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How fighting for the vote exposed the hierarchy of nationalisms in the UK

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Abstract

The Irish border, and subsequently Irish politics, have been declared 'troublesome' in negotiations over Brexit – Britain's exit out of the European Union. As the BBC reports, "In 2018, the Irish border assumed a greater role in British politics than at probably any time since it was created." Yet, ongoing attempts to make sense of Brexit has led some commentators to claim that it is not troublesome Irish politics – it is not even Britain's relationship with Europe – but rather, it is the relationship between the four-nation state United Kingdom and British democracy that is the problem.

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British Democracy & Irish Politics as a Distraction

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Yet, ongoing attempts to make sense of Brexit has led some commentators to claim that it is not troublesome Irish politics – it is not even Britain's relationship with Europe – but rather, it is the relationship between the four-nation state United Kingdom and British democracy that is the problem.

Writing for *The Guardian*, Fintan O'Toole claims that the 1998 Good Friday agreement and the subsequent rise of English nationalism, as well as a host of other factors – including profound regional inequalities and contempt for the poor and vulnerable – have made the UK an unworkable entity. Brexit exposed this.

The spectacle is ugly, but at least it shows that a fissiparous four-nation state cannot be governed without radical social and constitutional change.

Accusing Irish politics of disturbing British politics and disrupting the operation of British democracy is not a new phenomenon.

In my recent article, Divided sisterhood? Nationalist Feminism and Feminist Militancy in England and Ireland in the journal, Contemporary British History [https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13619462.2018.1519415], I argued that we could see the disruptive influence of English nationalism on the operation of democracy across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland through the lens of feminist politics –

– and we could see this at exactly the point at which the women of that less-than-united kingdom were fighting for a slice of that democracy themselves.

Abstract

The generally accepted story is that British militant suffragists performed an unexpected and abrupt move away from the feminist movement and towards a fiercely jingoistic nationalist campaign once

the war began in 1914. Yet, given the nature of exchanges between Irish and British militant feminists, Irish feminists should not have been surprised by this turn from gender solidarity to English nationalism.

In this article, I argue that Irish-British militant feminist entanglements worked to expose the powerful role that English nationalism played in suffrage politics at a time when nearly all the focus was on the disruptive influence of Irish nationalism.

The point of exposure?

When English militant suffragists travelled to Ireland and threw a small hatchet at Herbert Asquith, visiting British prime minister, and John Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party – who were meeting to discuss the issue of Irish Home Rule – they sparked a tense exchange between militants on each side of the Irish Sea about the right of English women to preform militancy on Irish soil without first consulting Irish women.

Irish militant suffragists repelled English feminist interference at a time when national politics on the island were tense – requiring sensitivity.

In 'Divided sisterhood?' I argued that the English leaders of the militant suffrage movement worked to construct a fantasy nation – drawing here on the theories of Ghassan Hage in White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society [https://www.amazon.com/White-Nation-Fantasies-Supremacy-Multicultural/dp/0415929237]–

that defined the United Kingdom as a multi-cultural and multi-racial entity where the more knowing, mature, rational and superior Anglo-Saxon or English core tolerated and led the more emotional, irrational, childlike and inferior Celtic peripheries.

Constructing their fantasy nation in this way enabled English suffrage leaders, like the Pankhursts, to promote the idea of a UK-based transnational feminist solidarity across the 'four nations', while actively denying the legitimacy of separate nationalisms within that 'multi-national' construct.

What is fascinating is that English suffragettes (militant suffragists) agreed with constructions of the Irish – women as well as men – as emotional and as prone to militancy/violence and that this helped them to justify English suffragettes' use of militant and violent tactics in the campaign for the vote.

How?

As intrinsic aspects of the UK, the Celtic peripheries modelled a militancy that the more rational core could borrow – but only as a matter of expediency.

When the crisis was over, the rational core could once again reassert itself over the irrational and violent peripheries.

The onset of the catastrophic world war (1914-18) made rational leadership in a seemingly irrational and violence world an inevitable remit – one that would ward off disunity and disintegration.

Today – and Brexit?

Understanding the role that English nationalism played – and continues to play – in UK politics is essential as violence once again threatens…as Ireland continues to deal with the legacies of British imperialism on the island…as UK disunity and disintegration threatens.