

Can the UK survive?

<https://www.taxresearch.org.uk/Blog/2025/11/03/can-the-uk-survive/>

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Is the breakup of Britain inevitable?

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are turning away from Westminster while England clings to a failing system of centralised power. In this video, I ask whether the UK can survive much longer in its current form, and whether its collapse might be the chance to start again.

Could four sovereign democracies emerge from the ruins of a tired union?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CnLkIsKxEEw?si=nKMoFmzYzW-ljklIA>

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=bxcd7-19af9ee-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&font=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

How long can the United Kingdom last? It's a real question, which needs a real answer.

In the 1970s, a chap called Tom Nairn wrote a book called *The Breakup of Britain*, and in that he warned that the UK was an artificial state made up, of course, of four nations,

who would only remain within it so long as they all believed it worthwhile. My argument is that three out of the four no longer have that belief, and in that case, for how much longer can the UK survive?

Plaid Cymru could soon lead the government of Wales. It's just won the Caerphilly by-election. It is ahead of Reform by a comfortable margin. Labour is disappearing as a power in Wales. The next government in the Welsh Senedd could be led by Welsh nationalists.

And at the same time, the SNP is still dominating Scottish politics, and questions around Scottish independence are showing that more and more people in that country are now looking for independence and supporting the SNP. As a result, the likelihood that the SNP will be in government again after the 2026 elections in that country is very high.

And in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin is already governing, and the possibility that Sinn Féin might be governing in Ireland as well sometime soon is real.

But the point is that in three of the four nations that currently make up the UK, parties whose goal is to leave the union might be leading governments from 2026 onwards.

Westminster doesn't seem to have noticed, or worse, it doesn't seem to care. It's as if London's model of centralised, extractive, and dismissive democracy is the only one that they know about.

Decades of austerity from Westminster have hollowed out the services of local authorities right across the UK and denied the devolved countries the funds they need to deliver for the people of those places. The promise that 'London knows best' has very clearly failed. Nobody in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland can now really believe that. People now don't see it as a risk; they see it as a prospect for relief from the failure that London is imposing upon them.

And they can see that we live in an unequal economy. That's true within England itself. People in England aren't happy either. The Southeast is hoarding wealth and claiming most of the investment in the UK, particularly in infrastructure, whilst the Treasury gifts small grants to the rest of the country in tokenistic, grudging rounds of grant giving, which frankly are desperately unfair in the way that they are managed.

This is not a union of equals. It's a fiscal hierarchy where not just Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland lose out, but so does the North, so does the West of England, so does the Midlands, so does East Anglia, and so does the Southwest.

This is a situation that creates real stress for the future of the United Kingdom. There's moral exhaustion inside the Labour and Tory parties. Both are clinging to a 19th-century idea of sovereignty. They imagine that authority still flows outward from

them, and London, towards everyone else, and that is based upon their continuing belief that the public wants competence, dignity, and democracy, but what they fail to notice is that Westminster no longer offers any of these. They have failed to deliver.

And the independence movements in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have noticed. In fact, they've noticed so much that the arguments for independence are now based upon the issues around democracy and governance and not so much on identity. People are not so obsessed with the issues of "I'm not British anymore" as "I want to be properly governed".

And at the same time, England has moved towards a toxic form of nationalism, of exclusion, that the far right is driving and which is proving to be pretty unacceptable elsewhere. The other nations now demand control over their own decisions, and Westminster's refusal to share power just makes breakup inevitable.

Now, the union's survival depends not on what happens now in those three other countries within the union, which are not England, but on what happens in England. Because there will have to be a choice that is made, and the choice will be between, do we want to stick with an alliance with England, or do we want to go our own way, where the alliance could quite possibly be between Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, working in some form of federation, although independent states, to mutually support each other? And that's plausible.

So what does England have to do to provide a choice to the people in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland who are at present being persuaded that it's time to leave?

First of all, England has to recognise that the union, which makes up the United Kingdom, is voluntary. You wouldn't believe that from what the Labour Party and the Tories say. They suggest that they have a right to govern, but the truth is, each nation is sovereign already, and in many aspects, that is recognised around the world.

Westminster also has to create a new fiscal settlement. The fact is that the countries of the UK and the regions of England are no longer willing to be constrained by what they're given by Westminster. They've had enough of being denied real power and the option to make choices locally. The limited funding they're being given is insufficient to empower them, and that is the cause of the frustration which is now rampant right throughout the UK, and giving rise to the feeling that three countries want to leave.

And there has to be constitutional reform as well. England has to indicate that it's not just willing to accept that these countries are sovereign with the right to decide, but it also has to indicate that it is willing to update its own power structures.]

It has to scrap the monarchy and everything that goes with it, and the eugenic power that is implicit within it.

It has to scrap the House of Lords. It is a total anachronism that we still have unelected peers governing this country.

It has to adopt proportional representation so that the votes that people cast are reflected in the power balances within Westminster and people can believe that democracy is something in which they can actually participate with the possibility of effecting change.

And England has to empower local government, not only in England, but everywhere to ensure that powers have devolved downwards to the point where they are best taken. That is something that Thatcher destroyed, and which we need to reimagine.

But England needs to reimagine itself. English democracy has been hollowed out to the point where it hardly exists, and if there is to be a debate about whether the United Kingdom is to continue, or not, England itself has to reinvent the democracy that it has denied the people of its own country for too long.

Then there's a real opportunity to ask the question, " So what do you want? Do you want to leave?", which is a question that Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland will all have to ask themselves at some point, and which they should be given the right to consider. And the rest of England also needs to be asked, "How do you want to deal with London?" The fact is, if this opportunity isn't given, then the breakup may happen anyway.

It is possible for a country to leave the United Kingdom without the consent of England. International law recognises that fact. Countries, of course, split up without the consent of the dominant party who wants to keep control over the minority party within a union. We've seen it. We have Czechia and Slovakia. Now we don't have Czechoslovakia, and we've seen the end of Yugoslavia as it once was, and the breakup into numerous states, and then some of them breaking up again because the outcome wasn't fair. The point is, countries can be changed and rechanged to achieve right outcomes. And to pretend that the UK has a right to survive is absurd; it doesn't. The arrogance of those who claim "We are in charge, you will do what we say," is one of the reasons why this very situation of stress exists.

There could be an opportunity, of course, here as well. There is the opportunity for four sovereign cooperative democracies to be created, working to a fair degree in alliance, creating their own free trade area, for example, to achieve outcomes which they could not achieve individually but which they could collectively. There could be agreements about defence. There could be agreements on many things. I suspect not on currency, each country will require its own currency. But the point is that even that could be coordinated to some degree, and they could work together on issues that are fundamental to our common concern, like climate and energy, migration, and peace. All of these suggest that we could have a politics of care and an economy of care and not of control.

But let's go back right to the beginning. Nairn's question still stands. Is there any reason for the union to exist? Have Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland got any reason to consent to remain in alliance with Westminster? And unless Westminster reforms, the answer to that is undoubtedly no. Right now, there is no reason for them to accept rule from England because England is failing to rule in their interests just as much as it's failing to rule in the interest of England itself.

So the breakup of the United Kingdom may be closer than we think, and perhaps that won't be a disaster, although most people in England probably think it would be, but it might instead be a chance to begin anew.

What do you think?

Do you think the days of the United Kingdom are over?

Do you think Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland deserve to be independent countries?

Do you think that Westminster itself has to be reformed and that we need major changes to the monarchy, to the Lords, to our voting system and everything else to make this happen?

Or do you think everything will carry on as is?

Let us know. There's a poll down below.

Poll

[poll id="240"]

Taking further action

If you want to write a letter to your MP on the issues raised in this blog post, there is a ChatGPT prompt to assist you in doing so, with full instructions, [here](#).

One word of warning, though: please ensure you have the correct MP. ChatGPT can get it wrong.

Comments

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