

A new regional divide in the UK?

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Every decade a census is taken and atlases are drawn of how the geographies of society are changing. At the University of Sheffield, Bethan Thomas and I have produced the first such atlas to be drawn following the census of 2001. The results were released to the press on June 30th and were reported as signalling a growth in the North-South divide. Had Iraq not been "handed back" a little earlier than was anticipated the media may have been less interested. However, June 30th turned out to be a slow news day and so a vigorous debate ensued as to whether the country was continuing to divide, if so with what implications and what prescriptions could be offered to remedy this.

In many ways the debate that followed our release of 'People and Places 2001' mirrored that which followed its predecessor (also published by Policy Press almost ten years ago). Conservative ministers were wheeled in and proclaimed that eventually wealth from the south would trickle to the north; current Government ministers suggested a great deal had improved in the three years between the taking of the census and the atlas publication. Perhaps it has, but in reality we as yet know little about how the human geography of the UK has changed since 2001. Even basic population data by area for 2002 and 2003 is not due to be released until later this summer. What we do know now is how the country changed during the last decade.

Our atlas contains over 600 maps and so a simple summary of these views of the changing social geography will always be inadequate, but some trends stand out so clearly and consistently that despite the usual caveats it is worth being clear. Furthermore these are trends which reinforce those patterns which were identified when the 1981 and 1991 censuses were compared, 1971 with 1981, and earlier pairs. When a trend is long term and consolidated by the latest data, it is not influenced by the particular year when a census is taken and highlights processes which appear relatively immune from short-term policy intervention. It is time to accept that this is happening and ask what can be done about it.

The fundamental story of a comparison of the 2001 and 1991 censuses tells of growing divides between what appears to be an expanded metropolis of Greater London (covering most of the population of the south) and an archipelago of provincial cities and their hinterlands. More than one map, especially of those which portray change, has to be viewed to see this, but here I've taken one example –an estimate of wealth made using census data. On the maps (of change and on the equal population cartogram in particular) the south of England appears to be coalescing into a ring of Home Counties affluence surrounding a much poorer inner London where levels of wealth have reduced in recent years (as the population has become younger and in many cases relatively poorer).

To the north of a line from the Severn to just south of the Humber (Grimsby is still in the north!) there are areas which have become more wealthy, but these are the exception rather than the norm. The clearest ring of such areas surrounds the West Midlands and admittedly straddles the north-south divide. As the text which accompanies these maps of wealth and changing wealth makes clear, here a measure is being modelled and that creates its own problems, especially in Northern Ireland. In general, though, the patterns this map shows are repeated in so many other maps of life in the UK, with reinforcement over time, that it is very difficult to

argue on the basis of this atlas that the country is “coming together again”. More people are wealthy and more are poor. Wealth has grown most where it was greatest to begin with and so too poverty.

To the south the population is revealed to be, on average, extremely well educated and the gap in qualifications (as measured by university degrees held) is growing with the north. The industries which dominate the south have fared best over the course of the 1990s, most obviously in finance. The north continues to lose some of its best-rewarded manufacturing jobs and more often than not these have been replaced by a combination of less permanent, less well paid or less full-time work, rising levels of sickness, early retirement and occasionally the actual net out-migration of young people. There are many ways in which good jobs can be lost and unemployment appears to fall also. Meanwhile the vast majority of new immigrants, most from the wealthier countries of the world, have flocked to the growing greater Greater London that the 2001 census now depicts.

What can be done? First, to accept what has happened and what is happening. Don't assume that current policies and a huge degree of good intent on behalf of government have done anything more than prevent this divide growing more quickly than it has. Second, stop the divisive argument between London (“we have our problems”) and the north (“ours are greater”). Almost everyone living in areas which have not fared well during the 1990s are represented by members of parliament from one party – that which currently holds power – Labour MPs represent almost all of the North and the poor of the South. Third, look to who is benefiting most from these growing divides: a minority group of very wealthy people in the south and an even smaller proportion of the population who live in the few rich northern enclaves. The growing north-south divide is largely the geographical manifestation of long-term social polarisation, the story of increasingly separate lives as they are played out on the ground. Tipping a few million children just out of poverty, introducing and increasing a minimum wage, raising some pensions and benefits will all make lives much better – but if they do not bring the living standards of those at the bottom nearer the ever improving standards of those at the top of the social hierarchy, we should not be surprised to be mapping a nation dividing.

Notes

The study, 'People and places: A 2001 Census atlas of the UK' by Daniel Dorling and Bethan Thomas, is published by The Policy Press and is available from Marston Book Services. (Tel: +44 (0)1235 465500, Fax: +44 (0)1235 465556, Email: direct.orders@marston.co.uk).

