

Chapter 1

Decentralisation and Devolution in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

The key to the core of this chapter is in its title. Constitutionally, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) is still a unitary state comprising three countries – England, Scotland, Wales – plus the province of Northern Ireland. Since 1998, though, the last three have had their own elected parliaments or assemblies and devolved governments, whose responsibilities naturally include most local government functions and operations. It is arguable, therefore, that in practice nowadays the UK is quasi-federal. England, with 84% of the UK population, doesn't have a separate parliament, but is gradually working out its own form of devolution. The chapter describes all these developments, but its detail is largely reserved for the structure and workings of local government in England – elections and elected councillors, services and functions, and its currently rapidly changing finances – and the impact, particularly on councils' financial and policy discretion, of its having, in population terms, by far the largest scale of local government in Western Europe.

BRITISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT: AN EXCEPTIONAL SYSTEM

As a single-country case study, this chapter will focus very largely on the decentralized, devolved – arguably quasi-federal – governmental system in Britain/the UK¹. It will also refer in places to other, particularly other European, systems and practices. More often than not, though, these references will take the form of contrasts, rather than the noting of similarities – the reason being that one of the chapter's assertions is that, in its organization and much of its conduct of sub-central government, Britain is exceptional.

All systems of decentralized government differ. But this chapter will suggest that, in several important ways, Britain's differs more than most. France – whose local government system and structures are likely to be more recognizable to Turkish readers – is also exceptional, but at the opposite end of the European scale spectrum, as can be seen in Table 1. The two countries – France and Britain – have very similarly sized populations and both have relatively large local government sectors, but in their approaches to

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Table 1. Scale of European local government: By average population per municipality

	Pop (Mil.)	Levels of Sub-Central Government	Approximate Numbers of Lower Tier (Most Local) Principal Councils	Average Population Per Council	% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP)		
					Total Public Sector Expenditure	Sub-National Public Sector Expenditure	Sub-National Public Sector Tax Revenue
France	65	3	36780 Communes	1800	56	12	5.5
Spain	47	3	8120 Municipios	5800	45	25 (fed)	10.3
Germany	83	3	11250 Gemeinden	7400	45	21 (fed)	11.1
Italy	61	3	8100 Comuni	7500	50	15	6.4
Belgium	11	3	590 Gemeenten	18700	53	22 (fed)	4.6
Greece	11	3	325 Dimos	33800	52	3	0.2
Sweden	10	2	290 Kommuner	34500	51	25	15.2
Netherlands	17	2	390 Gemeenten	43300	50	17	1.4
Denmark	6	2	98 Kommuner	61000	58	37	12.7
Turkey	77	2	1394 Belediye	55000	39	6	0.5
EU 28	510		89750	5680	49	17	6.6
UK	64	½	391 Districts, etc.	164000	48	13	1.7
England	54	½	326 Districts, etc.	167000			

Sources: Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) Factsheets: A figure-based portrait of local and regional Europe (Brussels, 2013); Turkish GDP figures calculated by Uğur Sadioğlu from T.R. Ministry of Finance and Turkish Statistical Institute data. (fed) – ‘Sub-national’ in these federal systems includes both provincial and local expenditure/revenue.

local government they are “at the opposite ends of the spectrum” (Council of European Municipalities and Regions [CEMR], 2009, p.3; CEMR, 2013b).

Local-Scale France and Large-Scale Britain Contrasted

The French local government structure, and much else about the system, is set out in the clauses and amendments of the country’s 1958 written constitution. Excluding its Overseas Departments and Territories, there are three tiers or levels of elected sub-central government: 13 *régions* (*les nouvelles super-régions*’, as they are currently known), 96 *départements*, and nearly 36,800 *communes* or municipalities. That last number is only very slightly smaller than it would have been a century ago, or even following the French Revolution, and demonstrates the tier’s far more effective resistance to national attempts at reform than were the formerly 22 *régions* or the equivalent tiers in many other countries (Dollery, Garcea, & LeSage Jr., 2008; Dollery & Robotti, 2008).

The average area of a *commune* is 17 km², the average or mean population about 1,800 (as shown in Figure 1), and roughly one in every 100 French adults is a currently elected *conseiller*. Although the range in population size is huge, the median *commune* population is only about 380, meaning that the great majority of *communes* have populations of no more than about 200 persons. Local government, in short, is on an exceptionally local scale (see, for example, Cole, 2011; Wollmann, 2012).

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