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Britishness: Devolution, Evolution and Revolution

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Paper presented at Why Policy Needs History, Wednesday 5 December, 2007

Draft - not checked against delivery

Introduction

I begin with some simple but I hope suggestive antitheses. Historians have very little notion of what politicians do, or much comprehension of the pressures under which they operate; politicians rarely have the time or the inclination to take the broad or the long view of affairs on which historians rightly insist. Historians are wise after events for which they are rarely if ever responsible; politicians are expected to be wise before events for which they are often responsible even if they wish (or insist) that they were not. Historians insist that choices in the present, which will affect outcomes in the future, are constrained by the past; politicians want to escape the past to move from the present into a future of their own making and devising. Historians are inclined to say that the world was (and is) very complicated and needs to be understood; politicians (and also journalists) prefer to believe that the world is (and was) very simple and needs to be changed. Historians like to explain past events in elaborate and multi-layered ways; politicians want policies for the present and future which can be instantly specified and effectively applied. Historians are interested in structures and processes and stories over time; politicians want to define issues and solve problems now. Historians believe that there is never one single, simple verdict of history; politicians hope (or worry) that there is (or fear that there might be). 'History will not be kind to Neville Chamberlain', Winston Churchill once observed. 'I know, because I am going to write it.' That may be how politicians see history in terms of its purpose and its practice; but it is not how most historians see it.

No doubt these contrasts between historians and politicians are over-simplified, but they are, I hope, suggestive. They are not intended to imply that historians and politicians have nothing to say to each other: on the contrary, they are meant to suggest that they bring very different perspectives to bear on the contemporary world, and that greater dialogue between them ought to be beneficial. Of course, today's world is more the province of politicians than it is of historians; but since the world did not begin this morning, there is something to be said for politicians developing (and recognizing the need to develop) a more nuanced and informed historical perspective on contemporary events. Historians believe that policies would be better made, and thus stand a greater chance of success, if they were involved in the policy-making process, before the

policies are announced and implemented, rather than merely commenting (and often criticizing) in retrospect. Of course, we historians would say that, wouldn't we? But we might actually be right. Certainly, we can suggest, on the basis of past precedents (or non precedents), what might (or might not) work; and certainly we can counsel against raising public expectations that policies will be instantly effective and will achieve their stated aims. Unlike my good friend David Reynolds, I DO think Whitehall departments should have historical advisers, and I DO think the government should have a chief historical adviser, and there are several people in this room tonight who are eminently qualified to undertake this task. I should now like to illustrate some of these observations by investigating the current pressing issue of devolution.

Perspectives

For most politicians, the nation state is the world within which they live and move and have their being. Yet there is nothing pre-ordained or primordial about the nation state as the quintessential unit within which political life is carried on. Much pre-modern history is best investigated in terms of empires or dynastic agglomerations, and the boundaries of nation states in modern times have often been significantly adjusted. Indeed, across the last one hundred years, the map of Europe has been three times fundamentally adjusted: once in the aftermath of the First World War (which witnessed the collapse of the Russian, German, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires); once in the aftermath of the Second World War (with the westward expansion of Soviet Russia and the bringing down of the iron curtain); and once in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall (when the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the creation of a significant number of successor states on its periphery). And the dismantling of the great European Empires during the second half of the twentieth century has led to the creation of many new states around the world, with varying degrees of viability, sustainability and success. Moreover, it is widely believed that the globalized world in which we live today is one in which national sovereignty counts for far less than it did: when the history Britain in the 1980s is written with longer perspective, it may well turn out that Bill Gates will be a much more significant figure than Margaret Thatcher.

All of which is but another way of saying that Britain is not immune to these historical trends and contemporary developments. Some people (and some politicians) may like to think that we are different from and superior to 'Europe', and that what goes on there does not go on here; but that is to display precisely the sort of temporal and geographical parochialism to which history is the best and indeed the only antidote. One way, for example, of thinking about contemporary Europe is that among its most besetting problems is how to construct – or to re-construct – states and nations on the basis of what seems to many to be the most significant and potent form of collective identity, namely ethno-linguistic nationalism. Yugoslavia offers the most grotesque and gruesome example of what happens when a nation collapses into a bloodbath of genocidal ethno-linguistic conflict; Czechoslovakia shows a contrary example of a nation breaking amicably into two parts. (It is still not clear whether Belgium will break up, but plenty of people seem to think or hope or fear that it will.) Devolution is a shorthand

term for Britain's own variant of these contemporary problems: namely how to modify what seems to be a unitary state structure to take greater account of the increasingly strong and strident claims of ethno-linguistic identities.

Background

All nations are invented: they had to start somewhere, someplace, with some people; but some nations are more invented than others, and some nations are more plausibly and more enduringly invented than others. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is just such an invented nation, and as such, although some of its constituent elements are of great and authentic antiquity, it is not much older than the United States of America. The key dates in the creation of the UK may be easily summarized:

1536: the union of the crowns and nations of England and Wales.

1541: the establishment of Ireland as a separate kingdom over whom English sovereigns also reigned

1603: the Union of the Crowns of England and Wales (and thus also of Ireland) with Scotland.

1707: the Union of the parliaments of England and Wales with that of Scotland, and the creation of the Kingdom of Great Britain (Ireland was still a separate kingdom, albeit with the same sovereign).

1801: the Union of the parliaments of Great Britain and Ireland, thus creating the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

These are the stages whereby the United Kingdom was put together: for some, this is a story of England inexorably and ruthlessly subduing and suborning the peripheral regions of the British Isles (with their separate histories, cultures, languages and religions); for others it is the story of the creation of a genuinely new British nation and a genuinely new identity, namely that of Britishness. Either way, the making of this national agglomeration needs to be explained, not just in terms of what was going on in these islands, but also in terms of these islands' relation to the broader world: for it is surely more than coincidence that both the British nation and the British Empire seemed to come into being simultaneously. That is an elaborate enough story in all conscience; but here are three additional and rarely-recognized complications: the civil wars of the mid seventeenth century are in significant part to be explained by the breakdown of relations between England and Wales, Scotland and Ireland, even though they shared the same sovereign; from 1688 to 1702, William III was not only (and separately) king of England and Wales, of Scotland and of Ireland: he was also Stadtholder of Holland; and from 1714 to 1837, British monarchs were also Electors of Hanover.

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, which was brought into being by the Act of Union of 1801, lasted barely one hundred years. Like the previous legislation which had tied together England and Wales, and then England and Wales with Scotland, it was passed by a legislature where the lower house was elected on a very

narrow franchise, and where the upper house was almost wholly hereditary. 'The people' as a whole were not consulted in these matters, and any notion of a referendum would have been unthinkable. To some degree, there is no doubt that these successive expansions of the territoriality of the British state expressed a growing convergence and homogenization, especially in trade and business and industry and as regards the empire. But there were also limits as to what these cumulative unions achieved: most of Britain was Protestant (though the established church was different in England and Scotland), but Ireland was overwhelmingly Catholic; and the legal systems in England and Scotland were (and still are) completely separate. Put another way, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland may have come into being in the century generally regarded as witnessing the zenith of the nation state; but constitutionally, religiously, linguistically and culturally, it was a polyglot agglomeration, which in some ways had more in common with (say) Tsarist Russia or Austria-Hungary than it did with France (though even France's claims to national homogeneity for this period have been disputed).

Devolution

Moreover, within decades of the creation of this new agglomeration of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, there were demands that it should be broken up, and from the last quarter of the nineteenth century onwards, mirroring and paralleling developments elsewhere in Europe, there were growing demands in Ireland but also in Scotland and Wales, for an end to the Union and some degree of independence or devolution. The most insistent demands came from Ireland, and Gladstone twice attempted, unsuccessfully, to pass Home Rule Bills, in the mid 1880s and the early 1890s. But the issue stayed very much on the agenda in British politics, and during the 1900s, there were discussions concerning what was called 'Home Rule All Round', whereby local assemblies would be established not only for Ireland, but also for Scotland, Wales and England as well, as part of a re-structured legislature which would include a reformed House of Lords in which there would also be imperial representation. This more elaborate scheme came to nothing, but Irish Home Rule was carried just before the outbreak of the First World War. It was then postponed, and when finally implemented in 1921-22, the Irish Free State was established as a sovereign nation and independent dominion within the British Empire, and a devolved parliament was established in Ulster, which remained an integral part of what had now become the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

In short, the most extended version of the British nation/state, which had come in being in 1801, lasted scarcely one hundred years, and the unraveling which began in 1914-22 has subsequently continued. Renewed nationalist demands were articulated in the 1970s, and in 1977, Tom Nairn published a book predicting The Break-Up of Britain. That prediction turned out to be premature, but the return of a Labour Government twenty years later led to the establishment of a Welsh Assembly and a Scottish Parliament in 1999; and the Northern Ireland legislature at Stormont, which had been suspended in 1972, has also recently been re-instated. One way of regarding these developments (and this was very much the case that Gladstone made for granting

Home Rule to Ireland more than a century ago), is to say that devolution is the best (indeed, the only) way of preserving the Union. The contrary argument insists that devolution is merely the prelude to inevitable and unavoidable disintegration. Either way, the result is a current British constitutional settlement that is full of anomalies and inconsistencies, with differing forms of devolved government for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland; with no devolved government whatsoever for England; and with Welsh, Scottish and Ulster MPs able to vote on English matters at Westminster, whereas English MPs cannot vote on similar issues for Scotland, Wales and Ulster, because they were now reserved for the legislatures in Cardiff, Edinburgh and Stormont.

According to many (though not all) historians, commentators and politicians, the British nation gradually expanded from the time of the Tudors to the nineteenth century, and it was not at all coincidence that the British Empire expanded at the same time. And so it is scarcely surprising that during the twentieth century, as the British Empire fell abroad, so the greater British nation, and the institutions and identities of Britishness which had underpinned it, also fragmented at home. Of course, that fragmentation is not yet finished, and it may never be finished, and that uncertain unity is the present position. Under Thatcher and Major, the Conservative Party, faithful to its Unionist past, originating in its opposition to Gladstone's Home Rule proposals, was determined to uphold the Union; but having lost ALL its seats in Wales and in Scotland in 1997, there now seems a strong temptation to for the Tories embrace English nationalism. As for Labour: having granted (but not thought through) devolution in the hope this would be a final settlement, there is now real anxiety, at least in regard to Scotland, that there will be (indeed, are) additional demands for the repeal of the Union itself. Yet Labour needs Scottish and Welsh votes and MPs for a majority at Westminster: hence Gordon Brown's repeated invocation of the significance and shared values of what he terms 'Britishness'.

Historical Perspectives

Such, in brief, is an historical account of how we got from there to here. It is, I think, a significant story, even in the simplified version of it I have given here; and it is certainly a story with which anyone who wants to take a view on the issue of devolution should be familiar. This is, in all conscience, a complex issue, both now and looking forward; but part of the reason for that is that it has always been a complex issue, both now and looking backward. In the light of that reflection, I should like to offer some comments, which are necessarily, but also appropriately, in the form of questions. And I pose six of them, as follows:

- i. From the 1600s onwards, there have been regular re-negotiations concerning the relations of the constituent parts of these isles to each other, and they have taken place roughly once every century. Is the devolution settlement that was enacted in 1999 the latest iteration of that cycle, or will there be more to come in the very near future?
- ii. As Eric Hobsbawm and others have repeatedly observed, identity politics, and especially identity politics built around ethno-linguistic nationalism, are at best

- intrinsically unstable, at words genocidally atrocious; and they ebb and flow over time in their intensity. Who can say whether the present demands in Scotland for greater independence will last?
- iii. By what process, if it was to come about, would Scotland become independent of the British Union? By definition, the Scottish Parliament (and Scottish people?) would have had to vote; but what about the Westminster Parliament and, indeed, the monarch, who might hold very different views on the matter?
 - iv. Although it is important to bear in mind that in terms of religion and the law, the Anglo-Scottish Union has never been complete, these two nations have been increasingly intertwined across three centuries, and unraveling that union – if it came to that -- would be extremely complex and costly (the armed forces? British Airways? Overseas representation? The seat on the UN Security Council?)
 - v. What would be the implications of a dissolved Anglo-Scottish Union for what would then be left of the Union, namely the United Kingdom of England, Wales and Northern Ireland? Would further devolution follow? Would Ireland be re-united? And if some or all of this came to pass, then would these separate and separated nations, post-Union, be internationally viable?
 - vi. What would be the implications of all this for what would once have been the 'British' monarchy? Could it become, once again, the crown that united four otherwise separate kingdoms? Yet even if it did, what would happen if there were demands in some of these four nations, but not all, for a republic?

Conclusions

As an historian, I cannot plausibly answer any of these questions, and nor do I think it is my job to do so. But I do think it is my job, as an historian, to pose them, and to pose them to politicians; and also to insist that as the devolution issue is continually addressed in years to come (and there seems every reason to suppose that it will be), these questions will not go away. All this is but another way of saying that while we cannot foresee the future, we ought certainly to think through, both historically and prospectively, the past issues that vex the present, and may influence and constrain what can be done in the future. As Soames Forsythe once told his daughter Fleur, 'the present is rooted in the past, the future in both.' We ignore any one of them at our peril.

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