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DEVOLUTION REVOLUTION ARE SWELLS OF POLITICS AND PRIDE BREAKING UP THE UNITED KINGDOM?

By Jonathan Miller

LONDON --

At a smart luncheon party here the other day, attended by a former cabinet minister, a novelist, a senior investment banker and a sprinkling of journalists, one of the guests, a constitutional historian, declared that in his view, the United Kingdom will have ceased to exist in 20 or 30 years.

Not so long ago, the venturing of such a remarkable opinion would have provoked astonishment. For centuries, Britain has appeared to be one of the most politically stable countries anywhere, the British themselves certain of their place in the world and famously indifferent to any suggestion of unsettling constitutional changes.

Yet not a person at the lunch table dissented from the proposition that the basic political union that comprises the United Kingdom is suddenly looking very tatty indeed. The ensuing discussion was not whether the historic unity of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland could continue, but only of what is likely to replace it, and when.

The glue of culture, tradition and institutions that has held the UK together is palpably dissolving. The assumption that the interests of the English are synonymous with those of the Scots and Welsh has gone. The Royal Family, once a durable symbol of Britishness, looks to be well beyond its sell-by date. Basic symbols of national life have been irredeemably polluted: The roast beef of old England is no longer safe; a national reputation for deference and politeness has given way to the image of the English football hooligan; even the BBC, the quintessential institution of British culture and national identity, is threatened. Its motto is "Nation Shall Broadcast Unto Nation," but exactly what nation does the BBC now represent? "Our new challenge is whether we can hold the BBC together as a national broadcaster when the pressure from the regions is that they be allowed to go their own way," confides one senior policy adviser.

In a country normally remarkable for its glacial pace of change, Prime Minister Tony Blair's new Labor government has forced the pace. Choosing to make constitutional

reform a priority, Blair has moved quickly to put in place a devolved legislature in Scotland. He was fulfilling a commitment made in the days when Labor was the dominant party in Scotland but appeared destined to remain permanently in opposition in Westminster.

Almost as an afterthought, an assembly for Wales was thrown in, too. Then, the Northern Ireland peace process presented a need for a third new legislature, in Belfast. Suddenly, the United Kingdom has been transformed from a country with one all-powerful parliament into a state of neo-federalism, a form of government that has been quite alien to Britain, in which there will soon be four legislatures--in Edinburgh, Cardiff, Belfast and in London, where Northern Irelanders, Scots and the Welsh will continue to be represented in the parliament.

Although it was never Blair's intention to set in motion a possible dissolution of the United Kingdom itself, the law of unintended consequences seems to be operating with full force. In a huge historical irony, a politician known for his caution and his instinct for centralized control appears to have initiated constitutional changes that could lead in time to the end of Britain as we know it.

Zareer Masani, producer of a BBC radio series on the impact of the new legislatures, believes that Blair, in his rush to devolve certain powers back to the regions, may have underestimated the extent to which he has opened fault lines in the most basic political geology of the British Isles. "The new parliament in Edinburgh, far from satisfying Scottish aspirations, could well become the platform for a continuing campaign for independence," he says.

It is a paradox that in this reconfiguration of Britain, it is the English themselves who are being left behind in the rush for devolution. Unlike the Scots, Welsh and Irish, who retain a strong sense of national pride and identity, the English are profoundly confused about their own identity and largely bemused about what to do amid a disintegrating United Kingdom.

A new book, "The English," by Jeremy Paxman, an author and television personality, grapples with the problem of defining a mongrel race of Jutes, Normans, Huguenots, Celts and Romans, which is now additionally comprised of Bangladeshis, Indians, Africans, Afro-Caribbeans and Chinese--and in which fish and chips has been replaced as the national fast food by McDonald's hamburgers.

Classic English films such as "Strangers on a Train" and "In Which We Serve" epitomized a stoical, homely, quiet, disciplined, self-denying, kindly, honorable and dignified people, Paxman observes. Today, however, they offer little resonance for a generation more likely to be watching the latest Hollywood epic at the local multiplex.

Paxman concludes: "Being English used to be easy. It is all so much more complicated now." David Starkey, the constitutional historian, believes England has ceased to be a mere country but has become "a place of the mind . . . a vile antithesis of a nation." Starkey may unwittingly have put his finger on a more enduring characteristic of

Englishness: a gloomy sense that the country is "going to the dogs."

England's historical consciousness is that it is a global power, the heritage of its empire entitling it to a continuing place at the head table of world councils. Other than the irony that the empire was in fact largely conquered and colonized by Scots and Irish, this is a history that makes it hard for the English to adapt to reduced circumstances. Sentiment alone will not put Humpty Dumpty together again.

Whatever emotional attachment has bound the English together with their Celtic neighbors is fast disintegrating. Watching the World Cup on television last summer in Scottish pubs, drinkers cheered when England conceded a goal. Mel Gibson's movie "Braveheart" struck a sensitive chord in Scotland, where it rekindled a resentment of the English that has smoldered since Scotland lost political independence in 1707. In commercials on Scottish television stations, advertisers use brazenly anti-English imagery to sell products to Scottish consumers. It is an article of faith in Scotland that the English have been the main beneficiaries of Scotland's offshore oil resources, and there is a lingering resentment that then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher first introduced her hated poll tax in Scotland in 1989.

The suspicion is mutual. "It's time we stopped being ruled by the Scots," said one caller to a radio talk show, expressing an increasingly common resentment in England at the large number of Scots who occupy senior positions in government (this was as true when the Tories were in power as it remains under Labor). The Scots are widely seen in England as perpetual scroungers who have enjoyed disproportionate representation in the Westminster parliament and who have manipulated Westminster to take a larger than fair share of tax spending. But to be fair, the English do not demonstrate the same casual contempt for the Scots as do the Scots for the English.

Although the Welsh are by no means as vehement as the Scots, there is a growing sense of nationalism there, too, even though the country has been little more than a province of England since it was effectively annexed by Henry VIII in 1536. Television stations and road signs in Welsh are one manifestation of a renewed national consciousness. Another tangible inspiration is across the Irish Sea: The success of the Irish Republic as a Celtic tiger within the European Union has inspired both Welsh and Scottish nationalists to believe that with Brussels in the background to look after their larger interests, there has never been a better time to go it alone.

Where this leaves the English is an interesting question. When the new Scottish parliament and Welsh assembly constitute themselves next year after elections in May, it will expose the disparity between the extensive devolution of power offered to the Scots, and the somewhat lesser degree of autonomy being given to the Northern Irish and Welsh, compared to none at all on offer to the English.

The Campaign for an English Parliament (CEP) is so far only an embryonic body operating on a shoestring budget, but it already appears to have captured the imagination of many in England. The CEP says it is not advocating the breakup of the United Kingdom and believes a reduced Westminster parliament should continue to be

responsible for defense, foreign policy and certain other "reserved" matters. Otherwise, it argues, England should have its own parliament, and possibly regional assemblies representing the interests of the English regions on an even more local level. Tony Linsell, a publisher from Norfolk who is chairman of the campaign, is demanding that a constitutional convention be established to produce a timetable and plan for change that would then be submitted to a referendum in England. "It is only fair and reasonable that the same courtesy be extended to the people of England as was shown to those in other parts of the UK," he says.

Once, such a campaign might have been dismissed as a crackpot idea but now it appears to be catching on. A recent discussion of the proposed English parliament on Radio Two, Britain's most popular national radio station, produced an unanticipated flood of calls supporting the idea.

Strong support is also coming from within the Conservative Party, which campaigned at the last election against devolution. Its landslide defeat has created a need for new policies. Just as a Scottish parliament became a rallying cry for the Labor Party in Scotland, some conservatives calculate that a demand for an English parliament might be a way back for their battered party. Half of Tory MPs already support the establishment of an English parliament to counterbalance Celtic devolution, according to a poll in the newspaper Scotland on Sunday. Peter Luff, a Tory MP, is among many conservatives who speak of a growing sense of grievance in England. The only way to contain English nationalism, he argues, is to create a constitutional settlement giving England equal status with Scotland. "We are worried that Scotland is going to have more MPs, more money and its own government," says Luff.

William Hague, Conservative Party opposition leader, told his party's annual conference in Bournemouth this month that the party would have to come up with its own proposals for major constitutional change including the possibility of an English parliament. Hague insisted that the Tories would "not become an English nationalist party" but to some extent they already are: The Tories did not win a single Scottish seat in parliament in the last general election.

"Many very senior members of our party are coming up with the idea that an English parliament is the solution," says David Davies, a former minister for Europe, speaking at a party fringe meeting in Bournemouth at the Tory policy conference. But not all Tories agree. Ann Widdecombe, an opposition spokeswoman whom some see as a potential new Thatcher figure, warns that an English parliament would hasten the decline of the UK parliament at Westminster. "The Labor Party is breaking up the United Kingdom and I do not want to give them any assistance," she says.

A century ago, Britannia ruled the waves and, on the maps on the walls of British classrooms, the lands of the empire were printed in pink. Britain itself might be a tiny island off the coast of mainland Europe, but the British were in no doubt of their place in the world. Now there is hardly anything left of this empire, bar a few offshore tax havens and the Rock of Gibraltar at the entrance to the Mediterranean (which the Spanish want back). Few doubt that, in time, Britain (or what remains of it) will be

forced to join in the European monetary union, further weakening the authority of its historically centralized political institutions.

In a 1939 song that became an anthem for the hardships of the second world war, Ross Parker and Charles Hughes wrote:

There'll always be an England,

while there's a country lane,

Wherever there's a cottage small

beside a field of grain.

But perhaps, after all, that may not be true. The English, after a history of expansion that goes back 1,000 years, have in just a century lost their empire entirely. Now they must contemplate the ultimate downsizing in which their kingdom is reduced to little more than the territory captured by William the Conquerer in 1066. It is starting to dawn on England that it is going to have to reinvent itself and that it will not do to muddle through with a stiff upper lip and a strong cup of tea.

Jonathan Miller is a writer in London.

The Sum of Its Parts

Many Americans routinely refer to England when they mean the United Kingdom. This does not go over well with the people in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, who are proud of their unique cultures, their histories--and the fact that they are not English.

England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are the constituent parts that make up the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The word "country" or "nation" is commonly and consciously employed by many Britons for each of the regions, a reminder of their distinctiveness.

England (population 48 million) is the largest and historically the most populous and powerful of the four. Over the centuries, it subsumed the other regions to form the United Kingdom. The major cities are London (where the parliament sits), Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool.

Scotland (population 5 million) is the northernmost region. While popular with tourists for its cultural traditions--kilts, bagpipes and so forth--it is more significantly known as a center of learning, particularly in the sciences, and now for high-tech activity (Dolly was cloned near Edinburgh). Scotland retains its own legal system and school system. Its largest cities are Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Wales (2.9 million), the westernmost region, has two distinct areas: the gentle rolling

hills and sea vistas of South Wales, and the stark mountains and peaks of North Wales. Wales and Scotland alike, along with the northeast of England, are still energetically pursuing new economic activity to replace the old and defunct coal mines and shipyards. Wales's largest cities are Cardiff and Swansea.

Northern Ireland (1.6 million) consists of the six counties partitioned off from Ireland in the 1920s as the British relinquished authority over the entire island. While it gets most of its publicity from its Catholic-Protestant disagreements (and more recently its Nobel Peace Prize-winning peace process), Northern Ireland is a beautiful, friendly place. Its main cities are Belfast and Londonderry (Derry to some.)

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