

## Introduction

In 1977, following a protracted debate in the pages of the journal *New Left Review*, Tom Nairn's *The Break-Up of Britain* was published. In those days an independently-minded left was a much more substantial intellectual and campaigning current than it is now. All things 1968 were still a relatively recent memory, and the last of the defeated US troops had only left Vietnam two years previously. This was an era when striking miners weren't just bolshily victorious; they had the power to bring down a government. Public-sector wage militancy against a monetarist-inclined Labour government was all the rage. Second-wave feminism was still in its infancy, and a vibrant mass movement against the street-fighting fascist National Front was beginning to emerge – including the Anti-Nazi League and Rock against Racism, with its brilliant fusion of pop and politics. The Sex Pistols were banned, yet still grabbed the number one spot in the Queen's silver jubilee year with their anarchic *God Save the Queen*.

And then Thatcherism seemed to undermine just about every hopeful advance these ideas and initiatives had once offered. Tom Nairn's thesis became to a certain extent sidelined, though not entirely forgotten, especially in Scotland and Wales. As the sheer scale of the Thatcherite revolution unfolded it gained what looked like at the time an unstoppable dynamic. CND and the Greenham Women, the 1984-85 Miners Strike, the municipal resistance of London's GLC, Liverpool City Council and the self-styled 'People's Republic of South Yorkshire', the Ghost Town riots of 1981 – each was devastatingly defeated. The progressive ideal was in danger of being extinguished once and for all.

Yet the Englishness of Thatcherism proved to be both its strength and its weakness. 'Loadsamoney' culture was very much a product of the City of London and its south-east commuter hinterland. The North of England, as John Harris records in his essay in this collection, remained enemy territory for Thatcherism; while Scotland, and to a

lesser extent Wales, remained Thatcher's most embittered foes of all. As for Northern Ireland, for almost the entire Thatcher reign a war raged, with occasional deadly excursions to the mainland.

The core argument of this collection is that by 2019 – twenty years after the first devolution elections of 1999 – Britain will have moved decisively towards Tom Nairn's 'Break Up'; and that the past decade of devolution has begun a process that now has an irreversible momentum. Key to this shift are the growing – and publicly obvious – differences in the political cultures of Westminster and those of the devolved nations. And these differences themselves could not have emerged without the devolution settlement of ten years ago, however flawed it may have been.

Mark Perryman's keynote essay, which opens the collection, makes the case that the break-up out of which England will eventually emerge is being driven by the Scots and Welsh pulling away. This will leave England exposed, forced finally to consider its own state of independence. And in this interregnum, between the old and the new regime, 'morbid symptoms' will appear (as identified by Antonio Gramsci in similar contexts); in England's case this is likely to be an ugly mix of a populist right and the racial nationalists of the BNP. The essay charts the cultures and processes of the break-up, to outline the potential of an alternative, progressive English national-popular politics. And it situates this in the context of the inter-relationships that will evolve between four nations after the end of the Union.

Kevin Williamson's survey of the making of a Scottish cultural resistance unpicks the impact of a nation-in-the-making in spite of a Tory reign in Westminster that was impervious to whatever was said or done north of the border. And this arrogance finally met its match in 1990 with the Poll Tax, first tested out on Scotland, with fateful consequences for the Tories. As recently as 1955 the Conservative Party secured more than 50 per cent of the popular vote in Scotland, a feat unequalled by any party since. But after Thatcher the Tories have been reduced to being Scotland's fourth party, with currently just one solitary Westminster MP, while they are neck and neck with the Liberal Democrats in terms of MSPs. After the Conservative general election victory of 1992 on a minority Scottish vote, a cultural resistance erupted that had antecedents stretching back to the nineteenth century and before, and this played a central role in the framing of modern Scottish nationalism as a left-of-centre political force. Tom Nairn is the intellectual diarist of this ancient and modern history,

tracking since 1997 its evolution with the SNP, who were an at-first reluctant partner in Labour's programme for devolution, but now are seeking to push the institutions and powers to the limit in finding pathways towards independence.

Charlotte Williams, in her critique of Tom Nairn's work, suggests that such a strategy isn't always as inclusive as it claims, and that any radicalism that submerges differences framed by ethnicity, gender and class in the cause of nationhood – old or new – will ultimately find itself with a narrative that fails to address issues of social inequality. This is a warning that those who offer civic nationalism as an essentially left-of-centre project ignore at their peril.

Not all the contributors entirely endorse the 'Break-Up' thesis of this collection. As well as Charlotte Williams's doubts about the limitations of a nationalist definition of self-determination, Arthur Aughey offers a warning that the extremities of outcome suggested by the 'endism' of Nairn and others may never actually materialise. Arthur suggests in its place a political practice of gradualism – which is perhaps more suggestive of a conservative English culture. Whether this can continue to co-exist with the impatience of England's neighbours remains an unfinished debate, however.

*Breaking-Up Britain* is a dialogue around four themes at the core of post-devolution and pre-independence politics, with each theme being discussed by a contributor from one of the four nations after Britain. The first four contributors – John Harris, Kevin Williamson, Charlotte Williams and Arthur Aughey – discuss national identity after devolution. Leanne Wood, Salma Yaqoob, Gerry Adams and Richard Thomson discuss different approaches to civic nationalism. Vron Ware, Inez McCormack, Gregor Gall and Mike Parker discuss some of the potential exclusions of nationalism. Lesley Riddoch, John Osmond, Peadar Kirby, and Michael Kenny & Guy Lodge discuss states of independence.

The civic nationalism of Wales as described by Leanne Wood has a strong green dimension; while Richard Thomson from Scotland looks at the social-democratisation of the SNP. From Ireland, Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams outlines his party's vision for an Ireland that is both united and egalitarian. In March 2009, after the murders of two British soldiers and a Northern Irish policeman by 'dissident' republicans, the English media found it impossible to distinguish between former IRA men, who condemned these murders, and those who committed them. But such an attitude threatens not only to cloud debate but to close it down completely. Ireland remains the most viciously intractable part of

the Break-Up, but the fact that the 'dissidents' are so isolated, and Northern Irish politics so united in its determination not to be drawn back into the trap they represent, remains a hugely encouraging sign of how much Northern Ireland has changed in such a short time. Writing from England, anti-war leader and Respect Party Birmingham City Councillor Salma Yaqoob points to ways in which a politics of community can begin to be constructed even in the most apparently unfavourable of circumstances, via a politics that recognises a pluralism of belongings in order to establish common ground.

Race – in England especially – remains the most potent of the exclusions that nationalism, whatever the good intentions, can generate. Vron Ware explores the histories that have contributed towards the racialisation of English identity while questioning how durable this once indelible association remains. Mike Parker provides a very different insight as an Englishman who has lived in Wales for the past ten years. He questions the notion that anti-Englishness is the defining characteristic of Welsh nationalism, and examines the resentment that exists towards a Britishness that is too often simply a polite term for 'Greater England'. Inez McCormack and Gregor Gall, in their different ways, record the missing dimension of class in nationalist politics. Inez's biography of civil rights as a political concept in Northern Ireland suggests a way of 'doing politics' that is centred on participation, the right for all to be heard, and an entrenched presence of those traditionally excluded from decision-making processes. Gregor's chapter concentrates on the woeful misunderstanding of nationalism across much of the left; he considers the demise of the Scottish Socialist Party's attempt to create a new leftist politics out of a deep appreciation of the radical pull of Scottish nationalism, and considers whether this spells the end of similar projects in the future.

The closing section of *Breaking-Up Britain* considers the states of the four independent nations after the union. Lesley Riddoch retells the story of Scottish Labour's defeat by the SNP in the Holyrood Elections of 2007. Alex Salmond's tenure as First Minister will in large measure determine the scale of support for Scottish independence at the next Holyrood Elections in 2011, or in any future independence referendum. John Osmond remains unconvinced that independence is necessarily the central issue for Wales; instead he points to the role of self-government as the key to an active state and active citizenship, which will enable Wales to play a role in a system of inter-dependent states, on our island as well as across Europe and beyond. The part

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Northern Ireland would play in such a process remains the most contentious of all. The nationalist parties there favour not simply independence but uniting with another state entirely, the Irish Republic. It is necessary therefore to consider, as Peadar Kirby so expertly does, the Republic's 'Celtic Tiger' economic model. This has a relevance not only to understanding any eventual united Ireland's capacity to produce an economy that is both prosperous and just, but also challenges the thinking of advocates of the economic viability of other 'small nations'. Prior to the 2008 recession such advocacy in Scotland and Wales would regularly cite the Irish example. Peadar offers a critical account that suggests that a different basis for the Irish, Scots and Welsh economies will have to be found – rather than the relying on the warmed-up neoliberalism the Celtic Tiger eventually came to represent. Michael Kenny and Guy Lodge offer a measured and wide-ranging critique of the inability of the political class – Brownite Labour and Tory Camerons alike – to engage with what the break-up means, and their failure to understand the depth of attachment that exists to each constituent nation of the union. They also point to a lack of awareness at Westminster of the urgent necessity for a reconfiguration of the Union, and an end to the glaring inconsistencies of England's non-place in an increasingly disunited Kingdom.

*Breaking up Britain* is a conversation between individuals, parties and social movements who rarely talk to one another – with or without borders. Each contributor presents their own national context for the collection's four themes, in an account that also seeks to be universal. In essence this is what a politics of the progressive nation would look like. A civic nationalist politics now exists in Scotland and Wales that is prepared to push the devolution settlement to its limits, its breaking point. In Northern Ireland the majority party representing the nationalist community is in favour of a united Irish Republic. In England a growing body of opinion and ideas is demanding that England must find a part to play in this process too. Ten years ago, Scots and Welsh voters went to the polls to elect a Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, and now, finally, the Northern Irish voters have elected their Assembly too. *Breaking Up Britain* seeks to chart the past, present and future of this movement towards states of independence, in which we will surely witness a reformation of four nations – after a Union that has run out of time.

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