
The Union? Let's call the whole thing off

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When the Union between Scotland and England draws to its close, the blame - or credit - will fall to the paradox of unsought outcomes. Something like this: every single individual who has ever set out to preserve, "save" or enhance the old arrangement has contrived to diminish its chances of survival. Now Ken Clarke, the former Chancellor, has added his illustrious name to the list.

Put his suggested reforms of "asymmetrical devolution" in a historical context. Scotland's demand for home rule was fed less by nationalism than by the persistent refusal of Tory governments to countenance self-determination north of the border. Scots began to say that the Union, as devised, was inherently unfair to a minority population. We called it a democratic deficit.

Yet what did the solution bring about, the "impossible" prospect of an SNP government aside? Only a state of affairs at Westminster that is, palpably, clearly unfair to the voters of England.

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The West Lothian issue is not one that can be dismissed easily if you happen to believe that the decisions of any parliament must be legitimate and representative. It cannot be overlooked - though I'd give the argument a go - just because Tory politicians saw no issue of principle during all the years when Scotland and England diverged, and when we were refusing, most of us, to vote for their party.

Unfair is unfair. I would fume daily if some bloke from Fife made decisions about schools and hospitals in my town while my MP had no equivalent say over education and health in Kirkcaldy. The economic arguments are rubbish, as this newspaper has demonstrated in exhaustive detail, and as most people in these islands will realise when the bill for the London Olympics is delivered. Natural justice is another matter, however.

So Mr Clarke lights up one of his small cigars and scratches his wise head. He knows (and we know) that his party leader, David Cameron, could probably sleep easily as the English leader of an English government. Nevertheless, his time at the Treasury probably reminds Mr Clarke that you do not write off Scotland - I'm thinking of wind, water and strategic relevance, never mind oil - for a few votes.

But he has been asked to address a fundamental problem of democracy. Let's say his every motive is pure. How do you keep Scotland within a functioning Union? How do you avoid making matters worse? How do you resolve a paradox without creating a new problem?

The polls say, more or less, that Mr Cameron can't lose the next British General Election. Experience reminds us, meanwhile, that the leader of this British party has done little more than visit Scotland from time to time, smile nicely and mouth the usual platitudes. So would Prime Minister Cameron really pursue the idea that Scottish MPs should no longer be allowed to vote on amendments to "England only" legislation?

First, a practicality. Can any British law ever be defined in such terms? I doubt it. Secondly, would the patriots of England really wish to see their parliament reduced to a pick-and-mix of part-time, second-class and "real" MPs? The symbolism alone would suggest to the peoples of England, Wales, Scotland and a corner of Ireland that the Union had become a Norwegian Blue among constitutions.

The final question can only be put in raw terms: why would the Scots then bother? Why would we go on sending all those expensive MPs on all those expensive journeys to London just to have them told - no hard feelings - that they are not properly British? Such is the inevitable inference, after all, from the musings of Mr Clarke and his "task force".

Alex Salmond himself could not have come up with a better wheeze. A few of us have noticed, in fact, that a certain community of interest has been emerging (Labour spinners will tell you all about it) between the SNP and England's Tories. None is more patriotic on behalf of the Saxon south, indeed, than our First Minister. The problem remains: how do you save this Union without destroying it utterly? How do you treat one group on these crowded little islands fairly without imposing on others?

Honest answer? You can't; give it up. Accept reality and create new, better and more convivial relationships. I can say so, but I'm not one of those on the long list of folk offering to save the Union. Labour - at least in the shape of Ian Davidson, of Glasgow South-West - would have us believe the Tories are pulling a fast one with these inquiries. "Five categories" of MP might suit Mr Cameron, but few others. Should we believe it?

Equally, Mr Davidson has been asking, quite rightly, why Mr Clarke fails to call for devolution, and a devolved legislature, for England. The assumption appears to be that our southern friends think they already have one of those, that it sits by

the Thames, and that it would function well enough without the anomaly called Scotland.

Is that a Union? Is it a partnership - check your treaties - between sovereign nations of equal standing? Such was the deal, after all. The group psychology of Scots, Nationalist or not, and rarely noticed in London (hence the BBC's recent journalistic difficulties), is that it is anything but. Ideally, I think, you do not preserve a political and economic Union by informing the junior partners that they are a damnable nuisance.

None of which, as you may have noticed, solves England's problem. My own answer verges on the simplistic: let's call the whole thing off. Failing that, create a legislature in Manchester. If it still doesn't suit, we could talk, finally, about money, with the proviso that this time we discuss inputs as well as outputs, what goes in as well as what is handed out.

Still, Mr Clarke has just done a better job for those of my persuasion than he appears to realise. My guess is that he doesn't spend much time around republican socialists. But is his actually the considered Conservative position? Scotland and the Disunited Kingdom written off as lost causes - that would be the real effect - for the sake of easy votes?

Or is this another example of the perennial failure to understand that administrative tinkering - as opposed to a grown-up, written constitution - is doing Britain astonishing damage?

I listen to Mr Clarke, Mr Cameron, most Liberals and all those Scottish Labour politicians who run other people's lives, with just three words in my head: keep it up. Selfish, no doubt, and perhaps a bit childish. But still I think: go on doing what you're doing and England will be independent before you know it. A good thing, too.

Rather than inviting Mr Clarke to ruminate, the Tories ought to have invited the Scottish Government to present its views on the making of nations in the 21st century. The sight of England wrestling with issues of democratic legitimacy is almost as quaint as a debate on rotten boroughs. We, on the other hand, have done all this stuff endlessly. And old friends are always welcome to advice.

Here's some: in a hole, dispense with the shovel.

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