

England and the Union

Bring a minority view of those Scotland as one of those who voted in 2014 and 2016 for Scotland to remain part of both of its unions and still fervently believes in both. I will save you an analysis of why I think Brexit is an act of geopolitical self-harm - even though I introduced Article 50 into law while I was Europe Minister.

More importantly I want to offer a perspective of a Briton rather than just a Scot to this English question of what type of Union will England be part of in the future? And as an individual I have no line to push and simply want to offer observations - some will feel criticisms - of many of the Political Parties.

Start by saying again that I am not and never have been a Unionist. I'm a Social Democrat for whom the Union is intrinsic to sharing risk and resources. I fought many elections - 5 of which I was the candidate from when I was first elected to the Commons in 1997 until when I lost in 2015 - and the most important vote was the one where my name wasn't on the ballot - the 2014 referendum campaign - but I believe that despite not being a Unionist.

I'm not a Nationalist - because I don't believe in national exceptionalism. That's why I went round Scotland to a 100 impromptu street meetings on my Irn-Bru crates - pre sugar tax. It's not just about respect for a shared history but about sharing risk and resources.

In 3 years since I left politics I've kept my council and observed politics from a middle-distance. I still believe that politics is a noble cause. But one of its least attractive characteristics is when those with influence deliberately confuse their personal ambition with their parties future and much worse still is when those same people then conflate their party's interests with those of our country's. We've all seen too much of that over the past six months.

One further point of introduction. Something that strikes me as I listen to nationalists the world over is that they believe not just the exceptionalism of 'their' people but also about the exceptionalism of their nationalism. That is also true on these islands.

Firstly, both Scotland and Northern Ireland have much in common not least they were the two countries of the UK who voted remain.

Union of GB is stronger while the union of the UK is weaker

I can say this because contemporary Scottish and Irish nationalism are opposites of one another. Political nationalism in Northern Ireland is about breaking from a political union to share an island union while Scottish nationalism is about breaking from an island with no certainty of joining anything at all. Northern Ireland can rejoin the EU if it joins an island union Scotland has no clear path back into full membership of the EU

I think that many more people in Northern Ireland will increasingly look Southwards in their relations. Small, incremental daily human interactions that aggregate of which will continue to change Northern Ireland for the better.

I also feel that England will have to come to terms with a Northern Ireland where there is more focus on the Ireland rather than the Northern.

Of course it looks like unionism may win a Border Poll but DUP demands on Brexit sounds like a reheat of the 'Ulster Says No' campaigns of the 1980's.

Secondly, the harder the Brexit, the harder Scottish independence would be to achieve

SNP's policy is built around 'Independence in Europe'. But in a future Britain of hard-Brexit, if Scotland were able to persuade the Scottish public and the Spanish government that it should be allowed to join the EU as a new Member State or allowed into the EEA, there are enormous unanswered questions. For example, back in the 2014 referendum our assertion that independence may lead to a border was attacked. But under a hard-Brexit an independent Scotland with an established relationship with Europe would necessitate an EU/Scotland/Brexit England border.

Thirdly, British politicians have an influence and England has a say on all of this. But that should be a cause for concern because on occasion the Conservative government has been cavalier with the island Union instead of being its guarantors

My mind became firm in that fact at 3am on the 15th September 2014. Michael Gove and I were discussing the referendum result and he announced plans for English votes for English laws and that David Cameron (who had done very well in the referendum) was meeting with Tory MPs later that morning at Chequers to discuss EVEL. A guarantor of the Union would have come to Scotland and helped bring people together. Cavalierism was to think of Party before Country. I was angry and remain really disappointed.

Fourthly, under David Cameron the Conservative Party was on a process of modernisation and it thought it could become the national Party but I worry that for some it may now become a nationalist Party

I feel that political Parties in England should be avowedly emotionally English while being politically British. Being emotionally English and politically British I think back to the General Election of 2015 Conservative ads of Ed Miliband in the SNP's pocket. They were highly effective.

They appealed to a political England. That's fine as a tactical election poster but is dangerous for the Union if it becomes a strategic political frame for significant elements of the Conservative Party.

I think that politicians in England from all Parties have a responsibility to the Union, part of which is accepting its imperfections. Part of the deal of being the numerically dominant partner is an acceptance of issues such as the Barnett Formula.

I worry about British politics post-Brexit. My own Party continues on a previously untested journey. Some others in Scotland will still have the ability to blame a distant 'other' in the shape of a distant London. Nationalists in England will go in search of someone else to blame and shorn of the EU I'm not sure where it will go.

So in conclusion, the Scottish Labour Party, which I led for twenty odd weeks, got the balance between emotion and reason wrong. In Scotland we were considered emotionally and politically British. And our clumsiness on the former made us more vulnerable on the latter. There are lessons for all of the political Parties in England about the experiences of Scottish Labour.