

Making sense of the United Kingdom: the declining importance of the 'Westminster model'

Presentation for Department of Political
Science, University of São Paulo, 9 December
2010

Alan Trench

(University of Edinburgh and the Constitution
Unit, UCL; Author, 'Devolution Matters' blog)

The 'Westminster model' and modern Britain

In this talk I will:

- Discuss traditional formulations of the 'Westminster model' as an account of how the UK's system of government works
- Identify a number of challenges to that model that have emerged, particularly over the last 15 years or so
- Discuss the UK's 'territorial politics', which never fitted comfortably into the 'Westminster model', and which changed after devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 1999
- Assess the overall usefulness of the 'Westminster model' as a way of understanding the UK's government and constitution today

The traditional description of British politics is the 'Westminster model'

- Applied between 1945 and 1990 (or so), and for much of the nineteenth century
- But didn't apply between about 1890 and 1945, as the Liberal party kept splitting, and as Labour emerged as the chief alternative to the Conservatives
- In the period 1945-90, key to its working was the cross-party post-War consensus:
 - Keynesian **economics**: government management of the macro economy, extensive public ownership of industry, commitment to full employment
 - The Beveridge model of the **welfare state**: free universal health care, old age pensions, unemployment benefits and other financial help for poorer people (children's allowances etc), public housing and support for housing costs
- By the late 1970s this consensus was under serious economic and political pressure, and shattered by Thatcher governments.

Lijphart's 10 criteria for the Westminster model

- Concentration of executive power in one-party and bare-majority cabinets
- Cabinet dominance
- Two party system
- Majoritarian and disproportional system of elections
- Interest group pluralism (not corporatism)
- Unitary and centralized government
- Concentration of legislative power in a unicameral legislature
- Constitutional flexibility
- Absence of judicial review
- A central bank controlled by the executive

What about a non-political, permanent civil service?

Many of these criteria were already under pressure by 1999

- Unicameralism – Thatcher period saw the House of Lords become increasingly assertive
 - New Labour started a process of reform (still uncompleted), and removed most of the hereditary peers
- Judicial review (and so the political role of the judges) has become more important, partly thanks to European Union law and the European Convention on Human Rights (Human Rights Act 1998)
- Central bank – became independent in 1997
- Decreasing constitutional flexibility as more of the constitution is now written (constraints from European Union and ECHR/Human Rights Act)
- Change in the role of the civil service in making policy, thanks to think tanks – focus on ‘delivery’

The decline of the 2-party system

The UK has turned from the 2-party system the 'Westminster model' assumes, into a 2 ½ party system at Westminster level.

- Key factor is emergence of Liberal/Liberal Democrats as a third party – now 57 Westminster MPs (out of 650)
- But the Conservatives face a challenge from their right, from the anti-EU UK Independence Party (no seats at Westminster, but 12 MEPs)
- And this doesn't take into account the Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties (together, they have 9 seats at Westminster)
- In any case, Westminster is not the sole electoral arena: there are also the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and Northern Ireland Assembly

The decline of the 2-party system II: the rise of the Liberal Democrats

- Liberal Party collapsed electorally after 1945, but saw a revival starting in 1962
- Alliance, then merger with Social Democratic Party which split from Labour in 1982 (merged. c. 1990)
- Regularly securing 20-25% of UK-wide vote, but failed to translate that into seats thanks to majoritarian electoral system
- But finally started to work out how to do that from 1997 onward – regularly got 50-65 seats since then
- Limited Parliamentary impact of that under Labour governments with large majorities 1997-2005
- But became crucial in 2010 with decline in Labour vote (even though Lib Dem vote also went down slightly) – hence Coalition government of Conservatives and Lib Dems

The 'territorial constitution': making the United Kingdom

The Westminster model assumes that the United Kingdom is a single, unitary state. This isn't true – even if it often looks like one. It is a compound monarchy, or a 'state of unions'.

- 4 nations: England, Scotland, Wales, (Northern) Ireland
- Historically: Scotland was an independent kingdom, keen to maintain its separate identity
- While Wales and Ireland were possessions of the English crown. Culturally and socially distinct, but politically under English control
- Wales legally incorporated into England 1536/1540
- Scotland came under the English crown in 1603 – a personal not constitutional union under James VI & I

The 'territorial constitution': making the United Kingdom II

- Creation of a *Parliamentary* union of England and Scotland by the Treaty of Union of 1707
 - Followed collapse of Scottish attempt to colonise Darien (Panama), which destroyed Scottish public finances
 - A Union of Parliaments, and economic union which gave Scotland access to English markets in Britain and overseas
 - Left intact not just Scottish sense of separate nationhood
 - But also key institutions: the established Church, the law and the Scottish courts, the banking system and the Universities; so Scotland retained its autonomy over much of domestic affairs including education, legal rights and public welfare provision

The ambivalent position of Northern Ireland

- Ireland: legally incorporated into Union by Act of Union of 1801 (following security threats during Napoleonic wars)
 - Supposed to be accompanied by enfranchising Catholic population, but this did not happen until 1829
- Treatment as a colony: Irish 'Potato' famine of 1846-7
 - Campaigns for independence: through Parliament during C18, 1916 'Easter uprising', Anglo-Irish war 1919-20
- Creation of 'Irish Free state' and Partition of Northern Ireland 1922
 - Northern Ireland chosen as largest area where Protestant community was in a majority, but included about 1/3 Catholics
 - Devolved government in N Ireland 1922-72: Protestant domination
 - Commitment of Irish nationalism to Irish unity; discrimination against Catholic population of NI a long-standing area of anger and resentment

The ambivalent position of Northern Ireland

- Violence broke out 1969 – ‘the Troubles’: continued through 1970s and 1980s, often spilling into British mainland (bombing campaigns by IRA)
 - Cease-fires from early 1990s; peace through Good Friday/Belfast Agreement of 1998
 - UK’s declaration of ‘no selfish strategic interest’ in NI; commitment to Irish unification if supported by majority of total population there
 - Restoration of devolved government as one of three ‘strands’: also all-Ireland and ‘archipelagic’ relationships
 - Agreement heavily influenced by ‘consociational’ approaches to reconciling divided communities
 - Problematic working, with devolution suspended 2002-07; amended by St Andrews Agreement, 2006 and devolved government restored March 2007
- N Ireland has to be understood as an exception to any generalisation about ‘the United Kingdom’; and its political treatment by the UK has emphasised its exceptionalism
 - Its 1 ½ million people must be the most studied group on the planet!
 - Demography works in favour of the Catholic minority in the medium term

Differences between Scotland, Wales and England

- About 60 million people live in UK as a whole:
 - 1.5 million in N Ireland
 - 4.5 million in Scotland
 - 3.5 million in Wales
 - 45.5 million in England – c. 85 per cent of the whole
- Strong identification in S & W with their ‘nations’, more than with being ‘British’ – the Moreno question
 - And increasing since 1999
- Other differences:
 - S & W much less ethnically diverse – ethnic minorities concentrated in parts of England and especially London
 - GDP levels are lower than UK average; Wales is among poorest parts of UK
 - S & W vote strongly against Conservative party – mostly for Labour at UK elections

Differences between Scotland, Wales and England II

- In Wales, ramified by the importance of the Welsh language
 - Taught in all schools since 1986; separate TV station too
 - Used everyday by about 50% of population; 1st language of about 20%
 - Bilingualism for official purposes
- England itself diverse – particularly divided between prosperous, post-industrial, services-oriented economy of south-eastern corner around London, and ‘outer England’ in northern and western parts which once were industrial areas but where industry has collapsed
- Differences in social attitudes on matters like role of state, nature of welfare etc limited
- But policy preferences in S & W for more ‘social democratic’ approaches are clear

The constitutional design of devolution

Intended to preserve the Union – enabling self-government for S & W without need for independence

- Devolution ‘the settled will of the Scottish people’ in 1990s
- Less firmly based in Wales – much weaker form, partly reflecting divisions within Welsh Labour
- Separate elected legislatures: Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales (since 2007)
- Profoundly asymmetric – only for the historic nations of UK. England still treated as a single entity, governed solely from Westminster.
- Doesn’t affect sovereignty of Westminster Parliament (at least formally)
 - regulated by convention that Parliament won’t legislate on devolved matters without devolved consent

The constitutional design of devolution II

- Scottish and Welsh MPs still sit at Westminster, and vote on 'English' matters
 - A source of concern to many, especially the Conservatives
- Little sign overall impact of devolution thought through at UK level – or any plan to manage the UK as a state.
 - There is no 'devolution strategy', just a series of ad hoc exceptions to wider rules
 - Nor any clear conception of what the UK as a 'social union' might be
- No financial reform since 1999 – devolved governments funded by a block grant from UK Government, which doesn't reflect need factors, fiscal capacity or anything – it 'just is'
 - Hang-over from pre-devolution period
- Attenuated use of intergovernmental institutions and mechanisms
- From English/UK point of view, devolution helps the centre to forget about Scotland and Wales

Scotland and Wales as political arenas

The 'political centre' in Scotland and Wales is clearly to the left of the UK as a whole

- Differentiation of policy preferences is largely due to the different nature of politics in S & W
- Proportional voting systems for devolved legislatures since 1999 (additional member system) – no guaranteed majority, and coalition or minority governments
- Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales are 4-party systems: Labour, Conservatives, Lib Dem and nationalist parties (Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru)
- Both SNP and PC clearly committed to 'social democratic' policies
- Differential voting behaviour – working to benefit of SNP and PC in devolved elections (and Labour in UK ones)
- In 2007, 75.5 per cent of Scottish voters and 79.4 per cent of Welsh voters supported clearly 'left-wing' parties – but at 2010 UK elections, only 55.3 per cent of voters did so (the last time Conservatives did as well in Scotland as in UK as a whole was 1951).

What do the publics want from devolution?

Good-quality data (from Scottish Social Attitudes and similar surveys) suggest that what people want is 'more devolution' – but not less, and not independence

- Limited support for independence, even in Scotland – never above 34 per cent
- In Scotland and Wales, desire for greater devolved autonomy
 - Belief that UK level remains most important level of government
 - But that devolved level should be most important (roughly 20 point gap, over about 10 years)
- Higher levels of trust in devolved institutions than UK ones
- In England: happiness for Scotland and Wales to have devolution, but no interest in it for themselves
- Concern about extent to which English taxes support higher levels of services in Scotland, and better services generally
- Evidence about policy differences confusing: support in S & W for both difference and uniformity!

So where is the 'Westminster model' in 2010?

- The UK has now clearly moved a long way from the classic 'Westminster model' – if that was ever an accurate description, not an ideal type
- Some aspects still apply: we still have concentration of power in the hands of a bare-majority executive, Cabinet dominance, majoritarian elections and interest-group pluralism
- But
 - No longer so highly centralised
 - Developing bicameralism
 - Increasingly written, inflexible constitution
 - Increasing role for judges
 - Certainly a multi-party system when Scottish and Welsh arenas are taken into account, and elections to the European Parliament (all of which use proportional voting systems)

So where is the 'Westminster model' in 2010 II?

- Regarding the party system at UK level, much depends on how well the Lib Dems do at next UK election (2015). Will their voters punish them for forming a government with the Conservatives that is undertaking many deeply unpopular policies? If so, we will be back toward a 2-party system.
- Over the last 15 years, much has changed to undermine the Westminster model and turn the UK into a polity that, in Lijphart's terms, is a hybrid between majoritarian and consensual models.
 - And ironically, it is now a Coalition government based on consensus that is trying to rebuild a more majoritarian approach, while it was a majority government that moved the system in a 'consensual' direction.

**Read more about devolution on the
'Devolution Matters' blog**

<http://devolutionmatters.wordpress.com/>