

Saving the Union to Death?
Gordon Brown and the Evacuation of Britishness

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From heartbreak to swagger inside eight months: the mighty resurgence of the beaten Yes campaign will dominate future histories of this period. But the matching plunge in Unionist sentiment is equally interesting, and may prove more significant over the long run. If the SNP mega-surge is best understood as an emotional reaction to September 19, an uncorking of pressures specific to these times, the depth of Unionist foreboding suggests a more essential political depletion. Allan Massie observes that ‘Scottish Unionists have come to regard their victory last September as only temporary. It’s as if they had built a dam already being battered by the rising water; it’s holding for the moment but more than likely to be swept away’.¹

Nothing is preordained, Massie insists, but ‘Scottish Independence Is Not Inevitable’ makes a soggy rallying cry (and a truly startling *Telegraph* headline). Writing under the same hearty slogan a few months later, the *Guardian*’s Martin Kettle confirms that ‘there is absolutely no law that says the nationalists are bound to win in the end’.² Something could yet turn up, and just look at Quebec. ‘The pendulum swings’, chirps Massie-Micawber. ‘Today’s ideas lose their attraction and wither.’ It’s hard to quibble with such meagre consolations, but any faith in deliverance by pendulum seems to overlook the dynamic nature of the forces in play. The Union of next time will differ from the Union of last time, not least because the Union of 2014 was preserved by arguments that seriously weaken its prospects of renewal. Most galling of all, much of

the ideological self-harm was inflicted not by hapless Project Fear-ists but by the modern Union's only remaining giant.

If Better Together achieved a successful defence of the state-nation and its armature, it leaves behind it no fallow ground in which a growing attachment to Britishness seems likely to take root and flourish. (This really matters: given the demographics of the No vote, winning *new* adherents to the Union will be crucial to its long-term survival.) As many have observed, the Union it chose to defend was a bundle of trusty mechanisms and safety-nets, devoted to no larger function than the 'pooling and sharing of risks and resources'. Related, emotionally decorative arguments for UK solidarity were largely premised on these mechanisms, and thus defined in chilly transactional terms. Here I want to focus on something less obvious and less discussed: how the technocratic case effectively foreclosed on other means of re-authenticating the Union as a living tradition or coherent political community. A year after the No victory, it remains very unclear how the British settlement successfully preserved, but also refashioned in the arguments of 2014, might begin to regain traction and sow new loyalties. The Union that was saved is the Union that was defended, and this should worry its supporters.

Alex Massie is one of several pro-UK commentators alive to this problem, eschewing Micawberism to take aim at Gradgrindery. 'Unionism needs to be armed with something more than pocket calculators', he urges, and should learn to mount arguments 'that are bigger, more generous, and more imaginative than ones that carry the subtext, Jings, aren't you – financially-speaking – damned LUCKY to be part of the United Kingdom?'³ The neglect of such arguments was indeed striking. 'Unionism has no new songs', observed Robert Crawford in 2014, mercifully overlooking the poignant ditties of 'Vote No Borders'.⁴ But it is only very recently that heartfelt pledges seemed either appropriate or necessary. 'The Union occupied a position of such unchallenged dominance in Scottish life between about 1750 and 1970', writes Colin Kidd, 'that there was no need to make a vigorous case on its behalf'. That its rightness was scarcely to be pondered was an index of its security, and *banal unionism* operated at the level of uncontentious 'background noise'.⁵ The forced de-banalisation of Britishness over the past four decades – the pushing to the surface of arguments to justify what had been accepted tacitly – has been bruising in

itself, but the real damage was done by pragmatic calculations made at surface level after 2011.

The No campaign had time to choose which image and version of the Union it would champion, and (quite reasonably) chose the face that seemed easiest to defend. But the Union easiest to save was also the one with fewest prospects of long-term recovery. In cutting straight to the economic chase – the endless litany of warnings on currency, pensions, welfare and oil revenue – the No campaign chose terrain on which it enjoyed a clear strategic advantage. And yet pitching its tents there effectively surrendered vast areas of defensible territory, including ground which had been central to earlier articulations of Unionism. Even if Better Together couldn't easily have *won* a larger cultural argument for Britishness, declining even to launch one ceded many easy acres to its opponents, and left key elements of the nationalist 'frame' uncontested.

Indeed, the No campaign fought the cultural campaign almost entirely on the terrain of *Scottishness*, making its key priority the authentication (as Scottish) of the pro-UK position. Joe Pike's insider account *Project Fear* confirms that Better Together invested much time and energy into cultivating messengers who 'best represent Scottishness', feeling the need 'to strongly counter any perception that voting No was a "vote of no confidence" in the country'.⁶ Refusing to concede the saltire to Yes is easy to understand; but an anti-nationalist patriotism centred on Scottishness simply reduced the space in which to argue for plural or mixed British identities. Instead, it was the Yes campaign who paid lip service to traditional Unionist tropes of this kind, in Salmond's talk of the 'five unions' – regal, fiscal, social, military, European – which would remain intact after independence.

To fully appreciate the damage done to the emotional and intellectual coherence of Unionism by the pro-UK campaign, we must revisit the dramatically shifting stance of its only heavyweight, and the striking extent to which Gordon Brown's case for the UK conceded and evacuated Unionist rhetorical space.

Great British Gordon Brown

Until quite recently, ‘Britishness’ was central to Gordon Brown’s politics and personal brand. In a major 2006 speech he argued that the ‘core values of what it is to be British are the key to the next stage of our progress as a people’, since ‘to address almost every one of the major challenges facing our country ... you must have a clear view of what being British means, what you value about being British and what gives us purpose as a nation’.⁷ Urging ‘a spirit of more self-conscious and positive patriotism, in which citizens flew the flag in their front gardens, and were given an annual British National Day to enjoy’, he earned the moniker ‘Bard of Britishness’ from Tom Nairn even before becoming Prime Minister, during which office he established UK Armed Forces Day, ordered government buildings to display the Union Flag, and dog-whistled about ‘British Jobs for British Workers’.⁸ Brown even proposed a pan-UK football team for the London 2012 Olympics. The transparency and cod-Americanism of these gestures aside, ‘critics pointed out that Brown’s attempt to forge a British Way owed too much to specifically English rather than British experiences’. Frank Bechhofer and David McCrone note that Brown’s evocation of ‘Magna Carta, the fourteenth-century Peasants’ Revolt, and the 1689 Bill of Rights all predated the 1707 Treaty of Union which created Great Britain’, though in truth the British sticking-point was not a matter of dates but accents: ‘Brown’s problem was that of any non-English Prime Minister, namely, to distance himself from his Scottish credentials, especially when Scottish nationalism was in the ascendant’.⁹

Looking back to the first period of nationalist promise, Tom Nairn traces Brown’s hyper-Britishness to an imbalance at the heart of his politics since *The Red Paper on Scotland* (1975): ‘The *Red Paper* ideology had imagined a symbiosis of Socialism and Britishness. However, losing the former meant that the *British* ingredient was destined to grow ever more important’.¹⁰ By the time Brown’s New Labour was poised to seize power, Nairn argues, state nationalism offered ‘an effective overarching belief system’, one

urgently needed ... by a movement by then unused to office, and with so much ground (and self-confidence) to recover. Party survival itself prompted this compensation, rather than popular belief. Over the same period most surveys have detected waning rather than reviving ‘Britishness’. But still, a declining or

contested *nationalism* offered (or seemed to offer) a far stronger chance of redemption than a socialism allied unto death all round the globe. That's surely why Brown, the 'Party man' who took flight as a left-wing prophet, was to end up as today's strident UK nationalist.¹¹

Between electoral defeat in 2010 and the indyref itself, the Bard was largely silent. In the final stages of the campaign Brown re-emerged as the one-man Unionist cavalry, riding to the rescue of Better Together at Maryhill Community Central Hall. The rumbling passion of 'the speech that saved the Union' is undeniable, though closer attention to Brown's words belies the force of their delivery. Indeed, Brown's 2014 arguments for the Union strike a very different, essentially non-British note.

The Bard Awakes

A few months before 'the speech that saved the Union', Brown published *My Scotland, Our Britain: A Future Worth Sharing*. By all accounts, the book was a godsend to the Labour strategists at the heart of Better Together:

'Gordon essentially gave a lot of people a playbook: an argument and a script,' explained one Labour adviser. Brown had talked to lots of Labour MPs, and had thought through the key arguments with an intellectual heft few others in Scottish politics possessed. It was a solidly Labour case for maintaining the union, with social justice and the UK's fostering of a 'moral community' – in which social and economic rights are pooled and shared – at the fore.¹²

It is undoubtedly an effective campaigning book, and its core arguments clearly shifted the pro-UK message in the latter stages of the indyref. But viewed at a certain distance from the weekly jousting of 2014, by far its most remarkable feature is Brown's failure to vindicate the current constitutional order *in Unionist terms*. Instead, the existing set-up receives a nationalist makeover to resemble everything a reasonable Scottish patriot could dream of, a bird in the hand with bonus tartan plumage. But maximizing the strength of Scottish identity and self-rule within the Union leads Brown to minimize – and even disappear – the British dimension of

Scottish governance and society, leaving him absurdly evasive about *why* the Union might need re-justifying in 2014.

A key strategy of the book is to drain all logic and legitimacy from pro-independence arguments and then affect bafflement at the emptiness of the remaining gourd. In an early passage Brown is remarking on the inexplicable rise of the SNP:

It is small wonder that commentators struggle to explain what has happened: neither the political nationalists who have driven the change, nor the Unionists who have resisted it, offer a clear sense of what really lies behind the recent rise of a hitherto unsuccessful party, the SNP, and what appears to be an upsurge in support for independence or at least for fundamental constitutional change. For we have to explain why political nationalism is on the rise *at this time*, when *at all times* there has been a strong Scottish consciousness of our distinctive national identity; when *at all times* we have – as Scots – not been passive but assertive about protecting and preserving our identity; when *at all times* we have sought to build, nurture and cherish distinctively Scottish institutions that reflect and advance our identity; and when *at all times* we have insisted that the British state does not interfere with the rights of our institutions to operate in an autonomous way. So for me the central Scottish mystery of modern history is not that people feel they want to assert their Scottishness (we have *always* felt Scottish), not that there is a demand for Scottish institutions to express that identity (our institutions have *always* done so), but that while for 300 years we have expressed our identity, run our own institutions and latterly shared political power as part of Britain, *now many want to do so without being part of Britain*.¹³ [emphasis added to this final line, here and below]

Brown never quite solves the mystery, nor does he intend to. This parade of historical constants tends to occlude any sense of Scottish change or development *within* the Union, rendering unfathomable the whole messy history of devolution – and thus the occasion for such a book as *My Scotland, Our Britain*. Post-1999 realities are acknowledged grudgingly or *sotto voce* – ‘latterly’ Scotland shared political power as part of Britain, and today there ‘appears to be an upsurge in support for independence’

– but without the slightest hint as to why the Scots should have wanted to renegotiate a system as perennially generous and benign as the one sketched by Brown.

A related strand of the book seeks ‘to try to understand why the trajectory of Scottish nationalism is so unlike the other forms it claims to parallel’, but ends in the denial that there *is* any historical dimension to this process, or indeed any content to Scottish nationalism which does not boil down to irrational hatred of the UK.¹⁴ Eternalising the appetite for Scottish political autonomy, Brown figures it as a fixed condition which stands outside the flow of history; it neither stems from, nor encounters any friction from, the cogs and kinks of the Union-in-practice. Thus, in order to save the Union its historical reality and development are placed under erasure. Because Scotland has ‘*at all times*’ been intact and what it always was, there simply is no process of evolving Union, or intermeshing of Scottish and British political identities, to narrate (still less to celebrate).

Devolution from what?

Seeking to grasp why devolution happened at all, the curious reader might turn to *The Politics of Nationalism and Devolution* (1980), whose authors – H.M Drucker and one Gordon Brown – briskly identify the shortcomings of British regional governance, and electoral cupidity of the 1970s, as key factors driving the changes that leave the 2014 Brown so baffled. The 1980 Brown, for instance, notes the tensions generated by cross-border electoral disparities: ‘the political colour of the Scottish Office’s ministerial team reflects the balance of power within the British parliament, not the balance of power within Scotland’.¹⁵ Reviewing Brown’s contribution to the 1980 book, the authors of *Tartan Pimps* observe that ‘perhaps the most interesting and provocative aspect of his essay is its siting of nationalism in a fully British context’¹⁶ – a perspective almost wholly excluded from the 2014 volume, which employs a strange back-projection of devolved Scotland onto the whole of post-1707 history. Scotland has *always* run its own institutions, and the character, locus and history of its governance is Scottish from A to Z. Devolution is unfathomable because there was never any need to boost Scottish self-government; but to be on the safe side, let it also be understood that devolution is a long-standing native tradition:

We should not underestimate the importance of a professional class of Scottish-born civil servants who saw public service as the means by which they helped Scotland. The creation of Scotland's parliament in 1999 was, therefore, built on Scotland's post-1707 history of decentralization and administration of Scottish affairs through Scottish boards, departments and committees. The difference was that Scotland now had a directly elected Scottish authority vested with wide-ranging powers, a tax-raising authority and, perhaps most importantly, a sense that it spoke for Scotland.¹⁷

But why, on this account, could there be any doubt? Any countervailing sense of being spoken for, from afar, is carefully muted – making the best available example of the Anglo-Scottish Union working and adapting largely unintelligible. Devolution from what, exactly? In this book we can easily forget that devolution is a British process delivered by a British government – a government in which Brown served. The UK horizon of power is cropped out of the case for its own preservation.

The book's rebuttal of the Yes historical case is no more subtle. Brown adumbrates the *absent* reasons for any legitimate desire for Scottish independence, and then invokes this 'fact' – the lack of a valid motive – as its own proof of nationalist malice. This ploy would not merit close attention but for its deeper implications for Scottishness and Britishness, which bob to the surface at the end of nearly every paragraph:

When nationalists argue that what's new is the 'desire to be the nation again', they are wrong. Through thick and thin, we have always thought of ourselves as a nation. When people say that what's new is the demand of the Scots to have our own institutions, they are wrong too. We maintained distinctive, and generally separate, national institutions for 300 years. In fact, it is difficult to sustain an argument that Scotland's cultural freedom and religious and civic institutions were suppressed. Direct rule was not attempted through most of the three centuries of the Union. So, if there has been a fundamental shift of Scottish opinion in recent years, *it is that more people than ever before want to break all constitutional links with Britain.*¹⁸

Again, why this should be is rendered utterly mysterious in Brown's account. Only some groundless and irrational spite toward Britain can account for the desire for full self-government, since Scotland (Brown insists) has always been what it shows baffling signs of wanting to become: 'the secessionists are asking for what we already have – with one exception: *the real change they want is to break all political links with people in the rest of Britain*'.¹⁹

Striking here is Brown's refusal to bring 'Britain' into his narrative of unbroken Scottish continuities, except as the object of contemporary betrayal and disconnection. He seems not to sense the implication of this reading, which is that, at bottom, *Scotland isn't British* in any deep political or historical sense, having remained stubbornly and uncompromisingly itself throughout the history of the Union. Thus to sever its British 'links' would be to break with some larger entity which is effectively externalised. (On the book's cover, the Union Flag delineates England.) In order to deprive Scottish nationalism of a valid motive, Brown has to deny the Unionist reality he means to preserve.

Ever-Looser Union

To bypass some of the contradictions of Scoto-Britishness on this account, Brown mounts a maximalist account of the union-state which exaggerates the 'composite' quality of the UK: as though the parliamentary union effects a very loose association of distinct and self-governing 'countries' with separate political cultures. The very looseness of these political ties makes their enduring qualities more noble and exceptional; what is 'British' are the 'links' between discrete political cultures and territories. The model comes apart as its consequences lead Brown into comic hyperbole:

I want to look at what I consider to be one of the crowning Scottish achievements of the last 300 years: the creation of shared social and economic rights across the four home nations. Indeed today it does not matter which of the four nations you were born into within the UK, or where you currently reside: you have a right to the same basic employment, welfare and general social

benefits just by virtue of being in a United Kingdom citizen. We take that so much for granted now we can sometimes forget just what a radical idea it is that four nations have agreed to pool and share their resources to give citizens of each nation exactly the same rights. To put it in some sort of context: *what we do every day in the UK has no parallel in human history*.²⁰

This astounding fact relies on our agreeing to pretend that the UK is, in fact, a confederal system where the citizen's primary attachment is to a sovereign 'home nation' voluntarily linked into a federal 'pool'. (Perhaps this is why Brown was so casual in promising quasi-federalism: he thinks we already have it.) In its propaganda aspect, Brown's history seems pitched to the soft-nationalist zeitgeist – the endemic and increasingly 'banal' desire for Scotland to be true to itself – but these are remarkably un-Unionist arguments to make in defence of the Union.

Note also that pan-UK social rights are, like every other beneficial feature of the Union, a 'Scottish achievement': 'when we look at it closely, we will see Scottish fingerprints all over Britain's social settlement'.²¹ Brown's unionist nationalism begins to list heavily to the north. Tom Johnston now becomes Father of the NHS (Aneurin Bevan is relegated to midwife), and 'Scottish pressure' gives rise to regional planning and the welfare state: 'Again we can trace the growth of these new regional and industrial policies to Scottish demands, first from trade-union leaders, and then from Scottish politicians and civil servants'.²² Not only was the best of British governance effected by Scots, the principles and priorities embodied by these institutions are *culturally* Scottish: 'Scottish Enlightenment ideas about mutual obligation created the drive for a civil society separate from the state. ... The Union, as currently constituted, is not just to Scotland's benefit – it is nothing less than Scottish values in action'.²³

Thus we already have what the separatists say we need: an effectively home-grown Scottish state expressing Scottish values and identity. It's a neat trick, but note again where it leaves the object of salvation: if the British system is fundamentally Scottish in origin and nature, and Scotland is utterly Scottish in its governance, identity and autonomy, just what is the Union and what is it for?

Since it does exist, there is

It should be obvious that dishonestly pretending there is no British component to Scottish governance and society will only bring this condition closer to reality. But Massie and Kettle are right: Scottish independence is not inevitable, and SNP hegemony will not last forever. And yet the slow hissing deflation of the nationalist bubble will not, by itself, restore cultural traction to Britishness in Scotland. At some point the opportunity to re-assert the value and relevance of the Union will re-emerge, but many avenues of potential recovery have been blocked or ceded in advance. It is a remarkably durable and flexible set of institutions, but precisely its capacity for adaptation and compromise has been excised from the non-British story of Union fashioned to suit the tactics of 2014. Such trimming is not entirely novel, of course. Historically, Colin Kidd points out, ‘the most influential forms of unionism have been tinged with nationalist considerations’, but seldom can a tract in that tradition have sought to rescue the British settlement by disappearing it.²⁴ When you cease to locate Scottish political agency within British political space, you have ceased to defend the Union.

From where might Unionism begin some process of intellectual rearmament? As Alex Massie suggests in *Drouth* 51, David Cameron ‘believes in the Union because it is there to be believed in. If it did not exist there might be no need for it but since it does exist there is’.²⁵ His likely successor, George Osborne, has never had cause (or opportunity) to extend his famous webs of patronage north of the border, and could plausibly claim the loss of Scotland as an inheritance from Cameron. Boris Johnson gave us ‘Ajockalypse Now’. There are no major Scottish figures near the top of the Labour party these days, and Jeremy Corbyn’s devotion to the Anglo-Scottish Union burns as brightly as his passion for supporting the troops, wearing a tie, and other compulsory duties. The polymathic Tory MP Rory Stewart has been a compelling voice for the Union, but over-identifying with Scotland can only harm his political ambitions at Westminster. As for Gordon Brown, the admiral best equipped to understand the strength and flexibility of the post-devolution Union has scuttled half the fleet, leaving the strongest story of modern Britishness submerged.

It is not beyond salvage, but pro-UK thinkers and politicians cannot simply wait for the nationalist tide to ebb. All that would emerge from the waters is a crumbling edifice, neglected and forgotten between floods. Its cracks only deepened under the triumphant emergency sandbagging of 2014.²⁶

¹ Allan Massie, 'Scottish Independence Is Not Inevitable', *Daily Telegraph*, 23 July 2015 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/scottish-independence/11758064/Scottish-independence-is-not-inevitable.html>

² Martin Kettle, 'Scottish independence is not inevitable – or not yet', *Guardian*, 15 October 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/15/scottish-independence-snp-pro-union>

³ Alex Massie, *Spectator* blog, 11 March 2015 <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2015/03/why-the-latest-economic-statistics-are-a-a-disaster-for-the-snp-but-b-that-doesnt-matter/>

⁴ Quoted by Kathleen Jamie, *Guardian*, 19 July 2014. (Crawford is not identified as the source of this phrase in the article; my thanks to Kathleen for the attribution.) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/19/scottish-referendum-independence-uk-how-writers-vote>

⁵ Colin Kidd, *Union and Unionisms: Political Thought in Scotland, 1500–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 25.

⁶ Joe Pike, *Project Fear: How an Unlikely Alliance Left a Kingdom United but a Country Divided* (London: Biteback, 2015), pp. 44, 57.

⁷ Gordon Brown, 'Speech to the Fabian New Year Conference, London 2006', <http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=316>

⁸ Tom Nairn, *Gordon Brown: Bard of Britishness* (Cardiff: Institute of Welsh Affairs, 2006), pp. 10–11.

⁹ Frank Bechhofer and David McCrone, 'The End of Being British?', *Scottish Affairs* 23.3 (2014): 309–322 (pp. 312–13).

¹⁰ Nairn, *Gordon Brown: Bard of Britishness*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹² Joe Pike, *Project Fear*, pp. 79–80.

¹³ Gordon Own *My Scotland, Our Britain: A Future Worth Sharing* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2014), pp. 19–20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁵ H.M Drucker and Gordon Brown, *The Politics of Nationalism and Devolution* (London: Longman, 1980), p. 17. This passage is from the section of the book written primarily by Brown (see preface).

¹⁶ Mitch Miller, Johnny Rodger and Owen Dudley Edwards, *Tartan Pimps: Gordon Brown, Margaret Thatcher, and the New Scotland* (Glendaruel: Argyll Publishing, 2010), p. 36.

¹⁷ Brown, *My Scotland, Our Britain*, p. 164.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 46–7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 203

²² *Ibid.*, p. 208.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

²⁴ Kidd, *Union and Unionisms*, p. 300.

²⁵ Alex Massie, 'Fast in the North?' (Review of Owen Dudley Edwards, *How David Cameron Saved Scotland*), *Drouth* 51 (Spring 2015), pp. 35–39 (p. 37).

²⁶ A version of this paper was given to the ‘Literature and Union’ workshop at St Andrews in May 2015. My thanks to the organisers, Colin Kidd and Gerry Carruthers.