

Comment

A Thousand Years of History?

Addressing his party conference at Bournemouth in October, the Prime Minister laid into Labour's proposals for the constitution of the United Kingdom, particularly as regards devolution in Scotland and Wales. Mr Major protested that, 'in less than a thousand days', a Labour administration would 'vandalise nearly a thousand years of history'.

Nearly a thousand years? In May 1994, during the election campaign for the European Parliament, John Major saw even further into the dark backward and abysm of time:

This British nation has a monarchy founded by the Kings of Wessex over eleven hundred years ago, a Parliament and universities formed over seven hundred years ago, a language with its roots in the mists of time, and the richest vocabulary in the world. This is no recent historical invention: it is the cherished creation of generations, and as we work to build a new and better Europe, we must never forget the traditions and inheritance of our past. I never leave Britain without the spirit sinking just a little, and it always lifts the heart to set foot here once again (*The Times*, 24 May 1994).

Alfred's victory over the Danes in 878 meant, as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1953 edition) says, that 'western Europe was saved from the danger of becoming a heathen Scandinavian power'. Clearly, Mr Major thinks of the Westminster Parliament as the result of Magna Carta, not of the Act of Union of 1707. The universities are obviously Oxford and Cambridge (actually far more Victorian than medieval.) The language, he interestingly forgets, has its roots, not in the mists of time but in a mixture of Old High German and Norman French. The behaviour of sun-bound holiday-makers in the departure lounge suggests that the spirits of his compatriots lift spectacularly as they leave the country, however glad they may be to get back. But clearly, in Mr Major's mind, in this quite affecting passage, the British nation is quintessentially English.

When James VI inherited the English throne in 1603 he wished to

be King of Great Britain. In 1649 his son was beheaded in London without anybody in Edinburgh being consulted. Throughout the seventeenth century Scotland, Ireland, and England were involved in hideous internecine conflicts. Early in the eighteenth century the parliaments of Scotland and England united. By mid-century Westminster had become the real centre of political gravity and, after Culloden, the Hanoverian dynasty was finally secure. The problem of persuading Ireland to be British remained, continuing throughout the Victorian age, reaching a certain resolution in 1922, but still on the agenda today. Setting aside Mr Major's eleven centuries of myth-history, however, we surely have to say that the creation of Britain dates from no earlier than the middle of the eighteenth century.

Vandalising a thousand years of history? Labour's devolution plans are only a matter of renegotiating a union of parliaments that dates back less than three hundred years.

At least they would be, if Labour's understanding of British history were not as wild as Mr Major's. Mr Blair is thinking of a 'subsidiary assembly' in Edinburgh. He insists that Labour's devolution bill will include 'a clear statement ... of the sovereignty of Parliament', by which of course he means the Westminster Parliament. When England and Scotland united in 1603, however, it was as sovereign powers, with a single monarch, but each with its own parliament and laws. In 1707 the two states negotiated a union of parliaments, but the Act of Union was not a cession of Scottish sovereignty. It was an international treaty between two equal sovereign states, even if one was much richer and more populous. Constitutionally, Britain has never been anything but a multinational state.

Renegotiation of the union of the parliaments may be in order. It would not be any more complicated and expensive than Labour's plans. The creation of an assembly in Edinburgh, subordinate to Westminster, with tax-raising powers or not, would, however, be an innovation with no constitutional foundation. Perhaps the Tories are more deeply committed to the myth of the essential Englishness of Britain, with its difference from the rest of Europe grounded in a mystique of the unbroken continuity of its unique traditions and institutions, from Wessex to Windsor and Westminster; but Labour's devolution plans are just as hostile to the idea of a multinational state. No wonder people in Britain find the European Union so difficult to understand.

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