Are You Local?   Rob Gandy PhD

Contribution to LSE British Politics and Policy academic blog

The *League of Gentlemen's* question 'Are you local?' will chime with all politicians, as voters view being from the local area as important. Often party members are at loggerheads with their headquarters, particularly when outsiders are perceived to be parachuted into safe seats; as with the 2012 Rotherham by-election when Labour party members felt their shortlist did not include a local candidate. The accusation was even levelled at Labour's Liverpool-born Dan Carden when chosen to stand for Liverpool Walton in 2017.

This issue is complex and dependent on the definition of 'local' used. A valid and practical high-level proxy for 'localism', is the relationship between elected politicians' birthplace and their constituency, based on UK regions; with politicians deemed 'local' if they represent a constituency in their region of birth. This reflects MEP constituencies being regional, as the issue equally applies to EU elections. Analyses of the respective 2009 and 2010 elections found that London, North East England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales had the highest number of MPs and MEPs born per head of population, with the latter four also having the most 'local' politicians. (See Figures 1 & 2) The greatest mobility was in south-east England, particularly London, but nationwide the vast majority of MPs and MEPs were 'local' or represented constituencies in regions adjacent to their region of birth. The latter is important because a politician can represent a constituency local to them personally, but just over a regional border. [https://doi.org/10.1057/bp.2013.30]

The respective 2014 and 2015 elections saw similar patterns, but with some fluctuations amongst the English regions. The number of MPs/MEPs born in each UK region per million population ranged from 5.8 for the East Midlands to 16.5 for Scotland, with a mean of 10.6 (excluding 41 Non-UK MPs/MEPs). The percentage of MPs elected within their region of birth in 2015 was 47 per cent (up from 44 per cent), increasing to 74 per cent if adjacent regions are included; MPs crossing more than one region was down nearly a point to 26 per cent. The corresponding figures for MEPs in 2014 were 45 per cent, 84 per cent and 22 per cent respectively, similarly showing increased 'localism'.

'Local' politicians accounted for 40 per cent of re-elected MPs, compared to 71 per cent of new MPs where the party changed. However, where new MPs replaced the incumbent and the party retained the seat, the figure was 56 per cent. Of those MPs who left the UK parliament 53 per cent were 'local'. The patterns for MEPs showed some differences, with a much lower percentage of those leaving the EU Parliament being 'local' and a much higher percentage having crossed more than one regional boundary (44).

The percentage of 'local' MPs for Labour (51 per cent) was much greater than for the Conservatives (35 per cent), despite its major losses of Scottish seats. Seats considered 'safe' at the 2010 general election, saw 'local' MPs representing only 17 per cent of the Conservatives' Top 100 safest seats and 22 per cent for their Top 150 seats. By contrast, 45 per cent of all other Conservative seats involved a 'local' politician. The respective figures for Labour were 58 per cent, 54 per cent and 47 per cent.

The Labour Party had greater female representation that the Conservatives, with 99 female MPs compared to 68, and a greater proportion of these were 'local': 51 per cent compared to

38 per cent. Notably, 37 per cent of female Conservative MPs had to cross more than one regional boundary, compared to 27 per cent for Labour and 13 per cent for all other parties. Interestingly, of new Conservative MPs who crossed more than one regional boundary or were Non-UK, there was an equal split between males and females (11:11), whereas for new Labour MPs the split was (1:13). Whether the latter was a result of all female shortlists or parachuting candidates by the Labour Party, or a combination of the two, is open to speculation.

MPs born before 1960 accounted for a third of MPs elected in 2015, and should incrementally reduce in number. Noticeably, younger MPs are more 'local' than their older counterparts, with a 14 per cent differential between those born after 1970 compared to those born in each of the preceding decades.

Extrapolation can be a questionable exercise, but if all future new MPs reflected the distribution of 2015 MPs born since 1970 then, when those born before 1950 leave parliament, the overall percentage of 'local' MPs would increase to 48 per cent and the percentage representing constituencies in their own or an adjacent region to that of their birth would increase to 75. The cumulative effect when the 1950s MPs leave would be to provide figures of 52 per cent and 78 per cent respectively; and when the 1960s MPs leave would be to provide figures of 56 per cent and 79 per cent respectively. These figures support the hypothesis of incrementally increasing 'local' representation.

There can be little doubt that the creation of Mayors for the major English provincial conurbations has heightened the debate about the distribution of resources to these areas compared to London and the devolved governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. And it would be interesting to research how MPs born in the capital and celtic countries, who represent constituencies in other parts of the country, voted on matters relating to their birthplaces. As the old saying goes: "You can take the boy out of Scotland but you can't take Scotland out of the boy". Also, might the recent Boundary Commission's recommendations to reduce MP numbers to 600 [https://boundarycommissionforengland.independent.gov.uk/2018-review/] act as a further stimulus to 'localism', and regionalism in England, by necessitating candidate selection processes for new constituencies? Neighbouring MPs from the same party could be pitted against one another, possibly prompting older MPs to retire. Whichever candidate is most 'local' will undoubtedly be a factor in how party members vote.

Of course, there was another general election in 2017, with 105 new MPs compared to 2017. How 'local' are they? Is there accelerating 'localism'? Watch this space....

1,014 words

Rob Gandy is a Visiting Professor at Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University, with many publications involving mobility in public services and their users.