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Brexit and the mythologies of nationalism: a warning for Wales

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Brexit and the mythologies of nationalism: a warning for Wales
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The ostensible aim of Brexit is to restore sovereignty to Westminster. Yet it also represents a threat to the British state itself. This is partly because the nations of the UK mythologise their historical relationships with Europe differently. As a result, national sentiment in Northern Ireland and Scotland is on a different trajectory from that in England and Wales. This may well result in the breakup of Britain, and the implications of that for Wales are troubling.

As we know, a majority in Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU whereas more people in England and Wales voted to leave. A correlation between nationalist sentiment and Europhilia can be discerned by comparing electoral voting patterns in Ireland, Scotland and Wales with those of leave and remain voters in the Brexit referendum. In broad terms, the areas which saw the highest proportions of Remain votes cast are also the places in which support for parties advocating secession from the UK is strongest.

Brexiteers couched the EU vote as a choice between a glorious British past and an ignominious European future. This polarised opinion in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, where nationalist parties offer a third alternative. The character of the nationalisms that such parties promote is therefore of central importance as the UK leaves the EU. And that character is informed by popular understandings of the past.

In recent years the SNP, now the dominant party in Scotland, have put forward an explicitly civic vision of Scottish identity; to be Scottish you just need to live there and participate. Indeed, nationalists in Scotland often present themselves as members of an ancient mongrel nation that has been an active member of the European community since the Middle Ages. What's more, Scottish nationalism, unlike that found elsewhere in Europe, lacks a linguistic element. Gaelic is spoken by a tiny minority whilst Scots is seen as a dialect of English. Nationalists are therefore free to present their cause as inclusive and outward-facing, rather than based on language or descent.

For many years Irish nationalists emphasised ethnicity and Catholicism; especially in Northern Ireland where vast numbers of English and Scottish Protestants settled in the early modern era. Language is also central to that vision, as the recent controversy over a proposed Irish Language Act shows. Yet alongside that is a sense that Ireland is, in historical and cultural terms, a European nation. Indeed the playful claim that the Irish saved European civilisation in the Middle Ages has gained considerable cultural traction. Since the Good Friday Agreement, Sinn Fein has gained significant ground in Northern Ireland and is now tied with the DUP in terms of electoral support. During the same period the party moved towards a civic understanding of Irishness which, whilst still making strident appeals to history, rejects ethnic or sectarian definitions of the nation. The fact that the party campaigned to remain in the EU, after a long tradition of Euroscepticism, is testament to that shift.

There is no comparable tradition of locating Welsh history within a European context. Popular views of the Welsh past are dominated by notions of Celtic heritage and

struggle against England. Plaid Cymru have tried to address this by following their Scottish and Irish brethren in [shedding the trimmings of ethnic nationalism](). Ultimately, however, they are seen by many as a cultural pressure group advocating a version of Welshness that does not represent the majority. The centrality of the Welsh language to Plaid's message is partly to blame for this. On one level, it is a reminder of the historical distinctiveness of the Welsh people. But less than 20% of the population speak it, making it a symbol of division rather than a unifying principle of Welshness

Indeed for almost a century, the politics of class rather than nation have held sway in Wales. Labour has been dominant there since 1945, and support for the party has historically been strongest in the industrial heartlands of the south-east. These areas are [predominantly English-speaking](), thanks to the multitude of English immigrants who settled there between 1850 and 1910. Moreover, those incomers were at the forefront of the early Labour Movement, which painted national boundaries as a bourgeois irrelevance in the struggle for working class emancipation.

It is therefore difficult for Welsh nationalism to speak to those on the breadline in the economically-deprived areas of south Wales. And it was those regions, with their [poverty and low levels of education](), which voted most strongly to leave. These parts of Wales are open to the insular and exclusionary idea of Britishness that has become powerful in England. The importance of the [immigration issue in swinging the Brexit vote]() is ample demonstration of that. English history is replete with events which Europhobes can draw upon, from the Norman Conquest and the Spanish Armada to Waterloo and D-Day. This has fed into a [fable of English uniqueness]() which played a significant if unacknowledged role in the vote to leave. Such inward-looking views of the past are at odds with the inclusive Europhile vision promoted by nationalists in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Moreover, Brexit has further undermined an Anglocentric and historically shallow idea of Britishness that was [already on the wane](). This British identity grew up in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the wake of the 1707 Union with Scotland.. It was based on the shared endeavour of empire, and a collective adherence to Protestant forms of Christianity strengthened by the threat from continental Catholic powers like France and Spain. The alliance with France during the First and Second World Wars, followed by the decline of empire and the secularisation of society afterwards, thus weakened the bonds which held the nations of the UK together.

Seen from that perspective, the growth of pro-European sentiment in the past few decades can be seen as both a factor in and symptom of the declining currency of Britishness. Brexit then forced voters in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to choose between two unions; the British and the European and, in so doing, made Scottish independence and Irish unification more likely. This will not be an immediate consequence – indeed the [SNP vote share fell significantly]() a year after the Brexit referendum. But seen from a generational perspective, this was the direction of travel long before the vote to leave the EU.

The referendum result arguably represents the triumph of Anglo-British nationalism in England and Wales, but at the same time it is an intolerable provocation to the internationalist self-image of the Remain majorities in Scotland and Ireland. It is

therefore likely to hasten the collapse of the British state as we know it, leaving Wales as the Celtic tail on a very large English dog.

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