

# Scotland: Normal nation, neurotic neighbour

Here's a brilliant piece from veteran writer and commentator Neal Ascherson on the age-old *problématique* of Anglo-Scottish relations. Required pre-election reading both north and south of the border.

# Scotland: Normal nation, neurotic neighbour

The Union has been in decline for decades. The root problem is not turbulent Scots, it is a very English failure to develop a healthy nationalism south of the border

by [Neal Ascherson](#) / April 7, 2017

Published in [May 2017](#) issue of Prospect Magazine



**“As the quarrel between Theresa May and Nicola Sturgeon grows ruder... it’s time to think about nationalism” ©ANDREW MILLIGAN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES**

I was a guest, one day, at a royal banquet at Windsor Castle. The table, set with immaculate Victorian china and Georgian silver, stretched far into a distance where a white speck must certainly have been Her Majesty, and the dark blob Árpád Göncz, then President of Hungary.

Servants waited behind the chairs, in which Brits and Hungarians alternated. Windsor’s ancient stock of Tokaj was served. Hungarian neighbours, reluctant to be impressed, conceded it was wonderful. Conversation began. And then it happened.

The pipe band of a Highland regiment, in full tartan splendour, tramped in and began a slow march around the table with a gigantic clamour of bagpipes. Talk became instantly impossible as they made two lengthy circuits of the hall. The Brits looked decorously at their plates, as if nothing was going on. But the Hungarians looked wildly around. Your

Queen—what does she mean by this?

I also wondered what she meant. But then I reflected how the Emperor Augustus no doubt brought loyal costumed Gauls to perform at his banquets. Habsburg emperors probably ordered ferocious Croats to dance with their weapons at dinners for foreign guests. So didn't British kings and queens want to show visitors that they, too, had tamed barbarous tribes from the distant mountains and trained them up to imperial service?

Windsor is not Westminster. But lurking somewhere beneath the wrangle between the Scottish and British governments over Brexit and another independence referendum is a faint imperial stain. Why have the Scots forgotten their place? That was never a colonised, subjugated place. Scotland was not Kikuyuland or even Ireland. Its role was as a loyal, if exotic, partner and body-guard in the imperial enterprise—a grand privilege. And for centuries after the 1707 Union, most Scots did think it a privilege. Now they increasingly don't. Why not?

Many English people can now see why not, even if they share the rising grumbles against Scots who “take our money and keep whinging.” After all, England just voted to break a Union and risk the economy, in order to get away from distant lawmakers nobody voted for. “Same thing with the Scots, if you think about it,” runs the thought for many ordinary English voters. But that's emphatically not the way the rulers of the Anglo-British state, the political and social elites and their retinue, think about it. This is because they have a tin ear for nationalism. Even though it was English nationalism which put this Tory, Brexit government where it is.

As the quarrel between Theresa May and Nicola Sturgeon grows ruder, with May asserting that the search for independence is just “playing political games,” it's time to think sensibly about nationalism. Time to junk the old Labour mantra, still repeated by many, that “nationalism equals racism equals

fascism equals war.” (Communists, who at least had a political education, usually knew better.) The truth is that nationalism has been the world’s strongest mobilising force for two centuries. Stronger than hunger or religion, stronger than the class struggle. A sort of spectrum reaches from the enlightened, modernising, liberalising “let’s join the world” variety, across to the backward-looking, myth-making, exclusive and vengeful variety which drenched the 20th century in blood. You can call these extremes “civic” and “ethnic”—though in fact there’s no nationalism which doesn’t contain something of both: it’s the proportions that matter. Scottish nationalism, like early Indian nationalism, is firmly, primly, at the civic end. English nationalism, though rooted in one of the most tolerant peoples on earth, has ugly ethnic elements. And there are reasons for that.

The Brexit voters in England and the Scottish voters for independence or the SNP (not always the same thing) are alike in some ways, unlike in others. Both provoke the baffled horror of well-educated and well-travelled people—who are for the most part not badly off, and generally living in big English cities or in Edinburgh. These nice people find both voting masses “divisive” (a favourite word), and ask how anyone can want more borders in a globalised world. A similar liberal horror is felt by Americans who didn’t see Donald Trump coming, by Dutch people who felt disgraced by Geert Wilders, and by French, Hungarian or Polish citizens incredulous at support for Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński.



**“Stop the world, Scotland wants to get on!” Winnie Ewing breaks through for the SNP at the Hamilton by-election in 1967 © PA/PA ARCHIVE/PA IMAGES**

The injured national feelings of the English gave the Brexit vote its power and its victory. Nigel Farage wasn't entirely wrong, as he sensed the wave of pride and delight which ran across much of England after the result, to talk about an “independence day.” People felt that they had indeed “taken back control.” I think they were quite wrong about that. The distant, oppressive “controllers” were not in Brussels: they are sitting here at home in Westminster and the City. But traits of “ethnic” nationalism deflected what could have been a reasonably “civic” campaign. The fomenting of often groundless panic over “migrants” led to outbursts of violent

xenophobia, including the heartbreaking murder of MP Jo Cox.

And yet English voters seem to have made another, more mature choice. Almost nobody believed Tory and Ukip assurances that Brexit would make them richer. People accepted that leaving the European Union could bring a bumpy, unpredictable time for the economy—but they reckoned it was worth risking for the political gain: “taking back our country.” That’s authentic nationalism. Those condescending maxims—“Nobody votes to get poorer” and “It’s the economy, stupid!”—lose traction here. In Scotland, the independence camp recognise now that they overdid detailed economic reassurances in the 2014 campaign. This time, from what I hear, the “Yes” strategy will be twin-track. It will admit frankly that the Scots—workers and pensioners—may well be in for a rough first few years of independence. But it will also offer a broad account of Scotland’s resources, natural, human and intellectual, and argue only an independent Scotland can release them.

Brexit and the Scottish upsurge are similar, too, as rebellions against complacent elites. But in Scotland the urge to mutiny could be channelled towards a mildly social-democratic party—the SNP—and not towards vengeful populism. The age profiles don’t match, either. In England, older people were more likely to be Leavers. In Scotland, according to the latest Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, it’s the opposite: 72 per cent of voters under the age of 24 support independence, but only 26 per cent of those over 65. This demographic difference suggests that the survival-time left to the United Kingdom is now measurable. But it also reaffirms a sense of Scotland’s nationalism as forward-looking and optimistic, in contrast to a Brexit nationalism in retreat from the world, yearning for a lost and mostly imaginary age when the whole world knew what Britain was and Britons had no “unhealthy” doubts about their identity.

*“If nationalism is normal, England is abnormal in not developing self-conscious national governance”*

In Scotland, the 2014 campaign left pride but also scars. Families and friends quarrelled, and the splits have been slow to heal. But that was nothing compared to England's post-Brexit anguish. Remainers south of the border lamented: "We suddenly find we are two nations who simply don't know each other!" Part of the explanation lies in England's enduring cultural segregation, in which class divisions acquire a caste-like opacity. Scotland is a more European, plebeian society, with a smaller "hereditary" middle class and a much less significant sector of private education. People may not like each other, but at least they know each other.

If nationalism is normal, it follows that England has been abnormal in not developing a self-conscious nationalist movement. But it also follows that Scotland, until recently, was even less normal. National awareness was always present—every Scottish school pupil has known that their country was once independent. But so what? In the 19th century, when nationalist revolutions were breaking out all over Europe in "submerged" nations such as Hungary, Poland, Lombardy or the Czech lands, nothing similar happened in Scotland. Instead, injured patriotism was safely displaced into the past—nostalgic adoration for the Jacobites, Robert the Bruce and William Wallace—or into the struggles of other nations (the Edinburgh bourgeoisie poured out money and poetry for Polish refugees).

Why? Because Scotland had begun to do well out of the Empire's vast opportunities. Because pious Scottish Protestants were loyal to the Hanoverian dynasty as a bulwark against hated continental Catholics. Because of the trauma left by popular Scottish support for the French Revolution—a sympathy brutally suppressed, but still a terrifying memory for the propertied classes. Because of Scotland's solidarity with England in the Napoleonic wars, which cut Britain off from European political development.

But a cultural nationalism, with its political implications

amputated, survived. It's a mistake to think nationalist movements only arise in backward peripheries. Most have been made by minorities who feel themselves more civilised than their metropolitan rulers. The industrialised Czechs rebelled against the semi-feudal despotism of the Habsburgs, the Poles against primitive Russian tyranny, the go-ahead Americans against the archaic British monarchy, the sophisticated Catalans and Basques against somnolent Castile. The Scots, in the 19th and 20th centuries, considered themselves far better educated and more technically sophisticated than forelock-tugging England. There was enough truth in this to preserve a sense of cultural superiority, even as the Scots continued to evade its political logic.

This began to change after the First World War. A literary and language revival was followed by the slow emergence of political nationalism (the National Party of Scotland, which would eventually become the Scottish National Party was founded in 1928). At first seen as dotty and marginal, the SNP began to break through when young Winnie Ewing won the 1967 Hamilton by-election with the words: "Stop the world! Scotland wants to get on."

By now, the context had changed. The Empire had collapsed, Scotland's heavy industries were in steep decline, poverty and unemployment were provoking mass emigration. The "bargain" of the 1707 Union—prosperity in return for our independence—was seen to be failing. And Scots always have regarded it as a bargain: as a revocable Treaty of Union rather than as a once-and-for-all Act which only the London parliament could repeal.

Put it another way. Many Scots, including senior Scottish lawyers, consider that Scotland still retains a "residual sovereignty." The "Claim of Right," eventually signed in 1989 by most of Scotland's (then overwhelmingly Labour) MPs, spoke of "the sovereign right of the Scottish people" to choose their form of government. English constitutional jurists—for whom Westminster's sovereignty is and always was foundational,



both before and after the Treaty of Union—think that is complete nonsense. Look for a moment at this collision between two philosophical planets—one Scottish-European and rooted in the Enlightenment, the other archaic and uniquely English—and you can feel its heat in the current angry rhetoric between May and Sturgeon.

What slowly followed after 1989 is now familiar. The glue holding UK politics together—all-British political parties—came apart. The Scottish parliament, with many domestic powers, was revived in 1999. The SNP has been governing Scotland for the last 10 years, and by destroying Labour in Scotland, has skewed the whole balance of British politics—probably forever.

Independence? The “Yes” campaign assumes that this next referendum may be even tougher to win than the last. The economy feels bleak; the enthusiasm of 2014 is probably unrepeatable. Yet it’s an odd situation. The polls show a curiously hard but static support for independence, only now showing a slight tendency to creep up to the halfway mark. But at the same time, Scotland’s place in the Union seems to grow looser almost month by month. The rejection by May of Scotland’s emphatic choice to stay in the EU—with all 32 council areas backing “Remain”—is only the most spectacular of a long chain of smaller rebuffs and apparent broken promises which began after the “No” victory in the 2014 referendum. When will those stubborn, watchful voters react to this? When will the loose tooth finally drop out?



**“Nationalists assume the next referendum will be tougher to win than the last” ©LESLEY MARTIN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES**

Sigs in the wind: the number of people I come across in

Scottish cities now saying that “it’s going to happen some day, whether we like it or not.” Or “I’d like to see an independent Scotland, but not now with all this uncertainty in the world.” These are opinions which can easily slide into “Yes,” if an independence campaign really gains conviction. Sturgeon is still liked and trusted. The Unionist campaign, by contrast, would be weak and divided in contrast to “Better Together” in 2014, and in the light of Holyrood’s changed arithmetic, probably Conservative-led. That would increase the difficulty of the Unionist sell at any time, but especially when the prospect of decades of right-wing Tory rule in London, committed to dismantling what’s left of the welfare state and the public sector—both so precious to Scotland—is everywhere found “horrendous.” But in spite of all that, a renewed impatience for change which would make those signs relevant hasn’t shown itself yet.

*“The bien pensants want nothing to do with popular nationalism, which they despise”*

If this is a tale of two nationalisms, one pretty normal and the other—English—still shapeless and nameless, then it’s striking that SNP leaders and thinkers would be happy for a sensible, sustainable “English National Party” to emerge. Ukip canalised plenty of English patriotic anger, but—surprisingly—Nigel Farage always insisted that “Britain” was the country he wanted taken back. English nationalism is always lurking, but—weirdly—it often takes resentment of the Scots to see it surface. As dawn broke and Scotland’s “No” vote came in on 19th September 2014, a relieved David Cameron stood outside No 10 and announced that progress on the campaign “vow” about fresh devolution to Holyrood would now depend on simultaneously introducing English-only votes at Westminster for English-laws. So it turned out—at least Downing Street saw it, before it had to back off—that Scotland’s two years of national soul-searching had, after all, been about English independence! Both Cameron and Farage

seemed to be clouded by the London fog which has blinded English thinking about these islands for several centuries. For distant historical reasons, they never grasped the distinction between a nation and a state—a difference obvious to other Europeans, whether Slovaks or Scots, who could see that Great Britain was a multi-national state rather than a nation.

Nonetheless, most foreigners still call the place “England” for short. And reading Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, you can see that the London upper classes in the 1920s would never have considered the monarchy, the government or themselves to be anything but “English.” The Empire—now yes, that was “British.” But soon after the Second World War, the idea spread that there was something a bit coarse, a bit hurtful to Welsh or Scottish feelings, to talk about stuff being “English” (except for football, of course). Very sportingly, the English brought themselves to do what seemed “inclusive” and, as it wasn’t yet called, “politically correct”; they began to talk about their own country as “Britain” and about “Britishness” instead.

There were two problems with this. One was ironic: the word-change caught on “down South” just as the Scots were discovering that they felt less and less British. The other is much more serious. The change has made talking about the English nation and Englishness seem “inappropriate,” even faintly racist, and this has helped to distort and stunt political expression in England to a frightening degree. The very reasonable movement for an English parliament is drowned out by cranky outfits like the English Democrats: “Give us back Monmouthshire!”

Elsewhere in Europe, communal self-assertion has often been tamed into a modernising, liberal force by middle-class intellectuals. But in England, the “enlightened elite” holds its nose and turns away. A class thing, yet again. The *bien pensants* want nothing to do with popular nationalism, which

they despise as uneducated hooliganism—white vans, St George’s flags, louts murdering Poles for speaking their own language in a pizza queue. The consequence: pop-up demagogues divert well-founded grievances into stupid xenophobia. An undirected English self-awareness is spreading, but English political life still stagnates. This is why some Scots, like political theorist Tom Nairn, argue that Scottish independence could also be the liberation of England. “Britishness,” they suggest, has been a heavy veil preventing English people from seeing their own situation clearly. Nairn invented the term “Ukania” to describe the decaying Union, echoing the Austrian novelist Robert Musil’s use of “Kakania” for the *fin-de-siècle* Austro-Hungarian Empire on the edge of disintegration. If the UK were broken up and “Britain” reduced to a mere term of geography, wouldn’t the English be free to rediscover those principles of fairness, equality and democracy which they once helped to spread overseas—and give them a new birth at home?

Was there ever a British people? Most great empires develop a ruling caste whose members transcend mere national or racial identities. There was *Civis Romanus*. There was *Homo Sovieticus*. And there was also *Homo Britannicus*. From one end of the archipelago to the other, he wore the same clothes, spoke with the same public-school accent, ate the same sad food and patted the same sort of dog. Sometimes he was a headmaster or vicar, sometimes a colonel, sometimes he went out to govern New South Wales. To meet him, you’d never know if his roots were in Cornwall, County Down or Caithness. His culture and values were simply... British—perhaps the only time that Britain showed one of the symptoms of a classic nation. (He’s not yet quite extinct, but found now only in a few protected environments.) One of his assumptions was that Great Britain and its empire had risen to be something universal, leaving petty nationalism behind. That delusion has been shared by many imperial powers: the Napoleonic legacy in France, or the Ostpolitik of Wilhelmine Germany. Unfortunately, it was a delusion that *Homo Britannicus*

bequeathed to his successors. Even today, London governments find it hard to take Welsh or Scottish nationalism seriously. Independence? These "Celts" of ours have to be joking or, as May revealingly puts it, "playing games." They can't really mean it, in the way Washington's Americans or Lord Byron's Greeks meant it. (Or as the Irish Celts meant it? Oh, don't bring all that up again... )

To come through this tumult into a new stability, several old mental ramparts have to be bulldozed. One is that basically imperial defect of vision. In 1883, the prophet of empire JR Seeley wrote *The Expansion of England*, in which he presented England's subordination of Scotland, Wales and Ireland as only the prelude to a racially English world-state dominating the globe. He conceded that these "utterly unintelligible" Celts, plus "a good many French and Dutch and a good many Caffres and Maories" could be admitted "without marring the ethnological unity of the whole." Never mind the Caffres and Maories. Traces of Seeley's attitude to the "unintelligibles" nearer home still survive at Westminster.

The "Ukanian" mindset also needs to drop the idea that Britain can muddle its way through this problem by embracing federalism. No month goes by now without somebody announcing that a federal constitution would end all these silly disputes over power. There are two problems here. The first is the gross British asymmetry. A federation is a coming-together of polities in a law-bound partnership. If it is to succeed, no single partner must dominate, so it helps if partners are of similar size. A federation of four in which one partner (England) has 85 per cent of the population simply wouldn't work. The hopeful answer has been: "Ah, but England could be divided into regions—then it would all balance out." Unhappily, England doesn't want to be divided up. Many regions have impressive cultural identities and growing resentments of London. But when invited to vote for devolution with their own sub-parliaments, as the North-East was most recently asked in

a 2004 referendum, they have said no. It may be that the English have a tradition, going back to the Tudors and beyond, that strong centralised government works best. Whatever the reason, the English have every right to spit out constitutional wheezes they don't fancy.

The second problem with federalising the UK is the weird and antique Anglo-British power structure. The three-way scrimmage over the Brexit referendum—"the people's voice" versus parliament versus Crown prerogative—showed that, when it comes to it, nobody really knows what the law of state is in this country. But most politicians, when it suits them, do agree that parliament at Westminster is sovereign: its authority should be absolute and its laws should not be overruled. No modern state would tolerate this bizarre idea. In most democracies, the legislature is subject to the supreme law of a Constitution. But in Britain, a sovereign parliament can't by definition irrevocably surrender authority—and the split of powers in a federation does need to be irrevocable. So when Gordon Brown talks about "near-federalism," he is really talking not about shared sovereignty but only about wider devolution.

So with federation "returned to sender" and the imperial monocle replaced by normal lenses, the UK's future looks clouded. For Scotland, the remaining alternatives are slightly expanded devolution or independence. Neither seems overwhelmingly attractive to most Scots, in this pause before the new independence campaign begins. But what most Scots do want is a future which keeps their contact with the other "British" nations open, warm, easy and very special. And, surprising as it sounds, Scottish independence is probably the best way to preserve that "Britishness."

Devolution works more and more scratchily. There's no way to reconcile the need of this small country for strong, interventionist government with the welfare-cutting, privatising programmes of Conservative administrations, now

likely to hold power in London for a generation. Even if the next “indyref” fails and Sturgeon’s SNP is discredited, the independence option will smoulder on like those fires that glow in the night from abandoned coalfields. And, though it seems unthinkable at the moment, history (not only Irish) warns that a much more radical and impatient movement might take the place of the SNP—just as Sinn Féin supplanted the moderate Irish Home Rule party.

Better, then, to “lose Scotland” (that revealing phrase), and to construct a close, affectionate relationship between independent states which respects all the personal and cultural links and tastes which do form a residual “Britishness.” If Scotland ends up inside the EU with “rump UK” outside, that intimacy—to say nothing of economic necessity—will find its way round any new frontiers.

Scotland and England know each other as no other two nations in the world do, and much of their problem at the moment comes from the fact that—having long lived in the shadow of Britannia—England does not appear to know herself. If Scotland had freedom, and England learned self-awareness, a new form of common self-respect and pride could grow: the virtuous nationalism of a virtual Britain.