

Measuring the impact of devolution: a discussion

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The central theme of the 2008 Radical Statistics conference, held in sunny Leith on Saturday March 1st, was examining ‘A Decade of Devolution’ and offering critical comment on how it ‘measured up’. What had devolution promised and what had it actually delivered, in Scotland and elsewhere? In total eight papers were delivered by speakers from a range of institutions and organisations and, in different ways, they all covered aspects of the ‘new politics’ of governance in what used to be called the ‘United Kingdom’. In many ways the papers, in addition to covering their specific topics such as child wellbeing, the costs of care, national identities or migration patterns, were also asking some fundamental questions that are important to all social researchers: examining the way we ask the questions we construct for surveys or interviews; the way we try and visually and textually present the data we capture and, perhaps most importantly, what we read from the data and how we can then use this empirical material to challenge day-to-day inequalities and social exclusion. Another key theme of a majority of the papers was interrogating the notion of a Scottish ‘distinctiveness’ to social research and data analysis. What is it that makes Scotland unique, potentially, as a social research ‘laboratory’, as Christopher Playford asked in his fascinating paper? In what ways can general claims be made from data that on the face of it is quite specific to the Scottish context?

Clearly a decade is a long time in devolved politics and this was reflected in all of the papers – there was much to examine and deconstruct. The five morning papers included three that had, for better or worse, a distinct ‘Scottishness’ to them – the paper by Christopher Playford, as mentioned above, highlighted the crucial role Scotland can play as a kind of ‘laboratory’ for social research and accumulating survey and other data on a range of social policy issues. Playford, from the University of Stirling, asked some fundamental questions about Scottish social survey data and by looking at past, current and possible future trends he wondered whether Scotland needed its own unique data strategy. What datasets from across the UK could be used and relied upon, currently, and in what ways would they need to adapt or change to meet future Scottish-specific needs? It was apparent that Scotland does require its own data strategy but this

needs to be set within the wider UK context and structures, whilst also acknowledging the importance of robust comparative analysis and perspectives, especially looking towards the Scandinavian / Nordic countries.

The paper before Playford's looked at the rather 'sexy' issue of happiness and wellbeing, a subject that seems to have captured the public imagination given the volume of titles you can now find in bookshops on this elusive subject. Sam Coope and Ian Storrie, both involved in conducting social research for the Scottish Government, were asking 'big' questions about child happiness and wellbeing and how, as social researchers, we go about trying to accurately measure such, on the face of it, unquantifiable aspects of social life. How do we agree on a common definition of happiness? How can we attempt to measure it? And if we can measure it, do the results actually matter or not? With a nice 'double-act' presentation with some excellent slides, Coope and Storrie suggested that there have been, to date, some efforts to try and get a grip on happiness and wellbeing but, fundamentally, much debate arises when trying to classify what counts as a 'variable'. Much of the existing research is from America and some differences appear between this 'geography' and Europe. The subjectivity of happiness can be overwhelming, especially from a policy perspective where some solid foundations are obviously required to gather accurate and useful data. The authors concluded that devolution has made a difference to what is possible, vis-à-vis accounting for happiness and wellbeing and that there are some fundamental differences between adult and child happiness (indeed, it is clear from the research evidence that pets are better than children at making adults happy!). Further, the wellbeing of children needs to be set against their 'rights' and this needs to be done, again, with some comparative measure in mind (in terms of trying to identify possible indicators).

The third 'Scottish' paper from the morning session was presented by Nick Wright from the General Register Office for Scotland, based in Edinburgh. Wright gave a sophisticated and insightful tour around the rather complex and muddled world of migration (as well as 'visitor') statistics and gave support to the claim that Scotland needs migrants coming to live and work in the country and, more than this, needs to work much harder at retaining people. In part this need is due to persistent declining fertility rates from the 1950s as well as people living longer (thus a rise in the 'dependant' population). Recent patterns of movement from the accession countries of central and Eastern Europe have secured much media and public interest, as well as capturing the attention of politicians and policy-makers, but this

has 'masked' other migration trends from outside Europe. Wright suggested that Health Board and School data was useful for helping chart numbers of migrants, as was the International Passenger Survey. However, the data is confusing and mixed and what might be required, if politically acceptable, would be further questions in Census 2011 around arrival, length of stay and citizenship status. Such a measure would be a start in trying to get an accurate handle on migration figures and their ever-changing and transient nature.

The first two papers of the morning session were given by Eldin Fahmy, from Bristol University, on Poverty, wealth and place in Britain during 1968 and 2005, and by Hafiz Khan, from the Oxford Institute of Ageing, on global attitudes towards the costs of care. These papers were both a little outside the remit of the central devolution theme but complemented the day well and the papers were a lesson in not just the substantive topics covered but also a timely reminder of the difficulties in presenting complex quantitative data. Both papers and presentations were very 'full' and at times it was difficult to keep up with everything that the authors were trying to convey. Fahmy's presentation was the more understandable of the two, as I heard it, and he picked up on some interesting ideas such as comparing the fate of the 'breadline poor' with the 'exclusive wealthy' as well as charting UK poverty and wealth data between the 1970s and 1990s. Not surprisingly, the conclusion here was that rich and poor are leading 'parallel lives' and there is far less social mixing now between the social classes than perhaps there once was (though this notion is open for debate). Certainly, with the effects of the very real 'credit crunch' kicking in, not to mention related 'public issues' of increasing personal debt, fuel price rises and a spate of house repossessions, the need for accurate and responsive data on poverty and wealth is a challenge and needed more than ever. Khan's paper on the costs of care was rather ambitious and wide in scope, covering as it did research findings from several countries and, literally, thousands of interviews. Questions were asked regarding old age and retirement and the financing and support for care. Both employers and 'consumers' of care were asked their thoughts on what constitutes old age and how it is perceived by different people in different countries and, importantly, who bears the responsibility for paying for this care? The impression was left, reading hard between the data that was presented, that it all comes down to variables but there is a noticeable distinction in data between 'developing' and 'developed' nations. Overall though the presentation by Khan was rather confusing and too much was crammed into too little time. Unfortunately, the session didn't bring out the best in what the data was doubtless trying to tell us.

After lunch three further papers were delivered, all relevant to Scotland and the context and politics of devolution. Michael Rosie and Ross Bond, from the University of Edinburgh, treated the audience to another glorious (and amusing) 'double-act' performance on the topic of national identities and politics after devolution, in England as well as Scotland. Given the theme of the conference, a proportion of the presentation dealt with the thorny issue of how you go about measuring national identity. The 'Rad Stats' audience were informed that a range of options are available to social researchers working in this field, from fairly simple 'tick box' or 'forced choice' survey/questionnaire formats to more complex measures that use scales or key identities, where nationality is one possible 'identity' amongst many other choices (including age, class, religion etc). As sociologists, Rosie and Bond, of course, reaffirmed the now widely held belief and commonly accepted argument that *all* identities are relational and fluid and we each have multiple identities. We are not, literally, one person. Or rather, we are one person but are made up of many layers and characteristics in terms of how we see ourselves and, crucially, how we see other people. Context is important here – from local city/place identities to nation states and territorial identities. What followed in the presentation was a range of statistics from a survey that had been recently completed on national identities. The results appeared to show that 'Scottish' is an important label for Scottish people, with over 80% of respondents declaring themselves as, primarily, 'Scottish' (as opposed, for example, to 'British' or even more cosmopolitan, 'European'). Similarly, 'Welshness' is important to Welsh people with similar figures reported in how people 'choose' their (national) identities. Interestingly, in using the scales, it was apparent that people were quick to define themselves outside the national labels as well, instead thinking of themselves as, primarily, a parent or a spouse, a woman or a worker.

The paper from Rachel Ormston, who works at the Scottish Centre for Social Research in Edinburgh, looked at some key findings from the last Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (2006) and chose to focus on three major ('iconic') Scottish policies that reflect, she correctly argued, devolved Scottish priorities: 1) free personal care for the elderly, 2) reform on Higher Education tuition fees and 3) the national smoking ban. Ormston examined these policies in some detail and looked at the kinds of support (and criticism or ambivalence) they had from the survey respondents. Did these 'flagship' policies represent 'Scottish' socio-economic and political aspirations? Who is benefiting most from these policies, in class-terms? For all three measures discussed it was found that there was a 'distinctiveness' in terms of their 'Scottishness', but a distinctiveness that England and other parts of the United

Kingdom had a vested interest in looking at as well (with England following Scotland in terms of implementing a smoking ban of course). On personal care and tuition fees the story is very different with England and Scotland at completely opposite ends of the spectrum regarding their policy and political approaches to such matters. In terms of positive and negative dynamics to all this, Ormston noted that the smoking policies and tuition fees policies were essentially 'middle class' in nature. Tuition fees reform, in particular, advantaged the young and the wealthy.

The last paper of the day was presented by Dave Byrne from Durham University. This was quite a canny move on the part of the conference organisers. Byrne's style is brilliantly engaging, funny and provocative – and all the more so on this occasion given that his paper was looking at vexed topic of 'the oversubsidized periphery'. Guess which bit of the UK map he had in mind here! Byrne critically reviewed the origins, workings and flaws of the much-derided Barnett Formula in determining public sector spending and the distribution of such spending, looking at those populations who benefited from it in Scotland and also in London. Fundamentally, who gets what? It was noted that the Scots poor are doing badly across various socio-economic and health indicators whereas the middle classes, thanks to some of the 'flagship' devolution policies noted by Ormston, are doing quite nicely (even with the ensuing 'credit crunch' making its impact felt). Byrne's paper was challenging and genuinely thought-provoking and produced some of the best questions asked from the floor. It deserves to be read by all those who declare themselves interested in the politics of devolution and advocates of the redistribution of wealth.

In closing this brief summary paper, I should say that as discussant, it was my job to try and capture the essence of the day. I have found this to be something of a difficult task, but, nonetheless, I have tried to do this as best I can. Suffice to say I will never be a discussant at a conference ever again. It is far too much like 'hard work'. You need to turn up for 9am and listen, carefully, to every single paper and you can't take an extended lunch break or nip off home at 3pm. In total, I scribbled semi-legible notes over thirty seven pages of my W. H. Smiths A5 jotter, based on the presentations offered on the day. Trying to make sense of these notes a few weeks (okay, I mean months) after the event was a real struggle, given my awful handwriting as well as the complex content of some of the papers. The day was a real success though and the presentations, as they say, were 'rich and varied'. As mentioned previously, the papers also served to tackle some of the 'big' questions of social research (why do we ask the questions we ask, how do we best present this data, how do we read and understand the data

as well as use it to try and make society better) alongside the specifics of the topics under investigation. Not to highlight any particular papers but, from a purely personal point of view, the presentation on child wellbeing and happiness, as well as the one on Scottish migration patterns, were both serious food for thought and Dave Byrne is always someone worth hearing, even if his contentions are usually a mix of the bizarre and the brilliant (and I mean this as a compliment, obviously!).

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Editors' notes

Two papers given at the Conference and described above were not available for inclusion at the time of publication:

Attitudes Toward Bearing the Cost of Care in Later Life: Evidence from a Global Survey, by *Hafiz T A Khan and George W Leeson*

Measuring Child Wellbeing in Scotland, by *Samantha Coope and Ian Storrie*

It is hoped that these will be included in a later issue. Meanwhile, the **Presentation Slides** for these and all the presentations, as well as the Conference photos, can be found at

<http://www.radstats.org.uk/conf2008/programme.htm>

Abstracts can be found at

http://www.radstats.org.uk/conf2008/Programme_w_abstracts.pdf

The editors are pleased to include another paper, not presented at the Conference.

Political Statistics Pertaining to Devolution in Scotland, by *John Martyn*