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**Devolving the heartland: making up a new social policy for the 'South East'**

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**Abstract:**

Devolution appears to challenge the traditional regional and national hierarchies of the UK, but in practice the dominance of the South East of England has been maintained through active state intervention. As social welfare has increasingly been redefined through economic success and access to the labour market, the focus of social policy has shifted accordingly. In this context the South East has been re-imagined not as a symbol of inequality and a potential source of redistribution, but rather as driver of economic prosperity and ‘national’ (UK) well-being.

**Key words:** regional policy; state entrepreneurialism; sustainable communities

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The process of devolution, both to the nations that have historically constituted the United Kingdom and to the regions of England, has generally been presented as one whose purpose is to empower the marginalised, giving increased access to decision-making for (some of) those who have previously been excluded from participation in the workings of national (UK) power. Of course, the process may be viewed sceptically, so that the extent to which devolution can deliver what it promises or the extent to which there really has been a devolution of power may be questioned. But the frame of the debate is clear enough.

But what does devolution mean to those from whom power has been devolved? Or, perhaps, what does it mean to those who have never pursued it, because they benefited from the old regime? It is on that question that this piece focuses, in exploring the policy repositioning of the South East of England. The paradox seems to be that, having apparently lost its privileged position, the region has both more explicitly found a voice through new sets of – regional – institutions and more explicitly and deliberately become a subject of social policy, for example, through the carrying forward of the ‘sustainable communities plan’, which amounts to a plan for population growth through the building of new ‘communities’ intended to underpin the economic growth of the region and so the UK.

Historically, of course, the South East has not been understood as a ‘region’ – an object of social policy - in the same sense as others. The discovery of a territorial aspect to social disadvantage in the 1930s made it clear that the regional question was one for the places identified as ‘depressed regions’ or ‘special areas’ while the other areas (such as the home counties) were left unproblematised, the normal against which the less fortunate ‘regions’ might be assessed (see, e.g., Ministry of Labour, 1934, Commissioner for the Special Areas, 1935). Amin et al. (2003) set this in a longer cultural history, emphasising the role of the ‘South East’ in defining the UK as nation state, suggesting that it reflects the ‘courtly’ structure through which the centrality of London and the South East is reproduced and naturalised in the institutional relations of class and politics (Amin et al., 2003: 9-12). ‘London is the presumptive location of the national’, they argue. ‘It is in this sphere that the political meets the economic meets the national imaginary’ and where Britain’s elites learn to be elites (Amin et al., 2003: 13).

Amin et al argue that the centralisation of power in London and the South East means that a 'significant element of 'national policy making effectively functions as an unacknowledged regional policy for the South Eastern part of England' (Amin et al., 2003: 17). So, for example, they suggest that the UK's economic policy is overly influenced by the state of the regional economy in London and South East, with steps being taken to restrain the economy when the region is 'overheating', even when the rest of the country still has significant capacity for growth (see also Morgan, 2002: 800). Similarly, Allen et al. (1998) argue that in the 1980s and 1990s the 'South East' took on the symbolic role of 'growth' region and specifically a region of neo-liberal growth, reflecting a particular confluence of political, cultural and economic dynamics. Although this has often been understood as a simple naturalised 'fact of life' - as a model of deregulated market led growth - in practice, it relied on a high degree of state intervention both to achieve the particular forms of 'deregulation' that were driven through and tended to advantage the South East, as well as significant investment in large scale public infrastructure, for example, associated with road construction, from by-passes to the M25 (and more recently the 2012 Olympics).

### *Re-imagining the South East*

The rise of a broader devolution agenda is discussed elsewhere in this issue, but its practical expression in England is to be found in the increased active role of regionally based government offices, the formation of regional assemblies with limited planning powers, and, probably most significant, the creation of regional, quasi autonomous, development agencies. These agencies were set up throughout England in 1999, with the role of fostering the competitiveness of the regions within which they found themselves. They were presented as a means of providing the regions with a secure (competitive) economic base, capable of delivering the financial well-being of their residents (in a social policy that was moving beyond welfarism – see, e.g., Morgan, 1997). Collectively the competitiveness of individual regions was seen as a way of enhancing the overall competitiveness of the country. It was intended to 'promote sustainable economic development' (Department of the Environment Transport and the Regions, 1997), with a 'greater focus on wealth creation and jobs' (John Prescott, quoted in Jones and MacLeod, 1999: 301). But the regional agenda

was also presented as a route to political and economic redistribution, since in the coded language of new Labour politics, a focus on the 'regions' offered a means of acknowledging the existence of economic inequality, as well as promising a programme of renewal through a form of economic self-help, rather than redistribution.

The arrival of the new regionalism, however, had particular significance for the South East of England. Unlike the era of the Keynesian welfare state in the middle of the twentieth century, when 'regional policy' as social policy was explicitly oriented towards shifting 'growth' from the more prosperous to the less prosperous regions of the country, this time the South East, too, (for these purposes surprisingly excluding London) is explicitly identified as a region, apparently driven by similar needs to the others. Regional policy is no longer a policy for a set of 'regions', defined as those places with economic and social problems which lie outside the golden heartlands of London and the Home Counties. *Every* region is being enjoined to improve its economic competitiveness. *Every* region has to prove its value in contributing to the competitiveness and the greater well-being of the UK. So, to counter the view of the South East as generator of inequality, undermining the position of other regions, Gordon et al (2003: 65-80) maintain that it is a net contributor to the rest of the country through its taxes and the public expenditure for which they pay. Meanwhile, the South East of England Development Agency makes no bones about its purpose, with a strap-line that promises that it is 'Working for England's World Class Region' and the explicit claim that it is the 'driving force of the UK's economy' or the 'powerhouse of the UK economy' (see also Musson et al., 2002, SEEDA, 1999, 2002a, b).

SEEDA explicitly defines the South East of England in terms of its economic success – as the UK's growth region. The drive to regional competitiveness is, therefore, identified as a British as well as a regional imperative, since although the South East is understood to have grown faster than other regions of the UK and – indeed – than London over the last decade, it is also stressed that the South-East's competitors are outside the UK, and particularly in Europe (see, e.g., SEEDA, 2002a). So, while in one context the scale of the South East's economy is stressed (as larger than some national economies), in this context what is emphasised is that the South East's GDP

is only 23<sup>rd</sup> among the regions of Europe (SEEDA, 2002a: 9). If the South East does not succeed in claiming its rightful place among Europe's elite regions, it is implied, then the UK (and the UK's other regions and devolved nations) will also suffer.

SEEDA's Regional Economic Strategy forefronts an image of the region as 'a dynamic, diverse and knowledge-based economy that excels in innovation and turning ideas into wealth creating enterprise'. The aim of the strategy is to ensure that by 2012 the region is acknowledged to be one of the fifteen 'top performing regional economies' in the world (SEEDA, 2002b: 8). The South East is said to be the UK's 'global gateway' and 'an international region', providing a way into both the UK and Europe for multinational companies, attracting almost as much foreign direct investment as London (SEEDA, 2002b: 13).

But the current policy game has another vitally important aspect, which encourages a focus on concentrations of disadvantage within the region. The new regionalism, is not just focused on economic competitiveness, even if that is the main driver. It is also expected to deliver on another of new Labour's great shibboleths – namely social exclusion. And this, too, finds a clear expression in the language of the new South East. Just as others point to the differences in wealth between regions, so in the South East emphasis is placed on differences within it. Since the current politics of regionalism require regional actors to emphasise the problems they face in order to attract state resources, there has recently been a remarkable turnaround in official representations. Where it was once left to agencies such as SEEDS (South East Economic Development Strategy, a local authority sponsored initiative of the 1980s) (SEEDS, 1987; see also Breugel, 1992) to highlight divisions within the South East, now the new regional agencies sponsor research to identify them so that they have something with which to bargain in the search for state funding. A sharp contrast is drawn between the region's Western growth belt and its coastal fringes to the East and South, which face problems of decline (both in tourism and other traditional industries). The old mining areas of north Kent and others with concentrations of declining industries, particularly those associated with defence or port activities are also identified as suitable cases for policy intervention (see, e.g. SEEDA, 2002b: 12-14). In this context, therefore, there is an explicit focus on 'tackling disadvantage'

*within* the region at the same time as any discussion of redistribution *between* regions is more or less explicitly removed from the agenda.

### *Making up sustainable communities*

The regionalisation of the South East - its re-imagination as a region - has opened up spaces for new policy actors within the region, but it also means that the 'region' plays a rather different role within the policy imaginary that constitutes the UK. This is particularly apparent in the development of the 'sustainable communities' agenda, which seems to have replaced the drive to 'urban renaissance' in defining the government's approach to urban policy, not least because of the way in which it brings together key aspects of new labour policy discourse: economic growth and competitiveness combined with the building of responsible and balanced communities capable of sustaining that growth. Within this model, 'sustainability' is defined to mean economic sustainability (that is the ability to ensure that the economic success of Britain's 'growth region' is not undermined because of labour shortages in key areas) and to mean the building of 'balanced' communities (that is communities within which jobs, housing and services are in balance, and which are not simply suburban dormitory towns). In many respects, despite its regionalised form, this is a UK-wide (or at least England-wide) agenda and – as John et al. (2005) note – this is also reflected in the increasingly strong part played by the regionally based Government Office in defining the planning context as well as funding or sponsoring infrastructural initiatives.

The new approach brings together two words that are increasingly used to give moral and political legitimation to a range of policies in the hybrid term 'sustainable communities'. It emphasises the potential for successful growth, rather than the solving of urban 'problems' in particular neighbourhoods (ODPM, 2003). At the core of the 'sustainable communities' agenda is the proposal to develop four new growth areas in and around the South-East of England – in Ashford, the Thames Gateway, Milton Keynes and the South Midlands and the London-Stansted-Cambridge-Peterborough corridor (ODPM, 2003, ODPM, 2004). So, for example, Milton Keynes (with a population of 212,000) has been a growth area within the South East since the

1960s and is earmarked for further planned population and employment growth (a doubling in population by 2031) as part of these plans (GOSE et al., 2004).

Major investment will be required to underpin these developments, and they represent a significant shift in ways of thinking about urban policy, since the main purpose of the development is to ensure that economic growth in the South East (and so the UK as a whole) is not limited by a lack of affordable housing leading to a 'tightening' of the labour market (see Allen et al., 1998, Peck and Tickell, 1995). For SEEDA, GOSE and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) there is no doubt that 'affordable housing' is a coded expression of the need to provide the necessary infrastructure to underpin continued growth. These issues are particularly clearly identified in the Barker Report, commissioned by the Treasury and the ODPM, within which it is strongly argued that substantial additional growth in housing supply will be required (particularly in the South East) if house prices are not to continue to rise dramatically (Barker, 2004). Providing housing for those who are needed to sustain the boom, even where (like teachers and other public sector workers, but also the growing army of service workers in retail, distribution, hotels and catering) they are not highly paid 'knowledge workers' is identified as a priority (see, e.g., ODPM, 2003).

With the exception of Thames Gateway (ODPM, 2004), where regeneration and development are combined, this programme clearly owes little to any concern for the inner cities or other traditional targets for urban policy. What is being promised is the creation of new 'communities', rather than the organic development of existing communities. These are communities that promise the space and security of suburbia, alongside the facilities of urban living (with easy access to shops, employment and entertainment) (a vision of urban living that is positively endorsed by Schoon, 2001).

This vision is not quite so simply translated into the popular understanding of the existing residents of the South East, even if they share some of its assumptions. So, for example, while there may be strong support for 'affordable housing' on all sides, and existing residents are happy to complain about the costs they incur by living in the South East, these complaints are always tempered by a desire to ensure that further development does not threaten their lifestyles. Similarly, while their economic

prosperity may be dependent on finding ways of 'sustaining' economic growth, they are equally ready to emphasise other aspects of life often captured by the notion of sustainability – such the protecting of areas from environmental depredation, ensuring that transport networks remain effective, that flooding is avoided or (above all) maintaining the quality of life for residents (see, e.g. Robinson, 2004 and Foley, 2004). In the draft South East Plan approved for consultation by the South East Regional Assembly (a body dominated by representatives of the region's county and district councils) in 2004, the tensions are explicitly acknowledged: 'On the one hand economic growth and concomitant development has been a necessary condition for prosperity and social and environmental action. On the other, some consider that the price of that growth in terms of resource consumption and other impacts is too high and unsustainable in the long-term' (SEERA, 2004: 4; the same sentences are incorporated into the Draft Plan published in 2005). While accepting the rhetoric that positions them as UK's 'success' story, this also allows the political representatives of the South East to reframe the policy question, so that it focuses on coping with the 'problems of success' (Foley, 2004).

Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, the existing institutions of local government have not been viewed as trustworthy agents of transformation. The proposals emphasise the need to break with traditional ways of working in order to enable housing growth, supported by social and economic infrastructure. The means of delivery chosen for the programme of 'sustainable communities' launched in England in 2003 (ODPM, 2003), highlights the extent to which a private sector model (or, at least, a particular interpretation of such a model) has increasingly been taken as the appropriate one for professional behaviour in the new urban policy. The institutional structures being imposed (the so-called local delivery vehicles) reinforce this emphasis, since they are effectively part of English Partnerships (the government's own property development agency, which describes itself as 'The national regeneration agency supporting high quality, sustainable growth across the country') (English Partnerships, 2004: 1) but include representatives of local government, business and the voluntary sector. The local delivery vehicles are akin to, if not quite as powerful as, the urban development corporations (see, e.g., Imrie and Thomas, 1999) or their new town predecessors (see, e.g. Schaffer, 1970), although some have been given urban development corporation status (ODPM, 2003).

The context within which the model is being reinvented may be a rather different one, as Raco (2005) suggests, because of the way in which the new urban development corporations are supposed to work more closely with other development agencies, as well as with local partnerships, local authorities and community organisations. They are supposed to offer additional capacity, rather than to substitute themselves for the existing organisations. Nevertheless, the model of a single purpose agency with an emphasis on property development as the lever of change (and indeed the source of added value to fund any social infrastructure) remains fundamentally rooted in an understanding of urban policy in terms that emphasise economic (and competitive) success. These bodies have planning powers and the ability to negotiate for surplus from property development to pay for the infrastructure required. The expectation is that they will work far more effectively as public entrepreneurs than existing local agencies. They are models of a public sector professionalism based around an ability to work in (and even) manipulate property markets more effectively.

The local implications of the new regionalism are clearly illustrated by the case of Milton Keynes, where, in the context of the wider framework given by the regional offices of government (GOSE et al., 2004), the emphasis is overwhelmingly placed (by the Local Strategic Partnership) on ways of positioning the new expanded Milton Keynes as a globally competitive city, making it a place that is attractive to globally footloose industry while also trying to make it less footloose (DTZPieda, 2004). If the new town was originally envisaged as offering opportunities to those relocating from the 'overcrowded' central cities, the international city is about bringing the right sort of people to Milton Keynes to ensure that it is able to grow further (and potentially better). In other words, what is being constructed is a form of state supported (and often funded) entrepreneurialism, under the broad leadership of English Partnerships, which operates as a state sponsored property developer, seeking to generate value from the development of land, to help fund its own activities and to meet the targets for house construction in the South-East (see, e.g. *Society Guardian*, 19.01.2005).

## **Conclusion**

In some respects the strategies being pursued and policies being fostered through the Sustainable Communities Plan have strong Keynesian echoes. There is no doubt about the support for highly interventionist – state led – investment in social and economic infrastructure of one sort or another (from railways to motorways; schools to higher education; health centres to hospitals) (see, e.g., GOSE, 2005). There is also a taken-for-granted and widely shared assumption about the need to sustain full employment. Even the emphasis on the social gain to be extracted from land value is part of a tradition that goes back as far as Ebenezer Howard. But the emphasis is fundamentally different, too. The underlying stress is on ways of sustaining economic growth in the South East, through a form of state entrepreneurialism. The Sustainable Communities Plan (ODPM 2003) is fundamentally predicated on finding some way of sustaining competitive growth in the South East and the role of the growth areas is to provide housing for ‘key’ workers as part of that process (Cochrane, 2005).

The South East has moved from being the ‘accidental’ or (at any rate) unacknowledged beneficiary of national policy (as a condensation of the UK ‘national’) to being actively produced as an object of social policy in its own right. Social policy has been actively redefined in economic terms so that access to labour markets based on successful economic growth is increasingly presented as the route to individual and social welfare through workfare. In that context, there is now an explicit argument about the distribution of state resources, and about the unbalanced distribution of economic growth and individual prosperity in the UK. Paradoxically, however, this seems to have strengthened the position of the South East, since it has been fundamentally positioned as ‘driver’ of the UK economy and thus, in the new world of competitive welfarism, as guarantor of continued well-being for us all. What is good for the South East is now understood to be good for the rest of the UK ...or, at least, the rest of England.

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