GLOSSARY

The four nations
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Devolution
Holyrood
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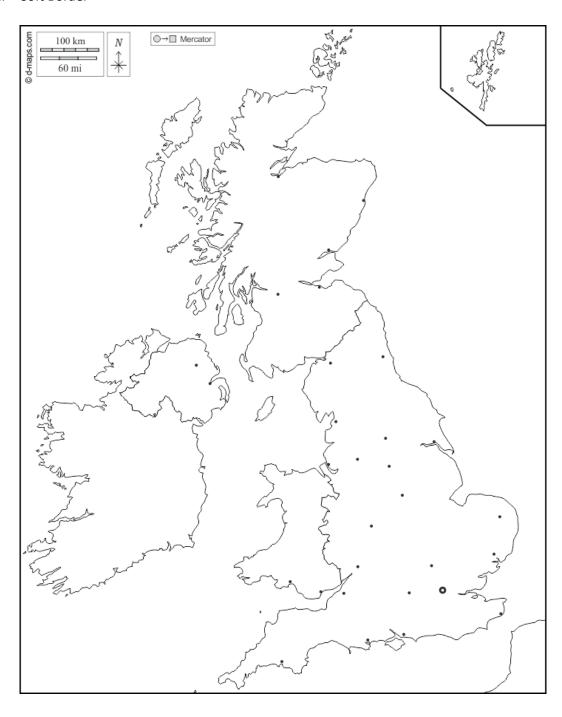The Senedd
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A road trip through the ancient past and shaky future of the (dis)United Kingdom

The Atlantic, By Tom McTague (extracts)

THE GRIM REALITY for Britain as it faces up to 2022 is that no other major power on Earth stands quite as close to its own dissolution. Given its recent record, perhaps this should not be a surprise. In the opening two decades of the 21st century, Britain has effectively lost two wars and seen its grand strategy collapse, first with the 2008

5 financial crisis, which blew up its social and economic settlement, and, then, in 2016, when the country chose to rip up its long-term foreign policy by leaving the European Union, achieving the rare feat of erecting an economic border with its largest trading partner *and* with a part of itself, Northern Ireland, while adding fuel to the fire of Scottish independence for good measure. And if this wasn't enough, it then spectacularly <u>failed in its response</u> to the coronavirus pandemic, combining one of the worst death rates in the developed world with one of the worst

10 economic recessions.

Yet however extraordinary this run of events has been, it seems to me that Britain's existential threat is not simply the result of poor governance—an undeniable reality—but of something much deeper: the manifestation of something close to a *spiritual* crisis.

The 20 years from 2000 to 2020 might have been objectively awful for Britain, but the country has been

15 through other grim periods in its recent past and not seen its coherence come quite as close to breakdown as it is today. At the heart of Britain's crisis is a crisis of identity. Put simply, no other major power is quite as conflicted about whether it is even a nation to begin with, let alone what it takes to act like one.

The problem is that Britain is not a traditional country like France, Germany, or even the United States. "Britain," here, is shorthand for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—a collection of nations

20 and territories, combining England, Scotland, Wales, and the disputed land of Northern Ireland—while also being a legitimate, sovereign, and unitary nation-state itself. With the passing of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, it is now one of the rare states in the Western world whose name is not simply the nation it represents: The United Kingdom is more than Britain and the British. Some of its citizens believe themselves to be British, while others say they are not British at all; others say they are British *and* another nationality—Scottish or Welsh, say. In

25 Northern Ireland it is even more complicated, with some describing themselves as *only* British while others say they are *only* Irish.

For many, the root of Britain's existential crisis today is Brexit—an apparent spasm of English nationalism that has broken the social contract holding Britain's union of nations together, revealing the country's true nature as an unequal union, of the English, by the English, for the English. Although Brexit was carried by a majority of the

30 U.K. as a whole, it was opposed by two of its constituent parts, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It was the votes of England, its dominant nation, that carried the day.

Yet the truth is that the *Englishness* of Brexit only matters if people see themselves as something other than British. So long as an American president has carried the Electoral College, it is irrelevant whether they were rejected by the voters in a given state because, at root, the voters are *Americans* first. Does Britain, as a nation,

35 even enjoy this basic tenet of national belonging any longer? Brexit, then, might have exacerbated the tensions within the union, but it did not cause them. If anything, Brexit revealed the scale of the problem that was already there.

OVER THE SUMMER, I had the opportunity to see for myself just how disunited the U.K. has become. With three months of paternity leave and a once-in-a-century pandemic leaving dreams of tropical island hopping in the

40 dust, I seized a rare chance to travel the length and breadth of my own country. (…)

Was I touring an anachronistic country, one destined to break up into its old component parts? The breakup of the U.K. is certainly not unthinkable. We tend to think of the world's most powerful nations as unshakable actors on the world stage, but of course they are not. You only have to cast your eyes back a few generations to the last time the U.K. lost a major chunk of its territory, when London failed to build a nation from the state it

45 had created between Britain and Ireland in 1800. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed entirely, unable to bear the weight of its failures as demands for independence from the periphery turned into demands for independence from the central state itself: Russia.

When you speak to people in Westminster—the heart of the British state—the extent of their pessimism about the future of the country is striking. (…)

TEXT 2 - The United Kingdom is broken. It's time for a new British federation

Simon Jenkins, *The Guardian*, Tue 5 Jul 2022

The legendary Welsh rugby star Phil Bennett, who died last month, would rouse his team against England, calling them "bastards … taking our coal, our water, our steel … They exploited, raped, controlled and punished us – that's who you are playing." It was fighting talk, only half in jest. It was Celts against the English.

In British history and politics, the Celts have grievances that wax and wane, but they never heal. They have

5 erupted once more over Brexit and Ireland and in a revived demand for Scottish independence, a process Boris Johnson and latterly Keir Starmer have vowed to resist. The result of this relentless nagging pressure has been to make the boundaries of the United Kingdom among the most unstable in Europe.

That a once-imperial nation on a small archipelago in the Atlantic cannot hold its domestic union in place is astonishing. Partly underlying its disunity is a notional split of the population into "Celts" and "Anglo-Saxons",

10 based on a fanciful conquest of one by the other supposedly in the fifth century. Modern genetics has shown the divide to be meaningless, yet it is embedded in the politics of the so-called Celtic fringe – or at least in England's reaction to it.

Traditional histories maintained that some time in the late bronze or iron ages a group of European tribes called Celts invaded and overwhelmed the ancient Britons, spreading their disparate but related languages over

15 the entire population. They survived the Roman occupation intact but tradition again holds that, on the Roman retreat, they were overwhelmed in turn by invading Saxons. These invaders reputedly drove the Celts westwards and created an English empire of the British Isles. No trace of the preceding Celtic remained in its language.

The details of both these invasions have long been challenged by scholars. In the 1960s, the historian JRR Tolkien dismissed the Celtic age as a "fabulous twilight … a magic bag". Since the 1990s, DNA archaeology has

20 indicated that the diverse peoples of the British Isles were many and various, their settlement dating back to the stone age. As the prehistorian Barry Cunliffe has argued, today's Celtic speakers probably migrated up the Atlantic littoral from Iberia long before anyone knew of Celts.

This might be of no account were it not for the manner in which the eastern Britons asserted supremacy over their western neighbours and maintained it ever since. From the Normans onwards, the rulers of the half of the

25 British Isles called England created one of the most centralised states in Europe. Medieval wars against the Welsh and Scots and later conflicts with the Irish duly bred a passionate western and northern aversion towards the English. In the 19th century this was reciprocated by an English invention of a "Celtic" stereotype. Matthew Arnold dismissed Celts as "romantic and sentimental … lacking the temperament to form a political entity", so unlike the "disciplined and steadily obedient" Anglo-Saxons.

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It is significant that this collective abuse of the Welsh, Scottish and Irish never met a collective response. There was no Celtic solidarity, never one nation, language or culture, let alone a military or political alliance. To the English these peoples should see themselves as what amounted to English counties, like Yorkshire or Kent, to be assimilated into a "great British" union. Wales was forced to join in 1536, Scotland in 1707 and Ireland in 1801.

35 Wales came into union peacefully, Scotland grudgingly and Ireland never. Irish rebellions followed one after another until it won its independence in 1922. Thereafter a rump United Kingdom did cohere. It was sustained by a Tory unionist obsession and by a Labour party that saw it as embodying Aneurin Bevan's "unity of the British working class". Celts were for fairy tales and antiquarians.

This makes the more extraordinary what happened at the end of the 20th century. Infuriated by Thatcher's

40 centralism, in 1989 a majority of Scottish MPs demanded the return of a Scottish parliament. Seizing the moment, Labour's Tony Blair would later deliver a modest devolution to new Scottish and Welsh assemblies. These assemblies sparked a sudden outbreak of regional identity politics. Nationalism surged back to life. In Scotland, the Tory party all but vanished.

In 2007, Scottish nationalists took power in Edinburgh and have never lost it. Though the popularity of

45 independence among the Scots has risen and fallen, voters under the age of 50 are overwhelmingly in favour. The odds at present are on Scottish independence one day. Meanwhile in Northern Ireland, Brexit chaos has fuelled an expectation of a vote for reunion with the south in the future. Even in Wales, the nationalist Plaid Cymru has acquired new vigour, with support for an "independent" Wales at between a quarter and a third of voters.

50 The response of England to this burst of dissent has been inert. Across Europe, nation-building has been long been a vexed art. Violently in Yugoslavia and Ukraine, and relatively peacefully in Spain and Italy, central governments have struggled ceaselessly to hold the loyalty of their component peoples. As the political historian Linda Colley has shown, this has required respect for identity and ingenuity in devolution. German *Länder* enjoy considerable autonomy. Spain's Basques and Catalans have degrees of economic, fiscal and judicial sovereignty.

55 Swiss cantons even have differing definitions of democracy.

Britain's Boris Johnson really could not care less. The prime minister has called devolution in Scotland "a disaster". After Brexit, he insisted that all EU powers and subsidies be repatriated not to the devolved governments but to London. On trade, he appeases the wildest Northern Ireland unionism. A mere one in five of voters in England now profess to care if Scotland goes independent, yet Johnson fights to retain this first English

60 empire with all the fervour of Edward I.

If I were Northern Irish, I would vote to rejoin the prospering south. If I were Scottish, I would wonder why I was once richer than Ireland and Denmark but am now poorer, and would opt for independence, whatever the pain. Yet I am neither of these things. I believe that a federated United Kingdom of England, Scotland and Wales benefits greatly from its diversity.

65 Lumping Celts together as one people and one problem that can be swept under a unionist carpet is demeaning to the ambitions of Irish, Scots and Welsh. It will not silence them. It will not help the search for what is now critical, a bespoke autonomy for each nation in a new British federation.

Simon Jenkins is a Guardian columnist. His book The Celts: A Sceptical History is published this month by Profile

Table 1: Population of the UK and its constituent countries, mid-2021

	Population mid-2011	Population mid-2021	Median age mid-2011	Median age mid-2021	Population density (pop per sq. km) mid-2021
UK	63,285,000	67,026,000	39.6	40.7	276
England	53,107,000	56,536,000	39.4	40.5	434
Wales	3,064,000	3,105,000	41.5	43.1	150
Northern Ireland	1,814,000	1,905,000	37.4	39.8	141
Scotland	5,300,000	5,480,000	41.3	42.2	70

Source: Office for National Statistics, National Records of Scotland, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency - Population estimates

Will Nationalism Break Britain?

By Fintan O'Toole, Foreign Affairs, *February 21, 2023*

In September 2022, the body of Queen Elizabeth was driven across Scotland from Balmoral Castle, where she died, to the royal palace of Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh. The coffin was draped in the Royal Standard of Scotland and carried by members of the Royal Regiment of Scotland, who wore tartan kilts. For the first six days after her death, the queen's passing seemed a very Scottish affair indeed. Only then was her body flown south to London, where the rest of the
5 United Kingdom got to show its respects.

This last journey echoed another royal passage, prompted by the death of a previous Elizabeth, that can reasonably be taken as a point of origin for the United Kingdom itself. In April 1603, King James VI of Scotland, then just 36, began a much slower ride from Edinburgh to London, where he would succeed the childless Queen Elizabeth I as James I of England and Wales. A year later, in his first address to the English Parliament, he compared the union of his two
10 kingdoms to a marriage from which there could be no divorce: "What God hath conjoined then, let no man separate. I am the husband, and all the whole isle is my lawful wife." Taking the hint, James's court dramatist, William Shakespeare, wrote his most terrifying play, *King Lear*. It warns of all the dreadful things that can happen if a united kingdom is foolishly broken up.

Anxiety about the future of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland is not new. It goes back to the
15 beginning of the story. Yet for many British citizens, the death of Queen Elizabeth II has given a sharp new edge to these old apprehensions. The stability she embodied for so long has been, as Shakespeare might have put it, interred with her bones. Liz Truss, the prime minister whom the queen swore in two days before she died, plunged the United Kingdom almost immediately into a fiscal crisis and was gone just weeks later. Since then, the country has faced soaring energy prices, widespread strikes, and what will likely be the worst economic contraction in decades. Having abandoned
20 Europe, the British government now finds itself not only less influential in the world but also increasingly at odds with Scotland and Northern Ireland, where large majorities voted to stay in the EU. And the monarchy, once an imposing symbol of British influence and British identity, is now the breeding ground for lurid tabloid tales of petty fratricidal wars and princes mired in scandal and enmity.

Of course, the United Kingdom has endured existential crises before. Formally inaugurated in 1707, when Scotland
25 dissolved its own parliament and joined with England and Wales, the kingdom has grown and shrunk over the centuries, with the addition of all of Ireland in 1801 and the loss of most of it in 1922. Yet this peculiar multinational state persists. The first modern book on the topic of dissolution—*The Breakup of Britain*, by the brilliant Scottish socialist intellectual Tom Nairn—was published in 1977. Nairn asserted with absolute confidence, "There is no doubt that the old British state is going down." Nearly a half century later, it is still afloat.

30 Although Nairn's dire prognosis may have been premature, it could nonetheless have been quite prescient. He described the end of the United Kingdom as "a slow foundering rather than the *Titanic*-type disaster so often predicted"—a useful metaphor for the way the good ship *Britannia* now seems to be holed below the waterline. Scottish politics are now dominated by the Scottish National Party (SNP), for which leaving the kingdom is a defining mission. For the first time, Northern Ireland has lost the Protestant majority that for more than a century has formed the backbone of its union with
35 Britain; demography alone suggests that its population will, over the coming decades, be ever more inclined toward

unification with the Republic of Ireland. Even Wales, which England annexed as far back as 1284, has become increasingly distinct from it. In December, the interim report of the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales, established by the devolved government in Cardiff, found that current political arrangements with London are not sustainable. The commission pointed to more radical options, including the possibility of Wales
40 becoming a fully independent country.

Most intriguing, as popular support for <u>Brexit</u> revealed, English voters themselves are increasingly asserting an English <u>nationalism</u> that was previously buried under British and imperial identities. These multiplying challenges leave the United Kingdom unsure about not just its place in the international order but also whether it can continue to be regarded as a single place. A polity that once shaped the world may no longer be able to hold its own shape.

45 **SHAKY LEGS**

The United Kingdom may still stand, but its foundations are shallower than they have been for many centuries. **The first of those foundations was empire.** To create one, England needed peace on its home island and control over its troublesome and fractious near neighbor, Ireland. It needed to know that if it went to war with Spain or France, it would not be attacked from the north by claymore-wielding Scots and that its European rivals could not use Ireland as
50 a base from which to invade the homeland. Conversely, especially for the Scottish elites, England could offer a lucrative share in its rapidly growing mercantile power. The bargain made sense for both sides: England could dominate the island of Great Britain, but by joining it, Scotland could help it dominate the world.

Second, there was Protestantism. In the sixteenth century, the Reformation took different forms in the various British nations. Over time, Scotland became typically Presbyterian, Wales strongly Methodist, and England loyal to the official
55 Episcopalian church that grew out of Henry VIII's split with Rome. The tensions between these faiths were bitter. Ultimately, however, they carried much less weight than the imperative of not being Catholic. Ireland, where the majority held on to a strongly Catholic identity, was therefore a perpetually fraught presence in the United Kingdom. But Protestantism solidified the sense of commonality among the other nations.

A third footing was provided by the industrial revolution. Until the 1980s, anyone traveling around the United
60 Kingdom would have been struck by the deep shared history of physical labor that encompassed the Welsh coalfields, the potteries of the English Midlands, the cotton mills of Manchester, the ironworks of Glasgow, and the shipyards of Belfast. This world forged its own bond of unity—the trade unions and the Labour Party that came, in the twentieth century, to represent a national working class that cut across regional divisions. Labour may have been, at least some of the time, radically reformist, but in terms of national identity, it was also deeply conservative. It gave ordinary people a
65 powerful sense of common political purpose. The welfare state it created after World War II, buttressed by common institutions like the National Health Service, provided the same benefits to ordinary people regardless of what part of the United Kingdom they inhabited.

Finally, there was prestige. Britishness was a winning brand. The subject peoples of the empire may not have felt the same way, but for the denizens of the mother country, **the "great" in Great Britain came to seem, even more than a**
70 **geographic qualification, an obvious expression of moral and political supremacy**. After the rather unfortunate business of the loss of the American colonies, the United Kingdom had an amazing run of successes: crushing Napoleon; smashing (with a violence it was rather good at forgetting) revolts in Africa, the Caribbean, Ireland, India, and elsewhere; defeating Russia in the Crimean War; humiliating China; and winning two world wars.

Even during its postwar decline, when the empire was dissolving and the United Kingdom was settling into its role as junior partner to the new Anglophone world power across the Atlantic, **the country was extraordinarily good at replacing hard power with soft**. Its sclerotic Establishment was slow to appreciate them, but the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, Judi Dench, and Monty Python cast a spell of glamour over Britishness. The physical empire was replaced by a cultural realm. In the arts and entertainment, in science and thought, Britishness retained a cachet for British citizens themselves as well as for foreigners. Rule Britannia became Cool Britannia.

The success of this branding lay in the ability to encompass two kinds of coolness. The idea of a chic, dynamic pop culture was twinned with the self-image of phlegmatic Brits. Like James Bond's martinis, the British people could be shaken by world events—the Suez Crisis of 1956, the collapse of the pound sterling in 1992—but they would never be stirred enough to make their own system of government, rooted in the mysteries of its unwritten constitution, truly volatile.

These are deep foundations. Many countries that now seem quite stable have shakier legs to stand on. The weakening of one, or even two, of the United Kingdom's pillars would not seem to pose an existential threat to the country. But how about all four? For on any objective analysis, it is impossible to believe that any of these underpinnings of Britishness remain firmly in place today.

THE SETTING SUN

The death of Queen Elizabeth II marked, in a belated way, the demise of empire. When she ascended the throne in 1952, her subjects constituted more than a quarter of the world's population. When she died, the United Kingdom had scarcely more than a dozen overseas territories, most of them island tax havens. Even the Commonwealth—long a convenient way to sustain a more symbolic form of cultural imperium—has lost much of its meaning. Such prominent members as Australia and New Zealand are considering following Barbados, which became a republic in 2021, in ditching the British monarch as head of state. The carnival of empire is now, at best, a nostalgic display. At worst, and arguably more realistically, it is a nightmare of unfinished business: the wages of slavery, racism, and savage brutality. (Recent work, such as Caroline Elkins's *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire,* make one marvel at the United Kingdom's ability to sustain for so long its self-image as a benign and civilized colonizer.) One of the attractions of Scottish or Welsh nationalism is the distance it creates between those nations and the guilt of imperialism: shame can be attributed to the United Kingdom and sloughed off as the country is left behind.

As for Protestant identity, the 2021 British census provides a rude awakening. For the first time ever, less than half the country's 67 million citizens—46 percent—describe themselves as Christian, a staggering decline from 2001, when 72 percent did. Never mind the historic divide between Protestants and Catholics; basic Christian identity no longer serves as a marker of Britishness. **See here**:

The United Kingdom's prime minister throughout the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher, smashed Britain's industrial base along with its trade unions. During her decade in power, manufacturing output grew by 21 percent in France, 50 percent in Japan, and 17 percent in the United States. In the United Kingdom, it fell by nine percent. This decline began a decisive collapse from which the United Kingdom's reputation as an industrial powerhouse has never recovered. Manufacturing now represents ten percent of the country's economic output and just eight percent of its jobs.

For one part of Thatcher's agenda—breaking organized labor—this was a triumph. But for another—the reassertion of Britishness—it was a long-term problem. As long as the <u>Cold War</u> was still a dominant narrative, Thatcher's projection

of Britain as a warrior nation facing down enemies from Berlin to the Falklands compensated for the real loss of industrial power. A mythically militant Britishness could mask the day-to-day experience of decline. But only for so long. Thatcher was simultaneously pumping up a British national identity and eroding its social foundations. Over time,
115 this contradiction was bound to have consequences for the viability of the United Kingdom. When Thatcher carpet-bombed the working class's political base, the collateral damage was a once potent sense of shared belonging that is now greatly diminished. The common culture in which huge numbers of people in England, Scotland, and Wales did the same jobs, belonged to the same unions, and voted for the same party (Labour) is almost gone.

Since the turn of this century, the prestige of Britishness has had to compete with the emergence of new centers
120 **of power in Scotland, Wales, and—albeit in more complex ways—Northern Ireland**. Tony Blair's Labour government, elected in 1997, gambled that the establishment of devolved administrations in Edinburgh, Cardiff, and Belfast would be enough to mollify all but the most fervent Scottish, Welsh, and Irish nationalists. Yet at least in Scotland and Wales, the very existence of those elected assemblies, and of ministers and leaders who behave like governments, has created a sense that significant political spaces, with their own agendas and discourses, exist beyond
125 the reach of the London-based elites.

Meanwhile, the tradition of British military élan has finally lost its luster. During the Iraq invasion in 2003, when he stood shoulder to shoulder with U.S. President George W. Bush, Blair imagined that he could use, as Thatcher had done, military victory to consolidate a sense of shared British patriotism. But even within the larger disaster of Bush's wars, Britain's experience was a stark tale of hubris and nemesis. In 2016, at the release of his official inquiry into the
130 Iraq war, the career civil servant John Chilcot issued a blunt assessment of British power: "From 2006, the U.K. military was conducting two enduring campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. It did not have sufficient resources to do so." Chilcot described the country's "humiliating" performance in the city of Basra, where British forces had to make deals with the same local militias that were attacking them. After these painful failures, it is no longer possible to see military might as part of the allure of Britishness. The United Kingdom still has important military and intelligence capacities, and
135 former Prime Minister Boris Johnson's moral and practical support for <u>Ukraine</u> had a very real impact. But it is striking that Truss's signature promise to increase the military budget to three percent of GDP evaporated along with her ill-fated premiership. Even among conservative hawks, there is almost no appetite in London for fantasies about renewed global military power and no sense that glory of arms on foreign fields can ever again paper over the cracks on the home front.

140 **LITTLER ENGLAND**

Brexit was in part an attempt to compensate for the waning of British hard power. As the former Conservative cabinet minister Jacob Rees-Mogg framed it at his party's conference in October 2017, a break with Brussels would be a continuation of historical English triumphs on the continent: "It's Waterloo! It's Crécy! It's Agincourt! We win all these things!" Well, not all of them. If Brexit was intended to provide a great psychological victory over the European
145 Union, it instead swept away any notion of British immunity to a politics of mass delusion. **Amid mounting evidence that leaving Europe has made the United Kingdom's long-term economic problems both deeper and more acute, the political pantomime performed by five different prime ministers in the six years since the Brexit referendum has destroyed all notions of British calm, competence, or coherence.**

For a while, the English (although certainly not the Scots or the Welsh) entertained themselves with the spectacle of
150 Johnson's knowingly ironic clowning, but the joke ceased to be funny after the COVID-19 outbreak. As Johnson and his circle dithered and broke the lockdown rules they had imposed on the public, the devolved regional administrations

appeared far more capable. For the first time in many centuries, in the face of a common threat, people in Scotland looked to Edinburgh for leadership, and those in Wales looked to Cardiff. The bitter truth was that their respective first ministers, Nicola Sturgeon and Mark Drakeford, did not have to be spectacularly brilliant to seem impressive compared with the chaos-inducing Johnson.

Beneath the political farce of Brexit lies the mundane tragedy of impoverishment. "The truth is we just got a lot poorer," Paul Johnson, the director of the London-based Institute for Fiscal Studies, said, after the British government announced its latest budget assessment this past November. He likened the country's disastrous recent policies—a list that includes, along with Brexit itself, ill-considered cuts to education and other social investments—to "a series of economic own goals." According to the independent spending watchdog the Office for Budget Responsibility, living standards are expected to fall by an alarming seven percent over the next two years, with the country's economic contraction nearly on par with Russia's. This harm can reasonably be called self-inflicted, but employing that description raises the awkward question of which national self is being talked about. **After all, Brexit was decisively rejected by the people of Scotland and Northern Ireland, who have good reason to think that the ensuing economic debacle was needlessly imposed on them by the English.**

Indeed, at least since the 1980s, the smaller nations in the United Kingdom have been thinking about Europe very differently from their English counterparts. Before the United Kingdom joined what was then called the European Economic Community in 1973, almost all nationalists—English, Northern Irish, Scottish, and Welsh—distrusted and feared it as a burgeoning superstate that would destroy their individuality. (In 1975, when the United Kingdom held its first referendum on continuing EEC membership, the SNP claimed that staying in Europe would "strike a death blow to [Scotland's] very existence as a nation.") As the EU expanded and became ever more multilingual, however, it began to offer the United Kingdom's non-English constituencies a new kind of buffer from London: an international body in which they could advocate for their own interests and remain connected to bigger powers without being dominated by them. Thus, in the EU era, the SNP promoted the rapid expansion of trade and professional ties between Scotland and the continent, allowing it to ditch its image as a throwback and project itself as modern, open, cosmopolitan, and European.

English nationalists, to the contrary, tended to see any pooling of sovereignty with Brussels as a betrayal of their own superior destiny. As Enoch Powell, the highly influential former cabinet minister and right-wing member of Parliament, put it in 1977, "submission to laws this nation has not made" raised the haunting prospect "that we . . . will soon have nothing left to die for." It was not accidental that Powell—and such political heirs as former UK Independence Party leader Nigel Farage—combined opposition to EU membership with rage against immigrants: both stood for the surrender of English greatness to foreign interference.

In this sense, English nationalism today has become an outlier among nationalist movements in the United Kingdom: more obviously right-wing, anti-immigrant, nostalgic for past greatness, and, above all, anti-European. It is also in part driven by a justified resentment at the way in which England was left without its own specific political identity during Tony Blair's devolution. Unlike its Scottish, Northern Irish, and Welsh counterparts, Englishness was given no positive expression in political life. It remained incoherent and poorly articulated—until, of course, the Brexit referendum gave it a cause and an opportunity. This was what almost no one who was thinking about the future unity of the United Kingdom had considered: that its most successful nationalist eruption might come not on the Celtic fringes but in the English heartland.

YOU CAN CHECK OUT, BUT YOU CAN'T LEAVE

Driven as it was by English politicians and English voters, Brexit could only increase disaffection from the United Kingdom in both Northern Ireland and Scotland. According to the most recent report of the authoritative British Attitudes Survey, more than half the population of Scotland—52 percent—now say they favor Scottish independence—even though just 45 percent voted for it in the 2014 referendum. Likewise, the proportion of people in Northern Ireland wishing to leave the United Kingdom and join with the rest of Ireland, which before Brexit rarely exceeded 20 percent, has risen dramatically. Now, as many as 30 percent favor a united Ireland, and only 49 percent—no longer a majority—support remaining in the United Kingdom, with the rest undecided and arguably persuadable either way. Especially remarkable is the growing overlap between those who voted to remain in the EU and those who are now drifting away from Britishness. In Scotland in 2016, only 44 percent of Remainers favored independence; now, 65 percent do so. In Northern Ireland, 64 percent of those who voted Remain wanted to stay in the United Kingdom. Now, just 37 percent do so.

This drift is not just a matter of sentiment. In legal fact, Brexit has set in train a process of detaching Northern Ireland from Great Britain. In November 2022, British Foreign Minister James Cleverly told a House of Commons committee that Northern Ireland was as integral to the United Kingdom as was his own constituency in the east of England. "Northern Ireland. North Essex. They are part of the U.K.," he said. But Brexit has already made Northern Ireland quite unlike North Essex: Northern Ireland has stayed in the EU's single market and customs union, thanks to the controversial Northern Ireland Protocol of the United Kingdom's withdrawal agreement, whereas North Essex has, along with the rest of the country, left them. This sets an extraordinary precedent. No polity that was confident about its future integrity would allow one of its constituent parts to be governed by a very different international regime, and both Johnson and his immediate predecessor, May, had strenuously disavowed the possibility of such an arrangement. But in the end, the need to, in Johnson's words, "get Brexit done" trumped the imperative of preserving the union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

There is, however, a further irony in the effects of Brexit on national identities within the United Kingdom. In another play that Shakespeare wrote for James I, *Macbeth*, the porter jokes about the effects of alcohol on "lechery": "it provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance." Brexit has greatly enhanced the desire for independence among the United Kingdom's constituent parts, especially Scotland. But it makes the performance a lot more difficult. Before Brexit, political, economic, and trade relations between England and an independent Scotland would have been eased by the continuity of shared participation in Brussels's structures and processes. Now, were England to remain outside the EU and Scotland to rejoin it, the barriers between the two nations would be formidable. Brexit may have inclined the Scots more toward independence, but it has also provided a rather scary example of how hard it is to leave a union, whether European or British. And whereas the United Kingdom was in the EU for less than 50 years, Scotland has been in the United Kingdom for more than three centuries.

Even the mechanics of holding another vote on independence are fraught. In November 2022, the British supreme court unanimously ruled that "the Scottish Parliament does not have the power to legislate for a referendum on Scottish independence." This means that no such plebiscite can be lawful unless the British government in London agrees to it. Sturgeon is too canny to press ahead in these circumstances, her natural wariness no doubt reinforced by the bitter experience of the Catalan government, which in 2017 staged an unconstitutional and ultimately abortive referendum on independence from Spain. Her response to the ruling has been to declare that Scotland's vote in the next British general election will be a "de facto" independence referendum. But this approach, too, is rife with uncertainties: a general election is not a referendum, and if pro-independence parties win a majority, it would still not be clear how their aims could be put into effect without London's consent.

Nor is a serious push for a united Ireland likely to take place soon. There may no longer be a unionist majority in Northern Ireland, but there is no nationalist majority either. The most notable political trend is the large number of Northern Irish voters who say they are open-minded about the future but in no hurry to leave the United Kingdom. Over the long term, the prosperity of Ireland, the dynamic effects of Northern Ireland's alignment with the EU, and its changing demography will make Irish unity increasingly likely—but not in the next decade.

REFORM OR DIE

What all of this means is that there may yet be a chance for the United Kingdom to save itself. Everything will depend on who forms the next British government—the next general election must take place no later than January 2025—and what that government does about constitutional reform. The current prime minister, Rishi Sunak, is a technocrat at heart and seems to have little interest in identity politics. Yet if the economic reality continues to look grim, his party may have little option but to double down on the defense of an archaic Britishness. An intransigent Conservative party that somehow wins reelection by appealing to English voters to stand firm against the rebellious Scots and rally around the existing political order could turn a slow process of dissolution into an immediate crisis. It is not hard to imagine that, amid a deepening economic recession and with Sturgeon already a hate figure for the Tory press in England (in December 2022, one column in Rupert Murdoch's tabloid *The Sun* compared her to the mass murderer Rosemary West), some Conservatives might actually relish a "patriotic" rhetorical war against Scottish and Welsh nationalists. The result, however, would be merely to exacerbate divisions and speed up the end of the United Kingdom.

The current likelihood, however, is that Labour leader Keir Starmer will be the next prime minister. Starmer has endorsed a plan, drawn up by a commission headed by former Prime Minister (and proud Scot) Gordon Brown, to clean up the British Parliament, replace the unelected House of Lords with an elected second chamber of "nations and regions," and devolve more power to local governments in what Brown calls "the biggest transfer of power out of Westminster . . . that our country has seen." If Starmer does achieve power, he may not be quite so enthusiastic about giving it away. And even these reforms may not be enough to save the United Kingdom. The case for the creation of a fully federal state seems strong. It has worked well for the former British dominions of Canada and Australia. If Quebec, which came very close to voting for independence in 1995, has settled down as a distinct society within a larger union, might not the same be possible for Scotland and Wales? But the English habit of muddling through—what Winston Churchill called KBO, for "keep buggering on"—is a powerful force for inertia.

The United Kingdom created a beta version of democracy in the eighteenth century: innovative and progressive in its day but long since surpassed by newer models. The country has, however, been extremely reluctant to abandon even the most egregious anachronisms. The biggest transformation in its governance was joining the European Union, and that has been reversed. It now has to make a momentous and existential choice—between a radically reimagined United Kingdom and a stubborn adherence to KBO. If it chooses the latter, it will muddle on toward its own extinction.

See also

ON the Disunited Kingdom
https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/how-brexit-might-break-britain-disunited-kingdom-n1062526
On the demography
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