

The heavy price of Johnson's English nationalism

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The world has, at last, noticed that not all is well in Northern Ireland. Loyalist rioting has gone on for six nights now. There is no sign, as yet, of it ending.

I will never condone violence. But when a community tolerates it - and it must be since it seems that several hundred people are engaged in this activity - then there is an indication of real political concern within it, and that requires attention.

Various justifications for this violence have been promoted. I am not able to determine whether they are reliable or not, and so will not comment. What I do know is that Boris Johnson wilfully changed the status of Northern Ireland and then wilfully lied about doing so when undertaking Brexit.

As years have passed it has become increasingly obvious how skilful the Good Friday Agreement on Northern Ireland was. By letting both communities feel that they secured the identity that they wished for the Agreement delivered an unexpected peace.

Unionists felt a part of the UK. Nationalists saw the border with Ireland disappear. The result was a compromise within the EU that proved to be remarkably durable.

Brexit took that away. The EU departed the scene. A border had to be created. It is in the Irish Sea, and not within Ireland. The result is Unionist anger. That was always predictable.

That Johnson lied about, and the DUP supported his plans for far too long made things worse. Being betrayed by those you think should be your own side is never a good feeling.

And betrayal is an appropriate word here. That is what Johnson did. He actually betrayed all in Northern Ireland by lying about what was being done. It's just some feel it more intensely.

What can be done? Honesty would help. But honesty about a deal that does, and even has to by its very nature, fail Northern Ireland can only go so far. The brutal reality is

that the basis for the peace has been fractured.

I have no obvious solution to offer. There is none available. That's because Johnson did not care. Nor did the rest of the UK care. Northern Ireland was simply not an issue for them. Only a tiny proportion from Great Britain has ever been there. The rest think it another country. And the Unionists don't want to accept that. They wish to be a part of a country that is now very obviously indifferent to them.

Do I care about this? Yes, of course I do. I am aware that the same issue exists in Wales and Scotland. I am also aware that the sense of betrayal by what is, in effect, England, will also be found amongst some there. So of course I am aware of this issue and care about it. Passions run high in such situations. Outcomes are unpredictable. I definitely care about that.

But what I also know is that none of this can be managed without skilful diplomatic input from London. And that is a lot, and maybe too much, to expect.

Brexit was the creation of those now in power in London. They advanced it for their own cynical gain. Their transformation of the Conservative Party into an English nationalist party was not by chance. The consequences have and will flow from that.

Have they the ability to both simultaneously promote the nationalist, micro-imperialist cause that they promote and deal with tensions that arise from it, so far only really apparent in Northern Ireland? I doubt it.

The reason is obvious, it comes from the paradox that their nationalism is simultaneously imperialist. English nationalism's identity requires that it has the right to rule others, even if only now in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. So they cannot even be honest enough to say to the loyalists in Northern Ireland that the country of which they wish to be a part no longer wants them, even if the vast majority in that country probably think that. As a result Johnson fuels the hope of those rioting, whilst ensuring that in reality there is none, as evidenced by his actions on Brexit.

I did not expect this to happen so quickly. I thought there would be a longer period of grace on this issue. It appears not. Johnson lit the blue touch paper. He has no fire extinguisher. He does not have the skills to diffuse what he so deliberately created. He may not even have the desire.

The best we can hope for is that the troubles might be contained. But what I am quite sure about is that the stresses will not be contained. The route on which English nationalism set us is a stressful one, for the UK and the nations that will now seemingly inevitably emerge from it. Anyone interested in the route to constitutional change has to recognise that, and be honest about it. Johnson proves the risk of dishonesty. It is very high, and we might all suffer as a result of it.