

Policy Insights: Race equality after devolution: Reversing the constitutional telescope?

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Policy Insights by Professor Nasar Meer and Dr Mahnoz Illias

Perspectives on the UK's devolution settlements in the transfer of powers from the Westminster Parliament and legislatures and administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, understandably appeal to legally oriented questions about the power to legislate, or which level of government governs which policy area, and perhaps less on whether jurisdictions have diverged from Westminster through the party systems, civic narratives and competing claims about national futures that comprise constitutional debates.

Our new project asks how race equality policy has developed differently across England, Scotland and Wales during the three decades of devolution. It offers the first comprehensive comparison of these changing policy landscapes. Looking closely at Scotland and Wales, we show how devolved government has given equality and anti-racism a distinctive place in public policy. This also tells us something about national belonging and how governments decide which policies to pursue, because each also tells us a story about who belongs to the political community and whose interests public institutions should serve.

The conclusion we draw is that devolution has generated significant race-equality policy activity, some of which offers important lessons for the rest of the UK. Scotland and Wales have used devolved institutions to develop distinctive strategies, duties, action plans, evidence frameworks and anti-racist vocabularies, often tied to wider claims about civic belonging and national

identity. These developments shouldn't be overstated as settled successes, but nor should they be dismissed as merely rhetorical. They show how race equality can be made more visible in public governance, connected to national narratives of belonging, and in some cases linked to stronger expectations around institutional accountability.

The harder question is whether this policy activity becomes policy implementation: whether it changes behaviour, resources, incentives and outcomes. Ambitious strategies and public commitments are only part of the picture. The test is whether they change institutional behaviour, redistribute resources and power, and reduce racial inequalities in areas such as housing, employment, policing, health and education.

In this sense, the timelines invite us to reverse the usual constitutional telescope. Rather than asking only how Scotland and Wales diverge from Westminster, they ask what UK-wide institutions might learn from devolved experiments in making race equality more explicit, accountable and central to government. This might also include how regional and mayoral devolution in England may also produce different approaches to race equality, although this first phase of the project starts with the creation of additional legislation by the devolved Parliaments which is not a power devolved to English cities or regions.

A shared legal architecture, but divergent trajectories

The first point is that the UK still has a shared race-equality architecture. The post-Macpherson period produced major UK-wide developments, including the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, the statutory and specific duties that followed, and later the Equality Act 2010. These measures established a common anti-discrimination and public-sector equality baseline across Great Britain.

But the timelines also show that a common legal foundation hasn't produced a single race-equality trajectory. At the UK level, development after the consolidation of the Equality Act becomes more uneven: distributed across reviews, equality governance, evidence exercises, community cohesion, parliamentary inquiries, and contested responses to racism and racial inequality. In Scotland and Wales, by contrast, devolution has created space for more distinctive policy repertoires - not wholly separate from the UK framework, but increasingly shaped by devolved institutions, political vocabularies and national narratives.

The [timelines from the project](#) offer a document registry of devolved race-equality governance and offer a living digital archive that maps the evolving policy ecosystem through which race equality has been narrated, governed and institutionalised across the UK, Scotland and Wales. Importantly, they make visible the intermediate layer of policy often missed in constitutional accounts: duties, regulations, mainstreaming reports, evidence strategies, action plans, implementation updates, funding conditions, practitioner guidance, curriculum materials and public-history initiatives. These are the instruments through which broad commitments are either translated into institutional practice or left as aspiration.

Scotland: race equality and the national “we”

In Scotland, the timeline begins with the restoration of the Scottish Parliament and follows the development of race duties, equality mainstreaming, evidence strategies, race equality frameworks, refugee integration, anti-racist education, data-improvement work and delivery planning. The Race Equality Framework for Scotland 2016-2030 is especially important because it places minority ethnic communities explicitly within Scotland's national “we”. It links race equality to

an inclusive national identity and presents minority ethnic presence as integral to its future.

The New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy develops a parallel civic argument, describing refugees as contributors to Scotland's national community. This shows how migration-related policies can also shape the public language of belonging, without being conflated with it. But refugee and sanctuary frameworks can help narrate plural membership and civic inclusion within devolved accounts of nationhood.

Scotland's more recent policy development also shows a shift from equality as compliance towards anti-racism as institutional transformation. The Race Equality Immediate Priorities Plan and subsequent anti-racist education work move beyond general commitments to inclusion by naming structural racism, institutional culture change, empire, colonialism and transatlantic slavery. In this respect, curriculum and education policy have become important sites where Scotland is reworking national memory and recognising the historical conditions through which contemporary racism is produced. For example, the Immediate Priorities Plan states that it is not enough simply to be 'not racist' and calls for an actively anti-racist approach in everything government does. Education guidance makes this concrete by asking learners to understand Scotland's role in empire, colonialism and transatlantic slavery, and how that past continues to shape everyday life.

Wales: anti-racism as systems change

Wales shows a related but distinct trajectory. Its constitutional statutes establish Welsh institutions, legislative authority and permanence within the UK's devolved settlement. Alongside this, Wales has developed a distinctive policy architecture through the Well-being of Future Generations framework,

Welsh Specific Duties, equality reporting, socio-economic duties, evidence units, the Nation of Sanctuary approach, curriculum reform and the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan.

The Welsh case is particularly important because it connects national identity to anti-racist systems change. The Nation of Sanctuary framework makes sanctuary part of the official language of Welsh identity, presenting Wales as a home in which refugees and asylum seekers can contribute to society and to the diversity of Welsh communities. The Curriculum for Wales and the work on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities, contributions and the idea of 'cynefin' (describing concept of situated belonging) bring questions of colonialism, racism, anti-racism and plural belonging into the story of Wales itself.

Most significantly, the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan marks one of the clearest attempts to move from aspiration to accountability. Its ambition is more than to include racialised minorities within an already settled national story, but to identify and change the systems, structures and processes that produce racially unequal outcomes. The 2024 update is especially notable for embedding anti-racist requirements into funding, remit letters, award letters and performance management. This is a crucial shift: anti-racism becomes a condition attached to institutional behaviour.

The implementation test

Across both Scotland and Wales, then, the briefing identifies real policy advances. Devolution has provided space for civic, plural and anti-racist accounts of national belonging. Both administrations have travelled a considerable distance from earlier models centred on legal compliance and equality of opportunity towards more explicit vocabularies of structural racism,

colonial history and institutional change. This development hasn't happened in government alone. It reflects the sustained work of civil society practitioners, racialised communities, equality organisations and policy actors who have built racial literacy, challenged institutional complacency and helped move anti-racism into the language of devolved governance. These shifts can be seen in Scotland's Race Equality Framework, which places minority ethnic communities within the national "we"; the New Scots strategy, which presents refugees as contributors to national life; and anti-racist education work on empire and slavery. In Wales, they are visible in the Nation of Sanctuary approach, the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan, curriculum reform and efforts to decolonise museums, heritage and public memory.

At the same time, the briefing is deliberately cautious. Policy activity cannot be conflated with policy capacity. Strategies, dashboards, implementation milestones and reporting mechanisms are important, but only insofar as they alter institutional behaviour, incentives and outcomes. A government can produce an ambitious strategy without changing resource allocation. It can narrate inclusion without redistributing power. It can recognise colonial histories in curriculum while leaving wider systems of housing, employment, policing, health and public administration untouched.

This is the central distinction the timelines help us hold in view. They show policy density rather than policy impact. They allow us to see where race equality becomes embedded in duties, evidence systems, funding requirements and accountability mechanisms, and where it remains primarily symbolic, rhetorical or concentrated in particular sectors. They help distinguish civic incorporation from structural transformation.

The strongest policy trajectories are those in which constitutional authority, equality duties, civic narratives and anti-racist commitments are connected to

institutional action. The weakest are those in which these layers remain parallel: where race and nation sit in separate policy registers; where belonging is narrated but not resourced; where legal duties exist without strong accountability; or where anti-racist ambition isn't matched by implementation capacity.

As the UK enters a new phase of constitutional and territorial politics, race equality will continue to be shaped by debates about nationhood, public authority and the future of the state. The question is more than whether devolved governments say different things about race and belonging. It is whether they build the policy capacity to make those commitments governable.

The briefing and timelines therefore offer a starting point for a wider conversation. They show that race equality since devolution is neither a single UK story, nor a set of isolated national cases. It is a layered and uneven field of law, governance, identity and institutional practice. Understanding that field is essential if we want to know both how race equality has been narrated since devolution, and also how it might be made stronger in the years ahead.

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About this research

[Racial Equality Since Devolution: Divergences, Outcomes and Frontiers](#) is a [Nuffield Foundation](#) research project examining how race equality has developed across the UK since devolution.

The project explores divergence across policy, law, and governance, and shares research, engagement activities, events, and outputs with policymakers, practitioners, academics, and wider publics.

Policy Insights

The Centre for Public Policy's Policy Insights series seeks to enhance and inform debate on the policy challenges facing Scotland, the UK and international communities, offering comprehensive insight and ways forward.

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