

The Great British Break-up (redux)

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It seems increasingly likely that the UK will cease to exist in any recognisable form within a decade. This blog is a slightly eclectic combination of my philosophical musings on the subject and a call to arms: we need to start thinking about what that is likely to mean in practical terms and how we deal with it.

What is driving this? I would suggest that the past decade has seen a resurgence of nationalism around the globe. Indeed, it is my contention that much of what has recently been labelled “populist” is, in fact simply a modern incarnation of an older phenomenon: nationalism. Indeed, in the modern world, the conception of the “nation” has sometimes run much wider than traditional conceptions would suggest (witness the resurgence of fundamentalist religious movements, much of whose appeal appears predicated on an “us and them” demarcation).

Do not be deceived, however, into thinking that this is merely a product of a newly potent Scottish nationalism. I merely posit that nationalism – for better or for worse – is on the rise around the globe. Indeed, there is an argument to be made that, at least in part, it is the growth of English nationalist sentiment that is the major factor in both Brexit and a divergence from Scottish norms. It is telling that in spite of it not being a policy position of any political party, nor receiving much (if any) media attention, over ¼ of the English population support “English independence” [\[1\]](#).

This rose to 40% of Conservative voters (the irony of this being the “Conservative and Unionist Party” notwithstanding) and almost half of “Leave” voters. If “don’t knows” are excluded as is often done – I suspect because it is more likely to generate shocking headlines – this rises to 49% of Conservative voters and a full 56% of “Leave” voters.

This sentiment has, I would contend, been abetted by both the media and several quite vicious election campaigns. There is a tendency within the UK to think that “2016 (i.e. Brexit) changed everything”. Yet I will not easily forget the posters of Ed Miliband in Alex Salmond’s back pocket in 2015. A stunt that was simultaneously crass and verging on xenophobic. If my Twitter feed is anything to go by, similarly offensive views exist in abundance north of the border as well.

These same forces of nationalism – the “in” group and the “out” group according to some predefined “nation” – are on the rise across Europe (and, indeed, much of the globe – witness the rhetoric of “America First”). They manifest in different ways in different places: an upsurge in Catalan nationalism (or its Scottish counterpart) has quite different geopolitical ramifications to the growing assertiveness and authoritarianism of Erdogan’s Turkey (or, indeed, Orbán’s Hungary).

Yet the binary outcomes of elections are profoundly misleading since they ignore the (often very large) minorities who oppose the overall outcome. They also tend to sharply delineate between views that are, ultimately, on a spectrum. As an example, it seems a common theme amongst highly intelligent, politically engaged EU citizens to view England as a hotbed of anti-European sentiment. Yet, 13.27m of those nefarious, anti-European English voters actively voted to remain in the EU – more than the entire population of Belgium. Well over a million of them felt so strongly that they were compelled to take “direct action” (street protests and the like) to attempt to reverse the decision. It is easy, too, to forget that almost 40% of Scottish voters voted to leave the EU (in spite of a much more pro-European media environment) in 2016.

“Leave” voters, too, are hardly the uniformly racist, uneducated rabid mob that is sometimes portrayed. I’ve met people who voted to leave the EU because they’ve worked first hand in lobbying

in Brussels and felt that the regulatory playing field was too unfairly weighted towards large firms and incumbents. I've met some who were concerned about pressure on local services and felt that rapid migration to their area – and they stressed that this was positive overall – was putting undue pressure on these (whether that belief is correct or not is irrelevant: what matters is their reasoning).

I've met those who felt we should be either “in” (adopting the Euro, fiscal and military integration etc.) or “out” but not “part-time” EU members. Between the two, they had a preference for “out”. I've met trade unionists who felt that the Single Market unfairly favoured capital at the expense of labour. I've met people who felt that the treatment of Greece post-crisis was so abominable they wanted “out”. A significant proportion of the UK's ethnic minority population voted “Leave”. And yes, I've met the racists and “Farageists” as well. I could go on. The point is the sheer diversity of people and views.

So, what does all this mean for the future? Well, it is difficult to see the UK surviving in its present form in the medium term. However, the break-up of the UK will need to be handled extremely sensitively to avoid unnecessary harm to all of us. We will need to find a way of gaining the acquiescence and consent of those who oppose the change. Healthy democracy depends on “losers' consent”.

I know that will be acutely felt in Northern Ireland, but the same will be true in Great Britain as well. There will be a large “unionist” minority in a newly independent Scotland and any referendum will be a divisive affair. How do we deal with that? Similarly, in England and Wales? What can be done to ensure that future relations remain amicable between partners and friends rather than rivals? We need to start thinking about these issues long before the starting gun is fired.

Plus, of course, we need to think about those left behind. Just as Brexit has enormous ramifications for the rest of the EU (particularly Ireland) who had no say in it, so Scoxit will have huge repercussions for England (and to a much lesser extent, Wales). The same would be true for English or Welsh independence. With Brexit, the Irish will (yet again!) suffer the consequences of a policy decision that is not of their making and I would suggest that this has been paid insufficient heed to (particularly in the UK). When we break up the UK, we must take much greater care of these problems or they will return to bite us.

More generally, we must ask ourselves what specific outcomes we seek to achieve by leaving the UK (or, indeed, the EU) and how can we best bring them about? Complete sovereignty is a mirage in the modern world – our freedom of manoeuvre is constrained by the behaviour and actions of others. Even WTO membership, for example, puts important constraints on a country's ability to set its own trading policies^[2]. As a result, breaking up the UK is surely a means, rather than an end in itself.

One obvious end, is for a newly independent Scotland to join the EU whilst England (and Wales?) remained outside it. In such an event, we must think carefully about how best to approach this over time as there would need to be an array of checks on goods at the border. Provisions would need to be put in place to avoid smuggling and there might be tariffs payable on some items. The customs issues raised by Brexit (all £7bn of them!) would rear their ugly heads again with a vengeance. Not to mention the fact that there will be all sorts of questions to resolve over citizenship, freedom of movement (or not), currency, division of assets and liabilities etc. etc. etc.

None of this is to suggest that constituent parts (whether Scotland, England, Wales or Yorkshire) shouldn't secede from the UK. I simply believe that all of us will need to start thinking about these

issues much more carefully and what they will mean and the sooner we do this, the better the ultimate outcome will be. The decisions we make could have ramifications decades hence.

[1] https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/9ibhldbfaq/YesCymru_Results_200618_EnglandPoll_Independence_W.pdf

[2] *“Most favoured nation” has become a household term in post-Brexit Britain! It might be an important “level playing field” provision but it is – by definition – an encroachment on absolute sovereignty.*