The Scottish political system and policy process share the same 'complex government' features as any country

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If we focus on the wider policymaking and political process, we should get a stronger sense that major further devolution would not produce major change, writes **Paul Cairney***. The idea of giving a Scottish Government the powers to make radical changes to inequalities, public services, and outcomes, should take second stage to the idea that all governments are constrained by a lack of resources to make a quick and fundamental difference to the economy and society.*

There was a 'No' vote in the Scottish independence referendum. Almost immediately, David Cameron announced that Lord Smith of Kelvin would take charge of the process to turn broad UK party promises on further devolution into a more detailed plan. I discuss the main issues regarding that plan here, but in this post will focus on the bigger picture, linking the discussion of Scottish devolution to academic work on the 'universal' challenges that all governments face. This is not to deny that Scottish politics is distinctive, but to argue that its political system, and policy process, shares the same 'complex government' features as any country. This may provide a useful sense of perspective after a long period of excitement about one aspect of British politics – which has produced the idea that (a) people know how the Scottish policy process would work after a yes or no vote, and (b) that major constitutional change produces a major change in policy and policymaking. I don't think that either of those beliefs is true.

Does anyone understand the policy process in Scotland and the UK?

You might get the impression from the debate on the referendum that one side knows how Scottish policymaking works; that if you vote yes or no, you guarantee a particular outcome or, at least, guard against a bad outcome. Yet, the policy process is too complex for anyone to understand fully – from the citizen, dipping in and out of political debate, to the policymaker trying to make a difference, and the academics, still confused after decades of study.

Instead, politicians and campaigners find ways to simplify the process enough to understand and explain, while academics develop a language to show why we couldn't possibly understand the process. We focus on five elements which, on their own, show the complexity of policymaking and, when combined, suggest that the world of policymaking is too complex to predict or fully understand. They expose slogans such as 'joined up' or 'holistic' government as attempts to give the *appearance* of order to policymaking when we know that policymakers can only pay attention to a small portion of the issues for which they are responsible.

Can anyone control or influence that process? If not, can we hold them to account?

The idea of 'complex government' can be used to reject the idea – associated with the 'Westminster model' – that power is concentrated in the hands of a small number of people in central government. Instead, governments develop strategies to deal with the fact that their powers are rather limited in practice. Consequently, there is a profoundly important tension between the reality of complex government and the assertion of government control and accountability. Policymakers have to justify their activities with regard to the idea of accountability to the public via ministers and Parliament – and few are brave enough to admit their limitations.

Complex government also prompts us to consider how we can hold policymakers to account if the vast majority of the population does not understand how the policy process works; if policy outcomes seem to emerge in unpredictable or uncontrollable ways, many kinds of government are in charge, or the allegation of complexity is used to undermine popular participation or obscure accountability.

To what extent does the Scottish Government face the same challenges as any other?

The Scottish Government faces the same task as many countries:

1. In the aftermath of economic crisis, it has to consider how to deliver similar levels of public services at lower cost.

2. It seeks to reduce inequalities, albeit without the policy levers that could make the biggest difference.

3. It needs to find a balance between uniform national policies and local discretion.

4. It needs to find a way to 'join up' its public services – to make, for example, health speak to education, social work and policing.

One potential solution is 'prevention' or 'early intervention' to reduce public service costs – regarding crime and anti-social behaviour, ill health and unhealthy behaviour, low educational attainment, and unemployment – by addressing them at source, before they become too severe and relatively expensive. Yet, it cannot simply make this happen:

- Inequalities are often described as 'wicked' problems because they seem intractable – because governments do not appear to have the means, or perhaps the ability and willingness, to solve them.

- To address social and economic problems at this scale requires something akin to complete central government control over policies and outcomes.

- No one is quite sure what 'early intervention' or 'prevention' is.

Policymakers have a limited amount of control over this process and they face the same problems as any government: the ability to pay attention to only a small proportion of public service activity; the tendency for problems to be processed in government 'silos'; the potential for policymakers, in different departments or levels of government, to understand and address problems in very different ways; and, 'complexity', which suggests that policy outcomes often 'emerge' from local action in the absence of central control.

Do Scottish political institutions have the capacity to address them in a distinctive way?

The Scottish Government addresses this problem in two potentially-distinctive ways:

- *Policymaking culture*. The 'Scottish policy style' refers to the ways in which the Scottish Government makes policy following consultation and negotiation with pressure participants such as interest groups, local government organisations and unions.

- *Administrative organisation*. The Scottish 'governance' style describes a relative willingness to devolve the delivery of policy in a meaningful way. It sets a broad national strategy, invites local bodies to produce policies consistent with it, and measures performance using broad, long term outcomes. For example, it now encourages local 'Community Planning Partnerships' to produce a 'strategic vision' for each local area.

Scotland can do things differently because it is small, which allows its government to develop closer relationships with key actors, and develop relatively high levels of trust in other bodies to deliver public services. What about the Scottish Parliament and other bodies? Consider the effect of the distinctiveness of Scottish political institutions on the rest of the political system:

1. There is a great potential for traditional forms of parliamentary scrutiny to be undermined. The Scottish Parliament already lacks the ability to gather information independently – it does not get enough information from the Scottish Government about what is going on locally, and local and health authorities push back against calls for detailed information. More devolution would exacerbate this tension.

2. Interest groups must reorganise, to shift from lobbying one national to 32 local governments. Well-resourced professional groups can adapt their multi-level lobbying strategies, but groups working on a small budget will

struggle.

3. The ERS Scotland's suggestion is that more local devolution could produce a more active local population. Even so, local communities do not have the resources to engage at the same level as Parliament and established groups.

Conclusion

So, if we focus on the wider policymaking and political process, we should get a stronger sense that major further devolution would not produce major change. The idea of giving a Scottish Government the powers to make radical changes to inequalities, public services, and outcomes, should take second stage to the idea that all governments are constrained by a lack of resources to make a quick and fundamental difference to the economy and society. No-one really understands the policy process, and no-one is in the position to control it. Rather, people pay attention to a small number of issues, and work with a large number of other people to negotiate some changes in some areas. This process involves major trade-offs, and the knowledge that attention to a small number of priorities means ignoring the rest.

So, too, should we be skeptical about the idea of a new era of popular participation, sweeping the nation and changing the way we do politics. Even the Scottish Parliament struggles to know what happens in the Scottish Government and beyond. Even well-resourced interest groups struggle to keep track of an increasingly devolved system. So, what chance would citizens have if they did not devote their whole lives to politics? We should encourage popular participation, as the right thing to do, without creating false expectations about the results.

These issues are discussed in greater depth here, and in a public lecture advertised here.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our comments policy before posting. Featured image credit: Joel Suss CC BY 2.0

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