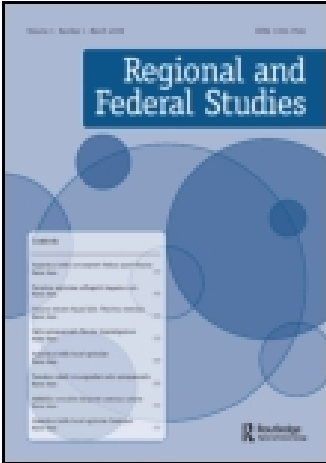


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### The Impact of Devolution on Social Policy

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identity, is not decentralized at all. It is still far too centralized in terms of culture and identity, so that they consider a re-federalization of Canadian society as necessary.

The chapters convey an impressive scope and depth of analysis, so that the reader benefits from ideas and thoughts that are organized along the different concepts of each book. If there is anything missing in this pair of books, it would be chapters dealing with cross-cutting issues. One, but not the only, example would be Medicare and child care, that C.N. Collier (p. 166) and I. Peach (p. 55) deal with, respectively. The question also arises of under what conditions decentralized federalism would promote a neo-liberal agenda, as B. Jeffrey questions in her chapter (p. 108). It is also questionable whether, as I. Weibust argues (p. 25), only the federal government could improve environmental performance in Canada. For Canada it might be fruitful to shift the possible future debate away from the concepts of centralized or decentralized federalism, and more towards specific policies. At least for the policies discussed in the books, Canada might benefit best if federal government and provinces would decide and act jointly. Of course, conditions for joint decision making are different depending on the policy at stake and a centralized or decentralized point of view. An intended continuing debate (for example through the online journal) would provide some answers on the conditions under which joint decision making would work best for Canada.

In sum, editors and authors should be congratulated for launching a discussion about the design of federalism that suits their country best. The books seem to primarily address a Canadian audience, but readers outside Canada may also appreciate a broad insight and rich understanding of the origins and evolution of Canadian federalism. This inspires readers to contribute to the debate, but also to reflect on other federal systems facing similar demands for centralization and decentralization.

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**The Impact of Devolution on Social Policy** by Derek Birrell. Bristol, The Policy Press, 2009, ISBN 978-1-84742-225-5

The main thrust of this book deals with social policy and how the British welfare state can adapt itself to the policy changes that devolution has brought since 1998. The author has carried out extensive research in order to provide a comprehensive assessment and a comparative framework for a general examination of the impact of devolution on UK social policy with regard to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It offers both an overview and a comparative description with analysis.

The endeavour pursued in this volume is to be most welcomed, as studies on the spatial dimension of power and social policy are rare. Both areas of analysis were often considered to belong to separate realms of societal life: the functional and the territorial. On the contrary, developments in recent decades have brought to the fore the issue of how multi-level governance can serve as an incentive for the expansion

of social entitlements. Claims that decentralization is synonymous with welfare retrenchment, as it leads to an unavoidable 'race to the bottom', have found no evidence in a good number of compound polities. Conversely, the 'credit claiming' argument that sub-state communities can advance social citizenship in decentralized countries has been validated empirically in several instances.

In the introductory chapter the author states that the main topics of the book are presented through an integrated approach. This is initiated in Chapter 2 by comparing the scope of the devolved powers over social policy in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Prof. Birrell assesses that the UK's devolved administrations have settled in with a civil service capacity to formulate policies and strategies, as well as with a capability and power to mould local government, public bodies and cross-cultural partnerships to suit the delivery of social policy objectives.

Chapters 3–5 engage in the central theme of comparing the social policies and strategies of the devolved administrations with appropriate references to England. These chapters explore the differences in social policy making and provision using a threefold typology of difference, ranging from innovative and distinctive differences through significant divergence to more low-level incremental differences. With regard to the latter, a large component of social policy seems to fall into this category of incremental divergence. According to the author, the main reasons for incremental differences lie with degrees of innovative thinking, variation in needs, different priorities and administrative structures.

Chapter 6 assesses the scope and significance of continuing convergence in social policy throughout the four countries of the UK and highlights the main factors promoting convergence. The author underlines that policy transfer and copying has had a clear influence on legislation and policy initiatives in the four countries, encouraged on occasions by popular opinion. Chapter 7 analyses the area of interfaces and overlaps in policy making and provision which have developed with the interaction of devolved and non-devolved powers between Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland executives and the UK central government. Despite the inevitability of those overlaps, adjustments have been relatively easy in order to achieve a degree of congruence between the devolved and UK ministerial departments.

Chapter 8 addresses the sensitive issue of explaining and comparing the approaches of the devolved administrations to social policy through the lenses of underlying values and principles. In the cases of Scotland and Wales, Prof. Birrell makes it clear that the devolved governments have demonstrated strong support for welfare state values, and an extension of universalism rather than selectivity or targeting in policy provision. They have adopted as well a strong participatory, localist and citizenship view of public sector delivery and modernization.

Chapter 9 examines some of the available data for comparing social need and the outcome of provision and expenditure since devolution. Although it is not possible to ascribe causation to devolution, in the case of Scotland there is evidence that health indicators and performance have improved, and that in 2009 per capita expenditure here was highest in the UK. The conclusions highlight some preliminary indications that new devolved administrations may be giving greater priority to economic policy than social policy issues, to the detriment of the latter.

The book written by Derek Birrell will be most useful for all those scholars and students interested in social policy, public policy and politics and, in general, welfare development. This volume is also to be welcomed by practitioners engaged in the design and implementation of policies and actions to advance social citizenship.

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