

Breaking Up Britain: Four Nations after a Union

Mark Perryman (ed.)

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Reviewed by Richard Weight

At a St. George's Day event of speeches and music starring Billy Bragg, which Mark Perryman organised at London's Barbican Centre in 2008, a band playing a mix of rock'n'roll, ska and Hawaiian tunes was interrupted by a heckler shouting 'What's Honolulu got to do with St. George's Day?' The heckler was my friend Ed Davie, a committed New Labour activist and prospective local councillor in South London.

Although Ed had missed the main point of the event, which was to celebrate the glorious hybridity of Englishness, Perryman notes at the start of his book that it took 'balls to shout out quite so loudly and rudely'. Balls are now needed by everyone to confront the fact that Britain in its present form may not exist by the time we reach the centenary of the Partition of Ireland in 2021. As the title of *Breaking Up Britain* suggests, Perryman and his contributors have the requisite cohunes.

The centre-left has led the constructive debate about national identity in Britain over the last thirty years. Yet there are some who think it's a luxury at a time of economic crisis, while others are repelled by opportunistic slogans like 'British jobs for British workers', which are designed to appease anxiety about immigration and globalisation. In fact, national identity should be debated more than ever now because it is during recessions that conservatism and fascism tend to capitalise on popular discontent by re-asserting traditional notions of Britishness based around a centralised, sovereign state and cultural/racial homogeneity.

There is also a tendency, especially among English radicals, to sit tight and hope that the concept of national identity will somehow wither in a world of cosmopolitan, networked 'global cities'. It won't. If anything, the need for individuals to securely locate themselves in national cultures will grow in response to globalisation. So what does the centre-left have to offer them? Devolution was one of New Labour's great achievements and this book is as good a progress report as I've read.

Breaking Up Britain contains an eloquent plea by Gerry Adams for a devolved united Ireland, although having seen the capacity of a Conservative/Unionist pact to road-block the existing Peace Process in Northern Ireland, one is tempted to say 'Good luck with that, Gerry'. With regard to Labour's more successful devolution of power within Britain, the book contains thoughtful essays on the progressive matrix of Scottish and Welsh politics, such as Leanne Wood's 'Greening the Welsh Dragon' and Richard Thomson's 'The social democratisation of Scottish nationalism'.

These and other pieces testify to the fact that England's neighbours are not only driving the debate on the future of the British state; they're also showing how to develop a consensual, left-of-centre civic nationalism (one that's led, for example, to most Asian

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Scots voting SNP). There's even been a recent attempt to persuade Scots to ditch anti-English prejudice, which since the 1960s has been the Petri dish on which both reformers and separatists have tacitly grown Scottish and Welsh political culture.

Another period of Conservative rule at Westminster may tip the Scots into independence, and a growing number of English Conservatives are tempted to ditch the symbolic link to British imperial power that the Union represents for them, in favour of the exciting prospect of almost permanent Tory rule in a separate England.

John Harris's essay 'An English realignment' is among the best in the collection. Remembering that the middle classes make use of the NHS, public transport, public parks, Legal Aid and universities to name a few, he argues that England can develop a civic nationalism, similar to that of the Scots and Welsh, that would appeal to voters he calls 'the Anxious Affluent' (see also his essay of this title in *Renewal* 15.4). This might not prevent a separate England becoming a Conservative fiefdom. But he rightly concludes that 'Southern England is by no means the write-off for left politics that a lot of people would have us believe, and those that claim it is are guilty of a lamentable failure of political imagination'.

On a par with Harris's piece is 'More than one English question' by Michael Kenny and Guy Lodge, which springs from a recent project of the ippr and Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust that's as notable for its practical outlook as for its intellectual sweep. Among other things, Kenny and Lodge endorse an overhaul of the iniquitous Barnett Formula that's now causing so much resentment in England, as well as the introduction of a St. George's Day national holiday and an official English national anthem. They call on politicians to 'engage with the English as citizens and identity-bearers, and not just as voters', an engagement 'which is long overdue'.

Perryman's book contains some mistaken assumptions common to identity politics in Britain. One is that the Scots and Welsh necessarily have a compact, when in fact their historic rivalry and antipathy towards each other has until recently handicapped the cause of devolution. Some of Perryman's contributors also conveniently forget that both Scotland and Wales were willing partners in the English imperial project and complicit in its worst crimes. Mike Parker's view that 'Britishness has never been much more than Greater Englishness' ignores the fact that, from the eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth, 'Britain' was a concept and a state supported as much in Cardiff and Edinburgh as in London because it gave Scotland and Wales the chance to be players on the world stage and to share in profits made largely at the expense of colonial subjects.

Alex Salmond has said that 'England stands to lose a surly lodger and gain a good neighbour' if Scotland is set free. Any future relationship has to begin with the Scots and Welsh admitting that they were more than just lodgers at the time of Britain's foreign conquests. Failing to do so, and perpetuating the nationalist myth that Scotland and Wales are England's first and last colonies, will only entrench the victim-hood that's characterised Scottish and Welsh identity since the 1960s and that won't be healthy for any of us. Mike Parker is, however, right to re-iterate the point that it's primarily the end of Empire that has removed the *raison d'être* of the United Kingdom.

Which is precisely why England, the country where most of Britain's black and Asian population live, most urgently needs to secure a post-imperial national identity that can be saluted as much in Shropshire villages as it is in Haringey or Leicester. At the same time, reformers should accept that in places like Barking the madness may never be cured, only medicated for the safety and well being of the non-racist majority. On Bernard Crick's

recommendation, New Labour made a start by introducing the American-style 'Life In The United Kingdom' citizenship test and ceremony in 2005 (although, in my view if *all* adult Britons took it when they reached voting age, and not just immigrants, the test's symbolic value as a social contract would be greatly enhanced). As for future initiatives, a social housing policy that takes more account of local citizen rights (whatever the citizen's colour) and less of new immigrant needs is a more testy issue but one that should be considered.

Responding to the question 'What's Honolulu got to do with St. George's Day?' Perryman concludes: 'that's the tasty thing about Englishness at its best, it's all mixed up with a myriad of influences that turn any search for the purity of essence into a futile and thankless task. How can post-war England be divorced from the influence of Americana? And inner-city England is irrevocably black, and in large parts of our urban nation increasingly Muslim too. We eat, dance, wear this nationhood of difference, or we retreat into the redoubt of wishing none of it had ever washed up on our shores.' Whether Britain breaks up or not, the challenge for the centre-left is to find practical and emotionally compelling ways of translating this 'nationhood of difference' into an Englishness that's fit for purpose in the twenty-first century. Like my friend's heckling, this debate and the policymaking that flows from it will sometimes be noisy and unsettling. But it must continue if Labour is in opposition as productively as it has while Labour has been in power.

The play-write David Edgar called Perryman's last collection on this subject 'a kind of primer for post-Britons'. This book is more of an intellectual sat-nav, though without the irritating matronly voice and the built-in assumption that there is only one route. As we survey the economic wreckage of the 'post-Thatcher' years, Perryman's collection of essays points the peoples of Britain in a number of directions, from re-constitution to amicable separation. Anyone interested in the future of the British nation state should read it.

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