The Disunited Kingdom

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Will Brexit break up Britain? It's a contentious question, but one that needs asking in all seriousness[1]. There is no doubt that Scottish separatism has certainly experienced a resurgence since 2016, given that Scotland overwhelmingly voted to remain in the EU. Indeed, the trend towards increasing support for independence has only been reinforced given the Westminster omnishambles.

Growing awareness of the situation in Scotland and the ongoing controversy over the border in Northern Ireland have also piqued interest in Welsh independence[2]. Yet these centrifugal tendencies are hardly unique. We can see the same processes at work in the movement for Catalonian independence amongst others. Moreover, the diminution of violent separatism within the EU – thanks to ETA (Basque nationalists), the IRA (Irish nationalist movement) and FLNC (Corsican nationalists) laying down arms – that does not mean that the political goals of these movements, whether greater autonomy or independence, have gone away.

I would venture to suggest that whilst the *modus operandi* of all these movements might differ their fundamental aims in terms of independence and autonomy largely coincide. Nor are these political aims in any sense less valid than the *status quo* – no country has a God-given right to exist and over the past centuries, political boundaries and states have shifted in an ever-changing kaleidoscopic pattern reminiscent of the lyrics of *Windmills of Your Mind*.

I would go one step further and argue that the Brexit vote itself was a manifestation of exactly the same phenomenon. That Brexit is now largely about identity should be inarguable. It is hard to believe that the topic of a customs union or adherence to a particular set of phytosanitary standards could otherwise evoke such passion. Indeed, much of the EU is technocratic in nature and whilst some regulations appear ill thought-out or a poor compromise between member states, they are hardly any worse than many passed by national parliaments.

All of this has a common root: the belief that a particular spatial scale is the appropriate locus of sovereignty (and all of the power that flows from it). For those in favour of Brexit, the appropriate executor of power is the British government and the spatial scale is Great Britain. "Take back control" was a powerful slogan precisely because of a desire to repatriate power to the 'correct' place. In this view, French laws should originate from Paris and German laws from Berlin. Our laws might be stupid, but they have legitimacy because they're *our* stupid laws and not those 'imposed' by outsiders (even if we have a vote on who those outsiders should be).

What's fascinating is that this is also true of many – perhaps most – Remain voters, and is certainly true of a number of Remainer MPs. Whether we are members of the EU or not, the UK is not large enough to impose its own regulatory standards in most areas. As a result, it's better to maximise our influence over those standards than to simply accept them. What's fascinating here is that the appropriate sovereign vehicle is still, in this view, the UK. In many cases, Remainers and Leavers differ only in their view of how best to maximise the sovereignty of the British state.

This parallels the situation across the EU. Across European capitals, the EU is seen as a domain in which to maximise one's own sovereignty. It is an important vehicle for these, precisely because it is seen as a way to do this and not because sovereignty is seen as properly residing in Brussels. In many ways this Scottish nationalism mirrors this. Scotland is widely seen as the appropriate sovereign territory – just like Britain (however diminished it might become) for Brexiters. The debate over independence then becomes not whether Scotland has the right become independent but rather about whether exercising that right is an optimal policy choice *for Scotland*.

Yet what is fascinating in every case is how little any of us seem to be discussing the rationale behind any of this. Nations might indeed be Imagined Communities[3] but we cleave to them with surprising passion. There is no logical reason why rule from Westminster is somehow more legitimate than rule from Brussels, providing one has a vote in both cases (and we do). It's certainly true that the mechanisms ensuring democratic oversight in the EU leave a lot to be desired, but this is no less true of the British electoral system.

In reality, of course, logic has little to do with any of these discussions. Questions of national identity speak powerfully not to our logical faculties but rather to our perceptions of who we are. Indeed, the very notion of "self-determination", which has been at the heart of politics for 100 years, is deeply problematic. Why do some spatial units have legitimacy whereas others (apparently) do not? There are no easy answers to this question, but there can be no question that the future legitimacy of the United Kingdom as a political unit is now in doubt.

[1] A terminological disclaimer – it would probably be more accurate to refer to the UK rather than Britain as Irish reunification is a serious long-term possibility but alliteration got the better of accuracy in this instance.

[2] https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/may/11/thousands-march-in-cardiff-calling-for-welsh-independence

[3] Anderson, B. (1983) *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.