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TGRG page

Transport and the impacts of multi-layered governance

In a previous TGRG page, [1] the emerging research agenda on the impacts of governmental devolution on transport policy in the UK was outlined. Over the last year, the Group has developed its thinking on this issue, and from the summer of 2004 will pursue a range of related projects addressing the impacts on transport policy of national devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the moves towards regional government for England. It develops recent work by members of the TGRG on the development of transport policy at the United Kingdom level since the election of the Labour government in 1997, as published in the recent RGS-IBG Book Series volume *A New Deal for Transport?: the UK's struggle with the sustainable transport agenda*.

Devolution in the UK is characterised by its unevenness and lack of symmetry, unlike the quasi-federal processes of governmental decentralisation that have taken place across Europe over the last 20 years. UK devolution has also been piecemeal in terms of the different powers gained by different territories and the absence of an explicit constitutional framework to govern institutional relations. Moves towards regional government for England have been particularly slow to develop, in large part because it is only in the more peripheral regions such as the north east and Cornwall that regional identities are strong enough to have generated and sustained coherent campaigns for greater local political autonomy. Nevertheless, since 1997, the Labour Government has pursued the devolution agenda, creating powerful Regional Development Agencies and interim representative assemblies in each of the English regions. In 2004, the first referendums offering the chance to move towards elected, executive regional government will be held.

One of the declared objectives of English devolution is to give the devolved administrations the ability to develop policies that are better tailored to the economic and social conditions prevalent within their areas, so that the 'competitiveness gap' between the provincial regions and the south east is narrowed. Although the powers of the regions will be limited—they cannot pass legislation and will essentially be scrutineers of local plans and spending priorities in a few policy areas such as transport, economic development and strategic planning—the government's proposals for English devolution nevertheless represent a radical experiment for a political system long been regarded as one of the most centralised in the developed world.

As part of the roadmap to devolution, the government has already engaged in significant 'capacity building' of the nascent regional institutions, particularly the new Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). The development of new transport initiatives has already become one of the main focuses of the pre-devolution organisations, as they seek to develop agreed strategies based on the core objective of improving regional economic performance. As such, the question of the degree to which policy divergence will be emerge as the result of interaction between novel institutional structures and innovative, regionally-defined political strategies, has already become a major line of political geographical enquiry.

The aim of the TGRG's work on devolution is to focus attention on the actual impacts of the process on policy delivery, rather than merely mapping changing institutional structures. The extent of policy divergence from inherited national strategies and the changing relationships between the national, regional and local scales of policy formulation and delivery are of central importance, running across the three main research questions:

- What key transport policy shifts have emerged as part of the devolution process to date? How have strategic priorities and attitudes toward the appraisal of competing forms of investment (such as road and public transport) changed as the new devolved institutions begin to establish themselves?
- To what extent has transport policy been integrated with other devolved areas of policy, such as economic development and social inclusion, to create new, regionally-distinctive political economies? Devolution is not simply decentralised delivery of central priorities, rather it provides the opportunity to develop policy strategies that are genuinely distinctive and tailored to the regions' and nations' unique needs.
- How has the development of (new) regional priorities for transport policy and investment been used to legitimise the devolution process and create or sustain new political identities?

[1] Docherty, I. (2003) "TGRG page: developing research agendas in the TGRG-transport and devolution in the UK", Journal of Transport Geography 11(1), 81.

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Moving beyond the UK, the TGRG is keen to explore the opportunities for comparative research on the impacts of multi-layered governance on transport policies across Europe and North America. International colleagues who hold similar research interests or who are interested in exploring this research agenda are invited to contact me at the address below. Alternatively, it is now possible to contact officers of the Group, and find more about its work, publications and forthcoming events on our new website, accessible via http://www.rgs.org.

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