

→ Mark your confusion.

→ Purposefully annotate the article (1-2 mature, thoughtful responses per page to what the author is saying)

→ Write a 250+ word response to the article.

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The great British crack-up

By *The Week* Staff, 5-6-17

Could Brexit spell the end of the United Kingdom — leaving "Little England" to go it alone? Here's everything you need to know:

Why might the U.K. break up?

Britain's decision to leave the European Union has left the kingdom's four countries deeply divided. While England and Wales voted for Brexit last June, both Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU, by majorities of 62 percent and 56 percent, respectively. Now faced with being dragged out of Europe, both are seriously reconsidering their historic position within the U.K. In March, the Scottish Parliament voted for the right to hold a second independence referendum, which could lead to Scotland seceding from the U.K. and rejoining the EU. Irish nationalists are demanding their own border poll on unification with the Republic of Ireland. If the Scots and Irish choose independence, England and Wales will stand alone. Ironically, the vote for Brexit was supposedly a vote for a resurgent Britain — one that would wrest back power and national pride from Brussels. Instead, says Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, it may have triggered "the beginning of the end of the United Kingdom."

When was the U.K. formed?

The British Isles have a complicated history, filled with conquests, rebellions, and reconquests. But the loose origins of the U.K. date back to the early 10th century, when the Anglo-Saxon King Athelstan unified England's disparate kingdoms and secured the reluctant allegiance of the Scots and the Welsh. But the relationship between England, Scotland, and Wales only became official in 1707, when the Acts of Union formally created "One Kingdom by the Name of Great Britain." That kingdom merged with Ireland in 1801 to create the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. When most of Ireland seceded in 1922, with just six Ulster counties in the north remaining under British control, that left the U.K. as we know it — stretching from Land's End in the south to John o'Groat's at the tip of Scotland.

Could a 'Scoxit' be next?

If Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has her way, yes. The country held its first independence referendum in 2014, when 55 percent of Scots voted to stay in the U.K. Sturgeon said she would hold another only if there was a "material change" in Scotland's circumstances — such as Scotland being removed from the EU against its democratic will. Scotland currently receives more than \$260 million a year in EU funding, and sends about \$16 billion in exports to the Eurozone; in addition, many Scots resent the ruling conservatives in London far more than they do the bureaucrats in Brussels. To hold another plebiscite, though, Sturgeon needs the permission of British Prime Minister Theresa May, who refuses to give it before Brexit negotiations have been completed in 2019. But momentum for independence is growing.

Why is that?

The unionists' most powerful argument for staying in the U.K. — that independence threatened Scotland's EU membership — has been flipped on its head by Brexit. Independence, though, would have its own economic costs: It would mean establishing a real border between Scotland and England, from the Solway to the Tweed, cutting the Scots off from their biggest market — and at a time when the country's income from dwindling North Sea oil has plunged 97 percent. During the first referendum campaign, says Aberdeen University's Michael Keating, Scots were told independence would be a leap in the dark, while staying in the U.K. would mean economic stability. "This time," says Keating, "they'll be offered two leaps in the dark."

What about Northern Ireland?

While Westminster frets about Scotland, Northern Ireland is quietly undergoing its own constitutional turmoil. Northern Ireland doesn't want to lose billions in regional development and farming funds from the EU — though it depends on billions in U.K. subsidies too. But Brexit poses another disturbing consequence for the Irish: the prospect of a hard, 300-mile land border between the North and independent South, which remains a member of the EU. That border wouldn't just disrupt trade and the jobs of the 30,000 people who commute between the two countries every day, but could also jeopardize the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which ended the region's three-decade Troubles. The hope was that the divisions between North and South "would eventually become redundant and float away like a sticking plaster from a wound that has healed," says Irish historian Roy Foster. "All this has been destroyed by Brexit."

Will the U.K. break up?

British politics are too volatile now for anyone to make reliable predictions. But before 2011, nationalists were just a noisy minority in Scotland. Today, they are a powerful force, and are on the cusp of a second historic independence referendum in just three years. Brits seem pessimistic about staying together: More than half think the U.K. will no longer exist in a decade in its current form, according to a BBC poll. "Historical change is like an avalanche," says British historian Norman Davies. "The starting point is a snow-covered mountainside that looks solid. All the changes take place under the surface and are rather invisible. But something is coming. What is impossible is to say when."

The future of 'Little England'

The breakup of the U.K. would raise some immediate questions for the English. Would the former world power retain its permanent seat — officially held by the U.K. — on the United Nations Security Council, and its influential positions within NATO and the World Bank? With the political and financial hub of London still in English hands, the nation's GDP would likely remain in the world's top 10. The English would also keep their military capabilities — though they would face troubling questions over their nuclear weapons, which are currently based in Scotland with no viable location to re-house them in England. After all of that, "Little England" would face its own identity crisis. Would people in Manchester or Bristol consider themselves English, or British? Would they continue to sing the U.K. national anthem at England's football games, or sing the English anthem, "Land of Hope and Glory," instead? In the post-Brexit era, says British historian Norman Davies, the English "are appallingly confused about who they are."

Response Options:

- Does anything in the article surprise you? Explain.
- Did you learn anything new about the United Kingdom? Summarize.
- Do you predict that the United Kingdom will break up? Explain.
- Choose a passage and respond to it.