

## POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE U.K.

One thing Brits really enjoy is whining about Americans calling the whole of the United Kingdom “England.” It’s usually an opener into some diatribe about Americans being xenophobic and ethnocentric.

Truth be told, a lot of Brits have a rather dismal understanding of their country and its constituent parts – try asking one whether Scotland is in the United Nations, or whether Northern Ireland is in Britain.



So, here we go. The United Kingdom is a country. It gets to do all sorts of neat things, like be in the United Nations, and the European Union and stuff. The Brits are the lucky owners of the longest official country name in the world: “The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.” So far so good. If anyone else looks like they’re going to beat them, I think they could always stick a “Democratic Republic of” in there. Now for the complicated bits.

The United Kingdom consists of Britain and Northern Ireland, and is governed from London. “Britain,” or more properly “Great Britain,” means the mainland countries: England, Scotland and Wales. Are these proper countries? Well, that’s a lot trickier to answer than you might think. In most political affairs, they behave as one country (the U.K.) but in some other things, notably sport, you’ll find separate English, Scottish and Welsh teams. Within Britain, Scotland and Wales do have their own regional mini-parliaments with some legislative power, but generally they’re told what to do by the main U.K. government, based in London. If you wanted to, you could see them as state

legislature and the U.K. as federal, though in reality they don’t have as much autonomy as the American states do.

Given that Scotland and Wales have their own pretend governments, you’d think that England would be pissed off about not having one too. The truth is that, given that England encompasses more than 80 percent of the U.K. population, the U.K. parliament usually adequately reflects what England wants.

To cover some popular misconceptions: Scotland and Wales are quite definitely not in England. English, Scottish and Welsh people are all British, but only people who come from England are English. These disparities can be equated reasonably closely to the interweaving of the United States - calling a Welshman “English” is pretty similar to calling a Texan an Alaskan. At least, it would be if Texans hated Alaskans.

And then there’s Northern Ireland. This is the northeast section of the island of Ireland, around Belfast. The rest of Ireland is a separate country, officially called “Eire” (its Irish name) but quite often just called “Ireland” (its English name). Northern Ireland is governed by the United Kingdom. How did the U.K. end up governing a small chunk of its next-door neighbour? Well, the whole of Ireland was given to England by Pope Adrian in the twelfth century, as a gift. He’d been given it the Christmas before by a distant relative and it had just been languishing in a cupboard. The Irish were pretty furious about this, and fought periodically against British rule until the First World War, when a bloody attempt at revolt provoked Britain to create two parliaments - one for Northern Ireland, and another one for the rest. The country of southern Ireland, Eire, became independent in 1937 but Northern Ireland remained a British protectorate. Quite a few people in Northern Ireland were rather angry about this, and have been letting off bombs now and again to remind the Brits of their unhappiness. The pro/anti-British divide in Northern Ireland is very much down religious lines — the Protestants want to stay with the Brits, and the Catholics don’t. Historically the population has been predominantly Protestant, but the Catholics are breeding like only Catholics can and eventually the balance will inevitably swing. Like Scotland and Wales, Northern Ireland has its own mini-parliament.

The upshot of all this is that the terms “United Kingdom” and “Britain” are pretty much interchangeable. The people who live in the U.K. are always called the British, rather than United Kingdomish. Or United Kingdomites. This, coupled with the fact that “The United Kingdom” is a crap name for a country, means that the whole country is more often called “Britain.” I don’t think anyone cares that they’re subconsciously leaving out Northern Ireland. It’s just some angry bearded men, a couple of bombs and the remains of the De Lorean factory.