

TOM NAIRN

## FAREWELL BRITANNIA

### *Break-Up or New Union?*

IT'S TWENTY-ONE YEARS since the original, failed referendum on devolution to Scotland and Wales in 1979, and so perhaps an appropriate moment to look back over this history.<sup>1</sup> Changes in the structure of the United Kingdom that were only prospected a generation ago are now fully under way. The uncertain eddies of the 1970s have turned into the rapids of 2000. A book was published earlier this year with the title *The Day Britain Died*. In 1979 such a title would have proclaimed the author, Andrew Marr, as an emissary out of dreamland. But in 2000 the lunatic turns out to be the new Chief Political Correspondent of the BBC—successor to the ultra-balanced Robin Oakley and (before that) the ultra-noncommittal John Cole.

Thus has History moved on. Where is it bearing us? As we accelerate into these rapids, there are some who hear the roar of a great waterfall ahead. Taking a larger view, we all know very well that since the 1980s, other rapids of disintegration have brought about general ruin and unresolved conflicts, in Indonesia, Eastern Europe, Sri Lanka and elsewhere. So why not here? The most generally debated scenario along these disastrist lines goes something like this. The United Kingdom has begun to 'break up' in the sense of falling apart into contending nationalist camps. Part of that dissolution goes back to the 1920s—Southern Ireland—and the rest is now upon us. A holding operation may have been undertaken in Northern Ireland; but although this is working for the moment, it is unlikely to last. In the main or 'British' island, devolution of power to Scotland and Wales seems likely to fuel rather than to appease the rise of nationality-politics. Mild-mannered as the new

Parliaments in Edinburgh and Cardiff may seem, they are bound to fall out with the UK state sooner or later, and so provoke reassertive or compensatory national animosity in England.

On the analogy of Serbia or Russia, a resentful and demoted (or even humiliated) elite will then try to preserve its privileged role and, if unsuccessful, obtain revenge by other means. Populist ‘What about us!’ sentiment will be worked up in the notorious British tabloid manner, and is likely to be politically appropriated by otherwise bankrupt or down-at-heel parties and leaders. It’s not clear who is cut out to be Belarus, Bosnia or Chechnya in this perspective. But what is pretty clear is that anybody easily identifiable as an internal enemy or fifth column would have a hard time of it. The big immigrant minorities of England would occupy the most exposed positions here. There could be a malignant growth of what Darcus Howe in *The White Tribe* called ‘the Dover mentality’ (‘the mark of the beast’); I’ll return to the question of that growth, and what might foster (or arrest) it.

Sometimes this is called the ‘four-nations’ formula, with reference to the supposed four main ethnic countries of the archipelago.<sup>2</sup> To sum up: the four-nations formula can be seen as suggesting that, perhaps before too long—while thousands cram into Heathrow on their way home to Jamaica or Pakistan—Jean-Marie Le Pen will be on his way over to address the House of Commons. His chosen theme is ‘Duc Guillaume jusqu’à Guillaume Hague: racines d’une vraie alliance européenne’. Later in the same day Mr. Le Pen is expected to don ermine and join Vladimir Putin as an Honorary Lord of the restructured Second Chamber.

Too easy to mock, I know, when real fears are involved, reinforced by hooligans with knives, by firebombs and institutional discrimination. So

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a talk given for the Barry Amiel and Norman Melburn Trust at the London School of Economics in May 2000. I take this chance of expressing my gratitude to the Trust for the opportunity to give their annual lecture. I have added some remarks in reply to the two critiques of my book *After Britain*, by J. G. A. Pocock and Francis Mulhern, which appeared in NLR 5, Sep–Oct 2000.

<sup>2</sup> England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, as one used to recite them in the schoolroom. There were at least seven, in fact; but at that time no-one bothered mentioning the Isle of Man, Jersey or Guernsey. And there were of course too few immigrants to qualify or upset the old map.

what is the alternative? What optional scenarios might more usefully be occupying our minds for 'after Britain', or 'beyond The White Tribe'? More particularly—what most people want to know—are any of these more hopeful and more probable?

### *Curse of the blueprint*

Here we encounter a strange problem. Not only is there such an alternative, there are so many of the damned things that you already need a dictionary of futurology to help out. Those dazzling blueprints invariably portray a tidied-up archipelago and globe from which the ogre of nationalism has been exorcized. In more recent examples the World Trade Organization is exorcized as well, and history as we know it has indeed ended. Unfortunately at the same time—and rather worryingly—what Ted Hughes called 'the salt taste of reality' has somehow ended as well. All round Regionalism; Subsidiarity (in the liturgy of the European Union); Federalism and its fifty-seven subspecies (asymmetric, hierarchical, confederal, consociational, and so forth). However wildly different on paper, all such plans are deemed better than the dreary, out-of-date nation-state. All are guaranteed to satisfy and so eliminate the supposed atavistic impulses of unrestrained ethnic human nature: racialism, communalism, nationalism and their insupportable political consequences. Yet all have also somehow left behind the constantly disconcerting universe we actually inhabit—the world of uneven development, of the unforeseen collapses and epiphanies which actual sea changes have cast up on the beach where we live.

I've made no secret of a personal preference towards a restructured archipelago (and Europe) of smaller-scale republics, but no purpose would be served by merely adding one more such scheme to the cache of utopianism. Instead, I think it would be more rewarding to look at one or two things which have actually happened. At plans that have left the drawing-board and become reality, and some other things which weren't planned at all, but are happening, and may be even more important. May it not be that these more effectively indicate some different way or ways ahead? That is, ways towards an alternative 'Britain' which—I do think we can be reasonably sure of this—will be neither the ancient, unitary state-regime that still persists through Blairism, nor its simple fragmentation into separate ethno-states?

In his comments about *After Britain* in NLR 5, John Pocock rightly pointed out how absurd it was to say so little about UK–Irish relations. By way of inadequate defence, I can only repeat here that this was not because I felt the subject too unimportant. Rather, I thought it was much too weighty to simply add on to a book which I knew had to be mainly concerned with Scotland and England. But on the day after the Belfast Agreement was signed I did add an ‘Envoi’ page to my personal website, a picture of the front door of our Irish house white with frost, and our puzzled cat Rosie waiting impatiently to be let back in again. Others may remember that morning of April 10th, 1998: winter struck back at Eastertime as if the seasons themselves were being reversed. The page was a way of indicating the political animus of the site as a whole, and it’s still there today.

### *Northern Ireland*

By far the most important of actual British developments since 1997 is Northern Ireland. Until the acceptance of the Belfast Agreement, it was widely believed (if not always stated openly) that no political formula embracing both sides would ever work. One of the leading analysts of Northern Ireland, the sociologist Steve Bruce, concluded his study of the Ulster Protestants, *The Edge of the Union*, with a judgement that the communal split was ‘ethnic’ in nature. Which implied at that time that it was rooted in incorrigible differences—for which either separate existence or permanent antagonism were the sole available answers. Such a society had therefore either to be ruled from outside, as a colony or a Protectorate, or else divided into virtually autonomous polities (as cantons, nations, ‘communities’ or whatever).

But today, very few people (and especially few outsiders or detached commentators) would assume this to be the case. Of course, equally, no-one can be certain that the new Assembly in the North will be able to go on working as specified by the Agreement—that ‘events’, in Harold Macmillan’s celebrated sense, may not yet occur to disrupt it. However, what is much more significant is the likely nature of such ‘events’. No-one can yet know just how many psychopaths there are still at large in Northern Ireland, or just how much Semtex and other firepower they now dispose of. Atrocities and reactions remain possible, and might still upset things. Yet this is surely a quite different and less serious doubt about the new arrangements. Die-hard gangs are one thing, effective

nationalist mobilization is quite another. If the new system is workable in practice, then it is fairly certain to carry on. The Northern Ireland Assembly should probably not have been suspended at all, in the spring of the year 2000, and is unlikely to be suspended again. And this new reality entails the viability of new principles. Which in turn suggests—even more puzzlingly—some deeper environmental change that must now be underpinning them.

What matters here is that an elaborate and—in a comparative sense—very advanced written constitutional order has been put in place and made to work, in the teeth of previously implacable and violent communal hostilities. The UK government played a major part in setting this up, mostly during the period when Mo Mowlam was Secretary of State. But that was ‘enabling’ rather than decreeing a solution. It was trying to replace or to get out of the old Protectorate, rather than give it new or ‘modernized’ life (as many Protestant Unionists continued to hope). Most important of all, the result is not a ‘British’ system in the old sense at all. That is, it does not depend on informal conventions, understandings among chaps and reinforcing the mythic Sovereignty of the UK Crown. On the contrary, it inclines towards republican formality and modern constitutionalism. This is the basic reason why Unionists profoundly mistrust it. Moral blackmail and appeals to Tradition will become that much more difficult under it. It depends, clearly and in a sense normally, upon formal and exacting rules, healthy distrust among ruling cadres, drastic institutional reforms, and a deliberate rundown of ‘Sovereignty’.<sup>3</sup>

This had to be negotiated over a long period of time among many different interests and, although there was considerable input from the Republic and the UK, most of the substantial content of the Agreement was home-grown. Just as the Scotland Act was mainly framed by Scots, so the gist of the peace process originated among Northern Irelanders themselves. Outside circumstances like the termination of the Cold War, the evolution of European Union, the advance of the Republic’s economy and the electoral interests of the American Presidency may have been indispensable as well. But however many necessary condi-

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<sup>3</sup> See Brendan O’Leary, ‘The Nature of the British–Irish Agreement’, in *NLR* 1/233, Jan–Feb 1999. Professor O’Leary has since then updated this very valuable account of the new system. As any reader can at once see, it describes a political universe utterly different from the conventional one of UK constitutional lore.

tions there were, a sufficiency of conditions depended on local will and possibility. In Scotland this was baptized as the ‘settled will’ of the population, shown in the 1997 referendum; in Ulster there was something analogous, a will for peace or an alternative settlement, manifested in the same way.

### *Council of the Isles*

The Northern Ireland change was therefore less ‘British’ and more original than the Scottish and Welsh new deals.<sup>4</sup> And the principal emblem of this was the very striking constitutional novelty it generated—something which no sober political scientist or constitutional lawyer would have put his or her name to only a short time before. It implied a big enough change in the unwritten rules of British constitutionalism over one British province, naturally. But it also added to this a remarkable forward projection. It was as if the very extremity of Northern Ireland—a theatre of ethnic strife infinitely worse than anything seen on the British mainland or anywhere else west of Trieste since 1945—had ended by producing an equivalently extreme, far-out ideological by-product. It gave rise to an imagined community disconcertingly different from anything in the political arsenal of the old British state.

This was, of course, ‘the Council of the Isles’. Under ‘Strand Three’ of the 1998 Agreement the British–Irish Council (to give it its official title) was originated as a way of reassuring Protestant sensibilities in the Province, in the context of the present government’s Devolution programme. Whatever happened in Scotland, Wales and England, it suggested there would always be a Britain (or at any rate a British something-or-other) to which this community could belong and appeal. All governments and governance-bodies were to be represented on it, like the Manx and Channel Island dependencies and the devolved parliaments, as well as the two independent states. It was intended to promote ‘the development of the totality of relationships among the peoples of these islands’. While this is in itself a phrase capable of meaning

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<sup>4</sup> Although more ‘original’ here also means more ‘normal’, as Arend Lijphart points out in his recent panorama of the world’s democratic constitutions, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performances in Thirty-six Countries*, New Haven, CT 1999. The Westminster ‘model’ is now effectively confined, Lijphart notes (without undue sadness) to Westminster itself and the small island state of Barbados (pop. 250,000). Professor Pocock’s New Zealand jumped ship in 1996.

everything or nothing, it certainly leaves doors open. Open (for example) to representing and farthing non-territorial communities ‘of these islands’, like the cultural and linguistic communities of the Irish and Scottish *Gaeltacht*, Travelling Peoples or (as far as I can see, though they’re not mentioned as such) immigrant populations as well.

In this context it may be worth underlining that the population ‘Strand Three’ was trying to placate, the Ulster Protestants, are themselves an ‘immigrant community’. They may have been there quite a while. But they are still perceived as such by part of the more indigenous Irish (or Irish-Catholic) community. And even more important, they are still worrying, after over three centuries, about *Who do they think they are?* in something like Yasmin Alibhai-Brown’s sense. Their customary answer, ‘British’ (with the largest capital ‘B’ available) has not really been testimony to great success with that endeavour. Some of them apparently still speak under duress of ‘going home’ if Ireland becomes more united. This usually means ‘Scotland’. While no-one can, under European Union rules, prevent individuals from moving and settling where they choose, there seem to be few in Ulster who understand that a *mass* repatriation would in present-day Scotland be approximately as welcome as a homecoming of Afrikaners to the Netherlands would have been in (say) the 1980s. This would be true above all if such a migration was prophetically led and inspired, along Paisleyite lines. No conceivable Edinburgh Parliament would tolerate the reintroduction of Orangeist redemption-politics.<sup>5</sup>

While it is possible that the Council proposal comes to mean extremely little in practice, and certain that some parts of Central Authority devoutly wish that to be the case, it is not actually likely to disappear. This is because there are so many prospective vested interests in its maintenance.<sup>6</sup> Although not informed in advance of the move, the governments of

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<sup>5</sup> The most useful background here is Tom Devine’s recent book on the history of anti-Catholic ideas and agitation in Scotland, *Scotland’s Shame*, Edinburgh 2000.

<sup>6</sup> This much was unintentionally revealed in the late Donald Dewar’s review of *After Britain (Scotland on Sunday*, 16 January 2000). The First Minister snapped in fatherly fashion at ‘the air of unreality about this author’s views . . . Who, apart from him, believes that the British–Irish Council is “intended to profoundly modify, and possibly even to succeed the United Kingdom?”’ Indeed, Mr Dewar was like most other Unionists in viewing all forms of devolution as shallow modifications designed to prop up the United Kingdom.

Man, Jersey and Guernsey warmly supported it. So, more surprisingly, have the nationalist movements in Wales and Scotland as well as the New Labour administrations. More important, the Dublin government is very keen on it. It sees the Council (and other aspects of the Agreement structure, like the standing Intergovernmental Conference) as a long-term way of influencing London. That would be all the more important if the government changes course at Westminster (as is sure to happen) and something more old-fashioned emerges. The stronger and more varied the Council of the Isles becomes in the meantime, the less chance there will be for the obdurate strain in Ulster Protestantism to attempt a comeback by exploiting such old-fashioned characteristics.

### *Devolutionary mutations*

As for the new governments and the nationalist parties in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, their motives are quite plain. An Islands Council would confer a new status on them, in no way equivalent to independence but a long way better than boring old provincialism or its tartered-up descendant, 'regionalism'. As Pocock patiently reiterates in the same article: 'the point about a region is that it is not a state'. However, there are also many 'regions' (provinces, etc.) which are on the way to being states, with a sense of what may help or hinder them along that trajectory. In that perspective the Council is perceived as something that not only doesn't prevent them becoming more independent, but may even help them onwards. 'Devolution' in the original sense was of course intended to underwrite the authority of the Centre. But a loose association of governments explicitly promoting initiatives from its members is a quite different kettle of increasingly distinct fish. It makes sense only on the assumption of a curious kind of quasi-equality, where a representative of the Douglas House of Keys or the Cardiff National Assembly is on the same footing as someone from the House of Commons (and, one would hope, a cut above anyone from the House of Lords).

Thus, I would argue, both the redefinition of Sovereignty inherent in the new Ulster accords and its support-structures, like the British-Irish Agreement, do suggest—albeit in a partial or shadowy way—something quite different from and potentially better than the old imperial state. Professor Pocock states at one point that 'Nairn's proposal is not to redefine "British" but to abandon it altogether, as incapable of acquiring any new meaning'. I must object to this. I suspect that most inhabitants

of Scotland, Wales and the other countries object to it too. Our collective stake in the archipelago is far too high for most people to think of abandoning it *altogether*. It is, surely, one thing to abandon an archaic imperialist state, but another to refuse any alternative arrangement. The old common political roof, or (if I may be excused the term) ‘dome’, was multinational by default rather than deliberation. It staggered or leaned in that direction because, resting on different nations in the archipelago and going on to co-opt others all over the world, there was never any other possibility. Its state form was condemned to class-based elitism and monarchism for much the same reasons. Yet at its last gasp, under Blair’s leadership, driven finally to resolve its most enduring historical and ethnic problem, something else has ended by showing through. Where the old fabric was thinnest and most contested, it has begun to give way—and already begun to turn into something else.

A similar analysis might be carried out of the political events in Wales and Scotland since 1997, showing how ‘devolution’ almost at once began to mutate into something quite un-blueprinted, but I don’t have space to undertake this here. Also, whatever pattern of deviance we have here is clearly accelerating out of any possible control. Scottish and Welsh devolution took a generation to evolve. The renewed Troubles in Ireland endured for thirty years. In the case of the London Mayor, however, almost no time at all passed (as it were) between initial plan and total failure. From the government’s angle, catastrophe had struck even before the electoral campaign began.

So something novel is emerging. I will not describe it as ‘new’, out of respect for the British language. None of those who have passed through the rhetorical foam-bath of the past three years will ever be capable of calling anything ‘New’ again without some undertone of irony or sarcasm. Nor (one hopes) will anything ever again be ‘Third’ except in some dully numeric sense. No, what’s novel is on the ground and in the air. It has less and less to do with party ideology and its accompanying bureaucratic schemes.

But the realization of its potential demands two things. Both seem to me essential in the present situation; and neither (regrettably) seem likely now to emerge from the remaining reform ideas of the present UK government. The two things required are, firstly, *some* representation of England in the new British polity; and secondly, a move towards

consolidating the demise (or replacement) of the old-time constitutional ‘dome’ with a written multinational constitution. Without these two (and closely related) features, the state of the nations might indeed deteriorate, and even slide backwards towards the dreaded ‘four-nations’ screenplay which I began from. The ‘white tribe’ has got to be represented, partly because it is no longer such a white tribe, but partly also (and I must say I feel, more importantly) because nothing else will ever make any sense in *British* terms without it.

### *The English Patient*

Saying as much of course raises the problem of English identity—‘who do *they* think they are?’ or now want to be, and so on. Pocock taxes me with having no answer to such queries and making undue fun of previous solutions. But (you’ll be relieved to know) I do not intend to attempt another exploration of this bizarre church-crypt. Nothing much tends to emerge from such excursions anyway, as *The White Tribe* convincingly showed. When the coffin-lid creaks open and the mildewed cadaver sits piteously upright, it seems usually to have a list of some kind in its shaking paw. Inscribed thereupon are the supposed credentials of nationhood. These invariably echo George Orwell’s litany of Englishry in *The Lion and the Unicorn*: red phone-boxes, suet puddings, unarmed bobbies, nuns bicycling through mist, Baroness Jay, fish and chips . . . and so on. Such lists are based on a curious but still quite important superstition, the notion that ‘nations’ are founded upon bundles of ethnic, gastronomic and customary idiosyncrasies. If discovered without the right attribute-bundle, a population has no right to be there. Unless satisfactory Ethnicity is at once produced, the lid might as well be nailed down again.

The consequences of such a belief are hallucinatory. For instance, it is reasonably clear that if the government of the Isle of Man joined the candidates’ list for entry to the United Nations, it would—on the strength of admission policy since the later eighties—be pretty casually allowed in. Provided (naturally) that the Tynwald had taken the precaution of resigning from the United Kingdom beforehand. Were an English delegation to turn up, however—representing 80 per cent of the British–Irish population—then the current crypt-view appears to be that it would have to do so list in hand. At the door some equivalent of St Peter might then scrutinize it, sadly shake his head like a legendary British bobby, and

declare: 'Sorry Sir . . . more ethnicity is required on your entry form. Go home and try again'.

*For Christ's sake!* Some profanity seems in order here, because the reason why any new, or renegotiated, Britain or any workable archipelago system, along Island Council lines, needs English representation has *nothing whatever to do with ethnicity*. It is entirely a matter of politics and of the altering character of statehood in the new, post-Cold War world. To put it another way: it's entirely a matter of civic or constitutional nationalism, and not of ethnic, pseudo-ethnic, fake-ethnic or (frankly) non-existent-ethnic national identity. Northern Ireland has been tackled via what one might call an anti-Folkum constitution. *Völkische* antics played very little part in the attainment of Scottish self-government and (it seems to me) less in Wales than most observers have allowed. As for Enoch Powell's inscrutable mystery of Englishness, that surely belongs in a museum of Social Anthropology, rather than in the emergent polity of the actual, post-imperial English.

What does matter is simply that no new archipelago order or rejigged British or British-Irish arrangement will be seriously possible as long as the government at Westminster continues to represent not just eighty-plus per cent of the insular population but *nearly everybody else as well*. In fact everybody else except the Irish Republic and (though only in part) the three micro-states. Thus representatives of the Welsh Assembly will be supposed under these novel arrangements to dialogue with representatives of a British government—a government which, if it chose to do so, could suspend them from one day to the next (as it did in Northern Ireland). Her Majesty will continue to control the entire operation, jointly with the government of the Republic. From a Whitehall point of view this may seem quite natural. But that is because some people there still live in a rose-clad thatch twice as old as time. And some of them are in Government. Their assumption continues to be that common sense and sound committee-work will prevail, while things are prevented from getting out of hand.

But things will. As we've seen again in the politics of London Town itself, the old power-centre has now declined too seriously for such nostrums to go on functioning. To go on clinging to Britishness in that way is hopeless, and—as one farce or tragedy follows another—could easily turn into disaster. That, rather than nationalism around

the periphery, could end in the antagonistic ‘four-nations’ strife I mentioned to begin with. The old state has, in its Blairite manifestation, undeniably triggered a series of great changes. But there is unfortunately less and less reason to believe it will be able to develop or complete these in the positive way which many people are still hoping for. Indeed there are compelling reasons for fearing the opposite: that it will now retreat from such farther developments, and attempt to remain in office by sound committee-work, PR offensives, and well-timed hand-outs. ‘Stabilization’, in other words, as ordained by Providence, with appropriate refurbishment of monarchical and other traditions.

### *The Unionist gamble*

Pocock is insistent upon the primacy of the British–Irish relationship, with which I agree. Yet he omits entirely what is plainly the most dangerous, and even deadly, feature of that relationship: the anachronism of its British side. Blair’s court assumed a high and very energetic profile in constructing the peace process, agreed; but it had to do so *as a substitute* for equivalently radical changes in its own constitution. Personalized charisma and a dramatic sales pitch were standing in for the development of UK democracy. As a result, both kinds of Irish voted intelligently and resoundingly for the deal. In Britain, nobody voted for anything. Old Corruption did the decent thing, but then reverted to being itself—the Sovereign of yore, quite willing to put the entire operation on ice for months at the urgings of an Ulster Unionist leader. This reassured the Protestant ultras far more than any new British–Irish Council. They could see that at home base nothing had really altered. Great Britain is not in Northern Ireland because its own electorate has called for it to stay there; not by right of conquest and *droit de Seigneur*, as in Wales; not by a half-purchased and half-forgotten bargain of elites, as in Scotland and the Dependencies. No, once ‘economic and strategic interest’ had been renounced in the Anglo-Irish Agreement, it was there by *noblesse oblige* alone—trying to extricate itself in the least damaging way possible, in agreement with Dublin and (inevitably) against the wishes of many Protestants.

All the skill and good will put into the Belfast accords were unlikely to work out unless the Ulster Unionist community was at some point decisively confronted, and forced to renounce its future as a ward of Westminster government. It was (obviously) desirable that this should

not be done militarily—as London could have done at Drumcree in any of the past three ‘marching seasons’. However, that means it has to be done ‘politically’—which really implies *constitutionally*. Here is the crux of the problem: the point of inevitable confrontation is also that of Britain’s greatest weakness. How can the Crown government go on making decisive constitutional changes for others, while refusing to change itself? The bluster and dazzle of Blairism have merely concealed this central inertia, a will to (as A. J. P. Taylor wrote of the Habsburgs) ‘persist in greatness’ from one age into the next.

Ulster Unionism has the strongest instinct for such persistence. Their obduracy over symbols like the Crown expresses a rational awareness that the old game is not over, or not over yet. After all, while the *ancien régime* endures, a more conventional government may yet return to office. Under William Hague or someone else, Protestants may then count at least on a longer-term reprieve from sharing power with their enemies and (as they still see it) submission to the new Dublin ascendancy. The ‘deadly’ side to this is that an increasingly run-down and knock-kneed United Kingdom will simply be unable to tolerate bouts of reversion to the Protectorate conditions that Unionists prefer. The *noblesse* is spread far too thin these days. Little of it is likely to outlive Blairism. Although not a constitutional democracy, the UK is a crudely representative system where—in the conditions of 2005 or 2010, say—policy towards Northern Ireland is likely to become a central issue of British politics (as it never has over the past three decades). Whether by referendum or in a general election, English, Scottish and Welsh voters would then have to vote about staying in or withdrawing from Ireland. One of the fundamental, yet rarely mentioned, features of the British–Irish dilemma is that there is nobody, in either London or Dublin, who entertains the slightest doubt about how such a vote would go.

So when the King’s man in Belfast tells Unionists ‘there is no alternative’ to the Belfast Agreement this is both true and false. Peter Mandelson means there is no other likely version of self-government on anyone’s horizon. But the persistence of British non-constitutionalism (which he and his master also represent) still leaves another avenue open: opposition to self-government by a resolutely ultra-British faction, leading eventually to apocalypse—that very abandonment which the Protestants have always dreaded, and which they appear now to be positively seeking in their last ditch.

No: for progress a farther revolution is needed, and this will depend upon more radical constitutional reform of the centre itself. That's why the two things—English representation and intelligible constitutional engineering—are needed, and needed jointly. Professor Pocock seems surprised that a Scottish nationalist should support such a multinational objective. But in fact most nationalists have been generally favourable to aims of this sort. Rightly or wrongly, independence has habitually been envisaged in the SNP as best linked to (the customary formula) an 'Association of British States' within which common aims and values could be redefined. 'Redefined' has to signify 'renegotiated' in the emergent context. Negotiation takes place among equals. It's not like 'consultation', via the goodwill of the dominant authority or state. This is why the independence of the different parties to any renegotiated Britain is a democratic *sine qua non*. It is also why the objectives of Charter 88 are probably much more important—for everybody on the archipelago—than they were when the organization was set up twelve years ago.

### *Regional resentments*

It's sometimes said in answer that the best formula for including English identity in any new deal would be via regional rather than all-England representation. As habitually put, this does risk a return to blueprintland. Jack Straw's original document about English regional policy, *A Choice for England* (1995) suggested elected regional governments might be possible, and invited them to submit proposals and campaign for popular support. Blair echoed him at the time, saying the trouble was there was 'no consensus about regional assemblies in England. We can't commit ourselves to do something until it is clear that the support and pressure for it is there'.

But of course no 'consensus' was going to emerge on such an issue, and all-round 'support and pressure' was not obtainable. It was difficult to establish what 'regions' meant in many parts, central authority couldn't conjure them into existence, there was antipathy to more politicians and bureaucracy—the standard round of objections at once imposed itself, and after 1997 made it easy for the Project to set the question to one side. However, all this implied was that a blueprint schema had been defeated—not the reality of regional unease and resentment themselves. These have not ceased to make themselves felt, in the only way they were

ever likely to do so. That is, unevenly and somewhat chaotically (more or less as nationalism had always done previously).

There is one single region away ahead of others in both its demands and its organization, the great North-Eastern conurbation of England in the Tyne and Wear valleys. When Darcus Howe visited it he apparently found nobody who would even own up to being 'English' in the Thames Valley or thatched-cottage sense. I must say my own family contacts with the former Kingdom of Northumbria tend to support that verdict. Geordies and Wearsiders have little allegiance to either England or Britain, and appear oblivious to grandiloquent projections of general regionalism. They are unlikely to react gently to suggestions that they cannot have a Northern Parliament after the next general election, unless East Anglia, East and West Mercia, Humberside (etc.) are also 'kept aboard' and moved ahead. What they want is 'something like' what happened in Ireland, Wales and Scotland, preferably soon. This is very thoughtless of them, from New Labour's point of view. But it is also 'uneven development', the critical lever of change throughout the era of modern nationality politics. Uneven development wrecks everybody's sense of 'the right time'. That's how it works. 'Soon' for some has to be 'Far too soon' for others and 'Not soon enough' for others again. In Blueprint Land things happen when they ought to; in history, they just tend to turn up at the wrong time.

The point here is really a more substantial one. A strong ferment of disaggregation is under way, within territorial England as well as the other parts of the archipelago. It's at best half-planned and more often hardly planned or foreseen at all, and driven on by mounting pressures of uneven development between South and North. It's intensely urban, not at all 'ethnic' in outlook, and overwhelmingly economic and political in its assumptions. In other words, this is positive disaggregation again, not something to be evaded or opposed by any except abject apologists of the unitarist *ancien régime*. Unfortunately, the abject-apologist faction seems now to be in the ascendant—regaining authority, perhaps, after the guilty excesses of 1997–2000. I have to admit that an awful lot of its cheerleaders are Scots or (the archaic term seems somehow appropriate again) *Scotch*. The successful chancers of a defunct regime are the slowest to acknowledge the disappearance of those circumstances which, in the past, served them so well.

I have of course ended, after all those hard words about ideal blueprints, with another sketchy and broken-backed blueprint of my own. So I might as well come clean about it, and then wind up with an equally tentative and implausible explanation of why I think all this may be going on at all and (even more astonishingly) going on here, in the British–Irish archipelago, and now, at the start of another century. My thoughts about this have been concentrated wonderfully for me by Francis Mulhern’s probing investigation, also in NLR 5. In his thoughtful, sinewy way he skewers *After Britain* neatly through its unprotected underbelly: ‘The new democratic-republican Scotland would be an equal partner in a post-Ukanian Council of the Isles and a developing European Union’, he concedes . . . *But—*

. . . about the possible social order of the new state, Nairn has nothing to say, not even to his fellow-Scots, who are the named or implied addressees of much of his book.

No defence, Your Honour. Instead of leniency, we have here a judge who ploughs remorselessly on: ‘any appeal to nationality is always a coded declaration for, or against, a substantive social state of affairs’, so that avoiding the issue must be ‘either insufficient or evasive’. So it boils down to ‘the insufficiency of constitutionalism as a line of political march’. While Mulhern is too subtle to fall back into Old Leftery, he ends by preaching another variant of the same creed. At least (he concludes) the Left ‘speaks to the national “question” in its only unmystified form, which is neither nationalist nor nihilist: not *Whither our nation?* but *What kind of social order do “we” want it for?*’

The accused must plead guilty as charged, able only to demand that several billion others be arraigned alongside him. In present conditions no-one can invent another plausible formula for socialism. In his presentation of *New Left Review*’s new series, the Editor wrote:

Common to all these visions [of the new] is an intimation that capitalism may be invincible, but might eventually prove soluble—or forgettable—in the waters of profounder kinds of equality, sustainability and self-determination. If so, such deeps still remain unfathomable . . .

The guilty party acknowledges this unfathomability, but refuses the blindfold and declares he would much rather face, with sober senses, his

real conditions of life and his relations with his kind. When Marx and Engels first made this plea in February 1848, it was not clear whether they were issuing a short or a very long-range weather forecast. But now we know that much at least: it was extremely long-range, their shorter predictions were hopeless, and we now find ourselves in the early stages of a developmental convulsion much vaster than even the brightest weathermen of the 19th century could imagine. The retreat from Armageddon after 1989 has led into the longest capitalist boom of modern times, where novel forces of production are generating daily changes in all social conditions, and yesterday's venerable prejudices and opinions get forgotten and despised even before they are swept away. What seer can at present determine the kind of overall social order the 'we' of the Human Genome's time will come to want, or be capable of?

In short, it is respect for historical materialism which confines this author to the terrain of nationhood and republican constitutionalism—those resistant forms of collective consciousness and will which seem most likely to survive the information revolution and to humanize the 'empire of civil society'. Mulhern cites his own Ireland as an example of social struggle and how it has recomposed the 'national imaginary'. Coincidentally, it is an example dear to me as well. I arrived there around the time when 'the Irish' switched identities. Within a year or so, the national imaginary galvanized from bog-trotting near-simians to being too clever by half. Rural peace was obliterated forever by the mobile phone, and the shades of smallholding autarky gave way to a hugely successful crusade for foreign investment. Another year or so, and the place had become the world's largest exporter of computer software. The last time I was home, it was to discover an American credit-card firm building its new call-centre a few fields away, the same week as Microsoft announced its decision to concentrate all future European and Middle East operations in Dublin. Where Flann O'Brien might once have mocked, his descendants speed by in BMWs. Such hyper-development of what was once labelled 'the material base' is bound to outpace all modes of superstructural evolution.

### *Communities of citizens*

However, it does not follow that such modes will remain outdated. 'Communities of citizens' (in Dominique Schnapper's phrase) have since Antiquity proved the most resistant and adaptable, and the

burden of what Mulhern accuses me of—‘constitutionalism’—is also the assumption that this will continue to be true.<sup>7</sup> The Belfast Agreement, the return of Scotland and the ‘Council of the Isles’ can then be read as important signals of change, of a regrouping of political aspiration and potential. In her commanding chart of modern nationhood, Liah Greenfeld assigned a pioneering place to England—as she sees it, the forge of political modernity and the vector of the nation-scale revolutions that ushered in modernity.<sup>8</sup> But what analogous place could be assigned today—given the impossibility of chest-beating over the Dome and ‘Cool Britannia’? Here it looks to me as if there is some genuine common ground between the ideal terrain implied by *After Britain* and that of both Pocock and Mulhern. England–Britain in dissolution will either fall backwards into late-ethnic anarchy or be driven towards the honourable fate of modest test-bed for the 21st century’s ‘communities of citizens’. The archipelago which was so prominent in making the whole ‘age of nationalism’ might then become an example of a drastically different kind—that is, of varied political responses to post-1989 ‘globalization’.

This isn’t a matter of ‘leading’ either Europe or the globe. In fact, it is in some ways dependent upon dropping the pretensions of leadership once and for all—that instinct built into the nervous system of the United Kingdom, and still disastrously rampant among the impulses of Blairism. In the scenario now appearing, East Timor and Taiwan seem certain to have much more importance than Northern Ireland or the fate of English identity. But this is no reason for despair (except among ruling cadres unable to perceive anything except ‘loss of influence’). Modest yet real opportunities are growing in the new atmosphere, and their ethos will not be very different from that evoked by Billy Bragg in the pages of Andrew Marr’s *The Day Britain Died*. To this English republican, ‘Britain’ is a label for things we have in common, rather than the banner of an omnipotent overarching state:

Britain is a bit like ‘our street’; it’s us and our neighbours. It’s not our house, but it’s our street and we know our neighbours’ houses and we come and go from one another’s houses. I would include the Irish Republic in that as well. I know they don’t feel themselves to be part of that, but I

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<sup>7</sup> *La communauté des citoyens: sur l’idée moderne de nation*, Paris 1994, translated as *Community of Citizens: on the Modern Idea of Nationality*, New Brunswick & London 1998, preface by Daniel Bell.

<sup>8</sup> *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, Cambridge, MA 1992.

would include them as neighbours in that we come and go and we have so many things in common.

‘Things in common’, customs in common, and (in effect) a somewhat untidy community council within which common interests are constantly negotiated and conflicts worked out. The ‘houses’ may be independent in the United Nations sense, or ‘chosen-dependent’ like the British micro-states, or elective regions, or city-regions, or nothing-in-particular local governments. The English house will remain the largest one, but not in a specially threatening sense since scale is no longer so significant. No longer attempting to ‘punch above its weight’ in the international arena, the scaled-down Palace of Westminster will abandon the nuclear deterrent and make itself still more popular by giving up its Security Council seat. The point about such a union is that (as mentioned earlier) it will have been negotiated by its constituent parts, and remain the terrain of constant renegotiation and readjustment. Its mode of existence and decision is really republican—even if there are still some monarchs around as house-pets in some parts of the new system. It will also be highly legalistic in a rather American sense, because of the proliferation of constitutions and the basic wish to settle conflicts in a civic and up-front manner.

But just *why* is this untidy future coming into being around us? There is a still deeper conundrum here which it would be wrong to evade, even if no answer can be given. It can only be because much more has changed since 1989 than was believed at the time, and at a far deeper historical level. Much more, then, began to thaw out than the Cold War itself. The reduction of that particular glaxis must have released something behind it again, and occasioned a larger earth-shift whose contours we are only beginning to perceive. So our situation today has become something like that of the travellers in the Fourth Book of Rabelais’s *Pantagruel*, that haunting episode when the words get frozen in the air, and are then released in stages into human earshot with a change in the climate.

The travellers in the boat suddenly hear voices in the air, seemingly coming from nowhere. Some of them are terrified and want to retreat to the nearest landfall, but the boat’s skipper explains it all calmly, in terms of where they happen to be sailing—

On the Confines of the Frozen Sea, on which about the beginning of last Winter happened a great and bloody war between the Arimaspians and the Nephelibates . . .

During that terrible conflict the weather worsened and a frost descended, so that all the sounds—the cannon-fire, the screams, the hacking and gouging, the oaths, rape and pillage—were frozen in the very air. The world fell silent, meaning vanished and for what seemed an eternity nothing changed. Until at length the dreary winter of imperial history ended and, in a more serene time, all the words began to melt, released into the air like birds. Pantagruel finds a sackful of still frozen words and dumps them on the boat's deck. They thaw them out in their hands, able now to crack jokes about the frightful oaths and the echoes of distant battle which emerge.

This story has come back to me so often recently—reading *Who Do We Think We Are?* for example, or watching Damien O'Donnell's film *East is East*. There, the youngest boy in the family, Sajid, decides at one point to take off his hood. He puts aside the protective cowl he's been wearing non-stop for years to shelter himself from the unbearable tensions of the mixed family and cultures surrounding his development. Then he just decides to stop shutting out the world, and in a sense accepts things (and himself) for what they are. I think of him as England, though in some ways an England still to come. He—it—will become himself, or herself, in an archipelago of British-Irish variety and dissonance, with all kinds of family quarrels still going on, but in a democratic and outward-looking manner, from which the claustrophobia of Great Britain will have disappeared alongside its false security, its hegemonic conceit and its be-Crowned stultification.

So my title here, 'Farewell Britannia', is also intended to entail a 'Hello' to some quite different, and much more liveable, extended family—the sort of family people would want to join (and maybe the family many or most individuals find themselves wishing their actual families had been). If I'm right, there are at the present at least some signs of this coming about, rather than the gloomy prognosis of 'four-nations' doomsterism.