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In the UK the health, economic, and social crisis of COVID-19 has been a further overlay of pressure and tension on the divisions already keenly felt over Brexit and over issues of devolution and (for Scotland) potential independence. In several respects the crisis has had a unifying effect, both as a function of the ‘natural’ whole-society response to a massive external threat, and the essentials of coordination and collaboration needed across all parts of UK geography and polity. But there have been differences too, reflecting the growing ‘federalisation’ of the UK state.

As to the unifying factors, the huge role of the National Health Service in responding to the crisis, and the conditions under which it has had to operate, has been unreservedly celebrated. Caring for the sick Prime Minister, creating new hospitals in record time, staff sacrificing their own safety to help those infected, and working at frantic pace for long hours, have all been visible signs of the importance of this great UK institution. The weekly public applause and the universal acclaim speak to a social glue which binds across all potential lines of division.

There are, however, devolution differences of a quasi-federal kind. Alongside the national unifying figures, most notably, Her Majesty the Queen, the UK has witnessed distributed leadership across the four Home Nations, with distinct variations of approach on show in Scotland especially. There are differences between the nations of the UK with regard to the information collected and presented on COVID-19. This includes, prosaically but fundamentally, the way in which deaths from the disease are counted and conveyed. As to public safety, whilst variations in the regulations for social distancing have been relatively minor thus far, they have given rise to intense public debate, for example about how many times people are allowed out for exercise, and precisely how. But greater variation based on the needs and interests of the devolved nations is likely to come, and is already emerging.

Waiting in the wings now are differences in how the lockdown should be eased, how normality should be re-gained, and over how long a time span. Both Wales and Scotland have set out their approaches, putting pressure on the UK Government to follow suit. The inter-nation arguments within the UK on these issues are likely to become much fiercer as the immediate threat recedes. Social and economic interests will re-assert, personal freedoms will become harder to curtail, and the balance of disadvantage between the ‘haven’ of protective lockdown and the ‘hell’ of being locked in will become harder to strike.



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These will be matters of substance, and not just of process and timing. Wales will apply, inter alia, a ‘test of equalities’ impact on potential measures to ease lockdown, and Scotland see the need to re-shape their economy as part of a new ‘normal’.

Beneath these intra-UK differences, the persisting unfolding of the UK devolution/federalist process, and the underlying risk of the departure of Scotland from the UK, there lies the current fundamental reality of UK fiscal centralism. The devolved nations of the UK have no serious finance raising powers of their own. They are effectively entirely dependant on resources from the central UK Government according to a funding formula. The huge injection of resources from the UK Government for business and social welfare support was very much a UK-wide initiative. The additional resources for the health service and for local government to help tackle the virus directly in health terms, and indirectly through social and economic support, is either being spent directly by the UK Government or distributed by formula to the devolved nations. The latter is the effective limit of the resources the devolved administrations have with which to do things differently. They have limited scope financially to develop and deploy their own measures and interventions. Most of the differences are minor in the overall scheme of things.

Political devolution in the UK is now strongly entrenched and relatively advanced, and continues to advance, although there remains a degree of variable geometry between the devolved nations of Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Administrative and policy devolution continues to grow and strengthen as the arguments for relative self-determination in the devolved nations are reinforced by deepening track records of successful self-government. But fiscal devolution remains under-developed and relatively weak, and carries risk for the devolved Governments because of their comparatively meagre tax base in terms of both income and property taxes.

As limited as the inter-nation differences are, a more devolved UK has almost certainly been a good thing when it has come to responding to the COVID-19 challenge. Each devolved nation has been able to shape their response in (limited) part according to the needs and priorities of their people and communities. They have brought challenge into the overall UK context through the inherent ‘friendly’ competition associated with federal and devolved states. This has been especially important at a time when politics ‘as normal’ has been largely suspended in the face of the national crisis, reinforced in part by the recently concluded leadership election in the opposition Labour Party.

The medium term effect of COVID-19 on devolution and proto-federalism in the UK is perhaps currently unfathomable. As to the likely effect of UK devolution on the recovery from the pandemic, the devolved nations will continue to explore and exploit their limited freedom of action to shape their response and future strategies according to their own needs and purposes, whilst remaining fully a part of the wider UK strategic approach. ■