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Can Radical Federalism Save the UK?

As we ponder the territorial scenarios facing the UK, I'm reminded of an old joke: Two French political philosophers are discussing the nature of the UK's multinational state system. After much bewilderment, one says "well it may work in practice, but it'll never work in theory".

It must be an old joke because the UK isn't working so well in practice any longer. Many people think the end is nigh and that it's a matter of when rather than if. The signs, they say, are mounting by the day. The polls in Scotland reveal a steady majority in favour of independence. Polling in Northern Ireland, especially in the younger demographic, seems to suggest a growing readiness to consider a united Ireland. And Wales - yes "even Wales" as the pundits often say - is witnessing a growing *YesCymru* movement.

Two things could fuel these polling trends. Firstly, the Covid-19 crisis has exposed the incompetence of the Westminster government. The pandemic has also demonstrated that the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales are more trusted than Johnson in dealing with the crisis. Secondly, the Tories seem hell bent on alienating the devolved governments in the Celtic nations by introducing legislation which effectively undermines their devolution settlements. For example, the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 (UKIMA) amounts to a power grab on the part of the Johnson regime because it gives central government powers to intervene in policy domains – like food, environment and economic development for example – that were devolved domains.

Of the three Devolved Administrations, the Welsh Government has traditionally been the least challenging from a Westminster standpoint. But such is the threat of the UKIMA that the Welsh Government has taken the lead in mounting a legal challenge to Johnson's government. It has sought a judicial review of the scope of the provisions of the UKIMA because these provisions "ostensibly – albeit implicitly - limit the scope of the devolved powers of the Senedd and Welsh Government".

The fact that the Labour-controlled Welsh Government has been alienated by the centralist ambitions of the Johnson government is perhaps the surest sign that the territorial integrity of the UK is being questioned increasingly.

We, the people: the case for radical federalism

It is also no coincidence that the Welsh Labour Party has taken the initiative to reform the territorial power structure of the UK along the lines of what it calls 'radical federalism'. On 14 January 2021 it launched an important new report called *We, the People: the case for Radical Federalism*, which opened with the following words:

"Radical constitutional reform is no longer an option, it is an unavoidable necessity. The internal conflicts within the structure of the UK must be resolved. This paper is a contribution to the start of that debate, and sets out the reasons for reform, the principles upon which any future reform should be based, and the process for getting there. We believe that the people of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England should be offered the opportunity to make a positive choice for the opportunity to envision, and contribute to the creation of a modern, collaborative, distributed and open democracy – the UK transformed".

At the launch event I welcomed the report because it sought to offer a compelling vision of what a progressive UK could look like. But I also endorsed the vision because it explicitly acknowledged that there were in fact two models of devolution underway in the UK today and they are equally important.

The *national model* of devolution - to the Celtic nations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland - has dominated the devolution debate for much of the past century and especially since their directly-elected assemblies and parliaments were created in 1999.

But more recently a *subnational model* of devolution has emerged as functions and limited powers have been devolved to city-regions and directly elected mayors, beginning with Greater Manchester in 2014. These models are rightly given equal weighting in the *Radical Federalism* report, which says: "Our countries, regions and cities deserve a future which is better than the options currently being offered to them by nationalists and Conservatives. The process of designing and planning for that future needs to start now – it is an urgent necessity".

Is this too little too late? Perhaps. But without a third option, between a reactionary status quo and the uncertainties of independence, it looks highly likely that a majority of Scots will decide to quit the UK. There are many

progressive forces in Scotland that support independence, like Common Weal for example, which campaigns for social and economic equality, for wellbeing and the environment, for quality of life, and for peace and justice. In other words, the pro-independence movement in Scotland is a broad political and civic coalition that should not be demonised, still less dismissed as narrow-minded ethnic nationalists by progressives in the rest of the UK.

To fashion a credible third option, the case of *Radical Federalism* needs to demonstrate that constitutional reform is relevant to and essential for the 'bread and butter' issues that determine the quality of everyday life – issues like affordable housing, dignified eldercare, food security, energy poverty and decarbonisation for example.

Radical Federalism might be the only option that can save the territorial integrity of the UK because, without such an option, the UK looks doomed. But to be effective, it needs to pass what I call the Raymond Williams test – which is to make hope possible and practical if we want to be truly radical.

It can only pass that test by proving that constitutional reform (which includes electoral reform), far from being a marginal issue, is actually an integral part of a radical agenda for decentralising power to the nations, regions and localities of a more democratic and sustainable United Kingdom.

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