

Devolution splits the country

Gordon Brown's idea that offering devolution to Scotland would cement the Union and satisfy the demands of the separatists always seemed to me to be misconceived. That was why I wrote "The Death of Britain?" and watched more in sorrow than anger as Labour's reforms gave a great platform to the SNP and duly led to the need for a referendum to settle the issue by asking the Scottish voters.

Today the PM is right to say there is no need for a second referendum so soon after the first delivered a clear result, especially given SNP pledges that the referendum would be a once in a generation event. Had the SNP won I doubt they would now be giving Scottish people a second vote to reconsider their decision to leave.

The SNP lost the referendum in part because they had not thought through some of the most basic points about leaving the U.K. They seemed to think they could stay in the pound common currency supported by the Bank of England. There is no way the Bank of England could continue to take Scottish needs into account or act as lender of last resort to Scottish banks.

They did not set out well how Scottish members of our armed forces would adjust. If the aim is to transfer their contracts to a Scottish army, navy and airforce there would need to be arrangements over equipment and it would make only a small force. If we assume the idea is that we would honour their contracts, that would mean they would have to commit their loyalty and service to a country other than their own. They would also be committed to an armed service with a nuclear deterrent that the SNP oppose.

They did not reveal how the large gap between Scottish tax revenue and current spending would be filled. They did stress the oil revenues which have now been slashed by a large fall in the oil price.

There was no clear pledge to take their share of the U.K. national debt on exit.

Quite often it seemed some of the SNP did not want independence, favouring a muddle of the pound and EU membership Instead.

It should now be quite clear that offering more and more devolved powers to the Scottish Parliament is not going to reconcile proponents of independence to the U.K. The SNP seeks to turn all debates in the U.K. Parliament into arguments about the relative powers of the Union pArliament and the devolved government. They do not want devolution to work.

My Question during the debate on the BBC: Dyson Report, 25 May 2021

Sir John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): How can someone who supports Brexit, believes in the Union and loves England be persuaded that the BBC's view of public service broadcasting will in future be fair to their views? In future, will the BBC allow the majority on these issues more voice and less denigration?

The Minister for Media & Data (Mr John Whittingdale): I can answer my right hon. Friend by saying that I am one of the people he has described precisely, in all three of those measures, and I, too, have occasionally been concerned at what appeared to be a lack of impartiality in the BBC on some of those issues.

That is something that has been, I think, felt by a large number of people. It is the job of the BBC—as I say, it is the first public purpose of the BBC—to deliver impartiality. I know that that is something that the leadership of the BBC which is now in place is absolutely committed to, but it will be examining ways in which that can be strengthened where necessary.

Levelling up

Levelling up is a good slogan and a worthy idea. The idea is not to press for equality by trying to drive the super rich out of the UK and by taxing the successful who remain more, but through greater opportunities to let more people succeed all round the country.

There are some who seem to see it as primarily a matter of providing more public money to the places that have been left behind. Where they need better public services or need to renovate the public estate that may be necessary, but it is not sufficient to level up. Levelling up is about the quality of life and the living standards of the many, not about the percentage gains in public money for the public sector minority.

There have been various government attempts in the past to institute regional and local policies by improving public buildings, putting in better arts facilities, expanding public sector offices to house more officials and tidying up pieces of land owned by a careful public sector owner. All of this can be helpful, but it does not generate the self sustaining jobs nor provide the private sector impetus needed to create a richer community where more people fulfil their personal ambitions.

Levelling up needs to be about hundreds of thousands of personal journeys, as

people in places on below average incomes and with a shortfall of good employment come to generate the businesses and the jobs that can sustain more well paid employment. One of the things a town or area needs to level up is a wider range of housing, with more of the new executive housing investment so favoured in the higher income communities available in places with aspirations. More good new homes are needed both for those who already live in the area to move into as they get promoted or build their own business. More good homes are need to attract in people on higher incomes or with successful businesses so they can enjoy the new local area and make various contributions to it.

The BBC is disruptive, anti-Brexit, divisive – and belittles and ignores England

This article was published yesterday on ConservativeHome and I am reproducing it here:

The BBC's decision to encourage and allow a journalist to use illegitimate means to gain an interview with the Princess of Wales was bound to damage her marriage more, and harm the family and monarchy that stood behind it. It was not just wrong in itself, but symptomatic of the BBC as an institution, which wanted to use its special place in our nation to disrupt our constitution.

The untruths encouraged more mistrust between close family members. It was cruel on the children of the marriage with the interview and its questions, and wounding to the monarchists in the wider nation. This is why this dispute about journalistic techniques has such resonance. It sums up a characteristic of BBC journalism in recent years that wants to go beyond acting as a faithful mirror to the varying views within our nation to being a player seeking to make news.

BBC journalists often go beyond their welcome task of reporting accurately and in a balanced way what people are saying, to adopting a tabloid opinionated approach seeking to put words into people's mouths. They attempt to get people to do ill-advised interviews in which they can try and make them say something disruptive, or can create a new division or split where it scarce existed before, or where the plan is to make one worse. All that may make sense for papers and campaigning websites with attitude if done with edge and not with lies – but is not what a public service broadcaster of record should be doing.

The BBC is meant to be a United Kingdom-wide institution. It should help create a sense of common culture and shared democratic conversation for citizens anywhere in our Union who want that. Instead, in recent years the

BBC has fanned division. It has helped nationalist movements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland gain more voice for protest and grievance. It has stood for the continuing submission of our country to government from Brussels against the pro-Brexit majority. It has belittled and ignored England, perhaps with a view to building an English backlash to nationalisms elsewhere in our Union, as the SNP and others want. By highlighting the differences and the better deal Scotland has over funding per head, access to higher education and social care, the BBC has done the SNP's work for them in trying to create English grievance.

The U.K. is a complex country. Many cannot describe the subtle differences between U.K and Great Britain, or explain the relative powers of the UK and Scottish Parliaments, or even remember the different voting system used in devolved elections. There is no adjective to describe U.K-ness. Pro-Union citizens of the U.K.

in Northern Ireland are happy to be called British even though, technically, our country is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The BBC seems less keen to be called British, using Scottish and Welsh branding in those parts of the Union whilst trying to break up England with regional branding that fails to resonate with most English people. The BBC often seems better disposed towards the EU/Republic of Ireland approach to Northern Ireland than to the view of the majority community in Northern Ireland it is meant to serve.

The BBC's treatment of England is a disgrace. It is as if our country did not exist. We are treated in England to a regular diet of commentary on the words and deeds of the SNP government in Scotland. The BBC gives Scotland its own Scottish news, and then muddles the national newscast with English news, because it cannot bring itself to have an English news to match the Scottish news. We are told much more about rules and decisions in Scotland. By contrast, large English mayoralties and county governments covering as many people as Scotland are largely ignored unless they are seeking to become part of the national opposition on things they do not decide.

The BBC is respectful of Scottish and Welsh culture and identity, but stumbles over UK and English identity. It loves pictures with plenty of Scottish saltires and Welsh dragon flags, but some of its presenters make a joke of the Union flag, and it repress the English flag most of the time. Most national broadcasters would be happy with their flag over their websites and close to their newsreaders, but you could not see the BBC ever wanting to do that.

The BBC website is largely devoid of symbols, colours and familiar favourite history of the UK, and carefully screened to remove anything that could reflect well on England. The choice of topics and references to our history seems keener to reveal the flaws of the past which the UK usually shared with many other nations, rather than the exceptions where England and the UK made unique contributions to the advancement of freedom and prosperity through bold moves and radical movements.

It is a great irony that an institution that is so keen to encourage and help

many people to come as migrants to our country can never think of all the good things about the UK which means so many of them want to come.

Fiscal rules

We await new fiscal rules to guide the economy. According to the IFS we have had 12 fiscal rules from 1997 until 2017 and have broken or ditched ten of them. Labour's aim to keep state debt below 40% of GDP was blown away by their Great Recession and the idea that they would balance the current budget over the cycle with it. Osborne's aim to get state debt falling as percentage of GDP every year so that actual debt fell from 2014-15 was relaxed when he did not hit target. The 2019 aim of getting the current budget in balance within three years was binned by the pandemic.

All the fiscal rules have been variants of the Maastricht requirements that the deficit should be under 3% and state debt should be under 60% of GDP or declining as a percentage of GDP to get closer to that target. The formal rules are currently in suspension pending new rules. However the Spring 2021 OBR and Red Book was based around getting the budget deficit down to slightly under 3% by 2024-5 and getting state debt falling as a percentage of GDP by the end of the period. It is all very familiar.

The government is still reporting our progress against the Maastricht rules as if we were still under the EU reporting system and in their semester control. The OBR assures us there are still guides and it still clearly likes the state debt and deficit controls. The rules that the current budget should on average across the cycle be in balance, and capital spending should be no more than 3% of GDP is just another way of expressing the EU budget deficit ceiling. The way spending growth is constrained in the later years of this Parliament and taxes planned to go up shows just what a grip on policy the state debt controls have.

I am urging a new approach. The government should stop monitoring the U.K. economy against the EU debt and deficit rules, and stop budgeting as if they ruled the future. Instead it is a good idea to have a limit on debt interest as a percentage of revenues. The current limit of 6% is generous and could be brought down to 5%.

There then could be targets for growth and inflation. We already have a 2% long term inflation target which is fine. To produce a balanced policy where there is scope to invest and grow we should set a stretching but achievable growth target. This should be above 2% for the long term average and should be much higher for this year and next given the need to recover from the pandemic recession.