

A United Kingdom? The future of the constitution and the Union

I knew John Antcliffe as a friend at Cambridge and later went campaigning with him around the backstreets of Greenwich.

John was a man of erudition, charm, civility and good humour. He was passionate about public service, politics and the arts but was never one to let political disagreements get in the way of friendship. I can never think of John without a grin on his face and an amusing or mildly scandalous anecdote to tell.

His death, at far too early an age, robbed the country and the Conservative Party of a man of great talent who had much more to give. Those of us who knew him still miss him and it is a privilege to have been asked to give this lecture in his memory.

Ten years ago, in his book “Vanished Kingdoms” the historian Norman Davies illustrated how political entities that are now almost completely forgotten - Aragon, Burgundy, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth - were once movers and shakers in European politics.

Even since I was born, four European countries have disappeared from the map. One, the German Democratic Republic, was absorbed into an enlarged West Germany. The other three - Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union - disintegrated into what are today no fewer than 19 successor states.

Powers, identities, allegiances seen by contemporaries as both real and enduring now appear ever more transient as the years and centuries roll on. In the words of the hymn, “Earth’s proud empires” do all, in the end, “pass away”.

Is the United Kingdom also doomed? Should we care if it is? And what are the implications for public policy if we do want to safeguard and strengthen the Union?

It should come as no shock to anyone if I make clear that I am not speaking as some kind of neutral observer. I am a Conservative, who believes in the value of established institutions and traditions and is cautious about radical blueprints for change. And I am a Unionist, who sees the prosperity and security of people in every part of our four nations as enhanced by membership of the United Kingdom.

Today, the United Kingdom is in greater peril than at any moment in my lifetime.

It’s easy - and wrong- just to blame it all on Brexit. It’s certainly true that the outcome of that 2016 referendum - a close but decisive overall result but with two of the home

nations voting to leave and two to remain - has bruised relationships within the United Kingdom. But what that referendum did was to crystallise tensions that had been building up over many years.

In Northern Ireland, demographic change has eroded the Unionist majority. In the last five years, for the first time since the establishment of Northern Ireland Unionists have comprised only a minority of members elected both to the devolved Assembly at Stormont and to represent Northern Ireland at Westminster.

We should know more when the 2021 census results are published, but now roughly 40 to 44 per cent of the population of Northern Ireland identify as Unionist and British and the same proportion as Nationalist or Republican and Irish, with between 12 and 20 per cent unaligned. The future of the Union in Northern Ireland rests on the continuing consent of sufficient numbers of unaligned and moderate Nationalist voters.

In Scotland, the independence referendum of 2014 produced a decisive majority against separation but by a much narrower margin than most pundits had expected at the start of the campaign. Just a year later we saw the SNP tsunami at the 2015 General Election.

The Scottish National Party has just one strategic objective - separation from the United Kingdom - which it pursues ruthlessly. Meanwhile the Unionist parties in Scotland, despite sharing the same strategic goal, have found it hard to put aside old political differences and find ways to work together to advance the cause of the United Kingdom.

Welsh nationalism, historically centred on language and culture rather than politics, has in recent years taken on a sharper political edge, with Cardiff Bay keen to claim the same powers as Holyrood. Though recent poll findings of an upsurge in support for Welsh independence failed to translate into support for Plaid Cymru candidates, we have already, in the wake of last week's Senedd election, seen the First Minister and the Welsh Labour Party, despite their commitment to Wales staying in the UK, call for still more powers to be transferred from United Kingdom to devolved level.

English nationalism has manifested itself not as demands to break free from the UK but rather as a growing assertion of English identity and deepening indifference about whether the Union survives.

Whereas in 1966 the crowds supporting England's World Cup team brandished Union Flags, you are now much more likely to see the cross of St George at both rugby and football internationals. This year's census seems certain to continue the

trend towards more people describing their primary national identity as English rather than British.

Lord Ashcroft's opinion research, in October 2019, found that while only a tiny proportion of the English would actually welcome Scotland or Northern Ireland seceding, most English people felt that the other nations do disproportionately well out of current constitutional and particularly financial arrangements.

More recent polling, by YouGov, in January this year, showed a majority of people in England believing that Scotland would be independent within 10 years, with seventeen percent said that they would be pleased at the prospect and a further 28 per cent said they were not bothered by it. English indifference is as great a threat to the United Kingdom as Scottish nationalism. The UK government, and for that matter the UK's Opposition, have to argue and win the case for the United Kingdom not just in Scotland or Northern Ireland but in England too.

Those poll findings matter because of course there can be no question today of the United Kingdom holding together save through consent - in the case of Northern Ireland a principle written into international treaty and for Scotland, Wales and England a statement of political reality.

Whatever the outcome of the current debate about a second independence referendum in Scotland (and for what it's worth I am firmly with the Prime Minister in that argument), those of us who wish to maintain and strengthen the United Kingdom need to identify and adopt an effective strategy to shift public opinion and rebuild support for the Union.

What lies behind these shifts in the public mood in all parts of the UK?

There is truth in Linda Colley's analysis, published in her book "Britons" in 1992, that the idea of "Britishness" was an eighteenth and early nineteenth century project that united both elites and the people more generally in a determination to defend the Protestant Settlement; resist in turn Jacobite pretenders and revolutionary France, and in the wake of the Seven Years War to build and administer a global empire. In her final chapter Colley questioned whether, in a now secular country, with friendly (albeit sometimes fractious) relationships with our continental neighbours, and in which Britain's imperial pomp really is "one with Nineveh and Tyre", there is any longer the essential ideological cement to hold the kingdom together.

However, Colley's thesis is not a sufficient explanation of what has happened. The last relic of protestantism in British politics (Northern Ireland is a different matter) disappeared with Harold Wilson's victories in 1964 in Glasgow and Liverpool seats

where the so-called “Orange vote” had long returned Conservative MPs. Almost all Britain’s imperial territories had gained independence by the end of the Heath government in 1974. Yet as recently as 2010 there were just six Scottish National Party MPs returned to Westminster at the General Election.

The rise of nationalism in all parts of the United Kingdom is, yes, due in part to particular developments here, but is also part of a much wider phenomenon in Europe and the wider democratic world of public impatience with and disaffection from systems of government, political institutions and established political parties.

Too many people in too many parts of all four nations came to believe that their interests were being ignored by those in power. We can debate what weight to attribute to particular elements: the decline of heavy industry and traditional mass manufacturing from the 1960s on, the financial crash of 2008/9 and the public’s sense that the institutions that they held responsible were paying no penalty, the impact of global competition and the digital revolution that have upended and are continuing to transform long-held assumptions about work and careers.

These have added up to rapid, deracinating economic and social change, in the face of which many people have looked to local, and regional identities for reassurance and a sense of rootedness.

To that one needs to add the new political dynamic stemming from the devolution settlements of the late 1990s. Newspapers and broadcast media in Edinburgh or Cardiff report and discuss public policy chiefly in terms of players and policies in the devolved governments and parliaments rather than Whitehall and Westminster - a focus on devolved institutions and controversies that ends up unintentionally making the government and politics of the United Kingdom seem still more distant from the people of Scotland and Wales.

The challenge facing those of us who want to see the United Kingdom survive and prosper is daunting.

Part of the answer must continue to be relentless pressure on nationalists to answer the difficult questions about life outside the UK, questions they often prefer to avoid. What currency would Scotland have? Which central bank would support that currency? How would an independent Scotland pay the bills for public services when its spending exceeds its income? What would happen to the NHS in Northern Ireland were it to join an Irish Republic with a different system for financing medical treatment? Would Dublin or Brussels pick up the bill for the £10 billion transferred every year from the UK Exchequer to Northern Ireland?

But it will not be enough to warn of the material and financial risks of separation. Those risks were and still are real but those of us who support the United Kingdom also need to take to heart the message of the last seven years.

In 2014, a campaign that was framed almost entirely in negative terms about the cost of Scottish independence got the “Better Together” campaign over the line to victory but failed to deliver any strategic shift of opinion in Scotland in favour of unionism.

Two years later, a campaign to remain in the European Union, which once again rested almost entirely on painting a bleak picture of life outside, went down to defeat in the face of a leave campaign whose language and argument - indeed its very slogan “Take Back Control” - was grounded in an appeal to identity and values, and it is on that ground that United Kingdom unionists need to be able to win.

The starting point has to be that you can be patriotically English, Scots, Welsh or Northern Irish and at the same time take pride in and feel loyalty to the United Kingdom and the institutions which underpin its constitution.

In Northern Ireland it also means going further. David Trimble, in his acceptance speech at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony, spoke of how Northern Ireland had in the past too often been a “cold house for Catholics”. Today, the greatest risk to Northern Ireland staying part of the United Kingdom would be if men and women who think of themselves as Irish come to believe that the only sure way to protect that identity was to seek a border poll and Irish unification.

For most people in our country today identity is not a binary choice.

Unsurprisingly for a Conservative, I’m going to quote Edmund Burke, an Irishman whose first seat in parliament was Wendover in my own former constituency and who is buried a few miles away in Beaconsfield, and in particular the famous passage from his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*:

“To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind”.

Note the words: the first link, not the final one; the first principle.

The point that Burke recognised was that most of us live perfectly comfortably with multiple, overlapping loyalties and identities. Imagine for example a proud Welshman, living in a new residential estate in say Milton Keynes, a supporter of Liverpool at football, Glamorgan at cricket, a keen member of his local tennis club,

serves on the residents association committee, a member of the methodist church who looks forward to celebrating Diwali with his Gujarati-heritage wife who, by the way, was born in Leicester, educated in Glasgow, is branch secretary of the Royal College of Nursing at the local hospital and on the committee of the local Conservative Party.

Identity does not have to be exclusive. In most people's lives it isn't.

The United Kingdom is made up of four much older nations, each of which is itself heterogeneous in character: Shetland, with its Nordic affinity, Aberdeenshire and Galloway feel a long way from metropolitan Glasgow; Cornwall very definitely has its own history and identity, with any notion that either local authority or parliamentary constituency boundaries cross the Tamar regarded as an insult to the memory of Bishop Trelawny; within Northern England, Tyneside feels very different from Yorkshire, as if some echo of the distinct identities of Bernicia and Deira had lingered on over the centuries. Gwynedd is a long drive from Gwent and for geographical reasons North and South Wales have economic ties with different parts of England.

Civic loyalties and both economic and cultural distinctiveness add to the complexity of any debate about identity. I remember going as a United Kingdom Minister to Derry to discuss with the Chamber of Commerce and others how the UK government could help to deliver a City Deal. One message that came through very powerfully at that meeting was that the deal for Derry/Londonderry had to be very different from the one that we were discussing for Belfast. The same message came through clearly in Scotland: what worked for Glasgow wasn't the same as for Edinburgh or for Moray.

There isn't time this evening to give more than the barest acknowledgment of how the emergence of a global economy and the fact of large scale movements of people has led to Britain and Ireland (like Germany, France, Spain, Sweden and others) becoming more ethnically diverse. Our thinking about what it means to be English or Scottish or Welsh or Northern Irish or British has to take account of and reflect that reality.

Nor is this just an inner city issue. In my old Aylesbury constituency, the town of Aylesbury made up more than half of my electorate. When I went into a school assembly in the town, I used to reckon that between a quarter and two fifths of the children there came from Commonwealth or Central European communities. For those children, let alone for their descendants, ideas about identity that are based on nineteenth century notions of ethnic or linguistic homogeneity will be, at best, meaningless, at worst utterly repugnant and divisive.

So, what is to be done? What is the positive case for the United Kingdom? And how can we ensure that the government and parliament of the UK, the constitutional and political wiring of our country, reflect both the importance of the Union but also the fact that the United Kingdom today is diverse and multi-layered.

So, let's start with the positive case - the mission statement for the United Kingdom, and let me suggest four elements.

First, the United Kingdom is an economic, monetary and fiscal union. No country, note even the United States, is immune from the impact of turbulent markets economic shocks. But the Bank of England and the UK Treasury are in a far stronger position than their counterparts in a small nation to protect businesses and families in every part of the country. It was the financial muscle of the United Kingdom that Gordon Brown deployed in 2008 to rescue Scotland's leading financial institutions. Every day, every week money raised in taxes from those in the UK who are prospering is transferred through the UK Exchequer into support for places and families that need help. A United Kingdom internal market, with common rules on product safety and standards of manufacture, and an absence of tariffs between different parts of the UK means that the salmon processor in Rosyth can sell his produce freely to supermarkets in Swansea or Southend, or a paint manufacturer in North Wales can supply car-makers in Falkirk or Washington New Town without worrying about additional chemical regulations.

Second, the UK is a social union in which, as we have seen in the last year, the scientific, financial and health policy strengths of the UK have delivered a vaccination programme which is saving lives in every part of the country. Where, too, a common system for financing state pensions, disability and unemployment benefits from a progressive, UK-wide tax system gives the same safety-net of social protection to all.

Third, the UK is a defence and security union. In the last few years Russian ships and aircraft have tested our alertness, particularly in the seas and airspace North of Scotland; both hostile states and criminal gangs have mounted cyber attacks on government, parliament and numerous private sector companies; the Russian state carried out a chemical weapons attack inside the United Kingdom; terrorists have continued to plan murder in every part of the UK, and organised crime has exploited the most vulnerable people in our society through sexual abuse, drug and people trafficking. In England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland alike it is the defence and security resources of the United Kingdom - our armed forces, security and intelligence agencies that are the most potent guarantors of the safety and security of individuals and families against these threats.

Fourth, the United Kingdom is a union of values. In an age when both Russia and China are challenging the western model of liberal democracy and the rule of law,

the United Kingdom is able to draw on a rich history of lawmaking and the gradual evolution of constitutional government: from the laws of Ine, Alfred and Hywel Dda to the Declaration of Arbroath, Magna Carta, the Glorious Revolution, the Claim of Right and the works of Blackstone and Stair. The recent history of Northern Ireland illustrates the savagery and destructive power of terrorism and sectarian hatred but also, in the form of the peace process, albeit imperfect and incomplete, shows that statesmanship, democratic institutions and a commitment to resolving political differences through exclusively peaceful means can start the process of healing and reconciliation.

Much of the history of twentieth century Europe can be written as a history of aggressive nationalisms, sectarian conflict and ethnic cleansing. Even today, in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, as well as in many other parts of the world, old hatreds linger. For all its faults the United Kingdom has found a way to enable large numbers of people to live peacefully together in a relatively small territory, and to respect different histories and identities.

Common values coupled with the diplomatic and economic weight of the UK also enable the United Kingdom to do far more to shape global action to address the climate crisis and promote international development than would be possible for any of the home nations acting on its own.

There are plenty of good songs for supporters of a United Kingdom to sing - and I haven't yet mentioned the arts, sciences or the vast network of family ties that unite people of Scottish, Welsh, English and Irish ancestry.

But what are the implications for public policy?

This month we mark 22 years of devolved government in Scotland and Wales. The changes of the 1990s transformed irreversibly the political landscape of the United Kingdom. We are not going to win the case for the Union either by carping about flaws in the devolution settlements or thinking that devolving yet more powers will somehow do the trick. Rather, our starting point must be that our vision for the United Kingdom is of effective devolution within a strong UK: not as some half-in-half-out compromise, nor something to tolerate reluctantly (let alone as a temporary stepping stone to a different constitutional future) but as a settled state.

What is needed from all sides is a commitment to constructive partnership and mutual respect. Of course this presents challenges. When devolution was first introduced, one political party held office and could command majorities at Westminster, Holyrood and Cardiff Bay. Now, a different political party is in charge in each of those three jurisdictions, with the need for cross-community consent to

enable the Northern Ireland Executive to take a clear position on anything being an additional layer of complexity.

Alongside a commitment to partnership and to making the devolved settlements work, the UK government can and should be more confident about its own role in the three devolved nations. I remember when in government being surprised at the reluctance of some of my ministerial colleagues even to visit Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, let alone to organise United Kingdom events and announcements there.

A United Kingdom Minister in Aberdeen, Anglesey or Armagh isn't making some kind of colonial visit nor does she or he need permission from the devolved government. That Minister is representing one of the two legitimate, elected governments of that part of our country.

And we need to get away from the wrongheaded idea that because the devolved nations all have two elected governments - each with complementary responsibilities for policy - the relationship can only be combative and adversarial.

The Johnson government is right to make it its key strategic priority to "level-up" educational and economic opportunities for people and communities who have for many years felt ignored and left behind. If the political and constitutional system that exists fails to deliver what people want and expect, whether you define that in terms of living standards or the quality of public services or security, discontent will fester and grow. People in Strabane or Merthyr Tydfil or Dundee should be as much entitled to benefit from levelling-up as much as their fellow-citizens in Middlesbrough or Grimsby.

An economic, educational and social transformation on the scale that the Prime Minister wants cannot be achieved simply by issuing instructions from an office in Whitehall. For those ambitious government policies to work they will have to be tailored to the needs of the different parts of this country and the people living in those areas will need to feel that they have a stake in their success.

I came to the conclusion, on the basis of my experience in the Cabinet Office, that whether it's delivering an industrial strategy, or high quality apprenticeships, or integrated transport or a joined-up plan to implement net-zero carbon, we are likely to get better and faster results, and to encourage innovation and experiment, if these things are done by the central government of the UK working in genuine partnership with elected devolved, local and regional leaders, who in turn are able both to use their convening power to rally business, education, cultural and third sector

organisations and through their endorsement give additional democratic legitimacy to the plan.

A lot of this is already happening: city deals in all four parts of the United Kingdom; broadband initiatives between the UK government and local authorities in rural Scotland; UK, devolved and local government support for spaceports and for landmark cultural projects like the V & A in Dundee.

Seen in the context of a commitment to partnership and mutual respect, the Johnson government's decision to replace EU regional spending programmes with a UK fund shouldn't be seen as a threat but as a way to engage the full leverage of the United Kingdom government in work to drive economic regeneration, skills training and technological innovation in all parts of the UK.

Those of us who argue for partnership need to be realistic. We will never persuade the current First Minister of Scotland that devolution is working well. Her over-riding strategic objective is independence.

But it isn't the ardent nationalists that we have to persuade but the pragmatic, sensible, moderate people whose votes will in the end determine whether the United Kingdom survives or not. When I met the distillers on Islay (I got *some* good gigs in government!), they were clear about their priority. They wanted their roads fixed to cope with the number of whisky tourists now visiting the island: they didn't care very much about whose competence it was to do it - they just wanted their two elected governments to work together and sort it out.

Intergovernmental relations are not defined by fixed moments, or set-piece events. Good relationships don't begin and end with a meeting in Downing Street. Rather, they require a culture of joint working and constant dialogue embedded between the governments that continues in the background, usually away from the headlines.

Even on the fraught issue of Europe, officials from Whitehall and devolved departments worked together to map out the new UK-wide common frameworks that are now needed to ensure that, as regulatory powers previously exercised at EU level come to be exercised by the relevant authorities within the UK, businesses can continue to buy and sell freely across the UK's internal market.

That collaborative work was what businesses in all parts of the UK told us they wanted, and it showed that many of those UK-wide frameworks could be light-touch or even handled exclusively at the devolved level. At the end of the process, out of

153 areas of policy where EU rules intersected with devolved competences, there were just four areas where disagreements remained unresolved.

All well and good, but the risk of the United Kingdom fracturing is now so serious that it cannot be enough to rely on goodwill and relationships of trust established between individuals who, whether Ministers or civil servants, are rarely in post for more than a few years. We need habits of partnership to be nurtured and supported by procedural, institutional and political reform.

Much work has already been done on this theme - including by the Commons Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs, the House of Lords Constitution Committee, the Constitution Unit, the Constitution Reform Group, the Institute for Government, the Bennett Institute, and the Dunlop, Smith and Silk reports. Gordon Brown has called for fundamental reform of the UK's constitution and Professor John Denham, a formidable Minister in the Blair and Brown governments, has written extensively about England's place in the United Kingdom.

There is no shortage of policy ideas. What is needed are political decisions to make choices and act upon them.

I make no claim to have devised a perfect blueprint for reform. But let me offer a few suggestions for change: to the machinery of government in Whitehall; to inter-governmental structures; to Parliamentary scrutiny and cooperation; the place of England in the UK, and (not to reopen old wounds but because, especially when dealing with Northern Ireland, the subject is unavoidable) how to develop the future relationship between the UK and the European Union in ways that strengthen rather than harm the United Kingdom.

First then, the formal machinery of the UK government, at both Ministerial and official level should be strengthened to improve union awareness and union capability across the whole of Whitehall. The pattern of devolved and United Kingdom responsibilities today is much more complex than that established back in 1998. That's due partly to the devolution of further powers in later legislation and partly also to the impact of Brexit, which has involved the return to the United Kingdom of more than a hundred policy responsibilities that interact with devolved powers.

At present, Departments vary enormously in their understanding of how devolution affects them. In part that reflects the extent to which devolved issues intersect with a particular Department's responsibilities and partly it's down to the priority that an

individual Secretary of State or Minister gives to such matters. Whitehall is not good at implementing cross-departmental strategies without a strong steer from the centre and some kind of institutional mechanism to monitor the implementation of policy across departments and hold Ministers and Permanent Secretaries to account.

Lord Dunlop has proposed designating a senior minister, probably in the Cabinet Office as having overall responsibility to make sure that all government policies contribute to strengthening the Union and that all Departments are alive to the legal competences and political sensitivities of the devolved nations. A beefed-up civil service structure would support that Minister and the three territorial Secretaries of State and there would be a determined effort to improve the Union and devolved capability of the civil service. That has to be right. Union, including devolution capability needs to be written into the system for the appraisal and promotion of civil servants. If we are to institutionalise habits of partnership and mutual trust we need to have a system in which every senior civil servant should have had experience of working with or working within one of the devolved administrations.

Second, the process and structure of intergovernmental arrangements between the UK government and the three devolved administrations, the Joint Ministerial Committee or JMC system, needs a reboot.

In 2016 the UK and devolved governments actually reached agreement on a set of reforms to the system, only for them to be vetoed at the last minute by Martin McGuinness in a row over how devolved ministers should engage with foreign governments, but the measures agreed then by Conservative, Labour and SNP administrations are still a decent basis for change: a regularised timetable for meetings, including those of the Prime Minister with First Ministers, rotation of venues between the four nations, provision for the commissioning of joint work (surely a need reinforced by our experience of the pandemic), and opportunities for more informal discussions between Ministers.

In the months and years ahead, both devolved and United Kingdom governments will want to amend retained EU law. There will be more and more cases where a new policy has devolved as well as UK implications, such as where the negotiation and agreement of an external trade or climate deal is a reserved power but the practical implementation of whatever is agreed touches on devolved competences. It makes sense in such circumstances to have established forums and processes which ensure that the particular interests and priorities of each part of the United

Kingdom have been identified and, wherever possible, a common approach has been endorsed by all.

The present JMC system isn't up to scratch and I hope that the still ongoing Inter-Governmental Review of those arrangements will conclude in a package of agreed reforms.

Third, Parliament needs to raise its game. There seems to me to be a strong case for a Select Committee, possibly a Joint Committee drawn from both Commons and Lords, with a remit to look cross-departmentally at the interaction of government policies with devolution, including responsibility for questioning the relevant senior Minister if the Dunlop proposal to create such a post were carried through.

It should also be possible for Parliament to develop closer relationships and more frequent meetings and conversations with the Scottish Parliament, Sennedd and Northern Ireland Assembly. The experience of online working during the last 14 months ought to make such exchanges easy to establish without the need for lots of extra travel.

I would also like to see the Standing Orders of the different Parliaments and Assemblies allow for joint work where there was agreement amongst the parliamentarians themselves that such an initiative was right.

Fourth, the "English Question". If English disillusion and indifference persists, the United Kingdom will remain in peril.

A classic federal model won't work for the United Kingdom because England is too big and the so-called regions of England are bureaucratic fictions that mean nothing to the majority of people living in them. A system of governance in England that was less centralised and sought opportunities for devolution would deliver better outcomes in terms of economic regeneration but also, I believe, reduce the sense of alienation that exists in too many places and stimulate civic pride.

Ben Houchen in the Tees Valley, Andy Street in the West Midlands and Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester have each shown how an elected mayor can galvanise thinking and action to deliver economic results for their area and act as a champion for local interests and priorities - demonstrating to voters that democratic politics really can make a difference to their lives.

And I want to see this government grasp the challenge of how to devolve more power in non-metropolitan areas. In England outside the city-regions I see unitary

county and borough authorities as the way forward, big enough to think and plan strategically but with historic civic identities that mean something to the people they represent. Of course such reforms can be controversial. Conservative authorities in Dorset and Buckinghamshire argued fiercely over different models of unitary government, as did Labour councils in South Yorkshire over the role of their metro-mayor. But I hope that the government continues to encourage reform. Devices like citizens' assemblies could play a useful role identifying compromises and ways forward.

Alongside further devolution within England there should be a distinct place for England's voice in the constitutional structures of the United Kingdom. In the JMC, or whatever succeeds it, there needs to be a Minister in attendance who knows that his or her job is to represent the English interest, leaving responsibility for brokering an overall and preferably UK position with the Cabinet Minister in the chair. And I'm attracted by the idea of a standing consultative body of England's mayors, counties and boroughs which UK Ministers would meet on a regular basis.

Devolution within England would not only help reconnect people in the largest UK nation with the democratic process, it would also have a beneficial impact on the unionist cause more generally. Institutionalising devolution throughout the United Kingdom would make devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland seem part of a broader pattern of decentralised, collaborative government in which relationships and dialogues take place not only between the devolved administration and the United Kingdom government but amongst those different national, regional and sub-regional leaders.

I would add this point: devolution shouldn't be limited just to England. As the Smith Commission noted, there is a powerful case to say that the devolved government in Scotland (I would add Wales and Northern Ireland too) is itself too centralised and that greater powers should be devolved to cities, counties and regions within those three nations.

Fifth, and very briefly, Europe. I am not arguing for the United Kingdom to rejoin the EU. But for many people, including for majorities in both Scotland and Northern Ireland, the sense of being European is one aspect of the multiple identities that I spoke of earlier. For now, having gone through the seismic quake of Brexit we are living through a series of aftershocks. But as we go forward I believe that friendship, close strategic cooperation and the rebuilding of people to people ties between a UK outside the EU and the other democracies of Europe would help some of the scars in Scotland and Northern Ireland to fade.

The United Kingdom is a remarkable example of a successful multi-national state: a peace project long before the European Union was dreamed of. Through the UK, the

political, economic and cultural influence of each of the home nations is amplified and the four nations have achieved far more collectively than any of them would have done had they tried to go it alone. To overcome the strains that now threaten the unity of the UK will require a cultural shift in UK politics in favour of partnership and mutual respect, backed up by changes to the way we do business in both government and Parliament. Time is short. We need to get on with that work.