

Crack in the Union Jack

By Professor Alex de Ruyter, Director, Centre for Brexit Studies

“Draw the blinds and watch the show

Heard it on the radio

Saw it on the news today

Heard the lonely people say

There’s a great big crack in the union jack”

These lyrics, penned some 25 years ago by Brett Anderson, front man for 90s glam pop group, Suede, in the song “Crack in the Union Jack” seem somewhat apposite as the UK formally departed the EU at 11pm on Friday 31st January.

As I sat in my dining room on Friday night, having come off an interview with BBC WM at 11pm, a few fireworks went off, but they sounded somewhat muted and the noise soon trailed off with the Police curfew on fireworks at 11pm having been kept in place (to the disappointment of ardent Brexiteers).

Saturday morning saw us wake up (feeling “free” or despondent, or otherwise hungover) with the realisation that nothing – at this (Transition period) stage had changed.

Still, this seemed a surprise to leading Leave campaigner (and former Tory MEP) Daniel Hannan, who felt the need to broadcast to the world that the predictions of “Remainers” about Brexit-induced chaos had not come to pass^[1].

For now indeed we are in a transition period, where both sides will set out their objectives for a future trading relationship. Crunch time will come (again) by June, at which point the UK Government will have to inform Brussels as to whether it wishes to extend the said Transition period beyond the end of this year if trade negotiations look bogged down.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Johnson states that Brexit shall be an opportunity for “national renewal”[\[2\]](#). Johnson of course, not so long ago, spoke at some length about the concept of the “Demos” and how (organic) nation states were the only legitimate representation of the will of the People thereof.

In previous columns on these pages we have criticised this argument, not least because it relies upon the notion that the “British” people comprise some kind of Demos by their own self-definition, for now, in the past, and forever more.

However, as academic *Benedict* Anderson pointed out way back in 1983, such (national) identities are fluid and prone to change over time[\[3\]](#). That only about 25% of people in the UK self-identify as “British” according to the last Census (dated 2011) testifies to this.

As such, to come back to *Brett* Anderson, I would not venture to suggest that he was in any way predicting Brexit, though it is interesting to speculate what was on his mind at the time – *a la* Tom Nairn, the break-up of the UK perhaps?

Fast-forward 25 years and we have EU flags being lowered outside Government buildings and of course the departure from Brussels of our MEPs.

However, in Scotland, the Scottish Parliament voted by a small margin to keep the EU flag flying outside of Holyrood.[\[4\]](#) Ostensibly held as a gesture to support EU citizens living in Scotland, it is only a symbolic gesture which will do nothing to keep Scotland in the EU.

Of course, flags have enormous emotive force and serves a notice of the intent of the Scottish Government to secure a return to being an EU member. That this could only be secured via Scottish independence only drives home the tectonic forces that are renting asunder the fabric of the UK as a cohesive political entity.

Recent polling by YouGov (between January 22nd and 29th of this year) suggests that a majority of Scots now favour Scotland becoming an independent country, but by only a small majority (51% to 49%).[\[5\]](#)

For those campaigning for Scottish independence, one would think that they would want a more emphatic majority before risking another referendum. Not that this will stop the Scottish National Party (SNP) pushing to hold another one soon.

First Minister Nicola Sturgeon only last week called on MSPs to back another referendum in 2020 (non-binding though it would be given Westminster's opposition). Logic would still dictate 2022 or 2023 as more likely.

This would particularly be the case if the UK exits at the end of this year with no trade agreement in place (de facto "No Deal") and the SNP win another working majority at Holyrood having committed to an independence referendum as part of their manifesto.

Elsewhere in the "UK" we face the prospect of Northern Ireland (NI) facing a (permanent) separate regulatory status to the rest of the UK. Not that this is necessarily a bad thing for NI if it can capture the 'best of both worlds' in staying to all intents and purposes in the EU Single Market and Customs Union, yet possibly benefitting also if the UK can capture favourable terms in trade deals elsewhere.

Yet none of this will appease the feelings of Unionists in NI who feel cut-off from the rest of the UK and see Johnson's Withdrawal Agreement as a slippery slope to the path of a (re-)united Ireland.

That NI returned a majority of nationalist/republican MPs for the first time in its history in the 2019 election can only add to the feeling that it is drifting away from the rest of the UK.

This leaves us with Wales (divided deeply in EU sentiments between its majority Welsh language-speaking pro-EU areas and the Anglophone pro-Brexit areas around Cardiff and the Valleys) and an England starkly defined by the global city of London, and the English regions.

Moreover, the bitterness around the Brexit debate will not subside soon. Good luck to any UK Prime Minister – let alone one who took a lead partisan role in the Brexit debate – saying that they want to bridge the divides that now plague the UK. The "Crack in the Union Jack" has never looked wider...

[1] <https://twitter.com/DanielJHannan/status/1223660421514698761?s=03>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jan/31/boris-johnson-promises-brexite-will-lead-to-national-revival>

[3] Anderson, B. (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* London: Verso.

[4] <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jan/29/scottish-government-wins-vote-to-keep-eu-flag-flying-over-holyrood>

[5] <https://www.eveningexpress.co.uk/fp/news/local/new-yougov-poll-shows-support-for-scottish-independence/>