

FAREWELL BRITANNIA: BREAK-UP OR NEW UNION?

It's twenty-one years since the original, failed referendum on devolution to Scotland and Wales in 1979, and so perhaps an appropriate moment to look back over this history. Changes in the structure of the United Kingdom that were only prospected a generation ago are now fully under way. The uncertain eddies of the 1970s have turned into the rapids of 2000. A book was published earlier this year with the title *The Day Britain Died*. In 1979 such a title would have proclaimed the author, Andrew Marr, as some sort of emissary out of dreamland. But in 2000 the lunatic turns out to be the new Chief Political Correspondent of the BBC — successor to the ultra-balanced Robin Oakley and (before that) the ultra-noncommittal John Cole.

Thus has History moved on. Where is it bearing us? As we accelerate into these rapids, there are some who hear the roar of a great waterfall ahead. Taking a larger view, we all know very well that since the 1980s, other rapids of disintegration have brought about general ruin and unresolved conflicts, in Indonesia, Eastern Europe, Sri Lanka and elsewhere. So why not here?

The most generally debated scenario along these disastrous lines goes something like this. The United Kingdom has begun to 'break up' in the sense of falling apart into contending nationalist camps. Part of that dissolution goes back to the 1920s — Southern Ireland — and the rest is now upon us. A holding operation may have been undertaken in Northern Ireland; but although this is working for the moment, it is unlikely to last. In the main or 'British' island, devolution of power to Scotland and Wales seems likely to fuel rather than to appease the rise of nationality-politics. Mild-mannered as the new Parliaments in Edinburgh and Cardiff may seem, they are bound to fall out with the

U.K. state sooner or later, and so provoke reassertive or compensatory national animosity in England.

On the analogy of Serbia or Russia, a resentful and demoted (or even humiliated) elite will then try to preserve its privileged role and, if unsuccessful, obtain revenge by other means. Populist 'What about us!' sentiment will be worked up in the notorious British tabloid manner, and is likely to be politically appropriated by otherwise bankrupt or down-at-heel parties and leaders. It's not clear who is cut out to be Belarus, Bosnia or Chechnya in this perspective. But what is pretty clear is that anybody easily identifiable as internal enemy or fifth column would have a hard time of it. The big immigrant minorities of England would occupy the most exposed positions here. There could be a malignant growth of what Darcus Howe in *The White Tribe* called 'the Dover mentality' ('the mark of the beast'). I'll come back later to the question of that growth, and what might foster (or arrest) it.

Sometimes this is called the 'four nations' formula, with reference to the supposed four main ethnic countries of the archipelago.¹ To sum up: the four-nations formula can be seen as suggesting that, perhaps before too long — while thousands cram into Heathrow on their way home to Jamaica or Pakistan — Jean-Marie Le Pen will be on his way over to address the House of Commons. His chosen theme is "De Due Guillaume jusqua Guillaume Hague: racines d'une vraie alliance europeenne". Later in the same day Mr Le Pen is expected to don ermine and join Vladimir Putin as an Honorary Lord of the restructured Second Chamber.

The Curse of the Blueprint

Too easy to mock, I know, when real fears are involved, reinforced by hooligans with knives, by firebombs and institutional discrimination. So — what is the alternative? What optional scenarios might more usefully be occupying our minds for 'after Britain', or 'beyond The White Tribe'? More particularly — what most people want to know — are any of these more hopeful and more probable ?

Here we encounter a strange problem. Not only is there such an alternative, there are so many of the damned things that you already

England, Scotland Ireland and Wales, as one was encouraged to recite them in school. There were always at least seven in truth, but noone bothered mentioning the Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey,

need a dictionary of futurology to help out. Those dazzling blueprints invariably portray a tidied-up archipelago and globe from which the ogre of nationalism has been exorcised. In more recent examples the World Trade Organisation is exorcised as well, and history as we know it has indeed ended. Unfortunately at the same time— and rather worryingly — what Ted Hughes called 'the salt taste of reality' has somehow ended as well. All round Regionalism; Subsidiarity (in the liturgy of European Union); Federalism and its fifty-seven sub-species (asymmetric, hierarchical, confederal, consociational, and so forth). However wildly different on paper, all such plans are deemed better than the dreary, out-of-date nation-state. All are guaranteed to satisfy and so eliminate the supposed atavistic impulses of unrestrained ethnic human nature: racialism, communalism, nationalism and their insupportable political consequences. Yet all have also somehow left behind the constantly disconcerting universe we actually inhabit — the world of uneven development, of the unforeseen collapses and epiphanies which actual sea-changes have cast up on the beach where we live.

I've made no secret of a personal preference towards a re-structured archipelago (and Europe) of smaller-scale republics, but no purpose would be served tonight by merely adding one more such scheme to the cache of utopianism. Instead, I think it would be more rewarding to look at one or two things which have actually happened. At plans that have left the drawing-board and become reality, and some other things which weren't planned at all, but are happening, and may be even more important. May it not be that these more effectively indicate some different way or ways ahead? That is, ways towards an alternative 'Britain' which — I do think we can be reasonably sure of this — will be neither the ancient, unitary state-regime that still persists in Blairism, nor its simple fragmentation into separate ethno-states?

Northern Ireland

By far the most important of these developments is Northern Ireland. Until 1998 and the acceptance of the Belfast Agreement, it was widely believed (if not always stated openly) that no political formula embracing both sides would ever work. One of the leading analysts of Northern Ireland, the sociologist Steve Bruce, said in his study of the Ulster Protestants, *The Edge of the Union*, that the communal split was 'ethnic' in nature. Which implied that it was rooted in incorrigible differences — for which either separate existence or permanent

antagonism were the sole available answers. Such a society had therefore either to be ruled from outside, as a colony or a Protectorate, or else divided into virtually autonomous polities (as cantons, nations, 'communities' or whatever).

But today, very few people (and especially few outsiders or detached commentators) would assume this to be the case. Of course, equally, no one can be certain that the new Parliament in the North will be able to go on working as specified by the Agreement — that 'events' in Harold Macmillan's celebrated sense may not yet occur to disrupt it. However, what is much more significant is the likely nature of such 'events'. No one can yet know just how many psychopaths there are still at large in Northern Ireland, or just how much Semtex and other firepower they now dispose of. Atrocities and reactions remain possible, and might still upset things.

Yet this is surely a quite different and less serious doubt about the new arrangements. Die-hard gangs are one thing, effective nationalist mobilisation is quite another. If the new system is workable in practice, then it is fairly certain to be re-established. The Belfast Agreement should probably not have been suspended at all, and is very unlikely to be suspended again. And this new reality entails the viability of new principles. Which in turn suggests — even more puzzlingly — some deeper environmental change that must now be underpinning them.

What matters here is that an elaborate and — in a comparative sense — very advanced written constitutional order has been put in place and made to work, in the teeth of previously implacable and violent communal hostilities. The U.K. government played a major part in setting this up, mostly during the period when Mo Mowlam was Secretary of State. But that was 'enabling' rather than decreeing a solution. It was trying to replace or to get out of the old Protectorate, rather than give it a new shape (as many Protestant Unionists continued to hope). Most important of all, the result is not a 'British' system in the old sense at all. It does not depend on informal conventions, understandings among chaps and reinforcing the mythic Sovereignty of the UK Crown. On the contrary it depends, perfectly clearly, on formal and exacting rules, healthy distrust among ruling cadres, drastic institutional reforms, and a deliberate rundown of 'Sovereignty'.

This had to be negotiated over a long period of time among many different interests, and although there was considerable input from the

Republic and the U.K. most of the substantial content of the Agreement was home-grown. Just as the Scotland Act was mainly framed by Scots, so the gist of the Peace process originated among Northern Irishmen themselves. Outside circumstances like the termination of the Cold War, the evolution of European Union, the advance of the Republic's economy and the electoral interests of the American Presidency may have been indispensable as well. But however many necessary conditions there were, a sufficiency of conditions depended on local will and possibility. In Scotland this was baptised as the 'settled will' of the population, shown in the 1998 referendum; in Ulster there was something analogous, a will for peace or an alternative settlement, manifested in the same way.

The Council of the Isles

The Northern Ireland change was therefore less 'British' (in a constitutional sense) than the Scottish and Welsh new deals. And it also generated a very striking constitutional novelty — something which no sober political scientist or constitutional lawyer would have put his or her name to only a short time before. It implied a big enough change in the unwritten rules of British constitutionalism over one British province, naturally. But it also added to this a remarkable forward projection. It was as if the very extremity of Northern Ireland — a theatre of ethnic strife infinitely worse than anything seen on the British mainland or anywhere else west of Trieste since 1945 — had ended by producing an equivalently extreme, far-out ideological by-product. It gave rise to an imagined community disconcertingly different from anything in the political arsenal of the old British state.

This was, of course, 'the Council of the Isles'. The British-Irish Council (to give it its official title) was originated as a way of reassuring Protestant sensibilities in the Province, in the context of the present government's Devolution programme. Whatever happened in Scotland, Wales and England, it suggested there would always be a Britain (or at any rate a British something-or-other) to which this community could belong and appeal. All governments and governance-bodies were to be represented on it, like the Manx and Channel Island dependencies and the devolved parliaments, as well as the two independent states. It was intended to promote 'the development of the totality of relationships among the peoples of these islands'. While this is in itself a phrase capable of meaning everything or nothing, it certainly leaves doors open. Open (for example) to representing and farthing non-territorial communities 'of these islands', like the cultural and linguistic communities of the Irish and Scottish *Gaeltacht*, Travelling Peoples or

(as far as I can see, though they're not mentioned as such) immigrant populations as well.²

It may be worth underlining that the population 'Strand Three' was conceived as placating, the Ulster Protestants, are themselves an 'immigrant community'. They may have been there quite a while. But they are still perceived as such by part of the more indigenous Irish (or Irish-Catholic) community. And even more important, they are still worrying after over three centuries about 'who do they think they are?' in something like Yasmin Allibhai-Brown's sense. Their customary answer, 'British; (with the largest capital 'B' available) has not really been testimony to great success with that endeavour.³

While it is possible that the Council proposal comes to mean extremely little in practice, and certain that some parts of Central Authority devoutly wish that to be the case, it is not actually likely to disappear. This is because there are so many prospective vested interests in its maintenance. Although not informed in advance of the move, the governments of Man, Jersey and Guernsey warmly supported it. So, more surprisingly have the nationalist movements in Wales and Scotland as well as the New Labour administrations. More important, the Dublin government is very keen on it. It sees the Council (and other aspects of the Agreement structure, like the standing Intergovernmental Conference) as a long-term way of influencing London. That would be all the more important if government changes at Westminster (as is sure to happen sooner or later) and something more old-fashioned emerges. The stronger and more varied the Council of the Isles becomes in the meantime, the less chance there will be for the obdurate strain in Ulster Protestantism to attempt a comeback by exploiting such old-fashioned characteristics.

As for the new governments and the nationalist parties in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, their motives are quite plain. An Islands Council would confer a new status on them, in no way equivalent to independence but a long way better than boring old provincialism or its tarted-up descendant, 'regionalism'. They perceive it as something that not only doesn't prevent them becoming more independent, but may even help them do so. 'Devolution' in the original sense was of course intended to underwrite the authority of the Centre. But a loose association of governments explicitly promoting initiatives from its

² *The Belfast Agreement: an Agreement reached at the Multi-Party Talks on Northern Ireland* (April 1998, Cm. 3883, Stationery Office), 'Strand Three', pp. 14-15.

³ Y. Allibhai-Brown, *Who Do We Think We Are?* (2000).

members is a quite different kettle of different fish. It makes sense only on the assumption of a curious kind of quasi-equality, where a representative of the Douglas House of Keys or the Cardiff National Assembly is on the same footing as someone from the House of Commons (and, one would hope, a cut above anyone from the House of Lords).

Thus, I would argue, both the redefinition of Sovereignty inherent in the new Ulster accords and its support-structures like the British-Irish do suggest — albeit in a partial or shadowy way — something quite different from and potentially better than the old imperial state. The old common political roof or (if I can be excused the term) 'dome', was multinational by default rather than deliberation. It staggered or leaned in that direction because, resting on different nations in the archipelago and going on to co-opt others all over the world, there was never any other possibility. Its state form was condemned to class-based elitism and Monarchism for much the same reasons. Yet at its last gasp, under Blair's leadership, driven finally to resolve its most enduring historical and ethnic problem, something else has ended by showing through. Where the old fabric was thinnest and most contested, it has begun to give way — and already begun to turn into something else.

A similar analysis might be carried out of the political events in Wales and Scotland since 1997, showing how 'devolution' almost at once began to mutate into something quite un-blueprinted, but I don't have time to undertake this right now. Also, whatever pattern of deviance we have here is clearly accelerating out of any possible control. Scottish and Welsh Devolution took a generation to evolve. The renewed Troubles in Ireland endured for thirty years. In the case of the London Mayor, however, almost no time at all passed (as it were) between initial plan and total failure. From the government's angle, catastrophe had struck even before the electoral campaign began.

The English Patient

So something novel is emerging. I will not describe it as 'new', simply out of respect for the British language. None of those who have passed through the rhetorical foam-bath of the past three years are now capable of calling anything 'New' (with capital letter) without some undertone of irony or sarcasm. Neither (one hopes) will anything ever

again be 'Third' in any but a flatly numeric sense. No, what's novel is on the ground and in the air. It has less and less to do with party ideology and their accompanying bureaucratic schemes.

But the realization of its potential demands two things. Both seem to me essential in the present situation; and neither (regrettably) seem likely now to emerge from the remaining reform ideas of the present U.K. government. The two things required are, firstly, some representation of England in the new British polity; and secondly, a move towards consolidating the demise (or replacement) of the old-time constitutional 'dome' with a written multi-national constitution. Without these two (and closely related) features, the state of the nations might indeed deteriorate, and even slide backwards towards the dreaded 'four-nations' screenplay which I began from.

The 'white tribe' has got to be represented, partly because it is no longer such a white tribe, but partly also (and I must say I feel, more importantly) because nothing else will ever make any sense in British terms without it. Saying as much of course raises the problem of English identity — 'who do *they* think they are?'¹ or now want to be, and so on. But (you'll be relieved to know) I do not intend to attempt another exploration of this bizarre church-crypt tonight. Nothing much tends to emerge from such excursion anyway, as *The White Tribe* convincingly showed. When the coffin-lid creaks open and the mildewed cadaver sits piteously upright, it seems usually to have a list of some kind in its shaking paw. Inscribed thereupon are the supposed credentials of nationhood. These appear invariably to echo George Orwell's litany of Englishry in *The Lion and the Unicorn*: red phone-boxes, suet-puddings, unarmed bobbies, nuns bicycling through mist, Baroness Jay, fish & chips...and so on. Such lists are based on a curious but still quite important superstition, the notion that 'nations' are founded upon such bundles of attributes. If found without one, then somehow a population has no right to be there. Satisfactory Ethnicity must be at once produced, or the lid might as well be nailed down again.

The consequences of such a belief are hallucinatory. For instance, it is reasonably clear that if the government of the Isle of Man joined the candidates' list for entry to the United Nations, it would — on the strength of admission policy since the later 'eighties — be pretty casually allowed in.⁴ Provided (naturally) that the Tynwald had taken

⁴ The House of Keys did in fact debate doing so in February 1999, but decided to hold off for a while and commission a Report on the implications of doing so instead. When the Report appeared it was non-

the precaution of resigning from the United Kingdom beforehand. Were an *English* delegation to turn up, however — representing 85% of the archipelago population — then the view appears to be that it would have to do so list in hand. At the door some equivalent of St Peter might then scrutinise it, sadly shake his head like the British Bobby of legend, and declare: 'Sorry Sir...it just won't do, more ethnicity is required on this entry form. Why don't you go home and try again?'

For Christ's sake! Some profanity seems in order here, because the reason why any new or renegotiated Britain, or any workable archipelago system along Island Council lines, needs English representation has in fact nothing whatever to do with ethnicity. It is entirely a matter of politics and of the altering character of statehood in the new, post-Cold War world. To put it in another way: it's entirely a matter of civic or constitutional nationalism, and not of ethnic, pseudo-ethnic, fake-ethnic or (frankly) non-existent-ethnic national identity. Northern Ireland has been tackled via what one might call an anti-Folkum constitution. Folkum played very little part in the attainment of Scottish self-government, and (it seems to me) less in Wales than most observers have allowed. Enoch Powell's inscrutable mystery of Englishness belongs in a museum of Social Anthropology, not in the emergent polity of the actual, post-imperial English.

What does matter is simply that no new archipelago order or re-jigged British or British-Irish arrangement will be seriously possible as long as the government at Westminster continues to represent not just eighty-plus per cent of the insular population but *nearly everybody else as well*. In fact everybody else except the Irish Republic and (though only in part) the three micro-states. Thus representatives of the Welsh Assembly will be supposed under these novel arrangements to dialogue with representatives of a British government — a government which, if it chose to do so, could suspend them from one day to the next (as it did in Northern Ireland). Her Majesty continues to control the entire operation, jointly with the government of the Republic. From a Whitehall point of view this of course seems quite natural. But this is because there are people there still living in a rose-clad thatch twice as old as time. Some of them are in the Government. Their assumption continues to be that common sense and sound committee-work will prevail, things must be prevented from getting out of hand.

committal. A policy of 'wait and see' has continued to prevail. But nobody contested either the right of Man to take such a course, or the feasibility of doing so.

But things won't. As we've seen again in London, the old power-centre has now declined too seriously for such nostrums to go on functioning. To go on clinging to Britishness in that way is hopeless, and — as one farce or tragedy follows another — could easily turn into disaster. That, rather than nationalism around the periphery, could end in the antagonistic 'four-nations' strife I mentioned to begin with. The old state has, in its Blairite manifestation, been able to trigger a series of great changes, but there is no longer good reason to believe it will be able to develop or complete them in the positive way which many people are still hoping for. Indeed there are quite important reasons for fearing the opposite: that it will now retreat from such farther developments, and attempt to remain in office by sound committee-work, public relations and periodical hand-outs. 'Stabilisation', as ordained by providence (which means in practice, back-tracking and the refurbishment of Monarchical and other traditions).

No: for progress a farther revolution is needed, and this will depend upon more radical constitutional reform of the centre itself. That's why the two things — English representation and intelligible constitutional engineering — are needed, and needed jointly. In this emerging context the objectives of Charter 88 are probably much more important than they were when the organization was set up twelve years ago.

England or Englands?

It's sometimes sard in answer that the best formula for including English identity into any new deal would be via regional rather than all-England representation. As habitually put, this does risk a return to blueprint-land. Jack Straw's original document about English regional policy, *A Choice for England* (1995) suggested elected regional governments might be possible, and invited them to submit proposals and campaign for popular support. Blair echoed him at the time, saying the trouble was there was 'no consensus about regional assemblies in England. We can't commit ourselves to do something until its is clear that the support and pressure for it is there'.⁵

⁵ *A Choice for England: Consultation Paper on Labour's Plans for English Regional Government* (Labour Party, John Smith House, 1995). Cf. *The New Statesman* editorial, 'Labour's Local Difficulty', March 10th 1995.

But of course no 'consensus' was going to emerge on such an issue, and all-round 'support and pressure' was not obtainable. It was difficult to establish what 'regions' meant in many parts, central authority couldn't conjure them into existence, there was antipathy to more politicians and bureaucracy — the standard round of objections at once imposed itself, and after 1997 made it easy for the Project to set the question to one side. However, all this implied was that a blueprint schema had been defeated — not the reality of regional unease and resentment themselves. These have not ceased to make themselves felt, in the only way they were ever likely to do so. That is, unevenly and somewhat chaotically (more or less as nationalism had always done previously).

There is one single region away ahead of others in both its demands and its organization, the great North-Eastern conurbation of England in the Tyne and Wear valleys. When Darcus Howe visited it he apparently found nobody who would even own up to being 'English' in the Thames Valley or thatched-cottage sense. I must say my own family contacts with the former Kingdom of Northumbria rather support that verdict. Geordies and Wearsiders have little allegiance to either England or Britain, and appear oblivious to grandiloquent projections of general regionalism. They are unlikely to react gently to suggestions that they cannot have a Northern Parliament after the next general election, unless East Anglia, East and West Mercia, Humberside (etc.) are also 'kept aboard' and moved ahead. What they want is 'something like' what happened in Ireland, Wales and Scotland, preferably soon. Uneven development wrecks everybody's sense of "the right time". That's how it works. "Soon" for some is "Far too soon" for others and "Not soon enough" for others again. In Blueprint Land things happen when they ought to; in history, they just tend to turn up at the wrong time.

The point here is really a more substantial one. A strong ferment of disaggregation is under way, within territorial England as well as the other parts of the archipelago. It's at best half-planned and more often hardly planned or foreseen at all, and driven on by mounting pressures of uneven development between South and North. It's intensely urban, not at all 'ethnic' in outlook, and overwhelmingly economic and political in its assumptions. In other words, this is positive disaggregation again, not something to be evaded or opposed by any except abject apologists of the unitarist *ancien regime*. Unfortunately, the abject-apologist faction seems now to be in the ascendant — regaining authority, perhaps, after the guilty excesses of 1997-2000. An awful lot of the cheer-leaders are Scots or (the archaic terms

seems somehow appropriate again) *Scotch*. Successful chancers may be the slowest to acknowledge the disappearance of the circumstances which, in the past, have served them so well.

In an Unfreezing World

I have of course ended, after all those hard words about ideal blueprints, with another sketchy and broken-backed blue-print of my own. So I might as well come clean about it, and then wind up with an equally tentative and implausible explanation of why I think all this is may be going on at all and (even more astonishingly) going on here, in the British-Irish archipelago, and now at the start of another century.

The Conciliar regime whose embryonic form may lie in the present British-Irish Council would surely have nothing to fear from any of those actual developments I have mentioned. This is because it isn't a dream-substitute for 'break-up' but a deliberately loose, flexible formula for recomposition. Far from resisting different forms of self-government, or thinking in terms of restraining or taming them, it would actually rest upon the autonomy of its constituent parts, including the independence of some of them. Founded with two *de jure* independent states, Southern Ireland and the United Kingdom, and three *de facto* independent ones, Man, Jersey and Guernsey, its constitution would be configured from the outset to accept what one might call 'moving target' self-rule. Constitutional democracy would be its regulatory principle, rather than established power or the crypt-mythology of ethno-national statehood.

Its ethos will not be very different from that evoked by Billy Bragg in the pages of *The Day Britain Died*. To this English republican, 'Britain' is a label for things we have in common, rather than the banner of an omnipotent overarching state:

Britain is a bit like 'our street'; it's us and our neighbours. It's not our house, but it's our street and we know our neighbours houses and we come and go from one another's houses. I would include the Irish Republic in that as well. I know they don't feel themselves to be part of that, but I would include them as neighbours in that we come and go and we have so many things in common.⁶

⁶ *The Day Britain Died* (2000) p.216

'Things in common', customs in common, and (in effect) a somewhat untidy community council within which common interests are constantly negotiated and conflicts worked out. The 'houses' may be independent in the United Nations sense, or 'chosen-dependent' like the British micro-states, or elective regions, or city-regions, or nothing-in-particular local governments. The English house will remain the largest one, but not in a specially threatening sense since scale is no longer so significant. No longer attempting to 'punch above its weight' in the international arena, the scaled-down Palace of Westminster will abandon the nuclear deterrent and make itself still more popular by giving up its Security Council seat.

The point about such an archipelagic union is that it will have been negotiated by its constituent parts, and remain the terrain of constant renegotiation and readjustment. Its mode of existence and decision is really Republican — in what I think is Jonathan Freedland's underlying sense. Republican (even if there are still some Monarchs around as house-pets in some parts of the new system) and also highly legalistic in a rather American sense, because of the proliferation of constitutions and the basic wish to settle conflicts in a civic and up-front manner.

But just why is this untidy future coming into being around us? It must be — it can only be — because much more has changed since 1989 than was believed at the time, and at a far deeper historical level. Much more than began to thaw out than the Cold War itself. The reduction of that particular glacis must have released something behind it again, and occasioned a larger earth-shift whose contours we are only beginning to perceive today. So our situation today is something like the travellers in the Fourth Book of Rabelais' *Pantagruel*, that haunting episode when the words get frozen in the air, and are then released in stages into human earshot with a change in the climate.

The travellers in the boat suddenly hear voices in the air, seemingly coming from nowhere. Some of them are terrified and want to retreat to the nearest landfall, but the boat's Skipper explains it all calmly, in terms of where they happen to be sailing —

.. .On the Confines of the Frozen Sea, on which about the beginning of last Winter happened a great and bloody war between the Arimaspians and the Nephelibates...

During that terrible conflict the weather worsened and a frost descended, so that all the sounds — the cannon-fire, the screams, the hacking and gouging, the oaths, rape and pillage — were frozen in the very air. The world fell silent, meaning vanished and for what seemed an eternity nothing changed. Until at length the dreary Winter of imperial history ended, and in a more serene time all the words began to melt, released into the air like birds. Pantagruel finds a sackful of still unfrozen words and dumps them on the boat's deck. They thaw them out in their hands, able now to crack jokes about the frightful oaths and the echoes of distant battle which emerge.

This story has come back to me so often recently — reading Yasmin's book for example, or seeing the concluding bit of Damien O'Donnell's film *East is East*. You remember how the youngest boy in the family, Sajid, decides to take off the hood? He puts aside the protective cowl he's been wearing non-stop for years to shelter himself from the unbearable tensions of the mixed family and cultures surrounding his development. Then he just stops shutting out the world, and in a sense accepts things (and himself) for what they are. I think of him as England, an England still to come. He — it — will become himself, or herself, in an archipelago of British-Irish variety and dissonance, with all kinds of family quarrels still going on, but in a democratic and outward-looking manner, from which the claustrophobia of Great Britain will have disappeared alongside its false security, its hegemonic conceit and its be-Crowned stultification.

So 'Farewell Britannia' could also mean 'Hello' to a quite different, and much more liveable, extended family — the sort of family people would want to join (and maybe the family many or most individuals find themselves wishing their actual families had been). If I'm right, there are at the present at least some signs of this coming about, rather than the gloomy prognosis of 'Four-Nations' doomsterism.

Tom Nairn
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