

1707-2007: CELEBRATING 300 YEARS OF POLITICAL UNION BETWEEN ENGLAND AND SCOTLAND

by Christopher Luke

To someone like me who is half-English and half Ulster-Scots and who has a Welsh sister-in-law the current state of the Union of the United Kingdom and, in particular, the growing acrimony between and within its component parts is deeply distressing. I was brought up to believe – and still do believe – that no one part of the United Kingdom is either inferior or superior to the others and that, to quote one former British Prime Minister, “the sum of the Union is greater than its component parts”.

Just as the United Kingdom is not unlike a family of four members – with each sharing a common language, history and culture with one another – so the Union which binds us together is not unlike a marriage with each country within the Kingdom committing themselves to one another “for better, for worse: for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God’s holy law”!!!

Like all families and marriages the United Kingdom and the Union have their moments – periods of happiness and success, and other periods of sorrow and comparative poverty; periods when the component parts of the Kingdom are content to be members of the same family and other periods when they seek independence from each other – but, on the whole, the Union has been good for each part of the Kingdom and good for the United Kingdom as a whole, both in terms of the UK’s standing in the world and our being able to achieve much more by being united than we would have realised were we to have remained, or to once again become, four smaller independent states.

Although I am no fan or friend of Gordon Brown I nevertheless find myself agreeing with him when, in his speech in Edinburgh on 8th September 2006, he said “In the last year, I have been in almost every corner of the United Kingdom – travelling through England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, visiting communities both urban and rural – meeting people of many different races, faiths and beliefs. Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland are not foreign lands to each other. We are all part of the United Kingdom which we all built ... By geography we are neighbours. By history we are linked together. And by economics, we are of course partners. Today, we have to teach the Conservatives, who were once proud to be the Party of the Union, that the Union matters...”.

My reason for recalling this is that 2007 marks both the 300th Anniversary of the Treaty of Union between England and Scotland, and the 50th Anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Rome. Whilst the Union of Crowns united the historic Kingdoms of England and Scotland under one crown – James VI of Scotland/James I of England – in 1603, it was not until the signing of the Treaty of Union in 1707 that the English Parliament and the Scottish Parliament were finally abolished and the Parliament of Great Britain was established in their stead – thus fulfilling the Biblical prophecy of the union of two sticks foretold in Ezekiel Chapter 37 – although the United Kingdom Parliament as we know it today did not come into being until Ireland joined Great Britain (following the enactment of the 1800 Act of Union) whilst the 1957 Treaty of Rome laid the foundation stone for the creation of what was then called the European Economic Community (now simply called the European Community or European Union) which the United Kingdom joined in 1973.

The contrast between these two treaties – the 1707 Treaty of Union and the 1957 Treaty of Rome – could not be more stark although there are remarkable similarities in the sense that just as the 1707 Treaty of Union created economic, monetary and political union (including a single currency and free movement of people) between England and Scotland, so the “ever closer union” envisaged by signatories to the 1957 Treaty of Rome has led them and the signatories to every successive EEC/EU Treaty to facilitate the free movement of people and capital across the EU paving the way for the eventual abolition of the parliaments of EU member-states, the adoption of a single currency throughout the European Union (including the United Kingdom) and the creation of a United States of Europe, with either the European Commission or European Parliament acting as the supreme legislative authority for all EU member-states and the European Court of Justice being the supreme arbiter in all disputes concerning EU law. The on-going efforts to create a common defence and foreign policy and a single European defence force (acting under the orders of either the European Parliament or European Council of Ministers and possibly superseding NATO) – to which what remains of our own armed forces will be subordinate – are perhaps the most telling revelation to date that the architects of the Treaty of Rome never envisaged that its signatories and the parties to any future “community” of European nations would remain masters of their own house, but become merely servants of a European super-state.

Whilst lesser mortals point to the Union of the United Kingdom as a microcosm of what the European Union could be – claiming that the peoples of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland share a common language, history, culture and, yes, free movement of people and capital between its component parts (and even a single currency and monetary union with each other) whilst being governed from the United Kingdom Parliament at Westminster – the diverse peoples of the United Kingdom and the nations which constitute Continental Europe do not share common loyalties and ties with each other nor are they likely to appreciate being governed from the European Parliament than Scottish, Welsh and Irish Nationalists appreciate being governed from Westminster!

The rosy-tinted illusion that “we are all one” appears to be endemic in the eyes of the chattering classes and the European and Whitehall Mafias who characteristically proceed to draft and implement initiatives, legislation and policies, which suppress difference and, in turn, nurture frustration and resentment from those who feel unable to express their own identity. It is all very well – and, incidentally, quite right – to proclaim that the English, Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish are

all British, but that does not mean each member of the Kingdom should be forced to jettison its own customs and traditions or be covered in a sweeping legislative blanket which suffocates local aspirations and identities. Just as one can only inflate a balloon so much before it bursts, so too one can only subject each member of the United Kingdom to the customs and traditions of the others before the pressure becomes too great and the attempt to emasculate difference explodes, and ends in tears for all concerned.

It was with this in mind – and to avert growing support for the separatist Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru – that the Blair Witch Project established the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, and has sought unsuccessfully to restore the Northern Ireland Assembly but, to date, has declined to establish an English Parliament, although one has to say that one would much prefer legislation for each part of the Kingdom to be made by Bill introduced into the United Kingdom Parliament and only the responsibility to execute and apply the law and provide/purchase local/public services to be devolved to locally-elected representatives throughout the Kingdom to avoid the anomaly commonly known as “the West Lothian Question”. This could still be done if any exclusively Scottish/Welsh/Northern Irish Bills were given their First and Second Readings on the floor of both the Commons and the Lords and then considered/amended by the appropriate Grand Committee (i.e., Scottish Grand Committee/Welsh Grand Committee/Northern Ireland Grand Committee, although such Committees need to be established in the House of Lords to compliment those already in being in the House of Commons) before being put before each House for the Report Stage and Third Reading, whilst exclusively English legislation could be made in much the same way were an English Grand Committee to be established in each House of Parliament. (U.K-wide matters should, as now, be legislated for by Bill with all stages of the Bill being dealt with on the floor of both Houses of Parliament and making primary legislation by non-amendable Orders-in-Council for any part, or all, of the United Kingdom should cease forthwith).

The advantage this proposal has over devolving legislative powers to locally-elected representatives in the component parts of the United Kingdom is that MPs/Peers’ knowledge and understanding of any one part of the Kingdom is not diminished although the detailed consideration of any Bill would fall exclusively to Members of both Houses directly affected by it to maximise their sense of “ownership” of it without undermining the authority of the United Kingdom Parliament to legislate for part (or all) of the Kingdom. Such a measure, I venture to suggest, is more in-keeping with the thinking of Edmund Burke (the founding father of Conservatism) who, in his speech to the electors of Bristol in 1774, said “Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests, which interests each must maintain as an agent and advocate against other agents and advocates, but parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation with one interest that of the whole, where not local purposes, not local prejudices ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole. You choose a Member indeed; but when you have chosen him he is not a Member of Bristol but he is a Member of Parliament” than the current Conservative Party Leader (David Cameron)’s ludicrous proposal for the introduction of Standing Orders in the United Kingdom Parliament to prevent Scottish MPs/Peers voting on English matters when English MPs/Peers are unable to vote on analogous matters already devolved to the Scottish Parliament; and would help bolster the Union at a time when the integrity and sovereignty of the United Kingdom appears increasingly under attack from traitors from within, let alone enemies outside, her boundaries. Were my preferred option for legislating for Scottish affairs to be adopted, the Scottish Parliament could easily be transformed into a solely administrative assembly to administer functions and services which local authorities in Scotland are unable to provide/purchase unilaterally (on account of economies of scale) to diminish the need for administration by quangos, civil servants and Government agencies.

That said, whilst one recognises and appreciates that Scotland has a separate legal system to England, Wales and Northern Ireland, one cannot help feeling apprehensive at calls by a growing number of Englishmen and women for the abolition of the Barnett Formula which currently affords Scotland a higher proportion of public expenditure per capita than England without appreciating that the cost of providing amenities, facilities and services is bound to be higher in Scotland as the population is more scattered than it is in England. In fairness to Non-Scots however, one feels equally anxious at the Scottish Parliament’s decision to levy university tuition fees on English, Welsh and Northern Irish students (but not indigenous Scottish students) studying at Scottish Universities, and provide both free personal care for the elderly (when such care is not free in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) and resources to allow GPs in Scotland to prescribe Velcade to their patients at the same time as the National Institute of Health & Clinical Excellence has declined to licence it (largely on grounds of cost-effectiveness) to allow GPs in England and Wales to prescribe it to their patients, as such blatant discrimination serves only to increase the acrimony between Scotland and the other parts of the United Kingdom.

All this may sound as “interesting” and “inspiring” as watching paint dry but it goes to the heart of what patriotism is all about. As we celebrate the Tercentenary Anniversary of the 1707 Treaty of Union, may we be resolved – collectively and individually – to redouble our efforts to maintain and strengthen the Union which joins us and the integrity and sovereignty of the United Kingdom of which all of us are privileged to be a part.

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