



Understanding English public reactions to the Scottish parliament

Susan Condor

To cite this article: Susan Condor (2012) Understanding English public reactions to the Scottish parliament, *National Identities*, 14:1, 83-98, DOI: [10.1080/14608944.2012.657080](https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2012.657080)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2012.657080>



Published online: 13 Apr 2012.



Submit your article to this journal 



Article views: 421



View related articles 

Understanding English public reactions to the Scottish parliament

Susan Condor*

Department of Psychology, Lancaster University, UK

Although elite commentators have regularly predicted an English backlash to the asymmetric devolution settlement, public opinion surveys generally reveal widespread acceptance of the principle of Scottish self-governance. In this article, I explore some of the reasoning behind English responses to UK constitutional change, drawing on a comprehensive programme of conversational interview research initiated in 2000. Analysis suggests that although people in England often endorse sincere and consistent views on various aspects of the devolution process, currently these are not typically salient, central or strongly held, and are rarely rooted in detailed domain-specific information. In the first decade following the devolution settlement, **English responses to UK constitutional reform have tended to be based on abstract values of national rights and procedural justice rather than on calculations of comparative national self-interest.** However, popular acceptance of the new constitutional arrangements may be contingent upon a particular set of ideological circumstances, and it would be premature to assume that asymmetric devolution necessarily reflects the settled will of the English people.

Keywords: English national identity; political attitudes; political information; social psychology; legitimacy

There is talk of a potential English backlash. I resent the use of the word ‘backlash’; it is not the right word to describe the concern of the English, who only expect fairness and who are just as entitled as the Scots, Welsh and Irish to express a national identity. Already much concern is being expressed. The English are normally very quiescent and slow to be aroused, but history shows that they wake up in the nick of time in the face of disaster.

The Government should not take too much for granted. They should remember the words of G.K. Chesterton:

‘Smile at us, pay us, pass us; but do not quite forget. For we are the people of England, that never have spoken yet.’

(Lord Ellenborough *Lords Hansard*, 21 April 1998, Columns 1106–7)

When the Scottish Parliament was first established, elite commentators commonly invoked the spectre of an impending English political backlash. Introducing the first post-devolution British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey of public opinion, Curtice and Heath (2000) suggested that the precise form that this backlash would take might be mediated by the impact of devolution on English people’s sense of national identity. On the one hand:

[P]eople in England might seek – if only for the sake of symmetry – some form of devolution along the lines of, say, their Scottish counterparts. At the same time they

*Email: s.condor@lancaster.ac.uk

might develop a stronger attachment to their ‘Englishness’ than to their ‘Britishness’ ... Such a reaction would probably be a greater threat to the continuation of the Union than would any of the nationalisms in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. (p. 156)

Alternatively, the population of England might assert their British identity and demand the reestablishment of a centralized British state:

Annoyed at the advantages granted to the rest of the UK but wishing to maintain Great Britain, people in England might seek to withdraw the ‘privileges’ granted to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. (p. 156)

In the event, the BSA survey did not reveal much evidence of either type of response. There was some indication that people in England were more likely to describe themselves as English than they had been prior to 1999. However, this did not seem to be accompanied by a sense of resentment towards the newly devolved administrations. On the contrary, the proportion of the population of England opposing the idea of a separate Scottish Parliament had fallen from 23% in 1997 to 13% in 1999.

Subsequent surveys continued to reveal widespread acceptance of the Scottish Parliament (Curtice & Seyd, 2001; Curtice, 2003; Curtice & Sandford, 2004), and relatively low levels of popular support for an English parliament or regional governance (Heath, Rothon & Jarvis, 2002). Two years after the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, Curtice and Seyd (2001, p. 233) cautiously concluded that, ‘devolution continues to be ... the “settled will of the people”, not just in Scotland but in England too’. Three years on, Bogdanor (2005) echoed these sentiments:

Survey evidence [...] enables us to cast considerable light upon the reality of English attitudes, as opposed to the claims of the commentators as to what they are or ought to be. Such evidence shows that the English, for the time being, at least, have come to accept devolution in Scotland and Wales. Indeed, there seems now to be a majority amongst English voters for devolution in Scotland and Wales. But the English do not want devolution for themselves. The late Donald Dewar [*sic*] once said that devolution was the ‘settled will’ of the Scottish people. Devolution to Scotland and Wales, but not to England, now appears as the settled will of the English people too.

However, the survey evidence has done little to curtail talk of an impending English backlash, and Westminster MPs continue to mobilize threats of an imminent sea change in English public opinion:

I suspect that there is a limit to how long the English electorate will put up with a situation where Welsh and Scottish votes determine what they get... There will be a backlash, and at some stage the issue ... will come back to bite us. (Alan Williams MP [Swansea West, Labour] *Hansard*, 9 January 2006, Column 55).

The dulcet tones of the leadership of the Labour Party, desperate for English votes, will echo around the hustings and the media studios at the next general election, so let me name a few members of that leadership: Mr Alexander, Mr Gordon Brown, Mr Des Brown, Mr Darling and Dr – as he prefers to be known – John Reid. They will find a considerable backlash from the English constituencies ... if they have not addressed the unease of the English at the discrimination against them. (Lord Patten, *Lords Hansard*, 25 January 2007, Column 1240)

Over the past few years there has, indeed, been some evidence of change in English public opinion. The BSA surveys show a rise in the proportion of people in England agreeing that Scotland gets ‘more than its fair share of Government spending’ (from 21% in 2003, to 30% in 2007, to 41% in 2008), and an increase in support for an English parliament (from 18% in 2003 to 29% in 2009). On the other hand, the BSA surveys indicate that the proportion of people agreeing that the best option is for England to be governed by ‘the UK parliament’ has remained stable since 2003 at about 50%. Views on the West Lothian question (or ‘English votes on English Matters’: EVoEM) also appear to have remained stable between 2000 and 2007, with about 60% of the population of England agreeing that ‘Scottish MPs should no longer be allowed to vote on English legislation’. In addition, it is notable that the apparent shift in opinion in favour of an English parliament has not yet been reflected in any concomitant rise of collective political action. Membership of the Campaign for an English Parliament is still low, and the English Democrats Party only attracted 0.3% of the vote in England in the 2010 general election.

From public opinion to political reasoning

Despite Bognador’s confidence in the capacity for surveys to reveal ‘the reality of English attitudes’, the situation is not quite as straightforward as the pollsters often suggest. Survey data can be highly susceptible to question-wording and ordering effects, and it is clear that response to questions relating to UK constitutional change can vary as a function of the way in which the item is phrased. In 2006, surveys indicated that more than 50% of people in England said that they supported the idea of Scottish Independence, but only 16% said that they would prefer the Union to end. People in England are also more inclined to endorse the idea of an English parliament if the ‘national parliaments for Scotland and Wales’ are mentioned in the question, but are less inclined to express support for an English parliament if the option of EVoEM is available as an alternative (Bryant, 2008).

How should we interpret these findings? Why might the same individual support the idea of devolution for Scotland, but not the extension of the principle to England? How can people agree with the principle of Scottish Independence but also support the continuation of the Union? Why should people agree with the principle of English self-governance, but not engage in political action designed to achieve it? More generally, why is there so little evidence of the long-anticipated English political backlash against the asymmetric devolution settlement?

In order to address these questions it is necessary to move beyond statistical summaries of survey data to explore the lines of reasoning that lie behind these responses. In this article I shall supplement the survey evidence with an analysis of the ways in which people in England talk about devolution in a relatively unstructured interview setting.

Conversational-style interviewing is widely advocated as a method for studying the nuances of everyday political reasoning (see Bhavnani, 1991; Gamson, 1992; Hochschild, 1981; Lane, 1962; Myers, 2004, for various approaches). The data corpus that I will be using in this article comprises 1896 transcripts of lightly structured interviews conducted in England between 2000–2009, including a subset of interviews conducted as part of a panel study designed to map changes in individuals’ attitudes over time.¹ Since the objective was to develop a conceptually

(rather than statistically) generalizable model of everyday political reasoning using analytic induction, the recruitment strategy was designed with a view to obtaining maximum sample diversity (Patton, 1990). Respondents came from a variety of geographical regions, and varied in terms of social class, ethnic background, age, gender, educational qualifications, political affiliation and sophistication, and level of engagement in civil society.

The interview technique was carefully designed to maximize the likelihood that respondents' accounts would reflect the types of vocabulary and lines of argument that they might use in their everyday lives. No specific mention was made of national identity or constitutional change when introducing the research. Instead, the study was described as an investigation into 'people's attitudes to where they live' in the context of 'recent social and political changes'. Respondents took part alone or together with friends or family members. At the start of the interview they were encouraged to talk freely in response to general prompts concerning place, identity and politics, with the interviewer steering the conversation towards particular issues as they became relevant. Interviewers initially avoided posing direct questions concerning constitutional change in order to allow the respondent the opportunity to raise the topic spontaneously. When the interviewer did pose direct questions on this topic they generally used vague terminology and avoided introducing specific information.

Issue salience

Bryant (2008) noted that people in England rarely mention devolution in response to the open-ended MORI question, 'What would you say are the most important issues facing Britain today?' For example, the proportion of respondents doing so in 2007 was less than half of one percent. A similar lack of issue salience was apparent in the interview data. Even respondents who were otherwise highly politically sophisticated rarely mentioned devolution spontaneously. When an interviewer raised the subject in the context of talk about national identity or the general relationship between England and Scotland, respondents commonly reacted with surprise, and often treated the intervention as a topic shift:

Extract 1²

- I Umm. What do you think about [...] erm, changing Britain, in terms of, kind of, Scotland having its own parliament and beginning to look after itself and Wales having theirs and Northern Ireland having theirs. Do you think that's going to affect you in any way? [...]
- EF It's not really something that I can say that, unless you brought it up like you have done now, it's something that I would never contemplate thinking about or it does or doesn't affect me in any way, or whatever, you know. Each to their own. If people feel so strongly that they want to do that, then let them do that.

Knowledge

The 2003 BSA survey included four 'quiz' questions designed to gauge levels of public information concerning the process of constitutional change.³ Discussing responses to these items, Curtice and Sandford (2004) noted simply that people in England had 'little knowledge of the current devolution settlement' (p. 208). This

could be regarded as something of an understatement. In fact, less than a third of the survey respondents had answered two or more questions correctly. For half of the items, the frequency of correct response was below chance.

On the basis of these data, it might be tempting to dismiss English survey responses on matters relating to devolution as nonattitudes: random answers generated by people who have no real understanding of the questions (Converse, 1970). However, it is notoriously difficult to assess political knowledge through survey questions (Mondak, 2000), and since the BSA items pertained to very specific policy issues we cannot be confident that they constituted a valid, or sensitive, measure of people's general understanding of UK constitutional reform.

In the interview context, respondents generally displayed a basic understanding of the changes to the UK constitution, with more than 90% demonstrating prior awareness of the Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales. However, most people displayed very little knowledge of the specific details of the devolution process. Longitudinal analysis of the panel study data did not suggest that people were becoming better informed over time. On the contrary, the same respondents typically displayed less factual knowledge in 2006 than they had in 2001.

The specific topic that respondents mentioned most often was, and has continued to be, EVoEM. In 2002 about a quarter of respondents – mainly those with relatively high levels of political literacy – raised this issue. Subsequently, awareness appears to have become more widespread, although the issue does not appear to be chronically salient, and is often mentioned only after a prompt from the interviewer ('is there anything that you think is unfair?'). Interestingly, there is little evidence to suggest that people's attitudes towards EVoEM inform their evaluations of the devolution process more generally. In fact, those respondents who most strongly support the principle of EVoEM tended also to express the most positive attitudes towards the Scottish Parliament.

Between 2000–2005, respondents generally displayed little concern over the fiscal relationship between Scotland and England, and rarely expressed the view that England was comparatively financially disadvantaged. In fact, until 2004, most respondents who alluded to fiscal matters at all tended to assume that the population of Scotland was disadvantaged in terms of public expenditure. By 2005, more respondents mentioned that the population of Scotland enjoyed a higher share of UK public expenditure than the population of England, but they commonly assumed that this had been determined on a calculation of relative need. Since 2007, interview respondents have been more inclined to assess the fiscal relationship between Scotland and England as 'unfair'.

In the conversational interview setting, participants have generally displayed little spontaneous concern over the possible extension of the principle of devolved governance to England. In 2000, about 20% of respondents displayed awareness of debates concerning the prospect of an English parliament.⁴ By 2009, this figure had risen to about 60%, although in most cases the respondent did not raise the issue spontaneously. Moreover, when people did express views concerning an English Parliament they rarely displayed much emotional investment in the issue, and seldom justified their views with reference to any factual information.

Empty attitudes

Political scientists often assume that individuals develop genuine attitudes through active engagement with relevant political information (see Saris & Sniderman, 2004). However, social psychologists have shown that people can adopt sincere and consistent evaluative stances in the absence of detailed information concerning the object of these views (Zajonc, 1980). Further, research suggests that ordinary social actors seldom have ready-made attitudes concerning topics of interest to survey researchers. Confronted by questions about specific policy options, members of the general public often resort to assembling opinions ‘on the fly’, basing their answers on whatever considerations happen to be salient to them at the time (Zaller, 2005).⁵

Unsurprisingly, in the conversational interview context, respondents sometimes claimed that their lack of knowledge rendered it difficult for them to adopt a definite attitude concerning particular aspects of the devolution process. However, this was by no means universally the case. Overall, about 75% of respondents were prepared to express a definite attitude for or against some aspect of the devolution process without displaying any topic-specific knowledge. These ‘empty attitudes’ did not always take the form of non-attitudes: that is, random responses to an interviewer’s questions. Rather, they often took the form of sincere (although not especially strongly held) assessments, which longitudinal analysis suggested were inclined to remain stable over time (Condor, 2010a).

At their most simple, empty attitudes in favour of the Scottish Parliament could be supported by minimal justifications such as, ‘why not?’

Extract 2

- I Mm. Okay. Do you think places like, countries like Scotland, and like Wales, and like Northern Ireland, are entitled to have their own parliaments?
 JM Yes.
 I Why? (2)
 JM Now then, actually, I can’t express it, positively ((laughter)) at all, but I can’t see any reason why not.

Alternatively, speakers could warrant their position by invoking generic idioms (e.g. ‘Scotland’s a nation in its own right’, ‘they’ve got their own culture’) or through reference to considerations that could be inferred from a mere knowledge of the existence of the devolved administrations (e.g. ‘they make their own decisions’):

Extract 3

- I Change the subject slightly. One of the things that people have sometimes mentioned is devolution. I’m not sure I–
 AM That all, that Wales, Scotland and England have their own governments.
 I Do you th–
 AM And make their own decisions. I thought.
 I Mm. Yes, that would make sense. Do you think that’s a good idea?
 AM No, it’s a good idea. Cos they’re different, different, they’re different, they are different people, and they got, different, and they’ve had different histories. And they want different things, and, I think it’s fair enough. It must be very irksome, especially for them in Scotland to have had their whole policy, decided by (.) sort of majority of (.) I mean, how many Scottish MPs are there, I, I don’t know, but

most of their policy was decided by people that are eight hundred miles away, and you go (.) it's right that they should at least have some decision over it.

Respondents with relatively high levels of political literacy were more inclined to formulate extended lines of argument in which they drew upon their general stock of political information, values and ideological commitments concerning the principle of political Nationalism.⁶ In these cases, UK devolution was consequently commonly discussed in tandem with concerns relating to Imperialism, and/or the EU.

An example of this kind of heuristic political reasoning is presented in extract 4. In this case, the respondent justifies her critical stance towards the establishment of the Scottish Parliament through reference to general values relating to international socialism. It is interesting to note that although her argument is coherent and politically sophisticated, at no stage does she allude to any specific information relating to the devolution process *per se*:

Extract 4

VC Well, (2) I'm not sure how to put it (.) It sounds terrible and I— I can sort of see it from their point of view. You know, I, I, understand wh— why they want it or think they want it. (.) So erm I do understand how they feel and (.) at at one level obviously there's a sense that if that's what they want then it's their right. But another part of me is thinking (.) and it's not (.) I'm not (.) you know it sounds a bit racist ((laugh)) but as I said my Dad's from Scotland so I'm half Scottish myself [...] as a Socialist and someone who works a lot with international organizations I don't like nationalism full stop. And I'm inclined to think that whatever the problems the Scots think they have with the Union nationalism isn't the solution (3) This current obsession with national identity and divisions isn't healthy. You just have to look at what's happened in the Balkans. And I know it probably sounds terrible but I seriously think that to establish a new national parliament just at a time when with Europe there's some sort of chance that we could really be moving forward (.) looking towards the larger picture (.) well it it all seems rather counterproductive.

Attitudes towards the Scottish parliament

As noted earlier, people in England generally express positive or neutral opinions concerning the Scottish Parliament in response to survey questioning. In the conversational interviews, about two-thirds of people voiced support for the Scottish parliament. The additional information available in the interview accounts allows us to appreciate why this might be. As we have seen, the interview studies indicated that people in England were often unaware of the specific aspects of the devolution settlement that elite commentators predicted would constitute potential sources of resentment. Further, a lack of information could render it difficult for people to formulate negative assessments (see extract 2), and facilitated the use of Just World (Lerner, 1980) reasoning, according to which the Scottish parliament 'must have' been established for a good reason:

Extract 5

MH [I think the Scottish parliament was a good idea] 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.

In addition to epistemological constraints, it was clear that the interview respondents also perceived normative constraints against the open expression of negative views concerning the Scottish parliament. Most respondents viewed their English identity as disqualifying them from expressing strong – and especially negative – opinions concerning ‘Scotland’s business’. In the relatively rare cases when a respondent did voice negative views concerning the Scottish parliament, they typically treated their attitudes as highly accountable, and were inclined to warrant their right to express these sentiments through a claim to non-English (e.g. Scottish or Irish) identity (see extract 4 for an example).

It is perhaps unsurprising that the conversational interview respondents tended to rationalize their attitudes through generic appeals to ‘fairness’. However, contrary to expectations, fairness was not typically understood to entail substantive national equality. There were a number of reasons why this should be. First, since the respondents rarely regarded an additional layer of government to be a ‘privilege’ (cf. Curtice & Heath, 2000) they were not inclined to regard the differential treatment of Scotland as an unfair advantage. Second, the asymmetric nature of the new constitutional arrangements was often treated as unexceptional in view of the fact that Scottish institutions had been different, and arguably ‘better’, before the establishment of the parliament:

Extract 6

- I What do you think about, devolution in Britain? About Scotland getting its own parliament [...]
- AG I think they should have what they want, cos they
- CH Yeah. So do I.
- AG Yeah. They should have what they want [...] I think, Scotland run their affairs better than England do. [...] Their laws are better,
- CH Different laws, haven’t they?
- AG Yeah, they clamp down on the criminals, like, instead of namby pamby like they do here.

Rather than judge the fairness of the new constitutional arrangements against the benchmark of substantive national equality, respondents tended to treat the legitimacy of the Scottish parliament as a matter of Scottish rights to self-determination, summed up by the cliché, ‘*if that’s what they want*’. This was closely associated with values of procedural justice, according to which the establishment of the parliament was deemed to be fair in so far as it reflected the democratic will of the Scottish people.

When a speaker invoked concerns relating to Scottish rights and procedural justice, it was possible for them to construct a coherent rationale for their views without the need for detailed information. Further, people could use these abstract principles to formulate nuanced lines of political reasoning, providing an overarching coherence to what, in a survey context, might appear to be contradictory views. For example, people who supported the establishment of the Scottish Parliament commonly prioritized values of procedural justice over considerations of substantive outcome for Scotland:

Extract 7

- 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 ((laugh)) But it's not up to me is it? They had a referendum and that's what they voted for. It's no skin off my nose.

Respondents could also adopt deontological forms of reasoning, prioritizing Scottish rights to self-determination over assessments of the abstract political good of the new constitutional arrangements:

Extract 8

HL I never really agreed with devolution. But I also felt that that's what the Scottish and Welsh people wanted, that was fine, you know, I'd go along with it there. [...]

I So, what do you think now about the Scots having their own parliament, are you in favour of it or not?

HL Personally, not. But I also believe if they, if that's what they want, they should have it.

I Yeah.

HL Yeah. Yeah. Self determination. You know, as a, as a person who's had an English father and a Scottish mother, I see us all, you know, as being one, and I think in general that it is better to have more inclusive political systems, but then, as I say, if that's what they want, yeah.

The fact that respondents could treat considerations of Scottish rights as trumping concerns over any possible economic or political outcomes should, of course, caution us against assuming that people who express positive attitudes towards the Scottish parliament are necessarily expressing positive views towards the abstract principle of UK devolution.

Similarly, the apparently contradictory survey evidence concerning English views on national independence may be understandable once we appreciate how in the conversational interview context an acceptance of the prospect of Scottish Independence was often based on a discourse of rights rather than cast as an expression of personal preference:

Extract 9

I: Do you think Scottish independence would be a good thing?

BS: That's up to Scotland. If it went for the independence, then, the Queen's not in charge. And, the two police forces would be totally different. And therefore, you'd have to have a border. Scotland would have to have their own passports [...]

I: Do you think they've got a right to want that?

BS: I don't see why not. Because they class themselves as different to us, if they want to go for independence, and they can see it working, it doesn't matter whether we can see it working, if they want to see it working, then fine, let them go ahead. [...]

I: Would you like to see that?

BS: Me personally no. As far as I'm concerned, Britain is like the island isn't it? In an ideal world we should be all together. But if the Scottish people don't want it that way, then as I say that's up to them.

Attitudes towards an English parliament

As noted earlier, survey evidence suggests that people in England are increasingly inclined to support the idea of a separate English parliament. Analysis of the conversational interview accounts indicated that these views also tended to be informed by a discourse of national rights rather than by considerations of needs or

deserts. Occasionally, respondents displayed a strong commitment to the principle of English national self-governance. These respondents tended to be reasonably political sophisticated, and were inclined to justify their support for an English parliament employing reflexive arguments concerning national self-determination as a universal political value. However, respondents who used this line of reasoning rarely argued simply in favour of an English parliament within a federal UK state. Rather, they tended to support the principle of English (and Scottish) national self-governance as a step in the direction of ultimate national independence (see also Condor, 2010b).

More commonly, when respondents voiced support for the idea of an English parliament, they tended to employ empty attitude formulations, and to rest their arguments on minimal justifications such as, '*it makes sense*':

Extract 10

- I: Some people have suggested maybe if you're going to have a Scottish parliament there should be an English parliament as well. Do you agree?
- JD: Yeah I mean it would be sensible for us to have a purely English government if everyone else wants their own. Yeah I agree.
- I: What would the benefits be do you think?
- JD: Well, it's not something I've really thought about to be honest with you. I don't suppose it would really be much different from what we've got now. I mean, I don't think that would have any benefits above what we've got already. I think at the moment.

One interesting factor to emerge from the conversational interviews was that those individuals who expressed positive attitudes towards the *principle* of an English parliament often went on to work up a line of argument in which they expressed ambivalence concerning the current practicality or desirability of English national self-governance. As we have seen, during the period when these interviews were conducted, people in England generally did not perceive their own country, or themselves as individuals, to be substantively disadvantaged by the existence of the Scottish parliament ('It's no skin off my nose'). Consequently, respondents could develop the idea expressed in extract 10, that an English parliament, whilst fair in principle, would not make any real difference in practice:

Extract 11

- I: Something some people are talking about is that now people in Scotland have their own parliament, maybe there should be one for England too.
- MS: Yeah, I heard about that.
- I: Yeah?
- MS: Yes, I mean it makes sense doesn't it? They have theirs and we have ours. So yes, I agree with that. But then again, is it really worth the hassle? Cos it wouldn't be much different from the one we have already got, would it? That's mostly English anyway. So just more money, more politicians, more bureaucracy, and for what?
- I: Because it's fairer?
- MS: Fairer to who? I can't see it would make any difference to people round here whether it was an English parliament or a British one. And we'll all be European soon anyway, so what's the point?

More politically sophisticated respondents, especially those with conservative-leaning views, could treat the idea of an English parliament as fair in principle whilst

also suggesting that self-governance might not be in England's best national interests:

Extract 12

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. [...] Because if there's one thing in this life, fairness doesn't in fact get you anywhere.

The fact that positive views towards the principle of English national self-governance were often articulated alongside expressions of practical ambivalence may of course partly explain the lack of correspondence between the survey data on public opinion and actual political action.

What of those individuals who argued in favour of the Scottish Parliament but opposed the idea of an English parliament? The conversational interview data point to two lines of reasoning that could provide an underlying coherence between these two apparently contradictory stances. First, in so far as respondents regarded national self-governance to be a matter of procedural justice, they could argue that the Scottish Parliament was justified by a national democratic mandate (based on a 'strong sense of national identity'), but that no such demand, and hence justification, currently existed for an English parliament:

Extract 13

I: Would you like to see one in England too?

PW: Not really. There's no point and it wouldn't work. The Scots have this really strong sense of national identity, so you'd see why they'd want their own Parliament. But we aren't really that bothered, you know? We're not so in your face, 'We're English, We're proud'. So I can't really see us really being arsed enough to vote for it or to make it work.

Second, respondents could invoke values of fairness as equity. Focusing on the unequal power and status of Scotland and England in the UK, people with liberal-left political commitments commonly reasoned that calls for an English parliament on the basis of equal rights do not constitute a 'decent argument':

Extract 14

I Mm. But you wouldn't particularly want to see [an English parliament]?

MM No. I don't think there's any need for one I think if the people think that they're getting the short [sic] end of the wedge because they haven't got their own parliament then perhaps they don't really understand the situation in Scotland and Wales.

I Mm. I guess they just see it as a a as a question of rights if they're entitled to their own then we should be entitled why should ours remain British?

MM Yeah. Well they're just jumping on the bandwagon really aren't they? They haven't really got anything to say. ((laughs)) Yeah. I mean they're just that's a just knee jerk reaction if you'll pardon the cliché. But yeah I mean they're not really

making a political statement about wanting their own parliament they're just like well they've got one why can't we have one? I mean that's not like a decent argument is it?

- I Bu then is that yeah but then is that fair? (.)
 MM Life's not fair.

Concluding comments

I am a Scot living in England and have long wondered why the English put up with the devolution scam. When I pointed out the injustice, people agreed it was all wrong and I wish I could detect any sign that the people of England are at last going to speak, but I don't know what will rouse them. Maybe most are all too apathetic or drummed into submission . . . (Posting on John Redwood's blog, by cherie79, 8 November 2007)⁷

The analysis of the conversational interview studies considered in this article generally accords with contemporary survey findings concerning the valence of English attitudes towards the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, the prospect of English national self-governance and the West Lothian question. However, a consideration of the precise ways and contexts in which people expressed their opinions in their own words provides some insight concerning the reasoning behind these views, and why attitudes concerning various aspects of the devolution settlement have yet to motivate widespread political action.

Although participants in the conversational interview studies were generally inclined to endorse the principle of Scottish self-governance and were typically disinclined to voice strong views in favour of the extension of devolution to England, the data did not necessarily support a representation of asymmetric devolution as the 'settled will of the English people'. It was clear that when people expressed views concerning aspects of the devolution settlement, they rarely treated these opinions as salient, strongly held, emotionally charged, or as central to their personal belief system. Furthermore, there was little evidence that people in England were inclined to view the current devolution settlement as a utopian political ideal. On the contrary, most of the interview participants either adopted an agnostic stance towards the devolution process, or else admitted a personal preference ('in an ideal world') for a centralized British state or for national independence.

The conversational interview discussions of UK constitutional change also did not provide unequivocal support for the representation of English public opinion as 'settled'. Certainly, there was no evidence of a general shift in opinion between 2000 and 2009. Further, the panel study component of this research revealed individuals' attitudes towards the Scottish parliament to be remarkably consistent over time (Condor, 2010a). However, it was also clear that the views that people expressed in the interview context rarely took the form of crystallized attitudes: that is, informed, considered opinions, to which the speaker displayed a personal commitment. Rather, the tendency on the part of people in England to regard asymmetric devolution as basically fair, and their general reluctance to actively challenge those aspects that they deemed unfair, appeared to be contingent on two factors.

First, responses to the asymmetric devolution settlement appeared in part to reflect a general lack of public information on the subject. Although most respondents displayed a basic awareness of changes to the UK constitution, the

conversational interviews revealed that they were typically unaware of the specific issues that elite commentators predicted would provoke resentment. The fact that most people's opinions took the form of 'empty attitudes', involving little domain-specific information, may also partly account for the general disinclination to oppose the new political status quo (cf. Eidelman, Crandall & Patatershall, 2009), the tendency to emphasize procedural legitimacy over concerns relating to the possible impact of the changes on the population of England (cf. See, 2009), and the tendency for views to remain consistent over time and relatively inflexible across different kinds of conversational context (Condor, 2010a).

Second, popular responses to the asymmetric devolution settlement appear in part to be contingent upon the tendency to frame constitutional change primarily as a matter of 'national identity'. One notable feature of the accounts collected between 2000–2009 was that people in England were generally unaware that UK constitutional change might be understood as anything other than a simple expression of national identity. The possibility that devolution might be framed, for example, as a Party political issue, was simply not cognitively available to most respondents. Elite commentators have, of course, generally supposed that a salient national identity frame would promote English opposition to asymmetric devolution (a position exemplified by the quotations from Lord Ellenborough and from Curtice and Heath cited at the beginning of this article).⁸ As a consequence, English political quiescence has commonly been interpreted as evidence of a lack of national identity, or of false national consciousness.

Analysis of the ways in which people spoke about UK constitutional reform in the conversational interview encounters suggested that far from fuelling an emotionally charged sense of political resentment, the primacy of the national identity frame may have imposed limits on the kinds of response that people in England considered prudent or politically legitimate (cf. Condor, 2011).⁹ For example, people were apt to regard the establishment of the Scottish parliament as legitimate in so far as it reflected Scottish people's needs or rights to 'express their identity'.¹⁰ In fact, so strong was the perceived normative imperative to recognize Scottish rights to express their distinctive national identity that the point tended to be conceded even those who might be otherwise inclined to oppose the establishment of the Scottish parliament (see extract 4 for an example).

The national identity frame was also associated with a tendency to regard political disengagement as a normatively appropriate response to the establishment of the Scottish parliament. Although political disengagement could sometimes take the form of passive apathy, it could also be cast more positively as a matter of principled agnosticism to what should be legitimately regarded as 'Scotland's business' (see also Condor, 2010b).

Currently, the prospect of an English parliament also tends overwhelmingly to be formulated as a matter of national identity. In this case, however, the perceived normative implications of the national identity frame are more inclined to vary. People with relatively low levels of education and political engagement, or those with right-wing political beliefs, often subscribe to a norm of equal rights to the expression of national identity, and consequently support in principle the idea of an English parliament. However, as we have seen, people who adopt this line of reasoning may not always view the establishment of an English parliament as politically expedient.

People with higher levels of education, and those who generally endorse liberal-left political positions, tend to base their political reasoning on concerns over perceived power inequalities between Scotland and England. Consequently, whilst they may accept the Scottish parliament as a legitimate expression of minority rights (possibly cast as a form of historical reparation), they are typically less inclined to regard the political expression of English national identity as democratically defensible.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that responses by the English public to the Scottish parliament have typically been more coherent, and rational, than the survey data alone might suggest. On the other hand, these considerations also point to the contingent nature of these responses. Although people in England may continue to accept the legitimacy of the Scottish parliament, and to display a general disinclination to argue strongly for the extension of the principle of devolved governance to England, there is no reason to assume that this will necessarily be the case. In the next ten years, people in England may become better informed about the new constitutional arrangements. In the next ten years, people in England may become more inclined to perceive the devolution settlement as a matter of-for example-Scottish national prejudice, or Party politics, rather than as a matter of national identity *per se*. Should this occur, the long-anticipated English backlash might at last begin to emerge.

Notes

1. The *Migrants and Nationals* project funded by the Leverhulme Trust, conducted with Jackie Abell, Frank Bechhofer, Stephen Gibson, Richard Kiely, David McCrone and Clifford Stevenson.
2. The transcription notation is as follows:
underline Stress on syllable or word.
dash – Abrupt cut-off.
(2) Pause measured to the nearest second.
(.) Hearable pause of less than one second.
((brackets)) Transcriber's note of something hard to represent phonetically.
[...] Omitted material.
3. The questions were: (1) Scottish MPs in the UK House of Commons cannot vote on laws that only apply in England; (2) it has been decided to cut the number of MPs in the UK House of Commons; (3) the Scottish parliament can increase the level of social security benefits in Scotland; and, (4) London is the only region in England with its own elected regional assembly.
4. The level of public awareness concerning the proposals for English Regional Assemblies was even lower. Even in 2004, immediately prior to the referendum in the North East, only 12% of respondents in other parts of the country displayed any meaningful understanding of the debates.
5. This process of *ad hoc* response often leads to apparent inconsistencies in survey response. Since people's opinions on complex issues may depend on which particular considerations are salient at the specific point in time when they are required to produce an answer, their responses can be affected by relatively minor changes in question wording and ordering.
6. Respondents who used empty attitude formulations often based their arguments on a banal (Billig, 1995) ideological presumption of rights to national self-determination. In these cases, however, the respondents did not reflexively treat nationalism itself as a topic of discourse.
7. <http://www.johnredwoodsdiary.com/2007/11/07/beware-the-english-lion-when-it-awakes/>
8. Following this general line of reasoning, a good deal of research in England has considered the relationship between policy preferences and self-reported national identity

- (e.g. Bechhofer & McCrone, 2008; Bond & Rosie, 2010; Curtice & Heath, 2000, 2009). The common failure to find clear patterns of simple statistical co-variation between these two factors has often led researchers to the – mistaken – conclusion that ‘national identity plays relatively little role in the politics of England’ (Curtice & Heath, 2009, p. 57), or that ‘national identities are not constitutionally significant in England’ (Bond & Rosie, 2010).
9. More generally, there is a tendency on the part of people in England (especially those who endorse liberal-left political views) to demonstrate scepticism over the political legitimacy of all explicitly nationalist ideologies, and to question the legitimacy of any politicized renditions of Anglo-British national identity in particular (see Condor, 2000; Condor & Abell, 2006a, 2006b).
 10. Support for the Scottish parliament tended to be associated with the idea that it reflected, or would help to construct, ‘Scottish identity’. In situations where respondents expressed negative attitudes concerning some aspect of Scottish devolution, they tended to attribute the process not to national identity but rather to anti-English prejudice.

References

- Bechhofer, F. & McCrone, D. (2008). Talking the talk: National identity in England and Scotland. In A. Park, J. Curtice, K. Thomson & M. Phillips (Eds.), *British social attitudes: The 24th report* (pp. 81–103). London: Sage.
- Billig, M. (1995). *Banal nationalism*. London: Sage.
- Bond, R. & Rosie, M. (2010). National identities and attitudes to constitutional change in post-devolution UK. *Regional and Federal Studies*, 20, 83–105.
- Bhavnani, K.-K. (1991). *Talking politics: A psychological framing for views from youth in Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bogdanor, V. (2005). Devolution and the territorial constitution. Retrieved from <http://www.gresham.ac.uk/event.aspx?PageId=39&EventId=281>
- Bryant, C. (2008). Devolution, equity and the English question. *Nations and Nationalism*, 14, 664–83.
- Condor, S. (2000). Pride and prejudice: Identity management in English people’s talk about ‘this country’. *Discourse and Society*, 11, 163–93.
- Condor, S. & Abell, J. (2006a). Vernacular accounts of ‘national identity’ in post-devolution Scotland and England. In J. Wilson & K. Stapleton (Eds.), *Devolution and identity* (pp. 51–75). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Condor, S. & Abell, J. (2006b). Romantic Scotland, tragic England, ambiguous Britain: Versions of ‘the Empire’ in post-devolution national accounting. *Nations and Nationalism*, 12, 451–70.
- Condor, S. (2010a). Political attitudes and political ignorance. Paper presented at the British Psychological Society (Social Psychology Section) Annual Conference, September, Winchester.
- Condor, S. (2010b). Devolution and national identity: The rules of English (dis)engagement. *Nations and Nationalism*, 16, 525–43.
- Condor, S. (2011). Sense and sensibility: The conversational etiquette of English national self-identification. In A. Aughey & C. Berberich (Eds.), *These Englands: A conversation on national identity* (pp. 29–54). Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Converse, P.E. (1970). Attitudes and nonattitudes. In E.R. Tufte (Ed.), *The quantitative analysis of social problems* (pp. 168–189). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Curtice, J. (2003, November). *Brought together or driven apart?* Paper presented at the RSE/British Academy Symposium on Anglo-Scottish Relations since 1914, Royal Society of Edinburgh.
- Curtice, J. (2009). Is there an English backlash? Reactions to devolution. In A. Park, J. Curtice, K. Thomson & M. Phillips (Eds.), *British social attitudes: The 25th report* (pp. 1–23). London: Sage.
- Curtice, J. & Heath, A. (2000). Is the English lion about to roar? National identity after devolution. In R. Jowell, J. Curtice, A. Park & K. Thomson (Eds.), *British social attitudes: The 17th report – Focusing on diversity* (pp. 201–219). London: Sage.

- Curtice, J. & Heath, A. (2009). England awakes? Trends in national identity in England. In F. Bechhofer & D. McCrone (Eds.), *National identity, nationalism and constitutional change* (pp. 41–63). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Curtice, J. & Sandford, M. (2004). Does England want devolution too? In A. Park, J. Curtice, K. Thomson & C. Bromley (Eds.), *British social attitudes: The 21st report* (pp. 201–219). London: Sage.
- Curtice, J. & Seyd, B. (2001). Is devolution strengthening or weakening the UK? In A. Park, J. Curtice & K. Thomson (Eds.), *British social attitudes: the 18th report* (pp. 227–244). London: Sage.
- Eidelman, S., Crandall, C. & Pattershall, J. (2009). The existence bias. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97, 765–75.
- Gamson, W. (1992). *Talking politics*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Heath, A., Rothon, C. & Jarvis, L. (2002). English to the core? In A. Park et al. (Eds.), *British social attitudes: The 19th report* (pp. 169–184). London: Sage.
- Hochschild, J. (1981). *What's fair?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Lane, R.E. (1962). *Political ideology*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Lerner, M.J. (1980). *The belief in a just world*. New York, NY: Plenum Press.
- Mondak, J. (2000). Reconsidering the measurement of political knowledge. *Political Analysis*, 8, 57–82.
- Myers, G. (2004). *Matters of opinion: Talking about public issues*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative research and evaluation*. London: Sage.
- Saris, W., & Sniderman, P. (Eds.) (2004). *Studies in public opinion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- See, K. (2009). Reactions to decisions with uncertain consequences: Reliance on perceived fairness versus predicted outcomes depends on knowledge. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96, 104–18.
- Zajonc, R. (1980). Preferences need no inferences. *American Psychologist*, 35, 151–75.
- Zaller, J. (2005). *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.