Borders Are back: Is this the End of the United Kingdom?

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Every European country has its semi-fictional national story, typically manufactured sometime in the 19th Century by a group of romantic intellectuals keen to impress a sense of cultural pride on their compatriots. In the case of my own country, Britain, that story has been used to devastating effect in recent years to splinter us off from the rest of the EU.

The story is that there is some fundamental difference between the UK and the rest of Europe, which no amount of short-term policy innovation could overcome; sooner or later Britain was always going to walk away from the European project. This comes in different forms, but all draw a clear contrast between the two sides of the English Channel. As a historical bastion of economic liberalism, Britain was never really at home in a union dominated by French statism and German corporatism. Unlike its neighbours, British democracy never succumbed to a totalitarian regime (or even, since the 17th Century, a successful revolution), which means it has never truly seen the importance of supranational integration. Deep down, Britain remains an essentially Protestant and individualistic society, as opposed to the Catholic and communitarian ones of mainland Europe. Even, pushing into the semi-mystical realms of 19th Century anthropology, Britain's status as an island has shaped its sense of place in the world differently to countries with land borders.

The problem with these grand generalisations is that they are all too easily undermined by inconvenient details. Britain has historically led the way in economic liberalisation, but it was also an architect of the Keynesian post-war order; similarly, over the last four decades no European country has avoided the winds of neoliberal reform. We may not have experienced totalitarian government in the 20th Century but there were some very near misses, and we still persist with a democratic system more elitist and exclusionary than those of our neighbours. There are historically Protestant states strongly embedded in the EU, including those (like the Netherlands) with low-church traditions more alien to Catholic heritage than high-church Anglicanism. And virtually any thesis can be justified if the bar for permissible evidence is lowered to include Victorian race science.

In fact – as Emmanuel Macron has argued – there is no good reason why Britain would have voted out of the present-day EU when another Member State would have chosen to remain. That conclusion has been borne out by the continued rise of Eurosceptic populism in the two and a half years since the referendum. Directly after the Brexit vote, some commentators (myself included) welcomed the prospect of UK departure from an EU perspective, even as we bemoaned Britain wandering off into the wilderness. Freed from perpetual British tantrums and obstruction the rest of Europe would finally be free to press ahead with deeper integration, forming the kind of robust federation which remains the only sustainable conclusion to the European project. Now things look rather different, as a chain of other countries have fallen prey to the forces of Euroscepticism. Britain, it turns out, was the canary in the mine and not the exception that proved the rule.

The growing of cultural divisions within countries

The crucial point is that – especially in an age of disruptive communications technology – the cultural divisions between countries are increasingly less important than those within each country. The narrow British vote to leave the EU has to be situated in the wider fragmentation of public opinion across Europe and North America. Trump versus Clinton in the USA, Le Pen versus Macron in France, even Kurz versus van der Bellen in Austria – all embody the ravine that is opening up between cosmopolitan liberals and conservative nationalists everywhere. Nevertheless, there is an additional dimension in Britain which complicates matters further. The political realignment triggered by Brexit could yet mean the breakup of the British state itself, as its constituent nations choose to go their separate ways.

The great success of the unitary British state – as measured both by its internal durability and its capacity to build a global empire – has also tended to obscure the fact that it is actually a multinational union. The story of British unification is the story of the elites in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland combining their interests in a single system of government in Westminster, at the expense of both their respective populations and those elsewhere within the British sphere of influence. As Britain's role in the world has diminished over the last century, that unitary system has been challenged on a number of fronts. Ireland made the first break with the British union, establishing a republic and leaving a troubled province caught partway between the two states. More recently, support for devolved government and secession have gained major support in Scotland and Wales. Separatist parties have played a major role in Edinburgh and Cardiff since the millennium, with the Scottish National Party (SNP) now enjoying its eleventh consecutive year in power.

The dominant Scottish and Welsh separatists both style themselves as progressive, social-democratic alternatives to the Right-wing establishment in Westminster. Both the SNP and Plaid Cymru have carved chunks out of the (unionist) British Labour Party's support base, whose classic electoral strategy has meant focussing efforts on English swing voters while relying on safe support in Scotland and Wales. As Labour accommodated itself to neoliberalism, ostensibly to win support in crucial areas of England, Celtic separatists have pulled their countries further away from British unionism. In a precursor to a greater shock two years later, the British establishment endured a near-miss in 2014 when 45% of Scottish voters opted for independence from the United Kingdom.

The friction between the British nations

The Brexit vote has only underlined the divergence between the British nations. While England and Wales both voted to leave the EU by 53%, Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain by 62% and 56% respectively. Scottish first minister Nicola Sturgeon has been especially vocal about the prospect of her country being taken out of the EU against its will. A key grievance is that, in the 2014 referendum campaign on Scottish independence, the unionist side warned that a newly-seceded Scotland would be blocked from EU membership by other governments, like Spain's, facing their own separatist movements. Now, there is arguably much less to lose from splitting off from Brexit Britain and staking a claim to becoming the next EU Member State.

Brexit is sometimes painted by its proponents as an English revolution, a reassertion of Anglo-Saxon interests after years of subjection to Brussels and the special treatment of the Celtic

minorities at home. You don't need to accept the tub-thumping chauvinism of Nigel Farage or Boris Johnson to see the underlying point. The population of England represents the vast majority of the British total, but its democratic institutions are scant at best. London and other major cities enjoy degrees of devolved government, but outside these areas there is a yawning gulf between disempowered and underfunded local authorities and the British government in Westminster. This democratic deficit is especially sharp in the post-industrial north, which has spent decades voting for Left-wing policies and being subjected to Right-wing ones. Meanwhile, a short distance over the border, similarly-minded Scots have repeatedly elected their own social-democratic governments to allocate budgets partly subsidised by English taxes and public borrowing.

And then there is Northern Ireland. The 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which ended the province's civil war between Protestant unionists and Catholic separatists, has been one of the great achievements of modern European diplomacy. Its guiding principle is that Northern Irish citizens should not be forced to choose between Britain and the Irish Republic, which in practice means maintaining an open border both on the island of Ireland and across the Irish Sea. That openness is, of course, threatened by any Brexit arrangement which seeks to sever ties between Britain and the rest of the EU. Since the referendum tensions between the different factions have been rising once again, with both sides fearful that a hard border could be imposed in the 'wrong' place. The draft UK withdrawal agreement currently under consideration only defers a solution to this problem until the next phase of negotiations.

Post-Brexit scenarios for the UK

The friction between the four British nations pre-dates the referendum, but Brexit has acted to increase the temperature. It is 300 years since the English and Scottish governments opted to merge their states and the phrase 'United Kingdom' became common parlance. There is now a distinct possibility that, before too long, the United Kingdom could splinter into three or four separate parts. Scotland was on the brink of independence even before the Brexit vote, and it wouldn't be too surprising if the Scots now opt for Brussels over Westminster. Northern Ireland may decide that its hard-won peace can only be maintained as a small independent state, or alternatively it may choose to bury the past and merge into an Irish Republic which is less and less defined by its historical Catholicism. The pull towards full separation is weakest in Wales, but the landscape may look rather different if the Welsh are to be left alone in a union with – and vastly outnumbered by – the English. And if they feel that their Celtic neighbours are too greatly obstructing their post-Brexit ambitions, the English themselves may decide to go it alone and withdraw from the union they first instigated.

If some of these scenarios sound unlikely then it is because they all have the potential to go disastrously wrong. All would, in some way or other, involve imposing borders acrimoniously, some of which have not existed for centuries. We know from the tragic recurrence of European history the damage that borders between interdependent territories can wreak. There are good reasons why the Christian-democratic architects of the European project looked back to the great continental empires as a model for post-war reconstruction. Free movement and economic integration provided a solution to different groups coexisting peacefully; after the Second World War it made sense to revive this model for former combatants, starting with the coal and steel sectors and gradually building towards greater alignment.

In the event that the British state starts to break up, the greatest immediate threat would be in Northern Ireland. Civil war is still in living memory there, and it would not take much to reignite the violence if one community felt its interests were being traded away at a high-level negotiating table. Even in mainland Britain there would be serious questions to answer. In some respects, Scottish independence would have been easier to settle before Brexit; as elsewhere two states, both in the single market, would have shared an open land border. Now there is the prospect of the island of Great Britain containing two or more separate entities, all, some or none of which could be part of the single market. No one directly involved would want the drawbacks of hard borders, but they may be necessary to preserve the formal sovereignty of the newly minted states.

There would, of course, be one simple solution to all these problems: for Britain to remain a Member State of the EU, or at least retain close ties along the lines of the European Economic Area and therefore soften the impact of imposing new borders. Amid the white noise of the negotiations, we cannot repeat often enough that Britain already had the best deal on offer with its full membership plus a set of opt-outs that no other state has managed to win. As we enter the last few months before Brexit, it feels as though that truth will go unheeded until the damage is already done.