

Devolution and national belonging: Could England learn from Scotland and Wales?

By Ebum Bamigboye

It has been over 25 years since the 1998 Acts of devolution transferred power to governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Nasar Meer, Professor of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Glasgow, is leading research into how devolution has impacted race equality in different parts of the UK.. Six months into his two-year RDUK-funded project, Professor Meer has published the results from Stage One of this study, which traced the evolution of race equality policies since devolution. One of the key findings is how devolution has created distinctive policy spaces in which Scotland and Wales have developed narratives of national belonging that are pluralistic and inclusive of their migrant-heritage populations.

In Scotland, an inclusive view of nationhood, where minority ethnic communities and refugees are placed within the national “we” is supported by use of anti-racist language in government, policy, and increasingly decolonial perspectives in education. This is also the case in Wales where curriculum reforms and the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan (a government initiative which aims to make Wales an anti-racist country by 2030) situate the histories of minority ethnic communities into the story of Wales.

Professor Meer explains that devolution has been an important enabling condition for inclusive narratives of nationhood because it has created political institutions that need to explain who they represent, what kind of political community they are governing, and what distinguishes their approach from Westminster. Race equality therefore “becomes connected to wider projects of national narration and institutional legitimacy”.

But he also points out that devolution alone has not created change. These developments have depended on political leadership, civil-service capacity, civil-

society advocacy, and the expertise of racialised communities. Nor should we romanticise devolved government: inclusive national narratives still coexist with substantial inequalities and uneven implementation.

England lacks an equivalent national devolved institutional space in which English nationhood, racial diversity, and public policy are considered together. Race equality is consequently often discussed through UK-wide legislation, departmental programmes, or local initiatives without a sustained account of what an inclusive, plural England might mean.

The lesson for England is not simply that it needs to copy Scottish or Welsh policy, but to recognise the value of institutional spaces in which belonging, history, and race equality can be considered together. Combined authorities, city regions, and local government may provide some opportunities for this, but England also requires a more explicit national conversation about race, belonging, and the character of its political community. The devolved experience shows that national narration can be used as a resource for inclusion, while also showing that narrative must be connected to enforceable duties and institutional change.

The RDUK programme is helping to create and contribute to these national conversations about race and the UK's racially diverse future. We will bring you more news from the programme as it develops, including the next stage of research, continued by Professor Meer and Dr Mahnoz Illias - the project's research associate - which will explore variations between the UK nations in racial inequalities across education, employment, housing, and criminal justice outcomes.

For more information about this project visit: <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/racial-equality-since-devolution-divergences-outcomes-and-frontiers>