

Brexit Broke Britain

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Last month's General Election has further exposed the fault lines dividing Britain and, at the risk of sounding like Cassandra, it's hard to see how the country can come back from this. This certainly has ramifications for the Union that makes up Great Britain (the situation in Northern Ireland is distinct and complex enough to warrant blogs of its own!)

However, to split this into an "England vs. Scotland" issue (leaving Wales conveniently on the side-lines) is vastly too simple. After all, data from the British Election Study, which is the most authoritative source of data we have on the issue, suggests that there is little {Fieldhouse, 2017 #895} distinction between the voting patterns of young Scots and young English voters with respect to Brexit.

In contrast, it is the attitude of older groups that differs decisively. Yet polling evidence also suggests that it is older Scots who tend to be more pro-Union than their younger counterparts. What is particularly interesting to me is that the distinctions between young and old (certainly within England) appear to be becoming considerably more acute.

Anecdotally, this became obvious to me over the Christmas break when visiting family and friends. One older individual commented to me,

"I feel very sorry for those who don't like Johnson ... because he was just so much better than the alternatives."

Another (older) person stated:

"I don't want to return to the 1970s... I don't know. I just wanted to bring the country together."

Meanwhile, their younger counterparts commented:

“I know! They both just really like Boris Johnson. I don’t understand it...”

Another representative comment from a younger voter was:

“[Groan] I knew she didn’t like Corbyn but oh my God...”

As someone who works in a particularly diverse HE institution (around half of the students I teach are from ethnic minority backgrounds) in the middle of a city on the cusp of becoming majority-minority, I also have a particular perspective. I am proud that we operate a zero-tolerance policy towards racism and other forms of discrimination. This jars uncomfortably with the language used by our Prime Minister.

In almost any other line of work, the kind of language used by Johnson *in public* (and I stress that term) would, at a minimum, cause his employer to invoke disciplinary procedures. It is not unreasonable to imagine that such sentiments ought to disbar him from high office. After all, Enoch Powell was sacked from the cabinet after his ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech.

We are not discussing language or behaviour from an earlier part of his life. After all, we have all said and done things as younger adults that we later regret. Nor are we discussing something that was allegedly said in private. However unsavoury someone’s private utterances and beliefs might be, it is neither feasible nor desirable to police them.

Johnson’s comments have been recent, public and he has refused to disavow them. It is surely little wonder that young people, often from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds themselves, find such sentiments difficult to stomach.

Indeed, it is ironic that some of Johnson’s comments (and perhaps even some of his more authoritarian tendencies) might find more support elsewhere in Europe. After all, it is not Britain that has banned the niqab.

So why do we see such a stark divide between the young and the old in England? I posit that there are two reasons and that they are the same two things that have weakened ties between the English and

the Scots over the past 2 decades. Specifically, we have seen a gradual erosion of “British” institutions and a notable divergence in media consumption.

British Rail, British Steel and the British Coal Corporation: all of these have one thing in common. They exist no longer. All the old nationalised industries provided a focal point for anyone who worked in them (or was connected to someone who was). Those working in Glasgow had a shared interest with those in Gateshead.

The same was true of the unions: they were *national* organisations operating across Great Britain. Today, even those organisations that are ostensibly national in scope (most notably the NHS) are effectively run as devolved entities. Moreover, these were also organisations that bound the generations together.

The apprentice had a shared interest with the master technician. Today, we live in a country that is ageing at dramatically different rates. The rural and peri-urban populations are rapidly growing older. At the same time, many of our cities are actually getting younger. The population of London is younger than it was a decade ago. The same trends are visible in Birmingham, Manchester and a host of other urban areas.

Widespread attendance at university is turbocharging this process. The young and old increasingly don't interact and their shared interests are minimal. The pensioner and the graduate certainly don't work in the same firm! In many cases, they aren't even related given that almost 30% of babies born in England are to mothers who were themselves born outside the UK.

The second major factor relates to the media. Scotland (and to a lesser extent Wales) has always had its own press culture. However, the divergence between the press in England and that in Scotland has grown dramatically over the past 2 decades. One only has to compare the front page of *The Sun* in England and *The Scottish Sun* upon the election of Boris Johnson as leader of the Conservative Party. It is noteworthy that the latter only came into existence in 1987.

In this vein, the voting behaviour of Liverpool in recent elections is particularly noteworthy (strongly in favour of remaining in the EU in

2016 and heavily against the Conservative Party in 2019 when many other traditionally 'red' seats were turning 'blue'). To a lesser extent, we have also seen divergence in TV news sources.

As for the young, they have very different media consumption habits to their older counterparts. Few read newspapers, preferring instead to access information from multiple sources online. One only needs to look at social media to see the derision with which many younger voters regard many traditional news sources.

I have yet to meet a young person who watches "the news" on a regular basis. In contrast, my (retired) parents do so religiously every night. Perhaps this is in part due to an education that teaches them to critically assess information and cross-reference multiple sources. I don't know.

What I do know is that sharing news sources bred a shared identity and view of the world. That has gone: access to multiple online news sources means that traditional conduits of information (most notably the BBC) are being challenged as never before. This island will never be the same again.