

New regions in the periphery: Agency and politics in shaping the governance of regional development in the Scotland–England border region

David Clelland 

University of Glasgow College of Social Sciences, Dumfries, UK

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Abstract

The restructuring of sub-national economic governance has been one response to persistent regional inequalities; in the United Kingdom, this has entailed a rescaling of strategic economic governance around city-regions. The variety of ‘left behind’ places, however, also includes peripheral and non-urban regions, prompting actors across different scales to seek arrangements for those places outside the city-regional paradigm. This paper provides insights into these processes through tracing the emergence of two new and overlapping spaces of governance in the largely rural South of Scotland, and across a larger area also including the far North of England. While driven by top-down priorities of the centre, new spaces are created through political processes contested across multiple scales, layered onto existing arrangements. These episodes demonstrate how regional actors exercise agency in shaping governance arrangements by articulating regional problems, and proposed responses, with political concerns of the centre. They also indicate the potential for dominant approaches, based on city-regional imaginaries, to be challenged. New regions offer at least the potential for actors in the periphery to secure resources for place-based development, within a fragmented and competitive landscape. They may however prove to be transient, requiring ongoing coupling of regional and central interests to be maintained.

Keywords

regional development, regions, governance, rescaling, peripheral, agency, politics

Introduction

The restructuring of spaces and institutions for governing regional economic development has been a common response to the persistent and worsening regional inequalities within many developed economies. This has tended to

Corresponding author:

David Clelland, School of Interdisciplinary Studies,
University of Glasgow College of Social Sciences,
Rutherford-McCowan Building, Crichton Campus,
Dumfries DG1 4UQ, UK.

Email: david.clelland@glasgow.ac.uk

privilege major cities and their hinterlands as the preferred scale for strategic governance. Those places apparently ‘left behind’ (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; MacKinnon et al., 2022) or disadvantaged in terms of social and economic outcomes are however diverse and, importantly, include peripheral, rural and coastal areas as well as towns and cities in former industrial regions (Davenport and Zaranko, 2020).

While orthodox narratives in geographical economics have indicated that ‘big cities are the future and that the best form of territorial intervention is not to focus on declining places’ (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018: p. 191), a competing case for ‘place-based’ approaches recognises a variety of possible routes for development and the potentials in all types of region (Barca et al., 2012). This suggests that strategies appropriately tailored to places’ assets, institutions and preferences can ‘tap in to’ latent potentials, even in lagging regions. Place-based approaches rest on the identification of these local strengths, with interventions emerging from interaction of internal and external knowledge (Barca, 2011; Barca et al., 2012). The potential effectiveness of place-based strategies will therefore be dependent on capacities of both regional and extra-regional institutions, the systems of multi-level governance within which they operate, and the geographies around which these are arranged (Bailey et al., 2015; Bentley et al., 2017).

The UK-England in particular has experienced a particularly high degree of ‘churn’ in governance arrangements through repeated episodes of reorganisation (Jones, 2010) by central government. From 2010 onwards, these have sought to promote arrangements and geographies that map onto city-regions, with a focus on the largest urban areas. More recently however this has prompted a variety of attempts to adapt these models-founded in the logic of urban agglomeration and functional economic areas-to ‘non-city’ regions in the periphery, within an uneven and fragmented patchwork of governance (Beel et al., 2020; Welsh and Heley, 2021).

This paper contributes to understanding of these processes through a theoretically informed account of two concurrent and overlapping episodes of rescaling in a largely rural and peripheral part of the UK. These have seen the creation of a new, dedicated economic development agency for the South of Scotland, and a ‘deal’ for strategic investments across a larger area straddling the Scotland–England border. As such they lie outside, and offer a potential challenge to, the city-regional paradigm of economic governance. This research draws on analysis of strategic documents and interviews ($N = 29$) conducted between March 2019 and February 2020 with stakeholders from the main state and quasi-state actors in economic development at different scales as well as business and community organisations and elected representatives¹ to explore the processes behind these episodes, the exercise of agency by actors across different scales in the construction of their particular geographies, and prospects for regional capacity to undertake effective strategic interventions.

Agency in new spaces of governance

There is an extensive literature on the rescaling of governance and the state (Goodwin et al., 2017), charting the creation of sub-national new state spaces (Brenner, 2004) as one element of qualitative and multi-directional change (O’Neill, 2008) with ‘hollowing out’ at certain scales (Jessop, 1997) and a concurrent ‘filling in’ (Shaw and MacKinnon, 2011) at others. There remain, however, questions about the processes by which such changes are generated, by whom they are undertaken, and how (Swyngedouw, 1996; Pike et al., 2015). As geographies and governance arrangements are constructed and contested by actors at different scales (Brenner, 2004; Bristow, 2013), with their own motivations and imperatives, this is an arena within which agency is exercised to promote particular visions of regional

development, as well as to achieve political goals (Varró, 2010; Mackinnon and Shaw, 2010), through attempts to ‘reshape the spatiality of power and authority’ (Leitner, 2004: p. 239).

On the one hand, the development of spatial governance arrangements is a temporal and evolutionary process, in that changes are historically embedded (Peck, 1998; Brenner, 2004). Successive rounds of reform and restructuring are pursued as spatial projects, but are ‘layered’ on to and interact with the ‘inherited institutional landscape’ (Peck, 1998: p. 29), such that although existing configurations and geographies can be altered and replaced, some elements of previous arrangements are nevertheless transmitted into the future (Mackinnon and Shaw, 2010). Different layers can relate to a range of different geographical scales and can vary in durability and tangibility (Grillitsch, 2015).

On the other, these processes are shaped by politics and agency (Mackinnon and Shaw, 2010) and can be highly contested. As Harrison (2008) observes, there is tendency for arrangements to be constructed to meet the requirements of the centre; they can also be changed, abolished, or replaced from above (Evenhuis, 2017). Agency can, however, be exercised by a variety of actors (MacKinnon and Shaw, 2010). Through institutional or governance entrepreneurship (Sotarauta and Pulkkinen, 2011; Doring, 2020), regional actors can seek to shape the outcomes of episodes of rescaling by framing particular problems as worthy of attention, presenting their preferred solutions in a way that is attractive to the centre, and linking both to political considerations when the climate is favourable (Kingdon, 1995; Zahariadis, 2007; Bache and Reardon, 2013; Cairney and Jones, 2016). Regional actors can also effect more incremental changes (Evenhuis, 2017) by articulating alternative visions of development, or through making network linkages with other actors (Doring, 2020). Changes in governance then have the potential to lead to changes

in strategic goals and priorities for regional development activity. There is therefore a recursive relationship between the potential for regional actors to exercise agency and the governance arrangements within which they operate (Bristow and Healy, 2013).

South of Scotland Enterprise

As part of the UK with a significant degree of policy autonomy, economic development in Scotland has been the responsibility of devolved government since 1999. Scotland as a whole has demonstrated relatively strong economic performance relative to the rest of the UK (outwith London and South East England; Zymek and Jones, 2020), with higher spending on economic development activity (Kelly et al., 2018). Within Scotland, however, there has been increasing divergence – the Edinburgh city-region in particular has exhibited strong employment and wage growth (McGeoch, 2019), while other places, including in the largely rural South of Scotland, have fallen further behind.

These inequalities have however attracted relatively little attention in Scottish policy discourse, and strategic approaches to economic development have instead been primarily concerned with national aggregate performance. Since the abolition of semi-autonomous Local Enterprise Companies (LECs) in 2007, Scottish Enterprise (SE; the economic development agency for most of Scotland) has focused on supporting high-growth businesses and projects of national importance, while ‘city region thinking’ (Copus et al., 2021) has become increasingly influential. At the same time, Local Authority (LA) budgets have been squeezed by fiscal austerity. As a result, capacity at the local scale to support strategic interventions has been hollowed out, particularly outside the main cities.

However, an alternative model for economic development has persisted in the north of Scotland, where Highlands and Islands

Enterprise (HIE) has retained a broader remit to support community and social development, and a somewhat more decentralised structure. More recently, national strategy has also undergone something of a re-orientation, with a professed goal of ‘inclusive growth’ that recognises spatial and distributional concerns, and the desirability ‘regional equity’ within Scotland (Scottish Government, 2015). The growing emphasis on place-based approaches to economic development was crystallised in the Scottish Government’s Enterprise and Skills Review in 2017 which introduced Regional Economic Partnerships that aim, at least in part, to engage more closely with regional needs and circumstances (Clelland, 2020). It also proposed the establishment of a dedicated enterprise agency for a new geography across the largely rural South of Scotland.

Following the recommendation of the Enterprise and Skills Review, a Bill to establish South of Scotland Enterprise (SoSE) was introduced to the Scottish Parliament, becoming law in 2019. SoSE formally came into being in April 2020. The new agency took over most of the functions previously exercised by SE in the LA areas of Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders (Figure 1) but as a new legal entity, with new structures of governance and redefined priorities; this represents both the conversion of previous institutions for new purposes and the layering of new arrangements on top of those existing (Evenhuis, 2017). A new enterprise agency with the ability to ‘do things differently’ was presented as a response to the region’s ‘unique challenges’ (Scottish Government, 2017) – a recognition of the region’s lagging economic performance, and of its status as a non-urban part of lowland Scotland, largely outside the emerging city-regional paradigm.

While a new geography in terms of formal institutions, the South does have an evolutionary history through collaboration between the two LAs, beginning in 2000 with a partnership to manage EU funding (Atterton and Steiner, 2014), which also provided resources

for research and policy development. This led to the formation of a South of Scotland Alliance to facilitate more wide-ranging collaboration—both in the context of devolved government as a new arena (Pike, 2002) in which it would compete for attention and resources, and in response to the perceived success of an equivalent body for the Highlands and Islands (Scott, 2004).

The Alliance provided a platform for drawing attention the region’s perceived needs and to concerns about national policy—including that the growing focus on cities neglected the social and economic issues of smaller towns (South of Scotland Alliance, 2006). It successfully lobbied at Scottish, UK and European levels for the creation of a NUTS2 geography for Southern Scotland, intended to increase its eligibility for EU funding. The collaboration also led to a succession of economic development strategies. These were notable in that the partners themselves lacked the ability to resource the proposed priorities—instead they were intended as ‘pitches’ to the Scottish Government, adopting the dominant framings of competitiveness (South of Scotland Alliance, 2011, 2016) and development stimulated by infrastructure investment (South of Scotland Alliance, 2014). These strategies therefore sought to both speak the contemporary language of decision makers at the Scottish level, and draw attention to alternatives.

This activity generated its own relational momentum towards further institutional ‘filling in’. The South of Scotland therefore demonstrates the coming together of a ‘regional assemblage’ (Allen and Cochrane, 2007), led by the two LAs, but also engaging with other regional actors and, crucially, the Scottish Government and its national agencies. In Scotland’s centralised governance context, it was this recognition by central government of the networks underpinning the assemblage that sustained it. While clearly operating within hierarchical power relations between different levels of government (Whitehead, 2003), this illustrates a more complex and shifting set of

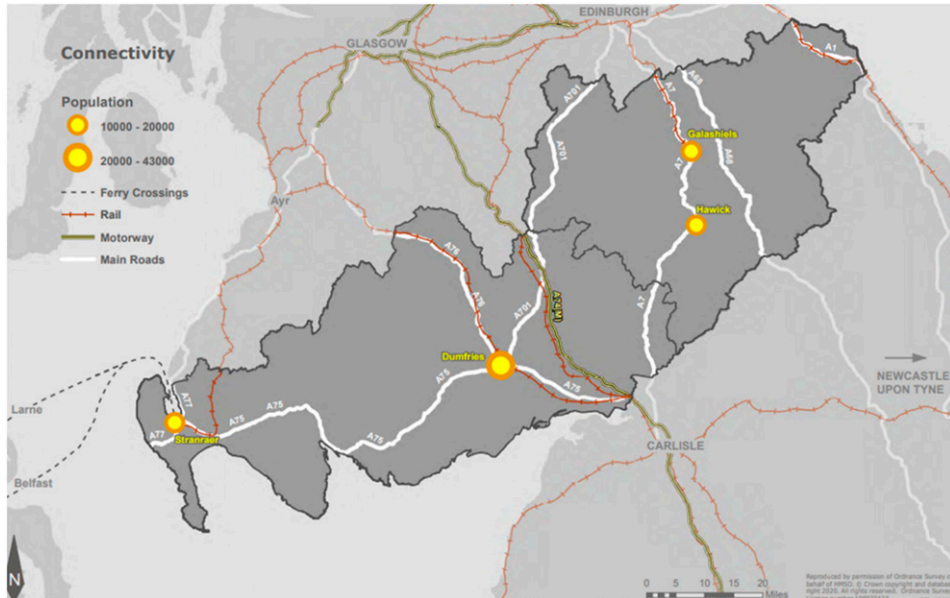


Figure 1. South of Scotland (Dumfries and Galloway Council and Scottish Borders Council, 2021).

linkages between actors at a variety of scales (Jessop, 2006).

The existence of alternative arrangements in the Highlands and Islands was also important here, contributing to a perception that the South was disadvantaged in comparison, and lacked the national profile and resources of the Highlands despite facing similar challenges of rurality and remoteness (Scott, 2004). In this context, the centralisation of SE, and its focus on large or high-growth firms and national targets, was widely seen as being to the particular detriment of the rural South, where these priorities have less relevance. This claim gained wider recognition through an inquiry of the [House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee \(2015\)](#) which explicitly drew a contrast the Highlands and Islands, and echoed the language used by a campaign for greater autonomy for Scotland's islands. These comparisons have also been important in constructing a narrative of disadvantage, with actors in Dumfries and Galloway in particular seeking to portray it as neglected or 'forgotten' by the Scottish

Government. This points to the importance of horizontal relations, and actors' interpretation of these, in processes of institutional change (Hermelin and Persson, 2021).

These narratives were one element of the discursive promotion of this new geography to have internal and external salience. As illustrated in [Figure 1](#), the South of Scotland constitutes a large region stretching from the Irish Sea to the North Sea, with limited transport linkages running east-west and few large towns. Rather than any contention that it constitutes a 'functional' economic area, the logic for the South as a space for strategic activity is framed in terms of common economic and social issues, as a set of largely rural and largely peripheral places distinct from more urban parts of Scotland. As [Paasi \(2010\)](#) notes, regions are socially constructed-created and given meaning-through a variety of complex processes. The creation of this new region has been enacted, in part, through emphasis of the South's 'difference' by regional stakeholders and in strategic documents, with a particular focus on shared challenges of rurality-including

an ageing population, low wages and issues of transport and connectivity. While this elides some significant internal differences (such as the historical importance of textile manufacturing in parts of the Scottish Borders; Pike, 2002), the construction of this specific 'South of Scotland' geography has been intimately connected to its articulation as a 'problem' to be addressed, and its perceived marginality to national policy priorities (as well as in geographical terms) has been a key element of this.

Regional actors have therefore sought, over a long period, to frame the regional development 'problem' and their preferred solution of a dedicated enterprise agency (Kingdon, 1995). However, electoral politics at the Scottish level also generated an imperative for the governing Scottish National Party (SNP) to recognise and address these issues. The South of Scotland has been relatively resistant both to the electoral appeal of the SNP and its political project of Scottish independence. Both areas registered amongst the lowest vote shares in favour of both devolution in 1997 (61% and 63%) and independence in 2014 (34%/33%). Although the SNP did win two constituencies in the South in the 2015 UK general election, this success was not repeated in the 2016 Scottish Parliament election (albeit with different boundaries) or the 2017 UK election, where these seats passed to the Conservatives.

Paradoxically, both the historic weakness of the SNP in the South and its unexpected electoral success in 2015 may have increased the region's salience in national political and electoral calculations. If economic development policy is, as Law and Mooney (2012) suggest, linked to a project of 'nation building' (Van de Walle, 2010), a demonstration that the South can be accommodated as a distinctive region could seek to bind it more closely into this project, in the context of shifting electoral geographies since the independence referendum (Agnew, 2018). The specific response of establishing a new enterprise agency had also been promoted by opposition parties, as a

means of advancing their own electoral prospects. To some extent this is analogous to the politicisation of the economic fortunes of the North of England and the adoption of the 'Northern Powerhouse' as a strategic and electoral response (Berry and Giovannini, 2018; MacKinnon, 2020). In this case, the political needs of the centre became aligned with the response being promoted by regional actors.

SoSE does exhibit some degree of 'difference' from the preceding arrangements. It has a remit which explicitly includes social as well as economic goals in its founding legislation—reflected in its initial investment priorities, which included funding for community organisations and assets (South of Scotland Enterprise, 2020)—and a commitment to match HIE's per capita funding (Scottish Parliament, 2019, col. 90). The legislative process, through calls for evidence, committee scrutiny and parliamentary debates, opened up space for political actors in the South of Scotland to influence these. The aims of the new agency are also aligned with the Scottish Government's current agendas around inclusive growth and fair work, which might suggest at least the potential for a departure from traditional approaches to economic development. While the Scottish Government does ultimately retain significant degree of directive power (Sandford, 2020) over SoSE, the national recognition afforded to the South of Scotland as a 'region', has the potential to further strengthen the voice of (at least some) regional actors. In addition to SoSE and its board, there is now (in common with other parts of Scotland) a Regional Economic Partnership for the South as a strategic body and mechanism for engagement with national bodies. In addition, a Convention of the South of Scotland has been established on a similar basis to long-standing arrangements for the Highlands and Islands, including twice-yearly meetings involving Scottish ministers, local government and other public bodies. This provides a more formal and public platform for regional actors to influence

national policy. The new regional scale is being filled in (Shaw and MacKinnon, 2011) and institutionalised (MacLeod, 1998) beyond the creation of a new economic development agency alone.

Borderlands

At the same time, a larger geography-including Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders in Scotland, as well Cumbria (including Carlisle City) and Northumberland in England-emerged as a space for economic development activity. This region, that became known as the 'Borderlands', was the basis of for an Inclusive Growth Deal signed with the UK and Scottish Governments in 2021 (Figure 2).

In England, the governance of economic development remains determined by the UK Government. From 1997, this was undertaken by Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), established in parallel with political devolution for Scotland and Wales. These 'regions' were large – the North West Development Agency served an area from the Scottish to the Welsh borders, including Manchester and Liverpool; while One North East covered rural Northumberland, along with Tyneside and Teeside. RDAs were summarily abolished by the incoming Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010 – on the grounds that they were remote, inefficient and undemocratic, and their geographies 'artificial' – as part of a broader programme of state contraction (Pike et al., 2018). The architecture that replaced RDAs – a system of smaller Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) had by comparison very limited institutional capacities, resources and remits (Pike et al., 2016), and little funding of their own, instead being expected to bid for competitive funding (Bentley et al., 2010). The configurations of these new partnerships were however driven by 'bottom-up' coalition building amongst LAs, often based on existing collaborations (Ayres and Stafford, 2014),

although still subject to approval by central government.

In tandem, the UK Government rolled out an approach to regional development based on 'deals' for investment in defined projects, negotiated with groups of LAs and LEPs; a series of devolution deals also awarded packages of powers and funding to new Combined Authorities with directly elected mayors. This deal-based approach has been subject to extensive critique on a number of grounds, among others that the process lacks transparency and democratic accountability (O'Brien and Pike, 2015; Tomaney, 2016); masks a significant centralisation of power (Hambleton, 2017); is based on existing institutional geographies rather than any economic logic (Rees and Lord, 2013); and risks further entrenching the existing disadvantages of more peripheral places (Harrison and Heley, 2015). Nevertheless, the deal-based approach has become entrenched as the dominant paradigm for the pursuit of regional policy in England, albeit progressing unevenly with the largest 'core' cities being prioritised (Shaw and Tewdwr-Jones, 2017). This was extended to Scotland from 2014 onwards as the UK Government sought to demonstrate its continuing relevance against the background of the independence referendum. As in Wales, these deals were tripartite arrangements including the devolved government. While initially negotiated with the main city-regions, subsequent deals were developed for a variety of areas to cover all parts of Scotland (Clelland, 2020).

The Borderlands collaboration can be traced back to 2000 when a memorandum of understanding between the LAs acknowledged a set of common interests and the potential advantages of working together, specifically seeking a collective 'louder voice', at least partly in response to Scottish devolution (Pike, 2002; Peck and Mulvey, 2018). This initial collaboration petered out, as the logic of devolution tended to direct the attention of the LAs towards their own 'national' governments, cross-border competition for jobs and investments,

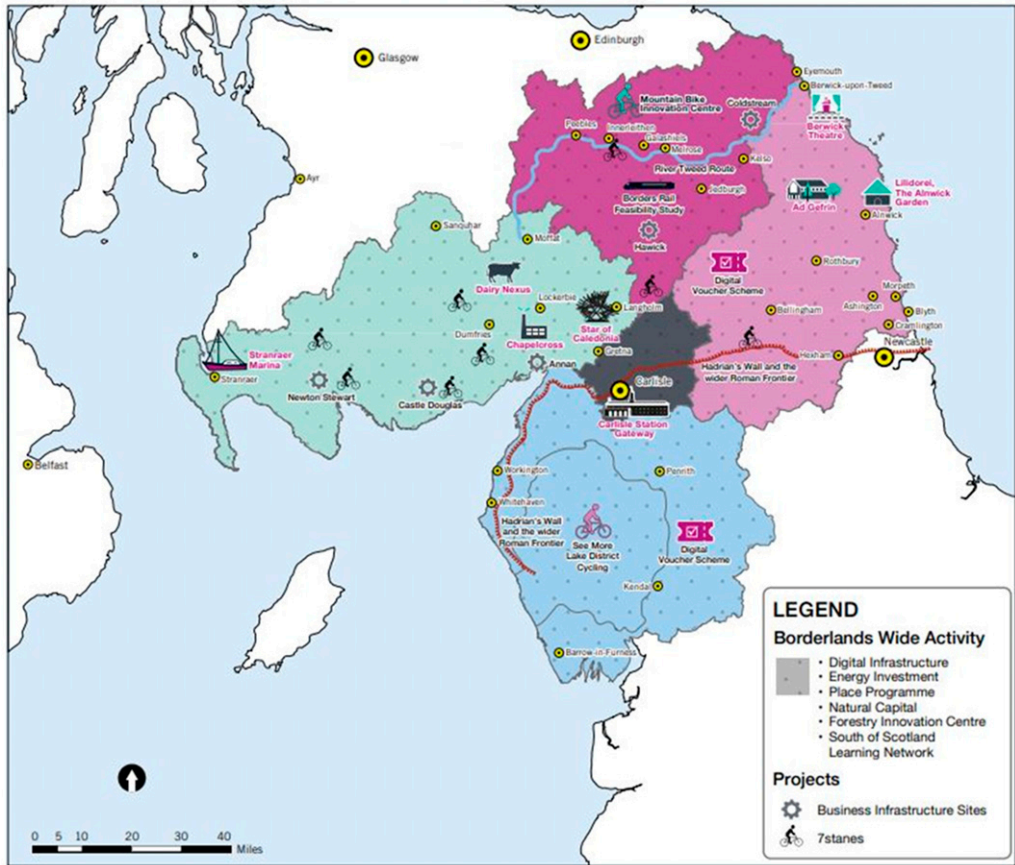


Figure 2. Borderlands inclusive growth deal. (Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal Partnership, 2021).

and concerns about ‘grant arbitrage’ (Pike, 2002). The initiative was however resurrected from 2014 onwards, stimulated by three inter-related factors.

Firstly, as Shaw et al. (2014) argue, the abolition of RDAs, through ‘clearing away’ existing institutional architecture, opened up space for English LAs to explore new approaches. At the same time, both Cumbria and Northumberland were perceived as peripheral even within the nascent Northern Powerhouse agenda that emphasised connections between urban centres. Actors in these areas were therefore prompted to seek alternative opportunities for promoting economic development. In tandem with growing centralisation in

Scotland, governance and institutional dimensions at the local and regional scale were weakened on both sides of the border (Peck and Mulvey, 2018).

Secondly, the Scottish independence referendum reignited interest in cross-border working. From the perspective of the English LAs, the referendum was seen as likely to lead to further autonomy for Scotland regardless of the outcome (Shaw et al., 2014), although whether this represented an opportunity or a risk was unclear (Schmuecker et al., 2012); this echoed similar concerns expressed in response to devolution in 1999 (Pike, 2002). The Scottish Affairs Committee (2015) also adopted the ‘Borderlands’ term in calling for greater

engagement by the UK Government in the South of Scotland, while attention was drawn to the possibility of an international border between Scotland and England.

Thirdly, the prospect of being able to secure investment from central government through a 'deal' was a catalyst for renewed collaboration, developed through two political summits between LA leaders and commissioned reports to establish a joint strategic framework for the proposed region (Shaw et al., 2015; EKOS, 2016), leading to the proposition for a Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal submitted in September 2018. The emerging possibility of accessing investment from central government was clearly an incentive here, but the prevailing dominance of city-regional narratives on both sides of the border was also factor, contributing to the partners' shared sense of peripherality within the existing Scottish and English policy environments.

During this period there were however a variety of possible geographical configurations that the deals in both England and Scotland could have taken. For example, negotiations for a Cumbria devolution deal failed in 2016, Northumberland became part of the North of Tyne devolution deal (and subsequent Combined Authority), and Scottish Borders was a partner in the Edinburgh and South East City Deal. Elsewhere in Scotland, small single LAs (such as Falkirk and Moray) have since secured their own growth deals without collaborating in wider geographies, although at the time this possibility was perhaps not clear given the dominant focus on city-regions.

The momentum for this specific collaboration was therefore contingent on each partner seeing it as being more likely to serve their interests than the possible alternatives. This mirrors evidence from elsewhere of emergent deal regions gaining pragmatic support on the basis of their potential to provide access to resources (Hoole and Hincks, 2020). In this instance, partners felt that a collaboration covering such a large area, and straddling the border (Figure 2), would be effective in gaining

attention or greater 'clout' with central government. This interpretation highlights the extent to which the institutional and policy dimension was a driver of collaboration (Peck and Mulvey, 2018), resting on a set of shared interests transcending the formal political boundary of the border. These were strong enough to overcome the territorial practices and consciousness that might have led them to foreground their place within their own 'national' contexts (Paasi, 2009b), and to outweigh conceptions of cross-border relations as potentially competitive (Pike, 2002; Schmuecker et al., 2012).

The Borderlands deal was however confirmed through the top-down endorsement of the UK Government, following its inclusion in the Conservative manifesto for the 2017 UK election. This appears to have been driven personally by David Mundell, local Conservative MP and Secretary of State for Scotland in the UK Government from 2015 to 2019, who was strongly committed to the idea. The cross-border nature of the proposition was a key factor in this high-level support-in the context of the SNP's electoral success, and the UK Government's stated objective of strengthening the Union (Kenny and Sheldon, 2021)-and provided a basis for Mundell to secure support for this unusual arrangement across relevant Whitehall departments. As has been observed in the EU, promotion of cross-border regions can be employed as part of a political project to promote integration and to reduce the salience of national borders (Paasi, 2009a). In this interpretation, the work of linking up a perceived policy problem, political imperatives and a potential solution (Kingdon, 1995) was initiated by an individual politician at the national scale, although regional actors had laid the groundwork for this.

Regional actors have also sought to legitimise the Borderlands through the promotion of particular 'regional imaginaries' (Jessop and Oosterlynck, 2006) by actors involved in cross-border collaborations. On the one hand, the Borderlands partners presented an inward-

looking narrative that stresses the commonalities of the places within the region – ‘Border towns such as Berwick, Carlisle, Galashiels and Hawick, arguably have more in common with each other than Newcastle, Manchester, Edinburgh or Glasgow’ (quoted in [Shaw et al., 2014](#): p. 422), framed in terms of both the challenges of rurality, demographics and low wages, and the region’s natural assets. Despite some claims for the importance of cross-border economic linkages – those in Carlisle for example see its city-regional ‘footprint’ as including parts of Scotland and Northumberland ([Shaw et al., 2013](#)) – overall, the Borderlands was not presented as a coherent economic region. In fact, weak internal links were seen a problem, with infrastructure investment to strengthen these included in the initial proposition. The emphasis on shared characteristics as a basis for regional collaboration marks a contrast to the logic of functional economic areas that originally underpinned city-regional deal-based approaches. Internal legitimisation of the Borderlands initiative was supported by the careful distribution of flagship investments across the partner local authority areas (see [Figure 2](#)).

On the other hand, regional partners also presented an externally orientated account that emphasised the relational place of the Borderlands in the national spatial political economy – ‘a strategically important region, integral to the development of the wider economy’ ([Borderlands Initiative, 2017](#): p. 2), ‘in the centre of the UK’ – and its connections to other places. This is in part a boosterish attempt to present the region as well-connected, competitive and attractive for investment and visitors, but also reflects the imperative to present a convincing case for support to both governments. Within the deal-making paradigm, it is not sufficient to demonstrate how investment might benefit the region itself; in order to effectively couple regional aspirations with the needs of the centre (where control over resources lies), there needs to be an articulation

of how this contributes to national growth and priorities.

The difference of the Borderlands from the more conventional city-centric deal regions that preceded it was however potentially empowering to partners in their negotiations. Despite the centrally orchestrated ([Harrison, 2008](#)) deal-making process, the tripartite nature of deals in Scotland has afforded local coalitions a degree of leverage in their negotiations with both governments ([Van der Zwet et al., 2020](#)). The cross-border geography, in the context of Scottish independence remaining a live issue, was seen as being potentially useful in attracting attention from both governments. As a non-city region ([Coombes, 2014](#)) (Carlisle notwithstanding), there were also opportunities for the Borderlands partners to challenge some of the assumptions and approaches that dominated earlier deals, which had initially been strongly focused on investments in physical infrastructure and promoting agglomeration, although there was a subsequent shift towards supporting a broader range of projects ([Waite et al., 2018](#)). The explicitly rural nature of the new region (links to the Edinburgh and Newcastle city-regions notwithstanding) perhaps granted partners greater latitude than in early city deals where options were limited to a ‘menu’ of Treasury-approved policies ([Tomaney, 2016](#): p. 550) – the final deal did include, for example, a flexible region-wide ‘place’ programme as well as more conventional capital projects ([Borderlands Inclusive Growth Partnership, 2021](#): p. 11).

This demonstrates the ability of regional actors to collaboratively exert influence ‘upwards’ in persuading policymakers at the centre to adapt existing approaches. There is some consensus amongst those involved that simply by facilitating the direct engagement of ministers and senior civil servants with regional partners, the negotiation of a deal helped to encourage some change in attitudes within central government. This was further enabled by the parallel emergence of the Scottish Government’s inclusive growth agenda which

provided a recognised alternative approach while remaining ‘fuzzy’ enough to be adapted to the region’s perceived needs (as illustrated in the naming of the deal). At the same time however, governance and institutional processes at the centre-dominated by the Treasury and its specific approach to appraisal which privileges investment in the largest cities (Coyle and Sensier, 2020)-constrained the scope of this adaptation.

Discussion: New regions in the periphery

These two concurrent developments are particular manifestations of a more general search for the ‘missing middle’ (Shaw and Greenhalgh, 2010)-an appropriate scale of intervention between the local and national levels-driven and justified by the failure of previous restructuring (Jones, 2019). They also represent different types of institutional filling in, and have some distinctive features that are useful in understanding these processes in a non-urban context and the exercise of agency by different actors over time. Three broad elements are particularly salient.

Firstly, specific geographies and governance arrangements are interlinked with dominant understandings and discourses of economic development, and with attempts to contest these. The emergence of growth-focused city deals emerged from of city-regional thinking percolating through Scottish and UK policy circles for two decades. In Scotland, this came into tension with a policy emphasis on growth being ‘inclusive’, prompting greater consideration of places beyond the largest cities and their hinterlands. In England, concern with regional inequality has been mostly framed around the North-South divide, albeit proposed steps to address this have also been mostly urban-centric. The combination of these agendas at the national levels-and the political salience of the Scotland-England border region for both governments, in the context of

persistent support for Scottish independence-goes some way towards explaining why both these episodes progressed concurrently. This shift in the political ‘mood’ (Kingdon, 1995; Zahariadis, 2007) created an environment where regional agendas could potentially gain traction with national policymakers.

Secondly, and relatedly, the resultant spatial configurations are shaped by the alignment of, and tensions between, priorities of actors at different scales. The Borderlands Deal has been driven by top-down processes, in that the programme of deal-making instigated by the UK Government was a catalyst. At the same time, the Scottish and UK Governments appear to have adopted a fairly laissez-faire approach to the formation of deal geographies. While the framework clearly remains centrally orchestrated (Harrison, 2008), LAs are requesting resources to be used in ways that meet the needs of central government-actors at the regional scale do exercise agency through participation (or non-participation) in deal coalitions. The South of Scotland has likewise been constructed by a bottom-up partnership of regional actors seeking access to resources from above. While decree from above does, then, play a part in the layering of these institutional changes (Evenhuis, 2017) it does not itself necessarily determine the outcomes.

These coalitions, in building on previous (although more circumscribed) attempts at collaboration, also demonstrate the evolutionary and path-dependent nature of institutional change (Hermelin and Persson, 2021). The most recent iteration of the UK’s patchwork of economic ‘regions’ has largely been shaped by pre-existing groups of LAs responding to the opportunity to draw down resources from higher levels of government. In England, many successful LEP proposals were continuations of existing multi-area arrangements (Townsend, 2012); in Scotland, the initial city deals broadly followed historic planning regions, with a variety of other areas filling in the gaps (Clelland, 2020). In practice then, geographies are the based on ‘realpolitik’ (Rees and

Lord, 2013) as opposed to systematic assessment of regional economic flows and linkages or of different places' needs. As illustrated in Figure 2, the Borderlands stretches from Stranraer in the west to the outskirts of Newcastle in the east, and from Barrow-in-Furness in the south to the periphery of the Edinburgh city-region in the north.

This has the potential to lead to an incoherent and dysfunctional system, where spaces have little logic in terms of economic development, effective policy or regional identity (Tomaney, 2018). Through participation in these coalitions, regional actors can however seek to improve their relational position-in terms of being able to couple with the needs and priorities of higher levels of governance to attract resources-with the aim of being more able to effectively influence their own development. The inherently competitive environment is still likely to favour regional assemblages with the strongest internal resources and connections to centres of power (Taylor, 2019). Nevertheless, the process described above does perhaps offer opportunities for smaller and more peripheral areas to raise their profile with a louder collective voice through cross-regional collaboration, and to promote their own approaches as potential solutions to regional problems that can be attractive to decision makers at the centre. To some extent, the South in particular has emerged as a 'place for itself' (Lipietz, 1994) and demonstrates the potential for these processes to become self-reinforcing, with the embedding of new regional arrangements, access to more resources for economic development, and greater capacity to articulate common agendas offering greater possibility for the exercise of strategic agency.

Thirdly, these new geographies are (like city-regions; Harrison, 2007) actively constructed for a purpose by specific actors (Allen et al., 1998). One element of this is the production of strategies and narratives that present shared imaginaries and implicit or explicit rationales for them as spaces for

policy. Such strategies can be seen as a 'governmental technology' through which regional economies are created (Painter, 2005), given that they tend to lack any inherent coherence or boundedness. In these examples, this construction is important in framing both an issue for national policy-makers' consideration - through raising the profile of a lagging rural and peripheral region - and a potential solution, in presenting this geography as a desirable scale for strategic interventions. This represents the active agency of regional actors in their attempts to gain recognition for regional 'problems' and their proposed solutions (Kingdon, 1995). In the absence of identifiable functional economic areas, this type of active construction around perceived shared challenges may be more important in non-city regions, particularly where there is limited institutional history, or common regional identity, and new or ad hoc geographies may have little meaning outside policy circles (Paasi, 2013). To be successful, this type of spatial imaginary needs to have resonance and legitimacy for actors at multiple scales (Hincks et al., 2017) particularly where there are alternative possible regional configurations that could be adopted (Hoole and Hincks, 2020). The political circumstances from 2014 onwards were propitious for the broad acceptance of these new geographies by both Scottish and UK governments.

These episodes have both emerged from and opened up opportunity spaces (Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020) for actors at the regional scale. In the case of the South of Scotland, the LAs and other regional stakeholders engaged in a long process of lobbying and promotion of the region as being both substantially different from the rest of lowland Scotland, and disadvantaged relative to the Highlands. This was supported by developing pan-regional institutional capacity. As a result, when the Scottish Government turned its attention to the South, they were well prepared to shape the response, with the HIE model as a template. Regional

actors therefore exercise agency through articulation of a perceived regional problem, and of their preferred solution-and in then linking these streams (Kingdon, 1995) to the interests of national policymakers and politicians. The emergence of the Borderlands is perhaps more contingent, given the position of a local MP in the UK Government, although it also rested on an established network of cross-regional actors. The nature of devolution also opened up the possibility of ‘venue-shopping’ (Cairney and Hepburn, 2009); in this case the renewed role of the UK Government in Scottish regional development provided an alternative arena for regional actors to attempt to couple their aspirations with national political priorities.

The legislative establishment of SoSE suggests that it is fairly securely entrenched. However, a risk for more unusual or ad hoc geographies is that they are only sustained for as long as sponsorship from above lasts (Deas and Lord, 2006). The Borderlands appears relatively fragile in this regard, and the policy environment at UK level has shifted significantly since the deal. Pan-UK arrangements for funding regional development (replacing EU programmes) signal a rescaling of competition for resources-these funds are allocated to LA areas, rather than the larger soft spaces around which deals have been constructed (HM Treasury, 2021), and LAs in Scotland will now compete with those in England and Wales. The approaches adopted by the UK Government to the distribution of these resources – likened to ‘pork barrel’ politics (Hanretty, 2021) – suggest that crude electoral calculations may play an even greater role. At the same time, alternative coalitions for engaging with central government – such as the recently announced devolution deal for North East England (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022) – may prove more attractive for some partners. The types of new regions described here will only be maintained and reproduced if they continue to meet the needs of both local partners and central government in this evolving landscape.

Conclusions

In the UK, the repeated restructuring of governance and geographies for regional development has been employed as a response to persistent problems of spatial inequality. This paper has analysed two recent episodes that have created new soft spaces (Haughton and Allmendinger, 2008) of governance – the establishment of a new regional development body for the South of Scotland, and a ‘deal’ for investment across the wider Borderlands region. It contributes to the established literature on rescaling in its emphasis on how and by whom agency is exercised in these episodes. In doing so it responds to gap in understanding of how and why such institutional structures, and their associated geographies, are produced (MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999; Pike et al., 2015). Given that ‘governance matters’ (Eversole and Walo, 2020) for effective place-based strategies, the structures and territories within which these are pursued will shape the possibilities and priorities for action.

These new spaces are ‘contingent forms’ (Ward and Jonas, 2004: p. 2133) that emerge from political processes across multiple scales and interaction with existing spatial structures. While not underplaying the extent to which they were both centrally orchestrated (Harrison, 2008), neither are straightforwardly top-down creations, and are layered on to established arrangements (Deas and Lord, 2006)-built on existing regional collaborations that then gained recognition and endorsement from the centre. In both episodes, changes instigated from above (in the context of a widespread reappraisal of the importance of place in economic development, and driven by political imperatives) opened up space for regional actors to shape these arrangements. Agency can be exercised in these processes ‘from below’ through the articulation of regional development ‘problems’, the promotion of preferred solutions (in terms of the geographies and strategic rationale for new arrangements) and the alignment of these with national political

currents (Kingdon, 1995). Both new geographies gained external support through their potential to address the political (and electoral) needs of those at higher levels of governance, at a particular juncture. The accounts presented here demonstrate how even in relatively centralised structures where formal powers reside at higher levels of governance, actors at the regional level can exercise agency to influence the outcomes of rescaling.

The two case studies also demonstrate a need to consider rescaling of governance as a temporal and evolutionary process. While different in many ways, both initiatives have long pre-histories in coalitions formed to articulate shared interests. That these have each have their origins around two decades ago demonstrates the long-term nature of regional agency. These processes can also generate their own relational momentum in establishing networks and governance arrangements for the pursuit of common agendas at these new scales, and for relations with the centre, demonstrating the links between horizontal and vertical patterns of governance (Bentley et al., 2017). Although not without their tensions, these new platforms and mechanisms could enhance the potential for strategic agency to be exercised at this scale in future. Conversely, these new spaces may prove to be transient if they no longer meet the changing needs of the centre.

Finally, this paper's focus on rescaling in peripheral regions, and the emphasis on agency in these accounts, also draws attention to how peripherality is constructed and contested. Recent developments in the UK have seen new spaces constructed around major cities, with these approaches then adapted to other places in an uneven patchwork. This analysis suggests that the fundamental logic of these city-regional approaches is open to challenge and adaptation by regional actors when being adapted to different contexts (Beel and Jones, 2021; Welsh and Heley, 2021).

The concept of peripherality has been subject to a degree of interrogation in the

regional development and planning literature, coming to be seen as produced by processes across social, economic and political domains (Copus, 2001), rather than determined by geography or distance. In this case the peripheralisation experienced by the South of Scotland and far North of England has been associated with a hollowing out of endogenous capacities, and limited ability to influence the centre, exacerbated by the dominance of an urban-centric economic development paradigm. This overlaps with perspectives from political science that see peripherality as exclusion from the resources and networks of political power (Herschel, 2012). Here, new spaces have emerged from coalitions formed by regional actors in attempts to counter their individual political peripherality. As part of this process, these actors also actively sought to discursively construct a shared notion of their regions as peripheral-characterised by distance, difference and neglect by the centre. This has been deployed in support of campaigns for new institutional arrangements that could facilitate access to resources, seeking both to generate regional solidarity and to influence national political actors. Simultaneously, however, they have sought to contest their regions' geographical peripherality and promote them as attractive sites for investment that will contribute to national outcomes. This ambiguity highlights the need for a nuanced and multi-dimensional understanding of peripherality and more work to integrate the construction and reproduction of governance arrangements into processes of peripheralisation (Kühn, 2015).

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ORCID iD

David Clelland  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1081-1478>

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. An indication of interviewees' broad roles and the scales at which they primarily operated is provided in [Supplementary Table 1](#); the level of detail here is however limited to protect participants' anonymity.

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