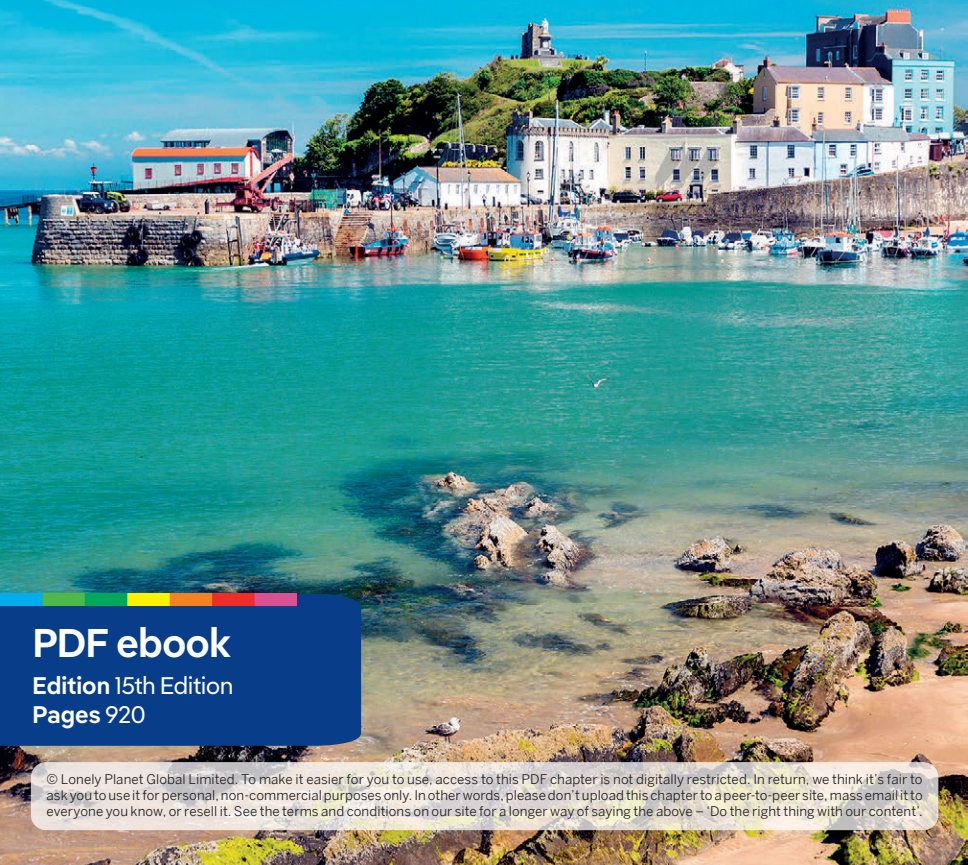


Great Britain



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A DIVIDED KINGDOM?

In the three centuries since its formation, Great Britain has rarely been as divided as it is today. How much longer can this union between England, Wales and Scotland survive? By Joseph Reaney

GREAT BRITAIN MAY only be a small island, but it has played an oversized role in world history. Since its genesis in the early 18th century, Britain has often been at the heart of significant global events, from empire building and world wars to scientific breakthroughs and industrial revolutions. Yet the last decade has been a turbulent one, with frailties beginning to appear in the fabric of the union. Two historical referendums, one on Scottish independence (result: remain) and another on Brexit (result: leave), have uncovered deep divisions between the three member nations – and have called into question the existence of Great Britain itself.

How it Started

Let's begin with a little history. The Kingdom of Great Britain was founded in 1707 with the joining of Scotland to England and Wales (who were themselves united around 165 years earlier) under a single parliament based in London. This was fiercely resisted by some, most notably in Scotland's Jacobite rebellions that sought to overthrow the Hanoverian monarchy

and bring back the Stuarts, but it was broadly welcomed by the Protestant elite, who actively sought to create a sense of a collective British identity. Over the next two centuries, with the expansion of the British Empire and the population fighting side-by-side on the battlefields of two world wars, Great Britain as a political union appeared to go from strength to strength.

However, as the 20th century marched on, there were grumblings of disquiet. The so-called 'British identity' began to be seen as an exclusively (and elitist) English one. Many in Wales and Scotland were feeling sidelined, with key decisions that affected their daily lives being made by a distant cohort of privately educated English MPs in Westminster. By the end of the century, a concession was needed, so two devolved national assemblies were created: the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh and the Welsh Parliament (Senedd) in Cardiff. This allowed for greater autonomy on a number of regional affairs, from education and healthcare to tourism. Further devolution followed in the early 21st century in the form of directly elected 'metro



mayors', who were given decision-making powers within their cities and urban areas. First came the Mayor of London in 2000, followed by other English metro mayors in the West Midlands, Greater Manchester, Liverpool and beyond – although none in Wales or Scotland.

How it's Going

For many, however, devolution didn't go fast or far enough. An agreement between Westminster and Edinburgh led to the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, when those resident in Scotland went to the polls to answer the simple yet existential question: 'Should Scotland be an independent country?'. If a majority voted 'Yes', Great Britain would effectively cease to exist. Ultimately, it was a narrow win for the 'No' side (55% to 45%), but that wasn't the end of the story. Hot on the heels of the Scottish referendum came another referendum, concerning whether the United Kingdom (that's Great Britain and Northern Ireland) should leave the European Union – and this time 'Yes' won the day. The margin for victory in this referendum was even narrower (52% to 48%), which meant many corners of the UK had overwhelmingly voted the other way: to remain in the EU. One of those was Scotland.

The years since the Brexit vote have only deepened resentments felt by many of those on the losing side. In the 2020 general election, the Conservative and Labour parties were trounced in Scotland by the nationalist Scottish National Party (SNP), which campaigned with the promise of seeking a second independence referendum. Across Britain, a period of extreme political and social upheaval followed, including three prime ministers in the space of six weeks and the triple-whammy economic impacts of Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war. A 'cost of living' crisis swiftly spiralled into a recession, which is predicted to last until at least 2024.

The death of Queen Elizabeth II in September 2022 was another body blow to the union. The Queen was widely seen as

a unifying figure, who spent most of her time at Buckingham Palace in London but escaped every summer to Balmoral Castle in Scotland. She was also a living link to a weightier Great Britain; her first prime minister was Winston Churchill. With the Queen's passing, the focus switched from Britain's nostalgic past to its uncertain future.

How it Ends?

There have been increasing calls in Scotland for a second independence referendum. First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has even laid out plans for how an independent Scotland might look, including details on how soon Scotland would adopt its own currency following an independence vote and that it would seek to re-join the EU at the earliest opportunity. Some polls suggest that if a new independence referendum were held today, 'Yes' would comfortably prevail. And the itch for independence isn't exclusive to Scotland: increasing calls for secession are coming from Wales, especially since the appointment of Prince William as the latest in a long line of English-born Princes of Wales. Even some parts of England are seeing growing separatist sentiments, notably in Cornwall, which claims its own Celtic cultural identity distinct from the rest of England, and (to a lesser extent) in Yorkshire, which has a similar population to Scotland and a larger economy than Wales.

However, the power to grant authority for independence referendums lies with Westminster, and there is currently no appetite for more political upheaval. Optimistic advocates of the union hope that a more stable and prosperous future will see a gradual decline in support for independence movements. But the calls are growing louder and coming from more directions; it won't be possible to ignore them forever. The union of Great Britain may be under greater threat now than it has been since the days of the Jacobite rebellions.