

British unionists struggled to adapt the legitimising foundations of their political project to the realities of a post-Brexit UK



How did key unionist actors articulate the legitimising foundations of the Union in the four years following the EU referendum? And to what extent did they set out a renewed case for its continuation? Drawing on parliamentary debates, party documents and conference notes, [Daniel Cetrà](#) and [Coree Brown Swan](#) find that, despite the profound nature of the challenges posed by Brexit, dominant legitimising 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.

Periods of constitutional change may lead to shifts in political actors' views on what the state is and what it is for. Brexit and its implications pose the latest such challenge to the Union as a political project and to unionism as the doctrine of state legitimacy. In our [recent research](#), we wanted to assess change, and establish whether and how justifications for the Union as presented in public discourse have adapted to the new circumstances.

To do so, we analysed speeches, parliamentary debates, manifestos, and other policy documents between 2016 and 2020. We focused primarily on mainstream political parties represented at Westminster – the Conservative and Unionist Party, Labour, Liberal Democrats, and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). The final database, numbering more than 80 discrete documents, was analysed in detail and unionist claims were extracted for further analysis.

We found that, despite the profound challenge posed by Brexit, the case for the Union continues to be largely rooted in economy, welfare, and values, consistent with the case made in previous periods of upheaval. The economic and welfare themes contrast the virtues of the Union with the risks of (essentially, Scottish) independence, while the latter contrasts the Union with (sub-state) nationalism.

The Economic Union

Theresa May as Prime Minister, for example, spoke of the Union as 'a huge source of strength' that was particularly necessary at times of economic uncertainty: 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 legitimising themes, which saw the virtue of the Union in the economic opportunities of the Empire and the global reach of the larger British state.

The emphasis on the economy was also unsurprising given the role that debates over economic prospects, debt, and currency played in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. However, while EU membership 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.

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.

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. Underpinning these instrumental defences of union rooted in welfare were notions of social union seeking to provide a sense of mutual belonging. Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford, for instance, argued that the case for the Union was rooted in 'unity and solidarity', a system in which common aims and interests could be advanced.

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 were 'the glue that holds the Union together', according to Theresa May. 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.

United by British values

Complementing and often underpinning instrumental claims focused on economy and welfare, we identify a third, less salient but still present theme around British values. 'British values' include equality and the rule of law, rights and freedoms, tolerance and respect, and equality of opportunity. Some unionists have extended these arguments on values to social rights. Gordon Brown provides the best exposition of the Labour view that values of fairness and solidarity are essentially British.

Speakers of all persuasions positioned these common values in contrast to (sub-state) nationalism, which they defined as divisive and exclusive. Ruth Davidson built on the old distinction between nationalism and patriotism, one exclusive, the other celebrating difference.

Conclusion

There is an emerging unionist conversation urged by the perception that the Union is at risk. However, our analysis casts doubt over the suggestion that Brexit has prompted a substantive rethinking of the case for the Union.

We found 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.

Note: The above draws on the authors' [published work](#) in *Politics, Territory, Governance*.

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