



Michael Keating. *State and Nation in the United Kingdom: The Fractured Union.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 256 pp. \$100.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-884137-1.

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“The United Kingdom,” states Michael Keating, “is a contested political object” (p. 170). Playing on Jacques Delors’s well-known description of the European Union as “an unknown political object,” Keating argues that the contestation that has been a feature of nationalist politics in the United Kingdom since the turn of the millennium is a result of a fracturing—although not a complete breakdown—of consensus in the three elements that sustain legitimizing narratives of political unions: *demos* (people), *telos* (purpose), and *ethos* (values) (p. 3).

In these three pillars, Keating has provided a means of understanding the structure of a nationalism-adjacent concept: unionism. This concept seeks to legitimize pluri-national polities with pre-modern dynastic antecedents in a period of history when nation-states were the political ideal, or in periods of reassertive sovereignties such as today. This builds upon the core argument of the book “that the United Kingdom must be understood as a union, rather than a unitary, state” (p. v).

This conclusion builds upon Scottish interpretations of the United Kingdom and the treaties and political unions that brought it into being. There are shades of the formerly influential “Nairn-Anderson thesis” on the emergence and

consolidation of the British state when Keating argues that “in the case of the United Kingdom there was no thoroughgoing national revolution to consolidate the state and bind the nation together as *demos*, *telos* and *ethos*” (p. 22). This thesis, elaborated by Tom Nairn in *The Break-up of Britain* (1977), built upon Antonio Gramsci’s explanation of Italy’s *risorgimento* as a “passive revolution” in which modernization was top-down and incomplete.[1] In such a political context there was no need to define a singular *demos* because unity was personified in the institution of the monarchy. In other words, there was no “Russification” of national minorities in the UK union, or shift from the concept of union to nation-state as in the United States of America.

As such, unions require their own form of constitutional reasoning and explanation when the norm that each nation should have its own state is in breach, yet in which the sovereignty of the component parts has never been fully ceded. This reasoning and explanation shape the discursive forms that unionism takes. The “apotheosis of British unionism” occurred from the 1930s to the 1960s when *ethos* and *telos* most closely aligned to produce a British *demos* predicated on an industrialization and a welfare state—thus becoming a

viable economic and social union. When this weakened in the 1980s it was replaced with a “strident British nationalism ... a nationalism without a state foundation but with lingering imperial memes” (p. 39).

Unionism’s chief interlocutor is nationalism and the two exist in tension with each other, at times overlapping, and at times in conflict. For Keating, nationality is an intersubjective concept that relies on ontological and normative claims that turn it into nationalism: the nation exists, and it should be self-determining. This tension between nationalist norms and pluri-national state structures means that polities that are political unions require constant statecraft to avert the possibility of disintegration (p. 19). Yet this statecraft requires legitimizing narratives that can be similar to nationalism itself. As Keating argues: “Pluri-national unions do not rely on unity of *demos*, *telos* and *ethos*, but neither are they likely to survive if these elements are totally lacking or have been successfully forged and aligned by competing national projects. Unions, rather, rest upon cross-cutting identities and aspirations or what Wittgenstein called ‘family resemblances’ in which features link individuals together but no one element is common to them all” (p. 193).

Thus the “paradox of unionism” is that it comes in so many guises, not least throughout the United Kingdom. Scottish Unionism differs from Ulster Loyalism in Northern Ireland, which is in turn different from Welsh understandings of the purpose of the United Kingdom; and all of which differ from the Anglo-British variant dominant in England. “The genius of unionism in the past was precisely that it was not uniform or unitary. It wove together chords that appealed to different audiences, who were often not listening to each other” (p. 130).

Yet today unionism is in crisis. When Boris Johnson felt obliged to appoint himself “Minister for the Union” and his predecessor Theresa May spoke of her feelings for the “precious, precious”

union in her first speech as prime minister, you know something is wrong. Keating’s analysis was researched at a particular moment in the UK’s history: its departure from the European Union. Keating rightly suggests that this moment has been the cause and symptom of a “crisis of unionism” (p. 130) that represents a critical juncture in the UK’s political history.

Brexit revealed and created contradictory centrifugal and centripetal forces through the United Kingdom to which unionism and unionists were forced to respond (p. 98). The *telos* and *ethos* of Brexit were highly controversial and weakened the sense of a common *demos* across the union. Using a device of a referendum that assumed a singular, UK-wide *demos* also pitted three sources of sovereignty against each other: the UK government, the Westminster parliament, and the People (as distinct from nations). When the issue was framed as a question of restoring sovereignty, it raised the immediate question of whose sovereignty was to be respected and restored; not Scotland’s and Northern Ireland’s, as it turned out, leading to further nationalist claims.

If Brexit sharply illuminated some of the blindness in unionist thinking at the political center, the groundwork had been laid by the devolution settlement twenty years previously. Devolution is not federalism and is consistent with the doctrine of Westminster’s ultimate sovereignty; the power of the center is unaffected by the devolution of power in certain areas, which it could in any case rescind if it so chose. Devolution in the United Kingdom was an ad hoc response by a reforming Labour government. It was aimed at ending the conflict in Northern Ireland, stemming the growth of support for secessionist nationalism in Scotland, and meeting a demand for self-government that barely existed in Wales. London had its devolved legislature restored into the bargain. Nevertheless, the settlements stuck and became the new status quo.

This had important outcomes for unionists. As Keating notes, “unionism has struggled to adapt to devolution, has moved into a defensive mode and sought itself to become a nationalism rather than a mode of government.... While nationalists and unionists may claim to rely on different normative principles, they are engaged in the same task, setting the bounds of the polity and of legitimate authority” (p. vi; p. v). What Keating calls “neo-Unionism” (p. 122) and Jack Sheldon and Michael Kenny have identified as “hyper-unionism” is hard to distinguish from what it claims to oppose: nationalism.[2]

Although Keating does not state this quite so explicitly, neo-unionism operates in an ideational space where, logically, something else ought to exist: England. England remains a central, but unarticulated, presence in all discussions of the future of the United Kingdom (p. 188). As Keating rightly notes, a “striking feature of the new territorial settlement was that, while there was radical change at the periphery, almost nothing changed at the centre” (p. 49). He goes on to correctly show that “in so far as England has emerged institutionally, it is by subtraction” (p. 81) and that “the impossibility of disentangling England from the centre goes to the heart of the conundrums underlying the devolution settlement” (p. 85)

Brexit posed “the English question” even more sharply than devolution, although both issues contained related grievances. Devolution crystallized a sense of political identity in England, not as separatism or devolution but as a claim for recognition (p. 116), leading to an “inchoate discontent focused on loss of voice, but with no obvious territorial solution” (p. 198). Brexit, in contrast, provided an outlet for mass grievances focused on immigration and loss of voice, aligned with an elite project to restore the UK and a free trading power outside of the European Union that invoked secessionist imaginaries. Although the arguments for leaving the EU were framed in Anglo-British,

neo-unionist language, political Englishness was an implicit presence in Brexit (p. 82).

Keating’s argument about the union, rather than unitary, nature of the United Kingdom is highly persuasive. The use of *demos*, *telos*, and *ethos* is instructive for the UK case and helps provide a basis of understanding for all unions. However, as he notes, unionism and nationalism are closely related political cousins, so this might explain nationalism as well as unionism. It is less clear if this concept could apply to all political unions, but this is not what the evidence provided is designed to do. In other words, are the UK’s unionisms *sui generis*, or can the concepts of *demos*, *telos*, and *ethos* be applied successfully more broadly?

Keating’s framework appears to open up the possibility of enlightening something scholars have struggled with in the past. The conundrum relates to identifying the origins and drivers of “European identity,” and the extent to which such an identity is tied to a macro-level political project like European integration but seems to fall short of the integrating, *demos*-creating nationalism of previous centuries. Keating notes that “unions are typically embedded in historical narratives about the coming together of discrete territories in a pact that allows them to maintain their existing institutions and practices” (p. 14). That is certainly true for what Ian Manners and Philomena Murray have called the “Nobel narrative” of European integration: that the EU’s origins are those of a peace project to overcome historical animosities.[3]

The irony here is that the major state to have left the EU might have much to illuminate about the statecraft required to hold the EU together. Like the United Kingdom, the European Union was formed and forged in large part through response to crises. Like the European Union the United Kingdom displayed an “ambivalence at the heart of the concept of territorial cohesion as to whether it is an integral part of economic policy, aimed at

improving markets, or a ‘social’ corrective to the market itself” (p. 135).

Informed by Scottish and European understandings of sovereignty and post-sovereignty, Keating’s analysis is another excellent example of the value of what Krishan Kumar called an “outside in” perspective.[4] Another aspect of Keating’s analysis that could have been deepened is the intriguing shadow of empire in discussions of unionism. As he notes, “in its concern with Britishness, neo-unionism often fails to place the union in broader geopolitical frameworks now that Empire is no longer available” (p. 129); although we might say that empire lives on in ideational ways through ideas such as the Anglosphere and broad policy positions such as “Global Britain.”[5]

Nevertheless, it is true that unionism’s antecedents lie in a coterminous but wider political project—that of empire. Unionism was adapted for Dominions and colonies, beyond economic frameworks (p. 28) and existed in the form of “race patriotism” that fed into understandings of state and nation in the United Kingdom itself. Keating notes that proposals for secession within the UK were informed by the experience of de-Dominionization (p. 201) in the Commonwealth. It would be fascinating to know more about if and how these memories live on in the “official mind.” The “break-up of Greater Britain” is perhaps more instructive for the UK case than the collapse of other pluri-national unions during the twentieth century.[6]

Keating concludes not that the United Kingdom will break up, but that as a union-state, it has already fractured. This is partly due to the structural strains of devolution and Brexit, but also because unionism, that mode of government linked to the union-state, has ceased to be an open and plural broad church, and has become an Anglo-British nationalism of its own. The argument is made persuasively and with well-organized clarity. Keating’s work marks another important stage in the emerging understanding of the relationship

between state and nations in the United Kingdom at a critical juncture in its political history and geopolitical orientation.

Notes

[1]. Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-nationalism* (London: Verso, 1997).

[2]. Michael Kenny and Jack Sheldon, “When Planets Collide: The British Conservative Party and the Discordant Goals of Delivering Brexit and Preserving the Domestic Union, 2016-19,” *Political Studies* 69, no. 4 (November 2021): 965-84.

[3]. Ian Manners and Philomena Murray, “The End of a Noble Narrative? European Integration Narratives after the Nobel Peace Prize,” *Journal of Common Market Studies* 54, no. 1 (January 2016): 185-202.

[4]. Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 16-17, and *The Idea of Englishness: English Culture, National Identity and Social Thought* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 205.

[5]. Ben Wellings, *English Nationalism, Brexit and the Anglosphere* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

[6]. Christian D. Pedersen and Stuart Ward, eds., *The Break-up of Greater Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).

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