The politics of English nostalgia

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The smugness of some Irish commentary on Brexit is ill-advised, writes Maurice Earls. Brexit is not an aberration but the expression of a deep-rooted cultural attitude – one that won't simply disappear under the wheel of progress. Failure to grasp this could prove dangerous for the European Union.

Current English travails, and the prominence of Irish matters in the same, have given rise to something approaching smugness in some Irish commentary. There is a hint of self-righteousness in the great Irish willingness to describe the many errors the English are committing.

Once upon a time, actually more than once, hardcore support from the continent – cavalry, swords, cannon and suchlike – was much hoped for, indeed prayed for in Ireland. It was believed that such help would assist us in our dealings with the other island, that it would help balance things a bit. But, as we know, the outcome was always the same; they just didn’t turn up. In school the teachers blamed the weather, which many found a convincing explanation.

But that was then. Now it’s different. The EU battalions have arrived and their generals keep going on about how important we are. The English media are hanging on Leo’s every word. “Up the EU” is the mood up and down the country. But if we persist in depicting the English who wish to leave the EU as irrational idiots, prisoners of their history, bent on self-harm etc etc, we may fail to get our heads around the scale and nature of the English crisis and, as a result, possibly, fail to recognise the dangers that exist for us and for the EU in finalising Brexit.

It is worth remembering that the reductive language used to describe the Brexit people is similar to the language the English reached for, for the best part of a millennium, when describing the Irish. They never took the trouble to see beyond stock phrases and, from time to time, it has cost them dear. Incredibly, many in London believed the Irish, out of a feeling of subservient kinship, would support them and join them in quitting the EU. The idea beggars belief. Of course they, and the country in general, have been on a steep learning curve since, one sign being the regular use of the once rare term Taoiseach in English media reports.

It could be said that unless we climb down from our pulpits, we will not arrive at a proper
understanding of what is going on in England. And it is England that matters. Scotland, Wales and the other bits will undoubtedly be affected by the outcome but they are not involved in the core struggle, which is taking place in England. The fringe peoples are not even in the room. This has always been the case. It is why we got out. We don’t have an objection to unions per se.

For Ireland the post-Brexit strategic consideration is that the English are not going away. They will remain a wealthy, populous land mass to our immediate east with whom we will have all sorts of dealings, cultural and economic, in the future. Many long centuries of contact have left numerous links, the language spoken in Ireland being just one. A political decision cannot eliminate these links or the facts of geography. It is better for Ireland and the EU if future dealings are based on a clear understanding of English political and historical culture.

It is, therefore, worth taking the trouble to understand the greatest crisis that has beset the English since the seventeenth century and to realise that it is likely to define English culture and politics for quite some time. To dismiss it all as idiocy is itself a form of idiocy. There is historical substance in the thing.

First let us look briefly at the toffs: the intellectual, the patriotic and the opportunist. Sir John Redwood [a Conservative MP – ed.] is in the patriotic intellectual cohort. Opposed to any dilution of England’s ancient sovereignty, he recently quoted from a 1533 act of parliament.

... by divers sundry old authentic histories and chronicles it is manifestly declared and expressed that this realm of England is an empire, and so hath been accepted in the world.

Ferdinand Mount says that some from the same camp believe Redwood could also have referenced the 1559 Act of Supremacy, which states that

no foreign prince, person, prelate state or potentate hath or ought to have any jurisdiction, power, superiority, pre-eminence or authority ecclesiastical or spiritual within this realm.

What can be learned from Redwood’s, not at all rare, attachment to this dusty old stuff is that the historical character taken by English autonomy is near absolute and continues to have its admirers. It also suggests that the idea of English exceptionalism and superiority remain real forces in English life. Redwood speaks for many among the advocates of Brexit. For this sizable swathe of English society, the cultural trumps the economic. They are not moved by predictions of economic contraction. They would gladly see a poorer England so long as it enjoyed its traditional undiluted sovereignty. Disliking the idea of diluting sovereignty is a natural conservative impulse in England.

In Ireland it is different. The struggle for autonomy here saw a constant casting about for allies. Membership of the EU is entirely in keeping with the historical form our quest for autonomy took.
The tradition of radical sovereignty which people like Redwood defend has a resonance across English society. The much derided older Brexit voters hold that tradition dear. Working class communities, disrupted by decades of assault from powerful Conservative and Labour market ideologues, find it is something real they can turn to, something which sustains their fragile identity. Opportunist populists, like Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage recognise it is a drum beat which will attract an audience.

These elements in English society comprise one side of a fundamental division. They will continue to press their case into the future. If it was the seventeenth century they would be reaching for their brass-hilted swords. The absence of organised violence should not distract from the fact that the constitutional issues involved are as profound as those of the seventeenth century. Indeed, in the absence of a military option, the division is likely to run longer.

The radical left, of both Trotskyist and Soviet hues, which have had a long and minor presence in English politics, are largely irrelevant, apart, of course, from the phenomenon of Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party. There is much which could be said about Corbyn’s rise but in relation to the constitutional question dividing the country, it is straightforward; it is highly unlikely he will be allowed to ignore the fervent pro-EU views of those responsible for his ascent.

That huge swathe of young people broadly in the Labour and social democratic tradition, passionate advocates of economic justice and social equality, are pro-Europe. Those who chose Jeremy Corbyn to lead a post-Blair Labour Party, one that would reject the discredited politics of New Labour, do not accept the old leftist depiction of the EU as a “capitalist club”. The urban and educated young, whether left or otherwise, are massively pro-EU. Together with older elements from Labour, the Conservatives, the Liberals and the Greens, elements who are happy to share sovereignty in a larger democracy, they constitute a force which is not going to go away. Whatever the short-term outcome, this side will constitute one of the great blocs in the political and cultural civil war which is under way in England.

The crucial thing about this division is that it is not minor; it is fundamental. So, sitting down and being reasonable and seeing the other chap’s point of view simply won’t deliver a “sensible compromise”. England is set to tear itself apart over this. Ireland and other neighbouring countries will have to negotiate this troubled landscape.

But the negotiation of the English political landscape is not only a matter for the future. It is necessary immediately. The point is that the anti-EU element are not going to disappear under the wheel of progress; they will persist for a long time, possibly a very long time.

And that element is poisonous to the EU project. Even if a second referendum were to yield a majority for remaining, that poison would remain in English culture and it would seep into EU political life. The EU needs to see the UK out of the Union, and the sooner the better.

The long extension just granted is possibly the first serious mis-step on the part of the EU states. It is unfortunate that Macron was not heeded.