

Britain, the nations and the election

"There be many Caesars, ere such another Julius: Britain's a world by itself"

The Tragedy of Cymbeline (Act 3 Scene 1)

William Shakespeare

The UK has always been an asymmetrical union of nations. Unlike the popular uprisings of Germany and Italy, or the revolutions of America and France, this island lacks a central founding mythology. The nation was formed by centuries of gradual conquest and coercion. Tony Blair was correct (on one thing at least) when he stated that we are a young country. It is always worth reminding ourselves that the UK in its current form only came to pass in 1922. As the constitutional sands we stand on shift, this year's general election has seen the arguments push and pull in numerous directions between the nations on the island of Britain.

Last year's Scottish independence referendum has re-ignited the constitutional discussion, rather than snubbing it out. In light of the 45% yes vote, the Smith Commission has recommended new powers for Scotland such as election and Crown Estate asset controls, some income tax varying and some benefit powers. Criticism has mounted against these recommendations, particularly in light of the 11th hour "vow" of a much more federal settlement by the no campaign. Despite a unionist victory, large swathes of Scotland voted in support of independence including a majority in Glasgow and Dundee. Disillusionment has now crystallised against Labour party MPs in Scotland, perceived to have lost touch with the electorate and detached from their traditional values. As a result, the near-wipe out of Labour seats (including Scottish Labour leader Jim Murphy) has transformed the Westminster landscape radically. The SNP secured all but three Scottish seats, winning Glasgow north east with an astounding UK-record swing of 39%. Of course, the frustration of the independence referendum and voting for the SNP does not necessarily result in support for independence. Another referendum in the short term was not part of the SNP's legislative programme for the next five years and it has been made very clear by First Minister Sturgeon that the focus of the SNP within Westminster is as a voice for securing further powers for Scotland. This could be a first time a non-unionist party can command the constitutional decision making within Westminster since Charles Stewart Parnell's Irish Parliamentary Party of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Despite this "strong voice for Scotland", it's always worth remembering the shortcomings of the unitary system, particularly that Scotland forms only 59 seats out of 650 leaving the SNP permanently outnumbered. It's worth remembering, however, that had every constituency in Scotland voted for Labour, the Conservative party still would have secured a majority. With the faltering of the Labour vote in England, sections of the SNP's programme may not be able to be achieved, but what is certain is that a voice has been given to those in Scotland with an appetite for more powers, and a return to the status quo is no longer an option.

Whilst England has been the overpowering force in the union, and has just installed a thin-majority Conservative government based on English votes, England does not have a parliament for itself. Scotland's referendum has loosened English tongues, and English Votes for English Laws (EVEL) in Westminster has been put forward by the Conservatives as a solution. Despite this, it has not silenced the long-held murmurings for an English Parliament which would truly federalise the UK. It has been speculated an English Parliament would persistently return a Conservative majority and

regional assemblies have alternatively been proposed. A similar accusation of Labour-dominated Welsh and Scottish legislatures were made prior to devolution. Contrary to this, both have seen non-Labour parties assume power. It's worth noting that regional assemblies were rejected by referendum in the last Labour government, partly because they fail to acknowledge England as a contiguous entity. On the other hand, it has been argued that Westminster is already an English parliament, with an overwhelming majority of MPs in the House of Commons representing English constituencies. It's easy to forget that England already has devolution, in the form of the London Assembly and this may be used as a model for further possible "city states". It is also worth considering the implications for Cornwall. The Liberal Democrats announced plans for a Cornish Assembly in an effort to recognise the forgotten fifth home nation. With the total wipe out of all of the Lib Dem's Cornish MPs, any possible plans for England may now not take into account the Cornish nation.

Wales occupies an unusual constitutional position in terms of devolution by sitting in front of England but behind Scotland. A lack of bargaining power has meant that Wales not sufficiently been able to raise concerns in Westminster. Unlike Scotland, Wales has recently been without a strong nationalist presence since the previous assembly government (a Labour/Plaid Cymru coalition that led to the first Welsh laws for 500 years). The Labour party has been dominant in Wales for the best part of a century and has the power to control the debate, but has resorted to framing it as a Labour/Tory exchange across a Cardiff Bay/Westminster dichotomy. St David's Day saw the UK Government reveal plans for more powers for Wales including energy, elections, some tax powers, and a long overdue name change of the assembly to the "Welsh Parliament". The proposed tax powers would have to face a significant hurdle in the form of a referendum, unlike Scotland. Previous tax offers had been proposed with an unpopular "lockstep" (i.e., any movement of a tax band would mean all other tax bands would have to change together by the same amount at the same time). Unlike the SNP, Plaid Cymru did not increase their number of seats in the election and their main target of Ynys Môn was held by Labour by a slim majority of only 229 votes. The strengthening of the Welsh Conservatives over the Welsh Liberal Democrats, seeing parts of Powys and Clwyd turn blue, has reduced the Lib Dems to a solitary MP in Wales. Liberalism has had a strong foundation in Wales since the upsurge of non-conformist, Welsh-speaking Liberals seized seats in the famous 1868 election over largely Anglican, English-speaking Tory landlord candidates. For a decimated party, the near loss of Wales could have further devolution implications twinned with their isolated lone Scottish MP. This will strengthen the Prime Minister's resolve in granting powers with what he believes is fair for the people of Wales, but to many they are perceived as cosmetic. Like Scotland, the majority of Wales did not vote for the Conservatives, but unlike Scotland, with the St. David's Day offer coming into force, this confirms that Welsh devolution continues to significantly drop behind the powers enjoyed by Scotland, underlining a deliberate plan to oppose equilibrium within the union. Labour, the Lib Dems and Plaid Cymru have criticised the offer and it seems unlikely that powers over policing, justice, benefits and the Crown Estate will be arriving at the Senedd soon.

It's far too early to predict what the next five years will bring, or how the story will develop. This is before we take into consideration what the Scottish and Welsh elections in 2016 will bring. A forthcoming referendum on Europe can only exacerbate issues with the devolved nations of Wales and Scotland (and also Greater London) showing a strong likelihood of voting to endorse EU membership, whilst England voting to leave. It's incredibly difficult to say what the answer is: Federalism? Confederation? A mutual end to the union? The only certainty that we have is the current system is not working, and we all agree that something needs to be done.