At 2am on 5th November 2004, the concept of English regional government appeared to have died an ignominious death. A referendum in the North-East region of England, asking voters whether or not an elected assembly should be established in the region, returned a vote of 22 per cent in favour of the proposition and 78 per cent against. A vote of such magnitude against the idea was wholly unexpected, in the light of the substantial campaigning efforts by the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, and his team through 2004, and in the light of years of opinion polls indicating strong support for the concept in the North-East, accompanied by often lukewarm support in other regions. As further referendums in the North-West and Yorkshire & Humber regions were abandoned on 8th November, regional government promptly disappeared from the press and public view. However, the debate over elected regional assemblies, though it attracted considerable short-term press interest, was only the tip of the iceberg of the development of patterns of governance within the English regions. Many institutions, individuals and non-public organisations continue to participate in policy-making, discussion, and disbursement of public funds, all of which are oriented around a division of England into nine regional parts. Rumours of the death of English regions are somewhat exaggerated.

The death of elected regional assemblies in England is a minor footnote in the Labour constitutional reform programme. The life of English regionalisation as a whole, on the other hand, is a worthy subject for continued academic analysis. English regionalisation has no strong vested interests to defend its existence, no cohesive political leadership at central or regional level, and no clear role in central government policy. Few in the electorate or in and around government
have considered the concept. And yet, as this book shows, regionalisation has slowly and quietly colonised an increasing range of policy debates, becoming an almost ubiquitous feature of the sub-national governance of England.

This book aims to answer two questions. First, under the unpropitious circumstances described, why has this happened? Why is there any regionalisation or regional policy at all within England? The subject has never appeared on the radar screen of the Cabinet and core executive. Press comment between the White Paper of May 2002 and the referendum of November 2004 was almost uniformly hostile, at best verging towards indifference. Public opinion remained disinterested and, in a minority of cases, actively hostile. Certainly John Prescott, the Deputy Prime Minister, has actively campaigned for elected regional government for many years, but he has had very little direct influence over the huge range of regionalisation of government activity that developed in parallel to that policy. Why should regionalisation in England, without political or institutional sponsors, have germinated and apparently thrived – particularly under what is often described as one of the most centralising governments in the UK’s history? The answer to this question lies in the conflation of a range of institutional, administrative, policy and political matters which have driven the formation and maintenance, so to speak, of the subterranean part of the iceberg. To understand why this has happened, and to trace the significance of the resulting structure of governance, it is necessary to examine the sources of regionalisation in England and to account for similarities between the processes of regional governance which have developed in many different policy fields.

The accompanying question, dealt with in the second part of the book, is: what has happened, and what significance does it have? Regionalisation has been primarily administrative within England: outside of London, there has been no devolution of political authority to a regional tier. Instead, a fragmented collection of executive and spending powers located within a range of national agencies has emerged. These agencies have become surrounded by a scaffolding of networks, forums and regular relationships between regional actors – senior managers, board members, local councillors, and representatives of business, voluntary sectors and other parts of ‘civil society’. This book argues that this collection of actors, institutions and relationships amounts to more than the sum of its parts: a distinctive system of governance is developing in the English regions. Despite the fact that ‘regional policy’ or ‘regionalisation’ has originated from many different locations within government, and from many different sources, simi-