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NATIONALIST PARTIES

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Ladies and gentlemen, this is the fourth lecture in a series on the British political parties. Previous lectures have been on the three major parties: The Conservative Party, The Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats, parties which seek to govern at Westminster. This lecture is on nationalist parties in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, the non-English parts of the United Kingdom, or, as with Ireland, parts of what was once the United Kingdom, and at the end of the lecture, I shall discuss why there has not been an English nationalist party and whether UKIP is, or perhaps it might be better to say “was” in view of the tribulations of that party, whether UKIP was an English nationalist party.

But first, what is a nationalist party? Nationalist parties play a different role from the three major parties we have so far considered, in two particular respects. The first is that they do not seek and could not, in any case, achieve power on their own at Westminster, and they could not do that because, obviously, the majority of Westminster constituencies are English, so they cannot win an election as the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Labour hope to do. Indeed, apart from the Unionist parties of Northern Ireland, they do not really wish to play any part in the affairs of Westminster, except to secure the independence of their countries. They are, in a sense, being sent to Westminster to say that they do not want to be there. Once the independence of their country has been secured, they would of course no longer send MPs to Westminster.

In the case of the Sinn Fein Party in Ireland, which, in the 1918 General Election, won almost every seat in Ireland outside Ulster, they went even further. They refused to send any MPs to Westminster at all since they did not recognise its authority over Ireland. They proceeded to set up their own parliament, the Dáil, in Dublin, and the British Government, in turn, refused to recognise that parliament, and fought a war to try to subdue it, but in the end, Ireland did achieve independence in 1922, and Irish Nationalists regard the parliament they set up in 1918, which from a British view was unlawful, as a legitimate Irish parliament. Today, the modern Sinn Fein Party in Northern Ireland also refuses to recognise Westminster and its MPs do not take up their seats there.

The second way in which the nationalist parties differ from the three major parties is that they are parties not of ideology but of identity. The Scottish Nationalists, for example, oppose the Conservatives and Labour not because they are too left-wing or too right-wing but because they are not Scottish enough, and they seek and win supporters from all sides of the political spectrum, from those in the North-East of Scotland who might otherwise vote Conservative, and from those in the Glasgow conurbation who might otherwise vote Labour. The Labour Party have attacked them as “tartan Tories”, while the Conservatives have called them “socialists in disguise”, but these attacks miss the point: they are both and neither, and perhaps if Scotland did become independent, the SNP might split into a left-wing Scottish party and a right-wing one.

In Ireland, once it obtained independence, the nationalist party split, not, admittedly, on economic issues but on a constitutional issue, the issue of whether Ireland should be a republic or continue to recognise George V as the King of Ireland. That was the basis of the conflict between the two main parties in Ireland, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gaer, in the early years of Irish independence.



But until they have achieved independence, nationalist parties do not necessarily need to be united on the economic issues which form the staple diet of the political debate of the major parties. They need to be united only on the need for the independence of their countries.

The first nationalist parties which Britain knew were in Ireland, and the history of Ireland offers a graphic illustration of the problems and difficulties of a nationalist movement. Winston Churchill once asked: “How is it that she, Ireland, has forced generation after generation to stop the whole traffic of the British Empire to debate her domestic affairs?” - something which perhaps Theresa May would echo. But perhaps the answer to Churchill’s question was given by Mr Gladstone in the 19th Century when he said: “The long, vexed and troubled relations between Great Britain and Ireland exhibit to us the one and only conspicuous failure of the political genius of our race to confront and master difficulty and to obtain, in a reasonable degree, the main ends of civilised life.”

Ireland came to send MPs to Westminster as a result of the Act of Union of 1801, and that Act was secured by corrupt means and by a promise which was to be broken. The Irish were promised that if they abandoned their own parliament, Catholics in Ireland, who of course formed then, as they still do, the vast majority of the population, would be emancipated. But Catholic emancipation was vetoed by George III, since he believed it was contrary to his Coronation Oath which required him to maintain the Protestant religion. Emancipation was not secured until 1829, and as so often in Irish affairs, concessions came too late to achieve goodwill. Despite Catholic emancipation and despite the fact the majority in Ireland were Catholic, the Church of Ireland, the Church of the Protestant minority, remained the established church there until 1869, and between 1829 and 1869, there was of course the Great Famine in Ireland, in which one million people died and a further million emigrated, cutting the Irish population by between 20% and 25%. The Famine was blamed, understandably, but to some extent unfairly, upon British rule. But as the Queen said when she visited Ireland in 2011, with the benefit of historical hindsight, we can all see things which we would wish had been done differently or not at all.

Once household suffrage was secured in Ireland in 1885, it became clear that almost the whole of Catholic Ireland favoured if not independence at least home rule. Almost every constituency outside Ulster returned Irish Nationalist MPs belonging to the Irish Parliamentary Party, and this party held at least 80 seats out of the 103 in Ireland at every general election between 1885 and 1914, and for much of that period, it exerted a virtual stranglehold on Westminster politics.

Ireland was of course governed during this period by Conservative or Liberal administrations, but whichever it was, the key Irish officials were bound to be in the hands of a party which had only minority support in Ireland. This meant that Irish representatives could play no part in the government of their country. The constitutional implication of the Anglo-Irish Union of 1800 had been the legal equality of Ireland with Great Britain, but to most Irish people, the relation seemed one of subordination.

When, in 1884, Gladstone was preparing to expand the franchise, his Home Secretary, Sir William Harcourt, feared that there would be: “...declared to the world, in larger print, what we all know to be the case, that we hold Ireland by force, and by force alone, as in the days of Cromwell, only that we are obliged to hold it by a force 10 times larger than he found necessary. We have never governed, and we never shall govern, Ireland by the good of its people.”

In 1908, at a time when the Liberals were reforming the Government of Ireland, an American commentator said: “While Scotland is governed by Scotchmen in accordance with Scottish ideas, Ireland has been governed by Englishmen, and until recently, in accordance with English ideas.” A leading Liberal, John Morley, told an audience in Manchester in 1902 that the government of Ireland was, and I quote, “the best machine that has ever been invented for governing a country against its will”. The administration of Ireland was primarily by Protestants and men committed to the Union.

An Irish magistrate, reminiscing in 1951, gave a not unfair verdict when he declared that: “We are governed from London by people who know little about our country but who ruled it fairly, though in the English



interests, through an oligarchy in Dublin”. Ireland was an exception in the developed Empire in being ruled not with the consent of the governed but paternalistically, and to paternalism was added a mixture of coercion.

In 1885, which was the first election in Ireland after household suffrage, the leader of the Irish Party, Charles Parnell, declared there was just one plank in his party’s programme and that was home rule. That was a clear policy. But the party faced a tactical problem: should it cooperate with the Liberals or retain complete independence from both British parties? Cooperating with the Liberals offered the hope of securing home rule through parliamentary methods, but at the cost of compromises which might make the party more remote from the people it represented, and indeed, the more the Irish Party got bogged down at Westminster, the greater the gap between its MPs and the public in Ireland. Some in the Irish Party repudiated alliance with the Liberals, which they regarded as a sacrifice of independence, and they said the Irish Party should act as an independent opposition, putting pressure on both parties. The argument between these two schools was never really resolved, but in 1885, the Irish Party held the balance in a Hung Parliament and sought to discover which of the two British parties would concede the most, and the consequence was Gladstone committing Liberals to home rule. As a result, in two later Hung Parliaments, in 1892 and from 1910, the Irish Party was in alliance with the Liberals, sustaining Liberal Governments in power in the hope of getting home rule.

The influence of the Irish Party was seen most graphically after 1910, when the Liberals depended on them for their majority, because the Irish refused to support the Liberal budget, Lloyd George’s famous People’s Budget of 1909, which was full of radical proposals that had been turned down by the House of Lords. The Irish said they wouldn’t support the budget unless the Liberals agreed to curtail the absolute veto of the House of Lords, and the outcome was the 1911 Parliament Act, which substituted for the absolute veto a mere suspensory veto, that is a time-limited veto, and that still exists, but it was reduced from two sessions to one session in the Parliament Act in 1949. So, the Irish Party has left a permanent mark upon British politics, and upon the British constitution, by limiting the power of the House of Lords, a limitation which of course still remains.

The Irish Party left a further mark on British politics: it was the first party which introduced stringent party discipline into our politics. It enforced a kind of democratic centralism on its MPs of a kind which I suspect Mr Corbyn would envy.

The Irish Party was also the first to organise the payment of MPs. It paid a salary to its MPs, and that was necessary to enable the small traders and farmers on whom it depended to sit in Parliament in the days before state payment of MPs. It used this payment of members to enforce discipline because, in return for the payment, candidates had to sign an undated letter pledging themselves not publicly to oppose, either inside or outside parliament, any decision reached by that party, even if the decision went against the MP’s constituency interest, and the MP would be required to resign if a majority of the party thought the pledge had been broken. The pledge was in the following form: “I pledge myself that, in the event of my election to parliament, I will sit, act and vote with the Irish Parliamentary Party, and if, at a meeting of the party, convened upon due notice specially to consider the question, it be determined by resolution, supported by a majority of the Irish Party, that I have not fulfilled the above pledges, I hereby undertake to resign my seat.” So, you see that Momentum is not a recent invention.

The problem with such a disciplined party was that, because it muffled genuine differences, it tended to stifle debate, and in its later years, the party seemed to lack vitality. Nevertheless, it remained, on the whole, a parliamentary party, adhering to constitutional methods. It accepted that Parliament was the institution through which redress of Irish grievances was to be obtained, and that influence has remained, even after the collapse of the Irish Party, and can be seen in the liberal and parliamentary character of the independent Irish state.

But perhaps the party was only conditionally constitutional. Its great leader, Charles Parnell, declared, in 1889, that: “If our constitutional movement were to fail, if it became evident that we could not, by parliamentary action and continued representation at Westminster, restore to Ireland the high privilege of self-government, I, for one, would not continue to remain for 24 hours longer in the House of Commons at Westminster. The most advanced section of Irishmen, as well as the least advanced, have always understood that the Parliamentary Party



was to be a trial and that we did not ourselves believe in the possibility of maintaining, for all time, an incorruptible and independent Irish representation at Westminster.”

After the death of Parnell in 1891, there was disassociation in Irish nationalism between the constitutional element and the popular element. Parnell alone had been able to reconcile the two. The Irish Party got bogged down at Westminster. The Liberals seemed to have absorbed them, and they were seen no longer an independent source in Ireland. They came to be outflanked by a more radical party, the Sinn Fein Party.

The Sinn Fein Party was formed in 1905. The words “Sinn Fein” mean “Ourselves alone” and the aim of Sinn Fein, by contrast with the Irish Party, came to be complete independence and a republic, and Sinn Fein was to replace the Irish Party after the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916, even though it was a rising which few in Ireland supported. But Irish opinion was revolted by what it saw as the brutal British method of suppressing it by executing its ringleaders, and in the next general election, in 1918, Sinn Fein won 73 of the 101 Irish constituencies and the Irish Party just seven. The rest of the seats, primarily in Ulster, were won by Unionists. In 1921, Ireland won her independence and the 26 counties which formed the Irish Free State, now the Irish Republic, ceased to send MPs to Westminster.

Winston Churchill declared, mischievously, that the two supreme services had rendered to the Empire were her accession to the Allied cause at the beginning of the War and her withdrawal from the Imperial Parliament at its end. Ireland’s withdrawal from Westminster was a benefit to Britain since it made a Hung Parliament much less likely. Between 1885 and 1914, four out of the eight general elections resulted in a Hung Parliament in which the Irish held the balance of power.

The Settlement of Ireland provided for the partition of Ireland. Six counties in Ulster remained part of the United Kingdom, as Northern Ireland, but some in Ireland refused to accept partition and they formed the core of a new Sinn Fein party, which still exists, demands a united Ireland and fights elections in both parts of Ireland. Now, the independence of Ireland did not resolve the Irish question, which now shifted to Northern Ireland, where it’s remained, and the conflict there between the majority Unionists, predominantly Protestant, and the minority Nationalists, predominantly Catholic. Again, this conflict was graphically described by Winston Churchill in a book he wrote shortly after the First World War. He said: “Then came the Great War. Every institution almost in the world was strained. Great empires had been overturned. The whole map of Europe has been changed. The mode of thought of men, the whole outlook on affairs, the grouping of parties, all have encountered violent and tremendous changes in the deluge of the world. But as the deluge subsides and the waters fall, we see again the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone emerging once against - the integrity of their quarrel is one of the few institutions that have been unaltered in the cataclysm which has swept the world.” Perhaps Theresa May thinks the same.

The conflict in Northern Ireland is an existential one, in that it’s a conflict as to whether it should exist at all. There is not the basic consensus which is needed for a democratic state to be effective. To the question, “Do you want to remain in the United Kingdom?” the two communities give different answers: the Nationalists say no – they say they belong to the Irish nation and that being Irish is incompatible with being British; but the Unionists say yes – they say that they too are Irish but being Irish is perfectly compatible with being British, just as Scottish Unionists say that being Scottish is perfectly compatible with also being British. So, the Unionists say they belong to the British state and the British nation, so there’s a conflict, a fundamental one, over national identity.

It’s sometimes wrongly said that Britain is composed of four nations. Indeed, those who believed that devolution would lead to the break-up of Britain said that, with devolution, Britain was fast becoming “four nations and a funeral”. But neither of the two traditions represented in Northern Ireland believe that Northern Ireland is a nation. They differ on which nation Northern Ireland is a part of. A Unionist, by definition, cannot favour an independent Northern Ireland, but says that she belongs to the British nation. The Ulster Covenant of 1912, which insisted upon the separateness of Ulster from the rest of Ireland, sought not independence but the need to preserve for Ulster their equal citizenship in the United Kingdom. The claim of unionism in Northern Ireland is not for independence but for equal citizenship. So, Britain is not four nations but three nations



together with a contested province, which is, according to your viewpoint, either part of the British nation or part of the Irish nation, and that makes the conflict in Northern Ireland particularly intractable. It is not a conflict over economics, but over nationality and religion, or perhaps, in Ireland, nationality and religion are merely different names for the same thing. This means that the conflict, unlike an economic conflict, is not bargainable. An economic conflict can be settled by a fairer division of the spoils. That is not possible with a conflict over nationality or religion.

The Unionists seem to be in a permanent majority in Northern Ireland, and this means that, by contrast with Westminster, there's no possibility of an alternative government, and alternation of power is not possible. In the old Northern Ireland Parliament, governed by majority rule, often known as Stormont, which sat from 1921 to 1972, until 1969, Unionists never won fewer than 32 of the 52 seats. Now, democracy in the rest of Britain is fuelled by alternation of power, or the possible alternation of power, and governments are, to some extent, deterred from implementing extreme methods for fear that they will be setting precedents which their opponents would be able to use. There was no such fear in Northern Ireland, and when the Northern Ireland Parliament, from 1921 to 1972, was based on majority rule, the Unionists tolerated a policy of discrimination in housing and employment.

With the province divided between two seemingly intractable communities, there seems no middle ground, no floating vote in the centre for which the parties can compete. There's no incentive for the Unionist Party to seek Nationalist votes – they won't win them; and similarly, Nationalist parties won't win Unionist votes. The only competition is within rather than between the two communities and the competition is, as it were, to outflank another party within the community by saying that it's not tough enough in representing the community, so this means a competition towards the extremes, centrifugal rather than centripetal. So, in the Unionist camp, the more moderate Ulster Unionist Party, often called the Official Unionists, have been pushed aside by the more militant Democratic Unionist Party founded by the Reverend Ian Paisley; while, on the Nationalist side, the more moderate Social Democratic & Labour Party has been pushed aside by the more militant Sinn Fein Party.

There is a competitive party system, but only within the two communities, not between them, and because the main issue in Northern Ireland has been the border, the British parties cannot compete successfully for votes there. Since 1974, when the Ulster Unionists broke with the Conservatives, the two major parties, Labour and the Conservatives, have not been able to win seats in Northern Ireland. For the most part, they have not tried.

When the alliance between the Ulster Unionists and Conservatives broke, since then, there have been one or two Conservative candidates in Northern Ireland, but they've been very unsuccessful, and the Conservatives have not been able to establish a permanent organisation in the province. There was, in the past, a Northern Ireland Labour Party, which, remarkably, until 1949, had no policy on the constitutional issue of the border, but pressed by the voters, the Northern Ireland Labour Party declared in 1949 that it was a unionist party, and this lost it the chance of securing the votes of the Catholic working class. In 1974, the Northern Ireland Labour Party supported a strike by Protestant workers which brought down the power-sharing executive set up by Conservative and Labour Governments, and the Labour Party then ceased to give it a financial subvention.

The Liberal Democrats do have a sister party in Northern Ireland, the Alliance Party, which is a bi-confessional party and seeks to win support from both communities, though its support comes mainly from middle class and professional people. The British Government introduced proportional representation for most elections in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, in the hope that this would strengthen the Alliance Party which occupied the centre ground, but there isn't actually much of a centre ground in Northern Ireland. One leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, Sammy Wilson, gave to the new leader of the Alliance Party in 2001 the most damning insult he could think of: he called him "you Guardian reader, you!" The Alliance, you won't be surprised to hear, has never gained more than 12% of the vote in Northern Ireland, and currently has no seats in Westminster at all.

Scottish nationalism is and always has been quite different from the Irish variety. Admittedly, the union with Scotland in 1707 was secured, as that in Ireland, in part by corrupt means, but the two unions had a very different psychological impact. Gladstone believed that, by contrast with Ireland, English policy had achieved no



triumph so great as the union between England and Scotland. There was a difference between Scotland and Ireland in their emotional response to union with England.

The union with Scotland, by contrast to that in Ireland, came about with broad consent, as a bargain between two autonomous teams of representatives, freely negotiating, and the union sought to preserve what were then the main and central institutions of Scottish civil society, the kirk and the legal system. Indeed, the Church of Scotland remains the established church in Scotland, and the monarch takes an oath to preserve it upon her accession. The union with Ireland, by contrast, was not a treaty or contract freely made between two independent states, but was imposed on the Irish, who initially resisted it. Religion, which united Scotland, divided Ireland, and the British party system, as we have seen, could not secure a foothold in a country dominated by sectarian divisions. The union with Scotland secured the rights of Presbyterians, whereas the union with Ireland had failed to secure the rights of Catholics, so the outcome was that, while the Scottish union proved compatible with the sense of nationality in Scotland, the Irish union seemed in conflict with it.

Of course, in the 21st Century, the kirk is no longer as important a symbol as it was in the 18th, and in the 20th Century, governments gradually assumed responsibility for economic and social policy, and some Scots came to feel that, in consequence, their country was being neglected by administrations centred in distant London. In 1934, the Scottish National Party, the SNP, was formed. At its foundation, it was a home rule party, but shortly afterwards, it became an explicitly separatist party, committed to independence. It succeeded in winning odd seats in by-elections, but it did not win a seat in a general election until 1970.

But shortly after that, the Scottish political landscape was totally transformed by the coming online of North Sea oil, which had been discovered in the 1960s. The slogan, “It’s Scotland’s oil”, was to prove a very powerful one for the SNP, and in retrospect, the period of the mid-1970s would have been the most propitious time for an independent Scotland, based on oil, because as a result of the discovery of oil in the North Sea, it seemed no longer the case that the union with England was a precondition of Scotland’s economic health. The discovery of oil altered the whole framework within which the economic implications of independence had been discussed. In the weeks following the February 1974 Election, a report prepared by an economic advisor at the Scottish Office, released under Freedom of Information provisions in 2005, suggested that an independent Scotland would enjoy a large budgetary surplus and that its currency, I quote, “...would become the hardest in Europe, with the exception perhaps of the Norwegian Krona” In consequence, and I quote, “Scottish banks could expect to find themselves inundated with a speculative inflow of foreign funds. Moreover, Scottish incomes per head would increase substantially.” An independent Scotland could use the oil revenues towards a development fund, as the Norwegians were to do. The British Government, by contrast, used it for current spending, partly to pay for increased unemployment benefits in the 1980s. North Sea oil provided a cushion for Margaret Thatcher’s economic policies, but the SNP argued this was a wasteful use of a valuable resource, and the Governments of Margaret Thatcher served to reinforce nationalist feelings.

There was a further factor which helped the SNP: Britain’s entry into the European Economic Community, as the EU then was, in 1973, because that would guarantee to an independent Scotland access to English and Continental markets, since other member states of the EU could not impose tariffs against her. In addition, as the major producer of oil in Western Europe, Scotland could expect to have political influence in Europe, out of all proportion to her modest size, and she would benefit from having her own European Commissioner, rather than having to rely on the indirect representation secured by a British Commissioner. But without independence, Scotland could appear even more remote and peripheral in Europe. Today, however, it would seem that much of the oil has already been exploited, so an independent Scotland would have much greater difficulty in securing budgetary equilibrium.

It is not surprising that, because of the oil, in the General Election of February 1974, the SNP won seven of Scotland’s 70 seats, in the second election of that year, in October, it won 11 of 71 seats, gaining 30% of the vote, by far the highest vote up to that point of any nationalist party in Western Europe. In October 1974, it was also second in a further 42 seats, including 35 of the Labour Party’s 41 seats. If the SNP could manage a further swing of 5%, it would win another 16 seats. So, the SNP was threatening Labour’s Scottish heartlands, and without support in Scotland, it would be very difficult for Labour to win an overall majority in Britain as a



whole, so it's hardly surprising that the Labour Government in the 1970s produced proposals for devolution to Scotland, and, I have to say probably as an afterthought, for Wales as well. In 1979, in the referendums, devolution failed to achieve sufficient support, and in the General Election of that year, the SNP fell back.

The success of the SNP in Scotland was a clear indication of the weakening of class politics there. In 1967, one authority on elections had declared that: "Class is the basis of British politics. All else is embellishment and detail." But since the 1970s, that has gradually ceased to be the case, and part of the reason for that was disillusion towards the two main parties, who seemed not to be able to resolve Britain's economic problems, nor to increase Britain's standing in the world. Economic failure seemed particularly relevant to Scotland, which had suffered persistent unemployment and net emigration, particularly in the West of Scotland, with accompanying poor social and environmental conditions. To cure unemployment and migration, Scotland needed a higher rate of growth, but neither Labour nor Conservative Governments seemed able to achieve this. There was disillusion in Britain as a whole, and in England, the beneficiaries of disillusion tended to be the Liberals, but in Scotland, it was the SNP. That was because the Act of Union, as we have seen, buttressed the sense of Scottish nationality because Scotland retained her separate institutions, so reactions to the failures of government would be different in Scotland from those in England, and the SNP proved to be a powerful pressure group for Scottish interests.

In February 1974, Labour governed as a minority for seven months. In October, it secured a majority of three, but that was soon whittled away through by-election losses and defections. Labour, therefore, was dependent upon the SNP and the SNP was not slow in claiming benefits for Scotland. In addition to devolution, Labour offered many other goodies. Labour doubled the regional employment premium, it gave Edinburgh and Leith Development Area status, it established the British National Oil Corporation in Scotland, and civil service jobs were moved to Scotland in consequence. In addition, a Scottish Development Agency was established, together with a Centre for Oil-Drilling Technology. Rail closures were halted and the modernisation of the Glasgow Underground was agreed.

But following the defeat of devolution in 1979, there were to be 18 years of Conservative Government, 11 of them under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher. These years of Conservative Government were to prove highly unpopular in Scotland, where the Conservatives were distinctly in the minority. In particular, the Thatcherite philosophy of competitive market individualism proved anathema to the Scots, who claimed that their philosophy gave much more emphasis to ideas of community. Margaret Thatcher could, on occasion, be insensitive to Scotland, which she saw as an outpost of a dependency culture, reliant on public subsidies, handouts and benefits. What Scotland needed, in her view, even more than the rest of the country, was a bracing dose of free market policies, and she tended to brush Scottish objections aside. In her memoirs, she declares that the union with Scotland, and I quote: "...was inevitably dominated by England, by reason of its greater population. The Scots, being an historic nation with a proud past, will inevitably resent some expressions of this fact from time to time." That was perhaps an understatement.

The Scots particularly resented the reform in local government finance in the late-1980s. the Community Charge, popularly known as the Poll Tax, which was tried out in Scotland before the rest of Britain. Rates of refusal to pay were much higher in Scotland than in England, and the SNP gained support by urging non-payment. Other Thatcherite policies, such as privatisation, deregulation, and opting out of local authority control, proved far less popular in Scotland than in England, and Margaret Thatcher had to conclude, sadly, in her memoirs that "...there was no tartan Thatcherite revolution".

During the years of Conservative Government, Conservative majorities in Britain in four successive general elections, 1979, 1983, 1987 and 1992, were matched by Labour majorities in Scotland. The Labour Party argued that the Conservative Government had no legitimacy in Scotland since the Conservatives were in a minority there and the majority of Scots were against it. But this argument was to rebound against Labour because it was a double-edged argument, because the SNP response was that an independent Scotland would not have to put up with Thatcherism or Conservative Governments at all. Labour, the SNP said, could not combat Thatcherism since, even though it was the majority party in Scotland, the Conservatives were the majority party in Britain, and Labour was tied to the Westminster system. But if the Westminster Government had no legitimacy in Scotland, was that not a strong case for independence, an independent Scotland? The SNP could combat



Thatcherism much more effectively than Labour since an independent Scotland would hardly ever be Conservative.

The Labour Party's response was devolution. That, Labour argued, would protect Scotland from Thatcherism, since domestic policy would then be in Scottish hands. For that reason, so one Labour Leader insisted, devolution, and I quote, "...would kill Scottish nationalism stone-dead". The policy of devolution was also fuelled by memories of Ireland, where the failure to grant home rule had been said to have caused more extreme nationalism. But of course, devolution did not kill Scottish nationalism stone-dead. From the time the Scottish Parliament was established, the SNP proved the main opposition to Labour. They would almost certainly be returned as the government in Scotland when Scottish Labour became unpopular, and that happened in 2007, when an SNP minority government took office. Labour had hoped that proportional representation used for elections to the Scottish Parliament would at least prevent the SNP from being able to form a majority government, but that hope too was disappointed when, in 2011, the SNP won an overall majority in the Scottish Parliament and claimed a mandate for an independence referendum. David Cameron, wisely, in my view, conceded that referendum, and what happens if you don't has been recently shown in Catalonia.

The referendum held in 2014 saw independence defeated by 55% of the vote to 45%. Nevertheless, it led to a surge in SNP support, and in the 2015 General Election, the unionist parties were wiped out in Scotland. The SNP won 56 of the 59 seats, albeit on just 50% of the vote, the distortions of the first-past-the-post system working in the party's favour. In the 2017 Election, however, the SNP fell back, winning just 35 seats on 37% of the vote. Even so, it remains over-represented because it won over 50% of the seats on under two-fifths of the Scottish vote.

The SNP, like UKIP in England, seems to appeal most of all to the constituency of the "left behind" by social and economic change, in the areas of the first industrial revolution marked by the decline of heavy industry, in particular, the west-central belt of Glasgow, an area that has never really recovered from industrial decline and the consequence from loss of jobs for the semi-skilled and unskilled. There's a sharp cleavage in Scotland, as in the rest of Britain, between those who have the skills to benefit from globalisation and those who have not. That was apparent in the Scottish independence referendum in 2014. Voters in the normally Labour-supporting west-central belt of Scotland around Glasgow, and in Dundee, voted for independence, while SNP voters in middle class areas such as Aberdeenshire, Angus and Perthshire, voted against it. Voters in West Dunbartonshire, which has one of the lowest life expectancies in Scotland, voted yes to independence; voters in East Dunbartonshire, which has one of the highest life expectancies in Scotland voted no. The SNP is stronger amongst the young than amongst the elderly and is a fervently Europhile party, though that is a comparatively recent development because, in the first European referendum in 1975, the SNP, oddly, in view of the advantages Scotland had to gain from Europe, the SNP was the only party in Scotland to advocate leaving the European Community, and the worry then was that a constitutional crisis would be caused if England and the United Kingdom as a whole voted to stay whilst Scotland voted to leave.

Today of course, the worry is the opposite, that while England and the United Kingdom have voted to leave, Scotland has voted to stay. But an independent Scotland seeking to join the EU would no longer enjoy frictionless trade with the rest of the United Kingdom. The position would be different from the 1970s. And it would presumably lose the benefit of the rebated negotiated by Margaret Thatcher in 1984, and probably be required to join the Eurozone. That would mean reducing its budget deficit to 3%. It is currently around 9% of GDP. The public spending cuts needed to achieve that reduction would be so severe as to make George Osborne appear like Santa Claus. So, in my view, Brexit makes Scottish independence less rather than more likely.

Welsh nationalism is different both from Scottish and from Irish nationalism. In Wales, there was no Act of Union, but the country was incorporated into England by Acts of Henry VIII in 1536 and 1543. There was a strong Welsh national consciousness which developed in the late-19th Century but it sought not independence but recognition of Welshness, and in particular religious equality for the Welsh, where the majority community was Non-Conformist, not Anglican. Wales sought equality within the United Kingdom, not separation.



The constitutional issue of Welsh home rule divided the Liberals, who were the majority party in Wales before the First World War. North Wales was sympathetic, but industrialising South Wales was not, fearing that Wales would be cut off from its markets in England. When, in the 1890s, Lloyd George tried to mount a campaign for a Welsh Parliament, he met with a stinging rebuff from South Wales and was defeated. But although divided on home rule, Wales seemed united in seeking recognition for Welsh cultural aspirations and religious distinctiveness. The sought recognition of their status rather than, as with the Irish, separate development. There was no equivalent in Wales of Irish conditions. There were no memories of famine, no forced emigration, and no absentee landlords, so Welshness was to be achieved not through separation or exclusion, as with the Irish, but through recognition by the English of Welsh claims. So, the focus was less on a Welsh Parliament than on national educational institutions and the disestablishment of the Welsh Church. The former proved easier to attain than the latter.

In 1889, an Intermediate Education Act made Welsh counties the first local education authorities in Britain, under a system that was later to be adopted in England in 1902, and then, in 1893, a charter was granted to the University of Wales, and so the Welsh educational system was in the process of becoming a national system. The first and most striking in institutional terms of the reawakened consciousness of Welsh nationhood. But disestablishment of the Welsh Church was much more contentious and was not enacted until 1914, and came into effect in 1920.

The Welsh nationalist party, Plaid Cymru, was founded in 1925. In its earliest years, it was primarily a pressure group seeking the revival of the Welsh language. The language issue gave rise to an acute dilemma for Welsh nationalists because Welsh was spoken only by around 20% - or is today spoken only by around 20% of the Welsh population, very much of a minority. So, whereas, in Scotland, the symbols of nationhood united the country, in Wales, the prime symbol of nationhood, the language, was divisive, and if language was a test of Welshness, around 80% of the population was not Welsh at all. So, Plaid Cymru had to decide whether its main aim was to seek restoration of the Welsh language, a policy which inevitably had only minority appeal, or of a Welsh Parliament, in which Welsh speakers would be in the minority. Opponents of the language argued that it was a product of a dying culture which should be left to die. Plaid Cymru, as I said, began as a movement to preserve the language – it was almost a cultural conservation society. As late as 1962, the party's first President, Saunders Lewis, said that the language was "...the only political question deserving of a Welshman's attention at the present time" and that it was more important than self-government.

But in 1968, Plaid Cymru adopted a policy of bilingualism, but even this policy was divisive in Wales, and the party has not been able to secure extensive support in every part of Wales. Its support is mainly derived from what might be called Welsh Wales, the Welsh-speaking counties of the North and West, primarily Caernarfon and Merioneth. Plaid Cymru is also a distinctively left-wing party, more so than the SNP, and while the SNP emphasises nationhood, Plaid Cymru emphasises culture, community and decentralisation.

In the devolution referendum in Wales in 1979, it was defeated by a massive four to one vote, but in 1997, it secured just over 50% of the vote because, in addition to Welsh-speaking North-West Wales, the Welsh-speaking heartland, it also secured the support of the industrial Wales of the valleys, the former coalfield areas, so there was a very small majority for the Assembly. But the majority in 1997, narrow though it was, did show a marked increase in the sense of Welsh identity since 1979, and there is evidence that this sense of identity has grown further since 1997, and support for the Assembly is almost certainly greater than it was then. Of course, in Wales, unlike Scotland, there seems little danger of devolution leading to independence.

I have so far dealt in this lecture with Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but what about England, by far the largest component of the UK, with 85% of its population? Does it too have a nationalist party? Now, until recently, the answer would have been a categorical "no". The English of course have always seen themselves as a non-philosophical nation and highly resistant to defining Englishness, so it's always been a puzzle.

In 1741, the Scottish philosopher, David Hume, wrote a essay of national character, in which he said: "The English, of any people in the universe, have the least of a national character, unless this very singularity may pass for such."



In one of Henry James' novels, 'The Tragic Muse' – and Henry James of course is an American – he makes his hero feel, and I quote: "The sense of England, a sort of apprehended revelation of his country, which laid on him a hand that was too ghostly to press and yet somehow too urgent to be light."

More recently, an English interviewee told a researcher: "I just wish that Scotland would bloody well hurry up and become independent so that everyone would shut up and people would stop doing all this stupid research about bloody national identity!" which is a very English view.

Now, part of the reason for the English unwillingness to define their nationhood is that, for many, in the past, England and Britain seemed to be one and the same. In 1924, the Conservative Leader, Stanley Baldwin, speaking at the annual dinner at the Royal Society of St George, confessed to a feeling of satisfaction and profound thankfulness "...that I may use the word "England" without some fellow at the back of the room shouting out "Britain"!"

Baldwin's Liberal predecessor as Prime Minister, Asquith, is buried near Oxford and his grave records the fact that he was, and I quote, "Prime Minister of England", though he always sat for a Scottish constituency.

In 1965, the historian, A. J. P. Taylor, in the preface to a volume of 'The Oxford History of England', which I suppose should really have been called 'The Oxford History of Britain', wrote: "When 'The Oxford History of England' was launched a generation ago, "England" was still an all-embracing word. It meant, indiscriminately, England and Wales, Great Britain, the United Kingdom, and even the British Empire. Foreigners used it as the name of a great power and, indeed, continue to do so. So, until recently, there seemed no need for a special English nationalism. It could be subsumed under British nationalism. Indeed, for many, it was the same thing, and because England was so dominant in the United Kingdom, there was no need to beat the drum or blow the bugle. If you're securely in charge, there's no need to remind others of the fact, and indeed, it could be counterproductive because a strong assertion of English identity might threaten the Union with Scotland by reminding the Scots of their subordinate position."

But English identity has been strengthened both by devolution to the non-English parts of the United Kingdom and by Brexit. In 1997, John Major warned of this. He said Labour's policies of devolution would "...as sure as night follows day, raise the spectre of nationalism in England". Margaret Thatcher wrote of the danger of Scotland "...awakening a resentful English nationalism which questions other aspects of present arrangements, which Scots themselves take for granted". William Hague, her successor as Conservative Leader, warned, in 1999, that Scottish nationalism was dangerous enough, but there was "...an even more dangerous spectre around the corner – extreme English nationalism".

Devolution has led to the English becoming more aware of the differences between Englishness and Britishness. The English are beginning now to ask themselves: what does it mean to be English? They are beginning the English question: why should Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own Parliaments but not England? Is not asymmetrical devolution unfair to the English? England seems to have become a mere residual, a kind of void. It is what is left of the United Kingdom once the rest of the United Kingdom has been given devolution. So, English nationalism can appear a kind of nationalism by default. Were it become stronger, it could threaten the United Kingdom, for unlike Scottish or Welsh nationalism, it is not the nationalism of a minority seeking secession but the nationalism of a majority.

The second factor that has fuelled English nationalism is Brexit. England has, in recent years, been more sceptical of European integration than Scotland. In Scotland, Europe was seen as an enabler of independence. In England, it was more often seen as a threat to independence. Whereas Scotland and Northern Ireland voted Remain in 2016, England voted for Brexit, with London being the only region to vote for Remain.

The satirists, David Frost and Antony Jay, wrote, perhaps unfairly, but perhaps presciently, in the 1970s: "Millions of words have been spoken and written about impediments to our joining the Common Market, none



at all about an obstacle more overwhelming than any of them: the blunt fact is that the English don't like foreigners."

How is English nationalism to be expressed? Despite what I've said, support for an English Parliament remains, very much, a minority concern - the English seem not terribly interested. Disraeli once said that England – and perhaps he meant Britain – he said England was governed not by logic but by Parliament. For the moment, it seems that, while the English seem prepared to accept devolution in Scotland and Wales, they do not seek it for themselves. There does not seem, as yet, majority support for an English Parliament, though that could change.

But do the English have to answer the English question? One party that says they do is UKIP, perhaps the nearest we have to an English nationalist party, and UKIP does favour an English Parliament. Despite its current travails, UKIP is, without question, the most successful minor party in British history. Indeed, it is arguable that, without UKIP, Brexit would not be occurring, so it deserves to be considered as part of my next lecture on minor parties. But perhaps the last word should rest with a short poem by Kipling, and you will have to decide whether, when he says "England", he means Britain.

*"If England was what England seems
An' not the England of our dreams,
But only putty, brass an' paint,
'Ow quick we'd drop 'er! But she ain't!"*

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