The territorial structures of the UK have been the source of a wide and growing literature over the decade and a half since the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly were created. Its strands have been diverse. Some contributions have considered the constitutional implications for London, others have dealt specifically with the emerging politics in Scotland and Wales while yet another strand has addressed British devolution against a wider European backdrop. Here, Spain, Belgium and to a lesser extent Italy have been important comparative cases of regionalisation.

Considered against the backdrop of this literature, *Devolution and Localism in England*, develops its own frontier in dealing specifically with developments in England. The focus is a timely one, since there is an ongoing debate on the “English question” following the Scottish independence referendum and the preceding vow from the three dominant UK party leaders to devolve more powers to the Scots. Professors Smith and Wistrich also wish to go beyond the discussion about England’s role within the UK to look at sub-state structures more broadly—that is, the broader set of territorial structures that have come and gone since the mid-1990s at the local, city and regional level.

In England, the prelude for territorial reforms after 1997 was a patchwork of different territorial denominations used by public administration. Amazingly for a modern state of its size, Britain has not been supplied with any uniform regional structures. Civil servants, whether dealing with energy supply, infrastructure or food security have conventionally had a patchwork of unofficial regional entities to relate to. John Major’s Conservative government made the first step to unify the patchwork in creating the Government Offices for the Regions in 1994, establishing nine English regions (adding to existing offices in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) and co-locating the regional outposts of various government agencies. These regions would also be the entities for EU funding of regional development, a crucial driving factor in the urge towards a regional level of administration in England.

The Labour Party’s plan when entering government in 1997 was to expand on and democratise these structures. The leap towards regionalism joined together several of its overarching ambitions. English regions would enhance the coordinating capacity of central government and strengthen democratic accountability. Moreover (and highly significant in light of later devel-
A regional structure for England was seen as an appropriate response to the creation of a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly, without treating the English colossus as a whole. The creation of Regional Development Agencies was symptomatic of the late-1990s pursuit of “joined-up government”. Here was a tying together of business, local government and civil society, all under the tutelage of the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills and with strategic funding from London. The democratic element would be added through the creation of Regional Assemblies, initially based on indirect election from local authorities.

A few years later, the government’s attempt at making Regional Assemblies directly electable was abruptly halted by the resounding rejection at the first referendum held over the issue, in the North East in 2004. Thereafter, the ambition of elected Assemblies was quietly put to rest, the Assemblies themselves then dismantled under Gordon Brown’s government. Instead, the appointed Regional Development Agencies were given an injection of democratic accountability through regional ministers and regional select committees in the House of Commons. To conclude the saga, with the change of government in 2010, all these structures were put to a grinding halt and replaced by a set of voluntary arrangements, among them the so-called local enterprise partnerships that unite local authorities and businesses. Meanwhile, a wide range of sub-state structures are on the table in what has historically been one of Europe’s most centralised polities. Elected mayors? City regions? Or another version of Elected mayors? City regions? Or another version of...
remain, whether Wales should be considered on par with the Scots within the Union, and whether there should be English votes for English laws to compensate for the absence of English devolution. Beyond these wider issues are the intra-English ones, related to democratic accountability and revitalisation of civil society. Moreover, aspirations to change the balance of the British economy, enhance social mobility etc. are also typically related to the argument that structures of territorial government must change. Towards all these noble aims, territorial structures will play an essential role. But as Smith and Wistrich point out, there is little reason for immediate optimism. In a short but succinct chapter 7 they sum up the findings and point towards likely developments for the future. “While central government talk is of empowering and permissive decentralisation, it is unclear what this could mean in practice”, the authors note (p. 107) and observe that even the concept of “region” has now been attached to so different territorial entities as to be rendered if not meaningless, then at least inadequate. While the Labour Party is guilty of excessive top-downism in its pursuit of reforms, the Coalition government is so geared towards competition that other concerns (such as a consistent structure) may be neglected or opposed. The British building site is likely to remain an interesting venue for researchers on territorial reform for some time.

**Conflict of Interests**

The author declares no conflict of interests.

**About the Author**

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Øivind Bratberg is a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Political Science, University of Oslo. He completed his PhD in Oslo in 2011. His dissertation addressed how devolution to Scotland and Wales has affected the territorial structures of the three statewide parties in Britain. Among other research interests, Bratberg is co-author of *The Nordic Model of Social Democracy* (Palgrave, 2013) and a textbook on research methods in textual analysis.