How united does a country have to be?

Patrick Riordan SJ

United Kingdom, *United* States, *United* Nations, European *Union*, Soviet *Union* – notions of unity and union are frequently found in names for political entities. This seems to express an important and central political value. But what kind of value is it? What does it mean, or entail? How much unity should a union have? How much disunity jeopardises the survival of a union? As Brexit negotiations are ongoing, and people bemoan the loss of unity, Patrick Riordan SJ considers how the wish for greater unity among the electorate and politicians could undermine the important political values of diversity and equality.

What degree of unity is appropriate for a political entity, a city, a state, a federation? This was a question on which Aristotle took issue with his teacher, Plato, whose views are represented by Socrates in *The Republic*. For Aristotle, Plato aspired to an excess of unity. He expected the best city to exhibit a degree of coherence and cohesion analogous to that found in a human person. In the one individual there might be found a plurality of drives and interests such as those of the physical body, the passionate spirit and the rational mind, but these could and should be harmonised under the rule of reason. Such a model of unity was applied to the city with its different elements that could also be unified if subject to rule by a knowledgeable authority. Aristotle rejected this vision of unity. He thought it would destroy the distinctively political, namely the combination of many and diverse human individuals in a common project, the pursuit together of a decent life commensurate with human aspirations. Two significant points from his critique are particularly relevant for our situation today: first, the assertion of plurality, and second, the denial of a unique authority.[1]

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The two are related. There is not and cannot be a single human individual who knows all that needs to be known about the good of the whole community. The philosopher king is a fantasy. Yes, there can be competent and qualified professionals, but no one individual can know what is conducive to the well-being of each one and of all together. Such knowledge is not available, since people themselves can know in their own situations what they want on their way to achieving their fulfilment. They don't need a ruler in every case to tell them what is good for them. This denial of the eminent knower is linked to the assertion of plurality. The members of a city are many and varied, but in a fundamental sense they are equal in their rule of themselves and in their entitlement to participate in the rule of the city.

While Aristotle thought that the unity in the city demanded by Plato was excessive, many today would find Aristotle's own proposals concerning unity excessive. He proposed that a political entity would have to agree on certain things. There would have to be a shared view on what is good, just and law-abiding, achieved through reasoned speech; the unifying factor would be agreement on the good as that which ultimately fulfils human beings; and thirdly, attention would have to be paid to the formation and training of citizens to enable them to achieve that fulfilment. It is possible to recognise the validity of what Aristotle sketches without endorsing his version completely. Politics today does not expect agreement on what is the ultimate fulfilment of humans, but it does expect agreement on how a political community might go about managing its conflicts. The contemporary version of Aristotle's reasoned speech is negotiation, conciliation and the

articulation of resolutions in laws, contracts and treaties. The business of politics today focuses more on rights than on the good, but the civil, political, economic and cultural rights we strive to uphold reflect achieved agreement on a minimum that human well-being requires. Similarly, law-makers today do not see it as their role to make people morally good, but they strive to eliminate practices and conditions that are harmful to human welfare.[2] The present concentration of concern about knife crime, for example, is not only a wish to protect victims but to deliver those young people tempted to carry weapons from the circumstances that motivate them to do so. Their well-being is also at stake.

For a viable political entity some degree of unity is important. That we are in agreement about how to go about managing conflict, that we come to a shared view on what is the minimum that must be assured to everyone, and that we can defend that minimum in terms of the conditions for well-being and ultimately flourishing, are the modern versions of what Aristotle spelled out in his *Politics*. We have legislatures, such as parliament, in which the debates about what is needed are conducted. We agree that this is the way to manage our conflicts, even if we are in dispute about the preferred outcomes. The ongoing disputes should not surprise us: they are the inevitable consequence of our plurality and diversity, the fact that our interests are varied and not necessarily compatible, and our perspectives and ambitions are similarly pluriform. Disagreement persists even within the framework of agreement about how we will manage our conflicts. And we agree further, since the debates cannot continue indefinitely, about how decisions can be taken, and how they are to be implemented and enforced if need be. After all, problems must be addressed in a timely fashion, they cannot wait until all questions have been answered. This is the point of voting and allowing majorities to settle controverted matters.

The founding generation of the American republic shared the conviction that political parties were incompatible with the kind of political rule in freedom from domination that they envisaged. They accepted Rousseau's view that a political party that achieved power would be tempted to elevate its interests to the position of the general interest. The common good of the whole country would be replaced by the restricted vision of common good contained in the ideology of a single party. Thomas Jefferson is frequently quoted for his description of party allegiance as 'the last degradation of a free and moral agent' and claimed that 'if I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all'.[3] The discovery of the necessity of collaborating with like-minded colleagues if he was to achieve any of his objectives led him and others to accept in practice the inevitability of political parties, even if in Jefferson's case at least, the view persisted that rational and moral principle was respected only by his side.[4] Parties were useful for the clarification and prioritisation of issues as well as for the rigour of challenge to and testing of policy proposals. The question of unity arose again for any political party, and manifestos served the purpose of signalling the minimum degree of unity required for cohesion. Many party members would find themselves in coalition with others in the party with different priorities. One might concentrate on an economic policy while another gave pre-eminence to a security issue, or a matter of public health or education provision. Each remained committed to the common project because that was the condition for the achievement of any of their objectives. Such unity is fragile and every political party has officers specifically responsible for discipline to ensure cohesion in speech and action. Just as at the national level there is danger that the common good of the whole might be replaced by the interests of a single party, so there is a constant danger that the shared interests of any political party be hijacked by the ideology of a single faction. How much disunity the union can tolerate is a constant question for political parties.

Some political parties are inclined to an excessive demand for unity, depending on the ideology they embrace. Some civic republican parties influenced by Rousseau can aspire to a unity rooted in the pre-existing unity of the people, that they hope to see realised in political institutions. Similarly, nationalists of various degrees predicate their politics on the assumption of a single nation that lends them the aspiration to a unity of identity and destiny. Marxists can be inspired by the aspiration to a future socialist regime in which the fundamental conflict between the propertied class and the property-less will be resolved and replaced by the unified interests of a classless society. Despite their differences, such parties often advocate an excess of unity, but history shows that they rarely succeed in exemplifying within their own ranks the kind of unity they promote.

Given the present turmoil of dispute within and between parties, and between the government and parliament, in relation to the United Kingdom's decision to withdraw from the European Union, it will not surprise us if frustration with disunity will lead to a clamour for a restoration of unity at every level. This frustration could provoke a challenge to the two Aristotelian principles outlined above. To the principle that there is no single knowledgeable authority to put an end to conflict, we may hear the claim that in fact there is one to be found in a charismatic leader, or in an ideology (whether nationalist, socialist, or liberal). To the premiss that our natural condition is one of plurality and diversity we may expect the contrary claim that we are uniform and homogeneous in our communities, so the preferred situation is Hungary for Hungarians, Czech for Czechs, Britain for the British, viewing pluralism as a threat to our proper unity.

Some authors analyse the current situation by relying on the notion of populism.[5] This is not a helpful term for analysis. But in those phenomena that are labelled as populism we see the same trends emerging in different contexts: the first trend is to deny diversity and plurality as values in order to affirm unity; the second trend is to assert the singularity of ideology and authority as the guarantors of unity. In the face of the pressure brought to bear by these trends, it is important that people who have enjoyed the benefits of life in freedom should remain committed to principles that Aristotle formulated as fundamental for the political common good: we are many, different but equal; we all have something to say, to contribute to the pursuit of the good life, and that would be jeopardised by the assertion of a single source of knowledge about what is good and worth pursuing.

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[1] See Aristotle, *The Politics*, Bk II c 2: 'I am referring to the dictum of Socrates, "It is best that the state should be as much of a unity as possible." But surely this is not true. A state which becomes progressively more and more of a unity will cease to be a state at all. Plurality of numbers is natural in a state ... For the state consists not merely of men, but of different kinds of men; you cannot make a state out of men who are all alike.' I rely on the thought of Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics*. Second Edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), for this view of politics and the need to defend it in Aristotelian terms.

[2] I make this argument at greater length in 'Aristotle and the Politics of the Common Good Today', in *Together for the Common Good: Towards a National Conversation*, edited by Nicholas Sagovsky and Peter McGrail, (London: SCM Press, 2015), pp. 31-48.

[3] Quoted in Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), p. 210.

[4] *Ibid*., pp. 230-1.

[5] E.g. William A. Galston, *Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).