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## Nationalism and National Identity in British Politics, c.1880s to 1914\*

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### Introduction

The conduct of British politics between the 1880s and 1914 was mediated by the multinational nature of the United Kingdom. A sense of national identity emerged in Ireland, Scotland and Wales that, in different degrees, translated into nationalist political demands on the state. This essay examines some aspects of those demands but also seeks to highlight forces that held the Union together in this turbulent period.

During the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries, the existence of the United Kingdom seemed to be called into question (For a comparative discussion with the ‘health’ of the United Kingdom at the end of the 21st century see Robbins, 2001). Most obviously this questioning came from Ireland, where from the 1870s, a majority of the seats returned nationalist MPs who sought the repeal or reform of the Act of Union of 1800. But elsewhere too, the ‘peripheries’ challenged the ‘core’ for control over their geographical spaces. While the terms ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ are problematic, they have been used here as shorthand for England dominated by London (core) and the non-

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English nations (peripheries). In the Scottish Highlands, the land agitation was accompanied by varying demands for Scottish Home Rule, and a crofters' party had a brief existence in the House of Commons. In Wales, Liberalism moved into the ascendant by associating itself with specific Welsh demands, yet it faced a nationalist challenge from Cymru Fydd which captured the North Wales Liberal Federation (Morgan, 1982, p. 44). Even in the Isle of Man a Celtic nationalism emerged associated with a racialised discourse that potentially distanced 'Celt' from 'Saxon' in the demand for Manx Home Rule, to remove the continuing restrictions on Manx autonomy (Belchem, 2000). Such moves might be seen as the first stages in the unravelling of the United Kingdom, the first phase in the break-up of Britain, postponed for nearly eight decades, but in which nationalisms on the 'periphery' eventually and inevitably emerged triumphant. Hence the signs of diversity of identities and the political demands associated with them could be taken to be part of the continuing resistance to economic and cultural imperialism, which according to Michael Hechter was imposed from the English core (Hechter, 1999). In this approach, signs of Scottishness, Welshness, Irishness and Manxness are seen as 'nationalism' – a political programme or philosophy concerned with state building. These signs are seen as a desire to assert not only distinctiveness from Englishness, but also from Britishness. They are seen as developments that would inevitably prove incompatible with the existence of the United Kingdom state. Between the 1880s and 1914, it was, however, perfectly acceptable to assert Scottishness, say, without being a nationalist. There were and are fundamental differences between *nationalism* and the assertion of national identity. Further, too often Unionism with a capital 'U' (that is the Unionism of the Conservatives and Liberal

Unionists) is seen as the opposite to assertions of national identity in the ‘peripheral’ nations of the United Kingdom. There is, however, a need for a more sophisticated typology of unionism. This essay argues, first, that Unionism with a capital ‘U’ was not monolithic and negative in its attitude to identities of place within the UK, but was well able to cope with diversity and multiple identities associated with the multinational nature of the UK. The second argument is that the opponents of Conservative and Liberal Unionism *often* shared many assumptions about the desirability of the continued existence of the United Kingdom with the Unionists. The conclusion drawn from these arguments is that the United Kingdom was much more stable than the challenges it faced before 1914 suggest. The approach taken in this essay is that Home Rule was a British question and that it needs to be addressed in the context of the United Kingdom as a multinational state. In conjunction with this, the essay adopts an argument that unionism was a product of the ‘peripheries’ as much as nationalism, and that this made ‘Britishness’ a stabilising force in this ‘age of transition’ (Green, 1997).

#### Unionism with a capital ‘U’

The electoral strength of Conservatism was in England. As Robert Blake points out, four-fifths of Conservative seats in January 1910 lay in London, the rest of the south of England and the Midlands (Blake, 1985). The concomitant of this was that the association of the party with Englishness was damaging in the ‘peripheries’ and Hugh Cunningham has argued that the association of the party with patriotism was itself problematic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Cunningham, 1986). Felix Aubel, for example, describes the fortunes of the party in Wales as ‘an often

abysmal electoral performance' in which '[o]ne of the greatest obstacles faced by the Conservative Party in Wales was its perceived identification with "Englishness" and "English interests"' (Aubel, 1996, pp. 97, 105-6). Yet while the party was often hard pushed to win seats in Wales, its average share of the vote between 1885 and 1910 was 37.7 per cent, that is more than one-third of voters supported the 'English' Conservative Party. This may not have won the Conservatives any more than one-quarter of the seats, but historians' interests should be more proportionately representative than the British electoral system. Scotland, too, is seen as a stronghold of Liberalism and an area of weakness for Conservatism. Yet, again, such assumptions do not always match electoral reality. In 1900, Unionists won thirty-eight Scottish seats to the Liberals thirty-four. The strength of Unionism in Scotland, built from the alliance of Conservatism and Liberal Unionism, was a testament to the desire to see the unity of the United Kingdom (McCaffrey, 1971). In these years therefore the electoral performance of 'English' Conservatism was bolstered by the support of British Liberal Unionism.

It is worth anyway examining the attitudes of the English leadership of Unionism to the United Kingdom. Lord Salisbury was of the view that progress tended to result in the absorption of lesser nationalities and that nationalism therefore was an anachronism, a situation that he viewed as a positive benefit: 'It is the agglomeration and not the comminution of states to which civilization is constantly tending; it is the fusion and not the isolation of races by which the physical and moral excellence of the species is advanced' (quoted in Smith, 1972, p. 55). He was less wordy when he remarked of an invitation to Scotland that 'it's a long way off and it's an awful climate' (quoted in

Hutchinson, 1986, p.198). Yet, to most Unionists, the aggregation of states within the UK did not mean the merging of identities to create a single and exclusive British identity (see Robbins, 1988). Lord Robert Cecil explained, in 1910, that ‘under the British Crown, though there are many races, there is but one nationality’ and the Irish Unionists used the slogan ‘One Crown, One Flag, One Parliament’, but in neither case was it expected that a single nationality or Crown meant a lack of diversity (Hennessey, 1998, p. 8). Likewise, Joseph Chamberlain’s view that ‘the separate nationalities of Welsh, Scots and English were now merely local divisions of the developing British/English imperial race’ did not preclude the continued existence of those ‘local divisions’ (Loughlin, 1995, p. 30). Unionism was aware of difference and it tolerated a range of identities as long as they remained subordinate to British national identity.

In Wales, for example, most Unionists rejected out of hand any scheme of devolution, and vigorously resisted disestablishment of the Welsh church. In addition, radicals questioned the very Welshness of the Unionist aristocracy. Yet that did not obliterate the desire of some British aristocrats with interests in Wales to engage with and adopt Welshness. In 1909 a National Pageant of Wales was staged in Cardiff, with around 4000-5000 amateur performers. Prominent among them were the notables of the Unionist aristocracy. Lord Tredegar played Owen Glyndwr and the Marchioness of Bute, from the Scottish aristocratic family that rebuilt Cardiff to give it a sense of itself as a city (a status granted to it by a Unionist government), led ‘a number of ladies of high social distinction’ representing the counties of Wales as Dame Wales (Murphy,

1909; For a discussion of class, civic and national identities in Cardiff see Evans, 1984-85).

Nor only did the Unionist version of Welshness look to the past. The Tory *Western Mail* in 1901 looked to the new century and decided that Wales was:

One of the brightest and most truly civilized spots in the Queen's dominions....  
It is a tale of growth in material and industrial prosperity, in social well being, in educational progress, in religious life, in literary pursuits and in musical attainments ... a veritable romance ... Wales will preserve its national entity and will be more than a mere geographical designation. Decay of language and modes of life and local customs notwithstanding, national characteristics will outlive the centuries (Quoted in Smith, 1980, p. 10).

Unionists could, therefore, see national distinctiveness as a positive benefit to the Union. If we turn to Scotland, the mutual relationship between that nation and the leadership of Unionism is apparent in the form of A.J. Balfour.

If I consider the case I know best (namely my own) [he wrote], I find that within a general regard for mankind, which I hope is not absent nor weak, I am moved by a feeling, especially patriotic in its character for a group of nations who are the authors and guardians of western civilization, for the subgroup which speaks the English language, and whose laws and institutions are rooted

in British history, for the communities which compose the British Empire, for the United Kingdom of which I am a citizen, and for Scotland, where I was born, where I live, and where my fathers lived before me. Where patriotisms such as these are not forced into conflict, they are not only consistent with each other, but they may mutually reinforce each other ... (Balfour, 1913, pp. 10-11)

As the Checklands remarked, 'It is a curious circumstance that the Conservatives did more to recognize Scottish claims than the Liberal Party so favoured by the Scots' (Checkland, 1974, p. 170), yet it becomes less curious if it is accepted that Unionism was well able to accommodate diversity within the United Kingdom. The flirtation of some senior Unionists, including Austen Chamberlain, Lord Selborne and Walter Long, with federalism and 'Home Rule all round' as a solution to the starkness of Irish Home Rule provides ample evidence of a Unionist belief in the diversity of the United Kingdom. There was a belief that the range of identities in the British Isles could be politically accommodated without jeopardising the continued existence of the United Kingdom (Kendle, 1997, pp. 72-3; see also Jalland, 1979). Indeed, such federalism could be linked into both 'national efficiency' and imperial federation to locate it more firmly within Conservative imperialism.

The connections between Unionism and an acceptance of multiple identities of place can be seen further in a brief examination of Unionism in Ireland. Loughlin has discussed the lessening of the link between Irish and particularly Ulster Unionism with Irishness after 1886, as Unionists sought to strengthen their claims to be seen as British and as

cultural nationalists asserted the Catholic and Gaelic nature of Irishness (Loughlin, 1995). Nonetheless, there remain many examples of Irish unionists asserting their Irishness, stressing the compatibility between being Irish and supporting the Union. The Reverend George Salmon in 1886, for example, said that

a man who avows his belief that the happiness of Ireland would best be promoted by drawing close the ties that bind her to England, becomes a mark of obloquy and misrepresentation; he is said not to love his country; he is said to be an enemy of Ireland ... It is because I love Ireland that I protest against a separation which, I believe, would be injurious to England and fatal to Ireland (Salmon, n.d.).

In Ulster, too, there was a recognition of the distinctiveness of local identities within the United Kingdom, hence the *Lisburn Standard* in 1914 described the British as ‘one composite people which has yet certain local differences,’ and Sir Edward Carson in February 1914 said that he believed in ‘Ireland a nation’, ‘England a nation’, ‘Scotland a nation’, but that they all became ‘a greater nation when they were mingled together’ (Quoted in Loughlin, 1995, pp. 64, 65).

There was, of course, some English Unionist hostility towards the pluralism of identities in the United Kingdom. Leo Maxse condemned Liberal Britain as ‘an island in the German ocean, governed by Scotsmen, kicked by Irishmen and plundered by Welshmen,’ and the Unionist chief whip, David Lindsay, spoke darkly of a Celtic

conspiracy (Quoted in Loughlin, 1995, p. 55). Most Unionists, however, accepted therefore that it was possible to have multiple identities of place, and that Unionism represented a merging of interests yet a separate retention of identities. Unionism existed in all four nations within the United Kingdom; it was not an imposition from the English core but the construction of a coalition in all parts of the British Isles.

### The Opponents of Unionism

If Unionists were the only political force holding the United Kingdom together between 1886 and 1914 then certainly the nation would have crumbled. The Unionists lost three general elections in a row after 1906 and in the 1910 elections the Union became the primary political issue (See Green, 1996). But it is not entirely accurate to see the opponents of the Unionists as opponents of the Union. The Liberal Party of Gladstone and Asquith might have been pressing for Home Rule for Ireland, but not with the intention of destroying the United Kingdom. Indeed, Biagini has suggested that 'it was the Liberals who were the true "United Kingdom" party in 1886' (Biagini, 2000, p. 108). It could well be argued that, while not underestimating their significance, the political forces desiring the destruction of the Union remained, if not marginal, then sidelined before the First World War.

It has been observed before that the major parties of the left in the British Isles between the 1880s and the First World War proved highly adaptable in their responses to the multinational nature of the United Kingdom, because of their acceptance of the existence of nations rather than a single British nation, even to the point of accepting the need for

the existence of separate political entities (see especially See especially J. S. Ellis, 1998). This acceptance was usually limited to institutions that would be subordinate to the Imperial parliament at Westminster. Sovereignty was not on offer. It was on this basis that the Liberal Party and the early Labour Party have been described by Biagini as ‘multinational “coalition” parties (Biagini, 1996, p. 2). Recognition of the political demands associated with national identities did not mean repeal of the relevant Acts of Union. Gladstone in 1880 told the House of Commons that

Those who endangered the Union with Ireland were the party that maintained there an alien church, an unjust land law ... and *the true supporters of the union* are those who firmly uphold the supreme authority of parliament, but exercise that authority to bind the three nations by the indissoluble tie of liberal and equal laws (Quoted in Biagini, 2000, p. 97).

This pluralist approach, shared by the pre-war Labour Party, believed that the political structure of the United Kingdom could be reformed to enable greater space for subsidiary national identities, and that the outcome would be a strengthening of the United Kingdom through the increased consent obtained from the ‘periphery’. It is tempting to see such ideas as imposed from the centre but that would be to ignore the critical role of the non-English in parties of the left in shaping policy towards the sub-nations. In a sense the leaderships of the Liberal and Labour parties were genuinely British – Gladstone, Rosebery, Ramsay MacDonald and Keir Hardie had links with at

least two of the British nations, and sometimes more (Robbins, 1998, p. 270; For Gladstone see Robbins, 1988, p. 106).

Kenneth Morgan has rightly concluded that ‘Welsh radicals were essentially British Liberals rather than Celtic nationalists’ (1982, p. 113). But such a phrase juxtaposes Wales to Britain. Mostly, there was not a conflict between Welsh national aspirations and British Liberalism. As D.A. Hamer has argued Wales and Scotland were ‘interests’ *within* the Liberal Party (1972, p. 2). Welsh and Scottish Liberals were embedded within the United Kingdom by their acceptance of Liberalism. Samuel T. Evans, Liberal MP for mid-Glamorgan, showed the entangled nature of Welsh and Liberal demands in his January 1910 election address. He espoused traditional Liberal shibboleths: ‘For the maintenance of the prosperity of the United Kingdom,’ he said, ‘Free Trade is essential.’ On the House of Lords he remarked that ‘Wales is specially interested in this matter. In the last session, the Welsh Disestablishment Bill was introduced, but unless the wrecking powers of the House of Lords are limited, this measure, though long overdue, will be further delayed’ (Evans, 1910).’ Evans was content within the Union. His view of Welsh history was that ‘The nation, since the Union, has escaped those internecine quarrels and feuds which theretofore ravaged it, and at the present day it presents a vigour and an individuality in its national life which should enable it, with noble ideals and worthy efforts, to achieve a high destiny in the future history and civilisation of the world’ (Evans, 1908-9). Certainly there were attempts at the renegotiation of the terms by which Wales was governed, through *Cymru Fydd* in the 1890s, through claims for

national institutions, and the demand for disestablishment, but such 'national' demands were accommodated within Liberalism and its pluralist attitude to the United Kingdom.

In Scotland too, Liberalism was associated with national demands, and Liberalism was assimilated with a version of Scottishness as both asserted the desirability of independence, thrift and self-help. Samuel Smiles was of course a (British) Scot. The anti-aristocratic nature of Liberalism aided in the absorption of the crofters in the 1880s. Little wonder that Taylor Innes in 1887 declared 'I am a Liberal because I am a Scotchman' (Quoted in Smout, 1990, p. 230).

In the early twentieth century the links between Liberalism and Scottish nationalism became almost indissoluble with the formation of the Young Scots Society. Formed in 1900 its aims were jointly, 'to stir interest in progressive politics ... to promote Liberal principles' and 'to further the interests of Scotland and to secure for Scotland the right of self-government' (Quoted in Webb, 1978, p. 64; see also Finlay, 1997). It had as many as 10,000 members by 1914, yet the Young Scots took up the pantheon of *British* Liberal heroes, celebrating Gladstone and Cobden. Liberalism and Scottish national aspirations were almost entirely compatible (Young Scots, n.d.; for Cobden see Cox to Gulland, 13 Aug. 1903 appointing the latter organizing secretary in Scotland, in co-operation with the Young Scots.).

The British Empire

Britain's global empire provided a further arena for the strengthening of a sense of the compatibility of multiple identities with a wider Britishness. The ending of empire and the assertion of successful political nationalisms in former colonies have drawn some historians to a desire to uncover the emergence of distinctive identities opposed to imperial Britishness. Stuart Ward has identified an approach in Australian historiography that draws out evidence of Australian national identity to stress the inevitability of the rejection of Britishness and the imperial connection:

Successive generations of historians have set out to identify the earliest sprouting of youthful, assertive, nationalist behaviour and having done so, to explain why these signs of early promise failed to achieve the full bloom of national independence (Ward, 2001, p. 6).

This 'thwarted nationalism paradigm', as Ward calls it, shares much in common with the 'break-up of Britain' thesis, and its weaknesses are also similar. Ward points to the compatibility of Australian national sentiment to 'British race patriotism', so that

For much of the twentieth century, Australian political culture was characterised by a deep attachment to the British embrace. London formed the center of an imperial imagination in which Australia was cast as a loyal outpost of British culture and civilization (Ward, 2001, p. 2).

Developments in Australian (and other dominion) autonomy were not, therefore, associated with the assertion of new national identities that challenged Britishness, but aided the view that Britishness was strengthened by diversity.

The Empire also aided in the challenge to English domination of Britishness, because the Empire was seen as the outcome of the partnership between the nations of the British Isles. When Richard Seddon, premier of New Zealand, supported his colonies decision to send troops to South Africa in 1899, he asserted the common ethnicity of the various parts of the Empire:

We belong to and are an integral part of a great Empire. The flag that floats over us and protects us was expected to protect our kindred and countrymen who are in the Transvaal. There are in the Transvaal New-Zealanders, Australians, English, Irish and Scotch ...: they are of our own race and our kindred (Quoted in Macintyre and Gardner, 1971, p. 260).

In this common endeavour the English were only one component of the British. The Empire provided a variety of opportunities for the assertion of the diversity of the British that stressed that pluralism strengthened the imperial project. In 1877 an 'imperial assemblage' was held to celebrate Queen Victoria's re-titling as Empress of India. The dais for the viceroy emphasised the imperial and 'British' aspects of the ritual, decorated as it was with laurel wreaths, imperial crowns, eagles, the cross of St George, the union jack, the rose, the shamrock and thistle. The dais was surrounded by shields representing

the Irish harp, the Lion Rampant of Scotland and the Three Lions of England (see Cohn, 1992, p. 20). In other contexts, the distinctiveness of the component parts of the United Kingdom in the Empire was stressed. The major social event of the British year in India was the St Andrew's day dinner, which clearly asserted the Scottish contribution to the Raj. Yet as Elizabeth Buettner has argued,

those who came together to dine in town halls on 30 November in the name of honouring Scotland's patron saint provide the strongest indications of what being Scottish meant to those playing a direct role in maintaining 'Greater Britain' ... Toasts and speeches with which these evenings culminated illustrate how Scottish culture and national consciousness during these decades were widely seen as compatible *within* the double context of Union and Empire, and not in opposition to them (2002, pp. 215-16).

There were, of course, signs of the emergence of distinctive colonial national identities. Jeanine Graham has argued that in New Zealand perceptions of the climate and geography were powerful forces shaping a new identity. 'These New Zealanders knew of their northern European origins only at second-hand, she argues. 'The bush, the mountains, and the clean air were part of their identity.' In this context, she argues that leisure operated to emphasise distinctiveness from British origins. Shooting, wood-chopping, regattas associated with New Zealand's maritime needs rather than the sea-faring traditions of the British Isles, and picnics all contributed to a sense of New Zealand identity (Graham, 1992, p. 114). However, such difference was widely seen in

New Zealand as a variant of Britishness. Two historians argued in 1902 that ‘The stock from which the New Zealanders are sprung is not only British, but the best of British’ (Quoted in Sinclair, 1969, p. 314). Throughout the dominions, therefore, pluralism was seen as strength, and it was the multinational nature of the United Kingdom that enabled the expression of multiple identities in the Empire.

## Ireland

Of course, Ireland throws up problems to such an interpretation of the compatibility between demands for devolution and maintenance of the Union. Most Liberals and the labour movement in England, Wales and Scotland accepted the Union even while wanting its reform. In addition, devolution was but one part of their wider political programmes. In Ireland, however, politics was almost entirely shaped by the national question, most obviously in the collapse of Liberalism in the face of the Irish parliamentary party, but also in the subordination of labour politics to the national question (Fitzpatrick, 1996, pp. 276-304). Without a doubt, there was a rejection of Britishness in parts of Irish nationalism. The emergence of cultural Irishness in the late nineteenth century was precipitated in part by Douglas Hyde’s essay ‘On the Necessity of De-Anglicizing the Irish People’, and as D.G. Boyce argues, ‘The Celtic Revival offered a distinctly racial challenge to the idea of a British nation forged by the predominant partner.’ The conception of Sinn Fein, he continues, marked a rejection of ‘the pluralist United Kingdom’ underlying the Irish Home Rule Bill (Boyce, 1986, pp. 239, 245). But the balance of forces in pre-1916 Ireland was very much more in favour of constitutional nationalism, and certainly here there was some acceptance of the

Liberal pluralist approach to the United Kingdom (Bew, 1999, pp. 730-2). There are all sorts of obstacles to getting a clear picture of nationalist attitudes towards the multi-national nature of the United Kingdom before 1914. For some, Home Rule was an acceptance of the subordination of a Dublin parliament to the Imperial parliament. Isaac Butt, founder of the Home Rule party, argued for 'federalism' to defend the Union (Kendle, 1997, p. 59). Many nationalists, however, saw Home Rule as only the first step on the road towards greater separation. Indeed Irish and British Unionists often saw it as such, and branded all nationalists, however moderate, as disloyal. There were different stances adopted within constitutional nationalism, and indeed it has been argued that the division between constitutional and physical force nationalism should not be overstated. There is, too, the ambiguous relationship of Ireland to the British Empire and imperialism, which made for complicity in overseas conquest (Jeffrey, 1996; Howe, 2000). On the other hand, some nationalists believed that pluralism would work too well and absorb Irishness within a wider British patriotism (Boyce, 1986).

There was, though, certainly some acceptance of the Liberal pluralist conception of the United Kingdom. Thomas Hennessey points to John Redmond's 'aspirational loyalty', his desire to be an equal partner in the British Empire (Hennessey, 1998, p. 22). With the passing of the Home Rule Act in September 1914, Redmond felt it possible to declare that 'Ireland has been admitted by the democracy of England upon equal terms to her proper place in the Empire, which she had as much to do in the building of as England or Scotland (loud applause); and already as a result she has taken her proper place with perfect and absolute good faith and loyalty' (Redmond, 1915). Redmond was not alone.

George Berkeley, who helped in the organization of the nationalist Volunteers in Belfast described the Home Rule Act as one which would ‘restore a Parliament to our country after so many generations of toil, the Act which would also enable Ireland to take her place willingly, and therefore without loss of honour, in the circle of self-governing states which form the British Empire’ (Berkeley, 1917). How representative such voices were remains open to question, but there was some enthusiastic acceptance of Ireland’s place within the British Empire, which suggests some reluctance to see the United Kingdom as the limit of Irish ambitions. Alvin Jackson suggests that it is a flaccid definition of British nationalism that might be able to incorporate those nationalists content with Home Rule, but indeed Britishness was, as Loughlin points out, conceptually flaccid in the decades up to (and again beyond) 1914 (Jackson, 1989, p. 10; Loughlin, 1995, p. 62).

## Conclusion

To remain with flaccidity for my conclusion, and to rephrase Harcourt, it can be suggested that it was possible to say between the 1880s and 1914 that ‘we are all unionists now’. As David Powell has argued, ‘politicians of both parties were seeking ways of integrating potentially disruptive elements into the framework of a British national state; ... the disagreements between them were more about means than ends’ (2002, p. 134). Of course there were tensions within the concept and practice of British national identity, but *nationalism* was remarkably weak. Unionism was dominant, even outside the Unionist party. Even Unionism could accommodate diverse identities, and Liberal pluralism made a virtue of such diversity. We should therefore be wary of

presuming that the United Kingdom was unraveling, the forces of national unity were strong, not least because such forces were a product of the ‘peripheries’ as well as of the ‘core’.

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