



VOTE: A thistle at the border of Scotland and England pictured during the independence referendum of 2014 which was won by unionists
PICTURE: Danny Lawson/PA

Unionists and nationalists alike should welcome debate on UK's future

THIS is from the discussion paper, Towards a New Act of Union: "A fundamental principle of a strengthened and revived United Kingdom is that each of the four component parts should have a mutually beneficial relationship both with the central mechanisms of the state and with each of the other four parts. The proposition that the union together is stronger than the sum of each of its component parts focuses in part on the idea that each part brings a unique cultural and political contribution to the whole, and benefits from the contributions of the other parts and from the central mechanisms. For this reason, ensuring effective relationships between the component parts at all levels, must be at the core of any proposals for constitutional reform."

The paper was published in September 2015, exactly a year after the Scottish independence referendum was won by unionists with a 55-45 per cent margin of victory. A recent piece in the *Economist* noted: "After focusing on Scotland during the independence referendum and winning, [unionists] promptly lost interest."

There is a tendency for unionists to lose interest rather than bank each victory and start preparing for the next battle. It's something we see in Northern Ireland all the time: which probably explains why unionists constantly find themselves on the back foot – and with a narrowing gap between them and nationalism.

It had been hoped in Downing Street that the 2014 result would have parked the Scottish independence issue for at least a generation: indeed, it's what many in the SNP feared. Yet Brexit, just 20 months later (when Scotland voted 62-38 per cent for Remain) upended the dynamics again. It's worth bearing in mind, of course, that even without Brexit the

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independence issue would have continued to dominate Scottish politics; but the turmoil within the Conservative party and the rise of a new variant of English nationalism made the independence cards easier to play.

Ironically, it was also a form of independence which English nationalism was seeking: independence from membership of the EU and, as it quickly transpired, independence from Scotland and Northern Ireland too, if that was the price required for a clean-break Brexit. All of this was, I think, the (perhaps inevitable) fallout from Tony Blair's 'great devolution experiment' in 1997/98, which led to a parliament in Scotland and assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland. Arguments in favour of regional assemblies in England fell on deaf ears. The arguments of integrationists fell on deaf ears, too.

I have long held the view – long before Brexit – that the competing tensions between the various nationalisms across and within the UK (Scottish, Welsh, English, Irish, NI/ Ulster unionism and smaller varieties) would,

eventually, come to a head. And that's why I've also argued for many years that there needed to be something which I've described as an overarching pan-UK unionism: a clear, coherent identity and platform for those, like me, who support the geographical/ constitutional status quo. Devolution serves a purpose, but it was never intended to facilitate those who prioritise the dismantling of the United Kingdom.

So, while Brexit brought things to a head more quickly than I expected, the fact that they came to a head was no surprise at all. Would the SDLP and SF, or SNP, or even English nationalism have rowed back had Remain won? Of course not. And nor would a victory for Remain, in and of itself, have represented a victory for the UK's constitutional status quo. The internal tensions would have remained.

The collapse of the United Kingdom is not inevitable. But those who believe in it must get much better at making the case for it. That begins with a clinical deconstruction of nationalist/independence arguments, not least the economic and socio/political consequences of going it alone. The debate – the existential debate, if you like – on the UK will continue to gather steam (Scottish parliamentary elections this year, local council elections in England as well, with Nigel Farage's new party, and Northern Ireland Assembly elections next year), so there's no better time for pan-UK unionism to really make its case.

Brexit has pushed the debate centre stage, but Brexit has also highlighted and pinpointed the fault lines, pressure points and sinkholes at the heart of the UK in its present form. The debate is long overdue and was always coming; and should be welcomed by unionists and nationalists alike. Everything is in play and, irrespective of how things look right now, no particular outcome is inevitable.

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ON THIS DAY

FEBRUARY 26 1971

Lynch Emerges As Undisputed Leader

MR JACK Lynch emerged as undisputed leader of the Fianna Fail party last night after two days of stormy debate at its annual Ard Fheis in Dublin. The Taoiseach received a standing ovation from about 4,000 delegates when he made his closing speech.

His chief opponents, former Ministers Mr Kevin Boland and Mr Neil Blaney failed to be re-elected to important Party posts. Twice during the Ard Fheis serious scuffles broke out. On Saturday the Speaker's rostrum collapsed during a clash between rival factions when Mr Boland, a former Minister, challenged the legality of the Party Secretary's annual report. Disorderly scenes were marked on Saturday when Mr Kevin Boland interrupted the speech of the Minister for External Affairs, Dr Patrick Hillery. Both men were attempting to speak into the microphone on the rostrum at the same time. Mr Boland was shouted down and Dr Hillery was then subjected to the same treatment.

Cheers and counter-cheers drowned the voices of the speakers as the delegates numbering over 4,000 jumped to their feet. Later when order was somewhat restored, Dr Hillery referred to 'bully boys' within the organisation.

Defiant Belfast Women Don Uniforms

SIX women dressed in combat jackets and black berets, flanked by young girls carrying hurling sticks, led a protest from the Oldpark to Ardoyne yesterday afternoon. The women were protesting about what they described as the 'internment by remand' of three men who attended the funeral of Jim Saunders (21). Saunders was shot dead during rioting in the Oldpark area two weeks ago.

The women were also protesting about 'British army impartiality' because soldiers had been stationed in Protestant-occupied Louisa Street with their guns pointing into the [nationalist] 'Bone' district.

Blast Blamed on IRA

THE Minister of State and Home Affairs, Mr John Taylor told Mr Austin Currie (SDLP) at Stormont yesterday that there was clear evidence of the IRA's responsibility for the Brougher Mountain tragedy in which five people lost their lives.

Mr Currie said if the IRA did not exist the Unionist Party would invent it.

AS THE Stormont government rushed through legislation to curtail paramilitary funerals, 'Honour Jack' Lynch, 'the mild man of Irish politics', was consolidating his position after the Ministerial sackings and spectacular Arms Trial of the previous year. It would be almost a decade before Charlie Haughey ousted Lynch as taoiseach.

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