

BOOK REVIEW

Local Government in England: Centralisation, Autonomy and Control, by Colin Copus, Mark Roberts and Rachel Wall, London, Palgrave Macmillan (2017), 206 pp. £59.99 (Hardcover); £47.99 (eBook), ISBN 978-1-137-26417-6 (Hardcover); 978-1-137-26418-3 (eBook).

In their preface to this book the authors inform us that it was written in response to the claims of Portuguese and Polish local government scholars, who dared to suggest that their countries were more centralised than England. Copus, Roberts and Wall thank their continental colleagues for 'throwing down the challenge' to demonstrate that England is 'where local government suffers the most' (p. vii), and predict that the book will convince the reader of their case.

Local Government in England: Centralisation, Autonomy and Control does indeed argue convincingly that political power in England has become too centralised in recent decades, and that recent 'localist' reforms have not reversed this process. The book has echoes of Jones and Stewart's *The Case for Local Government* (1983), in that some parts of it read like a manifesto for greater subnational autonomy – and it is refreshing to read an academic text that is so unashamedly normative in parts. Overall, it represents the latest contribution to an illustrious literature that argues local government in England is too weak, and that this has a detrimental impact on local democracy, accountability and economic development.

Particularly interesting is its discussion of different policy narratives that have shaped central-local relations and public perceptions around the purpose and activities of local government in England over the last four decades. Chapter three explores three meta-narratives (*The Sovereign Council*, *New Public Management* and *Network Governance*) in detail, and does an excellent job of highlighting their overlapping and often conflicting

nature. Although these concepts will not be new to readers of *Local Government Studies*, the chapter is very persuasive in explaining how each of them have characterised central-local relations in England to varying extents since the 1970s.

With that in mind, I found it slightly disappointing that the meta-narratives only play a minor role in the rest of the book. Subsequent chapters introduce and apply other narratives in a less systematic way, as they trace changes in English local government over recent decades. Chapter five, for example, makes a heroic attempt to explain the opaque, complex and asymmetric devolution of responsibilities to new 'combined authorities' and city regions within England – a process that was still ongoing in 2018. The chapter's analysis of the tensions and power relations that underpin each deal that a city region has negotiated with central government will be of interest to scholars, students and practitioners alike. However, as with chapters three and five (which cover territorial reorganisation and the 'ties that bind' central and local government together respectively), it might have benefitted from adhering more closely to the meta-narratives mentioned above. This would have strengthened the authors' core argument that centrally-driven rhetoric and actions shape public perceptions of local government and reduce its power accordingly.

The book also reminds us that English devolution and 'localism' are essentially about the decentralisation of administrative functions to subnational units, rather than ensuring a more equitable distribution of power across tiers of government. Although this characterisation is no doubt accurate, I had hoped to encounter a more detailed discussion about the nature of political power at this point. The authors tend to talk about power in zero-sum terms, rather than considering the possibility that both central and local actors could increase their capacity to act through closer collaboration. I found their plea near the end of book for local fiscal autonomy highlighted this issue most starkly: although it would result in councils gaining significant *de jure* powers to generate income and spend it as they wish, such a move would probably weaken local authorities in poorer areas that have a lower revenue base.

In addition, greater reference to intergovernmental systems in other countries could have given the reader a better understanding of how the authors' vision of a more localised state might operate in practice. They might also have provided more detail (perhaps an extra chapter) about the impact of austerity on local government in various countries, and how central government funding cuts may be easier to introduce in England because of the strength of pervading narratives about council financial mismanagement, incompetence and 'waste'. Greater emphasis on these two factors would have strengthened the authors' initial claim that England is where 'local government suffers the most', because in the absence of any comparative analysis it is difficult to draw such a conclusion convincingly.

Nonetheless, the book makes a persuasive case in favour of greater autonomy for English local government. Its explication of the narratives that shape central-local relations and public perceptions is particularly illuminating, and it also provides a very useful academic update on the dynamic process of devolution. As such, it should be of interest to students and researchers with interests in local government, intergovernmental relations and public policy – in England, Portugal, Poland and elsewhere.

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Jones, G.W. and Stewart, J.D. 1983. *The Case for Local Government*. London: Allen and Unwin.