

Will Britain Survive?

A theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/01/will-britain-survive/621095

January 5, 2022

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The statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square (Robbie Lawrence)

January 5, 2022, 1:30 AM ET

The grim reality for Britain as it faces up to 2022 is that no other major power on Earth stands quite as close to its own dissolution. Given its recent record, perhaps this should not be a surprise. In the opening two decades of the 21st century, Britain has effectively lost two wars and seen its grand strategy collapse, first with the 2008 financial crisis, which blew up its social and economic settlement, and, then, in 2016, when the country chose to rip up its long-term foreign policy by leaving the European Union, achieving the rare feat of erecting an economic border with its largest trading partner *and* with a part of itself, Northern Ireland, while adding fuel to the fire of Scottish independence for good measure. And if this wasn't enough, it then spectacularly failed in its response to the coronavirus pandemic, combining one of the worst death rates in the developed world with one of the worst economic recessions.

Yet however extraordinary this run of events has been, it seems to me that Britain's existential threat is not simply the result of poor governance—an undeniable reality—but of something much deeper: the manifestation of something close to a *spiritual* crisis.

The 20 years from 2000 to 2020 might have been objectively awful for Britain, but the country has been through other grim periods in its recent past and not seen its coherence come quite as close to breakdown as it is today. At the heart of Britain's crisis is a crisis of identity. Put simply, no other major power is quite as conflicted about whether it is even a nation to begin with, let alone what it takes to act like one.

The problem is that Britain is not a traditional country like France, Germany, or even the United States. "Britain," here, is shorthand for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—a collection of nations and territories, combining England, Scotland, Wales, and the disputed land of

Northern Ireland—while also being a legitimate, sovereign, and unitary nation-state itself. With the passing of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, it is now one of the rare states in the Western world whose name is not simply the nation it represents: The United Kingdom is more than Britain and the British. Some of its citizens believe themselves to be British, while others say they are not British at all; others say they are British *and* another nationality—Scottish or Welsh, say. In Northern Ireland it is even more complicated, with some describing themselves as *only* British while others say they are *only* Irish.

For many, the root of Britain's existential crisis today is Brexit—an apparent spasm of English nationalism that has broken the social contract holding Britain's union of nations together, revealing the country's true nature as an unequal union, of the English, by the English, for the English. Although Brexit was carried by a majority of the U.K. as a whole, it was opposed by two of its constituent parts, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It was the votes of England, its dominant nation, that carried the day.

Yet the truth is that the *Englishness* of Brexit only matters if people see themselves as something other than British. So long as an American president has carried the Electoral College, it is irrelevant whether they were rejected by the voters in a given state because, at root, the voters are *Americans* first. Does Britain, as a nation, even enjoy this basic tenet of national belonging any longer? Brexit, then, might have exacerbated the tensions within the union, but it did not cause them. If anything, Brexit revealed the scale of the problem that was already there.

Over the summer, I had the opportunity to see for myself just how disunited the U.K. has become. With three months of paternity leave and a once-in-a-century pandemic leaving dreams of tropical island hopping in the dust, I seized a rare chance to travel the length and breadth of my own country.

My wife, kids, and I had set off on our grand tour following the G7 in Cornwall in June—a dispiriting gathering of old and uninspiring Western leaders defending the idea of the West, hosted by a British prime minister attempting to defend the idea of Britain. After the summit, I deleted Twitter and most of the newspaper apps off my phone and we set off.

Trying to avoid the news, I began a book I'd been meaning to read for years: *The Leopard*, by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. The book soon became something of a prophetic companion, somehow able to reflect the crisis of identity at the heart of the U.K. better than any newspaper article or television segment had managed for years.

The book opens in revolutionary Sicily in the 1860s, as the old Kingdom of the Two Sicilies starts to collapse, subsumed into the new Italy of Garibaldi. The central character is the Prince of Salina, a member of the kingdom's old ruling class who is haunted by the discovery on his estate of a dead soldier who was killed fighting for the last Bourbon monarch in Naples.

The pointlessness of the soldier's death haunted the prince. What did he die for? Sicily was about to be subsumed into the new Italy. "He died for the King, of course," the prince says to himself by way of reassurance. "For the King, who stands for order, continuity, decency, honour, right." He died for a *cause*. But even as he was reassuring himself of this, the prince knew it was not true: The old king had been useless. "Kings who personify an idea should not, cannot, fall below a certain level," he admits. "If they do ... the idea suffers too."

The passage reminded me of a conversation I'd had with a figure who had been close to Boris Johnson and worried that the U.K. was in danger of becoming an anachronism like the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies or the Austro-Hungarian empire. Britain, this person said, was failing because it had grown lazy and complacent, unable to act with speed and purpose. The state had stopped paying attention to the basics of government, whether that was the development of its economy, the protection of its borders, or the defense of the realm. Instead, it had become guilty of a failed elite groupthink that had allowed separatism to flourish, wealth to concentrate in London and its surrounding areas, and the political elite to ignore the public mood.

The warning is as stark as it is bleak. Austria-Hungary, like the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, had squandered its popular legitimacy after failing to feed, protect, and represent its people equally during its calamitous handling of World War I. As the historian Pieter Judson shows in *The Habsburg Empire*, Austria-Hungary did not, as is often portrayed, disintegrate because it was illegitimate or a relic of a bygone era. It fell apart because in its desperation to survive World War I, it undermined the foundation of its legitimacy as an empire of nations, becoming instead an *Austrian* autocracy. In its scramble to survive, it forgot who it was.

Could the same be happening to Britain? Was I touring an anachronistic country, one destined to break up into its old component parts? The breakup of the U.K. is certainly not unthinkable. We tend to think of the world's most powerful nations as unshakable actors on the world stage, but of course they are not. You only have to cast your eyes back a few generations to the last time the U.K. lost a major chunk of its territory, when London failed to build a nation from the state it had created between Britain and Ireland in 1800. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed entirely, unable to bear the weight of its failures as demands for independence from the periphery turned into demands for independence from the central state itself: Russia.

When you speak to people in Westminster—the heart of the British state—the extent of their pessimism about the future of the country is striking. One friend of mine, who wished to remain anonymous because his public profile makes it difficult for him to speculate openly about the future of the country, told me a story about his grandfather, who had fought for Austria-Hungary before escaping to Britain after its collapse. When he died, he was buried in the United Kingdom, but in a coffin draped in the flag of the old empire, the state that had protected him, as a Jew, and which he had fought for and remained loyal to ever since. His grandson, who has fought under the flag of the United Kingdom, told me his own fear was that he might suffer the same fate—buried by his grandchildren in the flag of a nation he had fought for and served, but which had long since passed into history.

Our first stop in England was a holiday resort called Butlin's in Somerset, a county in southwest England, which is, perhaps, the most British place in the world. Built in the 1950s to offer affordable holidays for the working classes, Butlin's has survived the onset of cheap flights, package holidays, and the rise of the middle class to remain popular, relevant, and somehow more representative of modern Britain than anywhere else we went on our trip.

For me, a middle-class child of the 1980s, the whole experience felt far more alien than I'd like to admit: a land barely touched by the kind of gentrification I have come to think of as normal. Yet, while it is old-fashioned, it does not feel stuck in the past: There is a timelessness to it, managing to be both modern and a throwback to some lost age at the same time. When I told my mum where we were going,

she sent me a picture of her as a little girl on holiday at the same resort in the 1960s. There were the same cheap terraced chalets, garish red staff uniforms, fairground rides, and fried food. Yet it was also far more multicultural, multiracial, and multigenerational than the resorts for the middle classes where we spent most of our time during the rest of our trip—more upscale places where the food and wine is better and the conversation sounds more like Twitter, but the reality is far more exclusive and monocultural.

Butlin's was a reminder that there is still something distinctive about Britain; it could be nowhere else *but* Britain. It was not a cheap version of America or an attempt at continental sophistication. Yes, there were Italian restaurants and the like that would not have been there when my mum visited, but the canteens still served fried breakfasts, roast dinners, and sponge puddings with custard. It was, I realized, one of those English institutions that George Orwell talked about in *The Lion and the Unicorn*: somewhere viewed by the middle classes—that is, people like me—as something almost disgraceful, a place to snigger at, yet somehow more reflective and at ease with modern Britain than they were themselves. That I did not particularly enjoy it or feel at home there says more about me than Butlin's.

After leaving Butlin's, we ventured east toward London for our next stop: the Chalke Valley History Festival in Wiltshire. This is deep Wessex, the ancient Anglo-Saxon kingdom that gave birth to England itself. Our trip through this Tolkien land of rolling fields, woods, and pristine hobbit villages reminded me of the ageless continuity of England. The country overall likes to think of itself as a mini United States, but when you are this far into old England it becomes obvious that this is not the case: England, like the rest of Europe, is rooted in place and time in a way America is not.

Yet while we were undoubtedly deep into England here, it was a different country from Butlin's. It was as if we'd left a camp for Anglo-Saxon serfs and arrived at a gathering for their Norman lords. And just as Butlin's had its uniforms, so did the people of the Chalke Valley: every shade of pastel imaginable, linen jackets, and more pairs of boat shoes than a Cape Cod regatta. Getting coffee, I heard a snippet of a conversation that would have been impossible at Butlin's. "No, no responsibilities at all," one woman said to her friend, excitedly, describing her new job as a board member of some company or charity. "It's a non-exec position."

At the festival I met a friend, the historian Dan Snow. We chatted about the depths and complexities of England. As we looked out over the festival, he pointed to a series of folds in the hills on the other side of the valley. These lines in the landscape, easily visible to the eye, might have been old Roman terraces, he said, but nobody knows. England is so deep in places that its secrets remain hidden.

In a land this ancient, then, does the future of the United Kingdom—a political entity only 100 years old—really matter? After all, the state that exists today is the product of Irish secession in 1921. But even the state that existed before that is a relatively modern creation: the product of not just one union, between England and Scotland in 1707, but also a second, between Britain and Ireland in 1800. The United Kingdom might crumble, and perhaps so too will Britain, but England will surely remain. Is this not a comfort? My sense of sadness at the loosening of the ties that bind the U.K. are really just emotional. Would life change all that much?

If these were my ramblings, they were also dripping out of *The Leopard*, in which the prince begins to have similar thoughts about Sicily. “All will be the same, just as it is now: except for an imperceptible change round of classes,” he declares, dismissing the revolutionary hopes of the liberal *garibaldini*, who believed they were transforming society. “The Salina will remain the Salina,” he says, defiantly, of his own aristocratic family.

From England, we ventured north into Scotland, which today feels almost like a foreign country. Our plan was to attempt a grand tour of Scotland’s island periphery. We would spend a week in Shetland, an archipelago 100 miles north of the Scottish mainland, before venturing south to neighboring Orkney (another collection of islands off the coast), and from there through the Highlands to Scotland’s dramatic Western Isles.

In Shetland, you are closer to Bergen in Norway than to Edinburgh, and it was rare to spot a Scottish flag. There the people even spoke of going “to Scotland.” In Orkney, too, there was a striking sense of separation. “They are both very different from the rest of Scotland,” Alistair Carmichael, the member of Parliament for both sets of islands, told me. “[They are] Nordic, not Celtic.”

Orkney had been the center of a vast Stone Age world of the north. Here, 5,000 years ago, the Neolithic lived and worshipped in colossal stone temples, many of which remain standing today. As with the Chalke Valley, then, it is possible to visit Britain’s far north and feel a sense of calming fatalism: that geography is destiny, Orkney will remain Orkney, whatever happens to the United Kingdom. Yet, while this feeling was real, it was also fleeting. The overwhelming sense that I came away with from my time in Scotland was one of loss, not enduring stability.

This feeling began in Orkney but followed me throughout my time in Scotland. In Orkney, we visited the house of the local laird—the landed noble who would once have dominated life on the island. Skail House captures a bygone age and a bygone class. Each room is packed with trophies plundered from the East: tiger-skin carpets (with the head still on), Japanese silks, Chinese crockery, Indian embroidery. In one room a recording of the last lady of the house plays on loop. The voice is not that of a Scottish noblewoman, however, but a British one. At first I thought it was a recording of the Queen.

The recording and the family mementos were a reminder that even the aristocracy itself was a national British institution—one that stretched the length of the country, educating its children at the same schools, entering the same services, running the same empire. This has now all but gone, living on with the same costumes and titles but without the substance. Today, these figures do not sound British but English, representatives of a foreign class.

None of this is to suggest that the union will collapse because of the hollowing-out of Britain’s aristocracy—of course it won’t. But the story is nevertheless emblematic of the far more pernicious problem eating away at the core of the union: the imaginative sense of who we are.

Visiting Scotland today is to very obviously visit a land from which the British state has all but withdrawn. The national industries and national institutions that once existed have gone. By the time we arrived in Glasgow, we’d passed an abandoned British nuclear-research facility and an abandoned British military base. The only signs of the British state were the partially privatized post office, the pound, and the monarchy. Is this really enough?

The scale of the British state's voluntary withdrawal was brought home to me when I had to find a way to get my second COVID shot in Scotland. Nominally, Britain has a *National* Health Service, but in practice this has been broken up into its component (sub)national parts. In Glasgow there was a giant walk-in vaccination center available to anyone. The service was exemplary: Our details were taken on an iPad by a nurse, and within a few minutes my wife and I had received our second dose. It was only later, when we tried to prove that we'd had the vaccine, that things began to unravel.

After being vaccinated in Glasgow on July 20, we spent five months trying to get the Scottish health service to provide proof. The problem was that we had fallen into a bureaucratic black hole, a COVID catch-22 that reveals the scale of the British state's retreat.

To get proof of our vaccination, we had to log in to Scotland's NHS website, but to do so we needed login details that were only available to people living in Scotland. It has proved almost impossible to bypass this circular logic, even by asking NHS Scotland to post proof of our vaccination, because the Scottish health service will not mail records outside of Scotland. Our only hope was to ask our member of Parliament in London to somehow find a way of extracting proof from the Scottish system, but she has no power over the system north of the border. It took an intervention from the British secretary of state for health to change the system so that vaccination records can be shared between England and Scotland.

This conundrum exposes the absurdity at the heart of Britain's constitutional mess that was predictable and predicted. In 1998, Tony Blair devolved power from London to Edinburgh, giving a new Scottish assembly powers over a raft of areas that had previously been decided by the British Parliament. In the debates over this radical constitutional change, opponents warned that it would undermine the integrity of the United Kingdom by creating an imbalance at the heart of the country.

The central problem is this: With a separate Scottish Parliament, Scottish voters can elect lawmakers to the British Parliament in Westminster, whose votes decide policies that only apply in England. English voters, meanwhile, have no say over policies decided by the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, even though the money used to pay for these policies is raised by the British government. This structural problem has no solution, either, because to create an *English* parliament on a similar footing to the Scottish one would mean that the most important person in the country would no longer be the British prime minister, but whoever ran the new English assembly.

Today, Boris Johnson leads a government that is for the most part an English one, and only occasionally a British one. In dealing with the pandemic, he acts almost exclusively for England. In most of his job duties he acts as the de facto prime minister of England and is treated, psychologically at least, as a foreign leader when he visits Scotland.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. In 1998, supporters of devolution said the measure would not only strengthen the union but also kill support for Scottish independence "stone dead." The argument was essentially that Scotland would have the best of both worlds—self-government *and* unionism—so it would never feel the need for formal secession.

In *The Leopard*, when Italy is born, the prince worries about the future. "An evil fairy, of unknown name, must have been present," he says to himself—the speeches in favor were just too emphatic to be real. "Italy was born and one could only hope that she would live on in this form," he continues. "Any

other would be worse.” But he is still worried: “He had a feeling that something, someone, had died, God only knew in what back alley, in what corner of the popular conscience.”

In Britain, too, something has died.

States that have forgotten who they are tend not to last long.

The Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Austria-Hungary, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies: In each case, the breakup came about because of the demands of the dominant state in the union (or from outside the union, in the case of Sicily) as much as the demand for independence or autonomy from the peripheries.

One of the problems in Britain is that the loss of faith in the country is now so pervasive that it is hard to know whether it can be rebuilt. The union is not only being questioned by Welsh, Irish, and Scottish nationalists, but also, now, by the once-unionist middle classes in England for whom Brexit has broken a bit of the faith they had in Britain. Some simply no longer believe it's worth saving—that like Butlin's, it is somehow shameful or anachronistic. They actively prefer the thought of being a less powerful but more settled European country: a greater Holland rather than a mini United States.

This instinct is not unreasonable. The Dutch are no longer a world power, but they are rich and stable nonetheless. Anyone who has traveled to the Republic of Ireland in recent years (as I did at the end of my trip) must also acknowledge the uncomfortable challenge it presents to British unionism. And this is not just because it too is wealthy and settled, but because, in the imaginative sense, it knows who it is. Its national myths and stories might be just as bogus as any other country's, but it believes them and promotes them through symbols and ceremonies. It is, in effect, a deeply conservative state that promotes a cohesive nationalism in a way the British state simply does not. For Ireland, this success carries its own challenge as it seeks to subsume Northern Ireland and its million-strong British Protestant population, who do *not* share these national stories.

It seems to me that if Britain is to survive, it has to believe that there is such a thing as Britain and act as though that is the case. Joseph Roth wrote that the old Austro-Hungarian monarchy died “not through the empty verbiage of its revolutionaries, but through the ironical disbelief of those who should have believed in, and supported, it.” In time, we might well say the same of Britain.

It is for this reason that Brexit acts as both an irritant and a potential bandage for the union. At root, Brexit was an assertion of nation—the British nation—but one mostly made by the English. Herein lies its essential paradox. It is a revolution that has the potential to accelerate the breakup of the nation by revealing its Englishness, but also one that carries within it the potential to slowly rebuild a sense of *Britishness* by creating a new national distinctiveness from the other: *Europe*.

Outside the European Union, Britain's collective experience becomes more national by definition. Its economy diverges from the EU, with separate trading relationships, tariffs, standards, and products. It will have its own British immigration system, border checks, and citizenship. For good or bad, Brexit means that Britain will become more distinct from the other nations of Europe. It is for this reason that Brexit makes Scottish independence more likely in the short term, but more complicated in the long term, because it would mean imposing a hard border across the island of Britain that would not have been necessary had the U.K. remained in the EU.

None of this means that EU membership was a threat to British national unity. No other country in the European Union—apart from Spain—is at risk of breaking up. It is also crucial to point out that Northern Ireland will not experience the consequences of Brexit in the same way as the rest of the U.K., having been forced to accept permanently different rules than mainland Britain to ensure that there is no land border with the Republic of Ireland.

And while there is no active British state to speak of in Scotland, attempts to rebuild a sense of Britishness will remain marginal. In time, Brexit might prove to be the thing that finally breaks the union, or a shock that started the long, painful rebuilding process. If my travels are anything to go by, Brexit is unlikely to be the decisive factor either way. Unless people in Scotland believe that they are also British and that the British government and state is *their* government and state, nothing else matters.

At the end of *The Leopard*, as the prince lies dying in his old age, he realizes that his youthful calm about the fate of his class and country had been misplaced—he had been wrong to think nothing would change. “The significance of a noble family lies entirely in its traditions, that is in its vital memories,” he says to himself. But the revolution has swept away his family’s old aristocratic privileges and way of life. The meaning of his name, of being noble, had become, more and more, little more than “empty pomp.”

“He had said the Salina would always remain the Salina. He had been wrong. The last Salina was himself.”

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland remains an unusual country, but its vital memories are dying. To survive, it must be more than empty pomp.