

Devolution and national identity: the rules of English (dis)engagement

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ABSTRACT. In this article I consider why the expected English backlash to the asymmetric UK devolution settlement has not yet materialised. Using a corpus of conversational interviews, I discuss the various ways in which people in England currently understand the relationship between national identity and political entitlement. I conclude that English political quiescence, far from constituting an enigma, is comprehensible in the light of the fact that members of the general public do not usually base their assessments of political legitimacy on calculations of English national self-interest defined in contrast to Scotland. Rather, political issues tend to be judged with reference to principles of equity and procedural justice. English identity is rarely considered legitimate grounds for political voice. Rather, people are inclined to demonstrate a concern to balance the recognition of Scottish rights to national self-determination, with a display of public reason, civility and civic responsibility understood to be normatively incumbent upon the English majority.

KEYWORDS: apathy; constitutional change; English identity; liberalism; political knowledge; public opinion

The enigma of the missing English backlash

Over a decade ago, debates concerning the establishment of the Scottish parliament were accompanied by a series of moral panics concerning what, at the time, appeared to be the inevitable response of the population of England. The Earl of Onslow summed up the concerns of many when, during the second reading of the Scotland Bill in the House of Lords in June 1998, he stated categorically that ‘the English simply will not put up with it’.

Pundits differed on the finer details of the impending crisis. For some, the English would be galvanised into action once they realised that the ‘break-up of Britain’ threatened their cherished sense of British identity. Others predicted that the English public would mobilise around more pragmatic concerns relating to their country’s fiscal disadvantage, or the fact that the asymmetric character of the political settlement had resulted in a relative democratic deficit for the population of England (see Bryant 2008). These differences in focus aside, commentators generally adopted a similar con-

jectural schema: the fact that the component nations of the UK were not treated equivalently would provoke resentment that would, in turn, lead to conflict (see Curtice). This kind of stance is illustrated in an extract from Lord Ellenborough's contribution to the Lords' debate on the Scotland Bill:

There is no point in bringing forward proposals that are not fair to all concerned – and the proposals are not fair to England. The English not only expect fairness but are just as entitled as the Scots, Welsh and Irish to express their national identity. The irresponsible weakness of the Bill is that it builds up potential conflict between Scotland and England.¹

According to this account, the fundamental problem with the Scotland Bill was that it did not allow English people equal rights to political expression of their national identity. In contrast, other commentators, especially those from England, argued that the irresponsible weakness of the Bill rested precisely on the fact that it *would* encourage people in England to express their national identity in political terms:

The Government need to make up their mind what they think they are doing. Is their devolution policy based on regionalism or nationalism? If I understand the Bill correctly, I must conclude that the Government are acting on a sense of Scottish national self-identity. If that is so, the Bill is about nationalism, which is why I worry about the reawakening of English nationalism.

On whatever concept the Bill is based, the Government simply have to treat the other three parts of the United Kingdom in exactly the same way, because if they do not, as others have said before me, they will provoke an English backlash. Indeed, I get the impression that that backlash has already begun.

Far too many people seem to have forgotten what English nationalism is capable of. Even the briefest scanning of the history of the United Kingdom should be enough to remind us all: rape, pillage and mayhem leap from virtually every page of that history. Throughout Scotland, Wales and Ireland there are countless monuments to the local heroes who were slain in a vain attempt to stem a relentless tide of English domination. It is worth looking back at what history has to teach us (David Wilshire MP, Commons Second Reading of the Scotland Bill).²

Having been warned to anticipate mob rule, carnage, pillage and mayhem, the actual reaction of the population of England to the establishment of the Scottish parliament proved something of an anti-climax. A relatively small number of people mobilised through organisations such as the Campaign for an English Parliament, but the majority appeared disinclined to engage in any formal political response (see Aughey 2010; Curtice 2010, this issue). Regular *British Social Attitudes* surveys found little evidence of general resentment (Curtice and Heath 2000; Curtice and Seyd 2001; Curtice 2003; Curtice and Sandford 2004), and relatively low levels of popular support for the establishment of an English parliament or the development of English regional governance (e.g. Heath, Rethon and Jarvis 2002). As Aughey (2007: 198) summarised the situation, 'the impression (so far) is not one of simmering outrage but one of national equanimity'. Contrary to the Earl of Onslow's confident prediction, the English appeared to have simply put up with it.

Crisis? What crisis?

In this article I will consider why the resentful English backlash, predicted so confidently over a decade ago, has not materialised. Interestingly, this question has rarely been asked. Survey researchers are generally content to note that the asymmetric settlement apparently reflects the ‘settled will of the English people’ (e.g. Curtice and Seyd 2001; Bogdanor 2005), sometimes casting this as a curious enigma: ‘people in England may accept the principle of asymmetric devolution . . . *strangely*, people in England do not appear to be particularly keen on devolution for themselves’ (Curtice 2006: 104, my emphasis).

On the rare occasions when commentators have attempted to explain this unanticipated state of affairs, they have been disinclined to consider the possibility that the original forecasts might have been built upon false premises. Rather, they typically resort to speculative assertions concerning pathologies of English national character. Two kinds of account predominate. The first attributes the absence of English political response to apathy: a moral or motivational failure, often seen to be the product of arrogance, complacency or lethargy. As the political commentator Andrew Marr put it:

You hear people yelling about some looming crisis. What do you do? You sit back, sip your cooling tea and don’t bother your fat backside. How else can we explain the utter lack of interest in the possibility of the breakup of Britain, at least as far as the English majority is concerned?³

‘Apathy’ is a convenient construct for explaining away any form of political inaction. However, whether this can provide an adequate explanation for English political quiescence in the aftermath of UK devolution is questionable. Political scientists have certainly interpreted the tendency for people in England to respond to survey questions concerning devolution using the ‘don’t know’ option and avoiding the ‘strongly agree/disagree’ response categories as *prima facie* evidence of English ‘indifference’ (Curtice and Sandford 2004). However, these same response styles can also be used to convey ambivalence, a strongly held middle-of-the-road attitude, or can be employed when the respondent does not understand the question. In addition, any explanation of political quiescence needs to be able to distinguish between situations in which people are passively detached from current public debates and those in which political disengagement is actively motivated by concerns over civil etiquette and democratic respect (Eliasoph 1998; Condor and Gibson 2007).

A second form of explanation focuses on a supposed cognitive deficiency of the English public. Specifically, it is suggested that people in England have somehow failed to recognise their identity, and hence their distinctive interests, as English. These arguments draw upon widely available stereotypes to the effect that people in England do not know the difference between Englishness and Britishness (cf. Condor 2006; Condor and Abell 2006), or

that they simply lack any sense of national identity (cf. Aughey 2007). Once again, this line of argument is rather short on substantiating evidence. In the first place, survey researchers have found little statistical relationship in England between individual respondents' reports of their national identity and their constitutional preferences (Curtice and Seyd 2001; Curtice 2010, this issue). More generally, the presumption that people in England suffer from a collective deficiency of national identity often stems from an overly literal interpretation of questionnaire and interview responses. Forms of behaviour that are typically interpreted as evidence of English lack of, or indifference to, national identity (such as verbal identity denials, attempts to mitigate identity claims or a disinclination to engage in debates about whether they see themselves as English or British) may often in fact represent civility devices, designed to display modesty, interpersonal sensitivity and responsible citizenship (Condor 1996, 2006, 2010; Condor and Abell 2006).

Finally, as an explanation of political quiescence, identity-deficit explanations often appear to rest upon a rather dubious form of syllogistic reasoning: because political action may be promoted by national identity, it therefore follows that inaction must be caused by an absence of national identity. This line of argument overlooks the possibility that policy preferences might be motivated by concerns other than those of perceived national group self-interest. In addition, it rests upon the tacit presumption that the only way in which national identity may be manifested politically is through the 'rational' pursuit of national self-interest.

Studying commonsense political reasoning

When discussing the response of the population of England to devolved governance, politicians and public-opinion researchers have tended to invoke objectified, categorical images of the English. In an early study of vernacular political reasoning, Lane (1962: 9) outlined how the use of lightly structured conversational interviews might help to reveal the kinds of variety in, nuances of and coherence between the views expressed by particular individuals that are easily obscured when information is collected by more structured survey methods. In particular, Lane noted how conversational interviewing may provide 'insight into connotative meanings of words or phrases', enabling the analyst to 'follow the course of associative thinking' and to appreciate 'the mechanisms of argument and evasion employed with sensitive political material'. In this article, I will consider how a depth analysis of conversational interview discourse might usefully supplement survey research on the relationship between national identity and attitudes towards devolved governance in England.

The study on which I report was conceived as a programme of inductive research (see Haig 1995) and designed with two main objectives in mind. First,

I was concerned to shed light on the range of ways in which people in England⁴ understand the process of UK constitutional change. My aim was to harvest a comprehensive (ideally 'saturated') sample of arguments used by ordinary social actors. To this end, I took pains to ensure that the sample of respondents was as diverse as possible⁵ and that the topics of national identity and constitutional change were raised in a variety of rhetorical contexts in the interview conversations.

The interviews were designed to ensure that the data we collected would, as far as possible, reflect the types of vocabulary and lines of argument that the respondents might use in their everyday lives rather than simply reflecting back forms of representation primed by prior information or introduced by the researcher during the interview. Throughout the research process, care was taken to avoid alerting participants to my specific interest in national identity and constitutional change. The interviews were presented as 'chats', and usually took place in settings where idle talk might occur normally, such as coffee shops, public houses, the respondent's place of work, round the kitchen table during the day, or over an evening meal. Respondents were encouraged to talk freely in response to general prompts concerning personal identity, civil society and citizenship, with the interviewer apparently raising particular issues of interest incidentally as they became relevant to the ongoing flow of conversation.

My second objective was to develop a comprehensive and robust scheme for classifying distinctive constellations of belief or attitude that individual social actors may adopt toward issues relating to national identity and devolved governance.⁶ In the following sections I will start out by briefly noting some common features of the interview accounts. I will then go on to distinguish four different types of argument that respondents could use when discussing the legitimacy of devolved governance and formulating views concerning the relationship between national identity and political entitlement.⁷

Five common features of vernacular accounts of devolution

Perceived situational relevance of English national identity

In view of the diverse character of the sample it was hardly surprising that respondents differed in the ways in which they described their personal sense of national identity. In addition, it was apparent that the same individual's account of their sense of national identity could vary according to rhetorical context. However, in the course of discussing devolution, all respondents spontaneously adopted an English national footing, often contrasting an English *we* and *here* with a Scottish *them* and *there*. This tendency was apparent even among people who in other contexts refused to position themselves in national terms, and among those from minority ethnic backgrounds who consistently claimed never to regard themselves as English.

Lack of specific knowledge concerning the devolution process

Respondents generally displayed a basic awareness of UK constitutional reform, and the vast majority were at least aware of the existence of the Scottish parliament. However, very few people possessed detailed information about the devolution process, and even fewer displayed any meaningful awareness of debates concerning the prospect of English regional governance. Significantly, respondents were also generally unaware of those particular issues that political scientists predicted might constitute a 'source of tension' (Curtice and Seyd 2001: 230). For example, there was little evidence that people knew much about the fiscal relationship between Scotland and England.

Distinctions between attitude objects

Summaries of survey data often gloss questions concerning various policy issues pertaining to UK constitutional change in generic terms (e.g. as 'attitudes towards the principle of asymmetric devolution'). However, the respondents' vernacular accounts were often more nuanced than these kinds of formulations allow. For example, speakers often spontaneously distinguished their attitudes towards the Scottish parliament from their attitudes towards devolution as a general political principle. In addition, respondents were inclined to distinguish their views on devolution and/or the Scottish parliament from their opinions about more specific issues. For example, respondents who displayed awareness of the 'West Lothian Question' (relating to the ability of Westminster MPs representing constituencies in Scotland to vote on legislation pertaining only to England) generally expressed the view that the situation was unfair. However, they did not typically treat this consideration as relevant to their general assessment of the legitimacy of the devolution process or of the establishment of the Scottish parliament.

English interests not calculated through comparison with Scotland

As we have seen, elite predictions concerning an impending English backlash generally presumed that resentment would arise once people in England recognised that Scotland and England were not being treated in 'exactly the same way'. However, from the interview accounts it was clear that people were not inclined to evaluate their national interests in direct comparison to Scotland. Respondents tended overwhelmingly to employ historical (past–present) rather than international (England–Scotland) comparisons. Consequently, people were typically inclined towards the view that, because the governance of Scotland has 'always been different' and because devolution has not changed the governance of England, the situation for England has not changed materially.

Devolution understood as a matter of political rights

Predictions that the establishment of the Scottish parliament would fuel resentment among the population of England tended to be predicated on the

assumption that people would inevitably evaluate the new political status quo in terms of its substantive outcomes. In practice, however, the interview respondents rarely employed this kind of logic. Rather, their discussions of the Scottish parliament typically involved appeals to abstract principles of procedural justice. Specifically, the establishment of the Parliament was generally understood to be fair in so far as it reflected the rights of Scottish people to political self-determination. This perspective was summed up by the popular cliché, ‘if that’s what they want’:

I: So what were your views on the Scottish parliament?

JM: Good for them, if that’s what they want.

I: In what ways do you think that having a separate parliament will be good for Scotland?

JM: Well, I’m not actually sure that it is that good for Scotland [laughs]. But it’s not up to me is it? They had a referendum and that’s what they voted for.⁸

This tendency for assessments of the Scottish parliament to focus on rights and procedural justice meant that respondents typically did not regard the substantive outcome for England to be a relevant factor when calculating the legitimacy of the new constitutional arrangements:

KG: I’m not sure if it’s good for England. But it’s fair. If that’s what they want and what they voted for then I think they should have their own parliament. But I’m not sure how it’s going to pan out for England, whether England will lose out in any way. I don’t know.

In view of predictions that the asymmetric character of the devolution settlement would provoke an English backlash *against Scotland*, it was interesting to note that, on the rare occasions when respondents did voice any resentment concerning the consequences of devolution for their own country, they typically attributed blame to the British government rather than to the Scottish people.

As we will see shortly, rights-based arguments could take a variety of forms, and respondents in particular disagreed about the extent to which rights-based arguments should be applied to England. However, the common view that the Scottish parliament reflected the settled will of the Scottish people often led people to suggest that the population of England was not entitled to object, or even to express views on the subject:

I: Do you think Scotland should have its own parliament [. . .] do you agree with it?

DP: Dunno. That’s actually down to the people of the country.

I: Mm.

DP: That’s not for us to decide. That’s for them to decide.

I: Well, for you on your English side of the fence, what do you think?

DP: Oh I can’t answer that.⁹

Four lines of argument

Although survey researchers often represent their findings in terms of a single English national public opinion, it is hardly surprising that in the context of conversational-style interviews, people from England employed a range of

different arguments about UK constitutional change. I will summarise these in terms of four distinct, relatively coherent, clusters of views,¹⁰ which I will term as follows: popular nationalism; localism; reasonable pragmatism; and liberal cosmopolitanism.¹¹

In view of the common assumption that policy preferences are likely to be determined by a social actor's personal sense of national identity, it is interesting to note that only one of these lines of argument was reliably associated with a particular claim to national self-identity. Popular nationalism repertoires typically involved a speaker linking their assertion of English-not-British identity with a claim to political entitlement.¹² The other lines of argument could all accommodate a speaker variously claiming a strong, moderate or weak sense of identity as English, British, both or neither. However, this is not to say that the respondents were necessarily treating their sense of English identity as irrelevant to their views on devolved governance. On the contrary, each of these frames of reference tended to be associated with a particular understanding of the implications of English nationality for political voice and entitlement to an opinionation.¹³

Popular nationalism: national identity as political entitlement

Popular nationalist lines of argument were characterised by a combination of two distinctive features. First was the explicit invocation of an ethnic conceptualisation of nationhood in conjunction with the endorsement of political nationalism as an abstract principle. This stance was reflected, among other things, by the respondent displaying concern over the distinction between England and Britain (including a tendency to self-categorise as 'English not British'), and voicing opposition to multiculturalism and EU integration.

The second distinctive feature involved the adoption of what Kazin (1998) terms the 'language of popularism'. This entailed the respondent treating their avowals of English identity as claims to commonality with other 'ordinary' English people. Typically, this also involved the respondent adopting the stance of speaking 'up' for The English against existing agents and structures of state power, and against a dominant liberal value system. These arguments generally had a redemptive quality, pointing towards a utopian future when English national identity, currently suppressed by the British state, would be granted open political expression.

These kinds of accounts tended to be employed by respondents with relatively high levels of general political awareness and relatively high levels of domain-specific knowledge concerning the process of devolution. Respondents typically claimed right-wing political views, and were often affiliated with non-mainstream political parties.

Speakers employing the discourse of popular nationalism typically adopted a 'rational' position in Rawls's (1996) sense, in that they treated the accomplishment of national self-determination as an ultimate political good. They often expressed strong support for the Scottish parliament in so

far as it could be regarded as the first step towards eventual independence for the component nations of the UK:

AD: Scotland and England, I mean it's two separate countries, int'it?

I: Yeah.

AD: So why haven't they got a right to, if it's two separate countries? Why should we have this political correctness all one Great Britain. I mean, it's their choice. If the Scottish people want to rule themselves then they should. They are proud of being Scottish and good on them. And the English too. We should be allowed to be proud and say, 'we're English'.

I: So if the parliament's that's in London became just an English one and dealt with English affairs, that would be OK?

AD: Yeah. Well, that's how it should be.

From this vantage point, the value of national self-determination as a political end in its own right could be understood even to trump concerns over England's material interests:

I: What about Scottish independence?

LM: Well, I don't think that they need much from us do they? What can we offer the Scots?

I: What about England? Would we lose out?

LM: Almost certainly we'd be worse off. But all countries should be independent. Home Rule.

The adoption of popular nationalism as a general frame of political reference did not automatically determine the bottom-line position that a speaker adopted towards specific policy issues. For example, although respondents could invoke values of political nationalism to support arguments in favour of the symmetrical treatment of England and Scotland, they did not always do so. In the next extract we see a case where the speaker treats national self-governance as right in principle, but contrasts the pragmatic implications for Scotland with the likely consequences for England where the existence of a national parliament might paradoxically militate against the ultimate goal of national sovereignty:

I: Some people have suggested that one of the ways to go for devolution is to have an English parliament, you know Scotland's got theirs and the Welsh have got theirs, would you want to see that?

HK: Assuming that the changes we've got are irreversible, and it seems only fair that from an equitable stand point that yeah if you are going to go and have a Welsh assembly and a Scottish parliament that there should in fact be something that was going to go and provide a sounding board for the English.

But, that said, I am not pro-European. So to that extent I am not anxious to go and see an English parliament. Because I think it would be so much easier for them to go and slide us into a region of Europe and nothing could be said about it. And to that extent, even though I can see it's unfair, I suppose if it came to a referendum I wouldn't, in fact, go and vote for an English parliament.

Localite frames: prioritising concrete over imagined community

The main distinguishing feature of the localite (cf. Merton 1957) frame of reference was, as the label suggests, that the speaker displayed a primary

concern for issues understood to be personal, concrete and close to home, and displayed little interest in matters understood to be remote, generic or abstract. A concern for the personal and the local could also be evident in popular nationalist accounts. However, in these cases, the speaker tended to elide the local with the national, and to treat their personal experiences, social networks and local area of residence as exemplifications of the generic construct of Englishness (cf. Cohen's 1996 construct of "personal nationalism"). In contrast, localite repertoires tended to cast nationality in general, and Englishness in particular, as experience-distant constructs. In consequence, interviewees could experience great difficulty in eliciting conversation about the respondents' views concerning national issues, and about their personal sense of national identity.¹⁴

This kind of accounting system tended to be used by people with little formal education and relatively little experience of geographical mobility. These respondents tended to be politically disengaged, and to possess only the most basic understanding of the process of UK constitutional change.

English national identity was rarely associated spontaneously with entitlement to political voice by people who adopted a localite perspective. However, to put this in context, these individuals were generally disinclined to claim political voice on the basis of any abstract category membership. Some respondents made a positive claim to political apathy, and adopted a 'don't know/don't care' position in relation to devolution:

EV: Well to be honest I'd have to say I don't [care about the Scottish parliament]. The point is I'm not interested in politics. But in saying that everybody should get their own say [...] So if they want to have their own government it's entirely up to them. It's no skin off my nose.

I: Would you want to see an English one? If Scotland's got theirs would you want an English one to just look after England?

EV: Just England itself. I'm not particularly worried because again you're talking about politics and politics is one thing I'm not interested in [...] There's certain people who come [into the pub] and they blab on about politics but they turn round to me and they try and get me involved. And if I say something off-hand and they say, 'well if you don't vote what are you saying then?' And I say 'Well I'm only saying it because you asked me' and I just, you know, it's just to pass conversation. I mean, I've even told them they are all as bad as one another. And they say, 'how do you know unless you voted?'. Let's put it this way, all right I've never voted in my life, let's just say it was a tie, let's just say it was a tie right. Are they gonna come and ask me?

Other respondents adopting a localite perspective claimed positive attitudes towards the Scottish parliament. However, because the speakers generally possessed very little information about the devolution process, in practice these opinions often took the form of 'non-attitudes', lacking any meaningful issue-content (cf. Converse 1964). When asked to explain their views, respondents were inclined to produce minimal arguments ('why not?'), which often rested on a banal (Billig 1995) presumption concerning the legitimacy of national self-determination:

MH: Yeah, because they've got issues that we don't have, and only Scottish people would know what to do about it. I mean, they know their country just as much as we know ours. So, why shouldn't they?

I: Do you think there are issues, then, that are English issues or Scottish issues, that aren't British issues if that makes sense?

MH: There must be, otherwise they wouldn't want their own government [laughs].

Whereas people adopting popular nationalist lines of argument could extemporise around core beliefs concerning the value of national self-determination, people adopting localite perspectives were rarely able to justify their endorsement of nationalist politics as a matter of abstract principle, or to maintain an extended line of political argument:

I: [. . .] Are you interested in devolution in Britain, does it interest you?

LA: Yeah. Yeah. It does. Yeah.

I: In what way?

LA: I think erm, yeah, because, well, the way it interests me is because they should have their own parliaments, because they are separate from us.

I: Mm.

LA: And, I mean, the Scottish, they are separate from us, the Irish are separate, separated from us, they are different countries even though, you know, all the history about it, you can say OK, you know, that's not quite the case, but they are, and I think, yes, they should have their own parliaments.

I: Do you think that will have any effect upon this country?

LA: Ooh.

I: In giving people these different parliaments?

LA: Why not? Possibly.

I: What do you think the effect might be?

LA: Ooh, goodness. Politics.

I: Well, it's not really politics.

LA: Well, I mean, I think it will have an effect, like, because things we do, erm, it will have an effect because – because of – stop the tape. I'm stuck [laughs].

Reasonable pragmatism: the normative political irrelevance of (majority) identity

Reasonable pragmatist frames of reference were reasonable in Sibley's (1953) sense of displaying a willingness to adopt a common standpoint and to evaluate political issues in the light of the interests of others. They were pragmatic in the sense of demonstrating a preparedness of compromise in the interests of social harmony and political moderation. Significantly, respondents who adopted a stance of reasonable pragmatism were inclined to position their views in direct opposition to the confrontational discourse of popular nationalism.

The analytic category of reasonable pragmatism embraces a range of arguments concerning devolved governance adopted by people from a variety of backgrounds and mainstream party-political affiliations. The fact that the research sample was not representative in a statistical sense precludes precise estimates concerning the relative distribution of particular styles of argument.

However, research suggests that the kinds of accounts that I am classifying as examples of reasonable pragmatism tend to represent the most common kind of position adopted in explicit discussions of nationhood in England (Condor 1996, 2000, 2006; Condor and Abell 2006).

Speakers adopting a reasonable pragmatist line generally displayed concern for normative virtues of liberal democratic citizenship and values of pluralism. This often entailed a general suspicion of explicit invocations of nationalism and strong public claims to national identity, both of which tended to be regarded as antithetical to values of individualism, universalism and civility. People who presented their views in reasonable pragmatist terms could describe their own sense of national identity in a variety of ways. However, they were generally inclined to treat public claims to national identity as a communicative act that needed to be managed in the light of the sensitivities and interests of others.

From the common vantage point of reasonable pragmatism, speakers could assemble a variety of different sub-lines of argument concerning devolved governance. For example, when discussing the Scottish parliament or the prospect of Scottish independence they could adopt a position of principled agnosticism ('it's not for me to say'). Alternatively, they could express positive views concerning Scottish devolution ('I think it's great'), justified with reference to the rights of Scottish people as free and equal citizens. Finally, they could adopt a position of detached acceptance, typically justified with reference to values of toleration of diversity.

Respondents often displayed their commitment to reasonable pragmatism through the expression of empathy with the populations of Wales and Scotland, in conjunction with the adoption of a general air of rational disinterest:

ML: Yeah [devolution is] OK. It doesn't particularly concern me.

RL: I mean it's – I don't think it's been in the news as much as it was when it first all happened. When devolution first happened.

ML: You don't hear much about it do you really?

RL: You do get the odd thing. Especially around election time when you've obviously got Scottish nationalists and the Welsh nationalists competing for the seats.

I: And what are your views on that? Are you fine with it or – ?

ML: Yeah.

RL: Don't mind.

ML: I can understand it. If I was Welsh, I'd probably be supporting Plaid Cymru and you know.

I: What were your thoughts at the time the Scottish parliament was set up?

RL: I didn't – no I didn't feel strongly about it. No. I mean even before devolution [Scotland] had some different laws and things anyway didn't it?

ML: Well yes, different education system.

RL: Yes.

ML: Which is apparently better than the English one, you know.

RL: Yeah, it's why not, if they want – so I don't know. I just feel like that really, I think. It's up to them. I don't mind either way.

ML: Yeah, I agree with you.

RL: They've been dominated politically and culturally by England for so long. If they want some independence that's up to them. I can understand it. And you only

have to look at what happened in Northern Ireland to see – to see what happens when you try to force a political system on people who don't want it.

I: What would your thoughts be on the possibility of an English parliament in a similar vein to the Scottish parliament?

RL: I think it's just complicating what we've got really. Cos I think our Parliament is more English than anything else, don't you? More London than anything else isn't it?

ML: Yes it would be redundant really wouldn't it? Not necessary.

Significantly, reasonable pragmatist lines of argument tended to cast political fairness as a matter of equity, which cast the asymmetric character of the devolution settlement as essentially fair. Respondents who voiced support for the Scottish parliament could reasonably oppose the idea of an English parliament in a number of ways. They could refer to differences between the two national cultures noting, for example, that people in England were 'not as nationalistic' as the Scots. As Beiner (2003–2004) notes, arguments concerning identity-based rights tend, by their very nature, to be non-symmetrical. Respondents adopting a reasonable pragmatist position often treated the establishment of the Scottish parliament as a matter of 'minority rights' that, by definition, could not reasonably be applied to England:

I: What about the idea of an English parliament?

[. . .]

CJ: Erm. I dunno, I don't actually care. I don't think it's actually hurting England at the moment, not to have their own parliament [. . .] I don't think we have to do that yet. That may come, it may come, but I think that's divisive, I think the Scots have got enough, have suffered enough, to feel resentful. I think they're quite justified in hating our guts, yeah? But I don't think the English are justified in hating the Scots' guts because we've had most of the resources. I think they have come off worse, and so's Wales.

Consequently, whereas Scottish identity could be treated as a legitimate basis for claiming political entitlement, English identity could be understood to entail political responsibility (cf. Williams 2008), displayed through the use of public reason (cf. Rawls 1996) as opposed to appeals to rational self-interest:

I: So, what do you think about Scotland having its own parliament?

PP: It's fine. They had a referendum and that's what they wanted. I'm not sure why they wanted it mind [laughs] but there's no reason why they shouldn't as far as I can see.

I: Do you think that it's likely to have any effect on people in England?

PP: Hm, I shouldn't think so but I don't know that much about it as you might be able to tell. Um, but something I do get a bit concerned about is that mentality, you know, people who are always judging things in terms of what's in it for England and sod anyone else and, you know, the kind of anorak who goes about spouting all this esoteric information; you know, sits in the pub sounding off – of course for all I know it might well be true but, you know, bores you to death with all the facts and figures and wherever I hear an English person starting to spout all the facts and figures, you know, 'Scotland gets this, England doesn't have that', all that sort of thing my heckles start to rise

I: Yeah?

PP: Yeah. I don't know why some people get so het up, why they can't just, y'know, mind their own business. Live and let live.

Liberal cosmopolitanism: principled opposition to national politics

Liberal cosmopolitan lines of argument were distinguished by their explicit rejection of political nationalism. They also entailed opposition to ethnic constructions of nationhood and a strong endorsement of the fact and value of multiculturalism. In the conversational interview context, it was common for respondents to orient to all of these concerns from time to time. In particular, reasonable pragmatist lines of argument often included some endorsement of cosmopolitan values and virtues. However, it was relatively unusual for a speaker to assemble an extended argument around a core commitment to cosmopolitanism as a guiding political principle. Those who did so tended to be highly educated, and to claim left-of-centre political sympathies.

On occasions, respondents adopting a liberal cosmopolitan frame could forward symmetrical arguments concerning UK devolution, in which anti-nationalist political values were applied equally to Scotland and to England. This line of reasoning could lead speakers to express scepticism of, and very occasionally outright objections to, the Scottish parliament as a nationally defined polity. However, in these cases respondents typically found themselves in an ambivalent situation, because any objection to the Scottish parliament could also be construed as disrespectful of the Scots' minority national rights.

One way in which respondents could attempt to manage this potential contradiction was by using class-based considerations to trump the suspect classification of national identity. In the next extract we see one respondent (N.M.) adopting a liberal cosmopolitan frame, attempting to argue her case against another respondent (J.J.) who is adopting a reasonable pragmatist line:

NM: I just don't like this closed nationalism, basically, I don't think people should be defined by national groups, and I don't agree that, that the Scots do it, or other countries [. . .]

JJ: Maybe it is, but I can still see where they're coming from when they get upset about it.

NM: Well, to my mind, it's most of my ancestors probably, who were English, but they were poor English, mostly. And I don't see the difference, really.

JJ: I'm not saying the Scottish are right to be upset about it, I'm saying I can understand why they are.

Respondents adopting liberal cosmopolitan perspectives were inclined to depict nationalism as an atavistic form of ideology and political organisation (see also Condor 2006). Accordingly, they could avoid casting judgement on the Scottish parliament by treating it as a functional irrelevance in the light of the inexorable tide of utopian postnational historical progress:

MS: [. . .] When you think of it the idea of an autonomous Scottish parliament or a Scottish legal system come to that has a restricted shelf life given that in a few years hopefully we'll all be European anyway.

Respondents could also attempt to manage this dilemma by using non-symmetrical normative arguments, according to which the Scottish parlia-

ment was justified with reference to generic values of rights to self-determination, but the prospect of English national self-governance was rejected on the grounds of universal principles of anti-nationalism. For example, in the first of the following extracts the speaker is responding to a question concerning his views on the Scottish parliament:

GC: [. . .] If that's the way they want to go that's democracy, then that's it, isn't it? You have to go with the masses. But there's nothing I can do about it.

The interviewer then follows this up with a question concerning the speaker's views on an English parliament:

I: Would you want to see devolution for here, then? Would you want to see an English parliament?

GC: Not really.

I: Why not? Everybody else gets theirs. Why not?

GC: Well, cos two wrongs don't make a right do they?

Finally, some respondents managed the difficult situation of balancing a recognition of Scottish minority rights with an endorsement of universal values of anti-nationalism by adopting what effectively constituted an exit strategy. Assuming a position of moral relativity, they advocated leaving the Scots to their nationalism and, somewhat paradoxically, advocating Scottish independence as a means by which they, as English, could maintain an ideological commitment to cosmopolitanism:

PO: I got to the stage a while ago when I just thought, this is getting really boring. At first when there was the Scottish parliament and you got those surveys on 'are you English or are you British' or whatever, you thought, yeah, OK, and some of it was even mildly amusing. But now it's not just a bit of a joke, it's getting *really* irritating. It's an indulgence. It's a distraction from all the important things going on. There's Zimbabwe. There's Iraq. There's all these terrible things. There's people starving, there's children dying. And there's the European Union but no, that's not important. What's important is whether you call yourself English or bloody British. Does anyone really give a fuck? I'm fed up with having to listen to Scottish politicians on the media going on about England this, nation that, Scotland the other. I just wish that Scotland would bloody well hurry up and become independent so that everyone would shut up and people would stop doing all of this stupid research about national bloody identity.

Concluding comments

Since the alarm was first raised concerning the impending English reaction to the Scotland Act, false sightings of an English backlash on the political horizon have become a regular feature of media discourse. Recent examples include a feature in *The Scotsman* reported under the heading 'MPs warn of English backlash over Scots' votes in Commons',¹⁵ and a report in the *Daily Express* concerning English resentment over levels of Scottish public expenditure: 'A growing backlash against Scots among the English is leading to the break-up of the UK'.¹⁶ However, while issues relating to the devolution

settlement continue to excite media commentators, politicians and academics, ordinary English people have by and large remained stubbornly galvanised into inaction.

An examination of the way in which people in England actually reason about the process of constitutional change alerts us to the fact that this political disengagement may take a variety of forms. Certainly, some of the people who took part in my interview studies displayed an apathetic lack of concern about changes to the UK constitution. However, for others disengagement involved an active avoidance of what they understood to be an inherently dilemmatic political situation, in which their opposition to the establishment of nationally defined polities clashed with their support for the principle of national minority rights. For the majority, disengagement took the form of principled agnosticism or acquiescence based on the view that the new political status quo represented the legitimate political will of the Scottish people.

An appreciation of the fine details and internal logic of everyday political reasoning also can help us to appreciate why the asymmetric character of the devolution settlement has not yet provoked energetic public resentment in England. In the first place, most people remain unaware of the policy issues that excite so much interest among the political and intellectual elite. Additionally, people in England are still generally disinclined to evaluate the devolution settlement on the basis of calculations of absolute or comparative English national self-interest. Rather, they tend to justify their attitudes towards various aspects of the devolution settlement with reference to generic political values of equity and procedural justice.

Analysis of ordinary social actors' vernacular accounting practices can also provide invaluable insight into the subtle and varied ways in which people understand English national identity. Microanalysis of the interview talk revealed the complex, laminated, character of the respondents' national identity claims and displays. Speakers who adopted popular nationalist frames of reference usually treated their claims to English identity as acts of intimate self-disclosure, and displayed concern over the extent to which this identity was recognised both socially and politically. However, most people were inclined to forge distinctions between the acts of saying they were English and the subjective psychological conditions of feeling or knowing themselves to be English (see also Condor 2010). Consequently, while the people who took part in the conversational interviews did not always call themselves English, and sometimes even explicitly disclaimed a sense of English identity, in the course of talk about UK constitutional change they almost always adopted a footing as English.

Close analysis of the interviews also indicated that most of the respondents were inclined to distinguish between the constructs of identification *as* and identification *with* (see also Condor, Gibson and Abell 2006). Speakers who adopted popular nationalist lines of argument generally cast English identity both as a psychological condition (identification *as*), and as the appropriate

basis for defining civil society and polity (identification *with*). However, once again, this kind of position was relatively unusual. In fact, far from constituting the typical means by which English identity was associated with political action, for most respondents the popular nationalist repertoire represented the Other against which they positioned themselves. Respondents from a wide range of backgrounds and political affiliations were inclined to bracket off the condition of being or feeling English from the question of solidarity with the English as an imagined political community. Consequently, they could treat political allegiance with (or at least deference to the settled will of) the population of Scotland as entirely compatible with a subjective sense of English identity.

At this stage we may return to a point raised at the start of this article. Ten years ago, the moral panic discourses that accompanied the establishment of the Scottish parliament appealed to a particular stereotype of English public opinion. They assumed that, once released from the shackles of British identity, The English would inevitably revert to national type. The result would be a widespread (re)turn to a form of popular nationalism in which English identity would inevitably be used as the ('rational') basis for defining political interests and claiming political entitlement. This one-sided, homogenising image of English political common sense has often dominated elite discourse. Consequently, it has distracted attention from the other ways in which people may understand the relationship between English identity and political action. In particular, there has been a tendency to overlook the fact that people in England might also regard political action based on appeals to (majority national) identity as incompatible with the objective neutrality and public reason normatively required of citizens in diverse liberal democracies.

This consideration is important if we are to understand the absence of overt opposition to the devolution settlement on the part of the population of England. By and large, The English did not accept asymmetric devolution because they lacked a sense of English identity, or because they failed to recognise its potential political significance. On the contrary, they were inclined to publicly acquiesce with the new political status quo precisely because they regarded it as normatively incumbent upon themselves, as members of the English majority, to do so.

Notes

1 *Hansard Lords Debates*, 17 June 1998: columns 1,654–5.

2 *Hansard*, 12 January 1998: columns 89–90.

3 *Guardian Unlimited* (<http://www.guardian.co.uk>), 18 April 1999.

4 The research included interviews with people from a variety of national and ethnic backgrounds resident in England. However, because elite debates concerning the relationship between English identity and responses to constitutional change has tended to focus on the white ethnic majority population, for the purposes of this article I have focused exclusively on the interview discourse of this specific sub-group of respondents.

5 The data set currently comprises a corpus of 1,652 conversational interview transcripts collected between 2000 and 2009.

6 Some of the interviews in this corpus were collected for a panel study designed to study change over time (the *Migrants and Nationals* project funded by the Leverhulme Trust, conducted with David McCrone, Frank Bechhofer and Richard Kiely at the University of Edinburgh and Jackie Abell, Clifford Stevenson and Stephen Gibson at Lancaster University). Longitudinal analyses of these data indicated that the kinds of arguments that people in England employ when discussing the process of devolved governance have remained remarkably stable over time, and that this is true both at the level of the population and at the level of the individual.

7 Because the objective was to develop a comprehensive conceptual scheme based on a thick description of available lines of argument, analysis was conducted with a view to achieving conceptual, rather than statistical, generalisability. Future survey research would be necessary in order to make specific, reliable inferences concerning the comparative frequency with which each of the identified frames of reference are used.

8 The original transcripts recorded the conversations completely verbatim. However, for the purposes of this article I have simplified some of the extracts to facilitate readability.

9 Since 2007, respondents in England have been increasingly inclined to endorse the prospect of Scottish independence, in so far as they now commonly understand this to represent the settled will of the Scottish people.

10 Because respondents typically displayed little awareness of proposals for English regional governance, the account that follows focuses on views concerning the Scottish parliament, the prospect of Scottish political independence and the possibility of a separate English parliament.

11 These labels are intended to describe the way in which the respondent positioned themselves and their argument in national/political space, and are not intended to imply an evaluative judgement.

12 See Curtice (2010, this issue) for a parallel finding from survey research.

13 This typology pertains to lines of argument rather than to positions reliably adopted by individual speakers. However, although individual respondents did not always produce arguments that fell squarely into one particular category, it was in practice very rare for any respondent to employ lines of argument belonging to non-adjacent categories.

14 These respondents typically displayed problems in differentiating the constructs of English and British.

15 19 June 2006.

16 25 February 2008.

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