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Speaking for ‘our precious Union’: unionist claims in the time of Brexit, 2016–20

Daniel Cetrà ^a and Coree Brown Swan ^b

ABSTRACT

Brexit and its implications pose the latest challenge to the Union as a political project and to unionism as the doctrine of state legitimacy. How did key unionist actors articulate the legitimizing foundations of the Union in the critical period 2016–20? And to what extent did they set out a renewed case for its continuation? Drawing on an extensive database including parliamentary debates, party documents and conference notes, we find that, despite the profound nature of the challenges posed by Brexit, dominant legitimizing claims continued to be instrumentalist defences of the Union rooted in economics and welfare. These were underpinned by ideas of social union around shared solidarity and belonging and supplemented by an invocation of common British values. Overall, while we identify a plurality of competing and often conflicting unionist themes, we conclude that key unionist actors struggled to adapt the legitimizing foundations of their political project to the realities of a post-Brexit UK.

KEYWORDS

Union; unionism; nationalism; Scottish independence; Brexit; UK

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INTRODUCTION

‘We know what we are against, separation and independence, but we know less what we are for.’ With these words, Henry Hill, Assistant Editor of *Conservative Home*, summed up a core challenge facing contemporary unionism in the UK. Hill made his remark in the public event ‘These Islands: Our Past, Present, and Future’ (Newcastle, February 2020), itself an epitome of unionism’s moment of reckoning prompted by the territorial consequences of Brexit. The Scottish government’s demands for a second independence referendum, the growing calls to hold a ‘border poll’ on reunification in Ireland, and the conflictual relations between the UK government and its Welsh and Scottish counterparts over the repatriation of European Union (EU) competences and the consent of the devolved legislatures to the Internal Market Bill are testament to the strains under which the Union has been placed. These pressures fostered attempts to rethink and strengthen the Union as a political project and unionism as the ideology in defence of holding together the UK. Unionist voices showed awareness that ‘classical’ unionist justifications no longer

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compel and expressed urgency to supply a 'positive alternative to nationalism' (Brown, 2020a). But how exactly did unionists articulate the legitimizing foundations of the Union in this critical period (2016–20)? And to what extent did they set out a renewed case for its continuation?

While the other contributions to this special issue focus on the individual nations of the UK and specific aspects of policy, in this article we seek to offer a panoramic view of dominant justificatory unionist themes during the political moment of Brexit, which represents the latest pressure to doctrines of unionism after devolution and the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. Drawing on an extensive database including parliamentary debates, party documents and conference notes, we examine the legitimizing claims of mainstream parties' leading figures and, to a lesser extent, civil society actors actively shaping the public discussion about the present and future of the Union. Our ultimate goal is to assess change, establishing whether and how justifications for the Union as presented in public discourse have varied and adapted to the new circumstances. While political actors have relatively stable views on the state's *raison d'être* (what the state is for and what it represents), periods of constitutional change and peaks in territorial disputes may lead to shifts.

Our main finding is that, despite the profound nature of the challenges posed by Brexit, dominant legitimizing claims continued to be instrumentalist defences of union rooted in economics and welfare. Instrumentalist claims were underpinned by notions of social union and invocations of the history of the UK to suggest common belonging and an enduring legacy, although history was largely restricted to developments following the Second World War. Chief among these is the *National Health Service* (NHS), readapted as a symbol of unity and evidence of the UK's 'broad shoulders' amidst the coronavirus crisis, despite the existence of four distinct services. The continued emphasis on instrumental justifications begs the question of what may sustain the Union when it does not deliver desired political and economic outcomes. This is especially relevant for unionist arguments built from the left of the political spectrum in light of successive Conservative governments at the centre, while progressive governments in Wales and Scotland show that desired policy goals may be realized at lower levels. The economic case, grounded on large home markets and economies of scale, has also become more difficult for unionist supporters of Brexit, which reduced the internal market. In addition to economics and welfare, a third key theme points at the Union as the embodiment of universal values (repackaged as British values) around democracy and pluralism, in contrast to 'divisive' and 'exclusionary' (sub-state) nationalism, with the case for the Union being mostly reactive to Scottish independence. Overall, while we identify a plurality of competing and often conflicting legitimizing unionist themes, we conclude that prevalent unionist actors struggled to reforge the legitimizing foundations of their political project in novel ways in the period 2016–20.

This article is structured as follows. The next section sets out a conceptual framework in which we characterize unionism as a peculiar form of state nationalism that is recently searching for more uniform normative defences of the Union. The third section briefly presents our research design, while the fourth section constitutes our empirical analysis. We focus on the three main legitimizing themes (economy, welfare and social union, values), each of which is contextualized and embedded in the extant literature. In the conclusion, we reflect on the implications of our findings for the direct of travel of UK unionism and its implications for the holding together of the state.

UNIONISM

Conceptualizing unionism and union

We see unionism as the particular form that state nationalism has come to be adopted in the UK, albeit a peculiar one for two main reasons. The first is national recognition, which sets UK unionists apart from prevailing state nationalists in other pluri-national states such as Spain and

Canada, who deny it because they believe that that would entail the right to self-determination. In fact, the term ‘unionism’ captures a recognition of ‘national diversity under unitary authority’ (Keating, 2009, p. 368). There is at the same time a sense of common allegiance across the Union, but one that is not necessarily dependent on a single, one-and-indivisible, imagined community (Aughey, 2018). Perhaps significantly, the name of the state – the UK – has not generated a label for a state-wide identity: we do not talk of ‘UKanians’ (Nairn, 1988). The second peculiarity of unionism is that typically (and paradoxically) it was not unitary, but a plurality of ideas and (especially) practices adapted to the different parts of the state (Keating, 2021).

What this plurality of ideas and practices has in common is the defence of the holding together of the Union, a type of political entity that, *in principle*, links people, territory, and polity in loose and flexible ways (Todd, 2020). This allows for the recognition of a multiplicity of peoples and the development of a state that may be not entirely integrated. Unionism then defends a particular balance between diversity and integration, and unity as shaped by interaction, mutual engagement, and commitment and reciprocity, not *necessarily* by shared affection and belonging. In the UK, the presence of this type of political entity reflects of course the process of state creation, in which the amalgamation of previously separate entities through successive unions of different nature did not entail the assimilation of its constituent elements. While the union of England and that of England and Wales conformed more to the unitary state model of state formation, the ‘incorporation’ of Scotland created a union state (Mitchell, 2009), one which protected local institutions that would be focuses for Scottish patriotism while being able to retain participation in the Union (Morton, 1999). In fact, the ‘incompleteness’ of the Union in Scotland has been credited for its success and survival (McLean & McMillan, 2005). Later, the union with Ireland would also follow the union state mode, although it was a less complete union and one whose politics were inseparably linked with Catholic emancipation, land reform and famine (Mitchell, 2009). In the Irish case, the incompleteness of the Union ultimately militated against its survival (Jackson, 2020).

In turn, this process of state formation has given rise to different conceptions of the Union, some of which are less flexible than its ideal characterization. Indeed, there is a unitary state view that presents England as its core¹ and projects its status as the Union’s largest component into the UK as a whole. At the heart of this conception lay the notion that Parliament at Westminster is sovereign and no other body could be contemplated which might undermine or threaten that sovereignty. In a shift from hitherto dominant views within the Conservative and Unionist Party, under Margaret Thatcher (1979–90) the party adopted this view, suggesting that Scottish independence was preferable to devolution because independence would leave parliamentary sovereignty untouched (Mitchell, 1996). Later, this idea led upholders of parliamentary sovereignty to oppose both devolution in Scotland and Wales and European integration (Keating, 2021). More recently, the central Brexiter promise to ‘take back control’, understood to mean restoring national sovereignty, was initially interpreted as returning sovereignty to the UK Parliament. This unitary view coexists with that of the UK as a union state,² which is more pluralist in that it not only recognizes but celebrates, at least symbolically, the idea of the different nations within the UK. The union state strand is pluralistic but centralized: it grants territorial accommodation through administrative but not political devolution, for Parliament may delegate responsibility but not authority, a similarity with the unitary strand. For most of the 20th century, the Conservatives were the party of the union state, criticizing others for viewing it as a unitary state.³

Adapting unionism and union

In most countries, explicit debates on the purpose of the state arise particularly during critical junctures, for example, periods of constitutional change and peaks in territorial disputes. These may lead to shifts in political actors’ views on what the state *is* and what it is *for*, prompted by the urgency to make their ideology congruent with the new institutional architecture of the state and/or by

challengers in the form of sub-state movements and electoral competitors (Cetrà & Swenden, 2021). We see Brexit as the latest in a succession of constitutional and territorial moments urging unionist rethinking, with the two most recent being devolution and the 2014 Scottish independence referendum.

Indeed, unionism, which had in the past defined itself in opposition to devolution, now has to incorporate it in its defence of the UK political project while arguing against separation (Keating, 2021). This has given rise to the conception of the Union as a devolved state, one that accepts the establishment of devolved institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. As it is often the case with sub-state nationalist demands for constitutional change (Lecours, 2012), a crucial driver in Scotland was the perception that the government at the centre lacked legitimacy and failed to take adequate account of Scottish preferences. Devolution addressed this 'democratic deficit' and unsettled (though not replaced) conceptions of the Union characterized by the concentration of sovereignty in 'the Crown in Parliament'. This process of ideological adaptation has been particularly visible in the case of Scottish unionism. It defined itself during the 20th century by opposition to Irish and later Scottish home rule, with Scottish unionists recognizing the national character of Scotland but arguing against political autonomy (Morton, 1999; Torrance, 2020). However, since devolution, Scottish unionism is defined against Scottish independence, particularly since 2007 when the Scottish National Party (SNP) entered government at Holyrood and independence emerged as a primary issue on the political agenda.

The post-devolution UK state lacked a clear normative underpinning, with manifest difficulties in articulating what the state is for and how the new governing arrangements could strengthen state-wide purposes and solidarities (Jeffery & Wincott, 2006). In response to this perceived need, we have witnessed in recent times a process of unionist adaptation that consists in the search for a more uniform and consistent defence of the Union, based on consistent principles that would apply across all unions. This has included efforts to reinvent 'Britishness' and 'British values' in the face of pressures from multiculturalism and sub-state nationalism, with Labour arguing in its 2007 Green Paper *The Governance of Britain* that 'there is room to celebrate multiple and different identities, but none of these identities should take precedence over the core democratic values that define what it means to be British', which is a national identity 'founded in the values we hold in common' (Labour, 2007, p. 57). Some scholars consider the quest for a cohesive narrative of Britishness and the Union fundamentally misjudged because it abandons 'the British way' rooted in multiple and sometimes discordant and understated strands (Keating, 2021). Aughey (2018) is exceptional among contemporary unionist thinkers in seeing the dangers of the more recent 'high unionist' rhetoric, proposing a case for the Union built upon contractualism, solidarity and allegiance to institutions.

The 2014 Scottish independence referendum represented a catalyst for these ongoing efforts to articulate an explicit case for the continuation of the Union, prompted by the possibility of state fragmentation. The unionist campaign was built upon instrumental arguments, most notably about economics and currency, but also about public policy, EU membership, defence and foreign policy. Former Chancellor and head of the 2014 Better Together campaign Alistair Darling put the case bluntly: 'Because whether you like it or not, for a large number of people in Scotland, it is increasingly the case that it is a utilitarian relationship within the United Kingdom, rather than "We're British and we're never going to have to change"' (Darling, 2018). These instrumental claims were underpinned by emotive elements revolving around notions of social union, including shared identities and historical and familial ties (Keating & McEwen, 2017). When forced to explicate their project, active unionist voices emphasized the risks of separation but struggled to make a positive case for staying together (Brown Swan & Cetrà, 2020), which is a common characteristic of state nationalism facing secessionist agendas across contexts, given that independence supporters are always the first claimants and put defenders of the Union on the defensive.⁴

While the 2014 proposition was defeated, the issue of the future of the Union remained and remerged with Brexit, which reignited the already smouldering debate over Scottish independence, but crucially, sparked a broader concern that the Union was in peril. This perceived urgency has accelerated the search for a uniform case for the Union and has resulted in the proliferation of initiatives including the Ministry for the Union, the Act of Union proposal, parliamentary sessions on Strengthening the Union, and the official review led by former minister Lord Dunlop into how the Union is understood and promoted within central government. Upon entering Number 10, Boris Johnson pledged to make economic investments which would strengthen the Union and to ensure that the UK government got credit for its efforts, telling a Conservative audience in Scotland: 'We will make sure – with every policy we pursue, with every investment we make in Scotland, that we put a Union flag on it' (cited in Musson, 2019).

Having presented our understanding of unionism, in the next sections we examine how this quest for a normative underpinning of the Union has been articulated and adapted to Brexit in public discourse.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to capture and analyse unionist claims, we created a database of speeches by leaders and key party figures, parliamentary debates, manifestos, and other policy documents. We gathered contributions which were made between 2016 and 2020, a period of intense constitutional debate and electoral activity, with the Brexit vote in June 2016 reigniting the debate over Scottish independence, as well as bringing to the fore questions over the status of Northern Ireland within the Union. We focused primarily on mainstream political parties represented at Westminster – the Conservative and Unionist Party, Labour, Liberal Democrats, and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

We began our analysis with parliamentary debates, but, having noted a generally low level of detailed engagement with issues of Union, in itself one of our findings, we broadened our search to examine specific unionist speeches and commentary by those affiliated with a party but outside the parliamentary context. In the absence of a specific or official campaign, we noted remarkable variation *between* the political parties in their engagement with unionist themes, which made it difficult in some cases to identify with great certainty variation *within* parties. Our second search included opinion pieces in major newspapers, participation in civil society events and notable speeches. The final database, numbering more than 80 discrete documents, was analysed in detail and unionist claims were extracted for further analysis. We defined unionist claims minimally as statements supportive of the holding together of the UK. These were classified according to political party and core message. Within these, three key areas were identified: the economic case, the welfare and social union, and ('British') values versus those of (sub-state) nationalism. The aim was to provide a parsimonious framework to examine unionist claims in the moment of Brexit (2016–20), one that inevitably misses out detail but captures the main justificatory themes supplied by vocal unionist actors.

'OUR PRECIOUS UNION': THREE LEGITIMIZING THEMES

In the period 2016–20, vocal unionist actors most commonly invoked three justifications for union which, while different, are mutually reinforcing and often overlap in discourse. The first two are largely instrumental, suggesting that the Union should be maintained due to its economic benefits and because of the value of the welfare state, underpinned in turn by notions of social union. We also identify a more value-driven argument for the Union focused on 'British values'. The first two contrast the virtues of the Union with the risks of independence, while the latter contrasts the Union with sub-state nationalism (Table 1).

Table 1. Three dominant legitimizing claims for the Union in the period 2016–20.

Themes	Types of argument	Illustrative examples
The economic union <i>The economic benefits of remaining within the Union and the economic risks of independence</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Static</i> (Conservatives, DUP): assertive about the UK's economic strength • <i>Dynamic</i> (Labour): stressing the need for renewal and reform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'The broad shoulders of the world's fifth largest economy allowed the whole of the UK to weather the storm of the global financial crisis a decade ago' (May, 2019) • 'It is clearer now than ever that the real choice is either more cuts and division with the Tories and SNP, or hope and investment under Labour' (Leonard cited in the Scotsman, 2019)
The welfare and social union <i>The historical and contemporary influence of key institutions (NHS and welfare state), underpinned by a broader ethos of solidarity and shared belonging</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Dynamic</i> (Labour): calls for renewal as part of a programme of welfare expansion. Underpinned by the notion of social union as social citizenship • <i>Static</i> (Conservatives, DUP): an emphasis on historical establishment. Underpinned by the notion of social union as a family metaphor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Rediscovering the value of empathy and solidarity between nations and regions and demonstrating the benefits that can flow from co-operation and sharing in pursuit of important causes' (Brown, 2020a) • 'At its heart is the principle of solidarity. ... That we have a common stake in each other's success. That the happiness of someone in Belfast is the care and concern of someone in Bolton or Brecon or Bridge of Allan' (May, 2019)
United by British values <i>The UK state as repository of higher values shaping an accommodating British identity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'British values' identified with those of democracy, tolerance, pluralism and rule of law • Sub-state nationalism characterized as inward-looking and less pluralistic, contrasted with the openness of state patriotism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A 'unifying Britishness that was inclusive, outward-looking, tolerant and ultimately pragmatic' (Brown, 2019) • 'Patriotism does not force us to rank these identities in order, as if one or another had a higher claim' (Davidson, 2017)

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Alongside our central question of *how* the Union was justified, there is the pertinent matter of *who* shaped and took part in the debate. The Conservative and Unionist Party, as a party of government which positions itself as the defender of the Union, spoke frequently about its importance, with both Theresa May and Johnson showing a tendency to declare and demonstrate

fidelity to the Union. Labour, particularly under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, left former leaders Tony Blair and Gordon Brown to step into the breach. The Liberal Democrats were less engaged with the issue beyond registering their objection to Scottish independence, perhaps due to low levels of representation in the devolved nations as well as their more marginal influence at Westminster post-2015. The DUP approached the issue of Union from a particularly Northern Irish perspective, characterized by defensiveness and insecurity in the face of ‘mainland’ British ambivalence (Murphy & Evershed, 2020). Unionist politicians were joined by the media and civil society organizations in engaging with themes of Unionism, including the contributions of unionist journalist John Lloyd, who in 2020 published a monograph setting out the case against Scottish independence, and organizations such as These Islands, as well as various social media campaigns (Lloyd, 2020).

The economic union

The most common argument focused on the economic benefits of the Union, the Union as a guarantor of economic security and prosperity. This is reminiscent of historical legitimizing themes, which saw the virtue of the Union in the economic opportunities of the Empire and the global reach of the larger British state (Colley, 2003). The emphasis on the economy was unsurprising, given the role that debates over economic prospects, debt and currency played in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum debate; there is clear discursive continuity. However, while Europe made the economic argument for the Union easier in 2014, as it suggested continued access to a large market and economic security, Brexit undermined the economic case because of the withdrawal from the European internal market and related perceptions of economic risk.

Within this theme, we note a distinction, underpinned by party ideology, between a more *static* vision of the Union articulated by the Conservatives (and the DUP), assertive and confident about the UK’s economic present and future, and a more *dynamic* vision invoked by Labour, stressing the need for renewal and reform of the broader economy. This divergence was also present in discussions of the welfare and social unions, as we will see below.

Absent an imminent independence referendum, unionist political elites focused primarily on the strength of the UK rather than the economic risk of political independence, as they had in 2014. Conservative and DUP proponents of the Union stressed that the nations of the UK experienced the best of both worlds and owed their prosperity to the UK rather than the EU. May spoke of the Union as ‘a huge source of strength’ which risks being taken for granted. She reminded her audience that:

the UK’s Customs Union created the first modern industrial marketplace. That the pound sterling has served the four nations of the Union for centuries. And that our fully integrated internal market – with no barriers to doing business – remains the most important market for businesses across the UK. (May, 2019)

She continued, arguing that the Union was particularly necessary at times of economic uncertainty, suggesting that an independent Scotland would not be able to weather these challenges.

The broad shoulders of the world’s fifth largest economy allowed the whole of the UK to weather the storm of the global financial crisis a decade ago. ... The UK Government has been able to take unprecedented action to support the oil and gas sector. (May, 2019)

And while DUP leader Arlene Foster situated her unionism *via-à-vis* a deep British identity and history, she saw the economic argument as a compelling one for those who did not share her attachment to the British state: ‘Even those who would deny our cultural links have to accept

that, quite simply, the case for the Union makes financial sense' (Foster, 2017). The controversial Internal Market Bill, designed to ensure the functioning of the UK's internal market outside of the EU, was to further the economic interests of all four nations, with Johnson describing his aims outside of the EU: 'we will be restoring a great British industry to the eminence that it deserves, levelling up communities across the UK, particularly and including Scotland' (Johnson, 2020a).

The case for the Union was made more assertively by Conservatives as the Covid-19 pandemic sent shockwaves through the economy. The crisis, Conservatives argued, illustrated the case for the Union. In an opinion piece for *The Times*, Johnson painted a dramatic picture of the crisis, with the emphasis on the economic measures taken by the UK government but also on the strength of the UK: 'The lockdown forced on us all by coronavirus could have spelled disaster for the country, an economic tsunami that washed away hundreds of thousands of Scottish jobs and saw countless businesses lost for ever below the waves.' But, due to the Union, 'Scotland would not be forced to face this crisis alone. Because Scotland is an integral part of the UK', and could rely on 'the might of the UK Treasury', the 'sheer heft of the UK national economy' and the 'UK's massive purchasing power' (Johnson, 2020b). Colleagues in Scotland echoed the Prime Minister, heralding the 'broad shoulders of the United Kingdom', which enabled the mobilization of funds to prop up industries and furlough schemes throughout the UK (Fraser, 2020). Newly elected Scottish Conservative leader Douglas Ross described the furlough scheme as 'a real and tangible reminder of the economic security of the Union' (Ross, 2020).

In contrast, Labour voices showed a tendency to stress current economic disparities and the further risks that independence would bring. Corbyn, in a comparatively rare intervention into the issue of Scottish independence, warned that independence would exacerbate existing economic and social problems: 'It would lead to turbo-charged austerity and a glaring hole in the money required to fund essential services, and would not be in the interests of the people of Scotland,' a message adopted by the Labour Party and Labour leadership (*Herald Scotland*, 2017). Brown also spoke of the risks of independence, suggesting that it could see Scotland 'struggling to find the reserves to fund its own currency, condemning itself to years of austerity' (Brown, 2020a). Speaking candidly to an English audience, Ian Murray, Labour's only remaining Scottish MP after the 2015 election, explained that Scotland was reliant on London for its economic success:

Now that might be the right thing or the wrong thing, but it's still reality, and that's one of the big things that people have to realise, that where you have your economic centres, you stick close to them, and you share and pool your resources, which is a big thing that Scots need to appreciate. (cited in Richards, 2020)

Newly appointed Labour leader Keir Starmer adopted a similar line to the Conservatives, emphasizing the advantages of pooling and sharing within the Union. Scotland, Labour argued, benefited from the economic strength of the UK, and this economic capacity underpinned the welfare union:

We are all strong because we choose to pool our resources to share the risks and rewards. We are all better off because we can live, work and trade across borders, rather than behind them. And as one United Kingdom we're better able to weather the storms of a global financial crash, a pandemic, or the climate emergency. (Starmer, 2020)

The welfare state and the social union

In addition to the economic case, the emphasis on the institutions of the welfare state is a hallmark of British unionist discourse. These institutions, unionists argued from the Second World

War onward, underpin the legitimacy and purpose of the UK. The introduction of the *National Health Service* as well as a variety of social programmes provided relatively uniform levels of welfare across the state and fostered shared loyalty, binding people into the Union (McEwen, 2002). The continued discursive emphasis on the health service is remarkable in light of the halting of universal social programmes in the 1970s and the later rolling back of core services (Keating, 2021). This marshalling of the NHS also overlooks the devolved nature of the health services, as well as policy divergence in the delivery of health and social care across the nations and regions of the UK. Yet, the case for the Union built around welfare remains salient and constitutes another element of continuity in unionist discourse, with the totemic role of the NHS evident in the 2012 Olympics Game ceremony (Thomas & Antony, 2015), in left-of-centre unionist arguments around the Scottish independence debate (Brown, 2014) seeking to emphasize state-level solidarity, and, more recently, in political tributes made throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. The funding of the NHS was also central in the Brexit debate, with Leave campaigners arguing that the UK's exit from the EU would divert funds from the EU coffers to those of the NHS.

Here, we identify again two distinct narratives between the two main unionist parties, which reflects their ideological positioning and approach. A more *dynamic* Labour narrative encompassed both the establishment of these institutions and the need for their renewal, as part of a programme of welfare expansion in order to preserve the UK. This was the subject of one of the few interventions made by Corbyn in the broader debate on the future of the Union. The stress on the need for social solidarity rather than 'division rooted in selfishness' was a core message for Labour politicians. Brown described the rise of what he labelled 'Brexit nationalism', alongside Welsh, Scottish and Ulster/Irish nationalisms. At their root, he argued, was a lack of social solidarity and the degradation of the social safety net: 'their rise owes far more to common problems shared in every part of the UK: anxieties about stagnating incomes, the rundown of manufacturing, insecure employment, poor-quality public services, boarded-up high streets' (Brown, 2020b).

Underpinning these instrumental defences of union rooted in welfare were notions of social union, a term with different meanings and implications but seeking to provide a sense of mutual belonging. The social democratic version has its roots in the notion of social citizenship as articulated in Marshall's (1992) work in the post-war years. Labour politicians spoke of pooling and sharing of resources, advocating for redistribution within and between the UK's nations and regions. Welsh Labour leader and First Minister Mark Drakeford argued that the case for the Union was rooted in 'unity and solidarity', a system in which common aims and interests could be advanced (Drakeford, 2019). Speaking in a Holyrood debate on Scottish independence, Kezia Dugdale set out her case for the Union:

I believe in the United Kingdom – not as a symbol of past glories or purest ideology, but as a living, breathing union of nations that delivers for the people of Scotland. It delivers for the pensioners, whose income is secured through a UK state pension and benefits system. It delivers for the shipyard workers, who are in jobs because of UK defence contracts, and it delivers to the staff in East Kilbride, who deliver aid to some of the poorest countries in the world on behalf of all of us. It also delivers for the schools that are built because of the extra money that we receive by being in the UK; for the NHS that we built together and which is sustained because we pool and share our resources across the whole of Britain. (Dugdale, 2017)

These messages stressed the need for solidarity to cut across the internal borders of the UK. Implicit in this was a critique of both the SNP and the Conservatives, who undermined this social solidarity – the SNP for reverting to a 'more narrow, nationalist' understanding of the political community,

and the Conservatives for their pursuit of policies of austerity which undercut the case for Union. In the face of these threats, Brown urged a recommitment to social solidarity:

In 2020 that means rediscovering the value of empathy and solidarity between nations and regions and demonstrating the benefits that can flow from co-operation and sharing in pursuit of important causes – whether it means working together to address environmental pollution or pooling and sharing the resources necessary so that citizens everywhere have similar basic rights to an NHS, social care and help when sick unemployed disabled low paid and elderly. (Brown, 2020a)

Starmer's claims on social union included fewer calls for redistribution and more abstract language of social good:

I don't believe in putting up borders across any part of our United Kingdom, in dividing people, communities, and families who have stood together for so long ... It's not, England, or Scotland, or Wales, or Northern Ireland, I've had enough of hearing that. It's England, and Scotland, and Wales, and Northern Ireland, together. I believe in that core Labour principle: that we achieve more together than we do alone. All four nations working together to build a more open, more optimistic and outward-looking country. A United Kingdom that's a force for social justice and a moral force for good in the world. And that's why I'm so determined to preserve and to renew the United Kingdom. (Starmer, 2020)

In contrast, the Conservatives sought to combat Labour's owning of the issue by offering a more static defence of the NHS and the welfare state, invoking its historical establishment and ignoring more recent rollbacks of key services. These institutions, despite their largely devolved nature, were 'the glue that holds the Union together' (May, 2019). These claims were grounded in a Conservative vision of social union that is different, often deploying the metaphor of the family to underpin shared institutions such as the NHS but also the BBC and the armed forces. In her final speech, May made a plea for the Union:

At its heart is the principle of solidarity. ... That we have a common stake in each other's success. That the happiness of someone in Belfast is the care and concern of someone in Bolton or Brecon or Bridge of Allan. (May, 2019)

Present too was a sense of social union as a shared cultural experience, united by a common consciousness. This was most evident in the language of the DUP's Foster, who described a 'shared history going back generations and hundreds of years', a 'shared cultural experience that encompasses the newspapers we read, the television that we watch and the football teams we support' (Foster, 2017). Yet others deployed personal narratives, suggesting both familial ties and economic ones:

The Union is a family. The English, Welsh and the Northern Ireland are our cousins, nieces, nephews, wives and husbands. In my case, they are my mother, my son-in-law, my daughters-in-law and my grandchildren. We should not cast aside this social union for the sake of some backward-looking nationalist instinct. (Kerr, 2018)

The Conservatives offered the responses of the doctors and nurses of the NHS as a moment, like during the Second World War, where the British spirit shone through: 'The past six months have shown exactly why the historic and heartfelt bond that ties the four nations of our country together is so important and the sheer might of our Union has been proven once again' (Johnson, 2020b). In an opinion piece, Johnson described the Covid-19 response to the crisis as evidence of the strength of the Union:

That is what makes us the most successful political union the world has ever seen, and why being Scottish and British means so much more than 'someone who lives in this part of the world'. Because this is no marriage of convenience – and we are there for each other in sickness and in health. (Johnson, 2020b)

United by British values

Complementing and often underpinning instrumental claims focused on economy and welfare, we identify a third, less salient theme around British values. As in the previous two themes, there is here an element of continuity: there have been various efforts in recent times to appropriate universal values in order to portray the UK state as the repository of higher norms in the face of challenges posed by multiculturalism and, especially, sub-state (essentially, Scottish) nationalism. From the left, then Prime Minister Brown identified as essentially British values those of 'British tolerance, the British belief in liberty and the British sense of fair play' (Brown, 2007). The 2010–15 Coalition government saw as fundamental British values those of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect, and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs (UK Government, 2011, p. 109). In fact, this is consistent with experience in other pluri-national states, where it is common to witness the discursive practice of branding (state) patriots against (sub-state) nationalists, which places state elites on a superior normative plane by framing attachment to the state as intrinsically democratic and civic (Cetrà & Brown Swan, 2020). A fundamental difficulty with this legitimizing theme, however, is that these values are largely the same as those espoused by sub-state nationalist politicians in Scotland and Wales.

In the view of unionist actors, these values shape an inclusive, overarching British identity that can both accommodate and celebrate pluri-nationalism and multiculturalism. May described the 'accommodation of multiple, layered identities within a common system of values' as 'a hallmark of what it is to be British' (May, 2019). New Scottish Conservative leader Douglas Ross echoed this sentiment: 'Our Union is special because it respects our right to have multiple identities while still building a deep and strong partnership. We do not have to choose between being Scottish and being British' (Ross, 2020). Ruth Davidson described the 'messiness' of British patriotism in which people can 'be proudly Scottish, Welsh, Baja or Pakistani' (Davidson, 2017). Here, we note that pluri-national identities and multicultural identities are often used interchangeably, with the identities of those from nations within the UK state framed as similar challenges to the identities of those from outwith. From the DUP, Foster invoked a set of common values which bound the nations and regions of the UK: 'democracy, freedom and respect for the rule of law and the tolerance of others', suggesting that 'confident unionism can capture the diversity that nationalism cannot. It transcends nationalism and allows individuals to express the cultural identity and values they wish' (Foster, 2018). The appeal to the same universal values is particularly remarkable in the case of the DUP, whose party ideology defends restrictive views on issues such as abortion that contrast with the applicable legal framework in England, Wales and Scotland.

Further evidence of value-oriented justifications for the Union are identified within the Constitution Reform Group, which set out a proposal for a new 'Act of Union' to reforge the constitution to better suit the needs of the peoples of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to continue to join together to form the United Kingdom'. While this had little realistic prospect of impact, the articulation of the 'purposes of the Union' is of interest for this analysis. It built implicitly on the idea of British values: equality and the rule of law; rights and freedoms; tolerance and respect; equality of opportunity; safety and security; social and economic rights, including health and education; and benefiting from shared history and culture (Constitution Reform Group, 2018). This and other contributions were prompted by Brexit, but they were largely silent about the effect that the UK's exit from the EU would have on these narratives. Brown was exceptional in stating that:

the UK, once admired around the world for an understated but comfortably unifying Britishness that was inclusive, outward-looking, tolerant and ultimately pragmatic, now presents an ugly picture: of bitter divisions, intolerance and introversion so extreme that it has sacrificed common sense in favour of a dogmatic abandonment of its own best interests. (Brown, 2019)

Some unionists have extended these arguments on values to social rights, worrying that devolution has created different social entitlements across the UK. Brown (2014) provides the best exposition of the Labour view that values of fairness and solidarity are essentially British. At the same time, Welsh and other Labour leaders also warned of risks of centralization in light of Brexit, which saw the UK government adopt a more dominant approach to policy.

Speakers of all persuasions positioned these common values in contrast to nationalism, which they defined as divisive and exclusive. Davidson built on the old distinction between nationalism and patriotism, one exclusive, the other celebrating difference: 'Patriotism does not force us to rank these identities in order, as if one or another had a higher claim' (Davidson, 2017). Foster drew a sharp distinction between nationalism and unionism, arguing that the latter 'stands for pluralism and multi-culturalism. We are inclusive and welcome all', in contrast with 'narrow and exclusive' nationalism (Foster, 2018). Brown argued that there were two threats to British values: from nationalist voices within the SNP and from Conservatives, which had embarked upon a form of Brexit nationalism (Brown, 2020b). In this he has gone further than most political actors, using the focus on values not only to challenge nationalism, which he sees as inherently divisive and backwards, but also illiberal forms of unionism. This threat to 'British values' originated both from what he described as 'Brexit nationalists' and nationalists representing Scotland and Wales.

If we, the British, have prided ourselves in our tolerance, can we dismiss that infamous [Nigel] Farage-launched pre-referendum poster depicting almost exclusively non-white migrants threatening our borders – men and women who were, in fact, crossing from Croatia to Slovenia – as an aberration – a momentary episode in the heat of the moment of a bitter campaign? It is time to draw a line in the sand: to call on the tolerant, fair minded, decent, patriotic majority of British people, who include millions of Leave voters as well as Remain voters, to speak up against the hijacking of our patriotism. (Brown, 2019)

CONCLUSIONS

This article sought to identify the three main justificatory unionist claims in the time of Brexit (2016–20) and to assess the extent to which they inform a new unionism. There is an emerging unionist conversation urged by the perception that the Union is at risk and requires a positive and stronger rearticulation, as evidenced in partisan efforts to rearticulate the case for Union and in broader debates in civil society and the media. Yet, our analysis casts doubt over the suggestion that Brexit has prompted a substantive rethinking of the case for the Union.

We have shown that there is an enduring relevance of instrumental arguments for the Union, founded fundamentally in financial advantage and the maintenance of the welfare union, which are in turn underpinned by notions of social solidarity and complemented with an appeal to the Union as the repository of universal values. These are largely a rerun of the arguments made against Scottish independence in 2014 and they are consistent with unionism's quest in recent times for a cohesive normative justification for the Union. These three themes are, however, deployed inconsistently, and we find little evidence of adaptation to the circumstances brought by Brexit. For example, the economic case for the Union built on economic stability and financial advantage is potentially undermined as a result of the withdrawal from a larger market. At the same time, there is also the challenge of making an argument for union predicated on stability and openness at a time in which the UK withdraws from a larger political unit.

Despite the profound impact of Brexit on the territorial dynamics of the UK, defenders of the Union are struggling to adapt the foundations of their political project in a novel fashion. The continued discursive emphasis on Scottish independence, at the expense of a consideration of the Union more broadly, despite social surveys which suggest declining attachment to the Union throughout the UK (Henderson, 2018), lends itself to more negative and reactive arguments in favour of the continuation of the Union. The continued relevance of old ideas partly reflects the fact that the debate is largely shaped by Conservative, DUP and specific Labour figures, for whom these arguments are well trod. New or emergent voices within Labour, and civil society more generally, have had little traction, perhaps due to the absence of an imminent threat. The Liberal Democrats, now greatly reduced in their political influence in both Scotland and at the centre, had little direct input.

To return to the opening sentence of this article, unionism appears to know what it is against – separation – but is struggling to adapt to the new economic and political realities. The need to answer this question seems ever more urgent for Unionists in a post-Brexit UK.

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NOTES

1. The ideological importance of the ‘centre’ for this conception of the Union is at odds with the different unions which contributed towards the formation of the state. There have always been multiple ‘centres’ for the purposes of policymaking (despite the country being highly centralized) (Mitchell, 2000). This view also suggests that the centre is homogeneous but there are competing actors and interests within and across Whitehall, Parliament, and several agencies and public bodies.
2. Mitchell (2006) extended the concept to ‘state of unions’ in recognition of the differences in modes of incorporation.
3. For example, the Conservatives attacked the Attlee government for failing to take account of Scotland’s distinct status when industries were nationalized (Mitchell, 1996).
4. We are grateful to Karlo Basta for this insight.

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