

The United Kingdom “will probably stay together” despite Brexit, historian Brendan Simms tells the AEJ

By Martyn Bond, author of *Hitler's Cosmopolitan Bastard: Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi and His Vision of Europe* (2021), and William Horsley

In addressing the question “Is Brexit bound to lead to the breakup of the United Kingdom?” Professor Brendan Simms, Cambridge historian and Director of the Centre for Geopolitics, began by presenting a historical overview of the steps which led to the creation of the United Kingdom as a “multinational union” – from the English conquest of Wales in the 13th century, through the union of the Scottish parliament with Westminster in 1707, and finally union with Ireland in 1801.

In essence, the other nations of the UK were forced to be part of that England-centred “system” -- especially during the age of empire -- or else face being run by it. In that form the UK became an ordering force at every major juncture of European history, including the age of empire, the settlements that followed the Napoleonic wars, the peace treaties that followed the first and second World Wars, and at decisive moments during the Cold War and after.

He argued that the dynamics of the “triangular” relationship among England, the three other nations which constitute the UK, and the European continent, should be understood through that historical experience of England (and later the UK) having maintained the status of an “ordering power” in Europe; while England has also been the dominant or “ordering” force in what he described as an extraordinarily successful political union at home in the UK itself.

However, history is also peppered with occasions when Spain or France sought to use Ireland as a “backdoor” through which to challenge the English crown – such as the several landings of Spanish and French forces in Ireland during the 1600s; while Scotland’s close relations with France, based on the two nations’ mutual interest in containing English power, is famously known as the “auld alliance”.

The 2016 referendum vote to leave the EU by a majority of UK voters (but only a minority of voters in Scotland and Northern Ireland) changed the dynamic. And as tensions escalated between Brussels and London during the ill-tempered negotiations from 2017-2019 about the terms of the UK’s withdrawal, Brendan Simms acknowledged that the Brexit process threatened to “unravel the UK”. But he went on to explain why in his analysis the underlying strengths of the Union make it more likely that the United Kingdom will “keep together” and not dissolve.

He stressed the importance of understanding the distinction between the UK’s ‘incorporating union’ and the confederal nature of the European Union. In the UK power rests with the central government and parliament, the incorporated nations having a ‘voice’ through a common electoral system in all parts of the Union. They all have MPs at Westminster. Certain powers have then been delegated from the centre to devolved administrations in the member nations, whereas in the confederal EU independent member states have delegated specific roles and powers upwards to a central authority in Brussels.

Addressing the various perceived threats to the union, Professor Simms focused largely on the simmering and unresolved row over the status of Northern Ireland, which he said had the potential to lead to a disastrous outcome. Since the UK's departure from the EU, special customs and trade arrangements have been in place for Northern Ireland as the only part of the UK with a land border with the EU. That means that both the UK and the EU are in effect 'ordering powers' in N.W Europe. They both set the rules of economic life in the province of Northern Ireland. As a result the Republic of Ireland finds itself pulled by conflicting interests, while inter-communal tensions have risen between nationalists and unionists in Northern Ireland.

Although the British government formally agreed to a form of customs border in the Irish Sea to satisfy the EU's demand to protect its single market for goods travelling between the two parts of Ireland, Brendan Simms argues that any trade border – either within the island of Ireland or between Great Britain and Ulster – represents a violation of the 1998 Good Friday agreement, which brought an end to the violent tensions and heavy loss of life which Ulster experienced during the years of sectarian conflict there.

The thorny issue of trade flows and borders between Britain and a divided Ireland raised fears in Brussels that historical roles might be reversed: this time the British government might use Northern Ireland as a "backdoor" to gain access to the EU's closely-guarded single market. As Simms explained, the EU has the right to protect its internal market and the Northern Ireland unionists also have the right to maintain their own union and customs union with Britain. Since these two rights appear to be incompatible, it was imperative to seek creative solutions. A precedent for that patient approach exists in the form of the Good Friday agreement, which reconciled the conflicting national aspirations of Irish nationalists and Ulster unionists.

Instead, he argued, EU leaders had made a mistake by allowing their defence of the single market to "trump" the Good Friday agreement. Chief EU negotiator Michel Barnier had chosen to drive an especially hard bargain in order to demonstrate that Brexit had been a disaster.

Pressed further over his interpretation, Simms insisted that the EU and the Irish government could have sought ways of staying closer to the UK as its most important neighbour, but were intent on "punishing" the UK for Brexit. Thus the EU had used the so-called "backstop" arrangements to apply overly strict controls on goods from Britain entering Northern Ireland. That approach now risked "blowing up in its face" if the Unionists decided unilaterally to exit the backstop.

Questioners raised the looming possibility that before long another provision of the Good Friday agreement would be triggered that makes a referendum on Irish unity possible in the north. He acknowledged that in time Catholics were likely to become a majority in Northern Ireland. But by no means all Catholics there saw themselves as nationalists; and the merits of remaining part of the UK – such as access to the NHS – would remain persuasive to many. He noted, too, that the UK was still easily Ireland's most important trade partner.

As for Scotland's bid for independence, Brendan Simms believes that issue has now become less salient, even though the government led by the SNP's Nicola Sturgeon has forcefully renewed its demand for a second independence referendum. He cited polling evidence that 48 percent of Scottish voters say they wish to remain part of the UK, while problems concerning the prospective currency of an independent Scotland and the costs of managing a Scottish exit from the UK have come to the fore in the public debate. The explosion of public spending as a result of the Covid pandemic over the past

two years has also underlined Scotland's financial dependence on the UK. In his view that too has dampened enthusiasm for independence.

In the question and answer session Professor Simms expanded on the historical character of the issues at stake among the peoples of the British Isles and continental Europe. While the political tensions and dramas over Brexit might seem acute to people today, the military, political and dynastic rivalries of the 17th and 18th centuries had been real enough to the populations alive then. The British solution had been traditionally to 'hear the voices' of its composite nations through their elected representatives at Westminster. That was now also overlaid by political expression through the devolved administrations.

Simms was asked to address the rise of 'micro-nationalisms' in response to globalisation, boosting the sense of regional identities and separatist demands among communities that felt alienated from distant centres of power like Brussels as the administrative capital of the EU. Was Brexit not just such a form of English nationalism? Brendan Simms disagreed with that characterisation, countering that the essence of the UK was a multinational union, in spite of the dominant role of England within it. Equality among the UK's constituent parts was by head of population, not by nation; so if a majority of all four nations of the UK had voted to remain in the EU, that result would have been honoured.

He pointed instead to the case of Catalonia. There Professor Simms argued that the EU had acted effectively as an "agent" on behalf of the dominant Castilian rulers of Spain at the expense of Catalan nationalists whose bid for independence had been crushed.

Some participants cited first-hand evidence of disaffection in the non-English parts of the UK among people who resent the high-handedness of Boris Johnson's government's handling of Brexit and its lack of attention to the concerns of the periphery. Brendan Simms acknowledged that those tensions had grown, but said that provided the political union of the UK survived intact over the next couple of years, he thought it would remain intact.

That was because in that time the UK would complete its separation from the EU, and thereby from its former role as an ordering power in continental Europe. It would have established a separate ordering system in this corner of north-western Europe; and he believed that this would be sufficiently attractive to its four constituent parts, and of sufficient weight, to hold itself together and to remain an important influence in European and international affairs.