7 English nationalism and its role in building support for Brexit

The case of UKIP and the Brexit Party

Marcin Galent

Some peculiarities of British nationhood

The analysis of the contemporary transformation of British national identities is difficult for two main reasons. The first is that, in fact, we are dealing with four separate nations that are part of the state, plus the ‘fifth nation’, i.e. British national identity, which is in a sense an amalgamation of all four, i.e. an identity mixed from these four national components and going beyond their simple aggregate and constituting a separate, additional identification level. It is generally highlighted that this British level consists of Protestantism, involvement in building the British empire, British economic ties and a shared memory of conflicts with the countries of continental Europe. This, of course, does not put the British people in an exceptional position, as many federal states have a very similar situation. However, what is an additional problem is the lack of a written constitution that would regulate relations between the different nations and collective identities, even in the most rudimentary formal and legal sense. Indeed, what is clearly described in other countries in one fundamental document, in the case of Great Britain is very often recognised by the law of custom, tradition, the unwritten contract, or dispersed in numerous legislative acts, not always consistent and cohesive. Hence the continuing validity of the diagnosis by Benjamin Disraeli, who noted that: ‘England is not governed by logic, but by Parliament’. Such a situation did not give rise to special problems as long as British identity had a hegemonic status and did not collide significantly with lower-level identities. However, in the last few decades, this state of relative syntony began to seriously disintegrate.¹

For a long time, reflections on British national identity were rather fragmentary and causal, remaining slightly on the sidelines of research even in the work of such eminent British theorists of the second half of the 20th century nationalism as Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Elie Kedourie or Anthony D. Smith. This was for at least two main reasons.

First of all, this was because it was a derivative of English and British imperialism, which at its peak subjected a quarter of the world’s territory to the British monarchy along with a similar proportion of the global

population. Within the British empire, the ancient Roman principle of *Civis Britannicus Sum* was adopted, which meant that in legal terms every subject of the Monarch had equal rights, and thus theoretically belonged to the body politic of Britain. This idea was also upheld after the empire broke up. The first British Citizenship Act, adopted in 1948, granted it to all inhabitants of the countries of the former British colonies, and formally everyone who wished to do so had the full right to come to Britain, without hindrance, to settle, work, and exercise their electoral and other rights on equal terms with the English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish people who had lived in the United Kingdom for generations. Until 1981, between 600 and 800 million people worldwide had nominal British citizenship, although after 1962 it entailed fewer rights. This state of affairs meant that there was a constant tension within the identity, which did not always produce the desired results. On the one hand, such tension allows for the existence of a sense of unity and community that goes beyond particular identities. However, on the other hand, these particular identities can win and where there used to be an understated symbolic border, there can be a desire to transform the cultural border into a political one. A similar thesis was formulated by Robert Young in his work *The Idea of English Ethnicity*, in which he argues that Englishness had to remain open not only to neighbouring Celtic cultures, but as the empire grew, to the archipelagos of socio-cultural worlds from almost every latitude.² Although the thesis on the exceptional openness of the English collective identity is true, I do not believe that English identity was able to be so flexible that it could be used to bring together the inhabitants of the empire. This was partly because it was too closely linked to the ethno-cultural components, and partly because it would have been treated as an overly obvious expression of English interests, which in the United Kingdom also had to take into account the material and symbolic interests of the Scottish partner. Therefore, it was necessary to build a form of intermediary between Englishness and other national and ethnic identities. Following the union of Scottish and English identity, British identity became precisely such an identity. Hence came the British empire and then the British Commonwealth of Nations, from which the word British, but not the character, was removed in 1949.

The British identity as an imperial and post-imperial feature played a role for the English and still does, the so-called 'empty signifier', i.e. a mechanism allowing the building of an imaginary community in a symbolic dimension. According to Ernest Laclou, such an empty signifier can never be completely filled with symbolic content, because no symbolic set can fully and permanently obscure the lack of social unity.³ Symbols evolve and transform in order to maintain the ability to represent the community. They have to adapt to new contexts in order to confirm a sense of unity under fundamentally different conditions. Sometimes certain symbols wear out, their power fades and then there is a need to complete the symbolic universe. However, this addition never closes the empty signifier in its entirety. Instead, it is able to take its place in front of other, rival symbols and thus reflect and influence the

dominant power relations in society. In this way, there is a constant struggle for a symbolic hegemony in which rival symbolic models of the world try to overtake their competitors in order to fill the central symbolic field and create the dominant imaginarium.⁴

The British national flag is a good example of this mechanism. When a Scotsman looks at it, he sees above all the national symbol closest to him, the ancient national flag with the cross of St Andrew. For an Irishman from Ulster, the Scottish flag goes to the background and St Patrick's cross, the national flag of Northern Ireland, comes to the fore. The Englishman of course takes what is closest to him from the Union Jack, namely the cross of St George, which is the national flag of the English. The British flag lacks Welsh symbolism, which reflects the power relations within the United Kingdom. Wales did not have the status of a separate kingdom during the unification as it had been already absorbed into England with the status of a principality. This does not mean that certain elements of Welsh symbolism were not incorporated into the symbolic universe of England and then Britain. The red rose, unicorn, leek, clover, thistle or lion are the national symbols of the four British nations in the British coat of arms and wherever Britain is symbolically represented. Another, even broader symbol associated with Britishness is the monarchy. The image of Queen Elizabeth II can be found on banknotes and coins not only in Britain, but everywhere she is still considered the head of state, e.g. Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Jamaica and eleven other countries. This is not just a matter of symbolic representation. These countries still have the right to veto changes in certain areas of the United Kingdom, and representatives of their governments sit on the Royal Privy Council.

Today we are dealing with a process of disintegrating British identity which can easily be observed in the symbolic sphere as well. While until the end of the 1980s the British flag was a clear manifestation of English patriotism and nationalism, in the 1990s there was a fundamental change in this respect. The British Union Jack was no longer treated as an overarching symbol of the English political community. As the national consciousness of the countries on the Celtic outskirts grew, the self-awareness of English national identity began to grow too. This is reflected in the popularisation of English national symbolism. It occurred at first in nationalist and extreme right-wing circles, but with time it became more popular. In the 21st century, we can already observe a very clear distance between identification with the English flag, i.e. the red cross on a white background, representing the patron saint of England, St George, and the Union Jack. The British flag is treated rather as a state and royal flag, while the flag of St George is treated as primarily the English national flag. Thus, in the last three decades we have been dealing with the transformation of national identity in England from a state-citizenship model to an increasingly ethnic model, in which a common origin, to be read as being white and born in England, becomes the most important identity criterion. The British flag is more a symbol of British identity, i.e. one that includes four British nations plus immigrants and ethnic minorities. In this

sense, it is a symbol of a political bond, recognising the ethnic and cultural pluralism of the national community. The English flag, on the other hand, has become a symbol of exclusiveness, an identity based on the common history, culture and origin of the dominant ethnic group, i.e. white English people.

The second reason why Britishness was not mentioned enough was that the British identity enjoyed the privilege that generally accompanies ideologies at the peak of their effectiveness in influencing reality, when it becomes universal. This is due to the effective processes of naturalisation and dissimulation, which made Britishness a natural state of the world, self-understood and therefore escaping social self-reflection. As a result, Britishness was transparent and had a hegemonic status. Everything that was different, strange and noticeable could be described and studied. If someone referred to the problem of Britishness, they were charged with endangering things because only someone 'foreign' could ask questions that betrayed the lack of internalisation of the key identity elements. Just like the white colour of the skin, which for centuries was not a colour, it was a reference point for other colours like black, brown or yellow. The discovery that white people also possess a skin colour was not accepted in the Anglo-American academic world until the end of the 20th century, before which white was transparent, clear and understandable by itself. People of colour were people of any colour other than white. Its naturalness did not raise special doubts, on the contrary, it often served to establish racial hierarchies.

The same was true of Britishness. Therefore, British social and cultural anthropology studied races, peoples and cultures all over the world, but the point of reference was in the metropolis. It was also the centre of power. The British identity was built largely on power and wealth. As a result, British national identity easily embraced other nations, religions and even civilisations. The condition was to have the power or wealth to open the most important doors in Westminster. And the sources of power and wealth have been constantly changing in recent centuries. The traditional land-based aristocracy was joined by local bourgeoisie, maharajas, colonial-enriched nabobs, owners of plantations in West India and finally industrialists in the 19th century. At the royal court, anyone who contributed to the power and wealth of the empire was welcome. Whether it was an Englishman, a Scotsman, a Welshman, an Irishman, a Jew or a Sikh wasn't the first question. In the British Parliament, not only the indigenous people of Great Britain and Ireland were to be found in the 19th century, but also Jews and Hindus. In such a multicultural and cosmopolitan environment, clearly identifying differences was definitely not conducive to building political solidarity or the economic prosperity of relatively open elites.⁵

The Scottish nationalism theorist, McCrone, even recognised that British national identity was not educated as a nation-state, but as a state-nation.⁶ This means that in the formation of a sense of national belonging, ethnic factors played a much smaller role than in other nation states; civic factors played a much more important role, and in addition, a nation imagined in

this way was embraced by the overriding buckle of loyalty to the state. This open aspect of British identity is still maintained. In the 21st century, it is less related to external expansion and efforts to maintain ties with former colonies. Much more important is the need to maintain elementary cohesion in a multi-faith, multiracial and multicultural society. The most important British values defined during the period of David Cameron's reign, which every British school has had to teach from 2014, are rather difficult to consider as a symbolic ethnic border. Democracy, rule of law, individual liberties, mutual respect and tolerance, could also be a catalogue of the values of many supranational institutions, especially in Europe. However, this is precisely what it was all about, in order to create the best possible framework for diversity in unity, to save Britain from political disintegration and/or to transform it into segregated parallel communities.⁷ The conviction that British society had become too diverse has ceased to be the view of the extreme right, all the more so as the social geography of poverty and exclusion, which increasingly began to include the white working class, began to change at the end of the 20th century.⁸

Therefore, in such a dynamic and changing world, it was difficult to treat Britishness as a precisely identifiable ideology of a precisely identified territory, with a clearly identifiable culture and population. The boundaries of national identities were thus long, fuzzy, ambiguous, contextual and dynamic. Benedict Anderson claimed that such conditions caused Britishness to be long treated as a collection of dispersed and separated colloquial prejudices and taboos.⁹ Therefore, in cultural as well as legal, political and economic terms, the boundaries of British identity were much more blurred and intuitive than those of other European nation states.¹⁰ In the British tradition of common law, where pragmatism and common sense meant more than the abstract principles and rules imposed by the centralised state, these borders were subject to constant renegotiation, devaluation and revaluation. This process has continued to this day, as is perfectly illustrated by the real example of the political and legal struggle to maintain the Chagos Islands in the Indian Ocean, including the non-recognition of the judgment of the International Court of Justice in The Hague,¹¹ or the offer made by Prime Minister Boris Johnson¹² in 2020 to admit three million Hong Kong residents who still retain British National (Overseas) status under the Nationality Act of 1981. In more general terms, attempts are made to restore this volatile nature of the British border by renewing ties with countries associated with the Commonwealth of Nations. This is a return to those elements of the British imaginary that seemed to have gone away for good with the humiliating defeat in Suez in 1956. The introduction of such slogans as 'Global Britain' and especially 'Empire 2.0' to the political and public discourse means a return to the creation of a symbolic model of the world in which the British metropolis lay at the centre of the world.¹³ Perhaps it was an ideological alternative created for Brexit, maybe the British will actually come closer to their former compatriots. For the time being, the sustainability of the Union has been questioned.

The break-up of Britain

The first serious fractures in British identity date back at least to the end of the 1970s, when Tom Nairn, a Scottish nationalism theoretician with Marxist inclinations, published a collection of essays with the notable title *The Break-Up of Britain*.¹⁴ Apart from complex empirical analyses and theoretically sophisticated generalisations, his most important theses can be reduced to a few essential points. First, Nairn claimed that the British identity had developed mainly on the basis of English society, culture and state. Secondly, the English achieved centuries of state expansion, during which they subjugated various peoples, but in doing so, they allowed them considerable freedom in sustaining local social institutions and cultural specifics. Thirdly, the industrial revolution that took place in Great Britain was intertwined with economic and colonial expansion, which in the British nation-building process resulted in a class agreement crossing ethnic borders, which along with the co-opting of the working class, resulted in the state avoiding the formation of modern national identities through revolutionary upheaval and national mobilisation. However, with the cessation of political and economic expansion in the 20th century, the foundations of the British patriotism promoted by the state shrank, which resulted in the revival of a sense of national separateness in peripheral nations, the so-called Celtic fringe.

Let us take Scotland as an example. While Scotland, during the demographic explosion of the 19th and early 20th centuries, was able to benefit from the channels of mobility provided by imperial institutions covering a quarter of the earth's surface, after the Second World War and the period of decolonisation, such opportunities simply disappeared. The same was true of Scotland's economic structure, which went through a period of exceptionally effective competition mainly due to the fact that its industry was the economic back-up not only for the UK as a whole, but for the whole empire. After Britain lost its global influence, first following decolonisation and then by joining the European Community and restricting trade with the Commonwealth of Nations, Scottish industry ceased to receive lucrative orders and began to collapse. Finally, in the 1970s, rich oil and gas deposits were discovered in the North Sea. If Scotland were an independent country, all these deposits would be within Scottish territory and the Scots would profit from them. However, within the UK, the territory belongs to the whole country and it is up to the elite of Westminster and the City to decide who benefits from it, as well as what benefits it brings. It made no sense to stay in the Union with the English because the benefits of a common economy had disappeared and without independence there are no proper channels of social advancement. The highest positions were mostly in London.

Devolution

The British government's response to the national rebirth was to initiate the process of devolution, i.e. to agree to the transfer of part of the power from

the centre to individual countries in the UK. In 1979, this idea did not find sufficient support among the Scots and Welsh people for the idea of self-government, and therefore devolution failed in a referendum. It was only with the return of the Labour Party that the idea reappeared. The government, headed by Tony Blair, held new referendums in 1997, which this time proved to be successful for the supporters of self-government in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and which resulted in the creation of the Scottish Parliament, the Assembly of Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1999.¹⁵ This transformed the United Kingdom from a unitary state into a 'multi-union state'.¹⁶ The plurality is not insignificant here because it reflects the most characteristic feature of devolution, namely its asymmetric nature.¹⁷ This asymmetry lies in the unequal range of powers granted to the legislators and enforcers of the four constituent countries of the United Kingdom. Most power was given to the Scots, slightly less to the Irish and Welsh, while the English were not given any at all. The asymmetric nature of devolution became to a large extent the source of the reactive growth of English nationalism, especially when it turned out that this asymmetry brought a deterioration in their standard of living in comparison with other Union nations.

The development of national tendencies in the countries of the Celtic fringe has also contributed to an awareness of distinctiveness among the English themselves. Already in the early 1990s, research indicated that more than 60% of the English people stated that being British was the most important national identification, and only a few more than 30% claimed to be mostly Englishmen. In 2011, these proportions changed fundamentally. Only about 40% chose Britishness, while Englishness, as the most important national identity, was indicated by almost 50 percent.¹⁸ This scale of changes was also reflected in the growing politicisation of Englishness. It is manifested itself mainly in the crystallisation of public debate on the political and institutional consequences of strengthening English identity and the growing competition between political parties over which one would present itself to voters as the best representative of English interests and aspirations. A tangible effect of this politicisation of the English identity has been a sudden increase in support for a solution to a problem still referred to in the 1970s as the West Lothian Question. The point is that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own representatives in the Parliament at Westminster, who have full voting rights on all matters, whether they concern the whole kingdom or just matters relating to England. However, the English are not represented in the legislative bodies of Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast and therefore their views are not relevant to the legislation adopted there. The lack of a separate legislature for England means that matters for the English are decided by people who neither live in England, thus are not subject to that law, nor are they elected by the English, hence they are deprived of democratic legitimacy.

Meanwhile, these matters have become particularly intense in recent years. From 2007 to 2012, the number of responses among the English has doubled, indicating that British governance has deteriorated as a result of devolution.

While in 2007 this solution still enjoyed relative support, in 2012 as many as 35% of the English surveyed stated that it was worse in this respect than in the times of a strictly unitarian state, i.e. before 1999. These opinions go hand-in-hand with a critical assessment of the impact of devolution on England. Since 2000, the number of Englishmen claiming that Scotland is getting more than it deserves has also increased by almost 100% by 2012, and 45% of them believe so. At the same time, 40% of the English claim that England is disadvantaged by this arrangement and gets less than it deserves. The majority of the English think that the Scottish economy benefits more from the EU than the English economy, with less than 25% believing that each economy benefits equally.¹⁹

As a result of devolution, individual devolved governments make autonomous choices in very vulnerable areas. The consequence of these choices is that some solutions and goals are preferred over others, which leads to qualitative differences in the implemented public policies, and thus to a clear differentiation of the Scottish welfare state model. It is worth recalling that these differences affected three extremely sensitive areas of social policy: care for the elderly, payments for higher education and the role of the state in shaping housing policy. The Scottish welfare state model is clearly moving towards a social democratic model, typical of the Scandinavian countries. These 20 years of devolution have clearly shown that Scottish and English priorities differ. The Scottish National Party has consistently protected those social achievements that were introduced under the Labour Party and introduced new ones. Today, every Scot is entitled to free old age care, is exempt from university fees and is protected from the most drastic consequences of the austerity housing policy. Unlike England, the Scottish government has provided further funding for young people's rents and protected residents from the hated 'bedroom tax' in the south. The Scots were also the first to abolish the 'right to buy' programme in the UK, making it a priority again to rebuild the overall housing stock available and keep it relatively cheap.

However, these changes are so deep and dynamic that there is a lack of adequate monitoring studies. Therefore, this is a largely untransparent and uncertain situation. The British do not see whether Scotland's social policy is simply a reflection of the ideology of their ruling party, which has the main goal of building an efficient welfare state and egalitarian society. England has been ruled by the Tories for a decade, who have made the idea of egalitarianism and a welfare state their main opponent. They value individualism, the free market and competition more. Hence the fundamental question of whether the Scottish social model is simply a political choice and would be feasible in the same form in England, or whether Scotland enjoys a privileged position in the Union, thanks to which it receives proportionally more money than other nations? In 2009, the House of Lord Select Committee on the Barnett Formula recommended a change in the way the Union is funded.²⁰ Joel Barnett himself, the founder of a mechanism for financing devolution, admitted that 'It is unfair and it should be stopped. It is a mistake'.²¹

The whole mechanism of allocating money within the Union is so complex and indecipherable that it is in practice not the subject of analysis in public discourse. Almost no one can explain what costs the Scots have to pay in exchange for maintaining these three pro-social solutions, and why they can afford it – nor can England and the English. In the lack of access to objective knowledge and transparency of budgetary arrangements, the decline in confidence, increased suspicion and a sense of deprivation have contributed to the politicisation of English identity.

English backlash

Therefore, it is not surprising that in the second decade of the 21st century, public support in England started to grow rapidly for eliminating these asymmetries caused by devolution. In 2014, the electorate of every major political party in England was dominated by a vote that Scotland should have its privileged position taken away and bring spending levels down to the UK average. In the case of Labour Party voters, 50% expressed support for such a policy, among the supporters of the Liberal Democrats the support was slightly higher at 56%, while among the supporters of the Conservative Party and the UKIP electorate such support was 69% and 70% respectively, i.e. an overwhelming majority.²²

The overwhelming majority of English people also began to contest the constitutional solutions that had been adopted so far. No fewer than 80% of the English people were in favour of full financial responsibility for Scotland, i.e. the liquidation of the Barnett formula. On the other hand, as many as 79% supported the proposal to exclude Scottish members of parliament in Westminster from voting on matters concerning only England, a constitutional solution called the English Votes for English Laws.²³ Public opinion surveys very clearly reflected the conviction of the English people that they lacked a political representation which cares for their interests above all. Two years before the Brexit referendum, the greatest number of Englishmen would have wanted a special English parliament, particularly among those who identified themselves more as English than as British. This support for the establishment of their own parliament was double that of those who identified themselves as British. This feeling of a lack of subjectivity among the English was also shown by the data concerning the assessment of the size of the impact by various institutions of power on everyday life. Only 6% of those in Wales and 4% in Scotland indicated the European Union, while 26% of those living in England did so. 2014 also saw an extremely strong correlation between English identity and Euroscepticism, as well as a desire to vote to leave the EU. Among those in England who identified as British, 42% considered the EU to be a 'good thing' and 45% wanted to vote to stay in the EU. In the case of Englishmen who preferred their ethnic identity, only 23% considered the EU to be a 'good thing' and only 26% of them voted in a referendum to stay in the EU.²⁴

In response to these trends, in the autumn of 2015 David Cameron's government sent a draft law to the House of Commons which planned to exclude MPs not representing English constituencies from voting on purely English issues. The draft began as an ordinary parliamentary procedure and if it had not been for the announcement of a referendum on further UK membership of the European Union, it would have further complicated institutional, legal and identity relations in the UK. However, there is much to suggest that the Brexit issue pushed the UK reform project into the background. Perhaps Brexit has absorbed enough of the energy and emotions of English nationalists to avoid returning to it.

But the rise of English nationalism had, in addition to dissatisfaction with devolution, a second source: an unwillingness to be a member of the European Union and in particular the consequence of membership which was associated with the free movement of people.²⁵ Since the EU's enlargement to include the countries of central-eastern Europe, around 500,000 people a year had begun to immigrate to Great Britain. With 200,000 leaving the UK each year, this meant that about 300,000 people settled in the islands each year, the vast majority of them in England. Never before had Britain experienced such a scale of immigration over such a short period of time, and although until 2008 it was rather seen as a desirable strengthening of the British economy, these assessments changed dramatically after the outbreak of the financial crisis. This change did not occur so much in the opinions of economic experts as in social attitudes, especially among Englishmen from outside the major metropolitan centres. However, unlike in the 1960s, when the British government initiated many support programmes for those regions where the presence of immigrants was associated with increased pressure on local public services, this time neither the British government nor Brussels decided to intervene, although experts warned that such a *laissez-faire* policy was unsustainable.²⁶

Eric Kaufmann claims that the rapid change in the socio-cultural environment has never been welcomed positively, so even without the Great Recession, relations between immigrants and the English would have become increasingly tense.²⁷ This was particularly true in small-town and rural environments, where the presence of immigrants was previously either rare or seasonal.²⁸ After 2004, immigrants seemed to reach the most distant corners of England and in many places their presence contributed to real flexibility and further labour market deregulation.²⁹ Reliance on workers employed by employment agencies often meant bringing them directly from their countries of origin by plane. This obviously had a negative impact on the employment of local residents. This was firstly, because the wages offered were rarely higher than the minimum wage, and secondly, because a cultural mechanism is often created to discourage members of the host society from working in the same sector as immigrants in societies with rapid levels of immigration. This is a rather universal phenomenon and related to the fact that every profession and job has a prestige dimension beyond the financial one. Work is not only

a source of money, but also an important element in constructing identity and one's place in the social hierarchy, which is sometimes a more important source of value and self-esteem than money. Many professions or jobs lose their prestige because they are defined as immigrant ones. Moreover, as many British researchers have shown, over-reliance on immigrants to do certain jobs has often led to worsening working conditions and attempts to play off the image of 'hard-working immigrants' against alleged local freeloaders.³⁰ The massive degradation of labour standards has not only affected niche economic sectors such as seasonal agriculture, where civilised standards are difficult to control and enforce.³¹ Instead of being associated with supporting sectors that have been most in decline in the last decade, immigration has become better known for transforming businesses that are recognisable British high-street names into labour camps based on exploitation. One of the press titles describing such a reality invited readers to read a report from a day in the life of a 'gulag'.³²

Low wages and the decline in employment prestige have often resulted in decisions to relocate to where the jobs are, namely to London. However, the natural process of internal migration, which for decades was an effective mechanism of social mobility in the 21st century, lost its effectiveness. The sell-off of a huge number of council flats in the 1980s and 1990s, followed by the full marketisation of residential construction, resulted in a sharp housing deficit and a rapid increase in purchase and rental prices.³³ The cost of living in this respect became too high even for professions previously considered to ensure a middle-class standard of living. Moving to London no longer guaranteed an increase in living standards and a sense of social advancement.³⁴ With the increased fertility rate of immigrant families, ethnic minorities were more likely than the English to count on the allocation of social housing, waiting times for which have stretched from a few to a dozen or even several dozen years of waiting anyway.³⁵ For many English people, this situation created a sense of injustice. In their opinion, England was built by generations of Englishmen, a historic nation whose members should have some form of preference for those who had settled a few years earlier.³⁶ This sense of injustice in equating the contribution to the common good of England between those who have worked for generations for the prosperity of the country and those who have lived in England for a short time, often without emotional attachment or willingness to make sacrifices for it, has contributed to a stronger crystallisation of the boundary between the so-called 'somewherers', i.e. people attached and deeply loyal to 'here and now', and 'anywherers', i.e. those who are mobile, ready to change places to live and work, with flexible and contextual weak loyalties.³⁷

It seems that the winner of this competition for the title of the best representative of English aspirations was Nigel Farage. The leader of UKIP and later the Brexit Party managed to convince those most dissatisfied with the conditions of England's participation in the two unions, the British and European, to support his populist programme against the British and

European elites. All opinion surveys show that those least satisfied with the devolution process are the English, and the particular ones who prefer an English over British identification. In the second decade of the 21st century, a belief began to spread among the English that they had been left on their own and that there was a lack of a political representation that was based primarily on the English interest. In 2011, in a survey of public opinion, the most frequently chosen answer to the question of which political party best pursues the interests of England was 'none of the above'. The Labour Party came second, followed by the Conservative Party. In the case of the Liberal Democrats, the coalition partner of the Tories, this recognition barely reached 5%. The situation changed only in 2013, when most of the respondents indicated UKIP as the party best pursuing the interests of English. The situation was similar with regard to politicians. Nigel Farage is considered to be the best representative of England's interests, followed by the answer 'none of the above' and only much further on by Prime Minister David Cameron and the then opposition leader, Ed Milliband.³⁸

The referendum on Brexit was a merger of two sources of dissatisfaction. Since neither the Labour Party nor Coalition governments were able to make significant changes, the conviction emerged, quite rationally, that external restrictions were the reason for this impossibility. The organisation of a referendum in 2016 gave frustrated voters the opportunity to oppose everything that they had previously been dissatisfied with. Nigel Farage and UKIP managed to convince their supporters that English interests were not adequately represented within the UK and were doomed to be permanently marginalised in the European Union. Contrary to UKIP's name, Nigel Farage did everything he could to identify himself with the everyday non-metropolitan English person and thus attract their support. A cigarette, a glass of beer in the pub, an old-fashioned coat and an anorak were symbols that did not refer to Britishness, but introduced the kind of class props typical of the English provincial. Mobilising the emotions of the English proved to be effective enough to free Britain from the European yoke. Paradoxically, this may mean that devolution will survive and so too will the UK. St George may have killed the EU dragon, but emotions have fallen and now it is time to return to routine and take responsibility for the shape of things to come, free from European influence.

The origins of the rise of negative attitudes amongst the English towards devolution and the Scots are not irrational, and still the vast majority of the English people are in favour of maintaining the United Kingdom. There were also many reasons to rationally criticise the principles of the European market, especially the passivity shown by Brussels at the time when the UK became the labour market of last resort for a large part of the European Union in the Eurozone crisis. Modifying the solutions in ways that would remove the causes of social fears is possible and technically probably relatively easy to accomplish. However, today the Union faces a fundamental dilemma. If Westminster takes away the Scots' privileges, i.e. equalises the

funding with the English, a large part of the frustration fuelling English nationalism is likely to disappear. Such a choice would be almost a clear acceptance of Scottish independence. There is no doubt that today's Scots are much closer to the Scandinavian than the Anglo-Saxon model. Regardless of whether Scotland becomes the second Norway or not, depriving it of its social achievements of the last two decades would definitely tip the scales against support for staying in the Union. Let us recall that the full name of the ruling party is the Conservative and Unionist Party. The Tories would have to radically change their attitude to the Union to risk such a change and thus the break-up of the UK. Therefore, assuming that Westminster wants to extinguish British people's negative views of the current shape of devolution, and thus wants to keep the United Kingdom as a whole, it should introduce reforms in England that will break with the most painful consequences of the neoliberal economic policy initiated by Margaret Thatcher and a decade of austerity introduced after the crisis of 2008.

What next?

Given the size and intensity of conflict within the Conservative Party in 2016–2019 and the fact that an outsider, Boris Johnson, regarded as an anti-establishment politician who sees himself as a very flexible and ideologically stretched One Nation Tory, has emerged victorious, this is an opportunity to avoid alienating the Scots, while at the same time strengthening the sense among English people that someone has started to take care of their interests. This chance is reinforced by the experience of the recent Covid-19 pandemic, which has created what could be described as a critical juncture. For some time there will be a liminal situation in which the old norms and values cease to apply with their previous force and the new ones have not yet developed. Whether or not the new ones will develop depends on the level of empowerment of the authorities. The rejection of neoliberal dogmas during the pandemic, the announcement of the New Deal and Boris Johnson's promise to invest hundreds of billions of pounds in infrastructure and housing give rise to the idea that there will actually be a paradigmatic change in the relationship between society and economics.

An additional stimulus in this direction may also be the retreat from neoliberal orthodoxy in the European Union. The announcements of major investment programmes, financed by EU-wide joint borrowing for the first time, will undoubtedly be an important point of reference for the British government. The exit from the EU was supposed to give the British people an improvement in their economic situation, especially those who were in the most difficult circumstances. Therefore, it would be extremely difficult to deal with this cognitive dissonance if it turned out that Brexit meant a voluntary relinquishment of this pro-development impulse. It seems that Boris Johnson is aware of this, because during the announcement of his New Deal in Dudley, traditionally a working class and Labour district, he stated that: 'This is a

Government that is wholly committed not just to defeating coronavirus, but to using this crisis finally to tackle this country's great unresolved challenges of the last three decades'.³⁹

However, these Rooseveltian analogies have been widely criticised for overstating rhetoric over the planned mobilisation of resources. Nevertheless, the public acknowledgement by the head of the Conservative government that Thatcherism and post-Thatcherism in the form of New Labour have failed is unprecedented. The announcement of the creation of further tools for state intervention and the recognition that the state should be the initiator and leader of investments in infrastructure and construction is a return to the economic model of the 1960s. This was a time that was the most important point of reference for the voters who most identified with England and were the most alienated by the lack of active economic and social policy in England. These are mainly elderly people, living outside large metropolitan areas, less educated, whose main interpretative framework of the world is based on a belief that they have been left alone and left behind. Boris Johnson perhaps knows this all too well and identified it, as did his recent direct rival, Jeremy Corbyn. Presenting his New Deal, he admitted that: 'Too many parts of this country have felt left behind, neglected, unloved, as though someone had taken a strategic decision that their fate did not matter as much as the metropolis'.⁴⁰

If the rhetoric is followed by action, and the British government takes up the economic offensive, the English sense of being treated worse than other nations in the Union will also change, which in turn will weaken the determination of English nationalism to revise the constitutional order on which the current Union is based. Perhaps the rise of English nationalism has been consumed by an act of disobedience, as represented by the vote for Brexit. This was expressed as a democratic act of will but was also a vote against the government and almost all public authorities. The political defeat of Nigel Farage and his Brexit Party indicate that English nationalism did not have a long-term national-forming character, but voters rather used the Eurosceptic wave reinforced by the xenophobic policies of the Cameron government and the European migration crisis to relieve their frustration and articulate their dissatisfaction with developments in the country.

Notes

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