

Comment and analysis: Time to Reset the Reset! What next for UK Intergovernmental Relations (IGR)?

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In this piece Dr Paul Anderson of Liverpool John Moores University and Dr Coree Brown Swan of University of Stirling analyse the current state of Intergovernmental Relations (IGR) and explore the possible impacts of the May 2026 elections in Scotland and Wales plus the continuing trends in Northern Ireland. They ask whether it is now time to embed IGR (and the Sewel Convention) within a statutory framework.

Labour came to power in July 2024 promising a “reset” of relations with the devolved governments. In his first week in office, Prime Minister Keir Starmer met with the First Ministers in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast as well as convened a meeting in Downing Street with England’s combined authority mayors. To demonstrate the UK Government’s commitment to foster more positive relations with devolved and local leaders, Labour established three new intergovernmental councils: the Council of the Nations and Regions, the Mayoral Council for England and the Leaders’ Council. The Council of the Nations and Regions brings together the Prime Minister, other UK Government ministers and all the UK’s devolved leaders (First Ministers, Mayor of London and combined authority mayors), the Mayoral Council is composed of UK Government ministers, the Mayor of London and combined authority mayors and the Leaders’ Council brings together UK Government ministers and local authority representatives. These new Councils are intended to complement rather than replace existing intergovernmental machinery which were reformed in 2022 following a joint review by the UK and devolved governments.

The Review of Intergovernmental Relations overhauled the machinery of IGR with the objective of enhancing the regularity and effectiveness of intergovernmental engagement. The Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC) structures established in 1999 were replaced by a three-tier system of intergovernmental forums, administered by a standing secretariat also responsible for overseeing a new dispute resolution procedure. The Prime Minister and Heads of Devolved Governments Council forms the top tier, bringing together the UK Prime Minister and devolved First Ministers on an annual basis. The middle tier is composed of two committees – the Interministerial Standing Committee (IMSC) and the Finance: Interministerial Committee (F: ISC) – envisaged to meet every other month in the case of the former and quarterly for the latter. The bottom tier is composed of numerous Interministerial Groups (IMGs) focused on policy-specific issues in areas of both devolved and reserved matters. Since their inception, the frequency of intergovernmental interaction has, for the most part, increased, but while some forums have followed a

regular pattern, meetings of others, notably some IMGs, have been more ad hoc and sporadic.

Intergovernmental Relations under Labour

Almost two years after the 2024 General Election, the key question remains: has Labour's promised reset been delivered? The short answer is to some extent. The early mood music among devolved leaders was broadly positive following Starmer's visits to the devolved capitals. Scottish First Minister, John Swinney, described relations with the Labour Government as "incomparably better" than those with its Conservative predecessor. Fulfilling Labour's objective of enhancing the quality of interaction, during its first year in office, academics and devolved ministers identified a more cooperative and less confrontational approach to IGR. This included commitments to review the UK Internal Market Act and the operation of the Sewel Convention, as highlighted by Labour's 2022 Commission on the UK's Future. To date, however, no evident progress has been made on the Sewel Convention and while the UK Government conducted a review of the UK Internal Market Act and addressed some of its most significant challenges, this fell short of the repeal of the Act advocated by the Scottish and Welsh governments. The intergovernmental honeymoon period was short-lived.

10 months into Labour's time in office, Swinney described Scottish-UK Government relations as "deteriorating", largely the result of the latter's hierarchical approach to policy decisions even when these have ramifications for devolved policy areas. Then Cabinet Secretary Angus Robertson, for example, criticised the unilateral approach taken by the UK Government in signing a new cooperation agreement with the EU without any meaningful engagement with the Scottish Government, notably on the issue of fisheries. Indeed, Robertson highlighted that the UK Government cancelled successive meetings on the topic. Soured relations were also evident in Wales, reflected in an extraordinary intervention in December 2025 in which 11 Welsh Labour Senedd members wrote to Keir Starmer describing the UK Government's Pride in Place programme to allocate funding to local communities without any meaningful engagement with the Welsh Government as a "constitutional outrage" and an attempt to roll back devolution.

The Prime Minister, however, appeared to take little notice of these critiques. In fact, in a leaked memo, Starmer told his cabinet colleagues to not be "overly deferential" to the devolved governments. More reminiscent of the Boris Johnson Government's "Muscular Unionism", this memo was a far-cry from Labour's much-lauded reset. Besides the return of a more assertive rhetoric, the new intergovernmental machinery is at risk of repeating the same mistakes as the JMC. While the Council of the Nations and Regions is scheduled to meet biannually, since its establishment in 2024 it has met only twice, with the last meeting taking place in May 2025. As has been the typical pattern of UK IGR over the years, positive rhetoric has not translated into consistent good practice, conditioned, once again, by the prevailing preoccupations of Whitehall and Westminster.

Intergovernmental relations in 2026 and beyond

The results of the 2026 Welsh, Scottish, and English local elections pose significant challenges which the Labour Party, seemingly soon to be subsumed by a leadership contest, seems ill-fit to meet. Should Starmer be supplanted, his successor will face a busy in-tray, and relations with the nations and regions of the UK may be deemed

less consequential than sluggish growth and high inflation amidst geopolitical turbulence. Neglecting IGR, however, is at the UK Government's peril, not least in the context of 2026 election results, with pro-independence political parties now in government in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. A distracted and at worst, uninterested UK Government, risks further fuelling political and constitutional grievance.

Recent polling underlines public support for closer intergovernmental collaboration between the UK and devolved governments, with "95% of the public in Scotland and Wales" in favour of stronger cooperation. As has been highlighted by academics, commentators and parliamentary committees, cross-governmental working is crucial to tackling issues that cut across devolved and reserved competences, including the omnipresent cost-of-living crisis, eradicating poverty and reforming energy policy. Indeed, in the context of ongoing economic challenges, these topics are likely to provide significant mileage for future debates on constitutional change.

While the Welsh Government has not committed to an independence referendum in its first term, independence remains firmly on the Scottish political agenda, while in Northern Ireland Sinn Féin continues to press the case for Irish unity. The refusal of the UK Government to engage in any meaningful discussion of these issues has been recently described as "constitutionally counterproductive". The strengthened Celtic alliance emerging after the May elections demonstrates, however, that whether the UK Government wants to engage or not, debate on the constitutional future of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are not going away anytime soon.

For whomever inhabits Downing Street now and in the not-so-distant future, IGR should be a priority, with commitments across all governments to meet regularly, strengthen transparency, and deepen collaboration. Given the vulnerability of IGR to governmental neglect, there is an increasingly compelling case to embed IGR (and the Sewel Convention) within a statutory framework. Making extant Councils statutory bodies would increase their accountability and facilitate ongoing collaborative relations between governments, but most importantly would demonstrate a clear and much-needed commitment by the centre to refocusing and rejuvenating IGR. It's time to reset the reset!

About the authors

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Publication date: June 2026