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# BRIEFING

## A PARLIAMENT FOR ENGLAND

There are 50 million people living in England - that's more than 80% of the UK's total population. Despite this fact, England is the only nation in the Union that does not have a constitutional and legal identity of its own - despite having been a unified country for more than a thousand years. Devolution has given this to all the other home nations (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), along with varying degrees of self-governance, but England has been ignored. Even standing alone, England would be the third biggest economy in the European Union - but it remains the only country in the EU without a national parliament. Perhaps that's why the EU's 'Europe of the Regions Map' included Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland but omitted any reference to 'England'.

This asymmetrical devolution - which gave all the other countries in the Union an elected body of their own, but ignored the interests of England - has caused serious problems. The first of these is known as the 'West Lothian Question'. Since the Scotland Act (1998), which established the Scottish Parliament and devolved the power to enact primary legislation on many matters, Members of Parliament who represent Scottish constituencies in the House of Commons have been able to vote on legislation that will have no effect on their constituents whatsoever. This means that legislation on, say, health or education (affecting only England) could be passed solely because of the votes of Scottish MPs.

Scottish MPs can also initiate legislation that will not affect their own constituents. Indeed, since 1997 there have been many government ministers and cabinet members, with Scottish seats, who have controlled and administered legislation that would only affect England. To take a current example, Douglas Alexander, the Secretary of State for Transport, is a Scottish MP with a Scottish constituency. Yet transport is a devolved matter - and when none of his policies will affect the people who vote for him, how can he be held to account?

As if that were not bad enough, the people of England are actually underrepresented in the UK Parliament. Scotland and Wales have more MPs per head than England - Scotland has just 8.6% of the UK's population but is represented by 10.8% of its MPs. Meanwhile England has 83.7% of the UK's population but only 80.7% of its MPs. Furthermore, under the Barnett formula, Scottish residents receive £1306 more government spending per person per year than their English counterparts. Different levels of wealth do not explain this - the North-East of England remains poorer than Scotland, but still receives less government funding.

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All of the above adds up to a serious deficit of democracy and of fairness. **The only sensible solution to this is for England to have a parliament of its own.** Other options - such as only allowing English MPs to vote on English laws in the UK Parliament - are unsatisfactory because they still let an unrepresentative government set the agenda. England must have its own parliament, to legislate and govern with the interests of the English people at heart. The country deserves nothing less.

Of course, no one wants yet another set of politicians, or another layer of bureaucracy, or another expensive government building. But the new English Parliament be made up of all the existing English MPs in the UK Parliament, sitting in the House of Commons for two weeks of every month. This parliament would have its own First Minister, who would appoint his own cabinet. The English Parliament would have the same powers as the Scottish one. (It is anticipated that the same powers would be devolved to the Welsh Assembly. Northern Ireland remains a special case, but that may not always be so.)

What would this mean in practice? Well, the UK Parliament would remain responsible UK-wide matters and would control the various departments in charge of them: security and immigration, foreign affairs, international development, defence, employment and social security, energy, constitutional affairs, and tax and the economy. All the other departments currently serving the UK government would be transferred to the new English one. The Department of Health would be headed by an English Health Minister, the Department of Transport by an English Transport Minister, and so on. Justice, enterprise, the environment and rural affairs, local government and communities, education, tourism, culture and sport - all of these would be matters for the English Parliament.

Taxes would continue to be set by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the revenues collected by HM Revenue & Customs and then divided between the home nations. The Barnett formula is an unfair and outdated way of doing this - budgets should be assigned according to population. Like the Scottish Parliament, England would be able to vary the basic rate of income tax by up to three pence in either direction. This is as a first step - in time, the home nations would benefit from greater fiscal autonomy.

To test the popularity of these proposals, a YouGov poll was commissioned, asking the question, "Would you support or oppose a proposal that the English MPs are constituted as the Parliament of England, meeting in Westminster, choosing a First Minister and with powers similar to those wielded by the Scottish Parliament?" Of those expressing an opinion, 69% supported the proposal. **Those in support of the proposal outnumbered those opposed to it by more than two to one.**<sup>1</sup>

**This is an idea whose time has come.** There is an opportunity to put an end to the unfair constitutional arrangements that so disadvantage England, and which cause so much resentment in the UK. It is time to put the home nations on an equal footing again, to let them determine what works best in their own countries and what does not. **It is time for an English Parliament.**

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<sup>1</sup> Polling carried out by You Gov. 2471 people questioned from 6<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> February 2007. The raw figures were as follows: 48% in favour, 22% against, with 30% answering 'don't know'. Once the 'don't know' responses were removed, the figures were: **69% in favour, and 31% against.**

