The United Kingdom

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Introduction

Solidarity has been a key ingredient in the existence of the United Kingdom (UK) as a single political entity since its inception. As a pluri-national state (the country brings together four different nations: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), the UK has had to find a balance between what would otherwise be competing solidarities located at different geo-political levels. Infra-national solidarity (e.g. solidarity among Scottish or Welsh people) must be combined with cross-national forms of solidarities (e.g. Scottish towards Welsh), as well as with a supra-national solidarity (e.g. Scottish towards British).

A complex system is therefore necessary to sustain these forms of solidarities at different geo-political levels and has been developed through specific institutions and policies. In this chapter we focus on some of these key political-institutional factors, and we discuss how recent political-institutional and political-economic developments are challenging them.

From a political-institutional viewpoint, solidarity among constituting 'nations' has been maintained through a mechanism of power sharing (devolution) enabling mediation between the need for national (Scottish, Welsh, English, Northern Irish) sovereignty and supranational (British) interests. Therefore, political power and representation are divided between national (devolved assemblies and governments) and supranational (British) levels with the acceptance of all parties for the Westminster Parliament (as opposed to national assemblies) being the preeminent political institution. The Westminster Parliament is an institution which has been able to find, out of the national flavours of solidarity, the necessary 'supranational' synthesis. At the top of this institutional multi-layered system of solidaristic ties stands the monarchy as its supreme guarantor.

From a social-political point of view, this complex web of solidarities has been maintained via the development of the welfare state, namely the establishment of a public health care system, along with public pensions and insurance programmes that have been in place from the early decades

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of the 20th century. In the UK, like elsewhere, the welfare state as a set of redistributive policies has been a key tool in the promotion of national and supranational identity building, and therefore as a way to create solidarity among citizens. In fact, citizens allow a redistribution of their resources to happen so far as they perceive each other as members of the same group or nation (Miller 1995). Moreover, in the UK the development of the welfare state as a tool for building a British identity has replaced the vanishing "British empire" which had been a key-tool of identity building in earlier centuries (Williams 1989).

However, such solidarity-creating mechanisms are being seriously challenged by political and political-economic issues. These challenges seem to be a catalyst for the robust revival of national solidarities at the expense of supranational (British) ones.

One of the most salient of such challenges comes from a failure in the political institutional mechanisms designed to mediate claims for national sovereignty with supranational (British) interests. In fact, the devolution of power occurring from the end of the 1990s has come under intense scrutiny in recent years in terms of its capacity to allow national communities to have their voice and interests represented by supra-national (British) decision making. As a consequence, in Scotland in 2014, there took place a referendum for one of the constituting nations of the UK to become independent from the UK, and although the vote was lost by those supporting independence, the event has shaped the political landscape in Scotland ever since. Similarly, another form of supranational solidarity which in the meanwhile had been established between the UK and other European societies (namely the solidarity based on the European Union) came under pressure as a legitimate system of redistributing resources across the continent, with the British people having opted through a popular majority vote in 2016 to leave the European Union.

Consequently, solidarity issues have taken a central position not only in the political-institutional history of the country, but also in contemporary, socio-political affairs, given the relevance of the challenges posed against solidarity within the UK as a pluri-national country, and between the UK and supranational forms of solidarity which had been embodied by the European Union.

This chapter discusses key political institutional features in the UK underpinning solidarity: we begin with the constitutional setting; we then discuss the socio-cultural dimensions of solidarity; subsequently we discuss devolution arrangements; and finally we discuss how current politi-

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cal, social and economic challenges are threatening the very existence of the multi-layered system of solidarity that has held the UK together thus far.

The Constitutional Setting

One of the defining features of the UK constitution is that unlike many of its counterparts in Europe it is not codified. Therefore as no single document of reference for citizens exists, the constitution must be read using various sources such as statute law, common law, conventions and 'works of authority' (Norton 2015). On the one hand, the uncodified nature of the constitution obviously raises issues of clarity in terms of citizens understanding their rights, but on the other hand this has been regarded by some as an advantage, providing flexibility and enabling the constitution to move with the times. These issues are addressed by Bogdanor et al. (2007) who identify two key explanations as to why the UK has no codified constitution. Unlike many of its counterparts in Europe or the USA, there has never been a 'constitutional moment' (Bogdanor et al. 2007, 500) when the framework used to govern a country has required clarification: even when the Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain was created following the 1707 Act of Union, this remained located in London and adopted many of the characteristics of the existing English Parliament. Furthermore, Bogdanor et al. (2007) explain that aside from this historical explanation, there is also a conceptual reason, namely that the primary constitutional principle of the land has been the sovereignty of Parliament, indeed Bogdanor, Khaitan and Vogenauer claim that the British constitution can be summed up in eight words, "what the Queen in Parliament enacts in law" (Bogdanor et al. 2007, 501).

Therefore, understanding the entrenchment of the principle of solidarity within the UK constitution is made difficult by the lack of a codified constitution. We have to trace it back through the UK conventions and Acts of Parliament.

Efforts to understand some modern forms of legislation which may promote or instil solidarity in UK society must really begin with the blueprint for a different society in post-war Britain, exemplified by the Social Insurance and Allied Services report by the economist Sir William Beveridge in 1942 which, although never mentioning the word 'solidarity', recognised 'five giants' that were obstacles on the road to postwar reconstruc-

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tion, namely want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness and outlined a renewed relationship between the state and the individual, where in return for a contribution from the individual, the state would offer social security. Widely considered as having laid the foundations for the modern welfare state in the United Kingdom the 'Beveridge Report' would go on to be utilised by the postwar Atlee government to inform a number of significant pieces of legislation including the National Insurance Act 1946, Family Allowances Act 1945 and the Pensions (Increase) Act 1947 and remains a reference point in debates concerning welfare in the UK (Titmuss 1951; Townsend 1954; Timmins 2001).

In terms of developing a sense of solidarity (although, again, with no explicit mention of solidarity) another crucial example stems from the National Health Service Act 1946 which established a universal healthcare system, free at the point of use. Indeed the solidaristic element of the National Health Service is perhaps best summed up by its architect, the Labour Minister Aneurin Bevan who asserted that, 'illness is neither an indulgence for which people have to pay, nor an offence for which they should be penalised, but a misfortune, the cost of which should be shared by the community' (Curtis 2015). Over the decades the role of the NHS has been a source of much debate, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s when there were efforts to introduce market style reforms into the delivery of healthcare (see Klein 2013), nevertheless the basic principle that healthcare should be free at the point of use has remained steadfast and one of consensus.

The universalism which characterizes the NHS has also been a feature of other aspects of the welfare state since its inception including family allowances (which evolved into Child Benefit) and was offered to all families with children as well as the state pension offered to all retirees, reflecting the objective set out by the Beveridge Report to offer support 'from cradle to grave'. However as public spending has contracted since the turbulence of the crisis and austerity has manifested itself in policy discourses which question the 'affordability' of welfare benefits, challenges to the universalism of some benefits have been made. This has resulted in one of the foundation benefits of the postwar settlement, Child Benefit, being effectively reformed into a means-tested benefit where households with at least one higher rate tax payer (those earning above £50,000) see their child benefit reduced through a new 'High Income Child Benefit Charge' and withdrawn completely once earning £60,000.

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Therefore, although the NHS has been one of the areas of spending protected from the austerity measures implemented since 2010 other aspects of the welfare state have been far more exposed to cuts in public expenditure, including the introduction of a 'benefit cap' which limits the amount of welfare working age people can receive (Kennedy et al. 2016). Indeed, some research claims that without significant investment and support to tackle inequalities entrenched by austerity and the pressure on services caused by an ageing population, the UK welfare state may struggle to overcome the 'double crisis' (Taylor-Gooby 2013) it currently faces.

Although the absence of a codified constitution in the UK deprives us of the opportunity to highlight an explicit expression of solidarity, when examining the solidarity that is operationalised through the welfare state there can be little doubt what is at stake in a time of crisis and austerity. Solidarity becomes manifest through the collective efforts to overcome societal challenges such as the five giants identified by Beveridge and is expressed through forms of support and supportive institutions which are universalist, such as the NHS. On a practical level this is underpinned by a system of taxation and redistribution but is more fundamentally built upon an understanding of what T.H. Marshall described as 'social citizenship':

'from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society (1950, 11)'.

The Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Solidarity

One way to understand the principle of solidarityin the UK is to comprehend how it is practiced. Moreover, the diverse and fragmented nature of the organisations which engage in the practice of solidarity in the UK provides us with an insight into the variegated nature of solidarity in contemporary Britain. Thus to fully understand solidarity in UK society requires an appreciation of the diversity of solidarity both in society and the economy but also as a response to crisis and austerity.

One way in which the practice of solidarity in the UK is perhaps best exemplified is through the work of the voluntary sector. The term voluntary sector is often used as a catch-all word for organisations but a term equally used is that of the 'third sector', indeed the question of terminology has been one that has been addressed in extant research (Kendal and

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Knapp 1996; Alcock and Kendall 2011). Nevertheless neither term succeeds in capturing the diversity of these organisations which range in size, scale of activity and degree of formalisation. Voluntary organisations in the UK range from very small informal grassroots initiatives in local communities to large national charities and these organisations operate across a range of issues. According to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) there are over 160,000 voluntary organisations operating across the UK in areas such as culture, health, employment, housing, education and the environment[1]. Moreover, although these organisations may be considered as a locus of solidarity where people volunteer their time and skills, we must recognise the extent to which a number of voluntary organisations in the UK are also employers, with over 850,000 people making up part of the paid workforce of the voluntary sector. What we can establish from this is the extent to which solidarity exercised through the voluntary sector is well established enough in the UK to support a considerable workforce.

One of the areas of society in the UK where there is an explicit usage of the term solidarity is perhaps best recognised through the trade union movement where the word continues to signify comradeship between workers and trade unions operating across various sectors. At present there are over fifty trade unions in the UK representing over five million workers, unions which are also affiliated to the Trade Union Congress an umbrella organisation formed in 1868 which acts as the voice of the labour movement[2]. Despite its rich history and continued role in organising worker solidarity, perhaps the scarce use of the term in contemporary political and policy discourses in Britain can in some part be attributed to the decline of trade union membership (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2016) following a process of deindustrialisation which reached a pinnacle in the 1980s when the trade union movement and specifically the miners, were in open confrontation with the Thatcher Government. Despite this decline in membership, the activism of trade unions remains one area of contemporary society where solidarity is a term that is articulated openly and continues to have particular resonance (see Cohen 2006; Freeman and Pelletier 1990; McIlroy 1995; Fernie and Metcalf 2005).

1 https://data.ncvo.org.uk/a/almanac17/scope-data/
2 https://www.tuc.org.uk/britains-unions

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Trade unions are not however the only organisations which operationalise solidarity in the economy. A prime example of other forms of solidarity in the economy stems from the emergence of the cooperative movement in Britain. In the nineteenth century the endeavours of the 'Rochdale pioneers' in Lancashire as well as the community built by Robert Owen in New Lanark promoted the idea of solidarity through cooperative enterprise, reflecting a vision of a better society. Moreover, the impact of the cooperative movement continues to be felt in UK society today with sector representatives reporting that over 6,500 cooperatives are currently operating in the UK today, employing over 200,000 people[3]. Therefore although solidarity is a term which seldom forms part of the discourse in the UK regarding economic policy, this does not mean that the principle of solidarity is not being practiced within the UK economy.

Although there are examples, as outlined above, where solidarity is reflected in a functioning economy, there is also evidence in the UK of the role played by solidarity when the economy is not functioning properly. One example of this solidarity, through the rise of 'food banks', has emerged against the backdrop of the financial crisis and the austerity measures which followed, particularly those cuts to the welfare state. Food banks in the UK offer free basic foods to those experiencing hunger and destitution and depend on the donations of food made by members of the public and the organisation of distribution is frequently reliant upon volunteers. Concerns regarding the rising costs of living for the poorest in society, particularly those in low paid employment and those in receipt of benefits (APPG Hunger 2014) have been mirrored in the Scottish Parliament where the Welfare Reform Committee has claimed that 'there is a direct correlation between the Department of Work and Pensions welfare reforms and the increase in use of food banks' (Scottish Parliament 2014, 14). One of the leading charities involved in establishing food banks across the UK, the Trussell Trust, have reported that in 2010-2011 the number of people provided with three days emergency food (the standard level of support offered by Trussell Trust food banks) was 61, 468. These numbers then rose to 346, 992 in 2012-2013 and in 2013-2014 reached 913, 138 (Trussell Trust 2015). The link between austerity and the rise of food banks has been captured by extant research (Loopstra et al. 2015) and has also highlighted the renewed role of Churches in voluntary life in

3 http://reports.uk.coop/economy2016/

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Britain through their involvement in supporting food banks (Lambie-Mumford 2013). Therefore the rise of food banks as a form of solidarity in the UK reflects not only the impact of welfare state retrenchment but also highlights how cuts to public budgets can also reshape the expression of solidarity and the actors involved.

The Evolution of Solidarity in the UK

In the 2010 UK General Election, dominated by the debate over how to address the financial crisis, one central plank of the Conservative Party manifesto was that of the 'Big Society'. This strategy was widely regarded as an attempt by the Conservative leader David Cameron to distance himself, at least rhetorically, from the perception of the Conservative Government of the 1980s led by Margaret Thatcher who claimed during her premiership that, 'there was no such thing as society' (Keay 1987). The commitment to the Big Society by the Conservative Party involved, 'social responsibility, not state control, the Big Society, not big Government' (Conservative Party 2010, 35). The message conveyed in the manifesto and in their campaign suggested a link between the ability of the country to balance its budget and the strength of civil society in tackling social problems. Further still, the root causes of poverty and inequality in the UK were framed not as a consequence of market failure or cuts to public budgets, but instead excessive public spending by the previous Labour Government, an assertion that has not gone unchallenged (Kisby 2010).

Despite not winning an overall majority in the UK General Election of 2010 and entering into a Coalition Government with the Liberal Democrats, the newly elected Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron made clear his enthusiasm for the concept of the Big Society shortly after his election during a high profile speech in Liverpool where he stated his hope that when people looked back at the period from 2010 onwards they would say, 'in Britain they didn't just pay down the deficit, they didn't just balance the books, they didn't just get the economy moving again, they did something really exciting in their society' (Prime Minister's Office 2010).

The key values underpinning the type of community solidarity pursued by the Big Society were claimed by the Prime Minister to be liberalism, responsibility and community empowerment. These values were to be manifested through a greater level of voluntarism, including paving the

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way for charities, private enterprises and social enterprises to be much more involved in the running of public services, all of which were to be encouraged by the Coalition Government. To some extent this can be seen as an attempt by the Government to bridge the gap which may emerge when cutting welfare spending by appealing to a sense of public duty, a strategy which set the Conservative led Government apart from their predecessors both in the Labour Government which emphasised its commitment to the public sector and the previous Conservative Governments which valorised individualism (Smith 2010).

The actual success of the Big Society in meeting its objectives has however been mixed to say the least. In the final of a series of audits of the Big Society conducted by Civil Exchange (a civil society 'think tank'), the report's authors conclude that overall the initiative has failed, citing amongst other things, the domination of market based solutions via large private enterprise in the expansion of choice in public services, little evidence of the much promised decentralisation, a failure to provide targeted support to the poorest communities and a failure to build any real partnership between Government and the voluntary sector. These findings are further reflected in the report's conclusion that, 'the Big Society might have been expected to result in a more united and better society – but so far the signs are of a more divided one' (Slocock et al. 2015, 7). The conclusion that the UK is a more divided society does however require more evidence than the failure of one initiative, regardless of how prominently that initiative was supported by Government.

The Precariousness of 'British' Solidarity?

The campaigns which preceded and have to some extent continued since the decision of the UK electorate to vote to leave the European Union not only opened a huge debate surrounding the future relationship of Britain with its European neighbours but has also again revealed the fragility of the relationships between the constituent nations of the UK.

The UK has experienced a shift in recent years from a much centralised system of power at Westminster to one that has witnessed political devolution to different constituent nations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Although the processes of devolution occurred within a very similar timeframe, the actual powers that have been devolved and reserved (that is, retained at Westminster) have diversified over the years and thus leaves

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the UK with an 'asymmetric' form of devolution. One key illustration of this has been the relatively scarce degree of devolution that has been undertaken in the largest constituent nation of the UK, England, which via a referendum, rejected the establishment of regional assemblies. Nevertheless, England has witnessed some devolution and this is perhaps most prominently represented by the creation of a directly elected Mayor of London following a referendum.

The asymmetric nature of devolution in the UK makes for a complex polity that is constantly evolving and adapting to new demands for power. Constitutional issues have for some time been reflected over the years by the election of MPs from parties such as Sinn Fein and the DUP in Northern Ireland, Plaid Cymru in Wales and of course the 2015 election of 55 (out of Scotland's 59 MPs) representing the SNP at Westminster. Such a trend unveils in fact what could be a dysfunctional, in the long term, effect of the institutional mechanisms (devolution) created to maintain infra-national solidarity, when coupled with policy divergences that are at their peak with the Conservative Party in control of Westminster, as peoples living in the 'devolved' nations seem to consider their interests and ideas to better protected and promoted by nationalistic politics.

Moreover, the distribution of votes to leave the European Union have served to further emphasise the fragility of 'British' solidarity with two constituent nations – namely Scotland and Northern Ireland – voting to remain in the European Union whilst England and Wales voted to leave. These are results which have raised the prospect not only of another independence referendum in Scotland (Scottish Government 2016) but also raised the prospect of a renewed debate on Irish unity (Halpin 2016).

Therefore although contemporary UK politics has been marked by the debate surrounding future relations with European neighbours, the post-Brexit landscape has refuelled the debates on the future of the United Kingdom, leading to calls for greater equality between the constituent nations including radical constitutional reform in the shape of federalism (Carrell and Walker 2016). Should the pursuit of equality come to the fore in efforts to strengthen the fragile solidarity of the UK constitutional settlement then this to some extent would mirror similar endeavours to bolster the social solidarity of UK society through efforts to establish greater equality through legislation.

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Conclusion

The UK has been for sometime a paradigmatic example of how a polity can develop through a multi-layered system of social, political and economic solidarities. As a pluri-national country, it has managed to combine national-based solidarities (English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish) with a supranational one (British), and even to allow such a pluri-solidaristic community to embrace a further layer of supra-national solidarity through its membership of the European Union. This has been made possible by the mutual reinforcing effect of political-institutional arrangements, such as the sharing of political authority (and economic resources) between national and supra-national bodies, the development of a welfare state securing the redistribution of resources across nations and social classes, and the guarantor role of the monarchy in the constitution.

However, some of the mechanisms that have underpinned cross-national solidarity for so many years are now heavily challenged and consequently the basic framework of solidarity that has held together the UK is now at risk. Political-institutional arrangements such as power sharing among different nations and territorial-political actors have been closely scrutinised in their capacity to represent the range of interests and voices to the point that one of the constituent components of the UK, Scotland, has sought independence from the UK through a referendum. Another key-political institution that has guaranteed solidarity, such as the welfare state, has been curtailed by austerity policies following the financial and economic crisis. Finally, supranational solidarity in the form enshrined by the UK membership of the European Union has collapsed following the country's decision, through a referendum held in June 2016, to vote to leave.

To conclude, the solidarity infrastructure that has sustained the UK as a pluri-national polity for centuries is revealing new cracks which expose a precarious equilibrium and consequently a great deal of uncertainty regarding the long-term consequences for both state and society.

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