

Spitfire Britain and the Zombie Union

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In the pre-Covid classroom, I liked to explain the slipperiness of nationalism by pointing to the Wallace Monument, perched at the edge of campus outside Stirling. Every year, students find it harder to believe this Victorian tribute to Scotland's Rambo in the wars of independence was constructed by true-believers in the Union of 1707. In the unionist cultural tradition, quietly dominant until around the time the university was built in the 1960s, Wallace was a British-Scottish martyr. The 'Guardian of Scotland' preserved the nation's freedom in 1296 so that it could be honourably bargained away in the Acts of Union, creating a joint Anglo-Scottish project in which the ancient rights and difference of the Scots were both elevated and protected. Scotland joined with England by choice and not conquest, thanks to the guy from *Braveheart*, and this was central to the submerged 'nationalist' element in Scottish Unionism.

It's not surprising that children of devolution should trip on this puzzling British fold in the tartan rug, which has all but vanished from their own experience of Scottish identity and constitutional debate. And in fairness to them, the dominant narratives of political devolution, established by unionist parties seeking to kill nationalism with pretended kindness, have made it very difficult to follow the thread of 'unionist-nationalism' from the nineteenth century into the twenty-first. Consequently, Scots of every generation are much too inclined to view devolution as a home-grown endeavour. It was and remains a British process, delivered by the British electorate in 1997 – an election in which the SNP opposed Labour's made-in-Scotland plans for a Scottish Parliament, fearing a unionist trap.

If this thought is jarring, it's because the political meaning of devolution pulls strongly in the opposite direction, spotlighting the agency and 'confidence' of Scotland and Wales while easing the UK operating system into the background. (This was both the risk and the trap.) Today, that

muted base-code is making a noisy return to prominence. On Covid, Brexit and demands for Indyref2, the Scottish Government dashboard is shrieking with permission faults and capacity warnings. These are not error messages but unwelcome reminders, flatly explaining what younger Scots were learning to forget: the mainframe is beyond the local administrator's control. Now that the British limits and dimensions of devolution are once again obvious (and once again contentious), it's important to grasp how they took shape, and the extent of their mutation since Brexit.

To see this clearly, it is best to cast a cold eye on innumerable schemes for devolution over the past five decades, and all warm talk of democracy, respect and local empowerment. Devolution is a creature of high politics, where it names a conservative, state-nationalist strategy for re-cementing UK sovereignty on terms acceptable to public opinion in Scotland and Wales. It is a managerial sort of twentieth-century nationalism, of and for the *state-nation*, intended to strengthen the social, emotional and political anchorage of the UK's established governing arrangements (including the party duopoly). This is not a nationalism of pro-British folksong, but grey Whitehall officials plotting how to canalise 'national feeling' in Scotland and Wales, carrying it safely away from separatism.

It was meant to work by dispersing and spreading UK power at once, planting new cuttings of British governance in Edinburgh and Cardiff. Over time, the spreading roots of these sapling assemblies — their local power and responsiveness — would strengthen the larger UK canopy by choking out the SNP and Plaid (invasive species, as viewed from London). This approach would renew the vows of traditional unionism, a compact seen to protect national distinctiveness within British structures of dual identity and shared rule. While devolution appeared to dilute centralised power, UK sovereignty remained untouched at the centre; indeed, it was legally and symbolically fortified, boasting fresh shoots and modern flexibilities.

In this sense devolution means the re-fashioning and upgrading of 'the Union' in response to growing nationalism, particularly in Scotland, which it attempts to neutralise and incorporate. But it does not involve a corresponding renewal of *unionism* as a half-forgotten cultural ethos and tradition, which went on much as before. These divergent paths are only fully apparent

today, as canny state-nationalism is supplanted by a more vehement populist sovereignty movement, ‘taking back control’ of British identity and its symbols.

To see this shift clearly, we have to grasp just how shrewd a bargain devolution was. At once liberal and defensive, decentralising and revanchist, it aimed to place beyond doubt what the rise of the Celtic nationalist parties sporadically threatened in the 1960s and 70s. By the mid-1990s, Labour profited as the party of constitutional modernisation, but with no grand speeches forging a ‘new unionism’ for a New Britain. Their strategy re-secured the traditional ends of union – and two new democratic institutions Labour could hope to dominate – without seeing much need to revisit its underlying vision of multinational political community, as nebulous as it was durable. Indeed, union-*ism* increasingly seemed an artefact of the rickety thought-world Blairism was innovating away, and there would be little significant re-thinking of Britishness that went beyond marketing ‘newness’ (Cool Britannia) and the affirmation of popular culture as a source of international prestige.

This approach quietly endorsed Tom Nairn’s old argument that there is no actual British peoplehood underpinning the British state, only the residues of a ‘Greater’ (imperial) Englishness with a few pluri-national kitemarks and sacred heirlooms (the monarchy, the union flag, NHS, BBC). New Labour seemed to show that you could significantly remake the architecture of British governance without truly altering its cultural underpinnings. Like the vast ceiling of the Millennium Dome, the showy superstructure of devolution relied on controlled surface tension (between different poles of national loyalty and identity) rather than a deep foundation of British national feeling. The only notable re-visioning of UK identity in living memory, Danny Boyle’s 2012 spectacular at the Olympic Stadium, plaited the common threads of Britishness into the institutional folkways of the NHS, and only after paying tribute to four-nations cultural distinctions. (‘Flower of Scotland’ was beamed in from Edinburgh Castle.) Today, the Scottish Government’s mildly divergent response to Covid is effectively politicising areas of self-administration (in healthcare) older than the welfare state itself. Though it was the centrepiece of the Better Together campaign, not even the NHS is British all the way down.

So light and flexible had British cultural allegiance become by 2014, it could evaporate from its own case for survival. A leading architect of New Labour argued that Scotland should vote No to independence in order to preserve the essentially Scottish character of British governance. Appealing directly to the soft-nationalist zeitgeist, Gordon Brown's indyref book insisted that pan-UK social rights, like nearly every beneficial feature of the Union, were a gift and achievement of the Scots themselves: 'when we look at it closely, we will see Scottish fingerprints all over Britain's social settlement'. Not only was the best of British governance effected by Scots, the principles embodied by these institutions were *culturally* Scottish, with Brown claiming that 'the Union, as currently constituted, is not just to Scotland's benefit – it is nothing less than Scottish values in action' (*My Scotland, Our Britain*, 2014).

Thus, Brown argued, Scotland already had what the separatists said it needed: an effectively home-grown Scottish state expressing Scottish values and identity. And with this Scoto-British bird in the hand, tartan plumage to the fore, why venture the risks of independence? It's a neat trick, but note where it leaves the object of salvation: if the British political order is really Scottish in origin and sensibility, and Scotland today is Scottish in its governance and identity, just what is the Union and what is it for?

Puzzling over these effectively 'post-unionist' tactics a few years ago, I argued that when Labour ceases to locate Scottish political agency within British political space, it has ceased to defend the Union.¹ But I missed the real problem, which is that 'the Union' – as a reified totem or position – could be defended indefinitely on terms quite alien, and increasingly hostile, to *unionism* as a cultural and political tradition. In fact, the 'British political space' in which unionism must ultimately find oxygen and assent – in a word, England – could change the union's cultural and political meaning however it chose, especially after the No victory in 2014.

It took Brexit and its consequences to make this clear, but the roots of this detachment can be seen in the early years of Holyrood and the Welsh Assembly. Viewed from devolved Scotland, 'four-nations' political Britishness became increasingly a creature of governmental process

¹ 'Saving the Union to Death?', *Drouth* (Winter 2015-16)
https://issuu.com/drouth/docs/scott_hames_saving_the_union_to_dea

(budgets, administration) and institutional organisation, with scant cultural traction outside electoral politics and broadcasting. Increasingly unmoored from the fortunes of Scotland's nominally unionist parties, Scottish Unionism – as a traditionally passive *-ism* and outlook – seemed to make almost no intellectual or cultural response to these altered conditions.

Why? The Labour architects of devolution were not ardent unionists in the *-ism* sense, but they were continually obliged to soothe imperial pride, insisting their schemes posed no threat to Britishness and its fragile claims to greatness. From the early 1970s every fearful step toward a Scottish Assembly was defended in a spatialised vocabulary of 'decentralisation' (as Keir Starmer put it recently, 'so that decisions could be made closer to people' - 16 September, *Scotsman*), as though it was particular postcodes rather than national polities that were being empowered in Edinburgh and Cardiff.

Squealing under this tension, one 1976 Scottish Labour pamphlet even claimed that 'the creation of a legislature in Scotland will be an advantage open to any other identifiable part of the nation' – picture ears pricking up in Cornwall, Orkney, Kensington – and 'will consolidate the functioning of the government of Britain'. Such assurances were often chaperoned by strenuous celebrations of unitary Britishness, peoplehood and their historic glories. This nervous tic is everywhere in the official documents of devolution, as in the 'Core Principles' of the 1973 Kilbrandon Report (giving lukewarm endorsement to plans for devolution floated by the first Wilson government): 'the geographical separation of the United Kingdom from the continental mainland and its achievement of world prominence as one people have had a strong unifying effect which we regard as irreversible'.

With Brexit, these polite evasions and over-protestations fall apart – by becoming real. Labour's necessary fibs about inviolable tradition are now passionate convictions in the mouths of their rivals. A populist English nationalism has re-consecrated the avatars of 'world prominence as one people', and a Tory Brexit government elected on that wave is gleefully trashing the earlier, more colourless giving-back-control story of devolution (the one about localising power and accountability). The state-nationalist strategy of 1973-2007 has been over-taken by *grand guignol* macro-arguments for UK sovereignty, and tabloid visions of Global Britain restored to sea-going splendour. Domestically, Johnson and Cummings seek to govern through blob-

bursting audacities of centralised executive power, for which ‘taking back control’ evokes hostility to the social state, figured as a giant drooling quango. Against this, the SNP promise an island of sanity, liberalism and responsible state expenditure. With the exception of welcoming immigrants, the policies are quite close to Blairism, but their political and emotional meaning is *keeping Scotland normal* rather than making it ‘new’. A stiffening majority – in the most recent poll, 58% – feel Scotland must escape the British political structures in which its norms and modern identity were shaped, or cease to be Scotland at all.

In these circumstances, a noisy English nationalism – driven by inflamed popular resentment rather than wily statecraft – has every electoral incentive to ‘undermine devolution’. With the dominance of the SNP, neither of the main UK parties has much to defend north of Carlisle, nor indeed much to hope for. Scottish dissatisfaction with the UK’s governing arrangements is now priced in to UK politics, and almost a non-factor in the Westminster arithmetic. Labour knows it must somehow recover in the north while appeasing English nationalism, and looks set to tootle a minor-key ‘unionism’ which merely echoes the thundering Tory version. In 2019, a poll showed that fully 63% of Tory supporters would sacrifice the Union with Scotland if that was the price of Brexit – slightly more than the 61% of Tories who chose Brexit in 2016. Scrapping the UK is now a remarkably popular idea among strong adherents to its cherished lore, but this is only puzzling until we grasp that British icons have been assigned new meanings by Brexit-as-English-awakening. (Or rather *new old* meanings, mixing memory and desire in the classic nationalist style described by Gellner and Nairn.)

What can motivate political defence of ‘the Union’ in these conditions, and what is the intellectual character of the ‘unionism’ which accompanies it? At the level of high politics, Neal Ascherson may be correct to claim that the last stubborn sinews of the UK’s governing attachment to Scotland are face-saving and international prestige – ‘to prevent Britain’s retreat from greatness from turning into a rout’.² More intriguingly, he posits a ruling-class conspiracy to defend Britishness ‘to block the advance of political Englishness’, viewed by the UK elite (he

² Neal Ascherson, ‘Bye Bye Britain’, *London Review of Books* 42.18 (24 September 2020) <https://lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n18/neal-ascherson/bye-bye-britain>

argues) ‘as an angry and envious form of vulgar populism which potentially threatens the whole social order’.

Is this bottle not missing its genie? The present government is a coalition of the UK’s traditional and media elites joined with the leading bravos of the Brexo-chauvinist adventure, giddy with plans to remake the British order. Johnson and his media supporters pretend that a stirring national memory of Spitfires and gunboat commercial *élan* is the true bedrock of UK peoplehood, no longer inclined to articulate itself in unionist terms, still less to entrust subordinate parliaments with a key role in legitimising Westminster rule.

Indeed that deadening cipher ‘the Union’, today signifying implacable opposition to Scottish independence, simply names the reification of *unionism* as a strategy of this kind. Is Dominic Cummings any kind of unionist? He may be opposed to Scottish independence, but that is not the same thing. If he wishes to deepen Tory hegemony, nothing would serve his apparent aims better than to agitate English opinion against Scotland’s ruling enemies of Britishness, and to make war on devolution in the name of ‘the Union’. (The Internal Market Bill, reserving control to UK ministers of returning EU powers, is a manoeuvre pointing in this direction.)

The political motives and arguments for defending ‘the Union’ today are not only detached from traditional unionism, but antithetical to it. In retrospect, we can see that devolution made the Union flexible and modern by placing unionism beyond any possible reform. Strident electoral denials that Britishness was changing, or *could* change, discouraged any serious attention to why it must. With Brexit, we find the remaining strands of unionist feeling lashed tightly, tourniquet fashion, to phantom limbs of imperial greatness. With the re-animation of these lumbering forms, the rise of undead Britishness may render ‘the Union’ un-killable as a legal and constitutional arrangement, but at the cost of placing *union-ism* beyond any possible revival as a living habitus or mode of belonging.

The style of devolution which produced the Scottish Parliament drew on a century of finessing, placating and ‘managing’ demands for Scottish democracy, and sought above all to preserve the operating system of UK governance in which Labour must locate its electoral interest. In order to

upgrade the power-container aligned with Britishness, Labour determined that its retail identity must be rendered supple and adaptive, ripe for ‘modernisation’. Little thought was given to what Stuart Hall would call the ‘popular inventories’ of British nationalism, historic accretions of chauvinist ‘common sense’ which, under the right conditions, could resurface ‘to disarticulate old formations, and to rework their elements into new configurations’ (‘The Great Moving Right Show’, 1979). For the unionist project of devolution, the consolidation of an insurgent Brexit nationalism are just such circumstances. The old formations of devolutionary state-nationalism are being swiftly dissolved and re-defined, as the familiar outward lineaments of Great Britishness – little more than badge and brand to New Labour – shift from moth-eaten pageantry to a hot passion of national rebirth.

For Johnson, sovereignty and its scope for showy action is the whole point, and Britain will be made great again by re-consecrating state power as the outward manifestation of glorious UK peoplehood. (The other week, a Spitfire sputtered past the Wallace Monument on its national tour to mark NHS heroism.) On these transcendent terms ‘the Union’ can never die, and the state-nation will sooner scotch the spirit of devolution than defy an insurgent (English) national will that has outgrown the renegotiations of the 1990s. After 2014 and 2016, it is probably too late to articulate a reforming British unionism distinct from and opposed to Johnsonism. Labour seems likely to spend years burying the memory of Corbynism under poppies and patriotic pledge-making, but hymning ‘flag, forces and family’ with new zest can only deepen the ruts of culture wars Labour can only lose by fighting harder. A populist English nationalism is already here, and it has effective ownership of the Ukanian family silverware. As with the Wallace Monument, the outward signs and flummery of traditional Britishness have not visibly changed, but their meaning, potency and popular grounding have decisively shifted. The undying remains of ‘the Union’ may be protected by the new regime, for their own reasons of pride and prestige, but it is difficult to see a future for the *unionism* developed in Scotland to justify and defend that settlement.

As the rift between Union and unionism tilts toward outright hostility, a breaking point must soon be reached. Time will tell if Johnson’s Tories are prepared to risk ‘losing Scotland’, but it seems clear that only Scottish independence can now provide unionism a decent funeral. And

detached from the zombie Union, *Scotland's Britishness* – an essential but rapidly eroding context of its own cultural history – might even be restored to public consciousness on reasonable terms. It is Scottish nationalists who should now set about preserving the British dimensions and traditions of their national culture, before its most interesting twists and tensions are rendered unintelligible. A century ago, Scottish nationalists worried that school children were becoming so deracinated as to require a Scots-English glossary in order to read the poetry of Burns. Today, I fret that Scottish readers of Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson will soon find it impossible to parse their unionist-nationalist politics, or to grasp their significance as British cultural figures.

But these are seminar-room concerns. In the sphere of government, the unionist project of devolution is now treated like malware by the UK operating system once carefully designed around it. Expunged from the working memory of the British state, its future probably lies in pure theatre and set-piece display, taking its place among the relics and rituals of monarchy anatomised by Nairn. While ‘the Union’ has outlived and destroyed *union-ism*, this need not be the end, and it can moulder on indefinitely as a museum-piece. That is another kind of ending. Think not of the shining Spitfire but its crumbling hangar, the vast nothing where it rests between televised victory-laps, a monument to neglect and the indifference of England.