

REVIEW

Has Keir Starmer healed Britain's 'fractured union'?

Scott Lavery

Michael Kenny, *Fractured Union: Politics, Sovereignty and the Fight to Save the UK*, Hurst & Company, 2024

Has Keir Starmer saved the Union? The choreography of his first speech as Prime Minister aimed to leave that impression. Labour staffers lined Downing Street with party supporters, who enthusiastically waved Saltires, the red dragon flag of Wales, as well as the customary Union Jacks. The United Kingdom is 'four nations, standing together again', Starmer proclaimed from the lectern, as he promised a decade of 'national renewal to unite our country'.¹ The message was clear: Labour's election victory ended not only fourteen years of Conservative rule but also a period of nationalist insurgency and constitutional upheaval.

Labour's electoral turnaround north of the border was remarkable. Since 2015, the Scottish National Party (SNP) had eviscerated Scottish Labour in successive elections at Westminster, simultaneously consolidating its grip on power at Holyrood. At its zenith — amidst the convulsions of Brexit and COVID — the SNP appeared as an unassailable force. Starmer's victory in Scotland, combined with the SNP's own post-Sturgeon implosion, has punctured that illusion. Across Scotland's central belt, seat after seat returned to Labour, reducing the SNP to a rump of nine MPs, from the forty-eight it won in 2019. The prospect of defeat at the 2026 Holyrood elections now looms on the horizon; a second independence referendum is, for the medium-term at least, decisively off the table.

The recent publication of Michael Kenny's book, *Fractured Union: Politics, Sovereignty and the Fight to Save the UK*, may therefore appear to have arrived at an inopportune moment. This is a time of putative unionist revival. What can a book whose focus is on the territorial disunity and possible breakup of the UK, tell us about the present moment? Quite a lot, it turns out. Kenny's central claim is that

the UK is fundamentally fractured along national and regional lines. Focussing on the Scottish independence referendum, Brexit, and COVID-19, Kenny illustrates how territorial divides sharpened over the past decade of turbulence, as conflicting conceptions of sovereignty, intra-territorial disputes, and bureaucratic dysfunction gripped the UK's constituent nations. If Starmer is serious about securing the Union's long-term future, a reckoning with the deep, structural forces that brought the UK to the precipice is necessary. Will Labour be up to the task? Kenny's excellent book provides solid grounds for tempering the optimism of even the most ardent of Downing Street flag-wavers.

The temptation when thinking about devolution is to shift our gaze to the UK's peripheral nations. But to properly understand devolutionary dynamics, Kenny persuasively argues, we need to foreground the strategic calculations of actors at the UK's political centre. Drawing on extensive interviews with Westminster politicians and Whitehall officials, Kenny demonstrates how the history of devolution has been decisively shaped by elites at the apex of the British political system. Here, the question of England dominates. As Kenny shows, Tony Blair's embrace of the devolution agenda was always tempered by his desire to 'not rile English voters'.² In the aftermath of the Scottish independence referendum, Cameron felt obliged to push for English votes on English laws under pressure from his backbenches, in what Kenny describes as an 'uncoordinated spasm of constitutional activism'.³ In 2015, the Conservatives then weaponised the idea that a Labour minority government under Miliband would be dependent on the support of Alex Salmond's SNP. As Kenny notes, 'one of the key features of the devolved Union [is] the unavoidably interconnected nature of its territorial politics'.⁴ The English question casts a long shadow.

The connections between English politics and the wider context of devolution throws into question the complacent claim that Starmer's electoral victory embodied a defeat of nationalist politics in Britain. Indeed, Starmer's landslide majority was built in part upon an *upsurge* in nationalism – specifically, a virulent form of English nationalism. Reform UK, under the leadership of Nigel Farage, secured over four million votes – the third largest vote share of any political party – and came second place in 98 constituencies, splitting the Tory vote and resulting in the loss of 80 Conservative seats. As Farage made clear during his victory speech, the demolition of the Tories was 'only the beginning', however, and that his party would now be 'coming for Labour'.⁵ A resurgent Right, embodied in Reform and whatever form the post-Sunak Conservative opposition takes, will seek to hem Starmer in on key issues, holding his feet to the fire on immigration, Europe and various culture war issues. The way Starmer responds to these pressures is of course uncertain. But what we do know is that these battles on English soil will spill-over into the devolutionary context, creating a potential space for the SNP to re-mobilise support and capitalise on disaffection.

The backlash is likely to come sooner rather than later. The Starmer-Reeves economic strategy – iron fiscal discipline, coupled with a refusal to countenance significant tax increases or expand borrowing – will compound chronic under-investment in Britain’s public services and creaking infrastructure. British capitalism is in desperate need of a re-boot, but that is unlikely to come from a Labour government with its hands tied firmly behind its back. If – when – Labour’s anaemic economic strategy fails to generate the promised growth, the fall-out will assume a distinctly territorial form, as has been the case over the past fifteen years.

As Kenny notes throughout *Fractured Union*, Westminster elites have often fallen back on a complacent attitude to the Union and devolution, a sensibility that is reflected in the ‘ingrained pragmatic unionist idiom’ that predominates in governing circles.⁶ With support for Scottish independence still at fifty per cent despite the SNP’s travails, and with Faragism on the march south of the border, Labour would do well to avail itself of the comforting illusion that the Union’s deep internal fractures have miraculously healed.

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Notes

- 1 Speech available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/crgewjwqqq40>.
- 2 Michael Kenny, *Fractured Union: Politics, Sovereignty and the Fight to Save the UK*, Hurst & Company, 2024, p46.
- 3 Ibid., p86.
- 4 Ibid., p227.
- 5 Speech available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/reform-uk-nigel-farage-mp-speech-live-b2574735.html>.
- 6 Kenny, *Fractured Union*, p202.