

VIRTUAL LIBERATION OR: BRITISH SOVEREIGNTY SINCE THE ELECTION

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I have been invited to talk about what has befallen the Sovereignty of the United Kingdom since 1 May 1997, on a platform just vacated by our last and greatest Scottish Secretary of State. With an adroit mixture of optimism, shrewdness and lawyerly attention to detail, Mr Dewar has added farther to the momentum of the moment, the general sense of a tide of change carrying us forward into a new period of history.

I don't disagree with his verdict, let alone want to resist the tide itself. Like many others here today I waited only too too long for it to come in, and feel grateful for its very existence.

On the other hand, it is an existence which changes everything. This is why it also appears legitimate to doubt whether the new period will turn out quite in the way Mr Dewar and many others are planning it. In short, my view is going to be that all too little has befallen UK Sovereignty since the advent of the Blair government. Much less has happened than first met the eye - and henceforth even less seems likely. Relatively big changes in central authority would be needed to make Scottish and Welsh devolution 'work' (in the modest sense of being less than an unceasing pain in the neck at Westminster). Yet these look like being more a matter of rhetoric than of willing substance.

Causing national assemblies to exist is one thing - a fundamentally important step, and a lot less irreversible than British socialism. But getting them to function as parts of a renewed British fabric of state will be quite another. So I suspect that very soon 'Britain' may seem as reversible as its Socialism was. There is as yet no serious strategy for arresting this (though I know some believe Devolution to be such a strategy). Part of the argument will be that probably no such device is possible in British terms alone - that is, without

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putting Europe first. Late-British political practice itself lacks the means to do so.

I don't intend to distract you with much about the theology and lore of Sovereignty today, as we have just been reminded of how many urgently practical problems there are to be tackled. The contrast between 'government' and 'sovereignty' (with or without capital 'S') I will take to mean the difference between the ordinary exercise and deployment of authority and the underlying assumptions of such deployment: the 'constitution' (with or without capital 'C'), the written and unwritten rules of the national game, most often passed on unchanged from one government to the next. Power is a daily routine; sovereignty is about who has the ultimate say, why they have it and (though not too often in the British context) how this should be altered.

Governments propose (one might also say) but it is the sovereign authority of the state which disposes. Disposes - often - not just with the sense of implementing government plans but pretty often with the sense of establishing what such policies 'really mean'. The government has now proposed in the matter of Devolution to Scotland, Wales and London, and is working its cautious way towards reproposing something analogous for Northern Ireland. Are we now starting to perceive what these policies will mean? Well yes, I think so; and yes, I think they are already showing signs of meaning something different from what was intended by the policy-process.

THE STRANGE DEATHS OF BRITISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

In this context it may be salutary to recall something of the fairly recent past. We dwell in the afterglow of one extraordinary example of how British sovereign disposition may differ utterly from British policy-making. In that case the newly-minted policy did not just fail to be imposed, it was totally wrecked by the attempt to do so. This glistening blue-print, although think-tank nurtured and defended with vibrato in a thousand orations (now generally repressed from memory to avoid death by shame) not only crashed, but brought down Mrs Thatcher with it. It finished off her whole phase of Tory-radical social engineering. In its dismal wake there came the Tory palace coup d'état, and then the seven-year régime of fag-ends and left-overs which endured right down to May 1997.

I am of course referring to the Poll Tax or Community Charge, of living if abjured memory. This is worth recalling today, not for academic or historical reasons, and certainly not out of nostalgia. Not (either) to suggest that Devolution will be doomed to a similar débâcle. I know quite well I'm on the

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menu here today to stir up trouble and provoke some sort of row; but there are limits. I would not suggest for a moment that self-government in Scotland, Wales, Belfast or London will collapse in that kind of ignominy. The point is more modest: it may be that the attempt to implement Devolutionary policies by a central, sovereign and unitary power, itself essentially unreformed, will once more set up a partly unforeseen dynamic of change. And then, though anything but disastrous in themselves, these changes may come to resemble the Poll Tax in being uncontrollably different from what the blueprint-forgers had in mind.

It is quite important to recall here that the Community Charge was not an isolated episode in either Tory or British political life. Its defeat and ludicrous side-effects do not mean that it was actually a side-show. Shame has done its work all too well, however - today it does tend to be dismissed in just that way. Toryism is seen as having 'gone too far' into a kind of lonely convulsion, a one-off epileptic fit from which they and everyone else mercifully recovered. The results are now safely shelved in the Westminster museum of State folklore alongside the Gold Standard, the Eugenics Movements, Nationalization and the South Sea Bubble. Many people, not all hard-core Friedmanites or veterans of the Tory first hour, have conveniently forgotten that it was designed as the clinching financial armature of a much grander, and largely consensual, purpose. The latter's goal was the general and reinvigorating reorganization of the local government of the United Kingdom.

Far from being a one-off, this aim has been shared, supported, indulged in, and then repented of, by every successive British government for the last thirty years. Our new 1997 government, far from abandoning the idea, can be seen as busy extending it in new directions. Whatever other factors have come into play, the constitutional changes to be discussed today - Devolution, the new London assembly and the more vaguely proposed English agencies and regions - may also be seen as farther examples of a fairly long-term trend.

Widely differing formulae or recipes were of course employed over such a long period of time. Most present here will recall at least echoes of the bizarre and prolonged ideological clamour which invariably (and as Marxists used to say, not by coincidence) accompanied the process. It was launched by 1960s progressivism under the banner 'make local authority bigger and more rational', in order to foster a more modern and intelligible structure linking locality and State together, and also to make planning more effective and (of course) more cost-effective.

Some years passed; bigness mysteriously failed to function, and planning wilted away in the heat of reborn marketry. While people were still wondering just what had hit them, another comet was seen in the east. It was travelling in the opposite direction. 'Make it smaller and closer to the voter', the sky-writing now announced, thereby ensuring old-fashioned community, responsibility and the familial virtues. These bore an uncomfortable resemblance to the bad habits which the 1960s visionaries had despised and urged us to get rid of ('anachronism', the aldermanic or parish-pump mentality, etc.). Thus parochialism staged a grand come-back through the tradesman's entrance, re-robed as 'Back to Basics' and the no-nonsense native morality of old Grantham.

Not that these two avenues exhausted the illusionary potential of local-governance mania. It is unlikely anybody here today will forget that curious variant which straddled both camps, and was for obscure ethno-geographic reasons visited upon us in Scotland. Our proudly separate nature was in that part of the century acknowledged by a quite separate (or as people enjoyed saying, 'distinctive') reorganization which tried, as it were, to make everything bigger and smaller at the same time. So the Scots ended up with Strathclyde Region on one side - half the size of Denmark - and Crail Community Council on the other.

I still recall quite vividly the inaugural meeting of the latter, one freezing night in the winter of 1981-2, at which there was a prolonged discussion of the new-age mission being thus mysteriously signalled to the East Neuk. The still lamented (but at least partially understood) Royal and Ancient Burghs bequeathed from the time of the Scottish Kings were, it appeared, now designated for rebirth as voluble hives of true localism. They were to be made over into buzzing foci of popular initiative, enabled and spurred on by the broader and interwoven support-structures of District, Region and Scottish Office.

Over the next few years (until the final post-Thatcher reform-wave struck us amidships) I recall local opinion as largely enmeshed in the process of (so to speak) switching over from draughts to chess. This involved working out just who was now responsible for what, and how they could be got at. It made astrology look easy. Admittedly, the abiding purpose was itself simple enough, and in its way admirable: it was to establish just how the area's endemic clientelism could most swiftly get the better of the system. Nor - as everyone now knows - was this really so different from what was going on at the same time in the new super-fiefdoms of Strathclyde and the industrial West.

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Over the thirty-year period as a whole, one mission simply followed another, before vanishing forever from human ken. These were unbelievably expensive tides of British virtual reality, not effective or enduring reforms. Their Trident-scale costs were always designed to save central government cash (in the 'long run', which turned out to mean pretty soon, or even immediately) and invariably failed to do so. 'Roots' was the ideology (healthy, vibrant, participatory, etc.). But actually none were put down. Few even half-understood what was going on, and fewer still cared - apart, naturally, from those local councillors and functionaries who found themselves repeatedly uprooted, promoted sideways or found surplus to requirements, chided, re-named, and then blamed for everything both from on governmental high and long-suffering below, among the ungrateful beneficiaries of such bracingly 'radical' upheaval. In truth one aberrantly radical slogan merely succeeded another. 'We must make local government more responsible' gave way, as in some Red Queen's dream, to 'No no, cap them - spendthrift authorities deserve to have responsibility taken away' (or indeed to be abolished when misbehaviour became chronic). Whole tiers of local government were created to deal once and for all with the extremely serious problems at the foot of the British rainbow. Then closer inspection of this site showed there to be far too many of the damned things, inflicting far too much bureaucracy upon a local citizenry chafing for freedom - know-it-alls, do-gooders, reckless spenders. 'Get rid of them!'

No-one seems to have any idea what this generation of local-government reform mania cost, apart from a lot. No doubt the abiding purposes of the United Kingdom are better served by keeping a veil drawn over it. More significant, though, today no-one seems much concerned with what it was all about. I admit to not really being up on contemporaneous developments in (e.g.) President Ceaucescu's Romania or the central African kingdom of the Emperor Bokassa. But somehow I doubt if, over the period in question, such astounding vacillations affected any comparable non-dictatorial state. Has any other country engendered a municipally-founded near-revolution - a fiscal egalitarianism so preposterous that masses erupted into the streets and invited imprisonment in order to denounce it? And yet, these were not accidents. The Community Charge was simply the most determined (and naturally the most 'radical') moment of a long-range strategy, intended to endow Great Britain with appropriately great lower-tier administration once and for all.

The notion was always of Britain being thoroughly recast - pristinely renewed from its grass-roots upwards. The dénouement of this vision in the Poll Tax disorders was the most elaborately prepared suicide note in modern political history. So there must have been, at least implicitly, some profounder purpose behind the process. Whatever the strategy was, it was clearly continuous and

repeated enough to be phrased in terms of the State, or (in my terms today) of 'sovereignty', rather than just as successive governmental policies. Perhaps one could sum it up by saying that from the 1960s into the 1990s, as the United Kingdom state grew steadily more centralized in operation and unitary in practice, it sought with approximately equal constancy to counter-balance, conceal and legitimate this trend by the reconfiguration of local or 'regional' government.

PARTICIPATION AND MUTINY

Though done initially with an administrative rationale - efficiency, effective redistribution, cost-saving modernization etc - as time passed and the world became steadily more democratic, the ideology accompanying the quest was retailored to fit altering conditions. When it started off the UN Organization was occupied mainly by dictatorships; by the time of the post-Thatcher wave democracies were in the majority, and the Cold War was ending. British low-political reform acquired a stronger democratic camouflage - that of 'returning power to the people', whether as citizens or (Mrs Thatcher's preference) as entrepreneurs. Giving a say, a voice to the multitude, liberating them from bureaucracy and do-gooders - this became the ultimate motivation for the reform of local government. It started by imposing more effectual administration, and concluded by liberating folk from administration altogether, at least in the sense of officialdom and politicians.

I'm a rotten mimic and couldn't possibly attempt to imitate the accents of the present Leader of the Conservative and Unionist Party, but most people here are bound to remember the high point of the celebrated schoolboy conference oration in 1984, when the 17-year-old Hague concluded his peroration by turning archly towards Thatcher and the assembled Cabinet dignitaries on the platform: 'Get off our backs!' the lad boomed (as nearly as a 17-year old could). The importance of the motif was not displayed only in the delirious applause and benign smiles of the particular instant. The promising young fellow was acknowledging a deeper current, one whose longer-distance repercussions have undoubtedly helped put him where he is today.

Central Sovereignty rolled remorselessly forward, therefore, while claiming ever more shrilly to roll backwards. But the real point of the latter was always the former. 'Power devolved is power retained' was how J. Enoch Powell phrased it in the 1970s (talking of Scotland and Wales) - except that 'retained' was never a strong enough term. Great-Sovereign States in retreat have to augment such power as is left to them, not merely strive to retain it.

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'De-centralization' is (or seems to be) one way of doing this, and the pattern has been followed in both France and Britain over the last generation. In accordance with the differing character of sovereignty in the two countries, French reform was 'rational', uniform and consistent, while the British version (at least until Poll Tax dementia struck) was pragmatic, heterogeneous and revisable. But both were intended to re-concentrate authority and promote more effective *participation* (the same word applies for both tongues) within the regrettably shrunken command-structures of the ex-imperial states. Shrinkage does not lead automatically to fade-away. It may lead to refocusing or concentration, however, disguised as dispersal, 'rationalization' and keeping up with the times. The contingent is devolved, in order that the essential be re-empowered. In the terms used earlier, the state may shed certain levels or dimensions of governmental power, the better to keep up its sovereign authority and appearance: that is, its *standing* (another joint Anglo-French word) in the wider world.

In Britain that project reached its limit with the Community Charge débacle. It then fell through the floor in quite a useful way, however, which allows one to perceive the true parameters operating here - parameters presumably still in place, and hence likely to affect the devolution story as well. The Poll Tax was not defeated by sapient internal manoeuvres within the political élite or the parties (whatever gloss they then tried to put upon events). No, it was stopped by popular mutiny. The French are supposed to be better at mutiny than the British, but the weird tale of local government casts a different light upon this and other truisms. The anti-Community Charge upheaval had a deadly effectiveness about it, and one thing this revealed was the true polarity of political life in the United Kingdom. On the one hand, a forever unchanging sovereign state (add capitals as required) which simply commands whatever grass-roots alterations appear required by the moment's captaincy. On the other, there is a horizon of grass-root or below-decks revolt, the black hole of ultimate refusal. The 'Constitution' (here definitely with capital letter) is the elaborate, but alas unscripted, pretence that in Great Britain there is really something in between the two.

'Mutiny' is of course a system-limit, a sufficiently massive decision that enough is enough. It was that limit which eventually (in that sense I mentioned before) defined the true meaning of the Community Charge legislation, and destroyed it at the same time. The entire political class then scuttled to obey, congratulating itself on its realism rather than apologizing for its fickleness - behaving in fact rather as the British Royal Family did, after the scenes in London following Princess Diana's death in September 1997. Otherwise I suspect that most of us would still be grumblingly paying up. H.M.'s bailiffs would still be selling off non-payers' furniture, and the

first concern of Mr Blair's recently incumbent government might then have been not Devolution but finding, at long last, some 'fairer replacement' for this appalling mediaeval tax (etc., etc.).

This brings me to the point: I suspect that Devolution too is likely to have its meaning defined for it by spreading mutiny - but (it should be added at once) by a mutiny of a very different sort. If forced to phrase it as a one-liner, I would say, this time it will be by an equality-mutiny.

THE DEVIL'S ADVOCACY

To recapitulate: since the 1960s a congenitally imperial state form (I will come back to what this means later) has been struggling to adapt itself, not just to change but to accelerating rapids of transformation - above all since the end of the Cold War. And it has striven to do so without reforming its historical or constitutional mainframe. The nucleus has remained sacrosanct. Just as the Gaullist style-core of republican grandeur and rayonnement remained untouched under Mitterand and Chirac, so the British equivalent persisted under Thatcher and Major. For Mrs Thatcher, especially, part of the explicit *raison d'être* of 'radical' upheaval was to preserve the core of British sovereignty as virginally intact as possible. It was because these upper layers of sovereignty were too holy to touch (at least until last May) that the standard route of political modernization has been denied.

The decline-dilemma meant that the underlying claim (Best Constitution ever known, etc.) had to be made ever more resoundingly, as one preposterous episode followed another. Even the Poll Tax catastrophe did not change this. One particular idea had proved itself bankrupt beyond belief, yet the ideology it was designed to sustain continued to unfold - and in a way, Devolution remains part of that unfolding. I suspect this is much more because of its links to the ongoing dilemma of British sovereignty, rather than to the discrete and often diverse policies of one government or another. The basic unity of the United Kingdom has to be conserved so that the traditional sovereign-power structure can go on punching above its weight in the international arena (immorally, amorally or, as more recently, ultra-morally). '*Grandeur*' is another common French-English term, and meaning. This is usually put in terms of 'being stronger together' than as separate and possibly bickering parts. Thus truism is obliged to underwrite untouchability.

But one of its implications is that everything else must be, in a curious sense, over-reformed round about the untouchable core. This is the real sense of 'radicalism' in its late-British format. Incapable of passing through the

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ordinary channels of constitutional, juridical and electoral reform, it is as if the restless, increasingly resentful impatience inseparable from both French and United Kingdom decline has overflowed in other directions. Into the economic field, of course, where central-planning mania has been succeeded in both countries by bouts of raging capitalist fever. Planning too has been privatized. Think-tank blueprints were once despised by British Establishment culture and identified with smart-ass Parisian idéologues. Now they are taken for granted. The boot-strap renovation of civil society on paper has become a respectable profession in London too: associational self-help, new this, new that, new everything, preferably uncoupled from 'conventional politics'. Local government reinvention was but one long-running symptom of this compensatory overflow, albeit a particularly persistent and appealing one. Unwillingness to overhaul the semi-divine apparatus of Sovereign Power (Mother of Parliaments, made us what we are, etc.) continues to ensure the diversion of ideal energies on to the plane of the hapless British provinces.

The term is ancient yet appropriate. I use it here because the fact is these provinces combined two features crucial to the decline syndrome. They could be identified, in an imprecise yet rhetorically important fashion, with 'the people', or the 'grass-roots', daily lives and so on - the latest climate or sine qua non of modernity. But they were, at the same time, almost entirely dependent upon central power and under our ancien régime possessed not the faintest mote, beam or echo of Sovereignty. Hence they were entirely unable to resist or protest effectively against reinvention. The older rural or patrician stratum associated with local and provincial power had declined or disappeared over the same period (nowhere more strikingly than in the ranks of Mrs Thatcher's party).

Given the antipathy of British central power to formal, non-conventional reorganization, no statutory system had replaced that ad hoc old order. The abiding aim of UK stateliness is to avoid being 'pinned down' by that sort of thing. It continues to prefer the Public Bar company of Edmund Burke to the Saloon Bar rectitude of Tom Paine. Instead, the illusion was cultivated of a provincialdom reconstructable at will - of localities that could be remodelled, replaced, abolished or restored, with or without a semblance of 'consultation'. The grass roots would thereupon (in a revealing and endlessly reiterated phrase) 'settle down' once more, somehow magically transmuted by the sovereign recipe of the moment. These may be among the reasons why the

death-throes of the 1688 polity were first rehearsed at provincial or local administration level¹.

THE NEMESIS OF BRITISHNESS

The Devil's case gets stronger and stronger. 'Don't think for a second the death-throes are over...' I can hear Him whisper in our ears. The symptoms have merely moved on to the far more perilous terrain of regional/national government, and away from that of the 'local' which prevailed from the '60s down to the '90s. The system could re-establish its validity only by the massive electoral lurch of 1997, and this meant falling into the control of a party whose power-base had, in the intervening decades, grown over-dependent upon certain specific regional/national allegiances. The acquittal of such debts had become indispensable to the consolidation - by 1997 one had to say the 'restoration' - of central authority.

However, in spite of the currently outspoken clamour for renewal and rejuvenation, there is likely to be far less ground for the negotiation of novelty into this system than appears at first sight. A sovereignty built up over three centuries will go on tending, as it has been doing over the past generation, to consolidate or fall back upon its essence, even while it searches around frantically for new survival-formulae. The 1997 Labour government inherits easily the most dense, refractory and metropole-centred power-system in Europe. That historical unitarism was borne to a new level altogether by the reforming passion of Baroness Thatcher, who in important respects remains Tony Blair's heroine and model. He may want to move in different directions from her, but he also wants to do so as she did, in the sense of popularly and decisively (even ruthlessly).

Farthermore, he possesses something she did not: a new party. The new Premier's central authority rests upon the crucial vehicle of a modernized party where greater individual democracy has been counter-balanced by intensified core autocracy. To regain office, three successive modernizers

¹ *These quaint terms have much of the old régime's soul in them. 'Consultation' means something like: 'softening them up' (for whatever Power has decreed must come next), while 'settling down' seems to imply the more protracted process whereby, after a relatively short time, the imposed order comes to appear traditional or even immemorial, and hence immune to farther interference (save in the mind of utopians, fanatics, etc.). Poor old provinces. It is probably a sign of régime desperation that they got little consultation and next to no settling-down time at all.*

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(Kinnoek, Smith and Blair himself) have been forced to transform Labourism along parameters which were (immediately) those of 'Thatcherism' but (more profoundly) could not help also being those of an ultra-centralist polity near the end of its tether. These leaders did succeed in the sense of turning Labour into a party of power rather than protest. But 'power' in the deeper, sovereign sense is not an abstraction. Once reconfigured in these British post-imperial circumstances, a party inevitably becomes the vehicle of actual or historical sovereignty. There may now be few left who wish Labour was still a party of moralizing and futile protest. But the risk of rendering it capable of wielding authority is that, in turn, 'authority' may come to wield it. Under such a sovereignty-order, governments and Prime Ministers think they exercise power. How do they know? In any particular situation (and above all during crises or conflicts) a pre-constituted sovereignty may be exerting itself through them.

Nor finally (Auld Nick might conclude) ought we to forget how New Labour attained its power-objective: through the kind of absurd tip-over inherent in the ancient electoral system. By too great a victory, in other words, and one owing far more to the old mechanism of élite representation than to democracy. The electoral triumph of 1 May 1997 had a plebiscitary character which itself carried central authority on to a new plane of intensity. For the moment at least, we see a blatant presidentialism towering over a landscape almost void of opposition.

As it towers, it talks non-stop. The topic of such discourse is naturally radical change and (as with all its predecessors since the 1950s) the bestowal of undreamt-of power upon its subjects. But elementary caution and recollection should make one wary of this. Revolutions from above can happen; but feigned or non-revolutions from above have been more common. These ostentatiously alter a few things in order to preserve an essence, a creed, or a place in the sun. Admittedly, Blairism no longer officially fetishizes the State and Constitution. It has acquired superior public relations skills, as part of its modernization. However, it does not follow that the Labour Party will actually reform the machinery on which its power has been founded. It might (for example) merely reform some features of that government in order, like its predecessors, to conserve or reinforce the essence of Britishness, and hence increase its chances of remaining in office, or of returning to office for an appropriately and Britishly long period of time - an 'era', as it were, rather than an electoral term or session.

When located in this perspective of still accumulating, and still unreformed, central sovereignty, the new Scottish and Welsh Parliaments may appear also as farther episodes in the melancholy saga of British local-government

pseudo-reform. The particular circumstances of the election of the Labour Government have made opinion focus largely upon power to the detriment of sovereignty - upon the personnel, rhetoric and the professed (or spin-doctored) intentions of those so over-dramatically returned to office. It is very noticeable how most political commentary and debate has for some time ended, seemingly inevitably, with speculation about the subjectivity of the rulers: what they (or increasingly what he) really means or intends to do. If Tony Blair so much as winks at a journalist in the course of some perfectly anodyne remark about the constitution or the monarchy, it is sure to be read next day as a sure indicator of abiding radicalism (in **The Independent**) or impending sell-out (in the **Daily Telegraph**). But all this may mean is that the Anglo-British sovereignty-structure is reverting in its dotage to something like its origins - that is, to the purloined absolutism of William and Mary in 1688, at the time when regal authority was enduringly sanctioned (but also reinstated) through forms of élite consent.

Blair and his government do their declaiming in the name of a new, reborn and once more youthful Britain, naturally. The United Kingdom is in glad-confident-morning mode once more. But all that implies, really, is the appropriate intensification of a rhetoric which has counter-weighted each phase of decline since Queen Elizabeth IInd was crowned in 1953, symbol and radiant emblem - it is worth recalling - of a rejuvenated land. I found myself in a shop called Past Times last week, just off Princes Street in Edinburgh. It caters for 'period' gifts to older members of the family and friends, Edwardian and Victorian nick-nacks, 1920s-style clocks and radios, and nostalgia books. It struck me looking round the book section that one volume is still missing. Yet there will one day be money in it. It could be called **New Britains We Have Known**, and the cover-montage might be of Harold Wilson, Elizabeth and Phillip, Carnaby Street, Diana in her 1981 wedding-dress, Peter Mandelson and William Hague. The New Britain business has now been round quite long enough for its own sepia-tone mementoes. It may even deserve its own Theme Park, which could transport us from Annigoni's famous 1953 portrait of the girl-queen in a Spring landscape, via the youngsters who 'never had it so good' in the later 1950s, into the White Heat of 1960s Technology, then on to the juvenile comet-like entrepreneurs of the deregulated market, accelerating via the 'Get off our backs!' Pavilion into today's Blair-Hague apotheosis. A suitable conclusion to the trip might be the

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great collection of fruit-machines planned for Mr Mandelson's Millenium plastic tent at Greenwich in the Year 2000¹.

I suggested earlier that the local-government and other fetishes of modern British politics have actually been ways of standing still while appearing to be running extremely hard. Feigned social breathlessness is the public relations of deepening catatonia. Something of the same kind applies here, surely. After all, youthfulness is one thing; but the political or ideological fetishization of youth is quite another. Youth is raw, eager, clumsy, in a hurry, willing to take mad risks. Pseudo-juvenilia (as may now be verified each day that passes) is canny, anxious to avoid offence, eager mainly for compromise, delighted to postpone and propitiate, terribly good with excuses, and anxious above all to stay where it is for a very long time and to keep control of anything which might disturb its easy authority. A government of actually youthful 'radicalism' would have binned the House of Lords in its first week. The virtual radicalism of Mr Blair and Lord Irvine, on the other hand, appears to be moving gracefully towards a removal of hereditary entitlements, quite possibly before the year 2002, while retaining some kind of 'balanced' appointee Lordship less likely to obstruct the British elective dictatorship. It is (so to speak) time that crude biology ceased interfering with the pure Geist of 1688, distilled to final (though maybe also terminal) perfection by New Labour.

Seen from the angle of sovereignty and the particular nature of the UK State, indeed, the political fetishization of youth is quite easily interpreted as a symptom of dotage. This would mean it is simply another compensatory phenomenon, expressing the paralyzing difficulties attendant upon any revolution from above which cannot wholly avoid (at least by implication) threatening the position and powers of those who happen to be 'above', and claim to be pushing through the revolution.

¹ *Since the conference in November the régime has run into mounting difficulties on the social front. The Financial Times's Christmas Eve edition made Blair 'Man of the Year' but hinted that 'There has been a disjunction between vaulting rhetoric and prosaic reality. The unanswered question is whether the mood music is the precursor for radicalism; or whether it is enough. for New Labour, like Mr Clinton's New Democrats, merely to win a second term' The point was stabbed home by Max Wilkinson's column on the Millennium Dome plans, which he suggested might disclose how 'Truth ... can no longer be distinguished from the language in which it is packaged. The 1951 Festival of Britain commemorated actual achievements, while the great Greenwich tent would be devoted to virtual or aspirational ones'.*

BORN-AGAIN ALBION

A friend of mine published an article about Prague some years ago in the **New Statesman**, saying apologetically to the readers that though he had always wanted to write something on Prague without mentioning Kafka, here he was, failing once more. In the same way, as someone - not alone in this company, I'm sure - who has always wanted to write something about Devolution and Scottish self-rule without mentioning Tam Dalyell's 'West Lothian Question' I too owe an apology today. The absurd yet fatal folklore obtrudes, the preposterous yet unavoidable non-question which, since it consists essentially in waving a scarecrow about, has never and will never receive an answer.

That scarecrow is 'England'. All defenders of 'Britain', a United Kingdom ruled to all eternity from the Binns (or places resembling it) always fall back upon England. That is, upon the supposed eventual resentment, discomfiture or intolerance of an English people provoked beyond endurance by Scottish or other interference, unfair representation or appropriation of resources - by wilfully ethnocentric egotism directed against the common interest. This common, negotiable interest can only be defined by the Union, centrally. The reason is that Great Britain is not a federation, a confederation, an asymmetrical quasi-federation, a crypto- or pseudo-confederation, or any kind of consociational hippogryff. It is a great unitary state, which happens also to be what an important new book refers to as **A Union of Multiple Identities**¹. In their comparative conclusion the editors underline how the UK's English-made unitarism has given such low priority to ethnicity and cultural assimilation, because

In the United Kingdom ... political discourse was broadly built around the assumption that Parliament, not the people, was sovereign. As long as the inhabitants of the British Isles accepted the very English idea that change could occur legitimately only if sanctioned by the British Parliament, there was a limited need to foster unity by State-sponsored acculturation.

Hence 'political culture' was the crucially unifying element: Parliament and the parliamentary class or élite, a representative stratum itself rather than those it supposedly represented. 'Britain' was a multi-national social class before it was a multi-national state; and the latter remains in essence a

¹ Edited by Laurence Brockliss and David Eastwood, Manchester University Press (1997).

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manifestation of the former. Britishness was always a stratum-phenomenon rather than a mass or popular one. But later on the élite-mass linkage was fortified by an overseas command-structure in which mass participation was allowed, and indeed positively encouraged and channelled. Empire and successful warfare gave this class-forged link an iron durability¹. At the same time, the monarchy was refashioned into an equivalent or simulacrum of nationalist symbolism. The chain was both gilded and strengthened by this transformation.

While in France revolutionary methods had compelled the construction of a socially sovereign identity through intensive or even terroristic acculturation, the 'very English idea' was able to acquire considerable institutional rigidity and some symbolic charisma without an English nation-building in that sense. 'There was a British *Sonderweg*', conclude the editors of **A Union of Multiple Identities**, most strikingly configured by 'the experience and management of empire', and it is this which gets celebrated through the endemic mythologies of 'flexibility', empiricism and English national indeterminacy. I spoke earlier about the Westminster state form being 'congenitally imperial', and this is actually the same thing. Alas, the 'genes' no longer depend upon having colonies, or oceans to command: they go on working through the habits and instinctive assumptions of sovereignty. But these manifest a state-way rather than a folk-way: there has never been a British nation exemplifying and underpinning them.

Hence when the actual underpinnings of that idea decay, there is astonishingly little left. And anyone can see these have now largely disappeared. The external command-structure, the symbolism of regality, the old 'parliamentary class' and the rigid prestige of the institution itself have either disappeared or diminished. Their iron has turned to rust. The simulacrum aspect of 'Britishness' as national identity inevitably stands exposed. The post-1789 French nation always stayed much stronger than its various Republican incarnations, however fragile the latter may have occasionally been. In contrast, 'Britain' has been one continuous state-

¹ *In a recent article David McCrone has strongly underlined the function of warfare - and above all of World War I - in the formation of the British State. This function undoubtedly retained something of its efficacy until only fifteen years ago, with the war for the Falklands in 1982. On the other hand it was always double-edged: each dose of militarism emphasized the statist character of 'Britain' and the national character of contributions to the state's glory (especially in Scotland). See 'Unmasking Britannia' in **Nations and Nationalism**, vol.3, no.4 (1997).*

incarnation of formidable *durée* and outreach, but - in the end - significantly less indwelling power and human resource¹.

Over-identified with a single but extruded institutional form, English nationality has little political horizon beyond that. When summoned to present credentials at a deeper level it normally resorts to literature: English literature is made the vehicle of a national Geist which has become inaccessible in the narrower terms of territory and institutions. Accustomed to the wider - at one time global - mode of political expression, it responds to the invalidation of the latter by a kind of internalization, by falling back on the spirit. We should not overlook the fact that the final act of invalidation did not take place until after Blair assumed office, with the return of Hong Kong. Nor that it was followed almost at once by the bewildering 'spiritual revolution' after Princess Diana's death, in the course of which, for the first time in history, a capital city was barricaded by poems and floral tributes rather than armed crowds and soldiers.

The West Lothian scarecrow relies on this politically indeterminate or unfocused character of 'England'. It exploits it with the suggestion that restricting or provoking such a *Geist* can only generate resentful monsters. Thus the spirit which bestrode and (by its own accounts) civilized much of the world must on no account be engaged by mere nationality - or it will turn out to be a pretty mean bastard. Blind-Brit preservationism is the one hope for Scotland and Wales. We must cling forever to the cadaver of imperial Nurse, out of fear of something worse. There is in addition the minor yet vexing possibility of an entire multi-national, middle-management stratum being not simply unemployed, but in a sense unemployable: pensioned off as

¹ *The locus classicus for reflection on the English-British connection has become Linda Colley's **Britons** (1993), a dazzling account of how the wars against France and the earlier stages of empire-building favoured the building of an extruded identity which (for a time) embraced the non-English nationalities. However, two other recent studies have emphasized the depth of proto-national formation in England itself, before this feat was accomplished. Liah Greenfeld's **Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity** (1992) assigned a template-function to Englishness as the pioneer of modern nation-statehood. Then Adrian Hastings' **The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism** (1997) has convincingly portrayed the ethno-religious intensity and durability of the template. The unresolved dilemma of Englishness seems thus to be a contrast between this unique depth of field - from the 16th to the 19th century - and the final lack of focus inseparable from the extruded developmental mode of British imperialism.*

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it were, and condemned to a pitiable future of fête-opening, water boards and unpublishable memoirs.

I know West Lothianism is also conventionally 'answered' by a set of recommendations, utterly reasonable in themselves, about federalism, or the development of regional government in England. But I don't want to trudge over that terrain again today. Its sheer reasonableness is the trouble with it. Things which happen everywhere else in Union Europe, and could (abstractly) quite well happen here, represent precisely the converse of the fated *Sonderweg* still operative in Blairism - the state-form attached to the 'very English idea', built up for so long around Parliament and Crown rather than citizenship, and hence not 'like that'. Concretely, they stand no chance, because they presuppose a prior transformation of central power towards acceptance of the formal and statutory, and towards either cultural or legal homogeneity at the sovereignty-level. No blueprint-wand is capable of switching from one mode to the other: it needs a central revolution.

But Blairism is not that revolution. It is far more likely to be another virtual horizon prolonging the settled historic one of United Kingdom sovereignty. The fact that, like all its predecessors since Wilson, it gabbles unstoppably about galvanizing, modernizing and the virtues of youth is neither here nor there. As on these previous occasions, rhetoric will probably far outweigh actual reform - let alone the logically required 'revolution from above'.

I know this sounds suspicious too, since it's close to suggesting that nothing at all has changed - in which case the sense of liberation and possible renewal generated by 1 May 1997 must have been a delusion. No, things have changed all right. But not because of Party Political Broadcasts and think-tanks. They have shifted on a level far below that of Westminster and the spin-doctorate - on that of sovereignty itself. That is, on the plane referred to earlier, the under-pinnings of the old régime of multiple-identity Britishness. When the hollowness of earlier reform therapies - like local-government resurrectionism - was exposed, there was still an over-arching traditional structure to fall back upon. A century and a half of state-inculcated identity still counted. In the 1990s, by contrast, such reserves are low. The last bout of shake-up - 'Thatcherism' - devoured them, at the same time as it ate up the economic bounty from Britain's North Sea petroleum. After all the rehearsals, the break-up of Britain is actually happening. In 1979 Dalyell's scaremongering could still hold it back; in 1997 it merely helps escalate it.

It is that immediate context, incidentally, which may help one understand the obviously novel significance of (in the old Soviet sense) *partiinost* or party spirit in Blairite Britain. Rigid discipline, petty observance of appearances,

obsession with correctness of 'message' and insistence upon uniformity of 'line' have become so many much-mocked emblems of New Labour. At times it looks like Cromwell's New Model Army minus the musketry and (for the most part) God. But this resemblance of end to beginnings may not be entirely mistaken, for there is now very little except the Party now holding the Kingdom into its Unity. The social vehicle of union has altered - 'class' has turned into 'party', as it were, and the cohesive responsibilities of a dominant stratum have been refocused into those of a voluntarist and reforming movement. The latter's rigidity is hard to understand in terms of party conflicts alone, since Conservative opposition was so utterly effaced by its 1997 defeat, but may be easier to explain in terms of sovereignty. Long a buttress of the British ethos and culture, Labourism under Blair may have become Crown Sovereignty's last ditch - yet a redoubt now defensible only by further expedients of decentralization, and cumulative concessions to democracy. Ferreous party regimentation and conformity were always important in a class-based party. Amid the general corrosion and disorientation of forced post-imperial adjustment, the same traits have been elevated into the sole reliable bulwarks against disintegration - the one way to stay united, strong, etc. Hence they must be imposed manically, at all costs - guarantees of seriousness and power-worthiness, as it were, badges of salvation for some kind of British future. But are they also postponements of a more peculiarly English destiny lying somewhere behind it?

IMPOSSIBLE EQUALITY

One odd feature of West Lothianitis was an unconscious yet quite obvious, even visceral, anti-Englishness. Its depiction of the 'inevitable' English response got away with something close to racism - all the more daunting, and yet convincing, since put about by subjects so addicted to the ways of Westminster. Unionists were permitted a xenophobia for which any nationalist would have been condemned. Since 1 May 1997 and its impressive Labour-Liberal majority in the South, no-one will pay much attention to that either. However, the true reason for apprehension about resurgent English identity never depended on such equivocal fears. It is founded more simply, upon a recognition of certain inequalities inseparable from the demography and economics of the British Isles.

The British national minorities are too big to be simply ignored, yet far too small to count naturally as equals or partners. As we saw, they were subordinated through a system of informal hegemony, buttressed externally by empire. That multiple-identity order was made to cohere through close political union: 'Britain' was the label for the subsequent over-centralism of a

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ruling and administrative class, compensating for the persistence of national diversities. England's 'natural' dominance depended in turn on the absence of formal political voice among this system's components. The latter by its definition all became equivalently 'local', in the sense of sovereignty-less, and such a status was maintainable only under an 'unwritten' constitution. The rule of custom thus became, in effect if not in theory, the instinctive mode of English nationalism.

It meant that one could do anything one liked with the local, while a subordinate legislature was a contradiction in terms - that is, within the sui generis terms of imperially-oriented nationality. The mad vein of truth in West Lothianism is simply its prostrate acknowledgement of those terms: nothing will ever be allowable in between folkloric locality and Red-Queen Sovereignty, hence things had better stay the same. Federalism is just a theory - possibly applicable where different instinctive modes prevail, but futile within the reign of English-Britishness.

Were Charter 88 to succeed in its reforming campaign and install a modern written constitution, things would naturally become different again. However, the 'things' here happen to include England - which means, the dominant national group configured by Sovereignty, unwrittenness, the customs linked to not being vulgarly or narrowly English, the Monarchy and Shakespeare. Historical effect weighs more heavily than theoretical propriety, and instinctive modes of being can't be rewritten like blueprints. The constitutional question remains indissociable from the national question¹.

And this - if I can return to Auld Nick again - is really why mutiny is unavoidable. The 'self' active in once harmless phrases like 'self-rule' has been changed by the democratic revolution since the 1960s: nowadays it harbours the yeast of equality. The resultant fermentation carries enzymes alien to the archaic body of Anglo-British sovereignty. I don't see anything too surprising about this - it would be more surprising, surely, if the 1688 sovereignty-

¹ This is recognized by the most important analysis of Blairism to appear since 1 May 1997, Anthony Barnett's *This Time: Our Constitutional Revolution* (Vintage Books, December 1997). It argues that the new government still has a great opportunity to reform the British state and sovereignty, if only ... it retains the will and determination to do it. However, this needs a 'democratic revival', which in turn has to rely on the revival of the English-national identity the author explores in his chapter 9, 'The English Question'. However, if a post-imperial 'democratic Englishness' is feasible, as he maintains (pp.304-5), then why will a post-imperial Britishness also be needed to keep everybody in order (p.306)?

system were indeed gifted with the eternal life its worshippers used to take for granted.

The renewed Scottish parliament will naturally want to be taken seriously, in a sense which never figured in the local government saga. 'Seriously' can't help meaning something like 'equal', particularly in Scotland. This might be true anyway for the largest minority in the United Kingdom, even were it a 'region' without a state or nationality past. But here of course it applies to a nation whose credentials are comparable to those of pre-Union England, and which throughout the multiple-identity era clung stubbornly to notions of association or partnership - ideas of (in today's terms) 'virtual equality' in the absence of a separate political voice¹. I must say the belief that any devolutionary settlement will not involve a demand for and attempted resumption of equality in a stronger sense seems fairly laughable.

However, this implies some kind of disavowal of the 1707 Treaty of Union - a qualification, if not an outright renunciation of it. Is this why the draughtsmen of the Scottish Parliament Bill have been so careful to include it intact? Clause 1 (1) reads: 'There shall be a Scottish Parliament'. But fifteen pages later Clause 35. 'Miscellaneous', points out that: 'The Union with Scotland Act 1706 and the Union with England Act 1707 have effect subject to this Act.' Hence a Scottish Parliament, capital letters notwithstanding, will not be *the* Scottish Parliament, the sovereign body which dissolved itself two hundred and ninety years ago. The Union persists, 'subject to this Act': its sovereign power is unabated, and is merely being manifested in a new mode which may look as if it should affect the 1706 and 1707 Acts, but in Realpolitik does not (and in fact, judged in terms of the 'very English idea', cannot).

¹ In a previous paper I mentioned the historian Conrad Russell's perceptive account of this, before the general election: 'Scottish Sovereignty', published in **New Left Review** (July-August 1997) and with amendments as a chapter of **Faces of Nationalism: Janus Revisited**, (Verso Books, 1998) It is worth quoting part of it again here. Russell simply re-read the Treaty of Union as an historical agreement 'capable of renegotiation', and which reflected how

What the Scots have wanted ever since 1603 is recognition as equal partners in a union with England. This the English, because of their unitary theory of sovereignty, have consistently denied them ... For Scots the point of devolution is to destroy this unconscious English supremacism ... Something like two-thirds of Scots want to preserve the Union with England, but they do not want, and have never wanted, to preserve it on exclusively English terms.

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Why not? As Clause 35 states, there were two Acts involved in the Union Treaty, one English and one Scottish. Now, however, the only one which counts is that of 1706, passed at Westminster. It may have required two State Acts to set up the resultant British polity; but only one of these has truly animated the successor State - it alone, therefore, now possesses the authority to repeal, modify or replace the Treaty of Union. And no damned local government will be allowed to assume that right, either. Since there is effectively no 'very Scottish idea' to contest the Bill's interpretation of the 1688-1706 moment - at least until the new Parliament gets into operation - the other idea continues to determine its meaning.

Outside the universe of Parliamentary draughtsmen, however, Scottish ideas do go on existing, in Scottish minds. Two years or so before the new parliament meets, about a quarter of the Scottish electorate seems already to support 'Independence in Europe', a slogan which took over from straightforward 'Independence' over a decade ago and explicitly asserts an alternative equal-rights formula. Nor is this only a matter of party banners or election rhetoric. Events since May (and even more so since 11 September) have illustrated how energetic the equality-enzyme is in the new situation. As a matter of fact every relevant event I can think of has underlined the same point.

Most people here will recall the incidents I mean. The dispute over future representation of the UK regions in Europe, for instance, and the possibility of Scotland's Parliament representing British interests in Brussels. Or the argument (at present unresolved) over the control of funds for attracting inward investment. Central control is meant to prevent supposedly 'unfair' competition among UK regions - the North-East of England is not supposed to undercut (say) Wales, in the way that Spain or the Republic of Ireland regularly do parts of Britain, for fear of 'anarchy' (the sovereignty-enzyme) going to its head. As part of its Ulster Peace Process, the government undertook a balancing-act of concessions to both sides, notably to imprisoned terrorists; and a Scottish prisoner, Jason Campbell, looked like benefiting from this by being transferred to jail in Northern Ireland¹. The ensuing furore made it clear that *raison d'état* had either forgotten or ignored the fact that he was tried and convicted by a separate legal system, one not inclined to make the slightest concession to 'political prisoner' status in this case. A few weeks later, and the Scottish media were engulfed in disputes over the future of the

¹ *Campbell*, from a Glasgow Loyalist family associated with the UVF paramilitary organization, had cut a Catholic boy's throat in the street and left him to bleed to death. He was given a life sentence.

Barnett Formula, the mechanism for allotting government expenditure to various parts of the UK in proportion to population and need. Since the Edinburgh parliament will raise only a small part of its income in direct taxation, it has to remain dependent on a grant from London, and hence upon the Formula. But will the latter be kept at prevailing levels once Scots are (non-fiscally speaking) 'running their own affairs'? First doubt was cast upon this and then, with a decisive stroke of virtual insanity, it was announced that the Formula is set to become as flexible as the Constitution: it will be reviewed every year in future. Until things settle down, presumably.

On all these issues (and too many others to list here without being tiresome) the reaction from Scottish broadsheet and serious media comment has been fairly uniform, and continuous. Eighteen months before the new assembly is even elected, public opinion does nothing but 'stand in' for it, or behave as if it were actually in existence. And it does so on the basis of a single Leitmotif - one constant complaint, voiced in different accents or with varying degrees of irritation but returning invariably to the same thing: 'Treat us as equals!' The psychology always incorporated (as Russell notes) into the Scottish understanding of Unionism has become virtually stand-alone in the new circumstances. But when the parliament meets it will actually *be* stand-alone, and far better equipped than the media to voice resentment. Nor, on the post-May showing, will it have much trouble in finding subjects of complaint - every one of the arguments mentioned above was (or was perceived here as) the result of central arrogance, indifference, folly or worse. From the centre the perception is different, naturally: local prickliness and bias interfering with the broader perspective, parochialism best kept in its proper place, etc.

The point here is not to adjudicate such rows, but to point out their structure. They derive from perceived inequities. Whether or not real socio-economic inequalities increase, there surely cannot be the slightest doubt that perception and resentment of them will, where democratic voices have been willed into existence. A profound and unbridgeable non-equality between Sovereignty and locality was the axis of the old state. 'Devolution' projects an authority-mode somewhere in between these, but without a framework relating it to either. Such a 'framework' could of course only be a new, written constitutional instrument which at once distributed and codified 'sovereignty', limited central power and the Crown, and guaranteed regional or dependent rights - the very things which 'multiple-identity' empiricism has striven to avoid since its bad time with them in the 18th century. In its absence, a devolved authority can only oscillate between claiming sovereignty (like say Jersey or the Isle of Man) and sinking into locality (like old town and county councils, however the titles change). In Scotland, however, this choice is unreal from the outset: a long history, independent institutions, the Treaty of

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1707, and the way in which the devolved status was gained all combine to make sovereign equality the only practical possibility.

This means that Devolution as a process or continuum - the process joyfully evoked in so many recent power-to-people declarations - will be led, and in a sense conditioned, by a sovereignty-oriented movement of the largest UK national minority. Having been undertaken the wrong way round (from periphery to centre) it can hardly avoid being determined by the strongest tendency on the periphery. The Welsh parliament in turn will not want to be treated unequally, in spite of its more restricted range of powers. In England itself a mounting regionalism will then have to make the case - as representatives of the Campaign for a Northern Assembly are already doing - for not being regarded as inferior to 'what has been given' to the Scots and the Welsh. When Londoners vote for their new Mayor and Assembly, it will be bound to do so in terms of standing up for their own rights and status in this new context - and so on.

What will make this process into a rolling mutiny is not parochialism, let alone mad nationalism, but the sovereignty-vacuum in which it has to unfold. In Great Britain as historically constituted, there is simply nothing to be equal to: the Scottish Parliament can't (obviously) equal the poly-national statehood of Westminster, but has no English-national equivalent to compare itself with. The Welsh Parliament's wish to 'equal' Scotland would place it in the same insoluble dilemma which the Scots are already complaining about. As for Northumbrians and Londoners, given the absence of a national dimension to their autonomy, they will probably be forced to assert equality through an unlikely (and anyway aggravating) demotion of the 'privileges' accorded Edinburgh and Cardiff. The sole other alternative would be the Cornish one - claiming or coining national credentials in order to underwrite equal status. This too is a stratagem likely to increase. One should not omit from the view those places mentioned earlier, Jersey, Guernsey and Man - possessors of genuine sovereignty by a curious and special dispensation, and tolerated by Britishness because of their smallness and eccentricity. However, scale is not so significant these days, either in Britain or the world at large¹. 'Being like' Singapore, Andorra, Liechtenstein or Curaçao stopped being an absurd aspiration decades ago; but international-relations 'Realists' and metropolitan

¹ On this theme see *The Economist*, 3 January 1998, 'Little Countries: is it better nowadays to be a small nation than a big one?' (pp.63-5). I have also tackled this theme in some essays in *Faces of Nationalism: Janus Revisited* (London, Verso Books, 1998)

Foreign Secretaries failed to notice this, and theory (regrettably) has gone on taking them too seriously.

DE FACTO SOVEREIGNTY

That there are abundant examples of vital regional and regional-national governments functioning elsewhere in Europe is also handy for theorists (as well as their own citizens) but unfortunately useless in Britannic practice. The latter remains ancestrally configured, and so far incapable of either domestic reconfiguration or of any 'rash' dive into European company. Unable to shut out the great social currents of post-Cold War modernity - equality, democracy, economic globalization and rediscovered nationality - it has sought to incorporate them 'empirically', according to the mainstream reflexes of its history and politics.

What the Devil's advocacy ends by suggesting is simple: those who have lived too long by empiricism may now be dying by it. Philosophical empiricism and 'flexibility' were complex ideal forgeries designed to protect English-British sovereignty. Yet Sovereignty itself has been the opposite of empirical and flexible: as both Tam Dalyell and William Hague insist, it was (and remains) absolute, unqualifiable, and more divinely aloof than the most extreme of 'continental' doctrines. It deems itself capable of impossible feats like the Poll Tax and Devolution. *Force majeure* has made Foreign Secretaries admit they no longer control the globe these days; in relation to matters still within its domain, however, a God-like conviction persists - let it be so and, with a bit of consultation, things will magically settle down or 'work out' once again. 'Muddle through' was English nationalism's version of the world spirit, founded upon the supreme, if self-ascribed, reasonability of the class embodying it.

The contradiction of the moment is that Blairism responds both to the urge for change and to that for replication. As with Thatcherism before it, the enactment of 'radical' policies appeared to require the assumption of the old and (supposedly) sovereign power-base - the conviction and sway of absolute office will alone permit such drastic changes. Everything must be changed; but regrettably, the genes of changelessness are still required for the task.

I mentioned at the start the general contrast between the levels of policy-making and sovereign execution. They are never equal. In the longer term (or in confrontation with crisis and contradiction) the second has to prevail, and it is this thought which informed the subsequent analysis of the prospects for devolved government. The Community Charge was confined to the timeless

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reservation of provinciality; but 'Devolution' is not - it cannot avoid reconfiguring (or at least trying to reconfigure) the Geist itself. In the longer run I suspect that would be just as true of Wales, Northern Ireland and Northumbria as of Scotland. However, it is via the latter that the new syndrome will be most clearly manifested.

One interesting note may be worth adding to the discussion of re-emergent Scottish sovereignty. The audience may have noted that almost nothing has been said in it either about Scottish nationalism, or the familiar theme of the differences (real or imaginary) between Scottish and other British societies and cultures - for example, the frequently invoked 'corporate' character of Scots identity, Celticism, native egalitarianism, and so on. These tend to dominate the view from the South, and also from the angle of a certain kind of nationalism. But the odd fact is that they need scarcely be mentioned in the sovereignty perspective - not because they are unimportant, but because the contradictions within United Kingdom sovereignty itself are sufficient in themselves for an analysis of break-up. The Scots themselves generally argue things out within a spectrum of 'Home Rule' versus SNP-style Independence. I suspect the 'versus' aspect of the dispute is now fairly redundant. Within the crumbling clam-shell of British Sovereignty, 'serious' home rule (which everyone except Tam Dalyell and a few bitter-enders want) will find it hard to avoid *de facto* sovereignty. This category is formally unacknowledged by international relations ideology. But then, that ideology was evolved by and for *de jure* states, before the rise of European Union and the decline of Britain. Just how or under what conditions *de facto* might in this case turn into *de jure* would need another sort of discussion. In that debate the factors I have omitted here would naturally assume more importance - how important, I think I can safely leave at this point to your imagination.

In guise of a conclusion: you may occasionally have felt as if some parts of the tale outlined above must have been lifted straight from Lewis Carroll or J.R.Tolkien. And in a way that is the point: Ukanian Sovereignty was also such a story - a great public narrative collectively erected upon the foundations of English nationalism, in the course of its subsequent adventures and travails in the wider world. But as the world has changed, that narrative has grown obsolescent. It has been re-told too often, and instead of trying forever to upgrade it with ingenious twists and turns, a new start to sovereignty would be better. The new story of Europe opens a way here, as does Britain's mounting Republicanism. But so (I hope) will the emergence of *de facto* sovereignty - one might also say, counter-sovereignty - in Scotland.