

The 2015 election result has astounded the country and shaken the Labour Party to its foundations.

How could the Scottish electorate threaten the union it had voted to retain only months ago? Given the SNP's left wing manifesto, how could they in so voting, risk, as it turn out to ensure a Tory Government? How could they risk exit from the EU, clearly threatened if the Tories were enabled to fulfil their manifesto promise?

Was this result a sign that part of the UK was trying to re-define itself, or was it the most dramatic example of a wider shift on the Celtic borders of the nation?

Northern Ireland had already so moved, happy to co-exist within, but outside the mainstream of British politics. In Wales there had been drift rather than shift, to embrace more devolution expounded by Plaid Cymru and supported by many Welsh Labour MP's.

But are these movements exclusive to Celtic regions to pull away from England, or is it part of a wider reaction to excessive centralism and alienation shared with the Northern Regions of England? All have consistently rejected the Tories, only to find themselves without voice or power for the best part of 40 years.

Since the first Thatcher administration in 1979 we have witnessed a more aggressive market driven Tory Party. This has coincided with a structural change in the British economy. In the post war period, until then, there had been extended periods of full employment and all regions contributed to wealth creation in a reasonably balanced way. Where there were regional differences, the consensus between the Parties ensured that government intervention would marginalise extremes.

Global changes in the late 1970's however hit one industry after another, affecting huge areas, most particularly in the North and on the Celtic fringes. Whole industries disappeared almost overnight and with them prosperity and employment, affecting communities once proud, now dependant on the richer parts of the kingdom, in the capital and its southern hinterland, the centre of service industries.

This reversed what was thought immutable since the industrial revolution ie wealth was based on manufacture and that located in the North, the Clyde, South Wales and Belfast. The shock of the impact was hardly eased by a government that labelled failing industries 'lame ducks'. What is more, the Government seemed to compound the problems by de-regulation, privatisation and exposing vulnerable industries and communities to the uncontrolled forces of the market, declaring 'there is no alternative'. This embedded a deep resentment of both Westminster and the Tories,

which came to be regarded as synonymous. So, the end of the 70's proved a watershed, both economically and politically, and deepening ideological divisions took on a regional and nationalistic dimension.

As the Tories in the 1980's and 90's dominated the central government, the regions became more determinedly Labour, as did the Scots and Welsh. The Nations within the kingdom began to demand more devolved power to reflect their difference from Westminster. In the English Regions the feeling of division was reflected in acts of defiance by local authorities with the introduction of subsidised cheap fares, the creation of Enterprise Boards and later, in adamant opposition to the poll tax, all of which were an anathema to the Government. The clash between the Regions and countries of the union on the one hand and Westminster and Whitehall on the other; between traditional and new industries; between Labour and Tory, seemed to culminate in the 1984 miners' strike. Battle lines were clear. Tory domination with a monopoly of support in the South; Labour, the permanent opposition entrenched in the North and Celtic edges. Meanwhile, as market forces transferred even more resources from the outer regions to the southern centre of both economic and political power, the government reinforced existing economic imbalance with its own capital investment programme in Docklands, Euro Tunnel and the M62, compounding differentials in wealth and employment.

The New Labour landslide did much to alleviate the resentment between the different geographic areas of the country. It did represent both the centre and all regions, except the South East and West and even there, there was a substantial Labour presence. Perhaps more importantly it brought some balance between the regions by its investment in health and education and more even distribution of the Local Government Support Grant. Further, it did recognise the aspirations for degrees of autonomy in the nations of the UK by creation of the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the restoration of Stormont. This eased the tension but the drift of investment continued in the direction of London and the South. But New Labour, wishing to back winners, responded to infrastructure overheating by feeding it further; with Crossrail, the new terminal at Heathrow, and the Olympics. The most evident manifestation of differential was the capital investment by government in transport in London, the South East and the Northern Regions, in a ratio of 3:2:1 respectively. So the problem, though temporarily masked, had not gone away.

When the Coalition arrived, the disparities of investment and associated sense of grievance were fully apparent. This state of affairs was exacerbated by the new Government, which intended to reduce the size of the state and insisted that an austerity programme necessitated by the recession should be applied quickly and universally, and that cuts would apply equally to capital as well as revenue. It had no intention of shielding the most vulnerable regions from the harshest impact. In fact Regional Development Agencies were wound up and regional investment cut by two

thirds. The deepest of the cuts in the Rate Support Grant were to be felt by the large Northern cities and conurbations.

So, feelings of alienation and lack of representation from the 80's and 90's were re-awakened, but this time Scotland had a voice of its own and ability to implement policies, contrary to a Tory dominated coalition in Westminster. They could reject tuition fees, NHS changes and welfare cuts, which flew in the face of Government policy. Surprisingly the roof had not fallen in. With a voice of their own, Parliament and experience of government grew the confidence to go defiantly further. The rebellious acts were distinctively Scottish, left wing and not led by the Labour Party, which had looked somewhat ambivalent about austerity, with views and priorities apparently based on Westminster. At best Labour seemed powerless.

If one adds to this the hubris of Cameron following the Referendum, when he announced the day after the result that he would deal with Scottish demands for more devolution, but only in the context of a wider devolution including England. This arbitrary dismissive behaviour was followed by the insulting suggestion that Scottish MP's might not be offered full voting rights in the Parliament of the Union. During the election campaign he implied that a vote for a Nationalist was in some way disloyal. Against this backdrop and history it is hardly surprising that the Scots so reacted by returning the Nationalists in a landslide.

But where does this leave the rest of the UK, and more specifically the Northern Regions? They have no similar history of nationhood, no comparable experience and no unifying voice. Yet in many respects the communities of the North behaved similarly to the Scottish electorate.

All the Northern cities and their conurbations rejected the Tories and their Liberal Coalition partners, much as the Scots had rejected all Westminster Parties. On Merseyside all the Liverpool constituencies produced huge Labour majorities and the pattern was followed, albeit less dramatically, in Greater Manchester, West and South Yorkshire, Tyneside, Teesside and Hull. Thus, overwhelmingly, the Urban North supported Labour in stark contrast to the rest of England. This is not to say that the North is ripe for anything like independence, but a wish to express difference is clear, the feeling of alienation similar, the sense of unfairness in dealings with Westminster rankles equally. The North's only previous experience of successful self regeneration had been with the Metropolitan County Councils, long since abolished. Greater Manchester however has kept and fostered the tradition of local authorities within their own conurbation, working together to strikingly good effect. Building on this, George Osborne has offered, first Manchester and to follow the City Regions of Leeds, Sheffield, Liverpool and Newcastle significant devolved powers with regard to skills, transport, housing, planning, policy (even Health to Manchester). What he refers to as the Northern Powerhouse!

However, these deals are laced with caveats, conditions and financial restrictions, depending upon the meeting of targets, and subject to strictly defined and reduced resources. They involve recycling of money that was already destined for the regions or the constituent local authorities within them.

The honesty of the government's offering is evidenced by a condition of accepting an imposed Mayor, a mechanism it hopes will de-politicise the Labour heartlands and head off any demand for true Regional Government.

Nonetheless, the process of creating new combined local authorities, with significant strategic powers involving substantial capital investment will, as in Scotland, give experience, enhance consciousness, confidence and legitimacy, when one day might evolve into some form of Regional Government.

We need to balance the economies of all regions in the UK and empower them so that they may express differences of priority without challenging the authority of the Centre. This would admit a basic concept of subsidiarity, realising for this country what has always been an ideal for the European Movement, a Government of the Regions within the nations of Europe, with mutual interaction and respect between different tiers of government, all exercising power in their own right.

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