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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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by PATRICK COCKBURN

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Brexit Britain's Crisis of Self-Confidence Will Only End in Tears and Rising Nationalism



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The UK has long been divided by class, region and race, but these divisions have been masked by political and economic success. This has meant the English, as the dominant nation in the UK, are not good at coping with a sense of failure and a loss of self-confidence.

The current focus is on parliamentary turmoil and the acceptance or rejection of Theresa May's muted version of Brexit but, whatever happens in the coming weeks, there will be no resolution of the overall crisis. On the contrary, the divisions exacerbated by Brexit will

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only get deeper and more toxic, dominating the national agenda to the exclusion of everything else.

The nature of English nationalism – deeply ingrained but so self-confident its norms were assumed by most English people to be part of the natural order of things – is changing. George Bernard Shaw said “a healthy nation is as unconscious of its nationality as a healthy man is of his bones”. Smaller nations like the Irish and the Poles, with a history of defeat and occupation, have grim experience of having to nurse back to health the fractured bones of their nation but for the English worrying about their national identity and the future status is a new and unnerving experience.

The sense of English superiority was real but relaxed and often expressed in self-mockery. I remember my late brother-in-law Michael Flanders, part of the Flanders and Swann duo in the 1950s and 1960s, singing a song entitled Patriotic Prejudice, one version of which ran:

“The English, the English, the English are best,
I wouldn’t give tuppence for all of the rest.
The Germans are German, the Russians are red,
The French and Italians eat garlic in bed.
The English are moral, the English are good,
And clever and modest and misunderstood.”

Many pro-Brexit supporters do not seem to have advanced far beyond this benign picture of the national character. But these days their tone is defensive and self-assertive. Immigrants are to be schooled in British values – whatever those may be – the very thing Shaw saw as a symptom of unhealthy nationalism.

Analysis of the forces that led to Brexit usually looks at issues over too short a time span. The English may once have been confident of their own nationality but this does not mean they were as tolerant of others as they sometimes like to suppose. Punch cartoons in the 19th century showed the Irish as murderous sub-humans. The Aliens Act of 1905, brought in by a Conservative government with an eye to winning votes in a general election the following year, aimed to exclude Jews fleeing Russian pogroms. A century later, the Conservative Party spent years trying to trump Tony Blair’s ability to win successive elections by experimenting with different types of dog-whistle anti-immigrant rhetoric, often combined with demonisation of the EU.

Conservative politicians such as David Cameron, whose career was to be destroyed by the outcome of the 2016 Brexit referendum, were highlighting the migrant threat a year before

the vote, warning of “a swarm of people, coming from the Mediterranean, seeking a better life, wanting to come to Britain”. This showed real chutzpah, or cheek, since Cameron played a central role in launching the Nato war to overthrow Gaddafi in 2011 that turned Libya into a land of warlords and predatory militias, opening the way for migrants from North Africa to try to reach Europe from Libya in overcrowded boats and dinghies, often dying in the attempt.

A further feature of English nationalism will make it difficult to manoeuvre during the coming years of preoccupation with European relations. Small nations get used to inferior status and playing a weaker hand against opponents who hold most of the cards. British diplomats understand this, but a large part of public opinion in Britain, as in other former imperial nations, sees compromise as a sign of inexplicable weakness of will or as a treacherous stab in the back.

This lethal inability to calculate the real balance of power in the EU or anywhere else is not confined to an ill-informed public which has been spoon-fed war-time triumphs. Covering wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria over the last 20 years, I noticed again and again how difficult British politicians found it to take on board what was really happening and distinguish winners from losers, obvious though this often was.

A further English weakness – and the switch from referring to the English rather than the British is deliberate – is that neither Leavers nor Remainers have ever thought through what self-determination really means and how it can best be achieved. This is a perfectly legitimate aim that has inspired national movements in much of the world but Remainers tend to deride it as spurious patriotic bombast tinged with racism, and Leavers speak of achieving real independence for Britain almost automatically once the shackles of the EU are removed. This is in keeping with the behaviour of every nationalist or liberation movement in history which has invariably blamed all the woes of its people on foreign rulers or domestic tyrants. This conveniently saves them the trouble of having to explain what they would do themselves.

Britain could achieve a greater degree of formal self-determination outside the EU, though everybody in the country would be considerably poorer. But it would not be as a free trading entrepot like Singapore or Dubai: political and economic isolation for any country usually leads to the state playing a greater role. This is already happening in a small way in Britain with the Department of Health arranging uninterrupted supplies of medicine in case Britain topples out of the EU next year without an agreement.

A contradictory aspect of the Brexiteer project is fanaticism about freeing Britain from EU courts and regulations. At the same time, Leavers are relaxed about British water companies and other essential utilities being owned by financiers in Sydney, Hong Kong and anywhere else in the world.

As Shaw pointed out, national self-confidence is not something that you notice until it is gone and it is then difficult to win back. The same is true of national unity: the obvious fallacy that the British as a whole chose to leave the EU, when the vote was so evenly divided, could only end in a self-destructive crisis. To expect such a revolutionary change to be carried out by a minority government was demented. Whatever happens in the coming months and years, the English nationality will have to mend a lot of broken bones.