



# The English Question: The View from Westminster

What do our MPs think of 'The English Question' 10 years after devolution?

Michael Kenny and Guy Lodge

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **About the authors**

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## Introduction

Ten years on from the introduction of Labour's historic devolution settlement for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in the absence of any equivalent set of reforms for England, ippr has conducted a survey of MPs to find out if they think that England is losing out as a result of these changes, as many people have claimed.

Here we report some of the main findings of this survey and interpret their significance for ongoing debates about the constitutional position of England, the future of the Union and the question of whether English identity deserves greater recognition within our public culture.<sup>1</sup> Full details of the survey can be found in the appendix.

These findings will also provide one of a number of data sources that will feed into a major report on the politics of Englishness that ippr will be publishing early in 2010. ippr is grateful to the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust for supporting our work in this area.<sup>2</sup>

## Main findings

- The overwhelming majority of MPs believe that it is time to reform the way that England is governed. Keeping things as they are is MPs' least favoured option, attracting slightly less support than the radical option of establishing an English Parliament. However, while there is a clear mandate for reform on this issue within the House of Commons, opinion is divided over what to do.
- MPs, unsurprisingly, tend to think about issues relating to the governance and constitutional position of England through the lens of their own party's interest. Thus, most Conservative MPs favour 'English votes for English Laws' while the great majority of Labour members oppose this measure. Conversely, a significant number of Labour MPs still support the introduction of a form of regional government within England, which no Conservative MP favours. Given the importance of these issues, we need our politicians to engage with these major questions in a more independent and less self-interested fashion. There is a real danger that reform will be blocked by party self-interest.
- The one area in which there is overwhelming support among MPs from across the political divide is in relation to the levels of funding received by the constituent nations of the United Kingdom. A significant majority of MPs believe that the current system is unfair.
- The survey finds that of the three main parties it is Conservative MPs who are the least supportive of the 'localism' agenda. Far fewer Conservative MPs than their Labour or Liberal Democrat colleagues believe that empowering local government would help address the democratic deficit in England.

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<sup>1</sup> A working draft of this paper was published in December 2009 and then presented at the PSA Territorial Politics Conference in Oxford, January 2010. We are grateful to those who attended this conference and provided useful comments on the draft.

<sup>2</sup> See also 'More than one English Question' by Michael Kenny and Guy Lodge which was also published as part of the JRCT-funded research. [www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=667](http://www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=667)

- MPs appear to favour doing more to give English identity greater recognition and profile. Far more MPs support making St George's Day a public holiday than oppose it. Labour MPs in particular support doing more in this area, which suggests that the Government, which has conspicuously neglected to engage with Englishness, is out of tune with opinion in its own party.
- The majority of MPs believe that Scotland will never become independent.

## Is England losing out after devolution?

*40% of MPs agreed that England had lost out because of devolution to the other nations of the United Kingdom; 39% disagreed. 72% of Conservative MPs agreed with this view, while only 6% disagreed. In contrast, 55% of Labour MPs disagreed that England had lost out since the advent of devolution.*

**Analysis:** This response suggests that a significant number of our MPs have come to the view that asymmetric devolution has created inequities between the nations of the United Kingdom. While this is more typically a Conservative view, it should not go unnoticed that a sizeable minority of Labour MPs (23%) agreed with this judgement.

## Options for reforming the way England is governed

*Different reform options for the so-called 'English Question' have been put forward in the last few years. We asked MPs which, if any, of these proposals they favour.*

- The proposition that 'England should be governed as it is now' elicited a strikingly small amount of support from the current cohort of MPs (10%). Slightly more MPs (11%) support the very radical idea of an English Parliament than indicate support for the status quo.
- The so-called 'English Votes for English Laws' proposal which is favoured by some leading Conservatives, is the preference of 30% of respondents. It is much more popular with Conservative MPs, of whom 75% support it, than it is with Labour (4%) or Liberal Democrat MPs (11%).
- Devolved regional government in England – an idea that has been proposed by both the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties – was the most popular preference overall, with 43% of MPs favouring it. Support was highest among Labour (64%) and Liberal Democrat (67%) MPs. Not a single Conservative MP supported the introduction of regional government.
- The idea of giving more powers to local government in England is rhetorically supported by all the main parties, and is particularly associated with the pro-localism measures proposed by David Cameron. 39% of respondents favoured this proposal but this option is less enthusiastically supported by Conservative MPs as an answer to the 'English Question' than it is by MPs from other parties. Only 34% of Conservative MPs backed this option, compared with 61% of Liberal Democrat MPs and 41% of Labour MPs.

**Analysis:** There is a clear consensus among MPs in favour of the need to reform the way in which England is governed, with only 10% of respondents supporting the status quo. Indeed, this option received the least level of support from MPs. But there is marked disagreement along party lines about which reforms MPs support. 'English

Votes for English Laws' is the clear preference of Conservative MPs, while devolved regional government in England is the choice of most Labour MPs (despite the significant setback this idea received in the wake of the overwhelming No vote registered in the North East referendum on regional government held in 2004). The strength of support for the notion of giving more power to local government in England among Liberal Democrat and Labour MPs is striking, and so too is the relative lack of enthusiasm among current Conservative MPs for the pro-localism stance of the current Conservative leadership.

*MPs were also asked to consider the likelihood of each of these proposals being implemented within the next 20 years:*

- A parliament for England: only 4% of respondents saw this as likely to come about.
- English Votes for English Laws: 44% of MPs believe that this will be implemented (a view shared by 81% of Conservative MPs and 18% of Labour MPs).
- Devolved regional government in England: despite the fact that most MPs favoured this option, only 21% actually think that it will be implemented.
- More powers for local government in England: 43% of MPs believe that there will be reform in this area. Conservative MPs are the most sceptical, with only 34% expecting change in this area, compared with 52% of Labour and 50% of Liberal Democrat MPs.

**Analysis:** MPs' expectations in terms of reforms to the governance of England are conditioned by the policy position advocated by their own party.

If David Cameron wins the election then he will come under real pressure from his MPs to put in place a version of 'English votes for English laws', despite the technical difficulties and political controversy that such a move would generate. A form of 'English votes for English laws' was recommended by Kenneth Clarke's Democracy Taskforce in 2008. We also note that more Labour MPs (18%) believe that this policy will be implemented than actually support it (4%). And far fewer Labour MPs believe that regional government will happen than those who support this reform.

The responses to the question about more powers for local government are more surprising. Only 34% of Conservative MPs believe that policy is likely to move in this direction, despite the promise of the current Conservative leadership that if they win power they will embark upon the most radical decentralisation of power this country has seen for generations<sup>3</sup>.

## The West Lothian Question

*MPs were asked whether they believed that Scottish MPs should be allowed to vote on legislation that only affects England, a reference to the constitutional anomaly known as the West Lothian Question.*

- 38% of MPs said that Scottish MPs should be barred from voting on English matters, while 47% disagreed with this proposition.

<sup>3</sup> David Cameron, 'We can't go on like this', speech given 2 January 2010.

- When the results are broken down by party, a clear divide comes into view. 91% of Conservative MPs believe that Scottish MPs should not vote on English matters (note that not a single Conservative MP disagreed with the statement), whereas 77% of Labour MPs opposed any limits on the voting rights of Scottish MPs.

**Analysis:** MPs rather predictably divide along lines determined by their party's interest in their perception of the 'West Lothian' question. Since the Conservatives have a weak electoral base in Scotland – returning just one MP at the 2005 General Election – they have little to lose from a reform that would restrict the voting rights of non-English MPs. In contrast, the Labour Party, which won a total of 41 seats in Scotland at the 2005 General Election, would be much more seriously affected by any reform this area. Political expediency rather than constitutional principle appears to determine party attitudes to this vexed issue.

## **The Barnett formula and the distribution of public money across the UK**

*MPs were asked if they thought that the different levels of funding received by the nations of the United Kingdom was fair.*

- A clear majority of MPs (62%) said that the current distribution of funding was unfair.
- Although this view was held more strongly by Conservative MPs, of whom 74% believed the current funding levels to be unfair, a significant number of Labour MPs (50%) and Liberal Democrat MPs (61%) also agreed.

**Analysis:** These results give further weight to the growing pressure to reform the system for funding the devolved administrations (a view increasingly shared by the public). Importantly, there is a clear cross-party consensus supporting reform in this area.

*MPs were asked whether Scotland and Wales should be given tax-raising powers in order to pay for the public services for which they are responsible.*

- 42% of MPs agreed with this idea, while 40% disagreed.
- Conservative (55%) and Liberal Democrat MPs (61%) are more supportive of this reform than Labour MPs (30%).

**Analysis:** Though opinion is divided on granting greater fiscal powers to the devolved institutions, it is interesting to note that advocates of reform exist in all the main parties. This should especially assist with the reform agenda in Scotland, where there is a stronger case for devolving additional powers over taxation to the Scottish Parliament.

## **Greater recognition for Englishness**

*MPs were also asked some questions relating to the cultural position and recognition of English identity, including if:*

*...St George's Day should be a public holiday in England.*

- 44% of MPs agreed with this proposal; only 24% disagreed. Support for such a policy was strongest among Labour MPs, of whom 46% were in favour and only 20% disagreed.

*...‘God Save the Queen’ should be replaced by a specifically English anthem when English sporting teams compete.*

- A surprising one in four respondents agreed with this idea, with 28% undecided, and 47% opposed. It was more popular with Labour MPs (25%) than with Conservative MPs (19%).

**Analysis:** These are surprising and important findings. Nearly twice as many MPs agree rather than disagree with the idea of making St George’s Day (23 April) a public holiday in England, while a quarter of the current cohort of MPs would consider replacing ‘God Save the Queen’ with an English national anthem to mark occasions when English sporting teams compete. This suggests that MPs, particularly Labour ones, are increasingly attuned to the growth of a stronger sense of ‘Englishness’ in the last decade. The response of Labour MPs suggests that they would like to see the Labour government do more to engage with and promote Englishness.

## The end of the Union?

*MPs were asked whether and when they thought that Scotland could become independent.*

- A clear majority (58%) of respondents indicated that they believe this will never happen.

**Analysis:** Most MPs at Westminster are confident that the SNP will not be successful in its bid to make Scotland independent. Given the success of the SNP since 2007 and the difficulties that Labour has had in Scotland until recently, this confidence in the future integrity of the UK is striking.

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## Appendix: The survey

As part of the project ‘The English Question’, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, ippr sent a questionnaire survey to all MPs in 2009 to gauge the views of our elected representatives on this issue. The survey was originally sent out to all MPs in May, with reminder notices going out over the summer.

### Response rate

In total 114 replies were received, representing a response rate of 18%, which is in line with similar surveys which seek to reflect the views of MPs.<sup>4</sup> The responses we

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<sup>4</sup> For example, commercial polling companies regularly survey MPs on a range of policy areas and aim for a similar response rate.

received broadly reflect the current party, gender and regional composition of the House of Commons.

Party composition:

Party composition	House of Commons 2005 general election (%)	Our survey (%)
Labour	54	49
Conservative	30	28
Liberal Democrat	10	16
Other	6	7

Gender:

Gender	House of Commons 2005 election (%)	Our survey (%)
Men	80	85
Women	20	15

Nation	Seats in House of Commons 2005 (%)	Our survey (%)
England	82	77
Scotland	9	13
Wales	6	9
Northern Ireland	3	1

## Results

*Do you agree that England has lost out because of devolution to Scotland and Wales?*

(114 MPs answered this question)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Total no. of responses	19	27	24	26	18	114
Total as %	16%	24%	21%	23%	16%	100%

*Do you agree that England has lost out because of devolution to Scotland and Wales? (by party)*

(114 MPs answered this question)

Party	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Total
Labour	13	12	31	56
Conservative	23	7	2	32
Lib Dem	7	3	8	18
Other	3	2	3	8
Total	46	24	44	114



*Do you agree that England has lost out because of devolution to Scotland and Wales? ( %)*

(114 MPs answered this question)

Party	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Total
Labour	23%	21%	55%	100%
Conservative	72%	22%	6%	100%
Lib Dem	39%	17%	44%	100%
Other	38%	25%	38%	100%

*A number of options have been put forward as potential answers to the 'English Question'. Please indicate which, if any, of these proposals you support.*

(114 MPs answered this question)

	Labour	Con	Lib Dem	Other	Total no. of responses for each option	Total support %
A Parliament for England	3	1	3	5	12	11%
English votes on English laws	2	24	2	6	34	30%
Devolved regional government	36	0	12	1	49	43%
More powers for local government	23	11	11	0	45	39%
England should be governed as it is now	8	3	0	0	11	10%
None of the above	2	1	1	1	5	4%

*Which of these options do you think are likely to be implemented in the next 20 years?*

(114 MPs answered this question)

	Labour	Con	Lib Dem	Other	Total no. of responses for each option	Total %
A Parliament for England	1	1	2	1	5	4%
English votes on English laws	10	26	8	3	50	44%
Devolved regional government	16	0	6	2	24	21%
More powers for local government	29	11	9	0	49	43%

*Do you agree that Scottish MPs should no longer be allowed to vote on English legislation?*

(114 MPs answered this question)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Total no. of responses	25	18	17	23	31

*Do you agree that Scottish MPs should no longer be allowed to vote on English legislation? (by party)*

(114 MPs answered this question)

Party	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Total
Labour	4	9	43	56
Conservative	29	3	0	32
Lib Dem	3	4	11	18
Other	7	1	0	8
Total	43	17	54	114

*Do you agree that Scottish MPs should no longer be allowed to vote on English legislation? (%)*

(114 MPs answered this question)

Party	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Total
Labour	7%	16%	77%	100%
Conservative	91%	9%	0%	100%
Lib Dem	17%	22%	61%	100%
Other	88%	13%	0%	100%

*Do you think that the different levels of funding received by Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England are fair/unfair/don't know*

(113 people answered this question)

	Fair	Unfair	Don't know	Total
Labour	24	28	4	56
Conservative	2	23	6	31
Lib Dem	7	11	0	18
Others	0	8	0	8
Total	33	70	10	113
Total as %	29%	62%	9%	100%

*Do you think that the different levels of funding received by Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England are fair/unfair/don't know (%)*  
(113 people answered this question)

	Fair	Unfair	Don't know	Total
Labour	43%	50%	7%	100%
Conservative	6%	74%	19%	100%
Lib Dem	39%	61%	0%	100%
Others	0%	100%	0%	100%

*Now that Scotland has its own Parliament, and Wales its own Assembly, should both pay for the services they are responsible for from taxes collected in their own country?*  
(113 MPs answered this question)

Party	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Labour	5	12	9	21	9	56
Conservative	5	12	6	5	3	31
Lib Dem	2	9	4	1	2	18
Others	2	1	1	2	2	8
Total	14	34	20	29	16	113
Total as %	12%	30%	18%	26%	14%	100%

*Now that Scotland has its own Parliament, and Wales its own Assembly, should both pay for the services they are responsible for from taxes collected in their own country? (%)*  
(113 MPs answered this question)

Party	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Total
Labour	30%	16%	54%	100%
Conservative	55%	19%	26%	100%
Lib Dem	61%	22%	17%	100%
Others	38%	13%	50%	100%

*Do you agree that 'God save the Queen' should be replaced by a specifically English national anthem when England sporting teams compete? (by party)*  
(113 MPs answered this question)

Party	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Labour	6	8	18	13	11	56
Conservative	2	4	7	9	9	31
Lib Dem	2	2	5	7	2	18
Other	4	0	2	0	2	8
Total	14	14	32	29	24	113
Total as %	12%	12%	28%	26%	21%	100%

*Do you agree that 'God save the Queen' should be replaced by a specifically English national anthem when England sporting teams compete? (%)*  
(113 MPs answered this question)

Party	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Total
Labour	25%	32%	43%	100%
Conservative	19%	23%	58%	100%
Lib Dem	22%	28%	50%	100%
Other	50%	25%	25%	100%

*Do you agree that St George's Day should be a public holiday in England?*  
(113 MPs answered this question)

Party	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Labour	5	21	19	6	5	56
Conservative	3	9	9	4	6	31
Lib Dem	2	4	6	5	1	18
Other	5	1	2	0	0	8
Total	15	35	36	15	12	113
Total as %	13%	31%	32%	13%	11%	100%

*Do you agree that St George's Day should be a public holiday in England?*  
(113 MPs answered this question)

Party	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Total
Labour	46%	34%	20%	100%
Conservative	39%	29%	32%	100%
Lib Dem	33%	33%	33%	100%
Other	75%	25%	0%	100%

*Do you think that Scotland will become independent in less than 5 years; in less than 20 years; in less than 50 years; in at least 50 years; never; don't know*  
(114 MPs answered this question)

	In less than 5 years	In less than 20 years	In less than 50 years	In at least 50 years	Never	Don't know
Total	1	17	5	2	66	23
Total as %	1%	15%	4%	2%	58%	20%