Rethinking Britain: An English identity Crisis in the Era of Devolution

Regardless of one's political leanings, it is a recognized fact that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) is undergoing a constitutional crisis[1]. But, if we can find a common denominator amongst all the political upsets that have occurred this decade, from the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum and the 2015 UK General Election, to the 2016 "Brexit" Referendum, what we are actually witnessing is a war between two nationalisms.

This paper will focus on the two largest nations of the UK and divide the two nationalist movements by political party and the referenda associated with their cause. The first, the Scottish nationalist movement, represented by the Scottish National Party, and epitomized by the Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014, can be considered a "civic" nationalist movement—that is, non-ethnic. The second movement is not as straightforward. The English nationalist movement, best represented by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), and embodied by the "Brexit" Referendum of 2016, argues for "Britain First" policies but simultaneously champions a "voice for England."[2] The rhetoric of this movement—where England and Britain are used interchangeably can be confusing to an outsider, especially when a post-Brexit Great Britain is referred to as Little England by opponents of Brexit.[3] This suggests that the referendum was an English nationalist movement at its culmination. The line where

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[1] Albeit, without an actual written constitution.

[2] http://www.ukip.org/nigel_farage_a_voice_for_england

[3] http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21589420-country-faces-choice-between-comfortable-isolation-and-bracing-openness-go

Britishness begins and Englishness ends has been continuously moved forward, and it is only being challenged now that there is a serious divide between nations on matters such as the EU.

What is unique about this nationalist political climate is that the majority nation, England, and largest of the minority nations, Scotland, are both currently vying for increased sovereignty via referenda. Under current conditions, sovereignty, which is the political right to rule within one's own borders without interference, is a zero-sum game when it comes to multi-national states such as the UK. For example, Scotland's devolved autonomy has given rise to the "West Lothian" question in that Scottish MPs have had the ability to vote on bills that mainly effect England, and yet Scotland retains autonomy over devolved matters. England's desire to reinstate full sovereignty over its trade and immigration policies by leaving the European Union denies Scotland its perceived right to remain in the EU. Whenever one of these nations exercises its autonomy, it impedes the other's sovereignty. As will be explained shortly, the two nationalist movements feed off of one another.

We must first understand the context surrounding the dueling nationalisms. The nations that make up the UK each possess their own distinct territory, history, and language. The Scottish and Welsh in particular have had active nationalist movements—whether towards independence in Scotland's case, or simply for more ethnic recognition and cultural autonomy, as was the case with the Welsh advocacy for language equality. In 1997, the British Government under Prime Minister Tony Blair began the process of devolution. Devolution is essentially the delegating of authority to the local or regional level and it is a calculated move towards federalization. The Northern Irish, Welsh, and Cornish were all granted councils or assemblies that would legislate

devolved matters within their territory, and the Scottish were able to re-establish their Parliament which had been dissolved in 1707.[4]

Originally, these nations were all defined by common ethnic roots. The Scottish were from Scotland and the English were from England. This concept of an "ethno-geographic" national identity, while convenient, has not withstood the test of time, especially in Scotland. When surveyed, 83% of ethnic minorities living in Scotland (that is, non-Whites and their British-born children) claimed "Scottish" as one of their national identities, 20% of which claimed Scottish as their sole national identity.[5] While at first this may seem a small percentage, it must be considered alongside the fact that Scotland's immigrant population has doubled within this decade.[6] The University of Manchester report "Who Feels Scottish" concludes: "The census results clearly suggest that Scottish national identity is currently more ethnically inclusive in Scotland than is English in England."[7] Just as the UK is a multi-nation state, each nation within the UK is multi-ethnic—and ethnicity does not necessarily determine national identity in the modern day.

Even after England and Scotland merged parliaments, Scotland still remained a distinct territory, separate from England. This was more than just ceremonial sovereignty; Scotland has

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[4] Thus, the Scottish were granted a significant amount of national autonomy in comparison to the other Celtic minorities.

[5] Study: Dynamics Of Diversity: Evidence From the 2011 Census.
ESRC Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity (CoDE). University of Manchester. August 2014.
http://www.ethnicity.ac.uk/medialibrary/briefings/dynamicsofdiversity/code-census-briefing-national-identity-scotland.pdf

[6] http://www.workpermit.com/news/scotlands-immigrant-population-doubles-decade-20131216

[7] It should be noted, however, that England is "catching up." http://www.economist.com/news/britain/21578435-minorities-embrace-englishness-even-metropolitan-whites-shun-it-identity-parade

kept a separate Church, a separate education system, and a separate legal system. It is this distinctive civic sovereignty that has helped maintain a national identity separate from the rest of the UK.

This moderate autonomy and distinct nationality is perhaps the justification for many for Scottish separatism. Nevertheless, after nearly 300 years of union, it was the politics of the last half of the 20th century that instigated the modern Scottish separatist movement. In particular, it was the economic policies and perceived attitude of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that created a collective sense of victimization,[8] regardless of ethnicity in Scotland.

Thatcher's administration shut down and cut subsidies to mines, steel plants, and ship-building factories as an attempt to move Britain away from the centrally planned economy. This was particularly devastating to Scotland, which had little other industry at the time. Another example, the infamous Poll Tax, protested all across the UK, was introduced into Scotland one year prior to its implementation in England and Wales. It was a policy that many Scottish felt, and still feel, was a deliberate punishment for their left-leaning politics. [9]

Within her first two years in power, one in six Scots became unemployed and Scotland lost 20% of its workforce. The current Scottish minister for health has claimed that it was Thatcher's policies of shutting down entire industries without offering new avenues of employment that led to a 60% rise in deaths of Scottish working age men, due to alcoholism and suicide.[10] Whether or not these damaging statistics can be directly attributed to Mrs Thatcher has

[8] http://www.thestar.com/news/world/2014/09/14/scotlands_separatist_movement_influenced_by_margaret_thatcher.html

[9] http://www.bigissue.com/features/3823/poll-tax-the-battle-that-divided-britain

[10] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/10613091/SNP-Health-Minister-Margaret-Thatcher-to-blame-for-Scotlands-drinking.html

yet to be confirmed scientifically, however, it is a prime example of the Scottish collective memory regarding the late Prime Minister.

Thatcher's policies helped foster an "us versus them" mentality between the Scots and English. Perhaps the former First Minister of Scotland, Alex Salmond, said it best, when he spoke of her unintended role as "the handmaiden for a return to Scottish democracy."[11]

The Scottish Parliament has 129 seats and was granted powers to legislate on matters such as tourism, education, health, agriculture, and justice. "Reserved matters," that being everything else, are still determined by Westminster.

With the creation of the Scottish Parliament, the SNP, which had previously been seen as a regional fringe party, gained a considerable amount of authority as the second largest party in Scotland. Then in the 2011 Scottish election, the SNP won a clear majority and with the majority government formed, they were finally able to introduce a mandate to hold an independence referendum in 2014.

Having now considered some of the seminal events that reinforced the Scottish political identity and sense of nationalism, we must consider the referendum for Scottish independence in 2014. The campaign was divided into two groups: the Yes campaign[12] was in favor of independence and the No campaign, or Better Together, was in favor of Scotland staying in the United Kingdom. The No campaign warned Scottish voters of unintended consequences should

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[11] https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2014/09/14/
scotlands_separatist_movement_influenced_by_margaret_thatcher.html

[12] The Yes campaign was a conglomeration of many different political and ethnic groups. There existed groups such as "English Scots for Yes"—that would be English ex-pats that were pro-independence—, and "Asian Scots for Yes." These unlikely, diverse supporters provide clear evidence that Scottish Nationalism is not fueled by ethnocentrism, or as the British press flippantly labelled it, "Braveheart Mentality."

they vote for independence: the UK would veto an independent Scotland's bid for EU membership,[13] Scotland would not be allowed to use the pound sterling, and an independent Scotland would not be able to access episodes of Doctor Who![14] Despite this, one month before the referendum, the Yes vote was polled ahead at 52%.

A tri-party coalition comprising of Prime Minister David Cameron, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, and Leader of the Opposition Ed Miliband, published "The Vow" in the Daily Record promising the Scottish people that if they were to vote "no" in the referendum, Scotland would be rewarded with more autonomy. Assuming that three English politicians' promises would not sway a majority of Scottish voters convinced otherwise, former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, a Scot himself, was brought out of hibernation to promise Scots further devolution as a result of a No vote, and warn them of potential risks with independence.[15] The warnings against independence issued by the No campaign became official UK policy, and the rewards for remaining in the UK were only nominally guaranteed by the leading politicians in Westminster.

The No campaign won with 55% of the vote. One could have rationally suggested at the time that the defeat of the Scottish independence referendum would signal a renewed interest in Britishness as an identity now that the "Scottish question" had been resolved.

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[13] 47% of those who voted to remain in the UK did so in part in order to ensure EU membership for Scotland. http://lordashcroftpolls.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Lord-Ashcroft-Polls-Referendum-day-poll-summary-1409191.pdf

[14] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/scottish-independence/11046037/Scots-would-lose-access-to-BBC-shows-after-independence.html

[15] http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/sep/17/gordon-brown-appeals-to-labour-voters-vote-no

The day after the vote, David Cameron spoke of needing to devote attention to "English" matters and voters now that Scotland's voice had been heard. The UK had been divided by national lines during the campaign, and it was seen to be "England's turn." This is now a tale of two nationalisms.

How is it that within the same state, there are two opposing ideological nationalist movements? Why are English nationalists united in the far-right, while Scottish nationalists camping out in the left? As for the England: What combination or specific set of conditions foster the innate desire to resort to what cannot be described as anything other than tribalism? Economic crises are a major underlying factor: when people's livelihoods are threatened and the future is uncertain, it is instinct to resort to the "us versus them" mentality. We saw this in the interwar period in Europe, and we see this now in the US and Europe post-2008. This economic theory can certainly go a long way towards explaining the recent spring of "alt-right" movements in Europe—but there are other factors as well, including the influx of Middle-Eastern refugees and a growing EU agenda that challenges traditional state sovereignty.

However, the UK can and should be treated as separate from continental Europe for a variety of reasons. Their intake of refugees has been rather limited compared to countries such as Greece and Germany. By having a separate currency from the Euro, the impact of the 2008 crash was mitigated as compared to the recession experienced by its fellow single-marketers in the EU. The right-wing political parties we do see such as UKIP and the British National Party are "British" in name only, and in fact, are products of a rise in English nationalism.[16] So, what in particular instigated a rise in "Englishness," and the far-right as it were? Why is this movement

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[16] Besides the fact that UKIP voters are resoundingly English, Nigel Farage has been championed as a "Voice for England." http://www.ukip.org/nigel_farage_a_voice_for_England

towards ethnic nationalism unlike what some journalists and politicians are describing as romantic ideas of destiny, and ethnic zealotry?

The process towards a more federal union with regional autonomy and devolved sovereignty for the Celtic minorities, rather than having the anticipated mollifying of separatists, it had the unanticipated and unintended effect of creating a new "minority" nationalist—the Englishman.

After centuries of attempting to cultivate a pan-Britannic cultural identity in the UK, it seems that the only ethnic group convinced of the British identity was the English. For example, in popular culture, the English accent is synonymous with what is referred to as a British accent, and "England" has been used interchangeably with "Britain" even in a significant amount of political texts up until this century.

Recent polls conducted by the Institute for Public Policy Research and the Future of England Survey suggest that the culprit is Scottish Devolution. That is, the legitimizing of nationalist groups and minority agendas in the UK perhaps shattered the illusion that there was one Britain. By creating an "other," and by forming distinct regional and national governments, there was a perceived need by the English to defend what was considered by the Celtic minorities as the aggressive state, the conqueror. The rise of the left in Scotland via the SNP in a devolved government created a vacuum that allowed the rise of the English new right.

What you can see here is that as the Scottish identity became only stronger after devolution, only then did the English come to terms with being English.

The English Votes for English Laws Act passed with alarming efficiency and speed within weeks after the Scottish referendum.[17] The 59 Scottish MPs can now be blocked from voting on bills that are considered to be "English Only" or "English and Welsh Only." Although on the surface this seems only fair, it has alienated the Scottish public because all MPs (including the 533 English MPs) can vote on Scottish matters that have not been devolved to Holyrood. Rather than granting new powers for Scotland, Westminster further diminished the power and status of Scotland in the UK.

There was then a short-sightedness of the Conservative party trying to win the 2015 election that created a new urgency with regard to English nationalism. The campaign advertisements focused on warning English voters against Scottish politicians gaining power in Westminster, which not only alienated Scottish voters even more but it also invigorated what Charlie Jeffrey, et al. at the University of Edinburgh have termed "devo-anxiety" on the part of English voters.

The English voters' belief that the Scottish had used up their right to demand more representation and the concern that Scotland uses more than its fair share was taken advantage of by the Tories and they in turn stimulated the fear that a vote for the Labour party would lead to a coalition government with the SNP—a party that cannot represent voters or interests south of the Tweed. This drove English voters to the right, and not just to the Tories. UKIP, although only winning two seats due to the first past the post system, had actually earned the third highest share of votes. The Tories are now being pushed further right in their agenda in order to compete with UKIP for the working-class English vote.

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17 http://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2015/oct/22/mps-to-debate-english-votes-for-english-laws-plans-politics-live

Now we must talk about Brexit. Comparing the two psephological maps for Brexit, there is clearly a line that is drawn between England and Scotland that is resolute. There are two nations within this state that are on opposite sides of the political spectrum.

(Graphs to be inserted)

There is a correlation between a rise in English identity and votes for far-right parties. There seems to be a belief that the only parties accepting of the English identity were the anti-EU parties—so by default, those that felt cornered by devolution necessarily voted for the far right. When polled, English voters consistently felt that UKIP was the only political party that would look out for England's interests.

In 2011, 68% of English working class voters felt that the UK has changed for the worse in the past 20-30 years—that's since Margaret Thatcher left office and Devolution in Scotland took effect. A majority of 36% said that an English Parliament should have the most influence over the way England is run. The common theme in the survey results over the years is that the English feel that they get "less than their fair share" and that Scotland gets "more than their fair share." England also has the highest percentage of voters that believe that the EU has the most influence in their national politics out of any other region in the EU. This resentment, jealously even, towards Scottish devolution, in combination with the sentiment that English voters are not represented by their government, and the belief that foreign nations hold influence over that government signal that this new rise of nationalism in England is more a result of political insecurity than ethnic chauvinism. After all, the UK has been a union of different nationalities and ethnicities since 1066!

The issue at hand is that the majority nation of this Union feels under-represented and denied self-determination, and the shift towards the right has to do with not only with historical economic preferences, but as a reaction to the rise of the left north of the Border. It is not that so many English are far-right conservatives—but that there has been no other political party interested in cultivating a healthy support of English ethnic identity. According to a study conducted by Michael Skey at the University of East London, there is a perceived notion that English cultural activities and groups are "ignored or actively suppressed by government officials."[18] It certainly doesn't help that Skey and his colleagues also found that there is a broad consensus amongst English voters that there was an "infiltration of the government by Scottish elites" that relished in the ability to "undermine Englishness."[19] This fear has been satirized, if not validated, by television shows such as "The Thick of It," where there is constant reference to "the Caledonian Mafia" in Whitehall.

English identity has been absorbed into "British" identity. The problem with adopting a US-style of ethnic-free nationalism is that the UK is not free from their indigenous ethnic groups. The English still are the majority population in England, and yet St George's Day—England's national Saint's day— was not celebrated in Bristol, an English city, because the city was deemed by council officials to be "too multicultural."[20] By not allowing official events that would include all ethnic groups in a celebration of the national hero, the council effectively

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[18] Skey, Michael. "'Sod them, I'm English': The Changing of Status of the 'Majority' English in Post-Devolution Britain." *Ethnicities* 12(1), pp 106-125. 2011.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/663922/Anger-as-council-officials-say-UK-city-is-too-multicultural-to-celebrate-St-George-s-Day

signed off national symbols to far-right groups, and aggravated moderates who feel that their identity is being pushed out.

This presents a legitimacy issue for Westminster, and that is something that cannot quickly be resolved with a new election. As a result of the 2015 election, the UK has for all intents and purposes become a two-party system, which in of itself, is not an issue. The difficulty lies in that these two parties are exclusive nationalists. The only thing that appears to be common ground is that both nationalist movements in the UK share a lack of trust for the UK government.

There is no precedent for this situation—true, multi-national states have dissolved before, but it is usually the case that it is a weak or failing state, or a state that is at war. It is difficult to imagine the UK undergoing a situation such as that of Ukraine, Sudan, or the split between Pakistan and India. It is a myopic tendency to compare this current rise of nationalists parties with what Europe experienced in the interwar period, and indeed with what is happening in Europe today. There is a need to reframe nationalism and question the logic behind the current trend. If we can learn anything from the attitudes of the Scottish and English in the UK, there is a desire to be heard. The data suggests that supporters of UKIP and the SNP are not inherently isolationist or xenophobic. Therefore, Brexit, the offspring of English nationalism, was not necessarily won out of fear of the "other," or limited tolerance, but perhaps from a fear of not having control over one's destiny.