

spotlight europe

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Turbulent Times in the Disunited Kingdom

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The general election on 7th May 2015 is not only going to lead to radical changes in the political landscape. Britain will also have to come up with answers to the European, Scottish and English questions. How this can be done is a moot point. At any rate, it is not going to make EU policy-making any easier.

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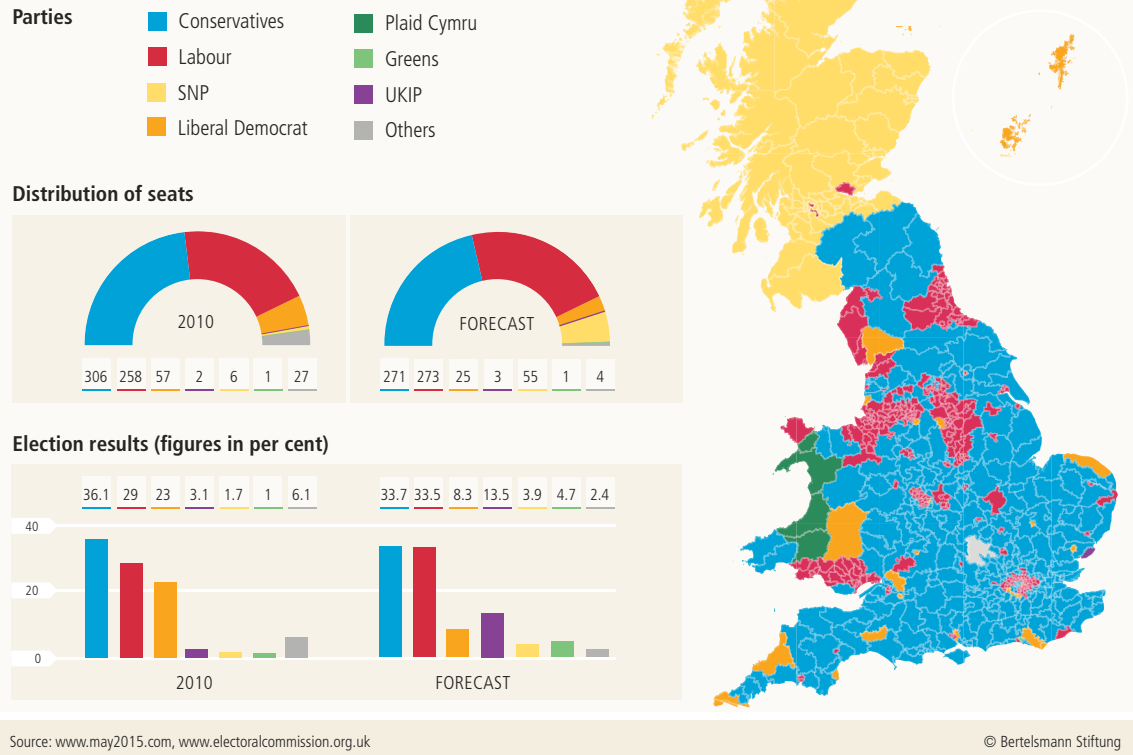
On 15th June the country will be celebrating the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta, which is the basis of English law and indeed of modern democracy. But not everyone is going to be in a festive mood. The fact of the matter is that after the forthcoming general election the United Kingdom is going to slide ineluctably into a constitutional crisis. Old habits and customs are fading away into oblivion, and the new ones have not as yet demonstrated that they can hold their own and survive. Since 1885 the Government and the Opposition have sat facing each other in the House of Commons two swords' length apart. Yet what came into being in the Palace of Westminster at the time of Queen Victoria as a clear-cut two-party system is disintegrating in the latter part of the reign of Queen Elizabeth II and becoming a fragmented

seven-party system with unsuspected and sometimes seemingly impossible alliances.

This means that the tacit agreement between the electorate and those it elects has lost its validity. For 130 years "first past the post" has been the golden rule of the British simple plurality voting system. What this means is that the largest party, no matter whether it was the Labour Party or the Conservative Party, obtained a clear-cut majority that enabled it to govern. It also made it impossible for small parties to participate in a government. For many decades this system was stable, unfair, and yet efficient. But that is now a thing of the past. The electorate and the politicians were wrong to assume that the current coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats was simply a fluke occurrence in the context of

Disunited Kingdom

General election results 2010 and forecast May 2015



the old system, and that things would quickly return to normal. In future Britain is going to see seven players (and not only three) in the House of Commons – two big ones, the Labour Party and the Conservative Party, and the Liberals, the UKIP, the Green Party and the Scottish and Welsh Nationalists.

On 21st February 2015 “The Economist” stated that “Britain’s slide into six-party politics presages instability and a crisis of legitimacy.” It went on to say that “almost all the running has been made by three insurgents: the *Scottish National Party* (SNP), which wants Scotland out of Britain; the *UK Independence Party* (UKIP), which wants Britain out of Europe; and the *Green Party*, which wants “hyper-capitalism” out of both Britain and Europe. It is the biggest shake-up since the early 20th century, when Labour displaced the Liberals.” The “Financial Times” sees things in much the same way, and has talked about “the great fragmentation.” Philip Stephens, its chief political commentator, believes that a vacuum of legitimacy

has emerged in the run-up to the election, and that it has been “filled by the ‘antis:’ the anti-elite, the anti-European, the anti-immigrant and the anti-capitalist.”

What we are faced with today is a *Disunited Kingdom*. The United Kingdom that emerged in the Victorian era is a thing of the past. However, as we will see in what follows, the country is fragmented not only with regard to party politics, but also and increasingly in social and geographical terms. This has certain consequences for the EU, which is the island’s most important partner.

David Cameron, the Conservative prime minister, has promised that if he is re-elected, he will permit the British electorate to decide by 2017 at the latest whether the UK should continue to be a member of the European Union or whether it should withdraw. In a survey commissioned by the think tank Chatham House sixty percent of the interviewees supported him on this point. Only 24 percent rejected

such a referendum. When all is said and done, a very small majority (40 percent for and 39 percent against) would now vote to keep the UK in the EU, and it is rising slowly.

Currently commentators in other countries like to focus on the decision for and against EU membership to the exclusion of all else. However, that is a rather superficial way of looking at this EU member state. Even if Britain votes to remain in the European Union, its domestic situation and thus British policy in the EU will continue to be at the mercy of the profound shifts and changes which we will now examine in greater detail.

A concomitant of the tendency to focus primarily on “Brexit,” that is, on the possibility that the United Kingdom will leave the EU, is the coverage of the rise of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and its popular leader, Nigel Farage. He is stealing the show from the established parties both with regard to European policy (90 percent of UKIP supporters are in favour of leaving the EU) and increasingly on the subject of immigration policy. Farage, a long-standing MEP, used to be a commodities trader in the City, is of Huguenot descent, and was educated at a prestigious school, Dulwich College. His second wife is German. Although he is obviously a member of the Establishment, he manages in an astonishing way to give the impression that he is an anti-establishment figure, even if it is just by posing with a pint of beer in front of a pub. He is far more effective in the media than Alex Salmond, who is actually a very popular figure. The former leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP) has now handed over the reins to party colleague Nicola Sturgeon.

Of course in domestic policy terms the pro-European SNP has become at least as influential as the UKIP. After the Scottish independence referendum on 18th September 2014 many people, and especially David Cameron, the prime minister, were totally convinced that the issue had been settled once and for all. This is certainly not the case. Despite the SNP’s lack of success at the ballot box, its membership has more than tripled, and has risen from 25,000 to over 90,000. It should

be borne in mind that in Scotland Labour and the Tories, the two “big” parties, each have about 20,000 members.

On 7th May the party that was defeated on 18th September, if the polls are anything to go by, is going to witness its greatest triumph. It will be getting a helping hand from both electoral law and the status of Scotland. There are 59 Scottish seats in the House of Commons. At the end of March the polls indicated that on this occasion the SNP will probably get as many as 55 of them (primarily at the expense of Labour, which has traditionally received strong support in the far north), even though in national terms it has only four or five percent of the votes.

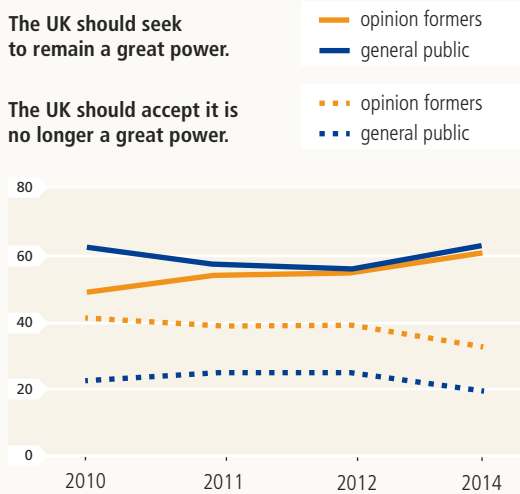
In the middle of April Labour and the Tories were running neck to neck. 33.5 percent of the interviewees expressed a preference for left-wing candidates, and 33.7 percent expressed a preference for right-wing candidates. At the beginning of the 1950s they received 97 percent of the votes, and in those days there were only two MPs in the House of Commons who did not belong to one of the two parties. Now there are 85. However, under the present system two-thirds of the votes are still enough in order to secure 90 percent of the seats. The UKIP is set to obtain 13.5 percent, the Liberals 8.3 percent, and the Green Party 4.7 percent. Taken together they will be getting about a quarter of the votes, but even in a best-case scenario only a tenth of the 650 seats in the House of Commons. Ulrich Storck, the head of the London office of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, has pointed out that the “general election on 7th May is the least predictable in British history.”

The fact that Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats have been such a failure has prompted the UKIP and the Green Party to reject the whole idea of a coalition. The SNP does not see it that way. It shares many of the convictions of the Labour Party, especially when it comes to the welfare state. The price for entering into a coalition could well be a second referendum on independence. This will almost certainly be held if the United Kingdom leaves the EU in 2017. The Scots are in fact loyal Europeans.

Vernon Bogdanor, a political scientist at King's College London, has pointed out that this means that the European question and the Scottish question are meeting head-on. "Nicola Sturgeon, the SNP leader, has indicated that such an outcome would not be accepted as legitimate in Scotland and that Scotland cannot be forced out of the European Union without its consent. She has argued that a mandate for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union can only be achieved through the consent of each of its constituent parts – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland."

Support for UK being a 'great power'

Percent of respondents



Source: Chatham House, YouGov Survey, 08/2014

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As it happens, the European question has reared its ugly head in another part of the Disunited Kingdom. The Cameron government would also like to redefine its membership of the Council of Europe, and thus to evade being subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights. However, this policy is not consonant with the Belfast Agreement of 1998. At the time the people of Northern Ireland were assured that on account of the vicious civil war between Unionists and Nationalists they would be given "rights supplementary to those in the European Convention on Human Rights, to reflect the particular circumstances

of Northern Ireland." In this area the Conservatives are driving a wedge into the United Kingdom that is similar to the one they have driven between the UK and the rest of Europe.

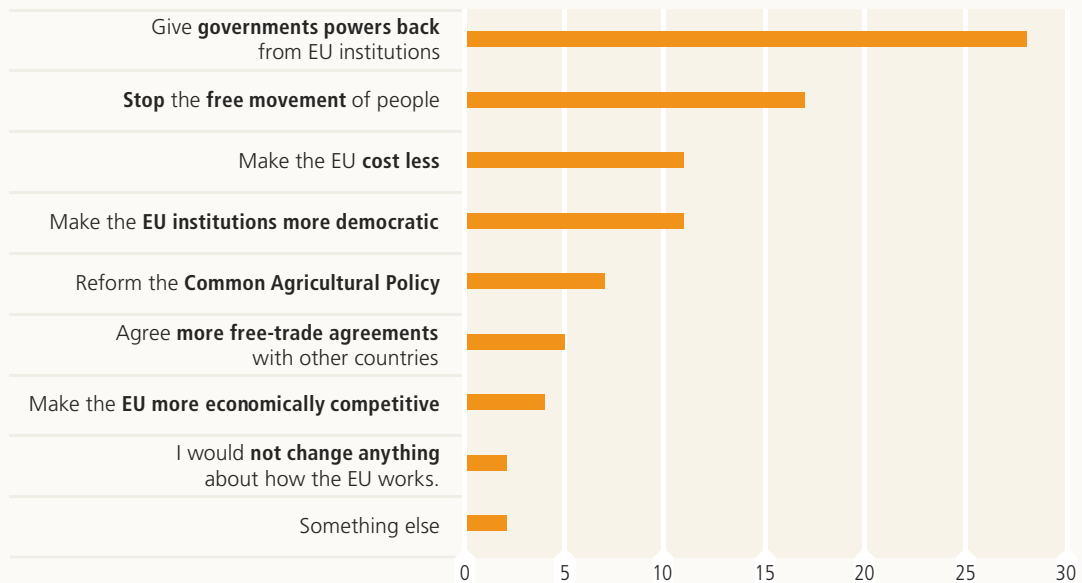
In recent times the rise of Scottish nationalism and the greater powers given to the Scottish Parliament before and after the independence referendum have prompted people to reconsider the meaning of "Englishness." Such questions are not merely about identity. They are also about appropriate political representation. Conservatives and members of the UKIP (who are especially interested in this issue) have taken to asking why Scottish MPs are permitted to vote in the House of Commons on laws which primarily affect the English. Thus the Scottish question is not only a European issue. It is also an English one. There are 650 MPs in the House of Commons, and 533 represent constituencies in England, which is where 85% of the people of Britain live. However, unlike the Welsh, the Scots and the Northern Irish the English do not have a parliament of their own. Since 1977 this constitutional dilemma has been referred to as the "West Lothian question" in the British debate. At the time the Labour MP for the West Lothian constituency came up with the following question. "For how long will English constituencies and English Honourable members tolerate ... at least 119 Honourable Members from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland exercising an important, and probably often decisive, effect on English politics while they themselves have no say in the same matters in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland?"

Vernon Bogdanor believes that at the heart of this dilemma there are, strictly speaking, two basic questions. "This means that legislation affecting the health service, schools or housing in England can be put on the statute book as a result of the votes of Scottish MPs, while English MPs no longer have responsibility for these matters in Scotland."

An English parliament would of course seem to be a logical solution. However, within a federal system this would represent 85 percent of the population, a state of affairs that exists nowhere else in the world. Another solution

If you could pick one area for reform in the EU, what would it be?

Percentage of respondents, general public



Source: Chatham House, YouGov Survey, 08/2014

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would be a series of regional parliaments in England, since these would split up the 85 percent into more manageable units. However, as Bogdanor points out, such a plan would have to overcome other obstacles. “The truth is that, in England, by contrast with many countries on the Continent and by contrast with federal states such as the United States and Canada, there is little regional feeling. Most people in England feel that they belong to a town and a county but not to a region. In England, the regions are little more than ghosts.”

The fault lines are not only between Scotland and England, but increasingly within England itself. There are roughly 54 million people in England, and almost 14 million of them, that is, about one in three, live in the Greater London area. “A political and cultural chasm has opened up between London, still the global hub of 2012, and a less prosperous English hinterland.” The City, which was all the rage in the era of Cool Britannia, has acquired a bad name with the man in the street

in England (and elsewhere) in the wake of the banking crisis and a whole series of banking scandals. In 1983 the British Social Attitudes Survey revealed that 90 percent of the electorate believed that banks were well-managed institutions. In 2012 only 19% were of this opinion. London now has a tarnished reputation. On 5th March 2015 the “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung” published an article entitled “The Black Money Capital” which claimed that 36,000 properties in London are owned by anonymous letterbox companies in offshore centres such as the British Virgin Islands and the Isle of Man. Many of these expensive buildings are empty. They are simply a good place “to park large sums of money.”

A federal structure is not a feasible option as far as the United Kingdom is concerned, and so one is led to ask whether there are any other possible solutions.

Since 2001 the Conservatives, in their political manifestos, have propagated the idea of

“English votes for English laws.” Bogdanor warns that this would lead to a divided or “bifurcated” House of Commons. The English would vote on health and educational legislation, and all British MPs would be entitled to vote on defence and economic policy. Thus in the case of a Labour-SNP coalition, which is a distinct possibility, this kind of division or bifurcation will always come into play whenever the government is forced to fall back on the votes of the Scottish MPs.

Risks and side-effects are part and parcel of all these scenarios. People have stopped thinking about their shared heritage and what they have in common, or, to put it another way, about the United Kingdom as a whole, and have taken to emphasizing the divisive aspects and the differences between its constituent parts.

Old ties and links are becoming increasingly unimportant because more and more powers are being taken away from Westminster. The trend to more “devolution” in Britain continues unabated. Thus the British do not have a problem only with the European Union. They also have a problem with their own union, which began to be forged towards the end of the sixteenth century and was subsequently enshrined in the Acts of Union.

The changes in the party landscape have been occasioned primarily by social factors, and to a certain extent by political constraints and the issue of identity. The Labour/Tory duopoly, which lasted for more than a hundred years, was of course aided and abetted by the simple plurality voting system, though in the final analysis it has its roots in British notions and perceptions of a class society. The workers and salaried employees were loyal to Labour, which they regarded as a kind of family. On the other hand, generations of bourgeois voters and aristocrats thought of themselves as members of the Tory tribe. An analysis of the current situation in “The Economist” comes to the following conclusion. “As the British class system has given way to a mish-mash of socio-economic groupings, tribal loyalties to Labour and the Conservatives have evaporated.”

The BBC Lab UK Great British Class Survey, which was conducted in 2013, defined seven social classes in modern British society on the basis of economic, social and cultural indicators.

At the top of the pyramid there is an elite which has the highest scores in all three areas. Next come the established middle class, the largest group; a technical middle class which scores low for social capital and is distinguished by cultural apathy; the new affluent workers, a young and socially and culturally active group; the traditional working class, the members of which have the highest average age, 66, and frequently own a small property; and the emergent service workers, a young urban group which has high social and cultural capital. And finally there is the precariat (or precarious proletariat), the poorest class.

This social fragmentation has now spilt over into the political space. Voters are no longer right-wing or left-wing. They have become political consumers who have rather high expectations with regard to politics and politicians. Their voting behaviour is both changeable and choosy.

The “Financial Times” sums up the situation as follows. “Britain needs a new way of governing itself and a new story – a binding narrative that affords due respect to the past but is no longer imprisoned by it.”

According to the Chatham House-YouGov Survey, in Britain almost two-thirds of the population are in favour of trying to achieve the status of a great power (which is not quite the same as the German term “Großmacht-Status.”) Yet this is not really on the cards, since there are simply not enough financial resources. The current government, which is made up of Conservatives and Liberals, has slashed the budgets for foreign relations and defence, and within the framework of the EU has vetoed many things that could have contributed to such a status. This is the reason why Washington keeps repeating that the “special relationship” between the US and the UK is in bad shape. The Minsk agreement with Vladimir Putin was negotiated by the German

chancellor and the French president. The British prime minister was not even asked to participate. The same thing happened in September 2014 when President Obama was trying to forge a coalition against the Islamic State. This kind of policymaking does not tally with the grand statements that were made in the government's "Strategic Defence and Security Review 2010." "Our country has always had global responsibilities and global ambitions. We have a proud history of standing up for the values we believe in."

The UK has been weakened internally. In economic terms it is dependent on the City, the world's greatest financial services centre. And, although no one has forced it to do so, it has retreated to the sidelines in the EU and on the global stage. British politicians should own up to the fact that there is a yawning gap between their assertions and the reality of the situation. Saying no to the European Union will simply deepen this chasm. But even if it were to say yes, an increasingly turbulent and strife-ridden Britain is going to be a difficult partner in the EU. ■

Further reading:

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