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## Passport to Padstow

**Bomb threats to fish restaurants, a shadowy Cornish liberation army and police raids. What's going on at the end of the A30? Is it just another eccentric English comedy or is there rebellion in the air?**

Richard Johnson

Don't tell Mike Chappell he lives in "the Southwest". He lives in Cornwall. That's not "Devon and Cornwall" – as in the Devon and Cornwall Police Authority, the Devon and Cornwall Probation Area, or the Devon and Cornwall Caravan Club – just Cornwall. Devon doesn't come before Cornwall in the alphabet, for crying out loud. When Cornwall qualified for a subsidy from the EU, it was administered by the South West of England Regional Development Agency. In Devon. Then it went and charged Cornwall for the privilege. It makes a proud Cornishman like Chappell spit.

He's stuck in tourist traffic on the A30, telling me – in detail – that he carries the MC1R, or "Celtic", gene. And that he can trace his ancestry back to the bloody warriors who came to Britain when it was still joined to mainland Europe. Being Cornish and Celtic is, to Chappell, about more than wearing a kilt and supporting France when they play England at rugby. It's about a sense of separateness. As his T-shirt says, "Cornwall is next to England – just like Wales". Which is why Chappell wants independence.

He's still behind a caravan. And he's late for his open meeting in Redruth on "Cornishness". People have become more interested in Cornishness since last June, when a terrorist organisation called the Cornish National Liberation Army (CNLA) sent an e-mail threatening the celebrity chefs Rick Stein and Jamie Oliver. The e-mail, entitled "directive number one", said the incomers – and their restaurants' customers – were legitimate targets in the CNLA's campaign to remove the "imperialist English flag of St George" from Cornwall. It was followed by a fire at the Redruth brewery. In another e-mail, sent via an Arabic web-hosting service based in Egypt, the CNLA claimed they were testing incendiary devices in "an urban environment". If, indeed, Redruth constitutes "an urban environment". But the whole business has put Chappell in a tricky position. As a former policeman, he's a great respecter of authority, and he doesn't want to prejudice the pension. But he's no fool. The CNLA is attracting a lot more press attention than his open meetings on Cornishness.

Press attention isn't always good. "The IRA?" asked the headline of one tabloid. "No – the Ooh-Arrr-A." The article ridiculed the Cornish for not being able to run a proper terrorist organisation, and gave instructions on how to distinguish the CNLA from the IRA, Eta and Al-Qaeda. A member of the CNLA would, according to the article, smell of scrumpy, and start any conversation with: "Yer not from roun' these parts, are yerrrr?" According to Chappell, it's typical of the racism he encounters every day.

As the traffic slows to a halt, Chappell pulls out a letter he wrote to the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) on behalf of a bus driver who had heard someone calling the Cornish "a bunch of pissed-off, straw-sucking, inbred wurzels". But the CRE wouldn't help. What with the Cornish not being a "race" and all. Some have suggested reclaiming "the W-word" for the Cornish, the way the Afro-Americans reclaimed "the N-word" – as in "Yo, Wurzel, what's up?" But not Chappell. He doesn't see the funny side at all.

And nor, it seems, do the Devon and Cornwall police. Since the CNLA's threats, they have pulled in a significant number of suspects for questioning. They have to be seen to take threats of terrorism seriously. After all, the CNLA's e-mails have claimed they are receiving "substantial" funding from pressure groups in the US, and practical advice from a group responsible for the arson campaign on holiday homes in Wales.

Hugh Rowe, a member of the Cornish Stannary parliament – the original governing body of Cornwall's tin-

mining community – was taken into custody on suspicion of the illegal possession of a firearm. All because the CNLA talked about having Fifteen Cornwall – Jamie Oliver’s restaurant in Watergate Bay – “in their sights”. As a “stannator”, Rowe is regularly involved in “tackling English cultural aggression in Cornwall”, which can include removing English Heritage signs from tourist destinations. But that involves bolt-cutters. Not a sawn-off shotgun.

The police pulled apart his Camborne home and left with a balaclava (“which I use for fishing or when I’m out with the pigeons,” says Rowe), three flags of St Piran and a book on the commissioning of the twin towers in New York. “I got it in an antique shop in Camborne for £2.” Rowe was released without charge, but the case is still being investigated. He insists his phone is being tapped. “I think the raid was ordered by central government,” he says.

Dave Eddy, a labourer from Padstow, was taken into custody after allegedly making a threatening call to Fifteen Cornwall, demanding to know how many Cornish people worked there. Eddy told the Western Morning News that, while he is happy to be called a Cornish nationalist, he doesn’t condone violence. And he emphatically denied being a member of the CNLA.

The Cornish do have a history of insurgency. In 1980, An Gof – a terrorist organisation named after Michael An Gof, a leader of the Cornish rebellion of 1497 – claimed responsibility for an explosion at a court in St Austell. And, later, for a fire at a hairdresser’s in Penzance, which An Gof allegedly thought was a branch of the Bristol & West. Monopoly capital and all that. An Gof has now, supposedly, changed its name to CNLA. But the CNLA aren’t the only little nationalists looking to devolve from modern Britain. In the Lake District, the self-styled Popular Liberation Army of Westmorland claims it has begun a campaign of arson against holiday homes. In a letter to the press it pledged: “We will one day see an end to the occupation of Westmorland by newcomers, holiday-home owners and the encroaching leech-like scum of that ilk.”

Historically, Cornwall has more right to its independence than Westmorland. The 14th-century Mappa Mundi defines Britain as “Scotia, Wallia, Anglia et Cornubia”. And as late as 1543 it was written that “Britain is divided into four parts, whereof the one is inhabited by Englishmen, the other of Scots, the third of Welshmen and the fourth of Cornish people” (Polydore Vergil, cited by Payton, 1992, 57). Historically, Cornwall is a duchy. Not a county. And it never “officially” became part of England. So it’s distinct from England, but not officially or constitutionally recognised by it. An anomaly.

To those of us in Scotia, Wallia and Anglia, Cornwall is a state of mind – where life passes by a little more slowly, and a little more sunnily, than anywhere else. Every year, 5m people go there on holiday and spend over £1.5 billion in the process. Everyone wants to live there (or own a second house there), according to a recent survey of second-homers, which is why prices are so high. But there’s another story, one that the tourist board likes to keep to itself.

The tinning has finished. So has the clay. And the quotas have all but finished off the fishing. Which is why average earnings in Cornwall are the lowest of any county in England. It’s one of four areas in the UK that qualify for “objective 1” funding, which means the average income is below 75% of the average EU income. Yet the house prices are nearly as high as London’s. It doesn’t have a city or a university. The result is widespread disaffection with the world of capital at the end of the A30. There is real frustration in enclaves of money, like Rock and Fowey, where public-school kids idle away the summer – and locals wait the tables. And Padstow, once a down-at-heel fishing port at the far end of the Waterloo-to-Padstow line, now serves up roast tronçons of turbot to tourists – for £32.50. Rick Stein insists local businesses benefit from the “rosy glow” of publicity from his restaurants in Padstow. But the locals don’t seem convinced.

The place is full of hostile, possibly malicious stories: that Stein didn’t contribute to the Cornwall Air Ambulance, wouldn’t queue for drinks, and that his windows have been smashed more than once. “I’ve heard rumours,” says Rev Barry Kinsmen, the former rector of St Issey in Padstow. “But this all needs cooling down. The real issue is affordable housing in the town.”

The local economy is one reason today’s meeting about Cornishness is so well attended. It’s at Murdock House in Redruth, the first house in the world to be lit by gas, which is why Chappell booked it. He’s invited proud Cornish folk who know it was Richard Pearse, a Cornish farmer, who first flew unaided (not Wilbur and Orville Wright); and that it was Richard Trevithick, a Cornish engineer, who invented the locomotive

(not George Stephenson).

In an upstairs room they complain of injustice. “The media portrays us as thickos,” says one man. “They give us ‘Mumerset’ accents on TV – that’s anything from East Anglia to Long John Silver – and make out we’re stupid.” Accent in Cornwall is a big thing. As the language is struggling, it’s an indicator of nationality. “Our accent is being diluted,” says another. “Our youngsters sound like they’re in EastEnders.” If, indeed, there are any youngsters left. Most of them headed up the A30 long ago. Nobody speaks out in favour of the CNLA, but everyone understands its motives. Graham Hart, a musician whose song This One’s for the Boys is the unofficial anthem of the Cornish Pirates, makes light of the furore with a new song, called CNLA, set to the tune of YMCA. He also aims to get Cornwall into the 2010 Commonwealth Games, promising to turn up with a team whether he’s accepted or not.

But nobody east of the border takes the idea of Cornishness seriously. Stannator Nigel Hicks thinks it’s time they did: “It appears wholly acceptable for the national press to refer to Cornwall and the Cornish in derogatory terms, but wholly unacceptable for the Cornish to hold legitimate aspirations relating to their non-English identity. These aspirations, despite being legitimately held and founded upon internationally accepted principles relating to human and minority rights, are seen by sectors of the majority as a manifestation of extremism, fanaticism, fascism or anti-English racism.”

Hicks was one of three members of the Cornish Stannary Parliament who removed English Heritage signs from Tintagel and Pendennis Castles in protest of the use of the word “English”. His fellow stannator Colin Murley called it “the first strike in the Cornish cultural revolution”. Murley, who is currently trying to piece together a High Court case against the government for discriminating against the Cornish, says bias against the Celtic nations “has become institutionalised”.

Men and women at the meeting take it in turns to say that Cornwall – along with Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Brittany and the Isle of Man – is one of the “Celtic nations”. It has a native history that predates the arrival of the English by several thousand years. It has its own sovereign parliament – the Stannary – and its own language. It is a country, not a county. With a grudge against the English dating back to 1549. It’s a brave man who’d suggest the phrase “inbred wurzel” was just an innocent bit of fun.

New Labour seemed happy to champion devolution within Britain. And the first region to vote in a referendum on whether to set up an elected regional assembly, in 2004, was the northeast. But when they overwhelmingly rejected the proposal, the government took it as proof that there was no support for regional government anywhere else. And cancelled the other two planned referendums, in the northwest and Yorkshire and the Humber. But in Cornwall they don’t see it like that. Nationalists of all colours pointed to the 50,000 names on a petition calling for a referendum on Cornish devolution. That was one-tenth of the people in the county. But not enough to persuade Westminster. John Prescott admitted his plans for regional devolution had suffered an “emphatic defeat” in the northeast – the number of people voting against the plans was 696,519 (78%), while 197,310 (22%) voted in favour.

He wasn’t going to put his neck on the line again.

There is disillusionment in Cornwall – and a sense of being overlooked. Cornwall has never had the special treatment that governments give out when it’s election time. Quite the opposite. So, although the Liberal Democrats were returned on a commitment to a Cornish assembly, they have only managed to deliver a single unitary authority. Which means that the county’s local councils will become a single, central council, responsible for roads and education as well as leisure, environmental health and housing. Even though 80% of people said they didn’t want it, it happened anyway.

But the party campaigning for Cornish devolution – Mebyon Kernow (MK) – isn’t making any political capital from the disillusionment. Although MK does well in the local elections (its leader Dick Cole polled 76% in the last local elections), it’s still to elect its first MP. Its message (that Cornwall needs devolution, not local government reform) just doesn’t seem to be getting through. And Cole is still only part time. So Cornishness, and a growing sense of Cornwall’s Celtic history, still seems to amount to little more than so much flag-waving. Cole doesn’t think the CNLA will help the cause. “A man came up to me and said, ‘Look at the Free Wales Army in the 1960s. It was because of them that Plaid Cymru won the Carmarthen by-election in 1966.’ I said, ‘Well, the reason Plaid won the election was they had an outstanding candidate

fighting his eighth election. He was speaking at three public meetings a night. He had supporters bussed in from all over Britain, sleeping in village halls. That's why he won. Not because a few people were running round in balaclavas in the woods."

Cole sees MK as the real Cornish nationalists. "We want to support the Cornish language," says Cole. "The CNLA obviously aren't Cornish speakers because their statement referred to 'the Kernewek', meaning the Cornish people. That's the wrong word. It's a basic error, and it makes me question how long they've been involved in campaigning for Cornwall." Cole would support some forms of non-violent direct action. Papering over estate agents' windows, for instance. Not the violent direct action of the CNLA. "It's two or three clueless people with nothing better to do than cause trouble."

It's not just the terrorists that MK takes issue with. It's the nationalists like Chappell, who take refuge in the small print of constitutional history. "They say we don't need to do anything because we're already independent," says Cole. "They take refuge in medieval legalistic rights – the fact that nobody has acted on them since 1508 seems to be irrelevant to them. But it's nice. They don't have to knock on doors or write press releases because they're already independent. All it takes is the government to recognise our rights."

Cornwall does feel separate from the rest of England. It's not the flag of St George, but the silver-and-black flag of St Piran that flies from the offices of the government and the houses of the people. The silver represents tin, the black raw ore. It's a poetic expression of Cornish pride. And it's everywhere, as more and more Cornish people choose to paint their regional discontents in the colours of their Celtic tradition.

It makes sense. Well, look at the Welsh, with their nice new assembly. But a Welsh referendum on devolving full law-making powers to the assembly – a status given to the Scottish parliament in 1997 – isn't expected until 2011. And, even if it happened, there would need to be a lot of "nation-building" before independence was an option. The Welsh look jealously at the Scots, with their own parliament. And, if Alex Salmond has his way, the promise of a referendum in the lifetime of this parliament.

But Scotland isn't a blueprint for Celtic devolution. It's a special case. It didn't lose its own unique legal system when the Act of Union was signed in 1707, and it retained its own church, the Church of Scotland being Presbyterian. The country's universities have also ensured the development of an independent academic culture, and allowed Edinburgh and Glasgow to grow into leading European cities. Cornwall clearly has a lot to learn from its Celtic cousins.

The trucks are still on site, as are the workmen. But the Welsh National Eisteddfod in Mold is opening in two hours. Cymuned representatives are setting up a stall across from the clog-makers and the flag-sellers. Cymuned, or "community", have been called all sorts of things – most notably, in the Daily Mail, the Welsh Taliban. But they think of themselves as "a community pressure group". And Cornish nationalists such as Chappell are keen to hear what they've got to say. After all, Wales is a Celtic country, with a history of terrorism. Meibion Glyndwr – or "the sons of Glyndwr" – attacked over 200 properties in Wales, in protest against rural homes being sold as holiday cottages to incomers. But the authorities were too heavy-handed. Aran Jones, Cymuned's chief executive, remembers the police hauling people out of bed in the early morning just because they'd worn

T-shirts saying "Ta Ta Tai Haf" – "Goodbye, Holiday Home". Meibion Glyndwr were left looking like the champions of the people.

It's too early to say if the CNLA will come to be seen as the Cornish Meibion Glyndwr. "But the fact of the matter is," says Jones, "that even if the CNLA is two people in a caravan, it is important that it's taken seriously." And, as Jones suggests, the Devon and Cornwall police would be well advised to proceed with caution. "If they are heavy-handed," says Jones, "the way they were in Gwynedd, they will advance the cause of Cornish nationalism by about 20 years."

Wales, further along the path to independence, is engaged in what Jones calls "nation building". It is defining its nationhood – and its language. There's a new Modern Welsh Dictionary, for the growing number of students of Welsh. It is both conversational (My name is Aled – Aled dw i / Aled ydy'r enw) and contemporary, so Welsh speakers won't need to resort to English to say they're sending an e-mail (e-bost) or using the internet (rhyngwyd). But the truth is, all is not well.

Migration has continued to swell, pushing up property prices in predominantly Welsh-speaking areas, forcing people – especially the young – to move out. This is putting pressure on the language, which can't survive simply as a second language spoken by the middle classes in the affluent south. Cymuned wants Wales to be Wales, and not an emasculated "England West". That means Welsh as the first language.

The Welsh have been oppressed in a variety of ways since their conquest in the late Middle Ages, including the legislative relegation of the language to a secondary status within Wales, and the practice of the "Welsh not" in the 19th century, which led to beating children for speaking their native tongue at school. And it's taking years to undo the damage. As part of the process, Cymuned has taken to knocking on the doors of incomers and asking them if they have thought of learning Welsh. If not, why not?

Cymuned calls the incomers who can't be bothered to learn Welsh "the colonists". It's provocative. But Cymuned wants to provoke action. "This isn't about the natural disintegration of a language over 40 years," says Jones. "The numbers speaking Welsh are pretty much the same. What has changed is the inward migration. The number of people moving into Welsh-speaking areas who don't speak Welsh." He pauses. He really doesn't want to say this? "It just happens that 99% of those people are English."

The Cornish say the same thing. The last native Cornish speaker was Dolly Pentreath, who died in 1777. Her last words, so the story goes, were "Me ne vidn cewsel Sawsnek" ("I don't want to speak English"). The language dwindled, but it never died out completely. And, as the Cornish-speakers say, Hebrew recovered from worse. It's now recognised as a "regional or minority" language by Westminster, and, with 300 speakers, qualifies for a £600,000 development grant. Which is a mixed blessing. It now has four different written systems.

To continue "nation building", Cymuned is taking its case to Unesco and comparing the plight of the indigenous Welsh to the native peoples of Australia and North America. It has come up with a series of controversial proposals, from controls on traffic in second homes to language qualifications for incomers. "The home secretary is proposing stronger measures than Cymuned have in mind to tie language in with citizenship," says Jones. "And no one could claim that the English language is in danger."

It's hard being an activist these days. "In the 1960s," says Jones, "a guy called Ffred Ffrancis climbed a telecommunications mast in mid-Wales to protest about multinational capital. And he got sent to jail. On the 40th anniversary he climbed it again because things hadn't improved. The police ran up and said, 'Ffred! How are you doing? Do you want us to wait?'" The media want more from a story these days. When media-savvy organisations like the CNLA come along, they have to accept their share of the blame.

In Scotland it was no different. A small nationalist group, Scottish Watch, attracted so much media attention with its threats to "white settlers" that the Scottish National Liberation Army launched its Flame Campaign, sending fake letter bombs to the estate agents – and government officers – helping immigrants to find homes in Scotland. It was a great way to get press – what fringe nationalist could resist? The real surprise is that there aren't more terrorist organisations out there doing the same thing.

But the move towards independence in Scotland seems to have quietened terrorist unrest. In October, "English out" was daubed in white paint on the walls of a Highland cottage, alongside "Sìol nan Gaidheal" (Seed of the Gael), a nationalist cultural group. But it's hardly revolutionary. The little nationalists in Scotland seem to be losing the centuries-old conviction that England's ruling classes are to blame for every Scottish ill. Things are changing – slowly.

Ask Frank and Sandra Walters. Back in 1999, the English couple (backed by the Commission for Racial Equality, CRE, now part of the Equality and Human Rights Commission) claimed villagers in Clarencefield, in Dumfries and Galloway, had run a campaign to drive them out of the village. On one visit to the village pub, Flower of Scotland was played 16 times. After reaching an out-of-court settlement of £4,000 plus costs, they headed south to live across the border. Since then, there's been only one other CRE-backed case, and complaints of anti-Englishness now form just 4% of the commission's Scottish workload. But anti-Englishness hasn't gone away – up to 25% of the English living in Scotland claim to have been harassed or discriminated against by ordinary Scots, according to a Glasgow University study. But it's on the decline. And, since devolution, 62% of English immigrants say they feel more at ease.

But because of national unrest within Britain, the Union is now a big issue in England as well. The question

of how Scottish devolution is funded (the so-called Barnett formula) and how Scottish MPs at Westminster are able to vote on laws that only affect England (the West Lothian question) still demands an answer – especially now that the English have the impression that the Scottish are receiving much better public services as a result of devolution. But what would a devolved England look like?

England isn't a "homogeneous" country. And if Cornwall, or Westmorland, secedes, where next? Devon is already making noises about its Celtic roots, its flag and its Stannary parliament. Maybe we should be done with it all, and go back to Mercia, Wessex, Northumberland and East Anglia. It has to stop somewhere, or else we'll be campaigning for parish-council autonomy. In whatever direction devolution now moves, a process is under way. It is under way in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It might even be under way in England. And it's going to prove difficult to stop.

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