPA-ECR). This was the second meeting in a series on "Identity and Representation" led by the ESCR.

The topics addressed on this occasion were: identities in multinational states; voters and elections; elected representatives; parties campaigning in a single region; parties campaigning nationwide; regional issues; and the media. The experiences and cases addressed were those of the United Kingdom, Spain, Austria and Italy; different models, with different degrees of political decentralisation and various durations of the experiences. The issues dealt with were the different degrees in strength of the territorial identities, the differences between regions regarding preferences for particular parties or particular kinds of policy, the degree to which political parties adapt their programmes to the needs of different regions, the perceptions in the roles of elected representatives at both regional and national levels, and communication through the regional media to the voters on political issues.

Hence, the central question of the event was: *Do we have a clear understanding of how representation works in multilevel governments, where regional elections provide additional but also competitive channels for expressing political views often different from those provided by national elections?*

Out of the several cases addressed during the meeting, two could be clearly identified as representing a strong relationship between identity and a constitutional framework guided towards political decentralisation, namely Spain and the United Kingdom, and they were therefore looked at more closely by the participants in the discussions. However, the differences are sizable.

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The first big difference relates to the time frame. In Spain, the current model of decentralisation was put in place by the Constitution of 1978, and its implementation began in 1979. In the UK, the process of the devolution of power to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, London and other English regions started in 1997. The time perspective for analysis therefore varies considerably from one case to another.

Furthermore, the system was extended to the whole territory in the Spanish case whereas in the UK – for the time being – devolution affected the "nationalist" areas. The first two autonomous communities to develop their autonomy in Spain were Catalonia and the Basque Country, in 1979. Currently, there are 17 autonomous communities with a similar status. The entire territory has been decentralised. In contrast, in the UK, only Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have a devolved status.

A third big difference between the two cases relates to the model of decentralisation, namely institutions, fields of competence, political capacity, party and electoral systems. These all vary between the UK and the Spanish cases.

Within this context, the issues of identity, party systems, electoral analysis, and media behaviour are very difficult to compare. Nonetheless, some general conclusions can be drawn.

The starting point for the discussion was the 2003 elections in Scotland and Wales, and their comparisons with the Westminster elections. There is a tendency, depending on the type of election, to vote for one party in state parliament elections and for another party in regional/national parliament elections. This differentiation is also clearly marked in the Catalan case. The elections to the state parliament have traditionally resulted in the victory of the Socialist Party in Catalonia. However, the main nationalist party in Catalonia called "Convergència i Unió" has won all the elections to the regional/national parliament since 1979. Nevertheless, in the Spanish case, in the autonomous communities without a strong nationalist party and without a strong

sense of identity, the voters have voted in a similar way in the two different kinds of elections.

In the Catalan case, the campaigns and the topics addressed are shaped by every party depending on whether the election is for the state parliament or the regional/national parliament. This differentiation also exists in the case of Scotland and Wales. However, in both cases (Spain and the UK), it is more difficult for statewide parties to develop a particular programme and speech when they are contesting regional/national elections than it is for the regional/nationalist parties. In the first case, the regional branch of a statewide party is dependent on the statewide party position and in some cases basic contradictions can arise. This is the case for the Catalan Socialist Party, which is federated with the Spanish Socialist Party. Although some tendencies within the Catalan Socialist Party could be more regional/ nationalist, they clash on occasion with the mainstream lines of the Spanish Socialist Party. When this occurs, the position of the Catalan Socialist Party has to be either tamed or changed by the regional leaders.

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A similar situation can also be observed in Austria, although there are no regional parties particularly contesting regional and national elections. Nonetheless, it is difficult for the 9 regions to have their specific concerns and topics considered in a nationwide party programme in national elections. Other means (e.g. cross-border collaboration arises in certain issues such as the traffic problem in Tirol in Austria, Bavaria in Germany and South-Tirol in Italy) have to be envisaged.

Taking this into account, the voters' perception of the differences between different kinds of elections is difficult to determine. In some occasions, there is confusion about who is actually the running candidate. In the Catalan case, there is a tendency to identify the party leader with the candidate, whatever the scope of the election –statewide, regional/national or local. Furthermore, the perceived proximity to the candidate or elected representatives is very low in all cases after the electoral period. In contrast, in Scotland, and probably because of the different electoral system, the proximity to the candidates is higher, which sometimes adds to the confusion. For example, a member of the Scottish Parliament may be approached by someone whose concern is about a matter for Westminster.

These days, identity is everywhere and nowhere. The decline of clear-cut ideologies, the increasing distinction in the meaning of nation and state and of nationality and citizenship define the politics of identity in the 21st century. So far, there has been a very close identification between nation and state. However, this strong connection is now in crisis. The acknowledgement of the existence of different "nations" (a particular cultural and political community) within a state is more and more evident and accepted. This brings a problem to the traditional notion of national identity. The feeling of a single identity no longer exists, rather a multi-level identity is now growing: one can feel Catalan, Spanish, European, or even a global citizen, with various degrees of intensity and even choosing different identities depending on the context.

This trend also brings a rediscovery of the link between identity and politics, exemplified in terms of nationality versus citizenship. In this regard, surveys have been conducted in Catalonia and Scotland showing that, in Scotland, there is a tendency to place the Scottish identity above the British, whereas in Catalonia more people place at the same level the Catalan identity and the Spanish identity.

However, any self-identity is related not only to a personal definition of being Scottish or being Catalan but also to the definition of being British or Spanish. British identity is something of a new trend; UK citizens usually define themselves as English, Welsh, Scottish or Northern Irish. Conversely, Spanish identity is something more defined over time and which carries a heavier political weight. Defining oneself as Spanish or Catalan carries a strong political message and may therefore be a more meaningful form of self-identity.

Another dimension should be added to these discussions: the European Union context. By pure coincidence, but with perfect timing, the conference took place on the same day the Thessaloniki Summit was being closed (19 June 2003). This historical event under the Greek presidency taking place at the same moment of the meeting in Barcelona opened the door and invited contributions to make a political analysis of the successes and failures of the regions during the last months of discussions in the Convention on the Future of Europe. In a nutshell, the regional claims had failed to find their way to success. This was confirmed by the participants.

On the other hand, the European Union is gradually being given a federal structure. The governments should therefore prepare the infrastructure for this new form of multilevel governance. The regions with legislative powers have been defending their special status since the post-Nice process. This has conflicted with other regions that did not view the claim for a special status with such great sympathy.

As a consequence, the divisions in strategies and positions among the regions have not facilitated the

dialogue between them.

The regions with legislative powers consider themselves to be very useful for the European Integration process. They are not satisfied with the results of the Convention. For example, some of the Spanish regions blame the Spanish Government for not having defended adequately their interests. Neither the composition of the Spanish representatives in the Convention, nor the representation of those interests by those present has been satisfactory.

The classical demands of the regions – consultation at the pre-legislative stage, control and direct defence of the principle of subsidiarity, participation in the Council of Ministers, and the institutionalisation of the Committee of the Regions – all failed during the Convention.

It is true that the Committee of the Regions has gained more power in the control of subsidiarity (access to the ECJ), but otherwise the other concessions are merely symbolic. The Convention recognises the regional and local levels only in the first articles of the draft Treaty. In this context, Wales and Scotland produced a paper just at the right moment. The paper was presented and accepted by the national government, the Foreign Office, who brought it into the Convention debate. In fact, the regions in the United Kingdom have timed their claims well, bringing the onto the Convention floor.

On the other hand, this is the second attempt to achieve what the Maastricht Treaty aimed at: "no implementation without consultation". The political debate around the participation of the Spanish regions in European affairs seems not to be evolving. Since the political debate is not prospering, some of the strongest regions in Spain have stated that they will have to look for other ways to be put on the map.

All the previous discussions and findings were brought into the framework of the last topic "Devolution and the Media." The media plays a key role as a tool, not only on the occasion of political campaigns but also in the definition of identities. In this sense, the existence or non-existence of regional/national media has an impact both in the development of political campaigns for a given election as well as in the definition of identity. In general, the regional media pays more attention to devolution issues than to the central issue. However, the fact that there is still no cohesive media arena at the regional level was a common factor within the different experiences presented. On the other hand, the media can be a very powerful tool in creating identity and/or changing geography.

This was one of the main reasons why one of the priorities of the first Catalan government was the development of an independent TV channel that would broadcast all sorts of programmes entirely in Catalan. There are currently several channels, both public and private, that broadcast in Catalan. In terms of the use of Catalan, the radio stations legally have to broadcast in Catalan for more than 50% of the time. The media – in this context – contributes greatly to the spread of Catalan and is very much oriented towards the Catalan society and territory.

In Scotland – in contrast – the media is relatively young and underdeveloped. Following devolution, the press coverage was initially characterised by hostility towards the new institutions. It is clear that there is still room for improvement in this domain, but progress is expected in the near future, since awareness of the importance of public spaces for identity-building needs to be brought into the political debate.

In conclusion, all agreed that devolution does add value. Nonetheless, this is a learning process, to which forums like the one organised in Barcelona may – on a modest scale – contribute some valuable thoughts and findings. The next seminar in the series is to be organised in a new Member State of the EU, in Poland, at the end of 2003.

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NOTES

[1]   For further information on programme and speakers, please consult our website www.eipa.nl.
[2]   The Devolution and Constitutional Change Research Programme was set up by the ESCR (Economic and Social Research Council) in 2000. It was formed to explore the series of devolution reforms, which have established new political institutions in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, London and the other English regions since 1997. Its work is focused around three themes, Nationalism and National Identity, Governance and Constitutional Matters, and Economic and Social Policy. The programme aims to provide a fuller understanding of the devolution dynamic and its implications for the UK (www.devolution.ac.uk).
[3]   www.britishcouncil.org ❑