

A New National Consensus? Building A Union Which Endures

By Michael Gove

Introduction – The Meaning of Unionism

The State of our Union – is strong.

So reports the American President in his - sadly not yet her - State of the Union Address every new year.

It is a ringing proclamation of faith in the future of the United States which is articulated with confidence every year – a confidence which reflects that amazing nation's capacity for renewal and reform over political cycles and human generations.

One does not need to be an uncritical fan of America – or any of its Presidents – to recognise the Great Republic's resilience and strength. A strength which is drawn from, indeed rooted in diversity. America is a creedal nation, one shaped by the power of ideas not defined by ties of blood. And its creed is best defined in its motto – *e pluribus unum* – from many, one. From multitudes, from diversity, comes unity, flows strength.

That principle, while powerfully expressed in the story of America, did not have its beginnings in the US. It began here. This country – the United Kingdom – was the original set of United States.

Out of the pluribus of Welsh and English, Irish and Scottish, Celtic and Anglo-Saxon, Catholic and Protestant, Stuart and Hanoverian, refugees from Bourbon oppression or Tsarist programs, arrivals who came on the Empire Windrush or fled from battlefields in Bosnia, out of that many, have come one - the British people.

The citizens of this United Kingdom, who have the same rights, are subject to the same laws, have the same say in choosing the Government and the same stake in our future. That principle is precious – the principle of equality among our citizenry in a country governed by agreed rules and common institutions. That principle is Unionism. And as long as we remember that, and renew that spirit in every generation, the state of our Union will be strong.

Unionism is, I know, not seen in the same way by everyone. Some see in Unionism a nostalgia for empire which was already out of date when it was embraced by Joe Chamberlain more than a century ago. Some seek to associate it indelibly with Ireland's Troubles. Others present it as the gateway to Scotland, or Wales's de-industrialisation and decline.

Unionism, like all political beliefs which have survived over the generations will, of course, have aspects of its history open to criticism, but its very durability over the years points to its ability to command loyalties and speak to values which are enduring.

And unionism, in the British context, speaks to some specific attachments. To institutions - from the Crown in Parliament to the National Health Service. To organisations which represent the best of us - from the BBC to the armed services And to people who fly the flag on all our behalves - from Team GB outperforming rivals at the Olympics to Gary Oldman in Darkest Hour at the Oscars.

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Unionism is radical, progressive and egalitarian.

But deeper even than those attachments for Unionism are the underpinning institutions which embody the principle of equal respect for every individual. These institutions accord respect, freedom and dignity to individuals by virtue of their shared citizenship rather than because of possession of any specific identity.

They include our common law traditions which guarantee the accused the presumption of innocence, safeguard them from arbitrary punishment, allow them to take the Government to court.

Alongside the impartial rule of law we have an independent parliamentary democracy which gives every vote equal value and requires MPs to serve all their constituents equally rather than favouring particular communities or interests.

And our common law traditions and parliamentary democracy also depend on our traditions of free speech and vigorous dissent which mean the state can't licence or suppress views from individuals who challenge orthodoxy. All of these freedoms celebrate the idea of the radical dignity of the individual citizen, imbued with worth and respect irrespective of their membership of any group or collective.

These Unionist principles are themselves the product of Unionist politics and history. They reflect the liberal ideals of John Locke which shaped political thinking at the time of the original Act of Union between England and Scotland. And they are also an expression of the world view of those Scottish Enlightenment thinkers - such as David Hume and Adam Smith - who flourished in an eighteenth century Edinburgh anchored in the Union.

These values have underpinned the growth in personal freedom, and social progress, which have characterised life in democracies in the last two hundred years. But, while these ideas are powerful and durable and these values are progressive and liberal, they depend upon continuity in political structures and institutions to remain strong.

And that is why its important - as this conference asks us to - to reflect on how we rejuvenate and strengthen the arguments and institutions which keep these liberal principles healthy and relevant.

And that means we need to be alert to the forces and arguments which are in opposition to these principles, which stand against the Unionist tradition.

One particular political trend that stands against these principles is the growth of identity politics. There is an increasing tendency - on left and right - in North America and across Europe - for people to look at political questions through the prism of identity. The identitarians want to move away from liberal principles of equal treatment for all, colour blindness and respect for individual rights. Instead they embrace a politics which divides society into contending groups and demands people define themselves by their group membership rather than as autonomous individuals.

Those who embrace identity politics want to pit their group against others - oppressors or outgroups - in a conflict for recognition, rights and resources. Identity politics involves an assertion that group membership confers certain specific rights or benefits on members which are denied to others and attempts by others to encroach on the in-group's rights must be rebuffed.

So an insistence that an individual should check their privilege before speaking, and therefore pipe down if they don't fit in, or avoid cultural appropriation, in other words know their place in the world if they want to get a hearing, is a sign of left identity politics.

And there is an equally concerning identity politics on the right. You hear it when there is an appeal to defend men's rights, which is an attempt to make gender a cause of conflict not an aspect of character, or when some politicians suggest that our borders be closed to people because of their faith or origin. Those are just some of the signs of a growing right identity politics.

Both right and left identity politics stand in opposition to the principles of genuine respect for diversity - of opinion and view as well as background and culture - and both subvert the idea of respecting the radical equality of the individual by demanding that some are owed more respect - and more equality - than others.

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Unionism - because it allows diversity to flourish through acceptance of common laws - because it accords equal value to individuals whatever their background and tradition - because its allegiances and attachments are to Magna Carta, Bills of Rights, Great Reform Acts and Golden Jubilees not tribal, cultural, sectional or divisive totems - stands in direct opposition to identity politics.

And Unionism is more - much more - than an anaemic liberalism which argues in abstractions and has no pull on the heart. The story of liberty which is woven through the history of Britain - even though there are many bleak and black moments in our past - has an emotional reach which commands loyalty and affection still. Unionists take pride in the fact that our institutions have endured and have helped provide a warm home for so many from such distinct and diverse backgrounds.

Those forces and movements in our politics which are most opposed to unionism tend to be those most susceptible to, or animated by, identity politics. Whether its a Scottish Nationalism that conflates truly progressive politics with the superior virtue that only really comes from living north of the border, or a Little Englanderism which feels that its not just the cross of St George that needs a white background, a politics opposed to the diversity of the United Kingdom, in either direction, privileges identity over inclusivity.

Unionism and Brexit – a Vote of Confidence in Britain

But if Unionism is a political outlook that stands opposed to identity politics how does it fare in a post Brexit world where - we are told - assertions of identity are becoming louder and centrifugal political forces grow more powerful.

Well, the truth, curious as it may appear to some, is that Brexit has, certainly so far, strengthened Unionist currents in our politics, not weakened them.

Take Scottish nationalism. Since the vote to leave the European Union in 2016, support for Scotland leaving the United Kingdom has diminished. The Scottish National Party's vigorous championing of another independence referendum has led it to drop in the polls, lose seats at the last General Election and now, lose momentum and authority in office. It faces further losses in future elections at the hands of all 3 major Unionist parties - Liberal Democrats, Labour and, above all, the resurgent Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party.

In the aftermath of Brexit, the Scottish Conservative Party secured its best general election result for thirty years and now represents working class communities from Alloa to Ayrshire at Westminster for the first time in living memory.

Scottish nationalism is not the only movement which has played with identity politics which is in retreat. The decline, indeed effective eclipse, of the United Kingdom Independence Party, is another blow to identity politics. To be sure, UKIP had a range of voices in its ranks, but there was a more pronounced identitarian strain of right wing politics in its platform than in any other British political party which has secured representation in the House of Commons. Once it could command four million votes, now its chairman, in an effort to paint an optimistic picture of its future, compared it to the Black Death.

And it is also striking that another feature of Unionism - the explicit embrace of diversity - has strengthened since Brexit. Britain has become more welcoming to migration since the Brexit vote, as opinion research has confirmed and liberal commentators such as Sunder Katwala of British Future and Alex Massie of The Times have explained. The act of taking back control has allowed British citizens to show they can be more welcoming to new arrivals if allowed to be rather than required to be. And now Britain is one of those EU nations with the warmest attitudes towards migration, mirroring the attitudes in sister countries across the globe such as Canada and New Zealand.

So - far from weakening Unionism - Brexit has delivered its supporters a boost and its opponents a check, and in some cases a reverse.

I think that is, at least in part because the Brexit vote was a vote of confidence in Britain. For the first time in my adult lifetime we voted to take power back from unaccountable institutions and return it to accountable UK politicians. That is an assertion of belief in Britain which we should celebrate.

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But supporters of the values that underpin the UK, and the diversity which is its strength, cannot afford to be complacent.

The Unionist challenge

As Policy Exchange's research has shown, there are different divisions which have developed over time in the UK - between the property-owning older generations and the young who see home ownership receding from their grasp - between London and other metropolitan centres and small town and provincial Britain - between a more prosperous south and east and a still under-performing north - between those whom David Goodhart has identified as the Anywheres - those with the connections and qualifications to move on and up in pursuit of prosperity and the Somewheres - those whose future, and loyalties, lie close to where they've always known as home.

One of the challenges for a new modern twenty-first century unionism is to bridge those gaps and heal those divisions, as well as working towards overcoming other tensions laid bare by the referendum campaign and indeed bringing more fully into the life of the nation those diaspora communities who have made the United Kingdom their home.

That is why the work Policy Exchange is doing under John Bew and David Goodhart on re-inventing patriotism, refreshing the mandate of the UK nation state and reacting a new national consensus is so important. It is the Unionist mission for our times.

Because we must increasingly see Unionism not just as a belief in the ties that bind England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, or attachment to the shared institutions we enjoy across these islands which have made it possible for us to accommodate diversity and welcome new arrivals. Unionism needs to be a dynamic, evolving and creative project aimed at ensuring a deeper respect for and radical equality of treatment towards all our citizens.

And this is where Brexit also provides potential new opportunities. Opportunities for us to support all our citizens to succeed.

I know that my own area of Food, Farming, Fishing and the Environment, Brexit provides opportunities to revive coastal communities that have been in decline, restore landscapes and habits which have been neglected to health, nurture new rural enterprises in parts of the country which have been overlooked in the past and revive local farm enterprises through, for example, helping to sustain an effective network of local collaboration.

And as Policy Exchange has pointed out, outside the EU we could, if we wished, reform our approach to taxation to support enterprise in less favoured areas. We could adjust corporation tax or create new tax credits for start up enterprises in regions which currently face lower growth and we could also establish free ports in those areas as part of a strengthened Northern Powerhouse.

We could also reform Government procurement, ensuring communities we value receive stronger support, whether that's through investing in local food economies or seeing if the lessons from the Preston model of local procurement can be applied more widely.

We could look more broadly at how we finance and support enterprise in those communities which have lacked investment in the past. We could organise our financials sector differently, making it easier for those who need capital in poorer areas to secure it.

These are all debates I know Policy Exchange wants to lead and I would not want to pre-empt their outcomes. But in considering how Brexit can play a part in bringing Britain together and re-distributing opportunity across our Union I believe Policy Exchange is being true to its modernising foundations. And that is why today's conference is so important and I wish Policy Exchange every success.