

Devolution and the virus

Devolution has provided the devolved administrations of Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland the opportunity to vary the response to the virus in their areas of the UK. Today I would be interested in your comments on how you think the different administrations have fared, and what if anything devolved power has brought to help us in this crisis.

If we start with the data we see that all four parts of the UK have suffered badly. Each had a bad attack in the spring, and each has seen a further flare up in the late autumn after a summer lull. The Scottish government's slightly tougher approach earlier in the year was designed to eliminate the virus, but it did not do so. Wales taking a modestly tougher approach has ended up with the worst figures for cases and deaths.

Latest figures 17.12.20 from inception of pandemic

Cases by area per 100,000 people

Wales 3633

Northern Ireland 3183

England 2957

Scotland 2000

Certified deaths involving CV 19 per 100,000

Wales 123 (0.123%)

England 115.6 (0.115%)

Scotland 107.4 (0.107%)

Northern Ireland 78.2 (0.078%)

We also see that despite plenty of different rhetoric and some criticism of the UK/English approach by both Scotland and Wales, the policies followed throughout the UK have been remarkably similar. There have been minor differences played up by spinners over the timing and length of some lock down moves, and over the numbers of contacts or hours of opening permitted. These do not seem to have made much difference. The Welsh short circuit breaker was followed by a further surge and more extensive lockdowns. Rural areas seem to fare better than more densely populated urban areas.

There has been no devolved challenge to the general academic and policy framework provided by UK experts, and no attempt to define a very distinctive course to see if a different approach works better. The experts of the devolved administrations seem to have very similar views to the UK national experts.

The First Minister of Scotland has used the crisis to give herself a much greater media exposure on UK as well as Scottish programmes, choosing to front run some of the common working of the UK and devolved governments before the daily UK news conferences which have characterised a lot of this period. She has wanted to argue there is a distinctively Scottish approach which is better, but has found this more difficult to sustain as the Scottish numbers remain high and her country stays in lock downs. Each administration has had its share of embarrassments, with experts and advisers breaking their own rules and now Wales discovering a lot of lost data.

I think the overall results have been disappointing. I would have liked to have seen more collaboration from the devolved governments. Alternatively it would have been good to see more intelligent challenge and experiment with a different way of responding so we could learn from the differing approaches, By nature this is an experimental period faced with a new disease where no-one started with the answers. The main breakthrough that can save all the administrations is the vaccine invention by US companies so far, coupled with the foresight of the UK government to licence it quickly and order it in big quantities. No administration has made Test and Trace work well. None has tried isolation hospitals nor used much extra capacity created by the Nightingales. Let us hope UK science soon lands its own vaccines and treatments. UK scientists and medics are to be congratulated on discovering that steroids can cut the death rate from the disease and on their progress with other treatments.