

SCOTLAND AND ENGLAND

By David Howell

A Better Union – an Essay in Realism.

The Union between England and Scotland may have begun in uncomfortable circumstances. There may have been repeated attempts to break it again. But in terms of results it has been one of the most successful marriages of neighbouring states in the past three centuries, possibly - and by some standards - of all time. Admire or dismiss the Enlightenment, but it was Scottish minds which led the way. Admire or condemn the British Empire, and views are certainly divided, it was the largest such structure in history and Scottish vigour and decisive military prowess was one of the keys. Admire or condemn the Industrial Revolution, but it brought a new age of prosperity to billions and opened new gates to progress and scientific advance, and many of the giants of industrial advance were Scottish or with Scottish antecedents. .

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In all this the rule undoubtedly lay at Westminster under a single crown, but Scottish influence led the way and everywhere it was the Scottish vigour which was at the spearhead.

So if emotions, passions, and the paths of history run so strongly in both directions, on which side does the argumentation here come out, because a side must be chosen, and a way forward must be chosen – waffling in the indecisive middle is useless and a waste of readers' time?

Well, wait and see 'til the end. To address and respond to an issue of this kind its origins have to be understood. All I would say now is that to reach anything like a clear and lasting answer, and to build a path ahead that works, we must go deep beneath the headlines, the Brexit issue, the goings on at Holyrood, whatever their short-term impact. We must examine the psychology, the theories out of which, over the last fifty years, this issue has grown to such monster proportions, the soil in which the seeds of separatism were planted and have so vigorously flourished.

When we do so we shall begin to see how immensely powerful the sentiment has been, is and will continue to be, in favour of Scotland as a separate and independent nation.

So how indeed has the feeling come about and grown so strong that these two amazing forces and causes, nations who shared a monarch for a while, then later worked so long together with such amazing grace, should split and part company? Which wheels of modern history have turned sentiment against this record of success – in some instances even against admitting that such a record ever existed?

Small is Beautiful.

Let us begin with an electrifying phrase, ‘Small is beautiful’, to which the sage Ernst Friedrich (Fritz) Schumacher gave birth and life in 1975 with his book of that name. Schumacher ridiculed organization on a large scale with its strutting undertones of giantism, and especially the national economic models underpinning it. Some of his economics and industrial conclusions may have been flawed, and the power of scale in the digitalized world, yet at that time to emerge, may have been completely underestimated. But Schumacher’s mentor had been the Austrian philosopher Leopold Kohr and the sizzling power of his message came through in the new book.

It was above all that small states mattered, were the source of progress and enlightenment in human affairs, and should and could flourish in safety and prosperity in emerging post-war world conditions.

Hadn’t someone said something like that before? Yes, Lloyd George in his day made the same point again and again. The best things in mankind’s advance, the greatest ideas, the deepest insights, he argued, came from small nations. The world owes much, he maintained, to little nations rather than this theory of bigness- that somehow you must have a big empire and a big nation, adding with a romantic and possibly OTT Welsh flourish that the greatest art of the world was the work of little nations, and that the most enduring literature of the world came from little nations.

But by the late ‘seventies, more than half a century later, the same theme in modern garb was there again, serving as a trumpet call in the battle against centralism, large nations dominating small, the big brigades and the large bullying the little.

To those of us of the post-war generation small was becoming very beautiful indeed, beautiful and exciting. Small nations could at last prosper. After imperialism, after the disastrous German attempt at empire, and with the already

declining appeal of the Soviet empire, this new flame seemed to burn fiercely. Its message was that the need for small nations to cling for safety to big ones no longer existed. All the world's worst troubles in the earlier part of the century seemed to have sprung from the opposite, from the vanities, conceits and alleged benefits of scale and bigness. Now a symphony of little nationalisms, frozen beneath the ice of clashing empires and cold war global schism, could play out into glorious freedom.

So here we were again after two hideous world wars and it is difficult to describe the sheer thrill which this new message sent through the younger generation in particular. No wonder that this story of immense potency flared up and fanned the smouldering embers in Scotland, looking, as the younger Scottish generation, could across the North Sea, and seeing bright little Baltic nations springing to life again, (of whom, Estonia, would come be described by independence enthusiasts as a cyber super-power).

In the Balkans, of course, the small nation experience would be not so good. There, the break-up of the old Yugoslavian entity, Marshal Tito's empire, led to considerable bloodshed, thanks to historical legacies, except in the case of clever and tiny Slovenia, which managed a short disengagement battle. Other little Balkan nations, seeking to regain lost pasts, were not so lucky and not so agile.

But in Scotland, went the reasoning, there needed to be no fear of any such threat. The break could be entirely peaceable. The English were hardly likely to send a Hanoverian Butcher north again. The world was now safe for the smaller guys. The nuclear threat was now so neutralised by mutual deterrence that it could be left to the existing nuclear powers to manage and contain. The rest of the world could get on with life. Talent, skills and education were the new drivers, plus, in the Scottish case, possession of rich natural resources, or what were then believed to be rich. All in all a thoroughly attractive end-20th century menu.

The incipient communications revolution, of which the world stood on the verge in the 1970s, could not fail to act like a vast amplifier of these visions and attractions. The media, the networks and the platforms were due to give a huge psychological boost to the Scottish go-it-alone case. Thanks to the microchip and the incredible information technology, bringing transparency on a level unparalleled in the past, wings could now be given to grievances as never before. As the 21st century unfolded, with its Moore's law of doubling microchip power every two years, and as the world swept on towards the hyper-connectivity age of the Iphone, (c.2007), it must have begun to look to Scottish nationalists like plain sailing towards separatism from uncaring London and unhelpful Westminster. Subsidies there might be from the south, with the Barnett formula

and the like, but much deeper forces and emotions were now engaged and enabled. Organising and opinion-promoting power, plus open windows of transparency, were now in almost every pocket on scale undreamt.

Against this background the small majority in the 2014 referendum for rejecting a clean break away might have been a check, but with the wind blowing so strongly one way it could clearly be depicted as no more than a setback in an inevitable advance. The time would come for a decisive break, whatever the talk about the referendum being a once-in-a-generation affair

Then came the 2016 Brexit decision, dividing England but seeming to unite Scotland, and the path looked wider and more open than ever. Now it seemed to lead in a straight line to the return of a strong, secure and well-resourced independent Scottish state.

For good measure there was the argument to be deployed that just as the UK had broken out of the EU embrace, so Scotland could and should safely follow suit and break from the British embrace. This was never a solid contention, since like Brexit or not, it was widely seen as reasserting sovereignty and nationhood, whereas the Scottish exit would be destroying that same nationhood, the very opposite. But with the ever louder drumbeat of the march towards independence, who really cared. The whole thesis was a useful recruit, readily adopted to the cause.

Safe no Longer

Oh joy - except for one thing – history does not proceed in straight lines. It bends and swerves. The certainties of one period melt away into the uncertainties of the next. Suddenly there are question marks where there used, until very recently, to be exhilaratingly clear visions. Could the five years since the Brexit referendum have quite abruptly made the world less safe again for smaller nations, and the case for sticking to functional alliances with close neighbours suddenly more attractive again? And could a number of factors, including the continuing hectic advance of digital technology, have turned that five years into a different age where the old assumptions suddenly look shaky.

Raising such doubts does not of course remove the small nation momentum overnight. That was not going to happen. It now runs much too deep. The complacent view that by doing nothing the separatist pressure will subside is the deepest of errors. Even if the present leadership of the SNP were to be wiped out tomorrow by internecine quarrels, as at the time of writing seems not impossible given the dramas raging in Edinburgh, the underlying impulse for independence,

greatly reinforced by the internet-powered search for identity and independence, would, and will, remain extremely strong.

Yet there are now areas at least to be examined, as the hectic swirl of world-altering events rolls on, as to why, despite the apparently rock solid strength of the small nation case, and especially the Scotland case, it may be crumbling at the edges.

Three recent developments in particular stand out for attention.

First, the cyber phenomenon, what has been called ‘the dark web of subjugation’, has mushroomed in reach and threatening power to all states, but to smaller ones in particular.

A prospect which seemed inconceivable five years ago is that nations can now be literally switched off by concerted cyber attack, unless powerfully protected by the combined strength of allies and neighbours. Estonia may be cited as a small state that looks after itself, but there was a moment when it very nearly failed to do so, it with utilities interrupted, all internal information links compromised and civilian life momentarily paralysed.

That was over ten years ago (in 2007). Since then the invasive potential of cyber has now been vastly increased by the penetrative power of technology. The Estonian raid was traced to a Russian pro-Kremlin youth group called Nashi, but the tools today are now infinitely more powerful. The Russia which then was still hoped to be on the path to democracy is now very far from it and looking all the time for trouble.

Second, little nations can be bought, as well as switched off. Any newly independent small state in today’s world would be naïve to a degree in thinking it would be free of Chinese attentions. The pattern of intrusion is subtle and it is one of which many small, and some larger states round the world as well, have now had bitter experience, and to which all are proving vulnerable. The Edinburgh Government has reportedly already entered Chinese deals. The Chinese chequebook brings loans and grants a-plenty for new projects and budget assistance, as well as more direct investment in utilities, universities, prime property, sports stadia and motorways, but it also brings debts, acquisitions and unwholesome intrusion.

Wise Scots will see the dangers but an independent Scottish state will need money. When the Chinese ask for their cash back and it is not available they will and take assets instead. A nation that seemed wealthy within the UK market system would begin to face the struggles of a failed state.

This is not project fear, it is project friendship and realism. Estonia was nearly gobbled up again by the technologically savvy Russian bear it believed it had escaped. Africa has a growing list of states counting the cost of too close a Chinese embrace. A hopeful new Scandinavian Scotland would be in just as much danger, or more.

Third, there is the matter of the resources. In the age of commodities, of steel and wheat, the meaning of resources was clear enough. When oil prices soared and the North Sea prospered Scotland's independence prospects always looked exceptionally strong. But in the five years since 2016 the energy world has been turned upside down. Surplus world oil and gas, thanks largely to the explosive growth of American shale production, has made gratifyingly high prices for producer states a feature of the past. Extreme volatility is now the pattern, especially in the price of crude. At one stage during the Covid crisis prices sank to negative levels. There was literally no money.

The oil price may spike again from time to time but the trend is firmly downwards, both sides of the Atlantic. It is not supply that has peaked, as once feared, but demand that has plateaued and looks like sinking, with green energy supplies slicing into markets once hungry for fossil fuels but no longer so.

From oil and gas revenues, once looking so secure there is now zero prospect of strong long-term budgetary support.

But besides that, what now is the most precious and wealth-giving national 'resource'? In an age of knowledge products, of dominant service industries, of soft power influence and intangible assets, can it still be measured by the standards of a past industrial age. Or do wealth and security now lie in other kinds of assets, notably in technical mastery, in innovative momentum, in education levels and skills, in the most favourable legal, social and attitudinal conditions for enhancement in all these areas, and of course, in a stable political environment ?

If so, then it is the kind of union which favours these sorts of developments which makes most sense between two neighbouring nations with such a unique past, and which should now be guiding any redesign and updating. And per contra, it is the kind of separation which is least favourable to these aspects, and inflicts the most damage on them, which must at all cost be avoided.

A Safe Haven

In short, with remarkable speed the world has turned into a much more dangerous place for smaller nations, and all at a pace with which things now happen in the

digital era, which is much faster than most people realize. The exhilarating small-is-beautiful story many found so attractive in past decades has soured, at least where nation states are concerned. This is not to say it's the time for a return to unwieldy blocs. There the Remainers' hopes are false. The centrifugal forces of localism, identity and popular empowerment which new technology has brought us, and the social transformation that goes with it, are far too strong for that kind of 20th century re-creation.

But it certainly *is* a time for close, practical and functional alliances and unions, maybe of new kinds, to keep us all safe.

What do the phrases about 'keeping safe' and 'national security' now mean anyway in modern conditions? The word 'defence still conjures up visions of the clash of weaponry, armoured divisions, ground forces at the ready, tanks, missiles, aircraft carriers and combat aircraft.

But that is a traditional warfare scene from yesterday. Defence today has to be against foes seeking victory by whole-of-society attacks and by disintegrating democracies from within. This is a well-documented process which has four phases – demoralisation, destabilisation, crisis and social breakdown, and then a new kind of uneasy and different 'normalisation', with very different standards from the past.

Against none of this would Scotland be immune. Proposals for a military force of 15000 troops, scanty weaponry and take-over of RAF Lossiemouth would be of no help. Nor would occupation of the Faslane UK nuclear deterrent base, since independent Scotland would have nothing to do with nuclear deterrence.

In short, the new independent nation, or old nation revived, would be a sitting duck. It is difficult to imagine a target more tempting for subversion by hostile powers than this small country, attached and right next door to the English with their troublesome adherence to Western values.

Security now calls for a new mindset. The window of independence sunlight, in which for a few decades smaller countries have been able to bask, with little or no strategic protection against unfamiliar outside forces, is shutting with a snap, leaving the need for new ,or renewed alliances as the top priority.

The Union - a cause renewed?

If this analysis sounds so far too negative then that is because one needs to start from realism and from the deepest possible understanding of the seeds of crisis. There are those who argue that all the downbeat argumentation should be left out,

certain, as it is, always to be rejected as just scare-mongering and more Project Fear material. The case for retaining and strengthening the Union should surely be couched solely in positive terms of what unity can bring in a changed world to both England, Scotland and for that matter Wales and Northern Ireland as well.

But that would be misleading. A realistic tally requires juxtaposing what can be gained and what would be lost. Neither side of the picture rings true without the other.

So then, after listing all the dangers, what can a renewed union of England and Scotland bring to this scene that was missing before? Let us remove rose-tinted spectacles about history and look honestly and frankly at the England of the past and where it fell short, where, indeed, it allowed Scotland's independence urge to grow so fast and powerfully into today's dilemma. This time, if London fully comprehends the force of the independence case and what is truly powering it, the opportunity comes to do better, offer better and implement a better settlement in a new spirit of unifying partnership – a better union.

Many fine minds, many study groups, and numerous commissions are at work on this. Ex-Prime Minister Gordon Brown has the Labour Party's remit to seek out new ways of keeping the UK intact and constitutionally secure. Lord Lisvane has presented a new Act of Union Bill to the Lords, based on the work of Lord Salisbury's group. A Union unit inside the Cabinet office has been set up, although it has got off to a rocky start, with two heads within a month. And now Boris Johnson has appointed himself to chair of the Cabinet's Union Committee.

In Parliament the Lords Constitution Committee is launching a full inquiry on Constitutional Reform and Future Governance, with the Scottish challenge at its centre, while an APPG on the Union is pushing studies forward. Schemes and strategies will emerge, some with a tone of desperation as the slide towards schism accelerates and the full, imminence of a possible Union break-up dawns.

The First Question

But all of them will need to ponder just with what forces they are really dealing. What kind of independence is the Scottish Government seeking? Is the goal a truly separate state, no longer sharing the Crown, in fact a republic (although maybe still in the Commonwealth)? There are certainly strong republican voices amongst the SNP. Or is the goal a realm under the Crown, as exists for sixteen Commonwealth member states, with a Governor General in Edinburgh? Or some kind of dual monarchy, or some other formula for shared sovereignty? Or is it an enhanced version of the existing single constitutional embrace, to which the

sovereign Parliament at Westminster must now adapt? These are issues over which Ireland fought a bitter civil war. Is that the painful path ahead?

It might be thought that these would be the first questions to be asked before any further moves are made towards an independence referendum. Everything in the way of future allocation of powers, and future sharing arrangements, and of course constitutional change, flows from that. The reason they are neither asked nor answered is because Scotland has no single and agreed view on the matter. We are moving into entirely new and uncharted territory.

Lessons in profusion can be, and are being, drawn from past confederations and from federal models round the world. But how relevant are they in the new age of instant and ubiquitous connectivity which allows, and has to accept, continuous contact at every level of governance between every institution and every member of society all the time.

This is the giant paradox and dilemma of the web and internet era – that it unlocks and brings on both central power and personal power with new potency, the power of unity and the power of one. History has no guide here. The recent vaccine phenomenon, the hitherto scarcely imaginable achievement of vaccinating an entire nation of more than sixty-five million people in a matter of months, every single adult, requires scale, direct connection with each individual and organization with the utmost central organizational coherence.

Yet it also requires the variations, the flexibility and the agility which only firmly decentralised authorities, counties, cities, nations, can deliver. For this particular vital service to the public, whereas attempts to procure vaccine and administer it on a continental and multinational scale proved just too much for the struggling European Union, and attempts to provide on the scale of the smaller nations and devolved regions would never have been driven through with such speed, the United Kingdom proved to be exactly the right size.

Challenges to governance of this totally new kind – and there will be more – depend on being met via the flow of data and its skilful and careful management – big data, information, that is, of immense detail about everybody and everything on a gargantuan scale and in continuous flow. There will be other pandemics to come, and other ‘black swan’ events where going-it-alone may feel instinctively good but enlarged togetherness of the closest and most robust kind is essential in response.

The prospects and potential for best arrangements between England and Scotland must be judged in this entirely new and revolutionary context. Not unrelated is the governance and control of the platforms which enable the new degree of

connectivity to occur, now at this very moment becoming a major issue in the political affairs of this nation, as in others.

As to physical law-making assemblies in a modern, reconnected Union, again ideas proliferate. The question cannot be avoided as to whether the Westminster parliament and its present procedures can be made to work with a different Union and a different politics from the familiar adversarial structure inherited from the 20th century.

Far wider questions are opened up here about the nature of modern government and the validity of old debates between left and right, collective and individual action, state power and market power. In some countries of Asia these issues, if not resolved, have been successfully contained and energies released to deliver quality government with decent standards of justice and fairness. If central governments of the future have the capacity to reach and engage almost every subject or citizen, and every local community, on a basis of continuous dialogue, do many of the grounds for fear and dislike of over centralisation start falling away?

A much more powerful Committee structure at Westminster, able to fasten onto, and hold to account, executive activities with greater precision and force than can be achieved in the rough and tumble of full Chamber debate, might be one step forward in the pattern of constitutional change that could flower in a new Union setting.

From Precedent to Precedent?

In the constitutional evolution of the United Kingdom over the centuries it has been very much the habit to rely on precedent and gradualism. Pragmatism and practicality have been the two shrines at which it has been customary to worship. It is these founding faiths which are seen as giving the British constitution, built up layer upon layer like the finest lacquer, but never gathered in one document or treatise, its enduring strength and resilience. That has been the accepted way since Magna Carta. Updated and reaffirmed with the Glorious Revolution of 1688, it is deemed to have served the nation well.

But at a time when so many occurrences are unprecedented in human affairs can the reliance on precedent be so safe. In re-cementing the Scotland-England relationship it could be time to use all the tools of new technology as well as old

wisdom and precedent to fabricate a different and more sustainable kind of linkage in the computer age.

Can the obvious advantages and commonsense practicality of cautious step-by-step constitutional change to bind the two nations together again be combined with the revolutionary changes and methods which new technology both offers and imposes on affairs of governance?

It is at this depth that the challenges must now be addressed and the dilemmas tackled.

A Power in the Network

Saving the Union sounds as though it is an argument for the status quo in UK affairs – a perpetuation of both its present purposes and of course its present problems. But a new and better Union, woven together in novel ways under novel 21st century conditions, would bring with it new synergies. The prospect could then swing from pessimistic talk about a dismembered UK losing its weight and influence in world affairs, its voice in international institutions, possibly its place and position at the United Nations, to a far more positive scenario.

A bonus of this re-cemented Kingdom alliance could well be a scale improvement in relations between Great Britain and the Irish Republic. With Ireland stabilized and comfortable with two governments – in Dublin and Belfast, and no closed border between them – and with growing goodwill between London and Dublin, the chance would open up for the entire ensemble, the British Isles, to act more closely – and weightily – on the world stage and to conduct international policy in areas ranging from security to aid and development – with new cohesion and effect.

We are, as they say, ‘getting a bit ahead’ here. But the point is aired simply to illustrate what becomes possible, and conceivable for the nations of the British Isles when acting together. Physical infrastructure underpinnings, such as full high speed train transport being constructed (and starting now) from the northern Kingdom down into England, and such as the Belfast high speed rail tunnel - laughed out of court hitherto, but rapidly becoming technically and economically feasible with new technology – could underpin the new narrative.

A Better Story , a renewed national narrative , starts to emerge for these islands, and one with the potential to inspire and give direction in ways which many have let in recent years to be dangerously lacking.

End Game

The only possible conclusion towards which a truly profound but also contemporary examination of English and Scottish relations can lead is that a split now would be a major disaster for both peoples, out of time, out of focus, out of connection with all the pressing needs and conditions of the times and out of kilter especially with all the colossal opportunities the age now offers.

For England the new Union of cooperating nations would inject fresh vigour and ambition into the task of repositioning itself in an utterly changed global environment.

For Scotland, the same, and so also for Wales and Northern Ireland.

By the same token, for all four nations a break-up now would see this new vista and its opportunities sliding away, problems enlarged, prospects dimmed, the future for each and every person endangered.

By no measure can it be worth taking this low road. The high road is better for all.

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