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Who cares, really, if the Scots one day choose independence? Would it matter if Wales and Northern Ireland, larger than half a dozen European states, wanted their own government as well as their own football team? It need not alter their allegiance to the crown. Gordon Brown and David Cameron, likely combatants at the next election, last week deplored any "loosening" of the union bond, as if it would jeopardise the security of the state.

They join a legion of London politicians to whom "the union" remains a quasi-religious cause. Both Margaret Thatcher and John Major went to Scotland and wrapped themselves in the Union Jack, wiping their party off the map in doing so.

For the past five years the Scots and Welsh have shown a mature response to devolution. They rejected formal independence in favour of greater autonomy. When granted it in 1998 they used it, for the most part, sensibly and now want more. If denied it, more Scots told last week's *Sunday Times* they were for independence than against.

Why this should terrify the English beats me. Beyond the British Isles, Britons are ardent for political fission. They imposed federalist constitutions on their colonies (and on the Germans after the war). They supported Slovenian and Croatian separatism and went to war to assist Bosnians and Kosovans to break the Yugoslav federation.

From Biafra to Tibet, from Catalonia to Ukraine, British sentiment has always tended towards the separatist and the small guy. It loathes anything called a European union. Yet at home the opposite juices run strong. Any nationalist surge from the Celtic fringe is seen as a threat.

Scotland and Wales once endangered the security of the English crown and union was an understandable talisman of macho monarchy. That danger ended with the Tudors, or at least with the Jacobites. Maintaining union has become a tired political cliché, a ghostly compensation for the loss of empire. The Conservatives, despite dropping the word Unionist from their title, remain obsessed with the subject, while Labour fears any loss of central control. To celebrate ethnic diversity at Westminster is compulsory; to celebrate regional diversity is akin to clog dancing. It "threatens the union".

The devolution of legislation or at least deliberation to a Scottish parliament and Welsh assembly in 1998 was seen by the many Blairites as an act of weakness, only tolerated in honour of John Smith, the former leader. Blair no sooner conceded it than he fought, unsuccessfully, to control it through his own nominees. Yet devolution remains his one constitutional success. Its institutions are not universally popular — no form of government is these days — their cost is high and their human calibre low. But twice as many Scots are now in favour of devolution as are sceptical. Welsh opposition, once as high as 40%, has halved in five years.

Nobody can visit Edinburgh or Cardiff today and not sense a marked change in confidence and mood. Ask any Scot where he or she lives and the answer is unequivocally Scotland, not Britain. Jack McConnell and Rhodri Morgan are seen as leaders not just of factions but of countries. Devolution has yielded two of the finest parliament buildings in Europe. The local media report and debate to a degree unimaginable before. Even the Welsh, so tentative about devolution at first, have acquired a political identity, a focus of argument they lacked before.

Any sensible politician should want to take this process forward. Yet both Brown and Cameron implied that devolution reflected on the potency of the state. Were they to delegate so much as a penny rate to the Scots or Welsh it would be like Mary Tudor losing Calais. Much-needed reforms to the regime thus seem a lost cause, whether a cut in the number of Scots and Welsh MPs or an end to the Barnett formula for subsidies from London.

Yet nothing so vexes the devolution debate as its version of Fermat's Last Theorem, the West Lothian question. It knits the highest brows and calls forth tomes of precedent. Why, it asks, should Scottish MPs be able to vote on "domestic" English policies when the converse does not apply? How can this inconsistency be? Nobody asks why there is no such question elsewhere in Europe. Why is there no Galician question, or a Corsican one, or even a Schleswig-Holstein one? The answer is that these questions have long been answered.

The West Lothian question could be met crudely by devolving tax-raising power to Scotland and Wales and reducing their number of Westminster MPs. They would have a reduced influence over English legislation while their assemblies would decide for themselves how far to tax and spend. Greenland and the Faroes honour the Danish state and crown and are represented in the Danish parliament, yet are autonomous in all domestic affairs and even excuse themselves from the European Union. There are many ways of skinning the West Lothian cat.

But the question dissolves if Westminster MPs were to behave like Scottish and Welsh ones back home, and have no responsibility for the delivery of public services in the cities and counties of England. There is no reason why Westminster MPs, wherever they are from, should be debating and deciding on matters which across Europe (and in Scotland and Wales) are matters for subsidiary government. It is the spectacle of MPs arguing over school admissions, hospital waiting lists, magistrates' decisions or the siting of housing estates that makes West Lothian so vexing.

Almost every nation is a federation, a union. Most countries have constitutions that distinguish "common interests" from provincial and local ones. The United Kingdom parliament need be no different. It deals with defence and foreign affairs, economic policy, migration and trade and maintains a rough balance of equity in the distribution of taxes across the union as a whole.