Charlotte Werther, February 1997

Region and Community: Keywords in British Political Discourse[1]

Introduction

This paper is about keywords in two senses. Briefly and for introductory purposes, it is about the Welsh born social critic and novelist Raymond Williams' book *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. Secondly, it deals with some keywords in present-day British political discourse, especially 'community' and 'region' and the issues and debates that underlie or result from the way they are used.

Raymond Williams (1921-88) has always seemed a good starting-point for discussions of British society. Born in Wales in a working-class family, he travelled via grammar school, Trinity College Cambridge, military service in the Second World War, adult education tutor, to a fellowship at Jesus College Cambridge. He was a typical representative of his own and those later generations who entered British academic life from a working-class background; throughout his life he was active on the British left, and he later became associated with Welsh nationalism. As an individual he crossed some of the cultural borders of British society, both in terms of class and nationality.

This cross-cultural experience was a major source of inspiration in his writing, and contributed to making him what might be characterised as an early interdisciplinary writer. His first book *Culture and Society: Coleridge to Orwell* (1958) was inspired by his finding, on returning from the army to Cambridge in 1945, an apparent rise in the use of the word 'culture' and

[1] This paper was presented at a departmental seminar, where Louise Phillips, Roskilde University, and Jørgen Sevaldsen, Copenhagen University, had kindly accepted to act as discussants. My thanks are due to them and the colleagues present for their constructive comments.

with different meanings from what he had noticed before.

This set him off on tracing the word and the idea of culture and finally on writing his 'account and (..) interpretation of our responses in thought and feeling to the changes in English society since the late eighteenth century' (Williams 1958:foreword), i.e. since the Industrial Revolution. The book covers ground that is the natural subject of several disciplines, and it has consequently defied classification and been interchangably labelled cultural history, historical semantics, history of ideas, social criticism, literary history and sociology. In his original manuscript Raymond Williams had included an appendix of keywords, which, however, was left out for publication and only appeared 18 years later in its own right as his *Keywords*.

On rereading his introduction, it has struck me that he is an early discourse analyst, or rather, a forerunner of discourse analysis in that a number of the insights that he bases his survey of vocabulary on are similar to latter-day accounts of discourse analysis.[2]

A programmatic statement in the introduction is that 'it is a central aim of this book to show that some important social and historical processes occur *within* language, in ways which indicate how integral the problems of meanings and of relationships really are' (Williams, 1976:22). Social processes are reflected in language, if not even partly constituted in language use.

There's a recognition that reference to a dictionary for the meaning of a word is only a starting-point; that the meaning of words depend on their context and their interconnection and co-

[2] see e.g. Fairclough (1992) *Discourse and Social Change*, and Fairclough (1995) *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*

occurence with other words in clusters, such as the meanings of 'nation' and 'region' in various contexts, and their interrelations.

The introduction stresses the importance, in thinking through and analysing problems, of 'being conscious of the words as elements of the problems', evidently without dispensing with other types of analysis, and recognizing 'that to understand the complexities of the meanings of class contributes very little to the resolution of actual class disputes and class struggles' (Williams, 1976:24).

By tracing the development of individual words, Raymond Williams points to the dynamics of language and meanings, and to the continuities and discontinuities in use. The vocabulary studied are central words in culture and society, the humanities and social science. For example, the entries under A are 'aestetic', 'alienation', 'anarchism', 'anthropology' and 'art'. This is of course one man's choice in the light of a specific project, but it also seems an interesting reflection of its period in that a number of additional entries were added for the second edition in 1983, among them 'development', 'ecology', 'ethnic', 'expert', 'liberation', 'technology' and 'western'. Equally it would seem that in a latter-day revision there would be no escaping the inclusion of 'international', 'global', 'European' and 'identity'.

To return to the original comparison with discourse analysis this is not discourse analysis in an e.g. Faircloughian sense. It is concerned with vocabulary and the ideas and social processes that lie behind the vocabulary and which it to some degree constitutes. While vocabulary is only one of the properties of texts investigated in discourse analysis in addition to e.g. syntax, information structure, and cohesion, there is an evident link in the recognition of the close interconnection between language and society and how, in our use of language, we contribute to shaping the world we inhabit.

This is the premiss of the rest of the paper. It is not a detailed discourse analysis, but a look at a cluster of words central to present-day British political discourse and the potentially significant variations in their use in an attempt to present aspects of an important political debate. This is the debate about the entire constitutional set-up of Britain; about democracy and efficiency - economic and administrative -, the trade-off between them, and how they relate to local and national identities in Great Britain.

One central concern in these debates is that political power in Britain is too concentrated; that the British state is overly centralized. Another is that popular involvement in the political process is too low; that citizen participation should be promoted. Both are concerned with the democratic process and a perceived low level of <u>democracy</u>. One is mostly a top-down perspective: powers need to be dispersed, devolved, decentralized, whereas the other could be characterized as a more bottom-up perspective: the proverbial (wo)man on the floor needs to get a bigger say, to gain more direct influence on decision-making. These are essentially political arguments.

A second overall concern is to do with the need to coordinate planning at a sub-national and a supra-local level; the need for supervision and provision of services at some sort of intermediate level. Another is for coordinating local efforts to achieve economies of scale; to obtain rationalization or - in a different terminology - a modernization of local (government) services. Again you might say that there is both a top-down and a bottom-up perspective. On a national level there is a need to administer various services more locally, and on a local level there is a need to join forces to do things more efficiently. In both, an argument of administrative <u>efficiency</u> takes precedence.

Placed between these two overall concerns is one which involves aspects of both democracy and (economic) efficiency, that of how to remedy an insufficient and unevenly distributed national growth. The argument that a reform of British political structures is a precondition for the reversal of economic decline is an old one in British academic writing[3] and has recently been restated by Will Hutton, former columnist in the Guardian, now editor of the Observer, in his book *The state we're in* (1995).

The two examples of this debate presented here are to do with the process of local government reform and with the potential political and administrative regionalisation of Britain, both underlying the overall debate. The discussions are centred around the keywords of <u>community</u> and <u>region/al/ism</u>, which - it can be argued along with Raymond Williams - may only be understood in their encounter with each other and with other terms such as nation, union, devolution, sovereignty, etc.

<u>Community</u>

'Community' takes up a prominent place in the English language, and constitutes one of the battlefields where political ideas and institutional structures are contested and fought over. However, 'community' has a very special flavour (Williams, 1976):

> 'Community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (*state, nation, society*, etc) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term'

What Williams points to is that, under the almost unfailingly warm persuasive surface, community seems open to endless ideological investment and appropriation, of a potentially contradictory nature. 'Community', 'natural community' and 'sense of community' have been central notions in the review of

[3] cf. the work of e.g. Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn

the local government structure of England, which has now gone on for 5 years, and in applying these terms, the Local Government Commission is battling with their underlying contradictions and trying to make sense of the wider social trends against which they should be seen.

The whole process of restructuring local government in England was set in motion in 1991-1992 by the then Secretary of the Environment Michael Heseltine and is most often interpreted as a grand plan of his, following his failure to win the leadership contest in the Conservative Party. As is so often the case with the well-laid and grand schemes of great men, they are passed on to someone else for implementation, which was also the case here, in that Michael Heseltine moved on to new responsibilities and left subsequent and less enthusiastic secretaries of the Environment with the task. In addition, the day-to-day activities were placed with the Local Government Commission of England, set up in July 1992 as the successor to the former Local Government Boundary Commission, which was to review all of shire England and recommend to the Secretary of State. The whole review was very much premised on the idea that the existing two-tier structure should be abandoned in favour of an essentially unitary structure and a move towards socalled **enabling authorities** that would have responsibility for securing the provision of services rather than actually providing them.

In its 1991 consultation paper on the structure of local government in England the government restates its commitment to the **efficient** delivery of services and points out that there is not an ideal size of authority or inherent logic in the two-tier structure for service delivery purposes. Therefore, the Department of the Environment called for the introduction of unitary authorities which would 'offer the opportunity of relating the structure of local government more closely to communities with which people identify' and 'reflect local people's own sense of identity with the community in which they live' (Department of the Environment, 1991:par. 26 and 27).

A more precise definition of what might constitute the basis of loyalty to and identification with a certain community does not emerge from the consultation paper. However, the concept is elaborated on in the policy guidance to the Local Government Commission. Paragraph 4 of the Policy Guidance reads:

> 'Local authorities should be based on **natural communities**. The Commission should assess the extent and strength of local peoples's **loyalties** and **identities**, and their **interests**. It will use its own judgement as to the best method for making this assessment, but should bear in mind that research has shown that people's sense of identity with a community is often intuitive. Topography and geography may influence the shape of communities. Traditional counties, historic cities, districts and towns can all excite powerful loyalties (Department of the Environment, 1992:par. 4)

The paragraph hints at a common history and topographical characteristics as potential objects of loyalties and hence of natural communities. This is further substantiated by the <u>community index</u> that accompanies the policy guidance, where both 'history' and 'topography' feature prominently under the general headline of 'identity'.

One concept of community that seems to underlie the department's thinking is that of community as <u>heritage</u>, where community, in the definition of Burns, Hambleton and Hoggett (1994), is 'the expression of a common cultural tradition or identity - a sense of continuity and belonging' - relying on history for legitimacy. This interpretation of community is equally inferrable from the criticism levelled at the local government restructuring of the 70s that 'some authorities which emerged from the 1974 reorganisation are still not wholly accepted by all the local communities which they serve. There is still a feeling in some areas that history and tradition were perhaps disregarded in search for administrative uniformity' (Department of the Environment, 1991:par. 22).

However, on inspection of the community index, supplementary understandings of community surface. The commission is instructed to take more latter-day concerns like travel-to-work and travel-to-leisure distances and shopping opportunities and habits into account (i.e. various catchment areas), just as the remoteness of service-providing authorities and their resultant accessibility is seen as playing an important role. In this view community may be seen as the basis of collective consumption and for the most effective production and provision of local public goods, which essentially relies on a rationale drawn from economics (Burns et al. 1994) A final representation of community that can be deduced from the index is one of power and political influence, which is featured under the headline of 'democracy'. It is one very much focused on the representative aspects of democracy, in that it stresses 'turnout in elections', 'the opportunity of representative groups to make an effective input into the decision making processes of councils', and 'the accountability of councils'. This is reflected in the statement that 'turnout in local government elections is patchy (;) (a) high turnout is desirable as it strengthens the democratic process', which assumes a correlation between high turnout and the democratic process that some might claim is the reverse.

While the Policy Guidance recognizes that 'there will usually be widening circles of communities' and that 'the Commission should take account of the strength of identity associated with each level of community' (Department of the Environment, 1992:par. 6), the application of the term 'natural communities' suggests that the communities are there to be found without much ado. If that was what the government had hoped for, they were disappointed.

First of all, given the Conservative governments' attempt to curb the powers of local government during the 1980s[4], it was

[4] the literature on developments in British local government is extensive, but a comprehensive recent overview is available in Stewart and Stoker (eds.) 1995, *Local Government in the 1990s*

difficult, for many, to view the whole process and read the guidance in a positive vein. It was seen as yet another attack on local authorities and a sophisticated piece of gerrymandering, which would do away with some local Labour strongholds. In addition, the appointed chairman, Sir John Banham, former chairman of the CBI, was less accommodating than the government had expected and had very set ideas of his own about community, efficiency and democracy[5]. One example can be found in his speech to the Centenary Dinner of Parish Councils, in April 1994:

> '(m)ost people wishing to contact their Council can do so by telephone; the number of telephones in use has risen from under 14 million in 1970 to over 35 million today. (..) In such circumstances, there is a strong case for **larger rather than smaller** unitary authorities with devolved management responsibility to the Community level and linked with local Parish and town Councils',

which seems informed by a notion of local authorities as primarily providers of services and of the local communities as consumers of these, rather than local authorities as the basis of local democracy. While his focus on service delivery was very much in line with government thinking, his sizist thinking did not quite tally with the government's assumption that the new unitary authorities would primarily be based on the former districts (the lower-tier unit), and the proposed redrawing of boundaries was not unilaterally to the advantage of the Conservatives or up to their expectations. Conservative backbenchers saw parliamentary constituencies that were coterminous with local districts potentially vanishing from under their feet, and there were calls for ending the process. Nevertheless, the review process went on, but on two occasions the Commission received new guidelines, and in 1995 Sir John Banham resigned - evidently having been asked to do so - and a new chairman (Sir David Cooksey) and another four new commissioners and a new chief executive were put in place.

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[5] for an insight into Sir John Banham's 'programme for change' for British institutions, see his book *The Anatomy of Change: Blueprint for a new era*, 1994, Orion, London

Natural communities?

Rather than contributing to the smooth running of the process the community criterion mined the process from the start. It relied on an essentially spatial or territorial logic, which has come to be questioned by e.g. Anthony Giddens (Giddens, 1991:146):

> (w)hile the milieux in which people live quite often remain the source of local attachments, place does not form the parameter of experience; and it does not offer the security of the ever-familiar which traditional locales characteristically display. (...) Active attempts to re-embed the lifespan within a local milieu may be undertaken in various ways. Some, such as the cultivation of a sense of community pride, are probably too vague to do more than recapture a glimmer of what used to be. Only when it is possible to gear regular practices to specifics of place can re-embedding occur in a significant way: but in conditions of high modernity this is difficult to achieve.

He, and others[6], point to the changing conditions and social diversity and fragmentation of modern life, and the lack of commonality of experience in localities, beyond the very local. For people to have a sense of belonging with a territorial community it needs to be the immediate neighbourhood - or in local government parlance, the parish. It is recognized that increasingly people belong to communities of interest, with common objectives and concerns in terms of e.g. employment and housing, which cut across localities and which may allow a much more instrumental view on locality, and that their sense of place and of belonging to a local community may be changing and take second place to their sense of belonging to other communities (of interest).

At the same time there is also an attempt to restate that the experience of community is both social and spatial, and that

[6] See e.g. Prior, Stewart and Walsh (1995) *Citizenship: Rights, Community & Participation*, and Hill (1994) *Citizens and Cities: Urban Policy in the 1990s*

there may be communities of attachment, or, in Benedict Anderson's typology, imagined communities based on space, and a feeling of commonality grounded in a territorial area; equally there is a concern with the essentially political project of arguing the potential of localities to continue to form the basis for the exercise of political choice and citizenship in spite of their diversity. Finally, it is pointed out that under the warm persuasive surface of 'community' the reality of communities may be distinctly exclusive and defensive, defined in negative rather than positive terms, and that the choice and mobility and potential of taking an instrumental view of locality underlying Giddens' analysis may be a far cry from the actual lives of a lot of people.

Such questions surfaced in the Local Government Commission's attempt to employ the elusive term. Equally, on presenting its first reports, the Commission came under attack for drawing very different conclusions on the basis of seemingly similar local settings - in other words, that the pairs of local commissioners in review areas applied the concept of community in a less than consistent manner. Local authorities, who in many cases had entered the process reluctantly and at gun-point, and who, in their own understanding, tried to apply the criteria conscientiously, increasingly felt that they were chasing a moving target.

In the latest phase of the review, the Commission was instructed by the Secretary of State to review 21 districts, in contrast to the former county reviews, under new guidance. A new term that entered the vocabulary of the review at this point was that of '**hybridity**', in that the guidance points out the possibility of one or more districts being granted unitary status within a county that otherwise remains two-tier. While still bound by the 1992 legislation's two pillars of 'effective and convenient' local government and the 'identity and interests of local communities', the Commission, in the light of the new emphasis on hybridity, ended up structuring its considerations under two headings: <u>intra-authority</u> considerations and <u>inter-authority</u> considerations, which would have to be balanced. So even if a community might arguably qualify for unitary status on internal or intra-authority grounds, the unitary solution might be problematic seen against the background of the wider county or community - inter-authority grounds. Given the legislative focus on effective and convenient local government, size reappeared as a critical parameter. The problem is summed up as follows by the new chief executive of the Local Government Commission, Bob Chilton:

> 'people's identity is often with quite small areas around their church, their shops, their school, maybe communities of 20-30,000 people at most. But given the critical mass of some of the services which local government has to deliver you need administrative units of somewhat greater size.'(Interview, London 28 September 1995, see also Prior et al. 1995:154)

In its overview report the Commission recognizes a distinction, between 'effective' and 'affective' communities (communities of interest and attachment respectively) and that there may be layers of these. Some of the issues uncovered by the review is the lack of overlapping effective and affective communities. For instance, some of the 'estuary' local authorities (e.g. Humberside) created in the 1974 restructuring have failed to become affective communities, although there are still valid reasons for considering them effective communities. Some suburbs of county towns have developed an affective community of their own, and contrast themselves to the core of the town, despite the fact that they do in fact rely on the town-centre for employment, shopping etc. In some instances, what might be called an imagined counter-community - 'the Other' of some analyses of nationalities - plays a powerful role, which is often the case with the general urban-rural dichotomy, which may find expression in urban opposition to being landed with 'pig-farmers'. This particular problem and, most often, a county town's claim for unitary status, is discussed under the headline of 'centrality', and the interdependence of town and country is judged against a geographic dimension of convenience, a socio-economic and cultural dimension of community interests, and a functional one of effectiveness. The commission's overall view was that 'growing suburbanisation of the countryside is reducing the divergence of interests between town and county', but in some settings this divergence was given precedence nevertheless. What has resulted so far is a mixed, hybrid or patchy structure, which may fairly reflect mixed or hybrid English communities, but is not necessarily a structure that will last long into the next millenium.

It is evident that 'natural communities' was a less than clear criterion on which to base a review of boundaries. As one of the local authorities involved in the review put it:

> '**community** proved an elusive and difficult concept to put into practice: local authorities, other interested parties, and the commission have all sought to develop their own operational definitions of 'community' with widely differing results'(Interview, Yorkshire, 1993)

The commission's own comment on the task of identifying the territorial manifestation of commmunity is:

> One of the root causes of the difficulties of this whole process of structural review (is) that we were using criteria which seemed plausible at first sight, but which have an underpinning concept that you can readily capture people's senses of **community identity and interests** when actually you are dealing with a much more complex set of behaviours. (...) (Interview, London September 1995)

A final evaluation of community is that

> is overused and underdefined, too general to have analytical value (..) and overladen with emotional attachments, an assertion of **what should be rather than what is**'. (Hill 1994:39)

It is precisely this continued ability to conjure up what should be rather than what is that keeps it alive and kicking British political discourse, as evidenced in one of the documents of the 1995 Labour Party Conference, Renewing democracy, rebuilding communities:

> The basic fact is that we all live somewhere and we all have local loyalties. The place we live is where we want the help we need. So our needs have a geographical location. We want home helps for the old people in **our** street, a school bus for **our** children, a fire engine to respond to **our** 999 call. Most people also have a sense of

place, of local loyalty, of commitment to the other people who live in their area. (The Labour Party: Renewing democracy, rebuilding communities, Conference 95)

Region/al/ism

It might be argued that, in contrast to community, the concepts of region and regionalism are foreign to a British context and not at all relevant in describing the British reality. But it is equally arguable that regions and regionalism have reemerged, if not at the centre, then on the periphery of British political discourse, and in some form or another are there to stay. One of the causes of this is that for various reasons the British Labour Party is once more committed to some form of regionalisation of Britain; another major influence is the 'invasion' of the European Union's focus on regions, which has triggered various concerns and attempts to come to terms with this new development in Britain.

In *Keywords* Raymond Williams traces the dual meaning of 'region(al)' as 'a distinct area or definite part' and argues that the latter has the more important history. In this sense 'region(al)' is a relational concept and can only be understood as part of - and almost inherently as subordinate to - something else. He equally points to the dual connotations of regionalism: to suggest incomplete centralization, divisive special pleadings, or - the counter-argument - to make the case for self-government on the basis of the distinctive features and identity of a region. Finally he asks the question where 'regions' and 'regional' begin. How far out of London and into the sticks do you have to venture for things to become 'regional'. One latter-day dictionary takes up this perspective and suggests that

> '**the regions** are the parts of a country that are not the capital city and its surroundings. ...London and the regions... (Collins Cobuild English Dictionary, 1995)

In contrast, another dictionary totally ignores this regional/metropolitan dichotomy and matter-of-factly states that

> '**the regions** (are) eight areas into which Britain is

> divided, mainly for statistical purposes. The regions are South East, East Anglia, South West, West Midlands, East Midlands, Yorkshire and Humberside, North West, and North. The regions play no part in local government.' (Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture, 1992)

The latter explanation is interesting, not only because it points to the existence of well-defined regions, but even more so because it is misleading.

<u>The Scottish Region?</u>

What makes it misleading is that it leaves out two out of ten <u>British</u> regions - Scotland and Wales (and the additional UK region, Northern Ireland)- and only lists the eight <u>English</u> standard regions. This is revealing of the very common confusion of English and British, and in this context begs the question whether Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are regions. In spite of the above quote they <u>are</u> of course for statistical purposes, as evidenced in the Government Statistical Service's annual Regional Trends publication.

At the same time they are, in terms of status within the British union, the exceptions. In the words of Michael Keating:

> 'Ever since the Union of 1707, British governments have practised a policy of exceptionalism for the peripheral nations of Scotland, Ireland and Wales.' (Garside and Hebbert (eds.) 1989, 166)

The important term here is 'nation'. In political rhetoric they are almost invariably referred to as (ancient) nations (or countries) with a distinct identity, separate from that of England, and based on language (Wales) or civil society and institutions (Scotland). In addition, there is a separate Scottish Office (created 1885) and a Welsh Office (established 1964). It is revealing that across the political board there seems to be agreement not to refer to for instance Scotland as a <u>region</u> in spite of the very different conclusions that the status as <u>nation</u> leads to. The present Conservative government's arguments run along the following lines:

> 'The Union between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is one of the most successful and enduring

partnerships in history. Together we wield greater influence than we would if we split into separate **nation-states**'(Conservative Research Department *The British Constitution*, n.d., 1)

'Within the Union special arrangements have evolved to ensure that Scotland's interests are protected and Scotland's **identity as a nation** enhanced' (*Scotland in the union - a partnership for good*, 1993, 8)

'We reject utterly the arguments of those who want Scotland to break away from the United Kingdom, either through the direct means of **separation** or by way of the slippery slope of a **separate parliament**. Our firm commitment is to the future integrity of the United Kingdom, secured through this House and this Parliament. The United Kingdom is a **partnership of nations** that has endured. We believe strongly that it is a partnership for good.' (Ian Lang, Secretary of State for Scotland, Hansard, 9 March 1993, Vol. 220 No. 139)

Scotland's status as a distinct nation is not questioned, but the case made is that union makes for strength and increased influence, not least internationally. Exactly the opposite case is made by Alex Salmond, Leader of the Scottish National Party:

'Scotland is a long established European **nation** - indeed, one of the earliest to have a clearly-defined **national identity** within borders which have changed little over the centuries. (..) Independence in Europe offers Scots the opportunity to recover our **nationhood** within the new Europe - to move out of a provincial isolationism imposed on us by seeing the world at second hand, and build a new relationship with our neighbours as an equal **partner in the European family of nations**. (*Response from Alex Salmond concerning Scottish Independence*, n.d. 1, 2)

Although they speak from opposite positions, the Conservatives and SNP unite in describing Scotland as a nation and agree that the choice is between independence (SNP)/the break-up of Britain (Conservatives) on the one hand and the status quo on the other. In contrast, the Labour Party is once more pledged to devolution[7] in Scotland (and Wales) if equally on the basis of acceptance of Scottish and Welsh nationhood[8].

[7] defined as 'the giving of governmental or personal power to a person or group at a lower or more local level' in *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture*, 1992

[8] for a dicussion of the 1970s attempts at devolution see Keating and Jones, 1995

> 'The United Kingdom is a **partnership** enriched by distinct and proud **national identities**. Proposals for **devolution** of power to Scotland have been part of the Labour tradition for over 100 years. Scotland has its own structure of local government and its own religious and social traditions.(..) In Scotland we will create **a parliament** with law-making powers firmly based on the agreement reached in the Scottish Constitutional Convention.'(*New Labour New life for Britain*, 1996, 29-30)

The above is the presentation of the Labour party line, but as indicated the Scottish Labour Party also participates in the Scottish Constitutional Convention, a cooperation between Scottish Labour, Liberal Democrats, local authorities and a number of other interest groups to work for the establishment of a Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh[9]. In its publication *Scotland's Parliament. Scotland's Rights* the argument is very much that of the right of the Scottish **people**, and the declaration 'A Claim of Right for Scotland' adopted at the inaugural meeting on the 30 March 1989 reads:

> We, gathered as the Scottish Constitutional Convention, do hereby acknowledge the sovereign right of the Scottish **people** to determine the form of Government best suited to their needs, and do hereby declare and pledge that in all our actions and deliberations their interests shall be paramount.
> We further declare and pledge that our actions and deliberations shall be directed to the following ends:
> To agree a scheme for an Assembly or Parliament for Scotland;
> To mobilise Scottish opinion and ensure the approval for the Scottish **people** for that scheme; and
> To assert the right of the Scottish **people** to secure the implementation of that scheme. (*Scotland's Parliament. Scotland's Right*, 1995, 10)

The conclusion is that for all, perhaps not practical but definitely rhetorical purposes, the Scots are a distinct **people** with their own **identity** and claim to **nationhood**, who are in **partnership** with the English, Welsh and Northern Irish. But what

[9] The Convention describes itself as 'a broadly based representative organisation in Scotland comprising political parties, the majority of Scottish MPs and MEPs, trades unions, the churches, local authorities, the business and industrial community and other national organisations.' (*Scotland's Parliament. Scotland's Right*. An executive Summary. 1995)

political and administrative conclusions might be drawn on that basis is a matter of much more controversy. The Scottish Constitutional Convention obviously pursues the argument of the lack of democracy of the unwritten British constitution, the democratic deficit of Conservative government in Scotland, and the need for democratic involvement of the Scottish people.

> 'We (the Scottish or British people) have come of age. We are adults not children. We are citizens not subjects. We are partners not customers. We are the heirs of a nation that has always prized freedom above all else. We deserve something better than the **secretive**, **centralised**, **self-serving super-state** that the UK has become.
> For the Convention, this is the end of the beginning. For Britain's **archaic** and **undemocratic** system of government this is the beginning of the end. For all of us in the United Kingdom, it is the dawn of new hope.' (*Scotland's Parliament. Scotland's Right.* 1995, 31)

Exclusive Labour phrasing is somewhat more cautious and aimed at opposing both the Conservative status quo on the one hand and SNP separatism on the other to achieve 'a wider democracy':

> This (creating a Scottish parliament and a Welsh assembly) is a reform of the structure of government in the UK, **retaining the essential links** between Scotland, Wales and the rest of the UK. The aim is to **strengthen our system of government** and to **reject narrow nationalism**. The Westminster Parliament remains sovereign but will pass power to the Scottish parliament and Welsh assembly as part of our drive for **a wider democracy**.'(*New Labour new life for Britain*, 1996, 30)

The SNP position is that nothing short of independence will deliver democracy, and consequently, "Labour and Tory are thus the two faces of Unionism north and south of the Border" (*SNP News Release*, 9 January 1995):

> 'The SNP believe that Scotland is currently ruled from Westminster by a government whose policies do little to reflect the needs of the **people** of Scotland. Scotland is **deprived of democracy**, a Conservative government rules Scotland, yet only a small minority of Scottish constituencies are held by Conservative MPs. (..)
> Any constitutional change for Scotland and England must not allow one **country** to exercise undue influence over the other. The **status quo** is totally unsuitable in this respect, as is **devolution**. The only system which would pass this test of democracy is **independence** for Scotland.' (*Devolution v. Independence; An Argument For Constitutional Change*, August 1995)

The Conservative case against devolution stresses 'how Scotland Benefits from the Union':

> 'No one should underestimate the dire consequences that would result from the loss of that Union. It would mean the end of one of the most successful and enduring partnerships in history.' (*The British Constitution*, n.d., 7)

The alleged consequences would be that the 'Economic Benefits' and 'Powerful Voice' that ensue from the union would be lost, and that 'Higher Public Spending' would result as, presently, 'Scotland receives 10 per cent of all UK Government spending, but contributes only 8.9 per cent of all taxes'. Instead, an additional income tax of 3p, a 'tartan tax', might be imposed, since such tax-levying abilities are foreseen in Labour's and the Liberal Democrats' proposal for devolution (*The British Constitution*, n.d). Evidently the Conservative strategy is to present 'Labour's Constitutional Price Tag' and to paint a horror vision of 'New Labour, New Danger'(*Labour's Constitutional Price Tag*, July 1996).

A European Region?

What does, after all, bring regions and regionalism back onto the Scottish (and Welsh) agenda is the EU, its regional policy and Committee of the Regions, which is evidently recognized by the political parties. While originally rejecting the Common Market as a non-starter for a peripheral area like Scotland, the SNP has now embraced European membership - but for an independent Scottish nation-state:

> 'The only way that Scotland will have a direct **voice** at the top table in Europe is by becoming an independent **member state** of the Community. (..) Some of the SNP's opponents would like to fob Scots off with **regional status** in a "Europe of the Regions". But Scotland is an ancient European **nation**, not a **region**.' (*Response from Alex Salmond concerning Scottish Independence*, n.d. 2, 9)

To the SNP an example of such 'fobbing off' would probably be the Conservative government's presentation of 'Scotland's Profile in Europe':

> 'Ratification of the Maastricht Treaty will bring with it

> the establishment of the Committee of the Regions, providing a new **forum for the expression of Scottish opinion**. This new Committee will give Scotland an additional **voice** at the centre of Community affairs and it will complement the work of the other Community institutions. The Committee will also be an effective **channel for the expression of the legitimate interests of the nations and regions** of Europe. In determining membership of the Committee, the Government will ensure that Scotland has substantial representation on it.' (*Scotland in the Union - a partnership for good*, 1993, 21)

Where SNP contrasts the "real" nations and the "mere" regions, the government rhetoric parallels the two in this particular section. In contrast to both, the Scottish Constitutional Convention, using the apparently universal metaphor of 'Scotland's **Voice** in Europe', is more concerned with establising the Scottish Parliament's role in liaising with Europe - and with Scottish interest groups:

> 'Scotland's Parliament will be **represented in** UK Ministerial delegations to the Council of Ministers where appropriate, and Scottish Ministers will **lead** these UK delegations when the areas under discussion are of specific relevance to Scotland. Scotland's Parliament will also have the **power to appoint** representatives to the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee, **in consultation with** local authorities and other agencies.' (*Scotland's Parliament, Scotland's Right*. 1995, 16)

The reality of these scenarios is a matter of much contention in political as well as academic circles. One central line of argument is that 'the United Kingdom faces the problem that its regional institutions are woefully underequipped for the competitive challenge of the internal market'; that Scotland and Wales do have a competitive advantage in having their own offices with Cabinet representation, which are, however, 'highly dependent on Whitehall for policy leadership'(Keating and Jones, 1995, 113); that 'in the absence of directly elected regional government, an intense debate as to who has the right to speak for the area (..) is bound to ensue and perhaps dissipate the effort made in lobbying externally' (Mazey and Mitchell, 1993, 118).[10] The opposite case made is that 'there is a great deal of

[10] for a further discussion of this aspect see Wyn Grant, 1989, 'The Regional Organization of Business Interests and

loose talk on the subject of European integration, heralding the demise of the nation state and stressing the need for the UK to refashion itself to maximise its influence in Brussels and its receipts of EU aid. (..) for all the Treaty of Maastricht's fine phrases about **a Europe of the Regions**, the substance is very thin'(Tindale, 1996, 49).

English regions?

Whatever the reality, the first 'losing out in Europe' argument can be used in arguing the case for Scottish and Welsh independence or devolution, but it has also been used by Labour to put the case for regional government in England.

> 'The government's reluctance to develop a rational structure for England's **regions** has put much needed European economic development funding at risk, and has undermined the capacity of the English **regions** to get the best deal for their areas (..) What is needed is a clear focal point for decision making, for putting together bids for European Programme funding, and for representation on the EU **Committee of the Regions**. (*A choice for England: A consultation paper on Labour's plans for English regional government*, 1995, 1, 11)

However, the European connection is only part of Labour's argument for regional government in England. Another is the need for better co-ordination above local and below national, in other words, at a regional level.

> 'There is, indeed, a strong argument for English **regional** government. Many of the decisions required for government are most appropriately determined at a **regional** level, for it is here that the best combination of local knowledge and broader strategy can be applied. This is especially the case in respect of **economic development**, transport, land use and the public services which interact with these functions.(*A choice for England*, 1995, 8)

Local authority co-ordinating bodies initiated from below, termed 'local authority regionalism', are 'a welcome development but they suffer from the lack of a statutory framework, and from the fact that they are detached from decision making at a

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Public Policy in the United Kingdom' in Coleman and Jacek (eds.) *Regionalism, Business Interests and Public Policy* regional level' (*A choice for England*, 1995, 13, 14). The Integrated Regional Offices (IROs) put in place by the Conservative government to coordinate the work of four major government departments[11] are described as 'an improvement on what existed before', but they are inadequate and part of 'an extensive de facto tier of regional government', which is 'unelected, unaccountable and largely unknown', the other element of which is the large number of quangos[12], 'which now spend over £50 billion a year of public money and run many of our public services'(*A choice for England*, 1995, 1). Labour's argumentation covers the whole spectrum of reasons for regionalisation. Regional government should be there to provide 'public accountability and democratic oversight of quangos' and other elected bodies, and 'strategic co-ordination' of local efforts, and, vis-a-vis Europe, to achieve 'economic development' (*A choice for England*, 1995, 2, 11). The problem that Labour is up against in putting this case is that it is exceedingly difficult to carve up England into natural regions with a distinctive identity, and that public enthusiasm for Labour's proposals is relatively low[13], which makes it vulnerable to attacks from political opponents. The lack of parallellism between the Scottish nation and the English regions is vehemently pronounced by Alex Salmond and Allan Macartney (MEP):

> 'Labour are miscalculating in seeking to impose assemblies throughout England, merely to **lend cover to** their Scottish devolution plans.'
> 'Labour's only response to the **anomalies** inherent in devolution is to issue **parrot cries** about creating regional assemblies in England.

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[11] the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), the Department of the Environment (DoE), the Department of Transport and that of the former Department for Education, now part of the Department for Education and Employment

[12] **qua**si-autonomous **n**on-**g**overnmental **o**rganization

[13] cf. MORI's State of the Nation 1995 report conducted on behalf of the Joseph Rowntree Trust Ltd, which suggests that nearly 60 % of the population oppose giving greater powers of government to regions such as the West Country, the North West, East Anglia etc

> In other words, Labour are proposing assemblies for regions whose names sound like contenders in the 'Come Dancing' television programme, merely as a means of disguising some of the **inadequacies** of their Scottish devolution plans!' (*SNP News Release*, 12 January 1995)

A central anomaly is the so-called '**West Lothian question**' posed in the 1970s devolution debate by the anti-devolution Labour MP Tam Dalyell[14], which asks why, after devolution, Scottish MPs would be entitled to decide English legislation when English MPs would have no say on Scottish affairs. Much the same position is taken by the Conservatives in their counter-argument. Labour has provided no answer to the 'tamnable'[15] question, and 'so far refused to countenance any reduction' of the number of Scottish MPs at Westminster, 'since almost 20 per cent of Labour MPs represent Scottish constituencies'. Labour has been 'backtracking on a Referendum' and 'are now beating the retreat and have conceded that they would have to hold a referendum in an attempt to dodge the unanswered questions on their proposals'(*The British Constitution*, n.d., 12). In general, Labour's proposals 'represent **a grave threat** to the future of the Union', 'pose **a real danger** to the cohesion and unity of the whole United Kingdom', and 'would **lead to chaos and the**

[14] described in Waller and Criddle, 1996, *The Almanac of British Politics*, 5th edition, 535, as 'an eccentric aristocrat, born 1932, educated at Eton and King's College, Cambridge, whose father was British minister in Bahrain in the 1930s and whose grandfather and great-grandfather were Governors of Bengal, married into a family of Scottish Labour politicians (the Wheatleys) and was elected in succession to a coalminer as MP for **West Lothian** in 1962 and for the redrawn seat of Linlithgow after 1983. (..) He has spent all but two years (..) as a backbencher, campaigning against Scottish devolution in the 1970s'

[15] referred to as such in Crick, Bernard, 'Ambushes and Advances:The Scottish Act 1998'. In: Marquand and Wright (eds.) *The Political Quarterly*, Volume 66 No 4 October-December 1995 where he addresses it as follows: 'The West Lothian question is usually raised simply to discredit the whole devolution project, but the alleged abuse will continue so long as entrenchment of devolved powers is impossible. In any case it is unimportant by comparison with more positive reasons for or even against the project. The anomaly will be lived with until such time as our anamolous (sic!) constitution becomes numinous'.

inevitable break-up of the United Kingdom'; and 'Labour's plans for English regional assemblies stand in stark contrast to the Government's **pragmatic** and **common sense** approach to reforming local government'(*The British Constitution*, n.d. 1, 12, 16, 19).

> 'Conservatives believe in a very different form of devolution from the **expensive** and **unnecessary** extra tiers of regional government which our opponents propose' (*The British Constitution*, n.d., 19)

The long-established evolutionary and practical constitution embodied with the wisdom of generations and grown with the instincts of the British people is invoked to counter the 'most **radical** package of constitutional reform ever put before the British people' (*The British Constitution*, n.d. Summary). Labour's problem is that not only do the Conservatives accuse them of

> 'aim(ing) to impose a **regional** government on **regions** that have **no grounding in history** and **no sense of popular affinity**. Few people feel as if they belong to, say, 'the South East' or the 'North West'. Fewer still would want a **regional** assembly to govern their affairs' (*The British Constitution*, n.d., 20);

similar criticism can be heard from quarters that are normally closer to the Labour Party. The former columnist and present editor of the Independent Andrew Marr in *Ruling Britannia: The Failure and Future of British Democracy* (1995) is in line with Labour's criticism of 'the creation of unelected regional government, both through government agencies and through quangos'(Marr, 1995, 84), but he equally comments that:

> 'When Labour launched its **ill-thought-out** ideas for regional parliaments across England, these were rightly attacked by Tories for having little public support' (Marr, 1995, 84)

John Stewart, professor of Local Government and Administration at the Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham points to a number of unresolved issues in the proposals for regional government and concludes

> 'Until these questions are answered it is difficult to assess any proposals for regional government, for without the answers regional government is an abstraction to which both advocates and opponents can ascribe whatever

> qualities they wish. Above all it is difficult to establish whether the outcome would really mean decentralisation in practice. To answer these questions, it is necessary to consider what sort of regional government is proposed in a way that few of its advocates have yet faced up to.' (Stewart, 1995, 277)

The left-of-centre *New Statesman & Society* in its editorial from 10 March 1995 agrees with John Major that Labour's plans for English regional assemblies are '**farcical**, **amateurish**, **ill thought-out** and **contradictory**', questions the underlying assumptions of the existence of regions, and likens the thought of a Labour Party committee sitting down to carve up Britain with 'an exercise in colonial cartography' rather than 'an advance for devolved democracy'(*New Statesman & Society* 'Labour's local difficulty', 10 March, 1995, 5). Their recommendation is that the issue 'be **uncoupled** from that of a Scottish parliament and Welsh assembly' and that regions should <u>not</u> be 'imposed from above rather than emerging from below' as

> 'any attempts to **"parachute" regions**, whether romantic or, more likely, **bureaucratic**, into today's varied, multicultural England may well end in disaster. For faced with this unpalatable prospect, the majority in England may yet opt for Major's and Portillo's narrow, restrictive, centralised and undemocratic notion of a unitary British state instead' (*New Statesman & Society* 'Labour's local difficulty', 10 March, 1995, 5)

The principle of <u>subsidiarity</u> should be taken seriously as should 'the predominant tradition in England' of 'intense **localism**' (New Statesman & Society, 10 March, 1995, 5). It is not that there is no sense of locality and local identity in England, but the identification is with much smaller communities such as a rural town of 20-30,000 people . Another aspect in the discussion of identity is that 'what is more important is not where people identify with, but where they have strong feelings against' (Bob Chilton, Chief Executive of Local Government Commission for England, 28 September 1995). They may feel quite strongly about being Yorkshire and not Lancashire people, and in that sense have a regional identity as suggested in Linda Colley's analysis of the forging of British national identity.

> 'As even the briefest acquaintance with Great Britain will confirm, the Welsh, the Scottish and the English remain in many ways distinct peoples in cultural terms, just as all

> three **countries** continue to be conspicuously sub-divided into different **regions**.' (Colley, 1992, 6)

But another common response is that 'this country has never had much of a regional flavour[16], certainly not England', and 'generally speaking, 'local interest'/'community identity' cannot span more than 20 miles' (Alan Taylor, president of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, April 1993). So although it might be possible to define viable regions in the North of England,

> 'as soon as you get into the South East, the East Midlands, the West Midlands, where do you draw the line? It just all merges somewhat. So it is rather difficult in the core of England to find **regional expressions**' (Bob Chilton, 28 September 1995)

and, for that reason, difficult to find the basis for popularly elected assemblies. It may be in recognition of this that Labour has opted for '**regional chambers**', 'which would consist of nominated representatives of elected local councils'(*A choice for England*, 1995, 2)

> 'In many **regions**, notably the North East and North West, there are already moves to **take this process further**. But there are parts of **England**, notably in the South, in which **regions** as such are far less cohesive. So it would be wrong to impose an inappropriate or unwanted uniform system of **regional government**' (*New Labour new life for Britain*, 1996, 30)

This 'taking the process further' or 'second step' would be 'the establishment of directly elected **regional assemblies** in those regions where public demand for these is evident'(*A choice for England*, 1995, 3). This new strategy is probably reflected in the title of the consultation paper: A choice for England. The

[16] Christopher Harvie, professor of British studies at the University of Tübingen, who describes himself as 'a Scot living and working in Germany, and spending most of my vacations in Wales', from a very Scottish vantagepoint refers to the 'natural **regionality** of the British Isles - the persistence of distinct **national** traditions and the comparative strength of civil society' in his book *The Rise of Regional Europe*, 1994, in which he equally adds to the 'regional' vocabulary by making a distinction between '**regionalisation**, the chopping-up of problems into manageable areas, which has now given way to a subjective and aggressive **regionalism**'(Harvie, 1994, 4, 74).

proposal of a two-phase, voluntary approach would also seem to be an attempt to counter the Conservative criticism of an expensive and corrupt additional layer of bureaucracy and the local government and academic criticism that Labour's imposed new tier of regional government will further undermine local (authority) democracy. *The New Statesman & Society* presented the Conservative case as follows:

> 'For the Conservatives, **regional assemblies** are a gift. They can be portrayed as **monstrous**, **undesired bureaucracies**, stuffed with **power-hungry councillors**. The Prime Minister already has them in his sights. "What **powers** would they have?" he inquired in December, reasonably enough. "How would they **relate to local government**? Would the assemblies be able to **raise new taxes**?" The polite word for Labour's plans is "embryonic".'(*New Statesman & Society*, 'Regions all round?', 3 February 1995, 25)

Labour's response, in *A choice for England* is:

> 'Far from creating another tier of **bureaucracy**, Labour's proposals will make the existing one more **accountable**, **coherent** and **democratic**. The new regional bodies, which we propose to call "regional chambers", would grow out of local authority regional co-ordination. Rather than being in competition with elected councils, they would be their **regional voice**.'(*A choice for England*, 1995, 2)

<u>Regional or local government?</u>

A final question concerning the regions is how they would relate to local government, which brings us back to the first part of the paper. One bid comes from the Institute of Public Policy Research, which - in spite of being called 'Blairite' in Conservative parlance (*The British Constitution*, n.d., 12) - critically assesses whether 'devolution to English regions (would) help strengthen local government?' (Tindale, 1996, 50)

> 'Supporters of **regionalism** argue that power would be drawn **down from the centre**, **not up from localities**. This is a fine principle, but ignores that fact that **much of the business of central government involves overseeing and constraining the work of local authorities**. Local government realises the threat which **regional authorities** might pose, and has traditionally **opposed regionalisation**.'(Tindale, 1996, 50)

> 'Many of the functions currently performed by central government have in the past, often the recent past, belonged to local authorities. A radical decentralising government ought to give these powers back to local government, not allocate them to **a regional halfway house**. It ought also to consider whether further powers could feasibly be **devolved to the local level**. This would be a true application of **subsidiarity**' (Tindale, 1996, 5)

The government's thinking behind the capping of finances, the removal of functions and of services having been put up for compulsive competitive tendering (CCT) was to achieve 'a reduction in unnecessary **bureaucracy** and **extra tiers of government**; the implementation of competition and tests for **efficiency** wherever possible; and the transformation of local authorities from 'providers' to 'enablers''(*Local government - the Conservative Approach*, April 1995, 1). Equally efficiency and reducing bureaucracy was part of the argument for the structural review. In contrast to the procedure chosen in England, in Scotland and Wales the respective Secretaries of State simply replaced the existing two-tier structure (which, incidentally, in Scotland consisted of **regional** councils divided into district councils) by single-tier, all-purpose or unitary councils. By many Scotsmen and Welshmen this was seen as yet another proof of Westminster dictating Wales and Scotland, but in view of the very divisive process in England, a lot of English authorities came to envy the two nations their lack of 'consultation', and there is growing realisation in Scotland and Wales that there may be something to say for not having spent all energy on proving the case of community. In addition, some Labour strategists might have wished for a more successful Conservative across-the-board installing of unitary councils, since that would produce a convincing argument for regional government. But even the hybrid structure might be conducive. In the words of Bob Chilton:

> 'as we move into this hybrid structure, we may be limiting the ability of local government to **manage strategically** because it is being divided into a larger number of smaller authorities. But in so doing we are **creating the means and the need for regional government** because you can argue that our counties were too small anyway for many of the strategic issues that they face. (..) I'd imagine, in

> the next 10 years we'll see some form of **regional government** in England despite (..) its difficulties. Such is the nature of the issues and the context within which we lead our lives that for some purposes you need an *administrative body* that transcends even our counties' (Bob Chilton, 28 September 1995)

It is arguable that in some sense the Conservative government has paved the way for devolution in Scotland and Wales:

> 'the Labour Party is arguing for the assemblies for Scotland and Wales - in effect a **regional government** forum, so the Labour Party itself would have to examine government beneath those **regional assemblies**, otherwise these two **countries** would have been overgoverned. A regional government, a county government, a district government, too much government' (Bob Chilton, 28 September 1995)

A more negative evaluation of the consequences of the restructuring is that - in the case of Scotland - 'the prospect is that **parliamentary devolution of power** would become **executive centralisation of power**, once the **limitations of small authorities** become clear. The future prospects for local democracy are not great' (Midwinter, 1995, 139). Another viewpoint is that e.g. Strathclyde, one of the now abolished regional councils of Scotland, 'turned out to be precisely the **right size and weight** to take a vigorous part in the development of Europe of the Regions.' (New Statesman & Society, 'Fuzzy democracy', 11 March 1994). In the case of Strathclyde, the alleged right size and weight for European action was a population of 2,290,700, by far the largest, in terms of population, pre-restructuring region in Scotland. (*The Counties and Regions of the UK*, 1994). It is obvious that the question of size is a central and contentious one in the regional - and local government - debate. What is the natural size of a locality for people to identify with, what is the right size of area for people to exercise their political choice within, what is a viable size for service delivery, what is a sensible size for strategic (whatever that means) planning, and what is the most conducive size for a region to interact with Europe?

Future prospects

So for all the rhetoric employed what are the prospects for the future? In 1991, prior to the most recent British general election, Chris Moore (1991) described the Conservative attitude to regionalism as principled opposition, the Liberal Democrats' as principled commitment[17], and that of the Labour Party as pragmatic evolution, and argued that

> 'only if the Conservative Party is re-elected is the status quo likely to be maintained. Any other combination of government formation increases the prospects of the introduction of **regional government**' (Moore, 1991, 223-224)

His attitude to the relative importance of the British domestic scene and the European connection was that

> 'whilst some aspects of European development have supported **the regional articulation of interests**, in particular around the European Regional Development Funds, it remains the case that the key decisions about the development of Europe remain locked into a process which operates through existing nation-states. There is thus no clear causal link between **Europeanization** and **European regionalism**. Domestic political considerations remain the likely key to the future of the **regional debate in the UK**' (Moore, 1991, 239-240).

This viewpoint seems to have been borne out, and in a more recent, pre-the-inevitable-1997-general-election, evaluation of the same issue, Keating and Jones (1995) agree with the evaluation of the British domestic scenario, and, in addition, lament the likely fate of especially English regions on the European scene:

> 'Regional policies and Community government have been seen as **extensions of Westminster politics**. This is likely to be untenable in the future. Demands for Scottish self-government are too strong for any future non-Conservative government to resist. (..) The peripheral **English regions** lack even the advantage of their own central departments (the Scottish and Welsh Offices). Across the British periphery, there are concerns about the inadequacy of infrastructure or public policies to prepare the regions for the competitive challenge. It is little wonder that a

[17] a slightly less academic account can be found in New Statesman & Society, 3 February, 1995, which claims that 'the Liberal Democrats stand for **unashamed federalism** throughout the UK

> 1990 Report for the Commission identifies **British regions** as ill endowed to face it'(Keating & Jones, 1995, 112-113).

And the British regions which the European Union seems to deal with are Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the eight English standard regions, which, it is recognized, 'unlike these territories (the three Celtic nations) (..) have no administrative functions, and **exist mainly as statistical units**'(*Portrait of the Regions* Volume 2, 1993, 161). Against this backdrop the next general election seems, as ever, very important for the prospects of British regionalism. But even if the predicted Labour triumph results, it is still highly unpredictable whether the future will bring continued regional administration or some form of highly contested regional government and the called-for strategic planning. For one thing, many commentators claim that, for all the rhetoric, Labour might, once in office, be less enthusiatic about delivering on all the promises made; that they might once more find it easier to pursue other elements of their programme from a comfortable power position in Westminster and Whitehall, even if some form of devolution to Scotland might be unavoidable. One aspect in this is the parliamentary time available for new legislation, to which regionalism might become subservient. Some cynics would claim that behind the official party lines devolution, local government administration and regionalism divide both Labour and the Conservatives, if not the Liberal Democrats; that the Conservatives have harboured and may still harbour 'closet regionalists' (*New Statesman & Society*, 3 February, 1995) just as Labour ranks would include staunch anti-devolutionists in the vein of Tam Dalyell.

At this point it might be appropriate to return to region/alism as a keyword and to revisit an article written in 1974, in the wake of Britain's entry into the Common Market and its encounter with European regional policy (Rhodes, 1974). The article opens as follows

> 'The subject of **regionalism** places almost impossible strains on the flexibility of the English language. This

> one word is used to cover such diverse subject areas as **national economic planning**, **political devolution**, **administrative deconcentration**, and **local government reform**. As a result there is considerable confusion surrounding the subject'. (Rhodes, 1974, 105)

Twenty-three years on, confusion still abounds. But then clarity in the keywords used is not necessarily the stuff that political discourse is made of.

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