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Europe Has Underestimated the Destructive Force of Nationalism

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I started working as a journalist at the height of the troubles in Northern Ireland, between 1972 and 1975, and then moved to Lebanon where the 15-year-long civil war was just beginning. I saw both countries as interesting but bloody and atypical, sad casualties of their divisive histories and out of keeping with the modern world.

Unfortunately, over the following 40 years it turned out that the Lebanese war was a foretaste of the violent sectarian, ethnic and social divisions that were to tear the Middle East apart. Nation states ruled by despots became more politically fragile by the year and foreign powers exacerbated civil wars by military intervention and by backing their local proxies. Extreme Islam flourished in conditions of chaos, replacing nationalism and socialism as the ideological vehicle for opposition to the status quo.

Just how Britain plunged into this morass without much idea of the dangers it was running should be illuminated at great length by the Chilcot Report when it is published next Wednesday, but the risks involved were obvious from the beginning.

Analogies between the break-up of Lebanon into warring factions, which I witnessed when I first arrived, and the disintegration of the Middle East today are clear cut and undeniable. There are currently at least seven wars and three serious insurgencies raging in the countries between Pakistan and Nigeria, with no signs of those conflicts ending. Over the years,

I periodically wrote doleful warnings about how the disintegration of Lebanon and Iraq, disasters that had once seemed to me to be so out of the ordinary, were spreading to neighbouring states and becoming the new norm.

By the way of contrast, Northern Ireland seldom provided useful parallels with developments in the rest of Britain or Western Europe; its violence and sectarian divisions made it feel more like a chunk of the Balkans that had accidentally lodged on the shores of the Atlantic.

It is only in the last couple of years that I began to notice similarities in tone and substance between Northern Ireland as I knew it in the 1970s and British politics today. The referendum on Scottish independence in 2014 and the electoral triumph of the Scottish Nationalist Party the following year, put the legitimacy and integrity of the British state in doubt on the mainland, with the same destabilising effect as it had always had in Northern Ireland. Equally disturbing was the way in which immigration moved to the centre of the political stage during the Brexit campaign.

One always knew that there were deep wells of xenophobia in England, but what was different about the last few months, and reminiscent of Northern Ireland, was the way in which mainstream politicians tolerated or promoted a racist message as their main instrument for mobilizing voters. British politicians once "played the Orange card" in Ireland with toxic results for its people; now they are playing "the immigrant card" at home with equally explosive potential.

I have always been suspicious of what I used to deride as "the department of shallow analogies" between superficially similar, but in reality very different, situations in different countries. I remember how much it used to annoy me when I was a correspondent in Moscow in the 1980s and visitors would assure me that the Soviet Union was just like South Africa, or some other country with which they were familiar.

But parallels between Ireland and England – it is difficult to speak of Britain any more for purposes of analysis – are useful because they have enough in common to illuminate divergent approaches and outcomes.

It is a difficult moment to look sensibly at the Brexit vote because most political, media and academic commentators wanted Britain to remain in the EU and enjoy a grim satisfaction in interpreting every development since the vote as a fresh sign of calamity. Many revel in exaggerations, such as the oft-quoted remark by the Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte, that "England has collapsed politically, monetarily, constitutionally and economically." This is self-evidently absurd but has given a thrill to those who are open to all signs that their predictions of disaster, in the event of an anti-EU vote, are being fulfilled.

There is a real crisis, but, unlike the Northern Irish and Lebanese, the English are not used to living with instability and have a difficulty in assessing the gravity of the risks they are facing.

A further source of perplexity is that the political terrain has genuinely changed. Analysts of British politics are not used to assessing the significance of an empowered and newly visible English nationalism – always potent but with no reason to display its strength in the past because it was so wholly in control of a successful British state. This over-confidence led the Conservatives, Labour and other political parties to underrate the strength of Scottish nationalism over the last decade.

When it comes to immigration there is an interesting difference between the response of Ireland and England. About one in nine of the 4.6 million population of Ireland are foreign born, but there has not been the same hostile reaction against immigrants as in England. This may be because in Ireland Sinn Fein, which, whatever else it is, is not a racist party, speaks for extreme Irish nationalism and for much of the urban poor, a situation in sharp contrast to Britain where Labour has always been wary of nationalism seeing it as a phony diversion from social and economic demands.

But it is precisely when economic, social and nationalist demands combine, as appears to be happening in England and Scotland, that they become a powerful force, as occurred in Ireland in the 19th century when the tenant farmers hunger for their own land united with the drive for Irish self-rule.

The implosion of the centre-left, not just in Britain but in countries like Germany and Austria, is a feature of the present political landscape. Abandoning full scale state intervention, the social democrats have ceased to be a convincing alternative to the status quo since the 1980s and were unable to take advantage of the financial crash in 2008.

Even when the centre-left flourished, it has always been uncomfortable in coping with nationalism as a form of communal identity. Conservatives used to be good at appealing to English nationalism, but appear to have lost this ability as globalisation downgrades national solidarity in the interests of a transnational ruling elite, thus opening up a political vacuum that only the far right is ideologically prepared to fill.

There are parallels here with the Middle East as it started to disintegration about 15 years ago: it emerged that only sectarian and ethnic identities commanded enough loyalty to defend or advance the interests of communities. This was true of Hezbollah in Lebanon, which became the Praetorian Guard of the Shia community, and later of Isis and the al-Nusra Front, which bore the same relationship to Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria.

The secular opposition moderates, who briefly flourished in 2011, framed their grievances in terms of human rights, abandoning territorial nationalism which they generally saw as a self-serving justification for corrupt authoritarian regimes. By downgrading loyalty to the national state, they unwittingly opened the door to religious and ethnic movements as the only alternatives to discredited old regimes.

There are common features between Britain's failure in Iraq between 2003 and 2009, which Chilcot Report will seek to describe and explain, and the crisis revolving around the British exit from the EU. It will be interesting to see what Sir John Chilcot makes of all this because the Iraq war was the last great test of the British political establishment and state before the Brexit vote and one that it demonstrably failed.

In the case of the Iraq war there was a prolonged unwillingness to recognise that mistakes had been made – witness the seven years it has taken for Chilcot to appear – or to learn from them. This does not fill one with confidence about Britain's capacity to grapple with and overcome the consequences of Brexit.