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## **Trajectories of Dependency: The English regions' path to economic development**

### **Abstract**

Path dependency highlights the impact that former situations are likely to have on any context. The objective is to shed light on how past decisions could have irreversible influences that might result in the formation of paths that would depend on initial conditions. Significant changes can lead to a certain outcome that could have long-term effects. This theoretical approach has been addressed by different disciplines. Because of the proliferation of discussions, our aim is not to get into a long exegesis about the different considerations. Our use of this theoretical framework centres therefore upon the effects of both political choices and institutionalism.

Based on a case study, this article will analyse the evolution of regional policy and the path on which the deprived regions continued to depend. The focus on a diachronic approach relying on historical institutionalism provides greater analytic leverage to confront the measures launched by successive governments with the reality experienced by the regions. This focus on how the regions remained state-managed allows us to explore the reasons that made them continue to be heavily dependent on the centre in terms of economic development.

The objective of the long regional policy tradition dating back to the beginning of the 1930s in Britain was to assist the regions that were hit by social and economic problems. The following decades bore witness to a growing prioritization of the poor regions which reflected an intense interest in reducing deprivation and triggering economic growth. This was the orientation that was adopted by successive central governments with the aim of lessening the underperformance of these territories.

Since these problems were most clearly visible in the developing regions, the UK government concentrated its intervention there while introducing several institutions to promote economic development and implement new initiatives. The delivery of regional economic development prompted the government to inject substantial funding and induce different government agencies to participate in this process. Whilst these institutional changes and the introduction of new initiatives were intended to bridge the gap between the centre and the periphery in terms of economic growth, a persistent economic divide continued to characterize the British regions which put the effectiveness of these changes into question.

The aim of this paper is twofold. It first describes the path in which British regional policy was developed and then assesses the impact of institutional innovations on the promotion of economic development in the deprived regions in the UK. This study will rely on historical institutionalism and path dependency. The recourse to historical institutionalism enables us to scrutinize the contribution of the institutional innovations that were introduced across the period in question. This is a multidisciplinary comparative approach that studies both the aspects of the changes implemented and the role of political institutions in shaping and restructuring public policy at the subnational levels<sup>1</sup>. It also clarifies the logic of the choices and orientations that have been adopted in the domain of regional policy management.

When adapted to the study of the impact of institutional innovations launched in the UK, historical institutionalism is used to question the concentration as well as the persistence of underperformance in the developing regions despite state intervention. This continued to be the case despite the emergence of new institutions to promote economic growth. The assisted regions have therefore remained state-managed with a regional economy heavily dependent on public sector employment.

The particularity of the UK's regional policy is that the central government plays a major role in managing regional economic initiatives. This practice has become the norm leaving few shares of intervention to the regional institutions involved in economic development. An effective analysis of the development of regional policy in these territories requires a study of the strategies that have been taken hitherto. In this respect, we may say that history matters, as it enables an insight into the circumstances that left the assisted regions in a state of dependency.

In the same vein, path dependency, as an analytical concept, explores the legacy of certain processes and the reasons for their persistence. The literature dealing with this theme reveals a recognition of the importance of the past and its contribution in the formation of paths. In other words, particular situations and contexts are shaped by former strategies that have become rooted. The main objective of the classical theory of path dependency is to explain

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Thelen and Sven Steinmo. "Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics" in Sven Steinmo, Kathleen Thelen and Frank Longstreth. *Structuring Politics: Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

how a path emerges in a particular context and influences the process of the evolution of the context in question (the path constitution).

As a theory, path dependency has been adopted in different disciplines. Organisation science has witnessed a number of research highlighting the pressure of past decisions in the development of some organisations<sup>2</sup>. Path dependency has notably been used in the study of technological development. Some scholars<sup>3</sup> analyzed the formation of technological paths and the lock-in of certain practices despite the emergence of more efficient alternatives (qwerty keyboard). Other scholars<sup>4</sup> explored the formation of a path dependent orientation based on a stable system with an equilibrium which can not be altered. Our use of path dependency consists of researching the path of development on which some peripheral regions have been dependent. In other words, it will be question to assess to what extent “current and future states, actions, or decisions depend on the path of previous states, actions, or decisions”<sup>5</sup>.

Public intervention in problem regions has been legitimated by development differentials between the British regions. The aim of this intervention, which has been evident since the 1930s, has been the reduction of socioeconomic imbalances affecting a number of regions. Persistent economic difficulties in these regions have only provoked greater interest from successive governments, which have invested considerable resources in the field.

The initial recognition of the regional problem in Britain dates back to the 1930s when unemployment rate fluctuated between 25 and 35% and the number of unemployed reached 3 million (table 1) in the assisted localities of South Wales, Northern England and Scotland (Armstrong and Taylor, 1993, p.203, Ritschell, 1997, Dennison, 1939)<sup>6</sup>. The intervention of

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<sup>2</sup> Marquis, C. 2003. « The Pressure of the past : Network imprinting in intercorporate communities ». *Administrative Science Quarterly*, N°48, pp.655-689.

<sup>3</sup> David, P.A. 1986. « Understanding the economics of QWERTY : The necessity of history” in Parker, W. N. Eds. *Economic History and the Modern Economist*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 30-49. See also: Dosi, G. 1982. “Technological paradigms and technological trajectories”. *Research Policy*. N°11, pp. 147-162.

<sup>4</sup> North, Douglas. 1990. *Institutions, institutional change and economic performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Crouch, C., Farrell, H. 2004. “Breaking the path of institutional development? Alternatives to the new determinism”. *Rationality and Society*, Vol. 16, N° 1, pp.5-43. Ebbinghaus, B. 2005. *Can path dependence explain institutional change? Two approaches applied to welfare state reform*. MPIfG Discussion Paper 05/2. Cologne: Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies. Paper available on: [http://www.mpifg.de/pu/mpifg\\_dp/dp05-2.pdf](http://www.mpifg.de/pu/mpifg_dp/dp05-2.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Scott E. Page. Path Dependence, *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 2006, 1, pp. 87-115.

<sup>6</sup> Harvey Armstrong et Jim Taylor. *Regional Economics and Policy*. Londres: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 203. Ritschell, Daniel. 1997. *The Politics of Planning. The Debate on Economic Planning in Britain in the*

public authorities consisted of a mere reaction to the increase of unemployment rate. One of the initial actions of the Department of Employment was to encourage labour mobility to Southern England and to the developed areas and drew up training schemes for the unemployed.

**Table 1. Unemployment rate in the UK regions, january 1933.**

<b>The Regions</b>	<b>Unemployment rate (%)</b>
<b>London</b>	14,2
<b>South East</b>	17,0
<b>South West</b>	19,6
<b>Midlands</b>	20,2
<b>North East</b>	29,8
<b>North West</b>	25,7
<b>Wales</b>	37,8
<b>Scotland</b>	30,2
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	28,9
<b>United Kingdom</b>	23,4

Source : Harvey Armstrong et Jim Taylor. *Regional Economics and Policy*. Londres: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 203.

The worsening economic decline in the mid-1930s led the government to draw up a map of the *Special Areas* and ratify the *Special Areas Reconstruction Agreement Act* in 1936. The objective was to provide a financial support to help new businesses develop their activities. In addition to prompting factories to relocate their activities to the *Special Areas*, companies were discouraged to set up their business in the developed areas and close to London because of the restrictions posed by the *Industrial Development Certificates* (IDC).

The economy of the assisted areas continued to be state-managed during the 1940s. The Barlow Committee that was appointed to undertake a thorough study of the economic decline drew public authorities' attention to the widening gap between the British regions in terms of economic growth. The Barlow report recommended more public intervention and the introduction of a government body to analyze the distribution of economic activities and the possibility of developing an industrial policy<sup>7</sup>. Despite the recommendations of the Barlow Report, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) continued to favour short-term options as a reaction to the increase of unemployment rates. Changes in unemployment represented the

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<sup>7</sup> The Barlow Report. *Royal Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population*, Cmnd. 6135, HMSO, January 1940, p. 148, para. 132.

main criteria that triggered the government intervention. The war period stimulated economic growth, as munition factories contributed to job creation in some regions such as the North East.

The improvement of the economic aspects of some deprived areas in the mid-1940s led the Attlee government to soften the restrictions of the IDCs that made it difficult for new companies to get commercial premises in London. Moreover, the shares of intervention of the BoT were consolidated by the *Distribution of Industry Act* of 1950 and 1958. This period showed above all two particularities: firstly the growing interest in the regional problem; and secondly the consolidation of the institutional framework following the improvement of the role of the BoT.

The decision of the Macmillan government to centralize the management of transport and planning in the aftermath of the abolition of the Regional Offices in 1958 indicated the willingness of the Conservatives to put Whitehall departments at the forefront of the management of regional policy. The regional representations of Whitehall played an important role when unemployment went up in the end of the 1950s in the less-favoured regions. In response, the government introduced the *Local Employment Act* in 1960 and drew up a new map: the *Development Districts* based on unemployment rate. During the same period, the changes in unemployment pushed the government to alter the boundaries of the *Development Districts* which illustrated the lack of a coherent long-term regional strategy.

The Wilson government had a different attitude towards the regional problem. When Harold Wilson came to power in 1964, he introduced the Regional Economic Planning Councils (REPCs) and the Regional Economic Planning Boards (REPBs) to work out a strategy for regional economic development. This institutional innovation represented an important step, as visible regional institutions and regional actors were involved in the management of regional initiatives. Meanwhile, unlike the Conservatives, the Labour government made it difficult for companies to get commercial premises in the developed areas and granted more power to the BoT.

Confronted with an unprecedented economic decline, notably in the mining areas where unemployment grew significantly, the Wilson government invested massively in the public services and manufacturing at the expense of the service sector. This was an orientation for

which the Wilson government was criticized. In this respect, the Hunt Report<sup>8</sup> targeted the negative aspects of the relocation of industries to the assisted areas. These took advantage of huge investments at the expense of other localities, thus highlighting a bad distribution of public subsidies.

The Conservatives were critical to this initiative. This was one of the first elements that they addressed when they came to power in 1970. The Heath government recognized the importance to promote long-term regional policy and drew up a new map of the deprived regions. The *Intermediate Areas*, which comprised the mining localities, were granted a great deal of subsidies. The difficult economic situation of the 1970s prompted the government to include new localities in the *Intermediate Areas* and end the restrictions that prevented businesses from being set up in the developed regions. Similarly, the local authorities were involved in the management of economic development and the Regional Industrial Development Boards were introduced. Their role was to provide recommendations to the Whitehall departments: this represented an important step. While a great deal of flexibility was demonstrated and other public bodies participated in the management of local and regional development, some commentators criticized this fragmentation, which led to a lack of clarity and duplication.

This concern was expressed by the newly-elected Labour government in 1974 that they decided to work closely with local and regional actors. In its struggle against the regional problem, the Callaghan government took advantage of the support of the European Community. The Community aids devoted to the deprived regions, namely the European Social Fund (ESF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) that were managed by the DTI and the Department of Environment (DoE) represented a significant support. European integration gave a new life into the management of British regional policy. European funding enabled the delivery of ambitious economic programmes in the regions. The support of the European Community gave credibility to public intervention which was recognized as a necessary orientation to promote economic development in the lagging regions. The regional representations of the DTI and the DoE were the inspiring influence with the participation of the REPCs even though there was no clear administrative framework to deal with regional issues.

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<sup>8</sup> The Hunt Report. *The Intermediate Areas*. Cmnd. 3998, Londres : HMSO, 1969.

The advent of the Conservatives in 1979 brought profound changes to regional policy. They did not hide their scepticism in regard the value-added of regional policy and the support to the declining traditional industries. The Thatcher government, which came to power with the profound belief that the State could no longer be in sole charge of regional economic development, showed its opposition to some measures, notably the relocation of businesses to Northern England and excessive state intervention. Margaret Thatcher considered that the subsidies allocated to the underdeveloped regions were inefficient. She made this clear in July 1985 when she alleged that: “It is no part of our policy to direct where people shall live or where firms set up or expand. If we try to discourage development and economic growth in large parts of the South of England in the hope that it will happen in the large cities in the North, we risk losing them altogether.”

The Conservatives adopted a radical approach in dealing with the regional problem. The budget devoted to regional policy was cut, as fewer areas were covered by regional aid (Table 2). It became more difficult for some deprived localities to be eligible for regional assistance. Sectors such as mining, shipbuilding and the steel industry lost a great deal of public subsidy and had to close down. A preference was given to urban policy and the projects in which the private sector was involved so as to encourage the development of the enterprise culture. Therefore, the retreat from the support of regional policy was compensated by massive investments in urban policy which targeted the construction of commercial premises in the inner cities.



**Tableau 2. Grants to local government as a percentage of their total revenue (1933-1998)**

Year	%
1933 – 1934	31
1943 – 1944	31
1953 – 1954	37
1963 – 1964	36
1973 – 1974	40
1978 – 1979	44
1983 – 1984	40
1988 – 1989	34
1991 – 1992	38
1997 – 1998	46

Source : DETR. *Local Government Financial Statistics*. Londres : HMSO, 1999. Quoted in: J. A. Chandler. *Local Government Today*. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2001 (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), p. 65.

The Thatcher government decided to cut the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement (PSBR) because of the difficult economic context of the 1980s. This explains why the shrinking of regional policy budget went hand in hand with the dismantling of the institutional framework in charge of territorial development. The REPCs and the Regional Planning Boards were abolished in 1979, leaving the management of regional policy under the influence of the regional representations of Whitehall departments. At the local level, the financial autonomy of the local authorities was questioned. While they lost some of their responsibilities, the Metropolitan Counties and the Greater London Council (GLC) were abolished for budget purposes even if some would argue that the reasons lied in the fact that a great number of local authorities were under Labour control. The abolished institutions were replaced by government agencies and quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations (quangos) whose intervention consisted of implementing the guidelines underlined by Whitehall departments.

During Thatcher's first term, urban policy spending exceeded regional policy expenditure<sup>9</sup> and became the priority in which local authorities participated to reach the government

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<sup>9</sup> J. J. Anderson. *The Territorial Imperative. Pluralism, corporatism, and economic crisis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

objectives. These revolved around the economic problems and the acquisition of land to enable local authorities to build commercial premises and take advantage of loans and grants to address local unemployment and promote their localities. This orientation represented both a real opportunity and a serious challenge, as local authorities had not only to compete to secure funding but were also compelled to reflect the emphasis on inner-city problems.

The other challenge was at the institutional level. The emergence of the *Urban Development Corporations* (UDCs) represented the beginning of a new era in the relationship between the centre and the peripheral regions. The UDCs oversaw the management of an important area of funding and controlled the delivery of urban regeneration. Different stakeholders including the private sector and other government agencies participated in this process. This institutional innovation made the UDCs appear as the primary actor enjoying more control over spending at the local level. While the Thatcherite urban plan was successful in reducing the powers of the local authorities, several questions were raised about its ability to engage genuine governance, as some UDCs were confronted to local oppositions. Needless to say the regeneration policy contributed to the development of a great number of cities and the delivery of ambitious economic projects. Yet, these institutional changes altered profoundly the way regional economic development was engaged and did not reflect a long-term strategy.

On the whole, the 1980s saw the multiplication of regional programmes partly funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF). While these two financial instruments represented a substantial source of money for the implementation of social and economic projects in the developing regions, the European Commission summoned the Central government to involve subnational actors in the management process. In fact, despite the evolution of the Community regional policy scheme and the introduction of new reforms, the UK did not adapt its institutional framework to the Community changes and did not respect the additionality principle which insists upon the fact that the funds of the European Community should not replace, but be an addition to national regional policy funding.

This continued to be the case until the end of the 1980s when the European Commission threatened to freeze the UK share of European funding for the RECHAR community programme destined for the economic restructuring of the mining localities, as the central government did not involve subnational actors. This event represented a turning point in the

relationship between the Centre and the peripheral regions, as the central government accepted the involvement of subnational levels of government in policymaking.

This was the issue the Major government attempted to address when it came to power in 1990. The introduction of the Government Offices for the Regions (GOs) – which intended to bring Whitehall closer to the regions – represented an important step which granted more visibility to the regions. Apart from some initial malfunctioning, the GOs managed to take control of a large number of policy areas, and developed instrumental links with local and regional actors. In a short time, the GOs became an important partner in the delivery of regional economic development. The management of the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), which was an innovative measure, came up with a strategy and meant not only to regenerate local economic development but also to change the practices of governance and participation in policymaking. However, despite the significance of the projects launched by the GOs at the regional level, this institutional innovation is still perceived as a mere administrative decentralisation and the GOs are still considered as the Government arm in the regions.

This criticism was articulated very strongly by the Labour party in opposition in the mid 1990s<sup>10</sup>. When New Labour came to power in 1997, it had an ambitious plan for the devolution of power to Scotland, Wales and the English regions. The White Paper on RDAs, *Building Partnership for Prosperity*, put the RDAs at the centre of policymaking in the English regions. It made it clear that in addition to being business-led, they should develop better co-ordination and new ways in the governance of regional economic development. Soon after they were introduced, the RDAs received important responsibilities and worked in close partnership with the GOs, the local authorities, the quangos, the Chambers of commerce, the unions, and Community organisations. The governance of regional economic development was the key issue.

One of the most important responsibilities was to draw up the Regional Economic Strategy (RES) to address the underperformance of the regions and identify their priorities. The management of the RES represented a thorny issue, as its development raised some controversial questions. The DTI (currently Department for Business and Skills “BIS”) was said to influence the orientations of the RES which left few share of intervention to some

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<sup>10</sup> Regional Policy Commission. *Renewing the Regions: Strategies for Regional Economic Development*. Sheffield : Sheffield Hallam University, 1996.

regions. This was particularly the case for some objectives – such as innovation – that some regions whose economy is based on traditional industries were unable to realize. A study conducted by the OECD devoted to the North East reveals the inability of this region to realize the objectives set out in the RES designed by One NorthEast (OECD)<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, the difficulty to provide smooth conditions for the preparation of the RES led to the resignation of the chief executive of Advantage West Midlands (AWM), the RDA of West Midlands, after the threat of motion of censure. The AWM Chamber criticized the lack of consultation in the preparation of the RES and the influence of the centre<sup>12</sup>.

This characteristic made the institutional innovations promoted by New Labour appear as a functional regionalisation in which the RDAs had to meet nationally defined objectives<sup>13</sup>. An alternative to improve this institutional framework and make it be accountable to the people in the regions was the introduction of the Regional Assemblies. This project represented a first step before the creation of directly-elected regional government (Elected Regional Assemblies ‘ERAs’). These Chambers started to operate as a voluntary organisation but their role was going to be made more substantial after a public consultation. The same White Paper stipulated that “the Government is committed to directly-elected regional government in England, where there is demand for it (...). But we are not in the business of imposing it.”<sup>14</sup>

Broadly speaking, the regions acquired more visibility and the Blair government made it clear that it will devote its second term to consolidate the democratic renewal and establish ERAs after holding a referendum in each region. The first consultation that took place in the North East in November 2004 was massively rejected by voters, highlighting the relationship people have with politics. The result of this referendum, which put an end to the ‘creeping regionalisation’<sup>15</sup> that started in the aftermath of the advent of New Labour, is likely to unveil

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<sup>11</sup> OECD. *OECD Territorial Reviews: Newcastle in the North East, The United Kingdom*. Paris: OECD, 2006, p.176.

<sup>12</sup> John Tomaney. “The Regional Governance of England” in Robert Hazell (dir). *The State and the Nations. The First Year of Devolution in the United Kingdom*. Thoverton : Imprint Academic, 2000, p. 128.

<sup>13</sup> Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions. New Release, 489, 21 July 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions. *Regions Development Agencies for England*. London: The Stationery Office, 1997, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> John Tomaney and Peter Hetherington. “English Regions: the Quiet Regional Revolution” in Alan Trench (dir). *Has Devolution Made a Difference. The State and the Nations 2004*. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2004, pp. 121-139.

some explanations about the “wider distrust of and cynicism about politicians and politics”<sup>16</sup>. The regional programme contained in the New Labour manifesto appeared more promising, as it promised to create a new institutional settlement to enable the regions participate in policy-making at the regional level. But the persistence of the centralizing trend made it difficult for different local and regional stakeholders to influence decision-making.

## **Conclusion**

Regional development and regional policy in the UK have been triggered by the persistent concentration of unemployment and deprivation in certain areas, prompting public authorities to intervene and take measures meant to promote growth and reduce unemployment. The recourse to history, which analyses regional policy since its inception in the 1930s, helps to explain the logic that has inspired the implementation of public policy. This approach sheds light on both continuity and change, and thus helps to clarify the coherence of successive initiatives. The historical approach that relies on a scrutiny of the evolution of regional policy highlights the persistence of underdevelopment in the areas where state intervention was concentrated and that are still dependent on public subsidy. Various plans have been adopted to alleviate economic problems but despite a significant intervention, poor regions have continued to experience difficult economic situations. The persistence of these conditions has placed a question mark over the way regional development has been conducted, and the lack of institutional foundations, with important consequences for the mode of governance in operation.

This is the main reason for favouring the path dependence analysis in this study. The most widely accepted application of this theory tends to place an emphasis on past actions and decisions as key shaping factors for present and future policy outcomes. In this case, the lack of long-term strategies during the post-war period left the developing areas without the capacity to deal with social and economic problems. The elaboration of regional development initiatives particularly based on the increase of the unemployment rate proved to be inefficient and less likely to contribute to job creation. This process reflected a policy based on a reaction

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<sup>16</sup> Mark Sandford et Peter Hetherington. « The Regions at the Crossroads: The Future for Sub-National Government in England » in Alan Trench (dir). *The Dynamics of Devolution: the State of the Nations 2005*. Exeter : Imprint Academic, 2005, p. 91.

rather than on an anticipation which would have favoured the implementation of long-term measures.

The short-term nature of initiatives due to the change-over of governments in power has worked against the development of long-term strategies based on regional expectations. Successive governments dismantled the framework that the previously incumbent government had established, leading to the abandonment of many projects. The institutional framework which continued to be dominated by the representations of Whitehall failed to provide the local tier of government with a share of intervention sufficient for them to shape these strategies.

One has to admit that the current situation is largely different from that of the 1970s and the 1980s, a period during which both Labour and Conservative governments did not show a real commitment to devolution. Numerous programs of decentralisation sought to bring Whitehall closer to the regions. In this regard, European integration has played an instrumental role in this process. The various reforms of European regional policy were intended to consolidate the position of the regions and institutionalise the engagement of local and regional actors in public policy. However, EU reforms began to have a significant impact in the UK only in the 1990s when the Major government introduced the GOs. This administrative regionalisation contributed to the emergence of a form of governance that engaged a variety of stakeholders.

However, the nature of this decentralisation led various actors to contest this form of governance. In response, New Labour introduced a whole institutional settlement that sought to encourage the governance practices to take root. Nonetheless, the institutional innovations implemented by New Labour did not reduce the fragmentation of the institutional framework and some regional initiatives continued to be nationally-defined. While these changes represented an unprecedented institutional innovation that attempted to improve the relationship between the different tiers of government, they brought the regional issue into the foreground and made it clear that other changes would be necessary.

What characterises British regional policy is the power dependence of the peripheral regions upon the centre. The persistence of the centralizing trend consisted in spreading an administrative framework largely dependent on the quangos and the representations of Whitehall. This is not to deny that successive governments implemented a plethora of

measures intended to improve the position of subnational tiers of government. Yet, successive reforms have led to a fragmentation of policymaking and to a weakening of the role of the local authorities. Similarly, the management of public services has been transferred to a variety of appointed institutions, notably government agencies, non-departmental government bodies. These institutional changes have put the English regions in a weak position, particularly at the political level and reduced their room for manoeuvre, leaving them without a true institutional identity.

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