

The Bargain: how our ancestors saw an opportunity for Scotland that still makes sense

The following article by Tom Miers was originally published by Think Scotland. We are grateful to them for allowing us republish it here...

In the first of a series of four articles on the Union and how to save it, Tom Miers argues we need to understand the original bargain struck by Scotland in 1707 and the nature of the nationalist threat to it.

THREE CENTURIES ago, Scotland struck an extraordinary bargain with its historic rival and neighbour to the South. Together, they forged one of the success stories of modern history. Great Britain became a powerhouse of industry and the spread of enlightenment values across the world.

Yet that Union with England is now in extreme danger. In a campaign of remarkable ruthlessness and discipline, nationalists have persuaded nearly half the population that Scotland would do better as a separate state.

How has it come to this, and what can those who cherish the Union do to save the situation? Typically, the fierce debate that dominates Scotland's public life on this matter is focussed on economics. For sure, money is important, the stakes are high, and the statistical evidence in favour of a continued Union very strong. Yet somehow this don't cut through to many Scots.

In my new book *The Bargain* I argue that, if we are to understand and promote Scotland's place in the UK, we need to place it in the context of the original purpose of the Union and how the sophisticated calculation that our ancestors made is still valid today. While sentiment is important – not least to me – the original Bargain struck all those years ago was ruthlessly transactional. The core ingredients of that deal – political, economic, and cultural – are still with us and we need to explain that in its entirety so that Scots can see the extraordinary win-win situation that we enjoy.

The key insight of the Scots who negotiated the Union all those years ago was that the country could exchange something insubstantial – the trappings of sovereignty – for significant political and economic gains. The essence of the deal was that Scotland retained control of the important domestic matters, while in international affairs it gained influence where before it had had none. Meanwhile, the economic gains were very significant – access to England's much larger markets, fiscal support backed by economies of scale, and a stable monetary framework.

Culture was a crucial part of the equation too. There was not much love lost between the two old rivals, but the calculation was that, with its shared experience of the Reformation, England was sufficiently compatible as a long-term partner given the safeguards over domestic policy. Of course, since then the two countries have become much more similar, with distinctiveness either side of the border eroded by joint endeavour and the passage of time.

Most importantly, in practical terms Scotland has more control, not less, over its affairs within the UK than it would have outside it, and this is the enduring genius of the bargain struck all those years ago. A good current example of this is the crisis in the Ukraine. As part of a medium sized power that takes a lead in the Western Alliance, Scotland can affect the crisis in its own interest. On its own it would be

reliant on the goodwill of others and would contribute nothing but platitudes and disunity. Putin would be delighted by the breakup of the UK.

I will explore the political side of the Union Bargain more in my next article here. But having the best arguments is not enough. They need to be articulated skilfully and convincingly. And it is the field of pure politics that the SNP has the mastery. A great part of the explanation for the UK's parlous situation is the way in which the SNP has exploited, with great skill, a combination of several features that characterise British politics today.

First of all is the zeitgeist that is shared by all Western democracies at present. A general weariness with the endless and unsatisfying balance between competing vested interests that is the bread and butter of social democracy. Lots of spending, lots of tax, lots of borrowing, general but stagnant prosperity undermined by intractable social problems.

In most Western countries insurgent political movements have arisen from left and right to challenge this unsatisfactory mix. The modern SNP is one of these. It has much in common in its appeal with movements as varied as AfD, Podemos, Syriza, 5 Star, Trump and, yes, Nigel Farage. Forget the notional objectives, it's the insurgent appeal that counts.

Look back at their history: the SNP's original (but limited) appeal was to a culturally conservative but marginalised constituency strongest (like UKIP's) in economically left-behind rural or coastal areas, usually Tory voting. They were even known as the 'Tartan Tories'. Its pioneering breakthrough was to add a much larger base of disillusioned working class voters fed up with the left-liberal elite that purported to represent them but failed to address their problems. This template – an alliance of two very different tribes united in disgruntlement and social conservatism – has been emulated by all of the movements I mentioned above.

I hasten to add that I have no complaint with the values, issues or outlook of either of these two unhappy tribes. Though I believe strongly that Scottish Nationalism is the last thing that either of them needs.

The SNP has combined this generally fertile background with very skilful tactical exploitation of unfolding British events. To achieve this so consistently over the years requires enormous discipline as well as an unscrupulous approach to politics. The SNP is essentially a revolutionary movement in its tactics and approach and this, I would suggest, is the key not just to its success but its eventual demise.

The secret, then, to saving the UK is to understand not just the nature of the Union Bargain, but the opponent that is threatening it.