

United no more: Constitutional Headaches ahead for the United Kingdom

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Lorenzo Zucca Di 28 Jun 2016

The best still has to come: The United Kingdom will have constitutional headaches for the foreseeable future. Scotland is in pole position: there is no doubt as to its willingness to remain in the EU, but now it is forced to go; when two years ago it voted to remain in the UK, the main argument concerned its relation with the EU. Now, it is ready to negotiate independently with EU leaders. Nicola Sturgeon is the only leader who has a clear idea as to what to do. On the other hand, Brexit leaders are divided and unprepared.

Norther Ireland is also on the brink of a major constitutional crisis. The majority wanted to remain in the EU, and to keep Westminster at arm's length. The peace is recent and unstable; it is potentially a constitutional moment, in which Northern Ireland reflects on its identity, ties and prospects. A constitutional convention could be a way to appease the turmoil that has been stirred by an unwelcome decision to leave the EU.

Then there is Wales and London. Wales will not sit quietly, when everyone is busy asking for more autonomy and independence. Brexit's domino effect will be felt in the UK as well as in the rest of Europe. It has already been endorsed as a victory by Catalanian Independence movement, and by the Northern League in Italy. It is a reaction against centralisation of power in London and in Bruxelles. It is a reaction to elites who live in capital cities and rule from their ivory tower.

London is not in sync with the rest of the country. Londoners voted to remain, but they have been outvoted by the rest of England and Wales united. It is not surprising: the rest of England is one of the poorest regions in Europe. The gap between London and the rest is outrageous; but let us be very clear: that has nothing to do with Europe. That has to do with UK domestic policies that wiped away the industrial fabric of the country during the Thatcher years. Little has been done in 40 years to relaunch a stable economic infrastructure in England and Wales. The economic engine was in the City of London: financial success propelled the UK for a couple of decades. But when the crisis hit, the rest of the country suffered enormously.

Eastern Europeans, and Poles in particular, are the scape goats of a situation that was inevitable. The blame is directed to the outsiders, taking jobs away, and wrecking the economy. But the truth is that the blame should be directed to the political leaders, Labour and Conservatives, who allowed the country to become so damningly polarised and economically unbalanced. Brexit leaders have exploited basic anger and hatred: they fed these emotions with an enemy. They told lies about the British Eldorado outside of the EU. The sad truth is that people will wake up soon with the same problems and lesser opportunities.

What is unforgivable is that Brexit leaders are no way near to act upon their promises. They are discussing at the moment the meaning of Brexit: OK, the people want us to leave. But in practice, what the hell does it mean? Brexit leaders do not know. In fact, we do not even know who will lead the negotiations with the EU. This will take time: a new prime minister has to be selected, and he has to appoint a delegation that will negotiate the terms of the exit. It will take time, but there is no time. The clock is ticking and the people would like to see some results. The EU is also keen to resolve the uncertainty; nobody, in fact, welcome years of uncertainty. Companies, businesses, individuals: we all need to know what is going to happen in the near future, in order to make the best decision for ourselves.

Boris Johnson is now shifting to a much more moderate tone. In essence, he would like to maintain a strong relation with the EU, but without any serious (political) commitment: friends with benefits. You do your business, you make your money and that is the end of the story. Well, that is one story from a viewpoint. What Boris is not saying is that in order to have a strong relation, one has to respect all the rules agreed by the EU without having a say. Also, it means that the fundamental economic freedoms at the core of the market have to be respected: they include freedom of circulation of workers, amongst other things. Being a friend with benefits may sound

good on paper, but the practice is often more demanding and complicated.

This will all take a long time. By the time Brexit leaders have agreed about the meaning of Brexit, and have elected a new Prime Minister, and have appointed a delegation to Bruxelles, Scotland might have already reached an agreement in Bruxelles. Northern Ireland might have decided to open a constitutional convention. And Wales will have knocked for more devolution. Those who voted Brexit are now celebrating and singing 'Rule Britannia' in the streets. They are still dreaming. When they will wake up, they will have to face the facts: there is no Empire, and Brexit will not solve their economic problems. Immigrants will not be deported, and if foreigners decide to leave, this will not solve their problems either. One day, they will wake up to discover that the Kingdom is dis-United.

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