COMPARING DEVOLVED GOVERNANCE, by Derek Birrell.

The main aim of the volume is to carry out a comprehensive review of government across all three devolved administrations of the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales). The inclusion of the word ‘governance’ in the title of the book makes explicit the intention by the author of incorporating in his analyses those other bodies and loci of decision-making not exclusively related to governmental bodies and the public delivery of goods and services. However, as it could not be otherwise, professor Birrell makes extensive use of governmental sources as empirical data for the analyses made in the book. These include materials from the three devolved administrations comprising strategies, reports and special inquiries from individual departments. However, it is clarified that the scrutiny of governance actions pays also attention to non-state interventions. In the context of the UK, where ‘quangos’ (quasi-non-governmental organisations) flourished after WWII during the long-pre-devolutionary period, the enmeshment of civil society initiatives and public regulations is an area of the outmost interest for researches of decentralised governance.

The chapters and sections of the volume examine in a comparative manner various areas of observations which had previously received little attention, such as the operation of the regional Executives and the development of inter-governmental relations. This exercise is carried out in an integrated fashion: within each chapter the major features of devolved governance are described and compared systematically regarding Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The layout of the books covers main aspects of the operation of devolved governance in eight main chapters: one relating to powers and financial resources; three to the operation of executive government and Parliament/Assemblies; three concerning the administrative and delivery systems; and one on intergovernmental relations.

Following the introductory section, and among other areas for general comparison on powers and resources, chapter 2 explores whether the implementation of the Barnett Formula involves differences in outcomes. The Formula establishes percentages of identifiable per capita expenditure on services around 97% in England, 127% in Northern Ireland; 117% in Scotland, and 111% in Wales. Some reflections are made on future possible changes, on which the pending celebration of the referendum on Scottish independence is to be considered a major intervening variable. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 cover the core institutions of devolved government concerning the working of the three executives, as well as the operation of the three elected chamber.

The next three chapters focus on the administrative and delivery institutions, the civil service, local government and ‘quangos’. The author pays special attention to the political and policy role of senior civil servants and underlines common concerns about the policy-making capacity in the devolved administrations. Likewise, a major focus is on the relationship between the devolved administrations and local government including partnership arrangements at decision-making, delivery and
community levels. Chapter 8 examines the major debate that has taken place about the role of the ‘quangos’ under devolution and their relationship with the devolved administrations. The following chapter is devoted to intergovernmental and external relations and emphasizes the important level of engagement of all three devolved administrations with the institutions of the European Union.

The concluding chapter assesses the appropriateness of the continuing orthodoxy on the asymmetrical nature of devolution, and on whether more recent trends mark a movement towards greater symmetry, particularly as regards what the author labels as ‘devolved style of governance’. This style is to be put to test as a consequence of the referendum on independence that the Scottish Government has announced to hold around autumn of 2014.

Certainly, the attempt of making independence and secession synonymous concepts is a simplification. In fact there is a growing strand of academics contending the over-determining view that a nation is to equate *par force* a sovereign state. Proposals for greater autonomy for Scotland within the UK are found to be popular in social surveys. The so-called ‘devo-plus’ or ‘devo-max’ arrangements for Scotland, as an possible outcome of the 2014 referendum, would imply further devolution of powers, particularly as regards fiscal matters. If that is the case, other parts of the UK, such as Northern Ireland and Wales might follow the pattern of emulation with regard to Scotland and they could claim further devolution of powers. Birrell points to the fact that such policy-copying and transfer has already been identified as operating between the three devolved administrations as regards, in particular, the social policy field.

Beyond the debate on Scotland’s independence and its implications for the United Kingdom as a whole, this book is to be most useful for practitioners, scholars and students of the UK’s devolved system of multi-level governance; a system which is evolving towards new political scenarios of institutional re-accommodation. It greatly contributes to shed light comparatively on sectors of governance which have too often been neglected in analyses of UK’s devolution.

Luis Moreno
Spanish National Research Council (IPP-CCHS-CSIC, Madrid)