Delegation of authority and political power from a central legislature to a regional government. Central government retains overall constitutional control. In the UK, central government has devolved power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland with the establishment of separate Parliaments. The Scottish Parliament has tax-varying powers.

In Scotland and Wales in the UK a bill for the creation of Scottish and Welsh assemblies was introduced in 1976 and rejected by referendums in Scotland and Wales in 1979. The Labour government which took office in May 1997 introduced legislation to establish a Scottish Parliament and a National Assembly for Wales, commonly called the Welsh Assembly. Devolution referendums were approved by Scottish and Welsh voters in September 1997 and elections to the new Scottish Parliament and Welsh assembly were held on 6 May 1999. On 1 July 1999, powers were transferred and the Scottish Parliament, located in Edinburgh, and the Welsh Assembly, located in Cardiff, were officially opened.

The Scottish Parliament has restricted tax-varying authority and law-making powers in all areas except defence, foreign affairs, the constitution, social security, company regulation, economic management, and taxation. In contrast, the Welsh Assembly does not have primary law-making powers, but may pass secondary legislation, and has taken over most of the administrative functions previously exercised by the Welsh secretary.

In Northern Ireland, the devolution of a range of executive and legislative powers was negotiated in the Good Friday peace agreement (10 April 1998), and approved in a referendum held on 22 May 1998. The powers involved include areas such as agriculture, economic development, education, the environment, finance, health, and social security. The UK government retains power over taxation and security, and can veto any legislation passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly. Elections to the Assembly were held on 25 June 1998.

The Assembly, comprising 108 members elected by the single transferable vote method of proportional representation, met for the first time on 1 July 1998, and David Trimble, leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, was elected first minister (the equivalent of prime minister). Powers were not formally devolved by the UK government to the power-sharing Northern Ireland Executive until 1 December 1999. Following the breakdown of Nationalist and Unionist talks, the Northern Ireland secretary, Peter Mandelson, suspended the Assembly in February 2000. This caused a reversion to direct rule from London until May 2000, when the Irish Republican Army (IRA) offered to open its arms dumps to independent inspection and to put its guns out of use. Upon this concession, the Unionists agreed to return to the power-sharing executive, which they headed. However, in July 2001 the Northern Ireland first minister David Trimble resigned after the IRA failed to decommission. Devolution was briefly suspended 10–11 August, when the Ulster Unionists rejected an IRA scheme to put its weapons completely and verifiably beyond use, but without specifying timing. However, in October it
was verified that the IRA had put some arms beyond use, heading off a further possible suspension of devolution. Trimble became first minister again in November 2001 but the Assembly was suspended again in October 2002 because of accusations of an IRA spy ring based in the Assembly building. After elections to the Assembly in May 2007, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader, Ian Paisley, became first minister, with Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, deputy first minister. During the 2002–07 suspension, the Assembly's powers reverted to the Northern Ireland Office.

Devolution and federalism

In theory, devolution is the division of power among central and regional authorities which can be legally altered by the central authority without the consent of the regional authorities. It is thus distinguished from federalism, in which the division of power can only be altered by a special process which usually involves the consent of the central authority and all or a majority of the regional authorities. In practice, however, devolution and federalism may operate in a similar fashion: in a devolved system it may not be practical to alter the division of powers because the resistance of the regional authorities may be such that the whole system would be undermined if the central authority attempted any change; and in a federal system either the central authority or one or more of the regional authorities may be able to alter the division of powers in practice because one or the other has greater resources, especially economic resources.

The classic federal system is the United States in which power is constitutionally divided between the national or federal government and the state governments.

Devolution in Ireland

The word ‘devolution’ was first widely used in connection with Ireland, with the Irish Nationalist Party leader John Redmond claiming in 1898 that the Liberals wished to diminish home rule into ‘some scheme of devolution or federalism’. Devolution was used in the United Kingdom in an attempt to solve the problem of Ireland after World War I. Under the Government of Ireland Act 1920, the 26 counties of Southern Ireland became the Irish Free State (later becoming the Republic of Ireland) and the 6 counties of Northern Ireland or Ulster remained part of the United Kingdom. The Irish Free State was given dominion status, but Northern Ireland was given its own parliament, with devolved powers to legislate in most areas of policy except foreign affairs and defence.

In 1972, following the outbreak of violence between the Protestant majority and the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland in 1969, the relevant sections of the Government of Ireland Act 1920 were suspended and direct rule from Westminster was imposed. For a short time an attempt was made to sustain an executive and legislature which shared power between the two communities, but this failed following a general strike in 1974 and direct rule was reimposed. In 1975 a constitutional convention was elected to propose new constitutional arrangements which would include a substantial measure of devolution, but the convention failed to produce a settlement.

Devolution was a key facet of the Northern Ireland peace process of the 1990s. Among the principal elements of the Good Friday agreement reached between the Northern Irish political parties in April 1998 were the devolution of a wide range of executive and legislative powers to a Northern Ireland Assembly, in which executive posts would be shared on a proportional basis; the establishment of a North–South Ministerial Council, accountable to the Assembly and the Irish Parliament; and a British–Irish Council to bring together the two governments and representatives of devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

Scotland and Wales

In the meantime, the growing strength during the latter half of the 1960s and in
the early 1970s of the nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales led the three main parties in Britain to propose a greater dispersal of power and influence among the component parts of the United Kingdom. Each party, however, favoured a different solution: the Liberals favoured a federal system, the Conservatives some form of consultative assembly, at least for Scotland, and the Labour Party favoured devolution. In 1975 the Labour government published a White Paper *Our Changing Democracy*, in which it proposed that both Scotland and Wales should enjoy extensive control over their own affairs by means of devolution. The principal policy areas to be devolved were: local government, health, personal social services, social security, education, housing, planning, transport, development and industry, and natural resources.

There was, however, an important difference between the proposals for Scotland and those for Wales. Scotland was to have both executive and legislative devolution; there would be a Scottish executive with the power to make decisions in the devolved areas and a legislature (to be known as the Scottish Assembly) which would be able to pass laws in those areas. In Wales, on the other hand, although there would be a similar executive, the National Assembly for Wales would not be able to pass any laws. It might, however, have limited powers to pass regulations under legislation passed at Westminster.

The Scotland and Wales Bill, providing for separate assemblies to be set up in Edinburgh and Cardiff for Scotland and Wales respectively, was introduced in the House of Commons in November 1976. It was based on the 1975 White Paper and further proposals contained in a second White Paper published on 3 August 1976. During the bill's passage through Parliament, the government announced that referendums would be held in Scotland and Wales before the respective schemes for devolution were implemented. Devolution was rejected by referendums in Scotland and Wales in 1979, but approved in 1997, following the election to power of the Labour government.

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