Chapter Nine: Saving the UK4

The failure of Home Rule All Round

The last chapter looked at the way in which the UK was formed. But now that we are in the twenty-first century, how is the UK to be held together? Some form of devolution for the 'four nations' of the UK has been a regular part of political debate over at least the last generation. But how seriously has it been implemented? G. K. Chesterton said of Christianity that it had not been tried and found wanting but found difficult and consequently not tried.[1] The same, this book will argue, can be said of devolution. The same insouciance, where the constitutional implications of belonging to the EU is concerned, now applies to the status of the 'four nations' within the UK.

Proposals for devolution go back a long way. They originally concerned the area created by the Act of Union of 1800, in which the whole of Ireland was incorporated into the UK. The Irish MP Isaac Butt proposed 'Home Government' in 1870, with parliaments in Scotland, Ireland and 'England plus Wales' (hence no separate parliament for Wales), all subordinate to Westminster. Gladstone supported Home Rule for Ireland as a way of preserving both the Union and the sovereignty of the Westminster Parliament but opposed the idea of the Irish MPs remaining in Westminster.[2] To his opponents, including those who broke away to form the Liberal Unionists, allowing Ireland a separate parliament would be the beginning of a move towards independence, and it is true that both the Act of Union in 1707 and that of 1800 had involved the abolition of the Scottish and Irish parliaments respectively.

1 It is a quote from Chesterton's *What's Wrong with the World*. It is found in Part One, 'The Homelessness of Man,' Section V. 'The Unfinished Temple'.

2 See Keating, *State and Nation in the United Kingdom*, p. 32.

The Liberal Unionist Joseph Chamberlain, who had split with Gladstone on precisely this issue, had his own idea for 'Home Rule All Round,' with Irish representation at Westminster continuing whatever was granted to Ireland in the way of home rule. This was subsequently backed by Gladstone's successor, the Earl of Rosebery, Liberal Prime Minister in 1895 (as it was at the time by the Welsh MP and future Prime Minister, David Lloyd George).

'Home Rule All Round' obviously referred to all the nations of the UK, including Wales. But given the fact that at the end of the nineteenth century the most pressing concern was Ireland, it was in the context of the future of Ireland that 'Home Rule All Round' came to a head towards the end of the First World War. What is noticeable from the constitutional debates of the time is that they raised precisely the issues that were raised at the end of the last century over devolution. Was Home Rule a way of avoiding independence or would it make it more likely? Why should Irish MPs be able to vote in Parliament on matters that concerned English, Welsh and Scottish MPs, while they would be unable to vote on matters that concerned the Irish Parliament alone (the West Lothian question associated with Tam Dalyell goes back a century further). The main difference is that for 'liberal imperialists' like Joseph Chamberlain 'Home Rule All Round' was seen in terms of the wider Empire and the role of the dominions in particular.

The early twentieth century was a time when people from all parties talked about some form of 'federal devolution' in the United Kingdom. Home Rule for Ireland was on the statute book from September 1914, but implementation was to be delayed until the end of the war. It was made more difficult by the Ulster Unionists, who resisted any form of Home Rule for the whole of Ireland, and by the Easter Rising in 1916. But perhaps more important was the effect of over a century during which, as the last chapter pointed out, Ireland had been incorporated into the United Kingdom but had seen its population remain stagnant and had been largely unaffected by the industrial revolution taking place elsewhere. On top of that was the effect of the famine in the 1840s, during which a million died and a further million were forced into emigration. Ireland's population of about four-and-a-half million on the outbreak of World War One was hardly any higher than its population at the time of the Act of Union with Britain in 1800.[3] The island of Britain, on the other hand, had seen its popula-

3 The figures are striking. Cormac O'Grada published an article in 1979 entitled 'The Population of Ireland 1700–1900: A survey,' *Annales de Démographie Historique* 1979, pp. 281–299. It contains a table of the population of the whole island of Ireland dur-

tion treble during the same period, mostly in England. Two results of this are often under-estimated. One was the fact that three times as many citizens of Irish origin ended up in the USA than lived in Ireland itself, a major influence upon US opinion and a contributing factor to its reluctance to become involved in wars between 'colonial powers' in the twentieth century. The other was an obvious reduction (insofar as seats were proportional to population, which was only partly so) in the influence of Irish MPs on the Westminster Parliament, even though Irish MPs did sometimes end up sustaining Liberal governments in power. They did so in 1885 and, most notably, in 1910, when Irish votes allowed the reforming Liberal government first elected in 1906 to continue in office after an election in which Conservatives and Liberals won the same number of seats.[4]

Modern discussions of devolution frequently point to England as the 'elephant in the room' and explain that something like five-sixths of the UK population is located there. At the time of the Act of Union (when of course the whole of Ireland was included in the UK) England represented only slightly more than half the UK population. Had anything like 'Home Rule All Round' been implemented at that point, England's dominance might have been much less marked. The island of Ireland, had it grown at the same rate of Britain, would have had about fifteen million inhabitants by the time of the First World War – about double the number of inhabitants that it has now.[5]

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ing those two centuries (p. 283). He gives a population of about 4 million in 1781, 7 million in 1821, 5 million in 1881 (after the famine and emigration) and 4 million in 1926. The population of the whole island is now about 7 million, roughly what it was two centuries ago. By way of contrast, the population of Britain roughly trebled in the period between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century, from 6–7 million to about 20 million, doubled again by the end of the century to around 40 million and then added another 25 million in the course of the 20th Century to its present (approximately) 65 million. Nowadays the Western Isle has only about one-tenth of the population of its Eastern neighbour.

4 The Liberals and Conservatives each won just over 270 seats. Labour had 42 and the Irish Nationalists 74. Thus the Liberals had a comfortable majority with the support of the Irish. It might be compared to the situation in 2010 when the Conservatives had a comfortable majority by governing in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Electoral Calculus publishes results for all elections since 1900. See https://www.electoralcalculus.co.uk/commentary.html The House of Commons Library publishes results for all elections since 1918.

5 As the article by O'Grada shows, the population of Ireland was about 7 million in 1820, at a time when that of Britain was perhaps 12–15 million. If it had more than doubled

The decreasing significance of the Irish vote and the long history of neglect and under-investment that made Ireland for a century more a victim of UK economic expansion than a partner in it, affected the willingness of Ireland to be satisfied with Home Rule. The Easter Rising and the brutal reaction to it by a government that thought such actions unconscionable at a time of world war were important factors too, but Home Rule all Round was still thought to be a practical proposition by many when the First World War ended. Moreover, in the early twentieth century the UK not only had a problem of how much power should be devolved to England, Scotland and Wales, but also how much should be devolved to its imperial possessions overseas, its colonies and dominions. The approach of Woodrow Wilson, the U.S. President, with his emphasis upon national self-determination, created obvious difficulties for European powers with colonial possessions.[6] The principle of self-determination was busy carving new states like Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia out of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. New states would arise from the declining Ottoman Empire. Must not the same thing happen to the other European empires? It was already clear that the so-called dominions like Canada and Australia were calling for greater autonomy and disliked the way in which they had simply been 'summoned to war' in 1914 on the basis of an imperial edict issued by George V. The governments and parliaments of the dominions and colonies were not consulted. As Taylor puts it:

> Some 50 million Africans and 250 million Indians were involved, without consultation, in a war of which they understood nothing against an enemy who was also unknown to them.[7]

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as the population of Britain did over the next century, 15 million is a reasonable estimate. It would also have meant far more Irish MPs in a UK parliament and thereby more influence.

6 Consider Wilson's 'fourteen points,' from 8th January 1918. Point 10 declared that 'the peoples of Austria-Hungary… should be accorded the freest opportunity of autonomous development.' But what about India? What about Egypt? Point 5 talked about a 'free, open-minded and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims,' but then went on to say that 'the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.' What if the populations concerned demanded autonomy like the newly-born nations of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia in order to serve 'the interests of their populations'? See Taylor, *English History 1914–1945*, p. 119 for a list of the 14 points.

7 Taylor, A.J.P *English History 1914–1945*, p. 3.

Australians and New Zealanders had fought and died in large numbers in the Dardanelles and elsewhere. Indians had fought in the trenches. Thousands of Canadians had died in the battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917. With talk of self-determination in the air when the War finally came to an end, it was clear that the future of Great Britain would be inseparable from the future of the British Empire. India had been promised 'responsible government… as an integral part of the British Empire.'[8] What was that responsible government going to mean? Was this Home Rule? How would it differ from the sort of responsible government to be offered to Wales, Scotland and Ireland? Home Rule All Round could represent Home Rule all round Britain or Home Rule All Round the Empire, with Westminster retained as an Imperial Parliament, where the Empire would be represented in a United States of Greater Britain or some kind of Britannic Commonwealth.

Britain had already been down a road which was similar to that explored by the European Economic Community half a century later. Joseph Chamberlain, the champion of the policy of Empire Free Trade, recognised the problems involved in trying to unite the Empire around a common defence and foreign policy. But he had high hopes of being able to unite it around a trade zone with a common external tariff on goods from outside the Empire. It proved to be a task beyond him, partly because some of Chamberlain's colleagues feared that his ideas were a threat to the principles of free trade. Another reason was that the dominions increasingly wished to develop their own industrial strength and did not want a system where they were given preference in supplying raw materials to the 'mother country' in return for preference being given to her manufacturing exports.[9] Though some forms of imperial preference were eventually put in place and were a bone of contention during the discussions about joining the EU in the 1960s and 1970s, the dream of an economically self-sufficient empire was not fulfilled. But in its attempt to strengthen the bonds of Empire through a common economic policy, Chamberlain anticipated a route to be taken later by those who moved on from the failure of the European Defence Policy to the development of the European Economic Community.

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8 See Taylor, E*nglish History 1914–1945*, p. 152. The promise was made in 1917, by which time hundreds of thousands of Indians had died from participating in a war which they were commanded to take part in on the basis of a proclamation by their viceroy.

9 Empire Free Trade failed because the dominions wished to industrialise themselves. This became clear at an Imperial Conference held in Ottawa in 1933. See Taylor, *English History 1914–1945*, p. 333.

The hope after the First World War, then, was that some form of autonomy would be an alternative to independence, not only within the UK but within the British Empire. The government was aware that not only the 'dominions' like Canada and Australia, but countries like Egypt and India, not ruled by settlers but with powerful voices calling for independence, were demanding more control over their affairs. Both within the British Isles and the British Empire Westminster was preparing to concede a little in the hope that it would not have to concede too much.

In the last year of the First World War, several Conservative MPs declared support for a 'system of federal devolution for the United Kingdom.' There was therefore a measure of all-party support for devolution, including Arthur Henderson, General Secretary of the Labour Party, who came out in favour of Home Rule All Round in June 1918. However, despite a vote in favour of devolution in 1919 and a Speaker's Conference being set up on how to deliver it, its final report the following year was ignored. It appeared to lose its significance almost as soon as it was proposed.[10]

The reason had a lot to do with developments both in Ireland and in the Empire in the aftermath of the First World War. Following the Easter rising of 1916 Lloyd George, who was not yet Prime Minister but had set his sights on becoming so, tried to negotiate immediate Home Rule for all of Ireland except for the six counties which formed part of historic Ulster. This was difficult for the Nationalists to accept, since it was Home Rule for the whole of Ireland that had been agreed and which was already on the statute book. Lloyd George proposed that the six counties remain part of the United Kingdom 'until after the war.'[11] It was the familiar expedient repeated later, assuring one side that the six counties represented a temporary expedient bound to fail and the other side that it was a viable proposition bound to succeed.

The negotiations nearly succeeded, but when they eventually didn't the supporters of constitutional reform rather than armed resistance found their position weakened. Sinn Fein began to triumph in by-elections and in the elections to the Dáil (the Irish Parliament) in 1918 Sinn Fein won 73 out of 103 seats.[12]

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10 See the excellent blog by Andrew Green, https://gwallter.com/history/the-home-rule-all-round-movement.html. Half English and half Scots, Andrew Green is a fluent Welsh speaker who now lives in Swansea.

11 See Note B, 'The Proposed Irish settlement, 1916' in Taylor, *English History 1914–1945*, pp. 71–72.

12 Though they received less than 50% of the votes.

They proceeded to proclaim a Republic and act as if it already existed, levying taxes and setting up republican courts. A similar strategy had been pursued by the Hungarians half a century earlier with agents of the Austrian Empire.

The strategy was soon undermined. The IRA (Irish Republican Army) launched a war without any authorisation from the Dáil, while the British brought in brutal irregulars who acted as terror squads. The death toll mounted on both sides. Once more Lloyd George tried to reach a settlement, again seeking to square the circle by ruling in a United Ireland while ruling out any coercion of the six counties to accept it. The Government of Ireland Act in 1920 devised two Home Rule Parliaments, one based in Dublin and the other in Belfast, together with reduced representation in the Westminster Parliament and a Council of Ireland drawn from the two parliaments to reflect the unity of Ireland. Sinn Fein refused to accept the Southern Parliament, while the Ulster Unionists rejected the Council of Ireland but accepted their own Parliament. Ironically, this meant that the one regional level of government in the UK after 1921 was the Unionist-dominated Northern Ireland Parliament.

There was a similar lack of progress in the Empire. In India a few provincial constitutions and much-trumpeted elections did not dent the power of the viceroy or the India office in London, while 1919 saw the bloody massacre at Amritsar where General Dyer oversaw the killing of nearly 400 members of an unarmed crowd. Perhaps because of the brutalising effect of four years of warfare, the excesses being displayed in Ireland seemed to be replicated elsewhere and with the same results. From that point nothing short of independence was acceptable. The India National Congress launched a campaign of civil disobedience in order to secure it.[13]

Home Rule All Round therefore took off neither in the Empire nor in the United Kingdom. Where the Isles were concerned, the creation of the Irish Free State in 1921 after two years of violent conflict suggested that it was impossible to concede anything less than almost total independence. When a settlement was finally reached, the Republic achieved Dominion status on a par with Canada, meaning that it could move towards full independence if it chose (which it eventually did). It had far more independence than the early home rulers had ever dreamed of, amounting to complete autonomy in finance, justice, administration and education. But in order to secure this it had had to

13 It should also be noted that India suffered disproportionately from the influenza outbreak of 1918, which accounted for over ten million deaths in the country, more than any other country.

give up the six counties, over the future of which a bloody civil war was fought in 1922–3. In 1925 the Council of Ireland that was meant to represent the whole island was formally abolished.

Hence the one instance of home rule to emerge from the events of the early twentieth century was the Northern Ireland Parliament – and it was hardly a good instance, since it was accused of using its powers to rig constituencies, create a police force that was not representative of both communities and tolerate discrimination against the Catholic minority (which made up one-third of the population of the six counties) in housing and employment allocations. Home Rule All Round had ended up as Home Rule in One Place Only, the results of which were to generate protests and later violence in the North for thirty years in the second half of the century.

Unsurprisingly, many concluded that whether it was Ireland or India, the nation state appeared to be the only kid on the block. Solutions in terms of increased autonomy, however defined, were a useless halfway house between regional status and full independence. Support for a wider federal settlement for the two islands that after 1922 made up the UK and the Irish Free State started to fade. This did not mean that interest in more autonomy went away. A petition asking for Home Rule for Scotland, for instance, presented to Parliament in 1949, was signed by some two million Scots (perhaps 40% of the population at that time). However, the so-called Scottish Covenant provoked little reaction in Westminster.[14] The halfway house between independence and regional or provincial status seemed unable to provide a viable option. At the time of the Scottish Covenant a Labour government elected after the Second World War was increasingly aware of the fact that nothing short of independence could follow the Empire. British India had just collapsed into different independent nations (more were to follow), with over a million dead. Doubtless a policy of 'divide and rule' on the part of the British themselves was partly to blame for this bloody civil war, whose consequences continue to this day. Nevertheless, it seemed clear that the only option for the future was the jostling pack of independent nation-states, the Hobbesian 'state of nature' transposed to the international realm as outlined earlier in this book.

Hence the development of a sovereignty-sharing system between member states of European Coal and Steel Community and later the European Economic Community did little to make the UK rethink the structure of its own in-

14 See Jack Brand, *The National Movement in Scotland*, originally published in 1978 but re-issued in 2021.

ternal union. As earlier chapters suggested, it was hostile to a system in which sovereignty was shared and did not think that there were lessons to be learned from it. Hence when in the 1970s, shortly after it had joined the EEC, the UK government began to interest itself in forms of devolution for Scotland and Wales, it did not for a moment consider the way power was shared between the UK, France, West Germany and the other countries in what by 1973 was the nine members of the EEC as a springboard for developing new approaches to power-sharing within the UK.

Devolution

One of the reasons why new approaches to power-sharing within the UK failed to connect with those outside it in the newly formed EEC was that the pioneers of such approaches were deeply hostile to the EEC. The 'original manifesto', as McBride calls it, for a 'four nations' approach to the future of the UK came from a New Zealander, J.G.A Pocock, whose 'British History: A Plea for a New Subject', was first published in 1975. As McBride explains:

> The 'Plea for a New Subject' was occasioned by the United Kingdom's entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) in January 1973 and the consequent demise of the system of imperial trade preference that discriminated in favour of British producers—even if the British in question lived on the other side of the planet.[15]

The impact of the Common Agricultural Policy on Commonwealth producers was a hotly debated topic at the time of Britain's entry to the EEC. Since the basis of the CAP was to support farmers through a guaranteed floor price together with a common external tariff to prevent that guaranteed minimum price being undercut by cheap imports, joining the EEC would effectively mean making the UK buy more expensive food from Europe rather than cheaper food from the Commonwealth. To those with memories of Empire Free Trade this went against a tradition reaching back nearly a century, where the aim was that Britain's manufacturing exports were received at a discount by her Empire and in return food from the Empire was received more cheaply by the 'mother country'. The economic model upon which this system was based was always a con-

15 McBride, Ian 'J.G.A. Pocock and the Politics of British History,' in Lloyd-Jones & Scull, *Four Nations Approaches to Modern British History: A (Dis)united Kingdom?* p. 40.

troversial one and never fully implemented, since it threatened to discourage industrial development in the Empire outside the UK. But as McBride makes clear, the system could still exert a romantic appeal:

> Emotional ties between New Zealand and Britain were strengthened by the islands' unique reliance on the export trade with Britain. Hundreds of thousands of tons of refrigerated mutton and dairy products were sent to Britain annually by steamship. In return, ships from Britain carried books, newspapers and mail to the dominions. More than ever before, the dominions were cultural provinces of London, co-owners—not mere subjects—of the world's largest empire.[16]

Pocock's concerns about the future of the United Kingdom were therefore tied up with his own sense of being 'British' as a New Zealander. The very fact that Pocock derived so much of his own sense of identity from Britain would now be seen as a failure to appreciate a culture that the settlers had undermined and that deserved to be part of a distinct identity formed in the South Pacific. But one can still see how his desire to untie the complex intricacies of 'Great Britain' might be linked to his awareness of an unravelling 'Greater Britain' that included the former dominions. The last thing he was likely to turn to was the sovereignty-sharing system that had come between his own country and Britain and was upsetting the model upon which trade between the two had been based for decades.

In any case, though the first years of UK membership of the EEC coincided with a new interest in some new kind of 'Home Rule All Round', now described as devolution, the interest produced no concrete results. In the 1970s a Labour government held referenda in both Scotland and Wales on the issue. Wales voted overwhelmingly 'no' (by about 4 to 1) while Scotland was deemed to have voted underwhelmingly 'yes'. The establishment of what was called a Scottish Assembly would only be granted if at least 40% of the electorate voted for it and the numbers failed to reach this figure.[17] Resentment over this condition, which was seen as an attempt to stymie the assembly by Labour MPs hostile to devolution, contributed to the Labour government's failure to survive a vote of confidence in 1979 and its consequent loss of power to Conservative governments for eighteen years.

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16 Lloyd-Jones & Scull, *Four Nations Approaches to Modern British History: A (Dis)united Kingdom?* p. 41.

17 Bogdanor, *Beyond Brexit,* pp. 104–105.

'Four nation' approaches really took off in the 1990s, in writers like Linda Colley, Norman Davies and Tom Nairn, who were particularly conscious not only of the growth in calls for devolution within the UK itself but also of the dangers of states in the process of decomposition. The 1990s was a time when people were conscious of five wars in the former Yugoslavia, causing tens of thousands of deaths and undermining the complacent boast that Europe since the war had seen half a century of peace. Yet though these writers were wary of Pocock's ideas about the detrimental effects of the 'Europeanisation' of Great Britain upon its former dominions, they did not always differ from him in failing to see a positive development in the move towards sovereignty-sharing in Europe's divided continent.

A further – and this time successful – attempt at devolution was made when Labour returned to power at the end of the twentieth century. There were clear political reasons for doing so. The party was highly dependent on votes in Scotland and Wales, which supplied between a fifth and a quarter of its MPs, to sustain Labour in government. It would be very difficult for it to secure a majority based on English votes alone. The failure to make something of Home Rule All Round had been a catastrophe for the Liberals at the beginning of the century. Irish independence meant that 80 Irish MPs who had generally supported the Liberals in Parliament were replaced by a dozen or so MPs from Northern Ireland who supported the Conservatives. The Liberals were never to return to power again (unless one counts the Liberal Democrat-Conservative Coalition government of 2010–2015).[18] Labour was afraid of the same thing happening to its own support, and it was right to be concerned. The rise of the Scottish National Party has had an enormous impact on the Labour Party's hopes of returning to power – unless in coalition with nationalist parties – after more than a decade in opposition.

In the new referenda at the end of the last century both Scotland and Wales voted in favour of devolution, though only by a whisker in the case of Wales. From 1999 some form of Home Rule was therefore established in both countries. Scotland received a parliament under the 'reserved powers' model, with legislative powers over all matters that were not reserved to Westminster.

18 Professor Vernon Bogdanor's lecture on 'The Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats', part of a series of Political History Lectures given at Gresham College, London in 2017. It gives a very good account of the traumatic history of the party, although since 2017 there have been some modest signs of revival that might have tempered Bogdanor's rather pessimistic account. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44ir_D_hD-M

Wales at first received an 'assembly' rather than a parliament, with powers over a prescribed range of policies, the 'defined powers' model, though it was later 'upgraded' to a parliament (*Senedd*) in 2020, while the 'executives' in both Scotland and Wales became recognised as 'governments.' By way of contrast, a special form of devolution through an 'Assembly' and 'Executive' was created in Northern Ireland as part of the Good Friday agreement in 1998, avoiding terms like 'parliament' and 'government' which might suggest that Northern Ireland was moving towards the status of sovereign state, something resisted for different reasons by both nationalists and unionists.[19]

Has devolution been a success this time round? In one sense, no. It has certainly not silenced those who would prefer full independence. If anything, support for full independence has grown. In Scotland it led to a referendum in 2014 when nearly half the population (45%) voted for independence. Opinion now appears to be evenly divided. Support for independence in Wales is less but has been growing, amounting to perhaps 20–25% of the population, (a poll in March 2021 put it as high as 40%, but was perhaps an outlier – Dafydd Trystan[20] has suggested increasing numbers of people who are 'Indycurious' (!) rather than outright supporters of independence) – while in the different situation of Northern Ireland support for reunification with the South has also grown.[21] It is currently favoured by around 40% of the population in Northern Ireland. It should always be borne in mind that more Catholics in Northern

19 See Davies, John *A History of Wales*, pp. 673–685 for an account of the arrival of the assembly and its first years of existence (up to 2005). For an interesting account of the ups and downs of the assembly in the first two decades of its existence, see former first minister Rhodri Morgan's *Rhodri: A Political Life in Wales and Westminster*, chapters 6–10. The book was almost completed when he died in 2017. For the last five years there is a shortage of in-depth analysis so far, but the Institute for Government provides a useful short account of how the powers of the devolved body have changed over time. See https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/article/explainer/senedd-cymru-welsh-parliament. There is a very good research briefing of 30th January 2023 produced by David Torrance for the House of Commons Library. It is called 'Devolution in Wales: A Process, not an Event' See https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8318/CBP-8318.pdf

20 Trystan, Dafydd. 'Indycurious and Curiouser: New Poll shows Support for Welsh Independence on the Rise'. The poll was in 2019. Welsh independence movements are associated with a much higher level of support for European integration than their counterparts in Scotland, a view reflected in the keen Europeanism of *Plaid Cymru*.

21 Bogdanor, *Beyond Brexit,* p. 237. Bogdanor argues that though Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK that could rejoin the EU without having to re-negotiate entry, even

Ireland are opposed to unification than Protestants favour it, so a simple headcount of the different religious communities will not give you a precise view of how likely it is the North will vote for independence. Brexit may well increase the proportion of Catholics favouring a united Ireland.

However, it would be unreasonable to pronounce devolution a failure on this basis. It has certainly increased its popularity in Wales since the very limited support it received in 1999. The granting of additional powers in the generation since it was first introduced suggests that it is something of which people in Wales and Scotland (though not necessarily, as we shall see, Northern Ireland) want more, even though some insist that nothing short of full independence will do. The possibility of developing a system that satisfies all the nations of the UK without dismantling the UK should not be ruled out.

The English 'problem'

One point that must not be forgotten is that devolution is a matter for England as well as for the other nations. What is often missing from considerations of devolution is an awareness of the level of support on the part of the English for what Gavin Esler called in a recent book the 'end of Britain.'[22] What polls there have been on support for Scottish independence, for instance, suggest that opinion in England on the issue is roughly split down the middle. Hence the end of the Union with Scotland is supported by about half the Scots and half the English. This may not be a majority and the general view may be one of indifference – Lord Ashcroft found in 2019 that about 40% of people cared about what happened in Northern Ireland while 40% didn't.[23] In the same year another survey showed 20% in favour of Scottish independence and 40% against, with 40% indifferent.[24] In England the level of indifference towards or even

in 2018, after the Brexit vote, polls showed that a minority in Northern Ireland favoured reunification – in the poll he quotes, a minority even of Roman Catholics.

22 Esler, Gavin *How Britain Ends: English nationalism and the Rebirth of Four Nations.*

23 Ashcroft, Lord 'England and the Union', Lord Ashcroft Polls.

24 It has to be borne in mind that in England there is a strong perception that the other parts of the UK are 'subsidised' at England's expense. This perception, whether right or wrong, leads many to adopt a 'we'd be better off without them' attitude. Lord Ashcroft makes this point in one of his many useful polling surveys. See https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2019/10/england-and-the-union/

support for the other 'nations' breaking away from the UK is far higher than it is in the equivalent majority parts of Canada or Spain.

It is not only 'English nationalists,' or those convinced that without the other nations England would be richer, who support the end of the Union. Some who certainly couldn't be called 'right-wing nationalists' seem to think that being on its own could be a wake-up call to bring England to its senses as a post-imperial medium-sized European state. Such a view has been put forward, for instance, by Professor David Edgerton in a podcast broadcast in April 2021,[25] even though in *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-Century History* he made much of the idea that the post-war generation's emphasis upon planning and a strong welfare state had intensified a sense of social citizenship at the UK level, since all parts benefited from the investment and welfare provision on offer. This view would have to be reconciled with Keating's point that a growth in support for self-government has been associated with good times while depressions increased dependence upon the centre.[26] One could also suggest that the last quarter of the twentieth century, when right-wing UK governments under Thatcher and Major tended to prefer the idea of the welfare state as a safety net for the poor to the idea of its expressing a clear sense of social citizenship, was a time when that central planning could be maintained only by being transferred to countries – like an independent Scotland – which were intent upon preserving it to its full extent. In any case Edgerton's suggestion in his podcast seemed to be a different one (if just as questionable), namely that cutting out Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland might help to cut England down to size and enable it to feel at ease with itself.

One reason why it is difficult to think of the UK as a 'multi-national state' is that England is so much bigger than the other three parts of it (five-sixths of the UK population live in England). Vernon Bogdanor points to the situation in Canada as the 'nearest equivalent' where about 40% of the population live in Ontario.[279] The much greater size of England's population has meant attention is often focused upon how to give extra powers less to the whole country than to parts of England, perhaps through regional assemblies, each of which might

25 https://euromovescotland.org.uk/podcast/brexit-ideology-and-the-decline-of-the-british-state/

26 See Keating, Michael *The Independence of Scotland: Self-Government and the Shifting Politics of Union*.

27 Bogdanor, Vernon *Beyond Brexit: Towards a British Constitution*, p. 185.

be considered roughly the same size as the other three non-English nations.[28] Progress in this direction has been mixed. In 2004 a proposal for a regional assembly in North-East England was rejected overwhelmingly (by almost 4:1 on a turnout just short of 50%).[29] Some people said that the proposal to have the assembly's headquarters in Newcastle alienated other cities in the North-East, but even in Newcastle the vote was 2:1 against. Behind the rejection was a perception that it lacked real powers, in which case it would only add another layer of taxpayer-funded bureaucracy to the administration of the area.

Much more successful has been the creation of 'metro-mayors' by the Conservative government elected in 2015 (with shades of the old metropolitan county councils abolished by the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher in 1986, and which in turn had been created by a Conservative government led by Edward Heath in the early 1970s – Conservative governments are rarely sure how much power they wish to allow local councils in England). Combined local authorities agreed to a directly elected mayor who would have substantial new powers in certain parts of the country. The metro mayors, like the mayor of London, have managed to raise their profiles, often leading the way in insisting that their areas had special needs (or that their needs had been neglected) during the coronavirus pandemic. They do not have the taxation or legislative powers of the nations outside England in the UK. However, some metro mayors have been able to convince voters that they have a strategic role in bringing together an area (a 'city region' such as Greater London or Greater Manchester) which has not been sufficiently recognised in the past.

Moreover, they raise important economic questions about the distribution of wealth and inequality within England itself which has sometimes led to talk of 'internal colonialism.' Though this charge has traditionally been levelled at the treatment of the nations outside England (for instance in Michael Hechter's revealingly titled *Internal Colonialism. The Celtic Fringe in British National Development 1536–1966*), written in the 1970s as the first moves towards devolution were being taken, one could also consider how far 'internal colonialism' applied within England itself, dominated as it is by the capital and its sprawling home county surroundings. In terms of broad economic strategy,

28 Bogdanor points out that the new metro-mayors introduced mostly in May 2017 made this a more plausible option. See *Beyond Brexit*, pp. 204–206.

29 As Bogdanor points out, this was despite the Labour Party being in favour of the assembly and despite the fact that Labour was the dominant party in the North-East. See Bogdanor, *Beyond Brexit*, p. 106.

there were certainly efforts at both the national and European levels to deal with regional disparities. UK plans included English regions as well as what are now the devolved nations, but there was also growing attention to regional disparities within the EEC (European Economic Community) and later the EU. When in the early 1970s Edward Heath's Conservative government led the UK into the EEC, he laid particular stress upon the need to support what came to be called 'cohesion' policies, addressing the needs of poorer regions with EEC funds (matched funding by national governments was necessary).[30]

By the 1990s centrally directed planning had fallen out of favour in the UK, and regional development was devolved with all the emphasis on local initiatives and competition for investment from overseas. EU regional policy, on the other hand, continued and two regions within the UK came to be particular beneficiaries of EU regional support. One was the West of Wales, but the other, Cornwall and the Scilly Isles, was at the South-Western tip of England. UK governments remained unwilling to embrace cohesion funds, seeing them as another bad example of central planning – despite the fact that the EU sought desperately to involve regional bodies in decision-making on the funding, often to come up against resistance from national governments, especially in highly centralised member-states like the UK. In the end the main beneficiary of such funds in England, Cornwall and the Scilly Isles, voted heavily for Brexit, partly because UK governments, determined always to focus on the money that was going *to* Brussels rather than the money that was coming *from* it, did very little to explain where the funding was coming from (and did their best to hide the plaques which recorded EU involvement and spending).[31] Meanwhile over the last decade a number of dinky little high-profile schemes with names like 'city deals' have reflected attempts to raise the profile of central government initiatives both in the regions and the devolved nations, but the amounts involved have been very small. The key point is that regional disparities inside

30 Heath left the details to be worked out after the UK became a member. As Duff points out, Heath remained 'optimistic that once inside the Community the UK could begin to effect much-needed reform.' Duff, *Britain and the Puzzle of the European Union*, p. 26. But soon after UK accession he was out of power in the UK. Hence it was the new Labour government that in December 1974 reached agreement on the shape and size of the regional development fund (Duff, p. 31).

31 That said, there were numerous high-profile characters who recognised the importance of EU funding. This is a YouTube video of celebrity chef Jamie Oliver thanking the European Regional Development Fund for help in training young people as chefs in Cornwall: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgJAY1060z4

the UK remain – the OECD ranks it as having the highest territorial disparities among its member states.

What seems clear is that people have a greater sense of belonging where the city regions are concerned than they do in the case of wider geographical regions. 'I'm from the North-East' means much less than I'm from Newcastle' or 'I'm from Tyneside.' If there isn't a sense of belonging or at least something similar to the national feeling that motivates people in Wales and Scotland to call for more powers, then administrative reorganisation may bring benefits but is unlikely to excite passions. Many people have heard of the old saying: 'You can take the boy out of Liverpool, but you can't take Liverpool out of the boy.' It is more difficult to imagine someone saying: 'You can take the girl out of the North-West region, but you can't take the North-West region out of the girl.'

What one can conclude from this is that it might not be impossible to divide England into regional blocs of some kind, some of which might be of roughly the same size as Scotland or Wales (London, of course, would be much bigger, but there are issues there over how London should be defined.)[32] Regional parliaments would then presumably be put together with the parliaments from the devolved nations. That would avoid the need to create an English Parliament which might look too much like a replication of the Westminster Parliament.

So far little has been done to bring together the devolved nations and the regions, although there has been some talk of the Upper House (House of Lords) being reformed in this direction. Instead, what has been attempted is a policy of giving English MPs a separate identity within the Westminster Parliament. The focus has been on the so-called EVEL principle (English votes for English Laws) where English MPs could accept or veto legislation affecting their constituents before it passed to a third reading, its final Commons stage, at which point it would be voted on by the whole House.[33] Introduced by a newly-elected Conservative government in October 2015, EVEL was finally abandoned by another Conservative government in July 2021 – arguably a testimony to how ill-thought out the proposal was.

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32 Vernon Bogdanor provides a wonderful summary of this impossibly tangled issue in one of his Gresham College lectures. See https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/future-london-government-mayor-and-london-boroughs

33 See Bogdanor, *Beyond Brexit*, pp. 203–204, where he explains how EVEL worked and some of its drawbacks.

Not the least of its problems was the difficulty of knowing which piece of legislation applied to England (or in some cases England and Wales, and in a few cases England, Wales and Northern Ireland) alone. At first sight it shouldn't have been too difficult. The issue first became controversial after a vote in 2004 over the issue of university top-up fees. These were only to apply to students in England, and yet the imposition of such fees was carried very narrowly (by five votes) in the House of Commons. It was clear that the support of Scottish Labour MPs had been enough to ensure that the bill was passed, and yet the bill would not apply North of the border, where the devolved Scottish Parliament had decided against such fees. Unsurprisingly, the reaction was to feel that this was an injustice that could only be righted if there was some mechanism by which only MPs representing English constituencies could vote on matters affecting England alone. At the same time the increase in powers for the Welsh *Senedd* and Scottish Parliament made it likely that there would be more and more issues which the devolved Parliaments would be dealing with. The more powers that were devolved, the more the 100 or so MPs in the Commons representing constituencies outside England would be dealing with matters that related only to England.[34]

There were several problems with EVEL. There was the question of identifying what was to be considered England-only legislation, a task which was assigned to the Speaker. The decision might have seemed straightforward, but apparently England-only legislation could have knock-on effects for other parts of the UK. For instance, some argued that according to the so-called Barnett formula, levels of spending on services like health and education in the devolved regions depended upon the levels in England. Therefore, a measure which had the effect of raising or lowering health or education spending in England would not be entirely an England-only matter, since it would affect the overall level of health spending in Scotland and Wales. This argument was used to suggest that in practical terms it was far more difficult to isolate 'England-only' issues than it might seem to be.

A second problem was that EVEL was in practice more an English veto than an English voice. It gave English MPs the right to stop legislation but hardly provided a forum within which they could discuss 'English issues.'

34 Keating suggests that EVEL arose because the UK Prime Minister David Cameron, having promised more powers for Scotland at the time of the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, had to promise 'something to England to compensate for the attention given to Scotland,' Keating, *State and Nation in the United Kingdom*, p. 84.

There wasn't even an English Affairs Committee in Westminster to match the Scottish Grand Committee. English MPs could pile in to stop something being passed but they didn't develop a sense of what 'English concerns' were. They didn't even have 'English-only days' in Parliament. The obvious reason for this lay in the fact that there was no English Parliament to match the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh *Senedd*. English concerns were effectively being tacked on to a body whose primary purpose was to consider the interests of the UK as a whole. One of the most effective criticisms of EVEL was that it would create two classes of MP, those representing English constituencies and those representing other constituencies who would be half-in and half-out of the law-making process. This was inevitable if there was an attempt to create an English Parliament inside the Westminster Parliament rather than separate from it.[35]

EVEL was condemned as a halfway house towards creating an English Parliament, or what the SNP MP Pete Wishart called a 'quasi-English parliament squat in the UK Parliament', a procedure that satisfied no one.[36] It would have made more sense to have established a separate English Parliament somewhere in the middle of the country rather than at its south-eastern edge, a development which would certainly have helped to counter the accusations of 'London-centrism' which leads to the occasional decampment of broadcasters, civil servants and other public officials to other parts of the country. But there is little sign that MPs have thought seriously in these terms, not least because the one thing that would force a re-defining of the sovereignty of Westminster, even more than a reformed and therefore potentially much more powerful House of Lords, is the creation of an English Parliament. If the system is left as it is at present, then 500 or so English MPs can effectively dominate the Westminster Parliament. However, if they were to have a separate Parliament, the Westminster Parliament would have to be reconfigured on federal lines to be a forum for joint working between the different nations. Ironically, the real reason why English MPs don't want an English Parliament is that they fear it would mean a loss of power for them.

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35 See Glover, Daniel and Kenny, Michael. 'Answering the West Lothian question? A Critical Assessment of 'English Votes for English Laws in the UK Parliament'.

36 Wishart made the remark on 13th July 2021, when the government had decided to scrap the law it had introduced 6 years earlier. His speech to the House of Commons, before members in various masks to remind us that it was during the COVID crisis, can be found on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NoVi8erLScY

Conclusion

The chapter began with a survey of 'Home Rule All round' over the last century. It argued that the failure of early schemes to keep both Britain and Ireland inside the United Kingdom, not to mention attempts to maintain the unity of the British Empire, led many in the UK to think that there was no halfway house between a centralised multinational state and independent nations breaking away. Devolution, they came to think, was more likely to encourage separatism than to restrain it.

The forms of governance emerging on the continent through the Coal and Steel community might have suggested this wasn't the case, but those who began to interest themselves in the idea of 'four nations' inside the UK did not – and do not – see much to encourage their efforts at devolution in the emergence of the institutions that eventually became the European Union.

The chapter emphasised that devolution cannot be discussed without considering England. It examined English attitudes, mindful of Keating's remark that 'this combination of Euroscepticism with Englishness would appear to be one of the strongest challenges to the Union.'[37] Much of the attention where England is concerned has been upon the installed and then rejected policy of 'English votes for English Laws'. This was too much like trying to graft an English Parliament onto Westminster, perhaps as a way of avoiding a separate English Parliament that might have been seen as a rival to Westminster. As a later chapter will look at in more detail, the most logical way of making devolution effective would be a body (perhaps a reformed House of Lords) bringing together the devolved parliaments and those of English regions or 'city-states' like London and Greater Manchester. Instead of wondering about how to set up an English Parliament, the focus would be upon how to establish a system whereby a dozen parliaments, regional and national, could jointly develop a system for managing the British Union. Joint working, however, is precisely what many fear most. To this point the book will return.

Where progress made to date is concerned, this may appear to be a rather negative conclusion to reach. However, the next chapter will suggest that, perhaps counter-intuitively, the one part of the United Kingdom where devolution has proved most difficult might provide the best indication of how it could be made effective at the UK level in the future.

37 Keating, *State and Nation*, p. 191.