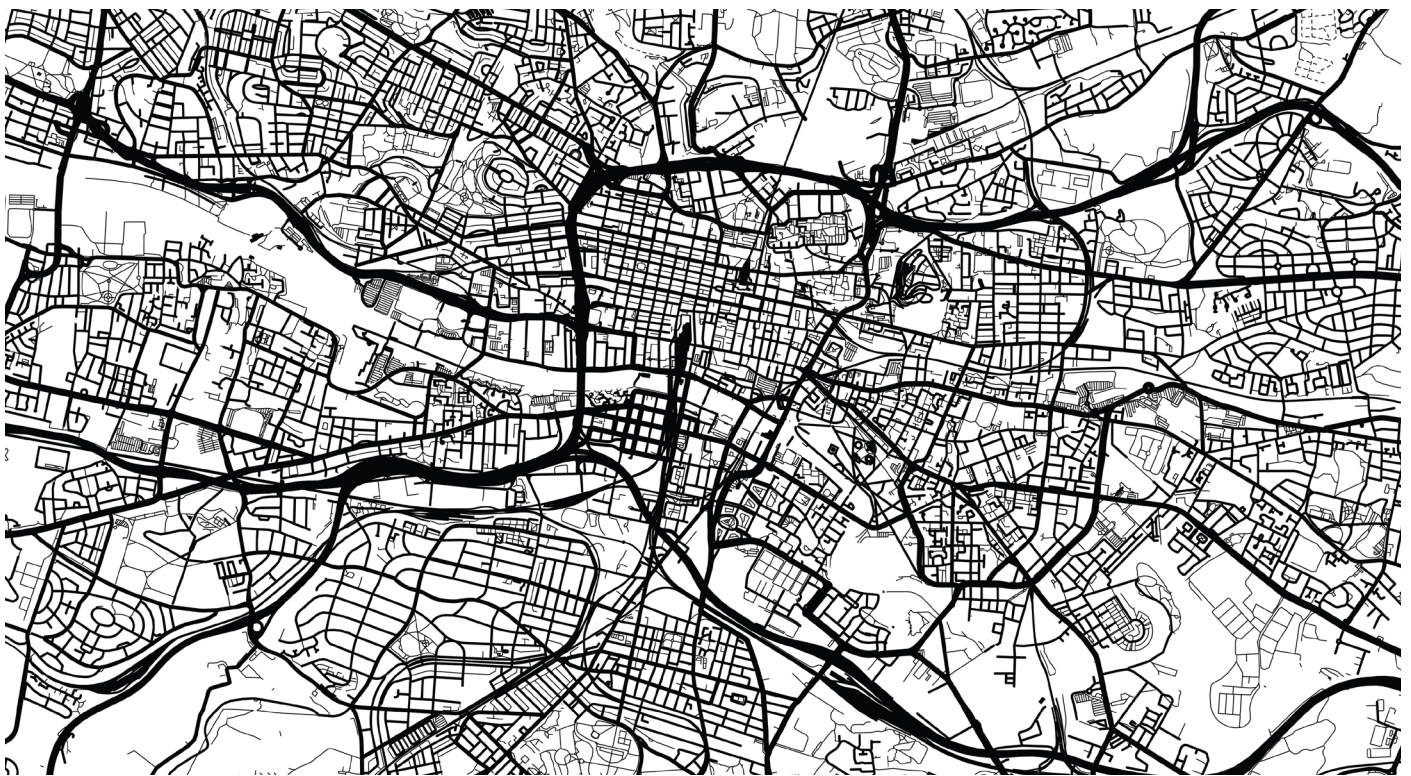


The Contradictions and Politics of Bringing Power Back to Scotland's Local Communities

JACK LIDDALL analyses the conflicting pushes to centralise political power in Scotland while maintaining the power of local communities.



Vector Map of Glasgow

Image: ink drop | Adobe Stock

In 2014, a report by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) showed that Scotland has become 'one of the most centralised countries in Europe' (Commission on Strengthening 2014, 4). Since 2007, the Scottish National Party (SNP) has consistently voiced demands for more devolved powers and greater autonomy from the UK (Scottish Parliament 2016). This article seeks to understand the apparently contradictory politics of demanding the decentralisation of Westminster governance whilst centralising at Holyrood. Firstly, this article will establish whether the Scottish Government is centralising powers, using three measures drawn from multi-level governance literature.

It will be argued that this centralisation has had a detrimental impact on the autonomy of local governments and their communities. Secondly, this article argues that the demands of domestic politics and general political expediency are the most convincing reasons for Scottish Government centralisation.

Scottish Government centralisation and local communities

Centralisation: the theory

A working definition of de/centralisation must be adopted in order to assess the extent to which the Scottish Government is centralising its devolved

powers. Unsurprisingly, de/centralisation is a contested term in the literature on local and multi-level governance. In evaluating the Scottish context, areas of consensus within the scholarship have been synthesised to conceptualise de/centralisation as constituting three dimensions: a) policy-making powers, b) resource allocation powers and c) the culture of decision-making.

In terms of dimension (a), Gaskell and Stoker (2020, 34) understand centralisation as where power lies, referring to the ability of ‘subnational governance actors’ (for this article’s purposes, this means Scottish local authorities) to ‘sanction decisions’ and ‘influence policymaking.’ Homsy et al. (2018, 574) proposed a framework of multi-level governance that similarly seeks to consider who has the ‘sanctioning and coordinating authority’ as a means of understanding the extent of centralisation.

Dimension (b) considers the more material side of power—who has the resource capacity to influence and implement decision-making. Comparing collaborative and centralised governance methods, Gash (2016, 455) highlights this measurement as the extent to which governance actors ‘share responsibilities and resources. Suggesting the key components of ‘[de/centralisation] measurement schemes,’ Dardanelli (2020) highlights the importance of differentiating between the powers to construct policies and the powers to ‘raise the resources needed to pay for them.’

Gaskell and Stoker (2020, 37) also recognise the significance of ‘celebrating difference,’ hence the ‘cultural’ aspect in dimension (c). ‘Celebrating difference’ refers to an understanding by the central government of the benefits of diverse solutions to locality-specific issues that communities face (Gaskell and Stoker 2020, 34). Describing a spirit of collaborative governance, Gash (2016, 455) has emphasised how policy design can stem from ‘joint decision-making efforts,’ rather than purely unilateral or consultative approaches. A general culture of shared decision-making was

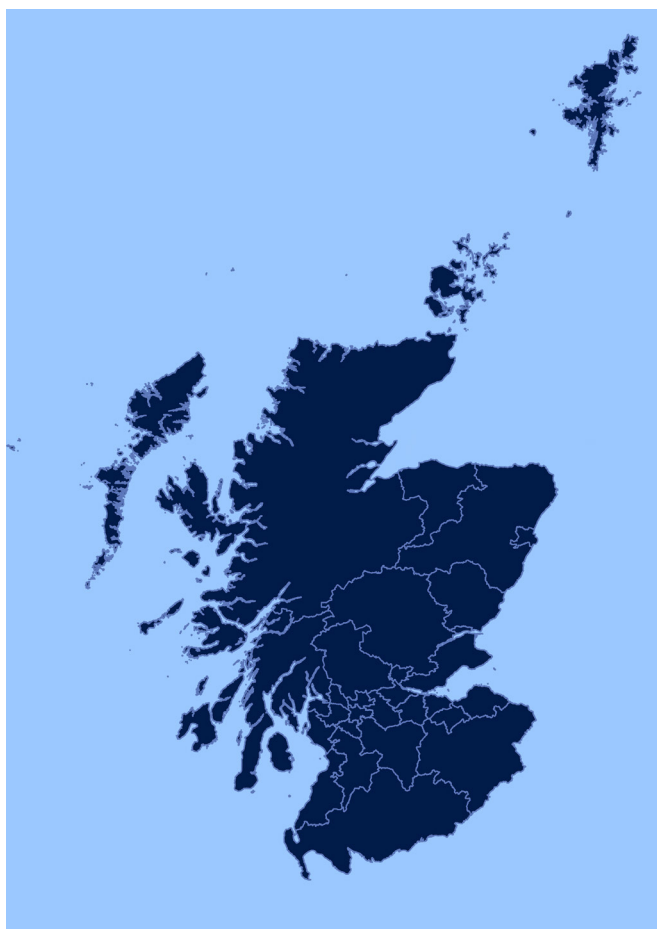
also important to the components of multi-level governance proposed by Homsy et al. (2018, 574), with one element being the extent of the ‘co-production of knowledge,’ meaning that local knowledge was part of the policymaking discourse at a central level.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that it is unhelpful to assume that centralisation is necessarily a negative means of governance, or indeed that more collaborative or symmetrical multi-level systems of governance always yield more effective or democratic results. However, it certainly means that power is taken away from the local level.

Centralisation: the evidence

The empirical evidence—drawn particularly from government documents and political discourse analysis—follows the above tripartite index of de/centralisation.

On the measurement of policy-making powers, there has been a considerable centralising impetus from the Scottish Government. One of the most recent centralising moves relates to the manner in which the Scottish Government is consulting on and implementing a largely popular policy: a National Care Service. Recommendations published in March 2021, following a review of adult social care, suggested that the statutory requirement for local authorities to provide care support be removed in favour of entrenching the accountability of government ministers for social care (Scottish Government 2021b, 70). The report held that local authorities would instead become ‘key partners in Integration Joint Boards,’ through which they would influence decision-making (Ibid). This constitutes a clear centralising shift; where decision-making power is currently being held statutorily by local authorities, it would be given to ministers and, at least in principle, re-shape the role of local authorities into a more consultative one. Indeed, COSLA (2021b) expressed its ‘grave concern’ at the recommendations regarding the prospective



The 32 Scottish Council Areas

Image: Nilfanion / WikiCommons

governance of a National Care Service. In particular, the leaders of Scotland's councils stated their unanimous rejection of what they believe constitutes 'the removal of local democratic accountability' (Ibid). In terms of what the Scottish Government's plans for a National Care Service would mean for children's social care, COSLA also called these proposals 'an attack on localism and on the rights of local people to make decisions democratically for their place' (CYPNOW 2021).

The Scottish Government has further centralised by directing resources away from local government. From 2013/14 to now, the Scottish Government has experienced a real-time increase in revenue funding of three-point-one percent, whilst the local government has suffered a two-point-four percent decrease (COSLA 2021a). Thus, in prioritising central funding, the Government is passing on disproportionate shares of cuts to local governments. Furthermore, local authorities have consistently

complained that the Government has sought to constrain its ability to decide the rate of council tax, in particular by offering financial incentives to freeze tax rates (Ibid). COSLA's Resources Spokesperson Gail Macgregor lamented that the Government impinged on their 'democratic right to determine their own council tax rates' (Ibid; Scottish Fabians 2021, 61). Clearly, resource allocation has been a tool through which centralisation has occurred, and local authority powers have been curtailed. There are examples of civil service jobs being centralised, diminishing local governments' ability to implement policy efficiently. In 2018, the Government came under particular pressure over plans to increase the proportion of civil service jobs based in Edinburgh and Glasgow to 80 percent (McPherson 2018). Indeed, the Public and Commercial Services Union noted a clear 'centralising tendency of the Scottish Government' in civil service occupations (Ibid).

Considering the cultural dimension of de/centralisation, the rhetoric and principles underlying central governance are important. Government and party discourses display the perception the central government has of local democracy. It is true that in recent years, the Government has committed in principle to devolving more power to local levels. In initiating a Local Governance Review, it has called on Scotland's 'diverse communities' to have 'greater control and influence over decisions that affect them most' (Scottish Government 2019a). Council leaders recognised the effort the central government was making to recognise the importance of local governance, declaring in a joint statement in March 2021 that both central and local governments had a 'clear appetite' to 'reinvigorate modern democracy across Scotland' (Scottish Government 2021a). However, a more critical evaluation of Government discourse around local democracy reveals a lack of detail and substance in what are often general and ambiguous statements about 'partnership working' and 'shared visions.' For example, in its last three 'Programme for Government' documents, discerning exactly how the Scottish Government

intends to provide local governments with a seat at the table on key policy issues is often challenging. In these programmes, the number of times ‘local governments’ or ‘local governance’ is mentioned has decreased from 24 to fifteen to eleven (Scottish Government 2019/20; 2020/21; 2021/22). Yet, when local government is mentioned, the programmes most often describe an intention to work ‘in partnership’ (Scottish Government 2019/20, 16), ‘in conjunction’ (Scottish Government 2020/21, 13) or ‘cohesively’ (Scottish Government 2021/22: 48) with local representatives. This involves little, if any, detail as to what that ‘partnership working’ entails—in particular, whether it involves joint decision-making or central government veto and what the mechanisms actually are for local governments to contribute their perspectives. Each year’s report has included a small section dedicated to local governance, in which the Government’s ‘Local Governance Review’ was discussed. The programmes state that the review considers how a ‘new tier of democracy can be made;’ that is, how the gap between local and national government can be bridged (Scottish Government 2020/21, 115). Although largely due to COVID-19, the intended legislation following the review remains underdeveloped: the Government remains in the preliminary stages of constructing an effective democracy at all levels of society. The SNP Manifesto 2021 (which mentions local government just ten times) also said it would ‘complete the review’ and bring forward a bill, suggesting again that the Government is only beginning to consider how to properly integrate local government into central decision-making (SNP 2021, 40).

The contradictory politics of bringing power closer to the people

The question then remains: why does the Scottish Government—which has been dominated by the pro-independence SNP since 2007, who demand greater autonomy from the UK Government—centralise power in a manner similar to the UK Government it

criticises?

The first approach to answering this question is theoretical. If we conceptualise politics as ‘who gets what, when, how’—as a constant battle over power—then centralisation could be perceived as a logical strategy (Laswell 1936). Once a party, or even an institution like the Scottish Government, has power, it seems counterintuitive to give it away. Faguet (2004, 23) maintains that naturally, those at the centre will ‘benefit directly from a highly centralised government’ and so it is in their interests to consolidate this status quo. In the same way, the Scottish Government—particularly one which received more devolved powers in 2016 from the UK Government—wants to retain control over a range of policy issues. Moreover, the SNP has grown to dominate party politics in Scotland—forming a minority government with 47 seats in 2007 and winning the most seats in 2011 (69) and 2016 (63) (Scottish Parliament 2016). Having a majority in government and a strong grip on the legislative process surely only encourages the retention of power at the centre—why demand more power if you are simply going to give it away?

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Another possible reason is that the Scottish Government is, as a fairly new institution at barely two decades old, seeking to prove its legitimacy. Thus, it has centralised power in order to show that it can effectively execute policy decisions (Hassan 2020). However, this reason is no longer so compelling since polls show that Scots want to keep the devolved institutions and actually trust them more than Westminster (What Scotland Thinks 2020). So, concerns over proving legitimacy are

probably not paramount to the centralising impetus anymore (at least in terms of proving legitimacy to Scots). The Parliament was also established by a national referendum, so undermining or retracting its powers is politically impractical, if not impossible (Maer et al. 2004).

Overall, considering the influence of domestic politics on centripetal forces is rather more convincing. By centralising, the Scottish Government can more easily purport to speak for Scotland; it can present itself as one unified ‘Scottish lobby.’ For example, on Brexit (where Scotland voted differently to England and Wales yet still left the EU as part of the UK), the Scottish Government has presented itself as the only effective institution which can properly speak for Scottish interests. In *Scotland’s Place in Europe (2016)*, produced by the Government following Brexit, the First Minister presented the Scottish Government and Parliament as the only legitimate loci for the expression of Scottish interests. The First Minister maintained that it was the Scottish Government which would ‘ensure Scotland’s voice is heard and acted upon’ and that Westminster Governments ‘that Scotland doesn’t vote for’ are ‘imposing policies that a majority in Scotland does not support’ (Scottish Government 2016, vi). It is not surprising that the First Minister views the Scottish Government/Parliament to be the primary body through which Scottish views are expressed, but it is illuminating that this is contrasted with a UK Government which is said to have less legitimacy in representing Scotland. It evinces this ‘Scottish lobby’ power of the Scottish Government; a power that can perhaps only truly come from one strong, centralised Scottish Government.

Even on local community-specific issues, the Scottish Government presents itself as the representative of Scottish people, perhaps to the detriment of local democratic voices. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, the Scottish Government arguably adopted a style of presidentialism, with the First Minister delivering daily briefings and the effort being centrally

led, with little influence from or voice for local communities (Hassan 2020). Local communities are diverse and varied—from rural to urban, coastal to inland—but local initiatives were not put in the spotlight (Hassan 2020). A centralised state facilitates the Scottish Government to present itself in this manner; to harness the ‘Scottish lobby’ power.

Another reason why the ‘Scottish lobby’ power is important to the current government is highly party political. The SNP Government wants independence, and it is arguably much easier to present that case to the Scottish people and the UK Government if the Scottish Government is a very singular, centralised authority. Indeed, much literature has been published exploring the ‘paradox of federalism’ (Erk and Anderson 2009, 191). It suggests that decentralising power has both ‘secession-inducing’ and ‘secession-preventing’ effects. Some in the UK Government have resisted devolution to Scotland because they believe it gives secessionist movements, like that of the SNP, the institutional apparatus to push for independence. It could be suggested then that the Scottish Government is an effective means by which the SNP can constitute a ‘Scottish lobby,’ presenting itself as the only true representative voice of the nation and, indeed, pushing for independence. Decentralisation within Scotland could dilute the power of the Scottish Government as an institution to achieve these political goals. Hence, perhaps, the reluctance of an SNP Government to do so.

To conclude, by reclaiming certain policy issues and public services for central operation, by systematic resource control (and resource deprivation for local authorities) and by an underdeveloped, weak discourse around shared and collaborative governance, the Scottish Government clearly has and is centralising devolved powers at Holyrood. This seemingly contradictory centripetal impetus can be largely attributed to political expediency, due to the importance of a highly centralised ‘Scottish lobby’ to the SNP Government’s political aims.

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