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# opinión

## DOES BRITAIN EXIST AS A NATION?

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**A**s the prime minister pledges to take Britain out of the European Union, arguments on whether a bold and ambitious trade agreement with the EU are possible roll back and forth. The politics of aggrieved nationalism are another focus of interest, encouraged by Donald Trump's arrival in the White House. Uncertainty is the order of the day as the usually benevolent US built architecture of international trade and security painstakingly built after 1945 starts to unravel.

The very word Britain does however pose a problem which is not always acknowledged, notably in continental Europe. The country more closely resembles the former Yugoslavia or the Austro-Hungarian empire of old than a national state such as France or Sweden. Discarding the origin of the name – the Roman Britannia did not include lands north of Hadrian's Wall or across the Irish Sea – Britain houses the four nations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The first contains an overwhelming percentage of the population and concentrates by far the most wealth, over 80% of the total. This is a situation which is very different from Germany or the US where no lander or state carries such a crushing weight among its peers.

The building of the United Kingdom was, over a millennium, the story of England's relentless expansion, at times extremely brutal across the outlying, often Celtic lands on its borders. Northern Ireland is the child of the bitter war of conquest led by the English crown against the Irish people going back more than half a millennium. The result is a predominantly Catholic North and East and an essentially Catholic South and West. The Act of Union of 1707 incorporated Scotland and England but was strongly resisted north of the boarder. Empire building is usually a brutal affair and this was no exception but England, then Britain's success at conquering a world empire from the 17<sup>th</sup> century gave every nation a stake in the shared prosperity not least Scotland. Its sons played a role in the military, banking and legal system of the empire which was far in excess of its weight in the population of what became the United Kingdom. In a neat reversal of history, many jobs today in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland depend on decisions taken abroad, in Canada, the US, India or Germany.

As the empire has vanished into a barely remembered past so have the shared memories of the military, the civil servants and the merchant classes whose achievements raked up so many riches for Britain for three and a half centuries. Devolution and a peaceful settlement in Ireland have created four capital cities, four legislatures and four bureaucracies out of what was once a monolithic state. Each nation meanwhile is pulling in its own direction – the Scottish Nationalists have a majority in Edinburgh, Labour in Cardiff and the Conservatives in England.

Further fragmentation forces are at work. Major cities in England such as Manchester and London chose to stay in the EU but so did Cardiff, the capital of Wales where a majority expressed a wish to leave. In Northern Ireland, the Sinn Fein party areas which are Catholic voted to stay while Democratic Unionist Party constituencies which are Protestant voted to leave. As for Scotland, it voted to stay and the nationalist government is toying with the idea of another vote on independence. Indeed those who voted against leaving the United Kingdom in 2014 had no intention of leaving the European Union. So the hard question for the Prime Minister is how to keep these three nations in the UK while England opts out. This amounts to squaring the circle.

The UK is a parliamentary democracy and referendums can only be advisory. The Prime Minister has accepted that parliament in Westminster will have the last say. But what if the House of Commons rejects the deal her government has negotiated in say two years time? Is it acceptable, even today that people in Scotland and Northern Ireland who have cast their vote to stay in the EU be forced to leave? The UK is not a unitary, still less an English state.

The recent resignation of the deputy leader of Sinn Fein, Martin McGuinness as deputy first minister of Northern Ireland and the threat this poses to power sharing with the DUP could destabilise matters. It does not help that the Republic of Ireland is aghast at the consequences of Brexit on its own economic well being. Economic links between the UK and Ireland are strong. Were Scotland and Northern Ireland to leave Britain, Wales, which votes Labour would be left as a rump nation, dominated by a Conservative England. This is hardly a fate the Welsh would wish for.

It is worth considering what position this leaves the Crown in. Traditional politics are being upended as the Tory party which did so much to build Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries goes about destroying what has proved to be one of the more successful unions of nations in modern European history. The Prime Minister would carry a heavy responsibility if she were to preside over the undoing of the United Kingdom, discard its remarkable achievements to the rubbish dump of history. It maybe that the rise of populism is ushering in irresponsible government. Demagogues like to pretend they speak for ordinary people while they pursue their own destructive policies of aggrieved nationalism. Sir Winston Churchill must be turning in his grave.