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Politics and the Pandemic: The UK Covid-19 Inquiry and Devolution

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Abstract
Drawing on documentary and oral evidence presented in Module 2 of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry, this article asks what the inquiry tells us about the nature and dynamics of intergovernmental relations (IGR) from the UK and devolved governments' interactions over the course of the pandemic. In so doing, the article focusses on formal IGR structures (since reformed), the actions of political leaders within these formal and informal structures and entrenched institutional cultures, with a particular focus on the ways in which decision-making processes and devolved dynamics were understood by the principal actors over the course of the pandemic. The article concludes with reflections on how IGR might be reset or reformed by the newly elected UK government.

Keywords: UK Covid Inquiry, intergovernmental relations, devolution

Introduction

IN THE WAKE OF ANY CRISIS, governments seek to learn lessons from what happened to prepare better for similar events in the future. As Boin, et al. posit, 'crises provide clear-cut opportunities for learning and adapting', identifying 'post-crisis inquiries … to be quite effective mechanisms for learning about crises'.[1] However, as they also acknowledge, and as we show in this article, lesson-learning is not straightforward and is often complicated by factors such as adversarial politics, blame games and the drawing of contradictory lessons by the main stakeholders involved.

In the aftermath of crises such as natural disasters, terrorist attacks and pandemics, public inquiries are often mooted as appropriate institutional responses to facilitate post-crisis learning and accountability. Critch has argued that the UK's 'favoured response' to crisis has been inquiries, although neither scholarly nor political understanding of the way these inquiries work is as advanced as their frequent use would suggest; they remain often *ad hoc* bodies.[2] In May 2021 the UK government established the UK Covid-19 Inquiry to examine its handling of the Covid crisis. Chaired by Baroness Hallett, a former judge, the inquiry has wide-ranging scope, with eight modules announced at the time of writing, ranging from 'resilience and preparedness' to examining the impact of the pandemic on specific groups. This article examines Module 2, *Core UK Decision-Making and Political Governance* which examined decision-making processes within the UK government and between the UK and devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.[3] While Module 2 outcomes will not be completed for some time, its content—drawing on contemporaneous accounts, documentary evidence and reflections gained in the years since—allows an unprecedented insight into

[1]A. Boin, P. 't Hart, E. Stern and B. Sundelius, *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership under Pressure*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 115–116.

[2]N. Critch, 'Britain's "favoured response" to crisis: a critical review of existing literature on public enquiries', *British Politics*, 2023, pp. 1–18.

[3]UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry, *Core UK Decision-Making and Political Governance (Module 2)*; https://covid19.public-inquiry.uk/modules/core-uk-decision-making-and-political-governance-module-2/ All references to written statements, witness statements, oral evidence, and so on, refer to this part of the inquiry.

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UK-devolved dynamics at a time of crisis. Therefore, in this article, we focus on two key questions: firstly, what did we learn about IGR from UK and devolved government engagement with the inquiry? Secondly, given these lessons, what should a new UK government do to improve relations between governments to tackle shared challenges?

In so doing, we analyse three key aspects of IGR: (1) formal IGR structures; (2) the role of leadership; and (3) institutional cultures. While IGR have been subject to much debate in recent years and were reformed in 2022, the inquiry highlighted ongoing dysfunction between the UK and devolved governments, exacerbated by unilateral decision making and inconsistent communications. Political leaders navigated these structures and often developed discordant relationships, which led to significant frustrations that emerged during the pandemic and were revealed during the inquiry. Interpersonal conflicts were exacerbated by poor communications and entrenched, polarised constitutional and party-political divisions. Finally, we explore the role of institutional cultures and the ways in which decision-making processes and devolved dynamics were understood by the principal actors over the course of the pandemic. Tellingly, the main stakeholders draw different lessons from their experiences, notably contradictory calls for a more centralised response to future crises on the part of UK government officials and a decentralised and coordinated response from their devolved counterparts.

Building on recent research on crisis and multilevel governance, we offer insights into institutional and intergovernmental dynamics in the UK at a moment of crisis and conclude with a series of lessons on IGR for the newly-elected Labour government.[4] We emphasise the ingrained and intransigent nature of conflict in IGR which is deeply rooted and will require not only reform, but significant commitment and political will to disrupt.

Devolution and the pandemic

The first cases of Covid-19 in the UK were identified on 29 January 2020, just two days before the UK exited the European Union. In the aftermath of the Brexit vote in 2016, relations between the UK and devolved governments had deteriorated.[5] The pandemic, however, necessitated intense interaction between the four governments, although the intensity of this interaction varied throughout the crisis, and can be viewed in three phases: (1) from January to March 2020 as the severity of the crisis became increasingly clear and interactions increased; (2) from lockdown through May where we see evidence of high levels of interaction and a four-nations approach; and (3) a final and prolonged phase in which each government acted largely independently, albeit one characterised by conflict over easing and reintroducing restrictions, communications and finance. In subsequent waves of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, intergovernmental interaction waxed and waned, characterised by some interaction—for instance, an agreed approach around rules at Christmas in 2020, but, as discussed here, largely coloured by distrust and conflict.

The mode of response, and the high degree of responsibility accorded to devolved governments, was a product of the UK government's choice to introduce new legislation, rather than use existing emergency legislation, such as the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, which would have given the UK government the leading role in managing the pandemic. Consequently, the responsibility for curtailing the spread of the virus and managing its effects fell to the respective governments in the UK's four constituent territories. The authority of the UK government in most measures was limited to England, while the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish governments enacted their own mitigation measures. The largely decentralised response to the pandemic shone a spotlight on the operation of the UK's multilevel political system, specifically the significant

[4]See, P. Anderson, C. Brown Swan, C. Ferreira and J. Sijstermans, 'State making or state breaking? Crisis, Covid-19 and the constitution in Belgium, Spain and the United Kingdom', *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2024, pp. 110–127; J. Schnabel, P. Anderson and F. de Francesco, 'Multilevel governance and political leadership: crisis communication in Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom during the Covid-19 pandemic', *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 31, no. 9, 2023, pp. 2719–2747.

[5]K. Morgan and R. Wyn Jones, 'Brexit and the death of devolution', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 94, no. 4, 2023, pp. 625–633.

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power wielded by the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the absence of an England-only government and parliament and the strained and at times dysfunctional relationship between Whitehall and regional and local governance in England.

In the early days of the pandemic, levels of coordination were high. Devolved leaders were invited to COBR meetings—though the prime minister did not always attend—the four governments jointly produced the Coronavirus Action Plan and devolved legislatures gave consent for the Coronavirus Act 2020, which conferred new powers on ministers in all four governments to exercise additional functions to manage the effects of the pandemic. As lockdown was imposed, responses were predominantly aligned, with most measures agreed jointly and only minor variations in timings.

Tensions increased in May 2020 in response to the UK government's easing of lockdown rules in England and unilateral alteration of the agreed message from 'stay at home' to 'stay alert'. This elicited criticism from the devolved governments and precipitated a divergence in policies. Previously frequent meetings ceased and did not reconvene again until July 2020, despite calls from the devolved leaders for regular intergovernmental interactions. The second wave of the pandemic in 2020 engendered some interactions between the governments, but these were less frequent and often more contentious—with conflicts emerging over the timing of firebreaks, the lack of financial autonomy for devolved governments, the approach towards gatherings in the Christmas holidays, and later, political competition over supplies and rates of vaccination.

By 2021, and in the context of devolved elections in Scotland and Wales, we witnessed increasing credit-taking and blame-shifting. The Scottish government sought to use the pandemic, specifically the task of economic recovery, to advance the cause for independence, while the UK government instrumentalised the pandemic to shore up the credentials of the Union. In Wales, the 2021 election was equally dominated by Covid. While Welsh Labour referenced the pandemic to advocate reforming the Union towards a more federal setup, pro-independence Plaid Cymru used Covid to underline Wales's ability to go it alone. Soon after these elections, the inquiry provided another high-profile arena for blame attribution and credit taking.

The inquiry and devolution

Over the first half of 2024, the inquiry solicited written evidence and carried out witness sessions on IGR, and in particular the ways in which the UK's governments interacted with one another in response to the public health crisis. In the opening remarks, Lady Hallett noted that a separate inquiry would be held in Scotland, but asserted that the inquiry would be wide-ranging and would not explicitly avoid Scotland.

The inquiry exposed a somewhat centralist point-of-view amongst questioners with a specific focus on exploring whether devolved structures were truly the appropriate means of pandemic response, and regularly returning to these institutions' relationship with the centre. The inquiry also suggested at times, a lack of familiarity by inquiry counsel with the structures of devolution, a tendency particularly pronounced in Northern Ireland. Witnesses were asked to draw equivalences between the governing structures of Northern Ireland and the UK structures. A perception amongst devolved governments emerged that the inquiry viewed the exercise of devolved powers as problematic divergence, and was roundly critiqued by then Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford, who said this was 'founded on a fundamental misconception of how a devolved United Kingdom works and is designed to work', and critiquing the process by which the actions of devolved governments are compared to those of the UK government, with the latter's actions viewed as the benchmark.[6]

In the following sections, we untangle three different dynamics of devolution that emerged from the inquiry: the formal structures and systems of IGR, political actors and interpersonal relations and the institutional cultures within which both IGR and leaders function.

Structures and systems of IGR

As the first cases of Covid-19 emerged in the UK, there was not an effective forum for multilateral cooperation, and intergovernmental dynamics had been damaged by the prolonged

[6]M. Drakeford, Witness statement, 21 September 2023.

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Brexit process. The UK's principal intergovernmental forum—the Joint Ministerial Committee—had ceased to meet during Johnson's premiership, and relations were widely viewed to be at a low point, in urgent need of a reset. Unlike other multilevel or formal federations, the UK government lacked robust, institutionalised forums for information-sharing and coordination and relations were shaped by low levels of trust, precipitated by the long-running debate about a second independence referendum in Scotland and an increasingly assertive position of the UK government keen to show the role of the Union in everyday life.[7]

At the outset of the pandemic, devolved first ministers and health ministers were included in COBR, named after the Cabinet Office briefing rooms, where meetings on emergency events take place. However, this was widely viewed as an awkward fit given the nature of the crisis and the political dynamic between the leaders. The capacity, membership and dynamic of COBR became a focal point for the inquiry and can be read as symptomatic of the challenges inherent in UK IGR. The quality of IGR was shaped by both the nature of intergovernmental forums and the personalities of those occupying offices in the UK's capital cities. The inquiry revealed a lack of trust and at times, antipathy between politicians at all levels.

Devolved ministers were highly critical of COBR as a forum for meaningful decision making, viewing it as a means by which the UK government communicated their plans, without input from the devolved governments. Vaughan Gething, then Welsh health minister, argued that COBR should have been a 'way for the four nations to make choices together'.[8] In Northern Ireland, this critique transcended the unionist-nationalist divide. The Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill described it as 'at best a fora for information exchange rather than a collaborative decision-making body', while Robin Swann of the DUP characterised the mode of meetings as particularly problematic, with devolved participants joining virtually while the UK government ministers were in person: 'It almost felt like we were there as observers listening to what was actually going on, rather than actually being full participants as to what was actually happening round the table'.[9]

The presence or absence of the prime minister within COBR in the early stages, and in multilateral meetings with devolved ministers at later stages became a point of tension. As the initial lockdown eased, the prime minister's engagement within COBR and with the devolved governments declined. In April 2020, the first ministers of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland's first and deputy first ministers, sent a joint letter asking for a meeting with Prime Minister Johnson. Another letter was sent in July 2020 from Drakeford and Sturgeon. Of the prime minister, Drakeford noted 'He was absent at key points when he should have been present. He met with the First Ministers when the situation was deteriorating significantly, but he failed to do so to discuss the path out of restrictions'.[10]

While within the devolved governments the absence of the prime minister was a source of concern, within Whitehall, the presence of the devolved ministers was controversial. Witnesses articulated a concern that devolved participants, particularly Nicola Sturgeon, might pre-empt UK government announcements using information gleaned from these meetings. Dominic Cummings, chief adviser to Boris Johnson, described COBR as a 'rather Potemkin process of handling the DAs (Devolved Administrations)' and contemporaneously lobbied for a UK government forum for decision making, adding colourfully 'NOT with the DAs on the [fucking] phone all the time either so people can't tell you the truth'.[11] In less colourful language, UK government ministers rebuffed the need for additional meetings or a new forum for IGR. Simon Hart, then Secretary of State for Wales, noted 'we were fighting something nobody had ever had any experience of doing before, and the idea that that could be kind of seamlessly resolved by just a series of more regular meetings is for the birds'.[12]

[7]C. Brown Swan and P. Anderson, 'Representing Scotland: conservative narratives of nation, union and Scottish independence', *Frontiers in Political Science*, vol. 6, 2024.
[8]V. Gething, Oral Evidence, 11 March 2024.
[9]M. O'Neill, Written Statement, 12 March 2024; R. Swann, Oral Evidence, 12 May 2024.
[10]Drakeford, Witness Statement.
[11]D. Cummings, Oral Evidence, 31 October 2023.
[12]S. Hart, Oral Evidence, 7 March 2024.

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In the written and oral evidence, a broader question about the legitimacy of devolved input at the centre emerged. In his written statement, the prime minister explained his absence from meetings with the first ministers: 'It is optically wrong, in the first place, for the UK prime minister to hold regular meetings with other DA first ministers, as though the UK were a kind of mini-EU of four nations'.[13] Regular executive level meetings would imply a degree of devolved input into decision making that was inconsistent with the Westminster system, described in UK government minutes released to the committee as 'a potential federalist trojan horse'. As a result, much of the UK government's interaction with the devolved governments was delegated to Michael Gove, then Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster with responsibility for IGR. This was explained by UK government ministers as necessary delegation at a moment of crisis, and a testament to the positive relationship Gove had cultivated with the devolved governments.

In the evidence taken by the inquiry, personalities took centre stage, which risks obscuring the weaknesses of the UK system of IGR that the pandemic exposed. While this dynamic is particularly reflective of the individual and idiosyncratic leadership of Boris Johnson, these comments underline the importance of agreed forums and processes of IGR, which can transcend personality differences and partisan conflict. Lacking an institutionalised intergovernmental forum, IGR were *ad hoc* and took place within structures (notably COBR) not designed for the inclusion of devolved governments in decision making. When contrasted with other multilevel states, the need for more coherent and effective vertical IGR becomes clear.[14] Even if future crises require a novel forum for coordination, the ability to build on existing structures and crucially, relationships forged in more routine interactions, seems essential.

Playing politics? Frustrated leaders in a competitive system

During the inquiry, politicians sought to distance themselves from perceptions that they had 'played' politics. Political leadership during a crisis is often characterised by the need for effective and regular communication with citizens. In the UK this took the form of regular (at times, daily) press conferences, with both strategic (to staunch the pandemic) and performative goals (creating a positive image of the speaker). As such, leaders' promotion of their own political aims was inevitable. Differing political aims and personalities led to interpersonal clashes between leaders and this poor communication was underpinned by pre-existing distrust and competitive dynamics between the UK government and devolved administrations. For the UK government, coordination with devolved administrations was portrayed as a source of irritation. Dominic Raab, former foreign secretary and deputy prime minister, accused the Scottish and Welsh governments of wanting 'to do things slightly differently or with different timings for what appeared to be political reasons', a rationale used to somewhat explain Boris Johnson's 'aversion' to meeting with the devolved leaders.[15] Devolved ministers sometimes suggested Johnson's involvement in IGR was a hindrance. Welsh health minister Gething explained that meetings chaired by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Matt Hancock, followed a clear agenda and culminated in decisions, while Johnson's chairmanship was 'scatty, incoherent and rambling'.[16] Sturgeon was also sceptical about the value of Johnson's attendance at meetings, noting that 'the former Prime Minister's leadership style' did not aid coordination.[17]

Personalities are crucial and challenging in crises, since a leader must deliver both decisive and strong internal leadership and ongoing, deft collaboration with other organisations. With Johnson, a tendency towards the former rather than the latter was clear. Devolved leaders expressed frustration at this centralising approach. Sturgeon noted bluntly: 'In order for me not to, to use the phrase that's been put to me, "irritate Boris Johnson", I think I would just have had to adopt a position of doing whatever Boris Johnson wanted me to do'.[18]

[13]B. Johnson, Written Statement, 31 August 2023.
[14]See R. Chattopadhyay and F. Knupling, *Federalism and the Response to Covid-19*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2022; N. Steytler, *Comparative Federalism and Covid-19: Combatting the Pandemic*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2021.
[15]D. Raab, Oral Evidence, 13 December 2023; S. Case, Oral Evidence, 23 May 2024.
[16]Gething, Oral Evidence.
[17]N. Sturgeon, Written Statement, 18 September 2023.
[18]N. Sturgeon, Oral Evidence, 31 January 2024.

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In Northern Ireland, tensions between political parties on either side of the communal divide were the core of frustrations, particularly tense relationships between First Minister Arlene Foster, Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill and Minister of Health Robin Swann. This did not preclude tensions between the UK government and Northern Irish politicians. Then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Brandon Lewis noted, 'I know that the minister for health got a bit frustrated at having to follow processes and the way UK Government worked and having to come through the Northern Ireland office'.[19]

While in the inquiry ministers tempered their statements, WhatsApp messages showed more virulent disagreements. Sturgeon, for example, wrote to adviser Liz Lloyd about Johnson: 'His utter incompetence in every sense is now offending me on behalf of politicians everywhere' and 'He is a fucking clown'. At another point, Lloyd wrote to Sturgeon that she wanted 'a good old fashioned rammy'. She translated this statement during the inquiry as 'an expression of frustration' and 'that frustration perhaps bubbling over a little bit'.[20] Clearly, the inquiry's polite language of frustration veiled a more visceral clash of personalities during the pandemic period.

Interpersonal disagreements were magnified by poorly functioning IGR structures and communication. Both the Scottish and Welsh health ministers noted their 'frustration' with the form and conduct of UK-devolved meetings, specifically the late arrival of papers and absence of co-decision-making processes. When faced with these complaints, Gove pointed the finger back at the devolved governments, arguing that they, specifically the Scottish government, had a 'desire to generate, at particular points, causes for grievance or objection to the UK Government's constitutional position and broader policy position'.[21] The UK government and devolved administrations could not come to a shared agreement of the problems underpinning their disagreements, neither during the pandemic nor during the inquiry.

In addition to individual disagreements, an 'us' versus 'them' dynamic drove disagreements, with divisions organised by territorial and party-political allegiances. Leaders at the devolved level sought to present a common line of argument. By early April 2020 a sense of frustration with the UK government had emerged, resulting in a joint letter to Johnson requesting the establishment of an 'orderly process'. On the other hand, the UK government presented the Union as benefitting all the devolved administrations. Rishi Sunak argued, 'There was incredible benefit to the people in Wales, and indeed Scotland and Northern Ireland, of being part of the United Kingdom'.[22] However, when pressed, he could not recall specific conversations he had had with devolved administrations. At the UK level, devolved administrations were portrayed as a singular often indivisible group in relation to the centre.

UK-level politicians often phrased critiques by referring explicitly to the SNP or nationalists. Johnson argued: 'I tended to be a particular target of nationalist ire'.[23] Dominic Raab also took aim at nationalists, noting: 'If you think that the Plaid Cymru or the SNP or whoever else were totally absent of political thinking during that process, I think there would be an element of naivety'.[24] In Northern Ireland, the inquiry focussed most heavily on the unionist-nationalist divide, including conflicts within the power-sharing executive and key events such as Sinn Féin politicians' attendance at the funeral of a senior republican. These specific party-political dynamics echoed points made at a UK level. For example, DUP chief whip and education minister Peter Weir said: '[Sinn Fein] had a natural inclination not to, sort of, follow what was happening from London'.[25]

Individual personalities and party political and centre-periphery divides clearly hindered the smooth working of pandemic IGR. These divides were emotional, visceral and deeply entrenched and may be difficult to break down, since they predate the pandemic and were solidified by the irritations and frustrations of that period.

Whitehall knows best?

British politics has long been characterised as representing a top-down conception of democracy, with a power-hoarding executive

[19]B. Lewis, Oral Evidence, 9 May 2024.
[20]L. Lloyd, Oral Evidence, 25 January 2024.
[21]M. Gove, Oral Evidence, 28 November 2023.
[22]R. Sunak, Oral Evidence, 11 December 2023.
[23]B. Johnson, Written Statement, 31 August 2023.
[24]D. Raab, Oral Evidence, 29 November 2023.
[25]P. Weir, Oral Evidence, 8 May 2024.

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and a prevailing notion that 'Westminster and Whitehall know best'. The transfer of political power to Scotland, Wales and the reinstatement of devolved institutions in Northern Ireland in the late 1990s did little to alter this characterisation of British politics, evidenced by the absence of reform at the centre and a lack of knowledge and understanding about devolved institutions in Whitehall. Devolution was not undergirded by a meaningful commitment by central state elites to subsidiarity but rather a hierarchical understanding of the British Constitution and latent centralising impulse that at times of crisis or territorial contestation has come to the fore.[26]

While the evidence submitted by UK government ministers to the inquiry painted a picture of the devolved administrations as obstructionist, in doing so, they underline the hierarchical notion of devolution ingrained in the upper echelons of British governance. As noted earlier, Boris Johnson believed it wrong to meet with the first ministers and justified a lack of cooperation with the devolved governments on the basis of opposing political visions. Michael Gove disagreed and argued in favour of increased coordination with the devolved governments, noting in his oral evidence that while some 'Cabinet colleagues bristled at the fact sometimes the devolved administrations were involved in discussions and influencing decision-making for a … my view is that overall we benefited from bringing in the devolved administrations as early as possible during the whole pandemic'.[27]

In their evidence, Mark Drakeford, Michelle O'Neill and Nicola Sturgeon argued that the UK government's approach to the pandemic was coloured by its hierarchical understanding of devolution and underpinned by a current of distrust. As O'Neill noted, 'the UK Government seemed to approach the devolved administrations with a degree of suspicion and as a problem to be managed', with Drakeford and Sturgeon echoing similar thoughts.[28] All three witnesses referred to the absence of a sense of partnership and equal status in relations between the UK government and devolved administrations, with the former seeing itself as 'the senior partner in the four nations context'.[29] For O'Neill, 'the UK Government simply did not consider that the devolved administrations were partners, not to mind equal partners, to be consulted with or engaged with. Their view was that the UK government were the decision makers throughout the United Kingdom and whilst engaging with us was something which had to be done, our views or input appeared to have no value'.[30] Tellingly, while the descriptions of the UK government offered by the devolved leaders related specifically to the Covid pandemic, they were symptomatic of the Johnson government's wider 'muscular unionism' strategy to keep the devolved governments in their place.

Contrary to the coordinated vision espoused by Gove, and supported by devolved government ministers, evidence from UK government ministers coalesced around the need for a more centralised and uniform response in the event of a future pandemic. Scottish Secretary Alister Jack called for 'a more centralised approach to our response [to] reduce the confusion we saw with different rules'.[31] Similarly, Simon Hart referenced the problem of confusion in his rationale for 'a UK-wide response' in a future pandemic, arguing that divergence in measures and message 'cause [d] confusion … rather than save[d] lives'.[32] Both Johnson and Hancock also argued in favour of centralisation, notably on the topic of communications by the devolved governments vis-à-vis measures and advice. Such calls for a more centralised response are very much in line with the hierarchical and overconfident notion that Whitehall knows best, underpinned by a belief that centralised decisions would more likely be the right ones and facilitate a more effective crisis response. Yet, as other scholars have astutely pointed out, the UK government's over-centralised and uncoordinated response in England did not deliver a more effective crisis response and therefore directly challenges 'the assertion that

[26]P. Anderson and C. Brown Swan, 'An unstable union? The Conservative party, the British political tradition and devolution 2010–2024', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 2024, pp. 1–26.
[27]M. Gove, Oral Evidence, 28 November 2023.
[28]M. O'Neill, Written Statement, 12 March 2024; M. Drakeford, Written Statement, 12 December 2023; N. Sturgeon, Written Statement, 6 November 2023.
[29]Submission on Behalf of the Scottish Ministers, 14 December 2023.
[30]M. O'Neill, Written Statement, 12 March 2024.
[31]A. Jack, Oral Evidence. 1 February 2024.
[32]S. Hart, Oral Evidence, 7 March 2024.

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the Government does in fact know best'.[33] Unsurprisingly, the devolved governments opposed recommendations for centralisation, pointing out that throughout the pandemic trust in the devolved governments was continuously higher than trust in the UK government.

In consonance with the 'Whitehall knows best' philosophy it is unsurprising that the UK government ministers advocated a more centralised approach, but as scholarship examining the effects of the pandemic in multilevel states has shown, centralisation can lead to jurisdictional friction and contradictory and inconsistent communication.[34] Research has highlighted the importance of coordination and collaboration in ensuring more effective crisis management, specifically 'the importance of building robust mechanisms for intergovernmental coordination and cooperation'.[35] As Gaskell, et al. argue, a more effective approach to crisis management in multilevel states requires 'more consensual leadership, a willingness to share ownership for problems and insights, greater trust and mutual respect between levels of government and a wider openness to local learning and diversity'.[36] UK government officials would do well to heed this advice.

Lessons learned from the inquiry

As we conclude this article, a new government has entered Downing Street. Keir Starmer's government is likely to face myriad challenges, and may face crisis, whether acute or endemic. Amidst many competing priorities, the Labour Party has pledged to reset relationships with the devolved governments and foster a more collaborative and respectful approach towards IGR.

However, as we have shown in this article, the pandemic and the inquiry underscored the difficulty of improving these intergovernmental workings. Structural challenges continued, despite reforms, and for leaders acting within these structures, interpersonal relationships were characterised by frustration and distrust. The institutional culture in Westminster and Whitehall privileged the knowledge and decision making of the centre and this culture underpinned dysfunctional structures and distrustful relationships. A centralising tendency from the UK government butted against devolved administrations and leaders who saw coordination as normal and necessary. Devolved administrations and the UK government were often speaking at cross-purposes.

What, then, can the new Labour government learn from the ongoing process of reckoning around the pandemic period? The new government will benefit from already improved intergovernmental structures, introduced in 2022. While the 2022 Agreement on Intergovernmental Relations set out new forums, executive level interactions which devolved governments seemed to prioritise have not yet been institutionalised. Many of the same dynamics remain, and speak to the structures and institutional cultures inherent in the UK system of devolution. Despite the commitment to improve IGR, the prime minister and heads of devolved governments met only once, in November 2022; no meeting of the council was held between November 2022 (the inaugural meeting) and the dissolution of Parliament in May 2024. These formal structures require political will, and we have seen multiple instances in which new forums fall into disuse. A more regular rhythm of IGR would engender more cooperation. This does not mean an absence of conflict but would support more productive and coordinated responses to challenging circumstances.

Leadership, which is negotiated within these structures, will remain equally important. Johnson's 'irritation' with devolved leaders and 'aversion' to IGR led to shared frustration between devolved leaders. Two polarised groups became deeply rooted in IGR dialogue: the devolved governments or 'nationalists' against the centre. Immediately following his victory, Starmer embarked upon a tour of the UK's capital cities and convened England's mayors. In so doing, he pledged a reset of IGR in the UK, suggesting a more constructive approach to the devolved capitals. However, only time will tell whether

[33]D. Marsh, D. Richards and M. Smith, 'The asymmetric power model twenty-years on', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 77, no. 2, 2024, pp. 658–85.
[34]Schnabel, et al., Multilevel Governance.
[35]R. Chattopadhyay and F. Knupling, *Federalism and the Response to Covid-19*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2022, pp. 302.
[36]J. Gaskell, G. Stoker, W. Jennings and D. Devine, 'Covid-19 and the blunders of our governments: long-run system failings aggravated by political choices', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 91, no.3, 2020, pp. 523–33.

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these warm words will survive the potentially challenging economic circumstances ahead.

A final lesson drawn from our analysis relates to addressing the ingrained, top-down mindset which dominates in Whitehall. The pandemic and the inquiry illuminated the preponderance of this 'Whitehall/UK government knows best' mentality, evidenced in the calls by UK government ministers for a more centralised response in the event of another crisis. As we argue above, and in line with the rhetoric in Labour's election manifesto, relations between the UK and devolved governments should be predicated not on a hierarchical notion of political power, but on the principles of mutual trust and respect. The major lesson for any UK government, therefore, is not to seek to impose order through centralisation, but to move beyond ingrained notions of political supremacy and hierarchy and foster a more collaborative working relationship with the devolved governments.

Twenty-five years after the establishment of the devolved institutions, in the wake of exogenous shocks such as Brexit and Covid, UK-devolved relations remain underdeveloped. For the new Labour government, the pandemic and inquiry provide impetus to learn from previous mistakes and to ensure a more mature relationship between the UK government and its devolved counterparts. An undoubtedly difficult but not impossible task.

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