Identity and the future of the "United" Kingdom

By Professor Alex de Ruyter, Centre for Brexit Studies

Much has been made about the vote to leave the UK as being an expression of the desire of people to reassert national (British) sovereignty. This has been a view articulated by prominent Brexiteer politicians, such as Boris Johnson, who in trying to argue for a "liberal" Brexit (a la John Stuart Mill), evoked the notion that law-making could only be legitimately undertaken by "the people" as a "demos". For Johnson, this "demos" is embodied in the UK as an organic nation-state (and hence that the EU lacks legitimacy in this regard). Hence, "only the nation can legitimise" obedience to laws[1] and Brexit represents as reassertion of the primacy of "Britons" as the demos to undertake this. It is thus of some pertinence to explore notions of "Britishness" and see how pervasive they are in the UK at large, today.

In this regard, the 2011 Census (data available for England and Wales) provides data on ethnicity and identity. What is striking here, in contrast to Johnson's purported Demos above, is that those who self-identify as "British" (either to the exclusion of any other identity or in concert with another) now number a minority in the UK, with only 29% of respondents in England identifying themselves as British. In contrast, 70% identified themselves as "English"[2]. The divergence between London and the rest of England is also starkly apparent – and only in London did "Britishness" compete with "Englishness" as an identity; with 38% of respondents identifying as British, and 44% English (notably, given the cosmopolitan nature of London, "other" identities comprised 26%). The 2014 Scottish independence referendum also illustrated this divergence in a very dramatic fashion, with 45% of voters desiring to break away from the UK (Hearne and De Ruyter, 2018). In turn, an increasing sense of Englishness in England has also been accompanied by increasing resentment against the 1997 devolution settlement offered to Scotland (Jones et al., 2012). This was epitomised in the famous "West Lothian Question" (Bogdanor, 2010), whereby Scottish MPs could vote on English affairs, but not vice-versa, which prompted the Cameron Government to explore the prospect of "English votes for English

laws" (Hayton, 2015) in the aftermath of the Scottish independence referendum.

Thus, not surprisingly, these fault-lines between London, Scotland and the rest of the UK manifested in the Brexit vote (and for which the prior growth of "Englishness" could have been seen as a portent thereof), which was characterised by strong variations between the constituent "nations" of the UK, with Scotland and Northern Ireland in particular demonstrating a strong Remain vote share, alongside London. Thus it could be argued that the Brexit vote represents the reassertion of an English identity or Demos, rather than a British one, and thus that the UK is no more of an organic (or legitimate) political entity than the EU. As such, one could argue that nations are only one form of identity and, moreover, these identities are frequently changeable over time (Anderson, 1983). Hearne and De Ruyter (2018), writing in this vein argue that:

"*the logical corollary of Johnson's argument is that the UK should be scrapped in favour of separate states for different nations* [Demos]. *Where that would leave the 25% of the population who do identify as British remains to be seen.*"[3]

Indeed. Post-referendum, there is an impasse (at the time of writing) over the status of the Northern Ireland border and Scottish (and Welsh) government dissatisfaction over perceived lack of consultation by the UK Government: i.e., of the "uncertainty surrounding… constitutional voice for the devolved institutions in Scotland and elsewhere" (McHarg and Mitchell, 2017). This in turn adds further impetus to the arguments of those who demand reunification on the island of Ireland, or of Scottish independence. Examined in this light, should Brexit come to pass (and possibly even if it does not), the future of the UK in surviving as a coherent political entity looks bleak. Such predictions are not new, with Tom Nairn having first penned "*The Break-up of Britain*" over 40 years ago (Nairn, 1977). However, Brexit, with the seemingly intractable constitutional issues generated in its wake, has given them renewed vigour (and added a renewed validity to Nairn's arguments). As such, Budd (2018), considering the likely economic shock to Northern Ireland from a hard Brexit, argued that:

"*its future may lie in an All-Ireland solution. Ironically, the Conservative and Unionist government and its current support from the Democratic Unionist Party may create the conditions for a united Ireland and consequently the break-up on the union of the UK*". [4]

If nothing else, this calls for an urgent, fundamental revisit to the debate as to the nature of the UK, and what form the "demos" within it (and consequent governance structures) should take, post-Brexit.

Acknowledgments: this blog is an extract from the conclusion to our forthcoming edited book (A. De Ruyter and B. Nielsen eds.) on "Brexit Negotiations After Article 50: Assessing Process, Progress and Impact" (Emerald Publishing, featuring contributors including A C Grayling, Patrick Minford, Sir Bernard Jenkin MP, Sir Mark Boleat, John Mills and David Bailey).

References:

Anderson, B. (1983), '*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*'. London: Verso.

Bogdanor, V. (2010), 'The West Lothian Question', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 63 (1): 156–72.

Hayton, R. (2015), 'The Coalition and the Politics of the English Question', *The Political Quarterly*, 86 (1): 125-32.

Jones, R.W., Lodge, G., Henderson, A. and Wincott, D. (2012), '*The dog that finally barked: England as an emerging political community*'. Report: Institute for Public Policy Research. Accessed on October 3rd 2018 at https://www.ippr.org/publications/the-dog-that-finally-barked-england-as-an-emerging-political-community

McHarg, A. and Mitchell, J. (2017), 'Brexit and Scotland', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19 (3): 512-26.

Nairn, T. (1977), '*The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism*' (1st edition). London: New Left Books.

[1] Boris Johnson (2018), '*Uniting for a Great Brexit*' Foreign Secretary's Speech. Policy Exchange.

[2] https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalide
ntity/ethnicity/articles/ethnicityandnationalidentityinenglandandwales/2
012-12-11#national-identity-in-england-and-wales Accessed on
October 20th 2018.

[3] https://centreforbrexitstudiesblog.wordpress.com/2018/02/16/boris-
stuart-johnson-on-liberty/#_ENREF_5 Accessed on October 18th 2018.

[4] https://centreforbrexitstudiesblog.wordpress.com/2018/06/08/north
ern-irelands-dance-to-the-music-of-time-of-brexit/ Accessed on
October 19th 2018.