

What's United About This Kingdom?

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Jon Snow

Good afternoon, everybody. What a revelation this meeting is, in and of itself, because fine though the turnout is, it's not telling us that this is a front-line, must meet, must talk, must urgently move, must try to lobby fast and hard to save the union – this, south of the border, is a dribble. It's fascinating, absolutely fascinating. We're in for a very fascinating lunchtime experience – indigestibly exciting. We've got three indigestibly exciting, or very digestibly exciting, speakers. I was nearly very abusive then. But quite seriously, this is coming in the aftermath of the *New York Times*' front-page article which described the collective nervous breakdown and loss of identity that Britain seems to be passing through – but fortunately, it's not worrying anybody in London, and therefore it's not a problem.

So I'm delighted to introduce our first speaker, Professor Linda Colley. Thank you very much, Linda. Fire away.

Linda Colley

It's a great pleasure and honour to be here. I thought I'd make just four brief points.

First of all, it's important not to be too distinctively masochistic and talk about the *British* identity crisis. Identity is under pressure in large parts of the world, partly because of what we call globalization. There's all sorts of changes putting pressure on traditional allegiances. Moreover, throughout Europe and indeed beyond Europe, you have the phenomenon of more small nations than there are states. A lot of European states are facing problems from small nations within their borders who are beginning to want their own state. Catalonia in Spain is a classic example.

So the identity crisis is not just ours. But second point, there are specific reasons why it is sharp and becoming more acute here. I tried to set out some of those reasons both in *Britons* and in my more recent *Acts of Union*. The United Kingdom is a composite state. In other words, it is a composite of different countries and indeed different regions that at one stage were separately ruled or had considerable autonomy. These countries have been put together at different times, often in a context of war. Composite states always have fault lines. They are difficult to run, inherently.

We also have the problem that some of the constitutive stories of the United Kingdom, or at least of Great Britain, have ceased to operate or aren't very powerful anymore. Protestantism – varieties of Protestantism – were an important cement, at least in Great Britain, from the Reformation to certainly the early 20th century. We have now a tapestry of different religious allegiances here. Other stories have gone too. So has the Empire. I think we deluded ourselves – or many people deluded themselves – in thinking that the Empire would go and that was something that happened outside us, but the disappearance of Empire has had a lot of internal consequences which have taken some time to work their way through.

Not the least: the loss of Empire means the loss of a certain number of perks and degrees of complacency which helped to keep the different component parts of these islands together. Scots, for example, were disproportionately invested in the Empire. I put it to you that if London still controlled a quarter of the globe, how many people in Scotland would necessarily want to leave such a honey pot? The principled might but many would not.

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Third issue. It's not just that some of these constitutive stories have gone or weakened and that the Empire is gone. The United Kingdom lacks a constitutional carapace of the sort that many polities elsewhere in the world have. We don't have a written constitution. That's probably a factor in some of the problems we have. A written constitution, among other things, is often a treaty between different regions, working out how they are to interrelate – famously, the federal constitution in the United States.

Nor do we have a real acceptance or understanding here of federalism. Without a more developed understanding of federalism, I think it's going to be hard to organize the UK in a stable way. It's also going to be hard – even harder than it would be anyway – for the UK, or what remains of it, to make sense of the EU.

Why does this matter? Some would say: let them all drift off and we'll drift off from the EU and so on and so forth. Why does it matter? Partly because we live in a very dangerous and insecure world, obviously. I think these issues about Scottish autonomy, possible British withdrawal from the EU, are too often looked at in very isolationist terms. We have to consider the wider global picture. We face, of course, the rising economic power of Asia. We face possible breakdowns in global power structures. New military movements, as we've been recently reminded in the Ukraine. We face all sorts of changes due to shifts in climate. And we can't assume that the relative stability of postwar Europe will endure.

So working out whether the union persists in its present form or not is not the only question on the block. It's how the different parts of these islands and how the different parts of Europe and beyond refurbish alliances, keep connections going, because under whatever political rubric that becomes important. In other words, this is not just a little local difficulty. These issues have much wider repercussions. If we're going to have a union, we have to think harder what unionism means and we have to think about governance.

Jon Snow

Thank you very much, Linda. Simon?

Simon Jenkins

I find it difficult, because I agree with almost everything that Linda has just said. I was hugely influenced by her book. I think that the perception that the union of England and Scotland was in many senses a creation of empire is a very important perception. Had it not been for Scotland's desire to share in the British imperial adventure, it would have been a very different sort of union. Wales and Ireland were colonies – quite a different phenomena from the union with Scotland. As a number of people have written, the end of the British Empire was bound to change the relationship between the components of the confederacy, which is the proper way of describing the British Isles.

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Whenever I go to Dublin or Cardiff or Edinburgh and have these sorts of conversations, it is completely different from the conversation we have in London, dominated hugely by Scots expatriates who are terrified of the end of the union, because in effect they are, so to speak, foreigners in their own country. It is very important to separate tribalism from reason here. Reason has not been terribly prominent in the debate about Scottish independence in London. Witness the endless trooping of British ministers to Scotland and pretending it's all about money. There is no case, to my knowledge, of secessionism being about money. It's about identity, emotion, tribalism, all these things. It's been a really, to my mind, ham-fisted attempt to hold a union together on the basis that it's all about money.

What is it about? To me it is about exactly the things that Linda has been describing. It's about the way in which people feel a sense of identity in a changing world. It always seemed to me that the way in which Scottish people feel towards England, which is very different from the way that English people – English people regard Scotland and (I'm half-Welsh) the Welsh and certainly the Irish, who are no longer part of the United Kingdom – the United Kingdom is effectively at an end as of 1921. That was the United Kingdom and it ended in 1921. A different sort of kingdom was put in place, which is effectively Great Britain plus Northern Ireland. But the way in which it's thought of is so different in the component parts and how it's thought of in England.

The problem almost is to say 'what does a union mean to the British' when it's really to the English. To the English, the union means England plus little bits of the outside. To Scotland there's a real, quite genuine resentment about the English. In Wales there's a very severe resentment about the English, and in Ireland it was so severe they got rid of them – or, got rid of us.

What it means is much more difficult to discern. Looking at the terms of the referendum, it is abundantly clear firstly that devolution meant something. It meant something in Wales, certainly. It meant a lot in Scotland. They gained a considerable degree of autonomy while remaining a part of the national parliament and the national conversation. As of the declaration of the referendum, panic took hold of the British government, both parties, to promise something called 'devo max'. 'Devo max' is a very good book by three Nuffield scholars on what are Scotland's choices. It goes through all the components of probable devo max, since no one knows what they really are.

It then goes through the probable consequences of a yes vote. If Scotland were to vote yes, there would be an almighty negotiation. It would be extremely unpleasant, probably, but it would have to have an outcome – we're rather good at outcomes, we're very pragmatic about it in this country. The outcome of the post-independence negotiation is something which the Scots pundits now call 'independence lite'.

Independence lite is almost indistinguishable from devo max. This is the reason why I've frequently written that the referendum doesn't make much difference. The outcome will be a lot more independence for Scotland. There will obviously be different constitutional arrangements, there will be different terminologies. But it's ludicrous to pretend there won't be a common currency of some sort. There will be a unified trade area. Migration controls will not be in place on the border. It will be even more linked to England than Ireland is post Ireland's independence. Ireland is, to all intents and purposes, an independent country. But devo max is going to be more or less that. It therefore doesn't really matter whether they vote yes or no.

What matters is what happens next, and what happens next is identical to what's happening across Europe (again, as Linda says). These component parts of nation-states that are effectively confederacies within themselves, they are all beginning to drift apart. There is nothing you can do about it. In a more globalized world, people want more local identity. When you have a very centralist government, as in Britain, that push for local identity is much stronger than it might be, for instance, in Italy or even Spain. But it's there.

That's why I think actually the debate we're having at the moment is quite useful, because it's pushed London finally into recognizing that forms of autonomy appropriate to the way in which the Scots feel about themselves – and possibly, god help us, the Welsh – means something and has got to be answered, in the same way that the Spanish government recognized that with the Basques and the Catalans and the Galicians, and the Italians with the Sicilians and the Valle d'Aostans and so on. There's no way you can avoid it nowadays. If you avoid it, you'll end up with the Czech Republic and Slovakia or whatever. I think that would be a pity. I don't think it's the end of the world but it would be a pity.

But all I'd say is, and I think the debate is not a misnomer because it's a real debate: it's going to lead to a new form of relationship with Scotland anyway. I think that relationship will be to Scotland's advantage. I think Scotland ought to be as rich, if not richer, than Denmark and it isn't – and it isn't because, in my view, it's been ruled badly from London for 50 years, if not 200 years. I think at the end of the day you will have a more appropriate relationship between a sort of friendly neighbour than between what has never been a United Kingdom. Thank you.

Jon Snow

Thank you, Simon, very much. Ben Page? A pollster's view.

Ben Page

The main thing is, of course – and it's a very sunny day – but the English so far haven't woken up to the cataclysm that could happen in a few weeks' time. So we have 72 per cent of Scots who think it's the biggest thing that's going to happen this year; the figure for England is 16 per cent, with the majority of people thinking it will be the World Cup (which, of course, they've been severely disappointed about).

When we ask people what they think will happen – it's quite interesting to go with the wisdom of crowds. This isn't necessarily what they want but what they think will happen. Forty-eight per cent of people in Britain believe that the UK will be around precisely as it is now in one decade's time; a third think that it won't be, it will have changed in some way. In 20 years' time, certainty disappears and it's even-stevens as to what happens.

There has never been a single opinion poll in Scotland that suggests a majority of Scots want to leave the union, although they certainly want devo max, which we will talk about. Indeed, the support for devolution in nearly all the nations of the United Kingdom, for localists like me who'd quite like to see local government getting a bit of power, only 30 per cent actually support giving tax-raising powers or real devolution to anything below the nation unit.

But underneath all of these figures are some quite interesting things about national identity. The proportion of Scots who really hate the English is only about 15 per cent. I'll do that with football, because we haven't asked it in precisely that way. So 15 per cent of Scots say they always support anybody but England. A third of the English and the Scots say they don't actually watch football at all. But when we ask – and the other thing on identity is Scottish and Welsh identity, perhaps in opposition to England, is stronger than Englishness. So it's interesting that about the same proportion of Scots and English will just say that if they have to choose a nationality, they will choose Scottishness or Englishness, but when you ask about how strongly do you feel you belong to your nation, the Scots and the Welsh have it by a margin of at least two to one to the English.

But at the same time, it is not that those countries are in some way fracturing away. If you look at what people say it means to be British or the things about the United Kingdom that you're proudest of, there is much more that unites the Scots and the English (and indeed the Welsh) than divides them.

Some of the differences that are greatest are actually between London and other parts of England. I think some of the subtext in all of this is that London – and I'll use Stephanie Flanders' words, ex of the BBC – London is a great city with a crap country attached to it. On so many indicators, when you look at London, it is becoming something other than the country – or countries – of which it is in charge. It's almost becoming a sort of separate city-state in its own right.

There's weirdness about the fact that we obviously have absolutely everything in this place. The Germans have Berlin and Hamburg and Frankfurt, the Americans have Washington, New York, LA. We have London. I think that is a problem in itself and it's partly that sort of separateness, the fact that people in London of all sorts are just less into identity politics of all sorts – because London is a massive melting pot – means in some ways that they're oblivious to things that people in other parts of the United Kingdom think and feel. I think that has some real challenges both for London and indeed for the rest of the country. So the 'most English' English people are actually the Geordies. They feel most strongly English. The Londoners are amongst the least English.

But overall, I think, when I look at the numbers, weighing it all up: Alex Salmond will win, as Sir Simon has just pointed out, whatever happens, because he will have devo max. He will be very happy to keep going and perhaps without some of the difficult decisions he might have had if he actually won.

Ultimately, the United Kingdom will muddle through. That's what it always does. The end.

Jon Snow

Thank you very much. That is a very interesting –

Simon Jenkins

We all agree.

Jon Snow

Well, except that I don't.

Ben Page

Perhaps you should do six minutes.

Jon Snow

I won't do six minutes, but I would argue very strongly that I'm not even sure that this is really about Scotland at all. It's in fact about our entire governance, that in fact it is failing. That the over-centralization to which you referred has reaped catastrophe, and that it's reaped catastrophe because people feel no local engagement at all. There is no local in this country.

Funnily enough, I attend something which I think you've been to once or twice, called the Pontignano Conference, which is an Anglo-Italian conference. It's a sublime experience, not least because it's in Italy, but beyond that. It's a sublime experience because it is a marriage of two nations that are completely complementary. They have, to coin the word that Stephanie Flanders used, a crap national – we have a crap local. They have an amazing local and we have a pretty stunning national. Failed a bit at some areas of sporting prowess and the rest of it.

Our collapse of local is, I think, a really serious thing which funnily enough – and I would like to ask you this, Simon – I think there's some evidence that politicians in the last few months have been desperately throwing rotting fish out to the regions, promising things like more money for the business rate. Even this very morning, the government talking about pushing more money out to the regions. But nobody ever talking about actually restoring a situation in which local people have control over local expenditure, elect local people to run their local.

There's so much you could say. The Birmingham schools thing, which I was mentioning to Simon coming in here – the Birmingham radicalization of these schools. If there had been still the coherent local authority that Birmingham ought to be and once was, somebody on the education committee would have heard about the radicalization of those schools, in the pub. (They might not have heard it from a Muslim but they would certainly have heard about it.) The fact that it took Whitehall nine months to discover that the best school in the locale had gone from being AAAA in Ofsted approval to completely disastrous radicalized heap – and I visited it, so I saw it for myself – that it went nine months without discovering that is itself a great testament to the lack of local.

Ben Page

I agree, but what's interesting about this is that the public exhibit what I would call cognitive polyphasia on this. They want their cake and to eat it too.

Jon Snow

That's right, no doubt.

Ben Page

It's a good way of describing people's ability to think conflicting things about the same thing – or at least to say in opinion polls conflicting things about the same thing, at the same time, and experiencing no dissonance. So 70 per cent of people say that local people should have much more control over their affairs, even possibly including some elements of taxation. However, 70 per cent also want the NHS to be identical anywhere and everywhere in the United Kingdom.

You will meet people from the left who say this is all about stopping unfairness happening. Of course we know – people who come to events like this know – that the NHS is radically different in different places, even within the same county sometimes. But there is a belief that somehow a central state can make sure that everything is the same. People want grass cutting, when we ask them, to be the same everywhere. If you could guarantee that all parks in England would have grass of uniform level, they will actually go for that. Eric Pickles, who says he is a localist – the minister for local government – is about to instruct all local authorities to start collecting dustbins again once a week. He's doing that partly because he knows his voters.

Simon Jenkins

I know this research well and it's certainly true. If you have a nationalized service like the NHS, people expect it to be national. This ghastly word I've tried to ban – the postcode lottery – dredged out whenever anything is going wrong. Oh, it's a postcode lottery, cancer care or prescriptions or whatever it might be, it's all a postcode lottery, it's a lottery. If on the other hand you say: would you like to keep your local hospital? If you had a vote on it, 100 per cent will say yes. So you're quite right, there's a paradox built into the democratic fact here.

The one thing you always find is they trust local more than national.

Ben Page

Yes.

Simon Jenkins

When they get an elected mayor, like London – I mean, there's no way London is going to disband an elected mayor and go back to the Ken Livingstone GLC. It just is not going to happen. Interestingly, Liverpool with – let's put it bluntly – a terrible elected mayor, it's got a curious self-confidence about it already, as does Middlesbrough. I'm an enthusiast for them: every city in the world, except in Britain, has elected mayors in some sense or other. We somehow feel it's the government's job to stop us having more higher rates, it's the government's job to do all these things. If, on the other hand, you say: would you like to control, for instance, where the housing estate goes in your village? They immediately become fanatical localists, in exactly the same way that Eric Pickles, who does not have a localist bone in his body, wants to overrule whatever local people want as far as housing estates are concerned.

There is, as Jon says, a huge local democratic deficit. It is the case that where, in the case of the Scots and previously the Welsh – and even once upon a time the Irish – get really stroppy and in fact vote to secede (or appear to be about to vote to secede) they throw localism at them. Cornwall, god help us, has now been sufficiently stroppy to get its own language recognized, which is ridiculous.

Jon Snow

That's part of what I was saying, because at the same time Wales was offered devolved powers it didn't ask for. Absolutely amazing. Suddenly Cameron got up three months ago and said, we're going to give you this, and they hadn't asked for it. Parity with Scotland.

Simon Jenkins

With Scotland, yes. They will get it.

Linda Colley

I think it's very interesting that we were supposed to be talking about 'what's united about this kingdom' and we end up talking about English dustbins. Obviously a very important topic.

Ben Page

It exercises the English more than Scottish independence, unfortunately.

Linda Colley

I'm sure you do polls on this subject all the time.

Ben Page

Sadly, I do.

Linda Colley

But can I enter something into this tapestry of comments, which are all very intriguing, that hasn't been mentioned? It does seem to me that both a cause and a symptom of what some see as the breakup of Britain, the breakup of the United Kingdom, is what's been happening with the Conservative Party, because I do think this is a really sort of crucial problem in our political makeup. If you think that the Conservative Party used to be the unionist party – its proud boast was that it was the pragmatic party of government, that the left might have divisive ideologies but the Conservatives were the sensible, pragmatic, 'let's make things work'. But since Thatcher (though not entirely due to Thatcher, because you can see similar trends across the Atlantic) the political right has become more extreme. The Conservative Party has been largely pushed out of Scotland. It's being pushed out of parts of the north of England. It's increasingly consolidating within the English south.

This is a really technical problem if you've got a parliamentary system that assumes a two-party divide, because Labour is still hanging on as a British-wide political party but the Conservatives aren't a British-wide political party. Therefore the only people who can compete with Labour in Scotland is the SNP, which is why we're in the situation we're in.

So one of the things I would like to know is: what do the Conservatives think they're doing? Are they really just wanting to be the party of southern English nationalism? Because it's not enough just to blame Thatcher. Thatcher is now actually quite a long time ago. Something could have been done, arguably, to change this.

But I think this is a part of the wider issue that this is about governance and it's about the governance of the UK. It's not just a Scottish issue.

Jon Snow

Very, very interesting.