

The UK is in the midst of a national nervous breakdown

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What a mess. Just when you thought that the governing class could do no more to fail in their custodianship of Britain's political settlement, it surprises us all. And let's not forget the role of "the people" in creating the current impasse.

The result of the [UK general election](#) has made it clear that the nation – the people, the politicians, the media, everyone – have surpassed themselves.

Theresa May, the prime minister, chose to go to the country in order to create "unity" in parliament and unite the country behind her diamond-hard Brexit strategy. That has not happened. The result reveals a country still divided along the lines of age, education, income and geography. Any hopes that people were coming back together after the division and unhappiness of last year's Brexit referendum have been dashed. And, having squandered a working majority in parliament, May now seems prepared to put the whole [Northern Irish peace process](#) at risk in order to struggle on in a minority government with the help of the Democratic Unionist Party.

May's arrogance and hubris may be the immediate cause of these troubles but what we are seeing now is the effect of many chickens coming home to roost. The UK is the creation of armed force, global expansion, and the projection of power around the world. It was the beating heart of a great empire that brought enormous wealth for the few and knitted a people together in a shared identity. That identity was underpinned by military prowess, material progress and a belief in the superiority of UK institutions, with a centralisation of power in one of the world's great cities, London.



The unpleasant truth kicks in. PA

Today, the empire is long gone and so has the shared belief in the UK and what it means. The military prowess is not what it was, the nation's material progress has been eclipsed by that of its trading partners, and the belief in the superiority of UK institutions has taken a battering.

Many of the drivers of this decline go back over a century but more recently to the impact of Thatcherism. Labour's well-intentioned but ultimately fudged programme of [devolution and constitutional reform](#) has also driven the constituent nations of the UK apart.

In [Northern Ireland](#), the Troubles may have ended but there is no agreement on the future of the province and a significant minority of its population wants to leave the UK. Despite the most recent electoral setbacks, it's also only a matter of time before the [Scottish National Party](#) finds the opportunity to restage 2014's independence referendum. And while there is currently no significant support for independence in Wales, Plaid Cymru pushes a strong cultural nationalist message that has been taken up by many in Welsh Labour as well.

The elephant in the room in all of this is England. It was English voters, particularly in the South-East, who showed the most enthusiasm for the Thatcher project and voted in sufficient numbers to effectively impose it on the rest of the UK in the 1980s. And it was the [English question](#) that Labour ignored when it drew up its devolution plans a decade later.

In the absence of a legitimate democratic stage on which to express itself, the last decade has seen English nationalism take on a darker, more anti-system tone. It drove the vote to leave the EU and continues to poison political discourse today. It now seems impossible to provide a political expression for English identity that does not drown out the voices of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This is an apparently intractable question and potentially fatal for the United Kingdom.

Divided at a crucial moment

Last year's Leave vote also fractured the UK's most important external links and further weakened its already diminishing influence in the world. Yet voters, often admired for their pragmatism and tolerance in the past, do not seem unduly troubled by that fact.

May's embrace of the hardest of Brexit strategies – leaving the single market and the customs union in order to slice off the influence of the European Court of Justice and control immigration – reflected this reality. It offered voters a certain clarity of purpose, albeit at considerable economic cost.

This electoral humiliation is a rejection of May's vision for a hard Brexit – but where does it leave the nation? The prime minister remains in power, for now at least, without a clear direction to take and with just days to go before negotiations begin with Europe.

So, as the dust settles, we are left with a prime minister who must now negotiate Brexit at the head of a minority government that will be propped up by some of the most socially conservative and sectarian politicians in Western Europe and will inevitably be at the mercy of its most disgruntled and xenophobic backbenchers.

And when she gets the chance to be debriefed on her electoral meltdown, May will see evidence of an electorate that has doubled-down on its position in the Brexit referendum. Thus, in constituencies where there was a majority for Remain, such as in [Bristol West](#), Labour easily exceeded the national swing towards the party. Yet barely 40 miles away, in pro-Brexit [Yeovil](#), the Conservatives increased their already substantial majority over the pro-Remain Liberal Democrats. And we see the same pattern around the country.

UK voters are estranged from one another, convinced of the virtue of their own positions, and in no mood to compromise with their fellow citizens. At the same time, the UK's governing class is paralysed and its politicians can see no further than their own survival. The UK's national nervous breakdown continues.