



COVID-19

UK Political Analysis

By Tim Hames, Senior Adviser | 23rd October 2020



Virus Victim? Will COVID-19 trigger the end of the United Kingdom?

What was left of consistency and consensus on COVID-19 within the nations of the United Kingdom and in England is close to disappearing. Wales has opted for a “fire break” akin to a softer version of a full national lockdown. Northern Ireland is in similar territory. For the moment it appears that Scotland will soon approve its own five tier variation of the three tier approach that has been set out within England but with more forceful restrictions in the hardest hit areas. A shift towards a full circuit break north of the border cannot be discounted. In England itself there has been a very bitter and public argument between the Greater Manchester region and Whitehall over the terms by which it should accept movement into the “Very High” risk category. This has at times looked like an exercise less of principle than hard haggling over additional money to offset any local increase in unemployment. Other city regions, such as Sheffield, have pursued more subtle tactics to secure their co-operation. Conservative MPs in the South West and South East of England have been enraged at the suggestion that there might need to be a national circuit break in England when the rates of infection in their regions remain very modest indeed compared to the overall figures with little sign of a surge.

All of these tensions between the four components of the country and in England itself predate the coronavirus crisis. Yet COVID-19 has brought them to the surface in a raw and sudden and almost revolutionary fashion. The virus factor and how various

politicians and political parties have handled it will surely be a significant factor in elections to be conducted in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and a series of English cities next May. Rarely has the term “the United Kingdom” had such a ragged appearance to it.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In the short-term, opinion polling suggests that Boris Johnson’s preference for a localised approach to new COVID-19 containment measures is backed by the public and fairly broadly across the four nations, regions and by party affiliation.
- The same polling, though, demonstrates that on key issues as to where political authority over the management of the virus crisis should lie there is now a stark division between Scotland and England/Wales and that within England there is a clear split in the attitudes of Conservative Party and Labour Party supporters.
- It is highly likely that the SNP will win an outright majority in the elections for the Scottish Parliament due in May and will do so on a manifesto dominated by an explicit pledge to hold a second independence referendum. While the initial response in Whitehall will be to reject such a ballot this may not be sustainable.
- The coronavirus crisis is less significant than Brexit in enhancing sentiment in favour of a border poll on Irish reunification. Unlike Scotland, such a plebiscite in the short-term is very unlikely. What is more probable is a longer-term process in which Northern Ireland becomes progressively more distant from the rest of the UK in economic, political and cultural terms before reunification is considered.
- Welsh nationalism has not been fuelled by either Brexit or the COVID-19 crisis but a set of local factors mean that there will be continued pressure from Cardiff to acquire additional devolved authority of the form currently found in Scotland.
- English local government has endured fifty years of successive reforms yet is arguably in a more incoherent state today than at any point in that time. There is no solution to the situation which is likely to command cross-party consent.
- Despite the notorious reluctance of the British (especially the English) to accept the need for a formal constitutional settlement, this may become unavoidable. It would be most likely to occur if the Conservatives were to lose a Westminster general election and be replaced by a Labour-led government during this decade.

The impact of the virus on public administration in the UK.

The coronavirus crisis has had many unanticipated effects on British life and that now includes the integrity of the United Kingdom as a political unit. The country had, albeit in a characteristically piecemeal fashion, moved away from being a largely unitary state to one with different formulations of devolution in different nations (mostly at the behest of the Blair Government) and most recently had also experimented with a limited delegation of authority within England to elected mayors in major city regions (an innovation most associated with David Cameron and especially George Osborne).

Although lacking the formal framework of federalism which is the hallmark of a number of other larger European nations (notably Germany), this division of political spoils was acceptable in Whitehall because the central government retained control of what have historically been thought of as akin to “Premier League” issues such as the economy and taxation, foreign policy and national security, while the devolved administrations and to a lesser degree English city regions focused on “Championship League” matters such as the administration of public health, schools, and aspects of transportation. In most circumstances, therefore, despite devolution, Whitehall very largely called the shots.

The virus crisis has completely upended this informal structure and relationship. It has transformed the administration of public health, schools and aspects of transportation almost overnight into “Premier League” issues with Whitehall largely without direct influence over how policy was conducted outside of England yet with the financial burden of engaging in enormous spending and borrowing across the entire UK.

Thus in many respects the man titled the Prime Minister of the UK has discovered that he is, in effect, on the most seismic issue to have emerged in 75 years, actually merely the Prime Minister of England alone, while his neighbour in 11 Downing Street is the Chancellor of the United Kingdom but is constrained by convention (not least the Barnett Formula) as to how much he can use money to control virus crisis policy outside of England. This was illustrated again yesterday in his latest statement in Parliament on financial support for businesses and employees. Thus the major disputes over financial resources that have occurred have been between Whitehall and other areas within England and not, for the most part, between London and the other nations of the UK.

What does the electorate currently think of all this?

A recent YouGov poll illustrates the national mood very neatly. On the immediate issue of whether there should be a local approach towards virus containment within each of the component nations of the UK there is, for now, broad agreement that there should be. England favours a local approach by 62%-29%, Scotland by a not dissimilar 65%-23% and Wales by a narrower 53%-35% margin (which suggests the Fire Break that is coming there might be a politically risky exercise). Within England, all regions also backed a local approach, although approval ranged from 69% in the South (excluding London) to 52% in the North. Conservatives backed the proposition most forcefully (71%-24%) but there was very respectable support from Labour voters as well (61%-35%) which might well encourage the Prime Minister to stick to his guns on localism and more forcefully resist the arguments for a two-to-three week England-wide circuit break floated by Labour.

Dig a little deeper, however, and this apparent unanimity starts to disappear swiftly. On the overall question of whether the devolved administrations or the UK Government should be in the lead on virus containment policy, England backs the autonomy of the devolved administrations by 53%-38% and Wales by 54%-34% but Scotland is much more unambiguous in its instincts with a 71%-20% in favour of rule by Edinburgh. Within England, Conservative adherents would actually prefer the UK Government to be able to overrule the devolved administrations (51%-44%) whereas it is Labour supporters (by a much wider 68%-27%) who provide the overall victory for the devolved administrations. Attitudes towards devolution are plainly acquiring a distinctively partisan aspect to them.

This is reinforced when the same survey asked whether any devolved administration should be able to reintroduce a full lockdown in its jurisdiction without the assent of the UK Government. England was almost evenly split (46% Yes, 44% No). Wales a little less divided (47% Yes, 41% No). Scotland, by contrast, was clearer (63% Yes, 27% No). Once again, within England, party affiliation was a sizeable factor. Conservatives believed the permission of the UK Government should be required (by 54% to 38%), whereas those who would cast a vote for Keir Starmer and Labour were the reverse (by 58% to 38%).

This is but part of a weight of polling data which suggests that Scotland (and for its own reasons Northern Ireland) now thinks very differently to England/Wales as to where

political power should reside and that within England there is now a party-based divide (although the lines of causality might well be more complex than it appears, those with a strong sense of national or English identity may be realigning towards the Conservatives while middle class formerly Remain Conservative voters with more sympathy for a semi-federal United Kingdom and England may be shifting in the other direction to Labour). This existed in outline before the virus crisis struck but seems to have become firmer.

Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England after the coronavirus crisis.

The dual impact of the aftermath of the virus crisis and (to a less predictable extent) Brexit mean that the current UK constitutional settlement is likely to be placed under very considerable strain in the decade ahead and will be extremely fortunate if it looks the same in 2030 as it does in 2020. Different parts of the UK will move differently on this.

Scotland – the short fuse.

Scotland is by far the first and most important probable flashpoint. A year ago, the SNP was not in the best of spirits. It expected to win more seats in the Westminster election that in October 2019 looked imminent (indeed it exceeded its own expectations in that regard) but the party leadership was haunted by what the trial of former First Minister Alex Salmond due in March 2020 might reveal, it was badly split on whether it should or should not enter the May 2021 election to the Scottish Parliament on an outright pledge to hold another independence referendum and there were even whispers that Nicola Sturgeon might, either by choice or because her hand was forced, stand down in 2020. The party still had plenty of support but it appeared to be enduring a crisis of purpose.

The virus crisis has had a transformative impact on Scottish politics. Its early stages served to overshadow the Alex Salmond trial (which, in any case, concluded with his acquittal, which has certainly had internal ramifications for the SNP high command but not on the scale of their worst fears if he had been found guilty). From the beginning, having found herself with an issue (public health) over which she had virtually complete political authority, the First Minister has presented herself as if the Prime Minister of Scotland and has taken a distinctive course in how to respond to the crisis (which has

invariably involved a willingness to take more forceful measures to suppress the virus and earlier) and with a void in alternatives to her leadership has appealed to voters.

By accident or design, events over the past several months in Edinburgh have served to act as a form of dress rehearsal for what an independent Scotland might look like under SNP leadership. This has undoubtedly moved the polling numbers in the direction of the SNP for the Parliament election next year with a similar shift towards independence. The Scottish Conservatives, Scottish Labour and Scottish Liberal Democrats are all in various degrees of disarray and uncertain as to how to respond to the First Minister's approach. It is possible that some startling new revelation as to what Ms Sturgeon knew when on what was being said about her predecessor might have a fatal impact on her political standing but that seems improbable and in any case a successor could distance themselves from the activities of an older generation within the SNP come the May 2021 election.

The reasonable assumption, therefore, is that the SNP will win an outright majority of seats in May and could even win a majority of votes cast and it will do so on an explicit manifesto pledge to hold a further referendum on independence. What is less certain is how forceful (if at all) the party will be in suggesting that a post-independence Scotland would reapply for membership of the European Union under the provisions of Article 49 of the Treaty of Lisbon. Such a stance would have the advantage of providing additional reassurance to those sympathetic to independence in theory but concerned about its economic implications in practice, but come at the price that not only would there be a prolonged period of negotiation and transition as to how Scotland exits the UK (the estimate at the last referendum in 2014 was that this would take eighteen months) but what the future trading relationship would be if Scotland were to return to the EU. The potential political and economic instability that all of this would involve is self-evident.

The SNP does not have the unilateral capacity to demand an independence referendum. The first response in London would be to resist the call. Whether that is a viable stance is extremely doubtful. There would be clashes in the courts (which might produce different results in England and Scotland), the SNP could opt to conduct an advisory or an informal ballot to demonstrate their support, even a referendum on a referendum (as mad as that might sound) might enter the equation. The best that the Conservative Government may

do is seek to delay such a plebiscite until 2023 in the hope that the virus factor may wane and that the SNP bubble (the party has held power since 2007) might finally burst and fears about the effects of Brexit on the Scottish economy will prove to be exaggerated. The UK PM might also insist that any referendum was a choice between independence and a package of even further devolution which might be enough to satisfy Scotland. None of the above is a prospect for which anyone in Whitehall would have remotest enthusiasm but the virus crisis has made it a more realistic possibility now than it was when the first victim of COVID-19 was struck down far away in Wuhan, China.

Northern Ireland – the slow burn.

Predictions of another ballot on independence in Scotland often come coupled with the argument that a border poll on Irish reunification would not arrive far behind it. This is, in the short-term, likely to be a misplaced analysis. The two nations diverge in this area.

For a start, few in Northern Ireland (or the Republic) are actually calling for such a ballot. Sinn Féin admittedly do so on a regular basis but there is an element of ritual to that. It is far from clear that there would be a majority for abandoning the UK if one was held. It is close to inconceivable, allowing for the nature of the political arrangements in Northern Ireland which essentially force the largest political party from each of the two traditional communities to govern in co-operation with each other, that a referendum could be held in this decade unless the Democratic Unionist Party wanted it (which seems improbable). Given the history of politically-inspired violence in the Province, any government sitting in Dublin would be wise to be wary about reunification after a close vote in favour of it. Even those with a strong emotional attachment to a 32-county country would prefer to play a longer game in the hope and belief of maximising agreement for such a solution.

All of which makes Northern Ireland less of a short-fuse than a slow-burn. For much of the last two decades there has been a shift towards more of an all-Ireland economy but with the pace of that movement dependent on sectors. There has been a cultural change as younger Protestants and Catholics alike (particularly from middle class backgrounds) have moved away from the sectarian moorings of their parents (which is now coming through in elections in Northern Ireland in increased support for the secular and Liberal Alliance Party). This process will, nevertheless, take decades to complete as the terrible

legacy of The Troubles eventually makes its way out of contemporary politics in Northern Ireland much as it took the Republic some sixty years to shake off its own civil war.

Ulster will stay part of the UK until that point but a more distant one as time evolves. It is unlikely to provide the immediate drama that a clash between Scotland and London will.

Wales – steady state.

It has been a striking feature of UK politics that the nationalist surge in Scotland has not really been repeated with any scale and consistency in Wales. This comparative lack of success for Plaid Cymru as an electoral force does not mean that devolution in Wales has changed little since the country (very narrowly) backed a National Assembly in 1997.

What was previously an extremely limited exercise in self-government has steadily been extended via a Government of Wales Act 2006, a referendum on accepting additional powers in 2011, followed by a Wales Act 2014, then another Wales Act in 2017. Earlier this year, almost completely unnoticed in London, the English version of the title of the legislature in Cardiff changed from the “Welsh Assembly” to the “Welsh Parliament”.

The real political shift in Wales has been away from the absolute dominance of the Labour Party there to a more competitive situation where the Conservatives may be strong enough to deny Labour and its allies an outright majority in the elections in May. The policy divide is between Labour’s willingness to seek additional devolved powers with those of Scotland as they exist today something of an unstated model (with Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats as de facto allies on this front) versus those led by the Conservatives who are cooler on this concept. The willingness of Mark Drakeford, as Welsh Labour leader, to act as a Sturgeon-lite during the virus crisis has more to do with positioning himself and his party for the 2021 election than any ambition to quit the UK.

England – the unanswered question.

The brutal truth is that ever since Scotland and Wales acquired devolved legislatures more than twenty years ago, what to do about political representation in England has been not merely the unanswered question but one that is often too awkward to ask. An English Parliament has been mused by some but how it would be distinguished from a UK Parliament where more than 80% of MPs come from England is perplexing. The

notion of regional assemblies as a semi-federal solution has also been explored but England has few natural regions and creating them would throw together large cities and surrounding more rural areas whose interests might not coincide. Besides which, on the one occasion when a section of the public (North East England) was consulted on this idea (in 2004) it was rejected by a massive margin. The appetite for revisiting it is slight.

What has emerged in its place is a very complicated patchwork of arrangements. There is a relatively powerful Mayor of London operating alongside a bespoke Greater London Assembly. There are less influential directly elected Mayors for a number of city regions (but by no means all of the largest cities). There are a sizeable number of (usually urban) single-tier unitary authorities. There are county councils which cover the whole of the county concerned and other hybrids where there is a county council that holds sway over some but not all of the county because there are other unitary authorities too.

This is far from ideal but the extent to which it is almost incomprehensible has been thrown into sharp relief during the past few weeks. Some city regions have been willing to enter the “Very High” tier if the financial incentives were right, others have held out. Essex County Council volunteered to be raised from “medium” to “high” status but the two unitary authorities in Essex but not under Essex County Council (covering Thurrock and Southend) did not wish to shift so remain within the “medium” classification. The number of voters who could correctly identify what City Regions, unitary authorities, county councils and district councils actually do must be absolutely miniscule. Yet despite the fact that the arguments over boundaries, powers and finance have been visited and revisited almost endlessly since at least 1970, it will probably be the case that another attempt at answering the English question will be made after the virus crisis.

A UK or post-UK Constitution?

The United Kingdom is one of precisely three countries in the world which does not have a single formal Constitution. The others, which are Israel and New Zealand, both come closer to one than we do through (for Israel) the Basic Law of 1950 and (in New Zealand) a Bill of Rights 1986 respectively. Despite the long-standing reluctance of political elites in the UK (both Conservative and Labour), the incoherence of current arrangements that have been highlighted by, of all items, an imported virus may force it to be considered.

This could occur as part of an attempt to retain Scotland in the United Kingdom or to work out how the United Kingdom would operate without Scotland in its realm. It may well incorporate other outstanding issues such as what the House of Lords or a future second chamber of Parliament should seek to do and what authority it might have. It would need to find some means of dealing with England. It appears increasingly likely that the Labour Party under Sir Keir Starmer would be prepared to promise to take this on if it should secure a majority at the next UK General Election (whether it would be fought with Scotland still having any seats at Westminster is an open question). The Conservatives may find themselves of necessity having to wrestle with the dilemma. It is not one about which they had offered much thought on as short a time ago as March.

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