Trajectories of union

Peace in Ireland: The War of Ideas (second edition)

Richard Bourke

PIMLICO, 2012

The Two Unions: Ireland, Scotland and the Survival of the United Kingdom, 1707-2007

Alvin Jackson

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2011

Reviewed by James Stafford

In January of this year, Scotland's First Minister, Alex Salmond, made a characteristically bold statement during an interview on Ireland's state radio broadcaster, RTE. The immediate context was a tussle between Holyrood and Westminster on the timing of the referendum on whether Scotland should reconstitute itself as a new state separate from the UK. Salmond told Irish listeners that 'as many people in Ireland will remember ... sometimes people in leadership positions in big countries find it very difficult not to bully small countries ... bullying and hectoring the Scottish people from London ain't going to work'. It was the response from north of the border that proved most revealing. While the former UUP leader Lord Trimble predictably upbraided Salmond for his 'grandstanding on stilts', it was the SDLP's Seamus Mallon who pointed out that 'Scotland was part of the bullying that took place in Ireland ... As recently as 15 years ago, you had Scottish regiments here, enforcing the writ of Britain' (Peterkin, 2012).

　　The Irish, and Northern Irish, dimension to the 'Scottish Question' goes largely unex-plored in day-to-day metropolitan discussion of the 2014 referendum. Yet, as both Salmond's rhetoric and the prominent deployment of UUP and DUP politicians in the pro-union campaign north of the border, demonstrate, Irish connections and parallels intrude on the two most important dimensions to the debate: national identity and political economy (Clarke, 2012; Elliot, 2012; see also Michael Keating's article in this issue). Where nationalist rhetoric has long sought to render Scotland, like Ireland, a victim, rather than a co-author (Rothschild, 2011), of the British imperial enterprise, it has more recently sought to construct a positive vision of a Scottish state. Pre-crisis, Scotland was to be dynamic, yet equitable, with Scandinavian social services and tax and regulation policies explicitly modelled on the Irish example, the 'Celtic Lion' to the 'Celtic Tiger' (Salmond, 2008). Latterly, the appeal to 'devo-max' – or 'home rule' – as a flexible category between the status quo and statehood has sought to reassure voters. The shade of Charles Stewart Parnell, as well as that of Keir Hardie, is now invoked in aid of a more flexible conception of 'independence' (Salmond, 2012). On the unionist side, the connections between Presbyterian Scottish voters in the heavily urbanised West and the 'Ulster Scots' of

Northern Ireland may prove significant to the political sociology of the referendum: 'independence' would imply the construction of a new state separate not only from England, but also from Northern Ireland. It was the question of Irish Home Rule that evoked some of the most strident declarations of a popular unionist identity in Scotland, independent of the long-established 'banal' unionism of a progressive intellectual elite. The affinities between the West of Scotland and Ulster remain strong (Kidd, 2008). Meanwhile, the unionist case against statehood has focused on the claim that it does not equate to what the SNP call 'independence', if this is to be understood as a condition of genuine political autonomy for an organised community. This could prove to be an elusive quality in the contemporary world economy, and especially in the immediate context of the crisis in the eurozone (Boffey and Helm, 2012). For the union campaign, there is no more proximate example than that of Ireland to suggest that statehood alone cannot guarantee effective political autonomy in a post-crisis world.

These two conceptually ambitious historical studies provide us with some resources for thinking about the interconnections between the trajectories of Ireland and Scotland on a deeper level, placing them within and without the British state since the start of the eighteenth century. They do so in different ways. A timely new edition of Bourke's 2003 work provides a fresh opportunity to examine a critical intellectual and political history of the Northern Irish conflict, designed to challenge both the partisan biases of existing historiographies and their associated political movements, and the lazy ascription of a peculiar propensity to sectarian strife among the communities of Northern Ireland (Bourke, pp. 1-10). Its relevance to the Scottish question does not lie in its analysis of specific historical relationships between the constituent nations of the United Kingdom. It can rather be found in its critique of crudely majoritarian conceptions of the relationship between popular sovereignty and democratic statehood, and their dangerous interaction with 'imperialism', an analytical model with a provenance stretching back to Hobson and Lenin (Bourke, pp. 33-8).

It was not inveterate, passionate sectarian hatred, but a clash of ideas about the proper operation of democracy in Northern Ireland that made the endemic conflict of 1968-98 possible (Bourke, p. x). From 1921, the province was governed by a bicameral parliament elected under first past the post, an electoral system that ensured permanent government by the majority Protestant population. Consciousness of their minority status on the island as a whole meant that unionist dominance of Northern Irish politics was aggressively sustained and defended. It became and remained an article of unionist faith that the support of the majority of the Northern Irish population for the Stormont government guaranteed its legitimacy independently of the claims of the Catholic population (Bourke, pp. 10-11, 266-72). Over time, one-party rule seriously undermined the equity of provision in the developing welfare state, with major inequalities developing between the services and housing available to the Protestant and Catholic communities. The result was the Catholic civil rights movement of the late 1960s, the violent response it provoked from loyalist paramilitaries, and British military intervention.

According to Bourke, the key mistake of British policy in Northern Ireland was to persist in attempting to manage the province through a Protestant-dominated parliament and police force until the early seventies (Bourke, pp. 43-80). The perceived alignment of British military forces with Protestant 'reactionaries' gave the traditional republican charge of British 'imperialism' genuine traction, and set in train a spiral of reaction and recrimination that proved difficult to defuse. The majoritarian claims of republicans and unionists proved incommensurable. The republicans claimed to represent a majority in the island as a whole, demanding that the Protestant population in the North yield to minority status in a united Ireland, while the unionists expected Northern Catholics to do the same under a Northern Irish democracy constructed on Protestant terms (Bourke, pp. iv-v (second

edition preface)). The Sunningdale agreement of 1973 signalled a recognition by the British government that it was the structure of Northern Irish democracy that was the problem, and that Catholics had to be guaranteed a minimum of representation if its legitimacy was to be restored. By this point, however, the principles Bourke describes had hardened into inveterate political movements, in which the representation of both communities had been taken up by their extremes. The DUP and Sinn Fein had displaced the UUP and the SDLP as the crucial actors in the conflict. The result was the Ulster Workers' Council strike, the reinvigoration of the republican cause from the late 1970s onwards, and a 24-year wait for the remarkably similar treaty that was concluded in 1998; 'Sunningdale for slow learners' (Bourke, pp. 219-21).

Alvin Jackson's study of the unions of 1707 and 1801 seeks, by contrast, to construct a parallel history from the seventeenth century onwards. It tries to explain their longevities, and their wildly differing fortunes, through a systematic comparison of their ideological, institutional and political bases (Jackson, pp. 22-8). While parliamentary union was a widely debated political option for both countries from the time of its brief and bloody enactment by Oliver Cromwell, each union was conducted, in the event, as a highly contingent high-political and economic 'bargain', doomed forever to lack popular impetus or (outside of Ulster) any overt public ceremonial (Jackson, pp. 340-2). The timing of the unions was determined by English strategic imperatives – in each case, a war with France – and the terms by the strengths of the political elites in the two countries. Scotland's relative confessional unity and longer tradition of independent sovereignty gave it the stronger hand (Jackson, pp. 3-4; 54; see also McLean, 2010). Both unions permitted a degree of local autonomy and institutional adaptation, with ambiguous consequences for the long-term durability of the political settlements they created. The most important explanatory factors for their differing fates were religious and economic. The Scottish union enshrined the status of the Presbyterian church as a Scottish national institution. The Irish union, by contrast, did not honour the engagements made by Pitt the Younger that union would entail full legal equality for the majority Catholic population (Jackson, pp. 110-2). Even after Catholic Emancipation in 1829, the socio-economic position and political institutions necessary to integrate the majority into metropolitan politics was conspicuously absent (Jackson, pp. 145-6). While, after a slow start, the Scottish union appeared to be vindicated by the performance of the Scottish economy in the second half of the eighteenth century, the strong Irish economy and population growth of the later eighteenth century was brought to a shuddering halt by the Famine (Jackson, pp. 72-7). The economic case for union, so instrumental in Scotland, was hard to sustain outside of the industrial (and Presbyterian) North.

Together, these two books provide some useful insights into how and why the unionist settlement has begun to come under such pressure in Scotland. If the preservation of local institutions and the success of the union-state's economy are so crucial to the continued legitimacy of the constitutional 'bargain', then it is easy to understand why the policies of the Thatcher government did so much to undermine it. The Conservative regime of the 1980s took its own legitimacy for granted on the basis of a narrow plurality of popular votes. Not unlike its Ulster Unionist counterpart, it pursued policies systematically favourable to its own supporters, to the detriment of democratic inclusion and equality in the nation as a whole (Jackson and McClymont, 2011). Jackson nuances traditional accounts of the Scottish 1980s by drawing attention to Westminster's willingness to keep a regional planning and investment infrastructure in place for longer than it permitted in England, under the auspices of Thatcher's first Scottish Secretary, George Younger. The government's problem was not that it was disinterested in Scotland, but that it was ignorant, badly advised, and convinced of the efficacy of economic doctrines that seemed to exacerbate the problems of Scotland's deindustrialising production base. Thatcher was

a 'Whig assimilationist' who did not understand the practical foundations of the union's continued operation (Jackson, pp. 265-8).

From a Scottish perspective, there were two potential responses to the emergence of a divisive, Anglo-centric Conservatism as a dominant force in British politics. The first was to leave the union; the second, to devise institutional means to reinforce the representation of Scottish interests within it. It was the second option that lay squarely in Labour's unionist tradition, which had long sought to use the political guile of the party and the Scottish Office to extract favourable terms from the union for Scotland (Jackson, pp. 270-7). But in practice, the distinction between these responses has now become blurred. Institutionalising the Scottish interest in a Scottish parliament, rather than via the largely private machinations of the Scottish Office or the internal structures of the unionist parties, has meant that, over time, the mantle of Scottish representation has been passed to the Scottish Nationalists. It is not difficult to suggest why: Scottish Labour is part of a UK-wide party, with a relatively limited capacity to stage the sorts of rhetorical conflicts with the metropolis that, over time, come to form a necessary ritual of public, democratic sub-national representation, for Salmond's Scotland as for Johnson's London. Labour is also constrained to respect, and sometimes to prioritise, the concerns of the rest of the UK in its practice of government and national policy-making.

It is therefore possible to envisage a division of representative labour between the two parliaments along the lines suggested by the election results in 2010 and 2011. Scots might continue to vote Labour at Westminster to secure a broadly favourable settlement from the union state, and vote SNP at Holyrood to ensure that it is delivered between Westminster elections. The identity and history of the SNP, however, mean that this sort of 'unionism' alone is unacceptable as an overt political strategy (Kidd, 2008). As Salmond's Irish rhetoric demonstrates, the party is still partially wedded to an 'imperialist', rather than an instrumentally 'unionist', analysis of England's role in Scottish politics. The credibility of the SNP's claim to 'stand up for Scotland' within the British state, meanwhile, rests on its commitment to Scottish statehood. This, in turn, embodies an appeal to a baldly majori-tarian conception of national self-determination, which postulates that a new state can be unproblematically constructed out of a pre-existing polity provided that 51 per cent of its electors consent. More than anything else, Bourke's work invites us to question this last assumption.

Nevertheless, the SNP cannot simply function as an effective regional lobby group: it must be perceived, and perceive itself, to be moving (however slowly) towards its funda-mental policy goal: self-determination of Scottish statehood. It is this need for constant momentum that informs the present administration's interest in 'devo-max' as a policy position between the status quo and statehood. While it does not lack unionist supporters, 'devo-max' – or 'Home Rule' – is a particularly efficacious institutional mechanism for the SNP, offering the opportunity for an enhanced field for competition between the represen-tative capacities of Holyrood and Westminster, and widening the party's advantage in this respect over Labour. It is telling, however, that the primary use the SNP intend to make of extra powers owes much to the 'Celtic Lion' era of economic policy: the party wishes to engage in supply-side tax and regulatory competition with England, starting with a 1p corporation tax cut (Jackson, 2012). If this sets in train an era of fierce competition for foreign investment between the component nations of the UK, then the twin tasks of economic recovery and constitutional stabilisation will be rendered significantly more diffi-cult. The SNP's claim to govern in an increasingly autonomous Scotland will be commensurately enhanced.

For social democrats, a vision of Britain as an island divided into bickering tax havens is distinctly unattractive. Yet this is a possible end-point of a union that has always constructed a singular 'Scottish interest' and provided it with ample channels to express

itself. At some point, the augmentation of Scottish parliamentary power will arouse English economic nationalism in the same manner as it did during the 1690s, with similarly disastrous political and economic consequences (Jackson, pp. 58-64). The history of the two unions, and of the breakdown of democracy in Northern Ireland, suggests that there is an important difference between a fissiparous bundle of institutionalised national resentments and an inclusive, geographically balanced, egalitarian democracy. It is too early to say which one will triumph.

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