



WEB SITE REVIEW

Regions and Nations in the United Kingdom: Constitution Unit

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Name of site: Regions and Nations Site

Author: Constitution Unit

Url: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/leverh/index.htm>

Type of site: research homepage

Housed at: University College London site

Status [at September 28th 2001]: live

Housed within the website of the Constitution Unit (CU) at University College London is a separate site devoted to the Leverhulme monitoring project on nations and regions. The project itself is designed to track the developments of constitutional change since the election of the New Labour government in 1997. Although there is considerable debate among academic circles on the extent to which the various campaigns for change are part of a coherent package, the usual suspects of constitutional reform fall under the remit of the Leverhulme report: devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and proposals for changes in the English regions. Also contained within the general CU site is a separate section devoted to its Nuffield-funded devolution and health care project. The Nations and Regions project contains three broad research questions:

- How is identity affecting and affected by devolution?
- How does devolution fit in with changing voter attitudes and changing demands on the nation-state?
- How is devolution working?

A combination of sociological and international relations approaches to politics are employed in a list of research projects organised and operated by various researchers at UK universities. The research agenda appears ambitious and the recent appearance of a work edited by Robert Hazell (and advertised on the site) includes many of the same participants whose work appears in research reports contained within the site.

Designed as a clearinghouse for information on the project, the CU Nations and Regions site offers monitoring reports on events in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the English regions, and inter-governmental relations in addition to a list of publications offered in scholarly journals and as edited works. Descriptions of the project and contact details are available but the main meat of the site has, until recently, been the monitoring reports on events in the constituent units. The recent addition of an annual report adds to the content of this page. The site appears to have identified its purpose as promoting its own material rather than contributing to the debate on devolution itself.

The site is relatively easy to navigate although on numerous visits within working hours the server was found to be both slow and uncooperative. At times, individual monitoring reports are impossible to access, and it is sometimes best to exit the entire site before re-attempting to uncover information. On one attempt all of the Northern Ireland reports proved inaccessible and the drop-down menus frequently appear to have minds on their own. Adobe Acrobat is required to view the reports; and whether it is a problem with the site itself or its interface with Adobe, accessing the monitoring reports sometimes proves impossible. Often it is more reliable to print the report rather than wait for the computer to freeze, something that may concern those seeking to conserve money from printing budgets. For whatever reason, my computer crashes roughly one quarter of the time I

visit the Nations and Regions site, something that has yet to happen with any other site on the Internet. The computer is not old, and is typical of resources available at any university, and thus typical of the resources available to any user at a university. The sheer determination that is required to view the reports may worry the architects of the site.

While the content of the reports is usually quite good, the presentation undermines its analysis. Title pages and fonts are forever changing, some with logos, some without. Some with title pages, some without. Some reports list the authors of each section, some do not. There is a breath-taking inconsistency of information that plagues the monitoring reports. By 2001, for example, it becomes clear that the project is jointly funded by Leverhulme and the ESRC, while earlier reports neglect to mention the ESRC. If the funding status of the report has changed, nothing appears on the site to this effect. Tables of contents sometimes indicate that sections are 'nil return' (see for example, Northern Ireland quarterly report November 2000) leading one to wonder why they weren't excluded from the list of available options. Some of the sections resort to listing relevant events while others employ clear and concise analysis. In short, there appears to be diversity in the quality of work in addition to the diversity in its presentation. In some of the earlier reports it is not clear how the material is different from that available from the local newspaper, while others contain material worthy of inclusion in academic journals. An analysis of one specific monitoring report further illustrates this point.

In a blind point-and-click it was decided at random to review the November 2000 Scottish monitoring report. After 5 minutes, page 2 of the pdf file had yet to become visible. It later became impossible to view the report and the site froze, forcing me to close down my Internet connection and begin again. This happened three more times before I gave up and decided to view August 2000. This, however, proved equally impossible so I opted to view May 2000, which also proved impossible to access. In the end, it required 12 attempts, during which the site would freeze and I would have to exit the internet, before I gave up attempting to access the Scottish reports and instead consulted a quarterly report for Northern Ireland that I had printed out earlier in the year. Sometimes the Scottish reports are easy to view, sometimes it is the Northern Ireland reports that prove difficult to access. The experience, however, is an exceedingly frustrating one.

The monitoring reports address the third of the previously listed research objectives, leaving aside the impact of and on identity and the changes to the nation state. The February 2001 Northern Ireland report contains one 'nil return' on devolution disputes but otherwise presents a full complement of topics covered under the regular reports. There appears to be an uneven distribution of labour, as Robin Wilson is either solely or jointly responsible for seven of the twelve sections. Authors of the reports appear to have scoured not only the official proceedings and various press releases of the assembly but also newspapers, journal articles and books in compiling their summaries. The section on Northern Ireland is well-written, providing a neutral examination of the problems faced by decommissioning, the schisms among the unionist camp, the culture of secrecy in the assembly and the lack of trust that appears to hinder relations both between and among the various interested parties. At times, comparisons with the progress of devolution in Scotland and Wales are explicitly made, usually citing the lack of progress made in Northern Ireland relative to the mainland nations. The analyses cover both the substance of devolved legislation, including proposals for health, economic development and investment, and the series of issues raised by the establishment of an assembly, including the ability of statutory committees to meet their



workload and the bouts of unparliamentary language that mar the debating chamber. Considerable concern surrounds the timidity with which committees are placing information in the public domain. The reluctance to provide comprehensive minutes of committee meetings and the frequency with which the committees meet in private has caused consternation among advocates of 'new politics'. The reports on the media coverage of the visit of the US president Bill Clinton, the resignation of then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Mandelson, and the contested use of the word 'massacre' to describe the events of Bloody Sunday equally projected the range of opinions held within the print media, while the section on public attitudes and identity tracked support for Mr Trimble and the continued if decreasing support for the Good Friday Agreement. Two reports analyse relations with the EU and the inter-governmental arrangements among the various governments within Ireland and the UK. Both list the various meetings that have taken place since the previous monitoring report between the governments in Dublin and London. The analysis contained within these two reports stands in contrast to the seven-line report on relations with local government. In short, the reports provide in detail notes on the important events since the previous report and, in most cases, provide analysis both on the progress thus far and the future success of the arrangements. As stated previously, inconsistency in presentation undermines the analysis.

It is not clear from the writing whether some of the comments are designed for inclusion or escaped editing. 'John Reid replaced the discredited(?) Peter Mandelsohn' is one such example, although others are frequent in several of the reports. It is not clear whether the author wasn't sure if he was discredited, or wasn't sure whether such comments should be included in the report. The beginning of the section on political attitudes notes that confusion about e-mail addresses had led to the exclusion of the analysis from the previous report. As the reports are taking the place of journal articles or edited collections they cannot be faulted for editing inconsistencies that would be corrected by copy editors. It seems that their presentation on the internet, however, would warrant a little extra editorial attention. If the internet site is designed to promote the Nations and Regions research programme, the research team might be discouraged to learn that the image, at present, is of a research team producing interesting work under considerable pressure of time and personnel.

On the whole, the authors of the reports appear to be let down by the inconsistent presentation and accessibility of their work. Those who feel it necessary to keep abreast of developments may find it useful to consult the monitoring reports. For those seeking more analysis, and a more polished product, it may be more rewarding to wait for the inevitable tidal wave of publications coming from Robert Hazell and the devolution research teams.