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"Scotland: A Nation Squeezed Between Two Nationalisms"

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Parliament Hall
ILCR Public Lecture. All Welcome

The Crown of Scotland is carried as Her Majesty The Queen leaves the Chamber following the Opening of the fourth Session of The Scottish Parliament in July 2011 (wikimedia commons).

Jim Gallagher was the UK government's most senior adviser on devolution and other constitutional issues, working in the Cabinet office and the number 10 policy unit under Gordon Brown. His career in Edinburgh and Whitehall included heading the Scottish justice department, running the offices of successive Secretaries of State for Scotland, and working in the Blair number 10 policy unit. He is an Honorary Professor at the University of St Andrews and has held visiting fellowships and professorships at Oxford and Glasgow universities. He is also a non-executive director in a number of commercial and third sector enterprises.

Scotland: A Nation Squeezed Between Two Nationalisms

Prof JD Gallagher

University of St Andrews, 7 November 2019

We live, it seems, in an age of nationalisms. Supranational organisations are in retreat – whether it's the World Trade Organisation or the European Union, from the likes of Donald Trump and Victor Orban. Here in Britain we have our own obsessions about sovereignty and disentangling from multinational unions. We've three, maybe four, arguably five nationalist parties standing in the UK General Election. Here in Scotland, some people want to leave both the UK and the EU, some want to stay in both, and some want one but not the other. In this lecture, I want to explore what's driving this, the nature and implications of nationalism in general, and what that tells us about the two nationalist ideologies squeezing Scotland between them.

Why nationalism now?

It's not so long since scholars were forecasting the end of the nation state. It was said to have discharged its historical function [1] or to be hollowed out by demands from below and above, and by markets (eg Rhodes,1994)[2]. So, why are demands for national sovereignty back with a bang?

First, national identity was never *not* going to matter. Nations might not be primordial, but are than just a particular phase of economic development. Feelings of belonging, kinship (if you wish), identity, patriotism do meet a real human need, even for those who reject the simplistic equation of nation with state. One of the lessons of recent years is that it's a mistake to forget that.

Second, there's the "end of history"[3]. Not so much the purported triumph of the liberal, democratic, order, which isn't necessarily going so well, but the end of five decades of a bipolar cold war world. New nation states emerged from the Soviet empire, and there was more space for asserting distinct national interests, rather than just aligning to one bloc or another.

But most of all, we all know, this new national assertiveness is a reaction to globalization, which has transformed the economic picture of the planet. Exhibit A illustrates the enormous increase in worldwide trade.
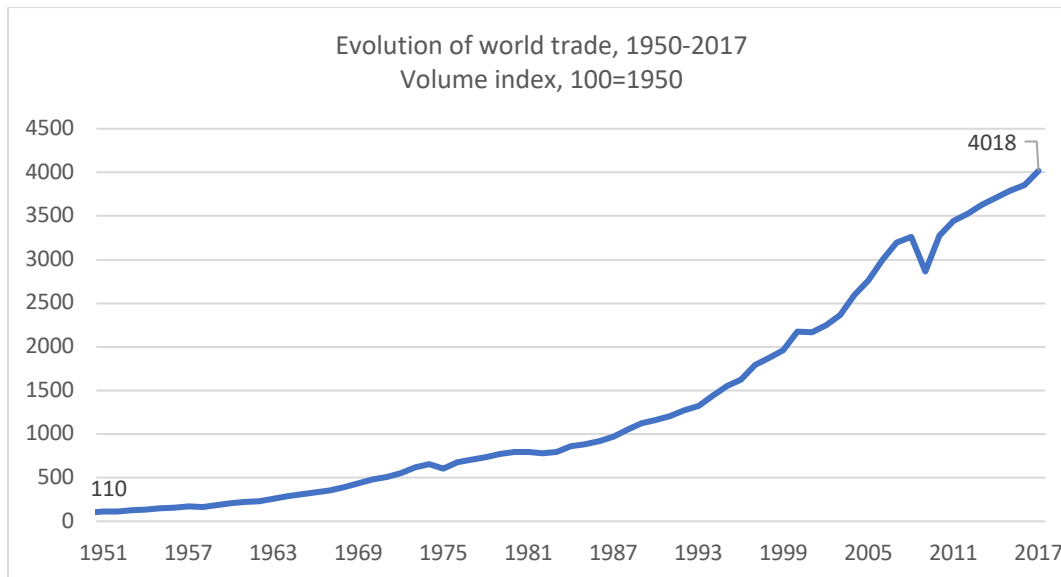
Exhibit A: Growth in world trade (volume terms) Source: WTO

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[1] Hobsbawm, 1990
[2] Rhodes(1994)
[3] Fukuyama, 1992

Evolution of world trade, 1950-2017
Volume index, 100=1950

It has brought huge previously excluded populations into the market economy, and lifted literally billions of people out of poverty. In 1981[4] 44% of the world's population lived at or below the international poverty line. Today it's 10%. Unequivocally a good thing.

But it puts competitive pressure on developed economies, on some sectors and some workers especially. Jobs move, often the jobs of the less skilled, less well off. People move too, and immigration moves up the political agenda. Much of this appears to be outside the control of national governments, never mind the ordinary voter, whose job has gone, or whose neighbourhood has changed character. Hence the appeal of 'taking back control'.

This might not, perhaps, have mattered so much were it not for the kink in the graph in exhibit A, the financial crisis of 2008. This has had a very direct effect on incomes across the Western world. Without that, arguments about sovereignty might have been confined to the chattering classes, or to ideological nationalists, rather than appealing to the breadth of the population. From mid 2008 until near the end of 2014, real wage growth in the UK was negative. While the statistical measures of income equality suggest that over this period it did not widen[5]) it is nevertheless the less well off, who found the pinch hardest, who have expressed their dissatisfaction with the constitutional arrangements that let this happen the most.

Exhibit B: Support for change in two referendums[6]

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4 United Nations, 2019
5 ONS, 2019
6 Curtice, 2015, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2018

	Household income <£20,000	*Household income > £60,000*
Percentage in favour of change	58 %	35%

	Most deprived 20% of neighbourhoods	*Least deprived 20 % of neighbourhoods*
Percentage in favour of change	65%	36%

I challenge you to identify which of these relates to the Scottish independence referendum, and which to the European referendum. It is the poor who are most open to arguments that constitutional change will address their concerns. Those who think they have the least to lose are most willing to upset the constitutional architecture. You might wonder why do people cling to a constitutional answer to an economic question. One reason is slick salesmanship, another the absence of a persuasive alternative.

So nationalism is back on the agenda in the developed West. Disempowerment from globalised economics and the financial crisis have left poor people especially dissatisfied with the constitutional setup which let all this happen. Demands for national sovereignty are not just an interest of the ideologically committed, but a proposition around half the population are willing to assent to, in both the UK and Scotland.

Nationalism and sovereignty

But does nationalism answer the questions which put it on the agenda?

It is easy enough to see the emotional appeal: if only "we" had control, we could deal with this problem, whatever it might be. And there are plenty of politicians happy to say their nationalism can deliver the solution, whatever the problem might be. But I think we have to look a bit more closely at the nature of nationalism and the sovereignty proposition, and ask - what kind of solutions can it actually deliver?

First of all, despite the often-repeated trope that independence would make Scotland a "normal" nation, the idea that every nation should have a state, and that every state should be sovereign, so the world consists just of sovereign states, is anything but self-evident. The notion that the globe is divided into a set of separate, exclusive territories, each with its own sovereignty, is a relatively modern one. For much of European history, it would have been deeply questionable. While it's possible to argue (alongside the likes of Adrian Hastings or Jeremy Black) that some nations like England are long-standing, parcelling out the whole world into sovereign nation-states reflects the economic and social circumstances of Europe from the 16th to the 19th century, then the 20th century in former colonial territories.

There will be those in this audience much better qualified than me to chart the historical development of European nationalism after the reformation, the religious wars which followed it, and into the 19th century, when geographical expressions became political entities. And others again, no doubt, on how European decolonisation exported this notion to the rest of the world, in the latter half of the 20th century.

Scholars have spilt much ink analyzing nationalism's defining characteristics. I like Ernest Gellner's notion that nationalism is the assertion there must be correspondence between a culture and a polity, a culture being Anderson's "imagined community" or nation. Gellner, like Hobsbawm, reckoned it was a temporary stage of economic development. Other scholars[7] make fewer predictions but broadly agree about the nature of the beast: a grouping with its own peculiar character, which asserts its interest must take precedence over others, and claims that it must be as independent as possible, that is to say sovereign. The blueprint for mass nationalism includes a territorially unified and ideally homogenous population, a distinctive public culture, and ideally language, and a set of distinctive myths and collective memories.

Out of this literature, I want to identify three well-accepted, simple characteristics of nationalism, and apply them to our situation today:

Exhibit C: three key characteristics of nationalism

- *The nation and its territory are asserted to exist*. The "imagined community" must become tangible one: the culture must become a polity. Two implications immediately follow.

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[7] See Smith, 2010, for a useful survey

- There are nationals and foreigners, people who belong and people who don't, "us" and therefore "them". Different rules apply to each.
- Secondly, the territory has limits, and so there are borders. Inside them one set of rules applies, outside them it does not.

- *The nation has a unique identity.* It is special in some way that differentiates it from other nations. It has its own myths. (To call these beliefs myths isn't *necessarily* to decry them.) Maybe stories about history and origin, maybe myths about National Character. To create or sustain a nation, myths must be polished, and differences magnified.
  - No nationalist asserts- "we are pretty much the same as everybody else, and are just proposing a convenient unit for administrative purposes."

- *The nation must be sovereign*. It brooks no superior. It cannot be dictated to by anybody else. *Rex imperator in regno suo*. Sovereignty is complete, indivisible, and answerable to no one.

So the surface of the Earth is a tessellation of exclusive sovereign entities, each of which can in principle do whatever it likes. Whether this works at all well for all the issues which governments actually have to manage I'll to come back to later.

There is one other distinction in the literature, frequently referred to today in Scotland: the difference between "civic" and "ethnic" nationalism. Originally used to differentiate mature, civilized, Western European nationalisms growing out of a pre-existing bourgeois culture, from Eastern European nationalisms, emerging from agrarian, feudal societies and more inclined to authoritarian populism.

In other words, nice nationalism and nasty nationalism. Scottish nationalism in particular has made lots of efforts to be nice. Its leadership no longer focuses much on Scottish ethnicity, the movement has jettisoned its 1930s religious intolerance, it adheres to constitutional routes (to its credit)and its adherents get very upset if they are put in the same populist category as, say, Victor Orban or Donald Trump, or (even) the English nationalist ideology which is behind Brexit. You can understand why. It is probably fair to say that Nicola Surgeon is nicer than Boris Johnson. In his turn he might, even, be nicer than Donald Trump. (These are not perhaps very demanding tests.)

But in truth, every nationalism considers itself unique, because every nation considers itself unique. A nationalist movement might be leftist or rightist, or civic or otherwise, but it still does what it says on the nationalist tin. The structural aims of each nationalism are just the same: create or defend the national territory, burnish the national myths to strengthen national identity, distinguishing us from them, and assert national sovereignty, and remove constraints on national freedom of action. And nationalism's structural aims give rise to problems, whether it's nasty nationalism or nice.

General problems of nationalism

By definition nationalism must identify us and them. Otherwise there is no nation – without an "other" there can be no "us". Sometimes this "othering" simply applies to neighbouring nations. Sometimes it is ethnic, explicitly or implicitly, and then internal to the territory. The treatment of Roma people in Eastern Europe today, or of the Jews even by such civic nationalist societies as France are cases in point.

We don't have to look far from home to see internal "othering" today. Those who do not support the project become "remainers", "traitors" "enemies of the people" "quislings" and so on; and please do not let anybody pretend we didn't see this the 2014 Scottish referendum as well as on Brexit.

By its nature, nationalism must also produce divisions between places – borders: no border, no nation, as the UK government has spent three hard years finding out in Brussels. That too has consequences, for trade, and people movement.

Then nationalism needs to tell stories, and needs to have myths. Some are just harmless tales sustaining cultural identity. What we see in practice, however, is that myths and stories are more powerful than evidence. In making political choices, what we want to believe, how we want our identity to seem, what has emotional resonance for us, is all more powerful than what our eyes, or certainly our experts, tell us. If you believe in rational, evidence-based, policy-making, you will not be driven by the data towards nationalism. It has other, deeper, roots than mere evidence.

But perhaps the biggest problems of nationalism come from the notion of sovereignty. Sovereignty is concept at once slippery and pernicious. Slippery because people often deliberately confuse the territory of a sovereign nation with how sovereignty is exercised within it, so for example claiming that Scottish sovereignty belongs to the people, while British sovereignty belongs to Parliament. Pernicious, because of its insistence, rooted if you like in a Hobbesian longing for order, that political power must be absolute, that it cannot be shared, and that a sovereign entity cannot be answerable or accountable. This notion of sovereignty makes it much more difficult to deal with problems which cross those very borders which nationalism creates. Reflect for a moment what those include:

Exhibit D1

> War and peace – the essential insight behind the founding of the European Union, and relevant to the Anglo Scottish Union too
> Global warming, very obviously
> Migration, particularly of refugees
> Regulation of trade
> Global economic coordination
> Taxation (try getting money out of a multinational)
> Sharing risks and resources, particularly for small countries.

Here is how these issues play out for in the UK and the EU

Exhibit D2

	United Kingdom	European Union
War and peace	Okay since 1745, internally	Okay since 1945, internally
Global warming	Some influence on others	More influence
Migration	Straightforward internally, struggling with borders	Okay internally, struggling with borders, but some burden sharing
Regulation of trade	Very good internally, some wider influence	Good internally, substantial a wider influence
Global economic coordination	some influence	more influence
Taxation	Struggles with multinationals	Struggles a bit more successfully with multinationals
Risk and resource sharing	Quite profound	Much more limited

Neither the UK nor the EU holds the answer to all these problems. But each does better than an individual nations within them on its own. The driver of popular support for nationalism is economic and social dislocation from globalization. Single countries are largely powerless against it. Bigger, multinational, supranational, entities have more clout. So nationalism actually undermines the very entities which are best placed deal with the problems that give rise to nationalism. It is just as likely to exacerbate the problem. You can see examples today – which of course suit Nationalist ideologues just as well.

None of us is so naive as to think we are getting a world government tomorrow, but there is one obvious conclusion to draw. If you care about the things in this list, and you already have multinational or supranational organisations which can make some impact on them, make them work better rather than destroy them. Making them better doesn't necessarily mean just making them more powerful: it includes ensuring that they don't do what they should not be doing (if you like, the principle of subsidiarity) and making them more legitimate in the eyes of those they affect.

Brexit and Scottish nationalism

So I have three objections to nationalism in the abstract – it divides people and places, it priorities myth over evidence, and it refuses to pool sovereignty.

What about our two domestic nationalisms? Start with Brexit – and be under no doubt that it is a nationalism, English nationalism. It meets all three tests, and it's an *English* nationalism, not because Scotland voted differently, but "*the English have always found it impossible to distinguish their English ethno-nationalism from British patriotism, which they conceive of equally as their own*[8]*".* And because it has prioritised England's leaving the EU over the union with Northern Ireland and – if the polls are to be believed – would value it more than even than the union with Scotland.

You've seen "othering" of foreigners. Angela Merkel portrayed as a Nazi. Domestic judges were "enemies of the people". You've seen how ludicrous myths – like Brexit as somehow a repeat of Dunkirk – and disagreeable ones – a kind of buccaneering Britain from the 16th century. You've seen the prolonged car crash over borders, to the extent that it is now proposed that the United Kingdom has an internal border, just like an international border for tariff and regulatory purposes. Customs checks *inside* a nation state. And you've seen the obsession with sovereignty: we cannot be a "vassal state", as if Europe was somehow a feudal overlord.

Look at Scottish nationalism through the same lense. It tries very hard to be civic, but there is quite a deep anti-English thread, and not just on the Internet fringes. "Westminster" "London" are code for England. The depth of division which it has produced in Scottish society is tangible. 2014 referendum was for many Yes supporters a great festival; but the data shows the majority of No voters felt silenced, even intimidated.

The great engine of division is the referendum. If you want to split a country down the middle, few devices are better than a binary referendum on an existential, deeply emotional, question. It divides families, friends and colleagues. It supplants other social divisions and creates new, main political identities. So it is no surprise that Nationalists want one: the stupidity of David Cameron in calling one is even harder to fathom in retrospect than it was in 2015

As for dividing places, Scottish nationalists, just like the Brexiteers before them, are in denial about the problem of borders. It really does take some Chutzpah to present a hard border from England as an opportunity to be a bridge between Europe and the UK, as Nicola Sturgeon recently did.

Scottish nationalism's big myth is that Scotland is essentially different from England: more left of centre, delighted to pay higher taxes etc, and more pro-European – essentially more virtuous, a Holy Willie among nations.

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[8] Smith, 2016

To be fair, this has some basis in recent voting behaviour, perhaps driven by elite views, but the survey data suggests that underlying attitudes in Scotland aren't all that different from England. Before all this started Scotland was marginally more pro-European than the rest of the UK, but moving in the same Eurosceptic direction. There is actually very little evidence of deep-seated, long-standing differences in political preferences between Scotland and England (despite the partisan numbers). Scotland stood marginally to the left on the left-right spectrum, but as much a consequence, I suspect, having left leaning leaders than having different values. But the big myth that Scotland is different and better is the answer to all those inconvenient questions about the economy, fiscal issues, borders and so on. If only we were more Scottish, all would be well. We heard the same on Brexit.

The irony in all this is that English nationalism has revived Scottish nationalism. The differential result in the Brexit referendum is a big problem, but the message the SNP take from is not really an economic one or even a pro-European one, but the lesson of difference, of us and them. Nicola Sturgeon's conference speech to the SNP this year had one theme, one image. Boris Johnson. Her message was that Boris was England, we were not Boris and we were not England. He and the Conservative party (and thus England) embodied the opposite of Scotland's myths about itself so we must leave the UK. The real truth is that England has become *more* like Scotland: half the population now supports nationalism. Just the same, indeed.

Pulling and squeezing

Four years ago, opinion among the population of Scotland divided something like this.

Exhibit E[9]
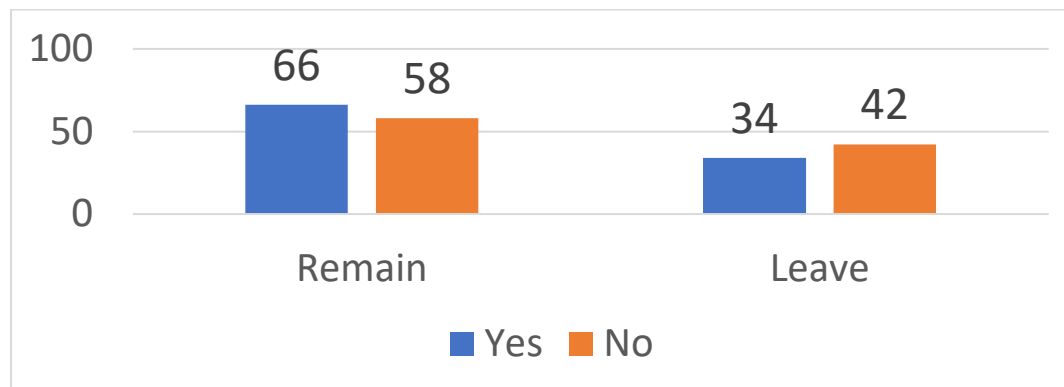
Yes voters were more pro-European, but half of them disliked *all* foreign entanglements. Remain voters were more pro-UK than not, but views on Europe were not very strongly aligned to views on independence. Recently these numbers have been changing a bit, to the advantage of the SNP, as they seek to align pro-European and anti-UK sentiment.

The border problems of Brexit for the UK and Scottish economies are very real, and the SNP understandably emphasise them. But you will struggle to see any realism about the same border problems in the Scotland-UK case. Indeed the idea that by becoming independent Scotland could avoid the economic downside of Brexit not only ignores the economic disruption of leaving the UK, but also the example of Ireland – already independent, and about to suffer very badly from Brexit, with cuts to GDP estimated at between 4 and 7%[10]. Evidence is only of value when it supports your beliefs.

This might just make you shrug at the intellectual honesty of the political class, were it not for potential consequences for Scotland:

- **Us and them**: anything between 25% (Conservative voters) and 50% (those who want to remain the in the UK) of the Scottish population is "othered" as being 'like the English', not truly Scottish.
- **Borders:** A hard Anglo-Scottish border would be even more damaging to the Scottish economy than a hard border with the EU will be, and it won't offset the EU losses.
- **Evidence:** it's all too easy to imagine Scotland in a few years' time negotiating to leave the UK and finding all those border warnings were spot on, that the economics don't add up, with all the while Yes Zealots arguing for no deal. Sound familiar?

[9] Source: British Election Survey 2015 Internet Panel waves 6 and 9
[10] dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Ireland-and-the-Impacts-of-Brexit.pdf

- **Oh, and sovereignty**: no pooled sovereignty with the rest of the UK, no pooled resources. Remember the Barnett formula? And the truly extraordinary proposition that we are willing to share sovereignty with countries from Portugal to Greece, but not with our nearest neighbours, with whom we share a language, culture and for two thirds or moer of our population a common identity.

What we could be seeing is one nationalism, Brexit, which Scotland had opposed, squeezing Scotland into the arms of another nationalism which only a few years before it had rejected, doubling down on the problem and repeating the errors of one vote in response to another.

But what is the alternative?

You've spotted I'm not a fan of nationalism – English, Scottish or indeed anybody else's. It divides rather than unites. It makes belief trump evidence and identity override rationality. It doesn't solve problems, rather creates them. But you might be thinking, this guy's missed the boat. One nationalism has already triumphed, and another one is on the way. Nice abstract argument, mate, but you're on the wrong side of history.

Well maybe. Sometimes the wrong side of history is the right place to be.

But actually we have choices. Some concerning our public debate. It's been dire over Brexit, identity-driven and evidence-light. It wasn't *all* that much better in 2014, and the Scottish debate shows signs taking the Brexit lesson: fake news and crude appeals to identity work. We need to get better than that – and that's a responsibility that falls on people like you – call out the "othering", demand and provide the evidence.

But on the substance of the issue, we are not obliged to turn ourselves into a series of divided, isolated, and impoverished statelets off the coast of Europe. The answer is a simple one: we need the courage to compromise.

Again start with Brexit. I would like to be arguing today for a different version of Remain, one with more change than David Cameron's much derided concessions, actually possible under EU law, eg in relation to migration. Let's see how the election goes. Maybe that opportunity will arise. But assume we are indeed leaving. We still don't know the terms. Despite the present government's fantasy world of Canada-lite, they are still to play for. The closer the economic and social relationship we can agree with the EU today, the easier it will be for our children to take us back into something that looks more like membership of whatever it has developed into. This at least is still to play for.

The same point applies to Scotland. As things stand, we might be looking at a face-off between two intransigent nationalist governments, one demanding and one refusing a referendum. If a referendum somehow happened the best the nationalist movement can hope for is a narrow majority, after an even more divisive campaign, and problems of implementation which would dwarf those of Brexit, on top of Brexit's already damaging effects. The best a reactionary UK government can hope for is a narrow vote to remain in the UK, leaving half the Scottish population disappointed, and maybe a third deeply resentful.

We can do better than that. Not just compromise, but what I have called elsewhere strategic compromise, in which both sides give up things they deeply want in a constitutional settlement. I've argued elsewhere[11] for a new federal constitution for the UK - albeit a deeply asymmetrical one, and I will not set out the full detail today., I have even heard voices in the nationalist movement arguing for the weakest form of independence, which sounds to me like the strongest form of devolution. Even Nicola Sturgeon has suggested people should make proposals for a more powerful Scottish parliament, short of independence.

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[11] Gallagher, 2019,

Changes like this could only work if they represented changes to the whole UK constitution. Not on the table just to keep the Scots happy, you might say. But go back to the beginning of this story. Brexit *won't* fix the problems of the left-behind towns of northern England. It will make them worse. In truth those people's beef was with London not Brussels. It was London which left them behind. So there is an need for a redistribution of political, and in consequence I hope economic, power across the territory of the whole UK, and new institutions at the centre of UK governance to make everyone feel they have a voice and a stake in the UK state, which our Westminster Parliament is at the moment failing to achieve.

What would this look like? Much greater decentralisation of power in England, probably not legislative decentralisation, as Westminster is England's parliament as well as the UK's, but certainly fiscal and administrative decentralisation on a scale comparable to Scotland, perhaps to city-regions. We might start by increasing the powers of city mayors, giving them more control over public services and genuine fiscal powers – matched by appropriate electoral accountability. At the centre we need to create some kind of new federal system of accountability, to replace the present joint ministerial working arrangements. Perhaps the House of Lords can indeed evolve into a Senate of the nations and regions, but we had better start now. An easy first step would be a joint committee of all the UK legislatures – maybe in the Lords, maybe in the Commons – overseeing this transformation and the work of all the UK's governments, perhaps addressing some of the complaints of the devolved about how their disputes with Whitehall never seem to get fixed.

For Scotland (and Northern Ireland and Wales) this would certainly mean some new powers – in particular the powers which, for good or ill, are likely to be repatriated from Brussels. The May government made a complete mess of that, and the present one shows no signs of understanding the error, but there is scope to make it work.

But would this mean simply accepting Brexit if it is finally put into effect, and abandoning the positive relations with the EU for which Scotland voted? Not necessarily, or at least not wholly. We should consider whether the Holyrood should take over responsibility for relations with Brussels in relation to devolved matters, as I have also proposed elsewhere. This isn't as good as EU membership, but, on the lines I have argued above, is a step in the direction to which we will in future eventually return. Brexiteers argue for the dominance of British sovereignty, rejecting the EU. Scottish Nationalists arguing for undivided Scottish sovereignty, and are willing to reject Britain to get it. What Scotland actually needs is a way to keep sharing its sovereignty, which everyone acknowledges, to the greatest extent possible, with both these multinational institutions. I hope that proposition will be made in the General Election campaign

Conclusion

A pipedream, I hear you say. Why would the United Kingdom reorganise itself just to please the Scots? The truth is it needs to reorganise itself to save itself, from enduring internal social and economic division. Why would the SNP, riding high, compromise now? Well they are not getting a referendum now, by the looks of it, and who knows what support for Independence might be if they eventually did. But they shouldn't do a tactical calculation, but a strategic one. The big lesson of Brexit is that the path of separation is a dead end, driven by an ideology which can by its very nature only produce division –and independence plus Brexit really is the worst of both worlds. Scotland's sovereignty is already acknowledged, the question is how best to share it for the benefit of the people. We don't need to hear more arguments about how different we are from people who live next door, speak the same language, watch the same television programmes, and have just the same aspirations for their families. Just as we don't need to hear that the folk in the next house but one are feudal overlords when they suggest some common standards for whole neighbourhood.

We do live in troubling times. Nationalism is problematic, not because it's nasty, although there are some nasty bits of work out there, but even when it sounds quite nice. Nor because it's progressive or reactionary. But because of its underlying nature which requires divisions between people and places, promotes myths over rationality, and demands territorial sovereignty over problems which can be only well addressed when sovereignty is shared.

We can do better than this: we can improve the effectiveness and legitimacy of larger groupings, the EU and the United Kingdom, and propose solutions which promote compromise and shared values rather than divisions and separate identity, based on evidence and not myths, and if in so doing we address the underlying issues that really drive people's concerns people. It's not too late for Scotland and the UK, and maybe not even for the UK and Europe either.

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