

Citizenship, diversity and national identity

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This article explores the issues of citizenship, diversity and national identity in the context of the introduction of citizenship education in the UK. It considers the historical context of national identity in the UK and notes that the 'British national identity has historically implied diversity'. It also analyses the views of British national identity in the speeches of major contemporary politicians including Gordon Brown and the challenge they provide for citizenship education

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Yes, there could have been more stress on diversity in the original national curriculum for citizenship, the report that preceded it and the first QCA guidances that followed it.¹ But they were written before the terrorist bombings which to press and politicians, at least, have given urgency to the matter – although I think a misleading one. Terrorism does not arise from diversity but from a very specific ideology which is targeted, among others, for quite obvious reasons on the UK. I am no more surprised that some few British Muslims, or Muslims resident in Britain, actively support Al Qaeda, than I was that somewhat more British once actively supported to the lengths of sedition the former Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Also many of us once thought that the carefully worded prescript in the national curriculum was enough: 'KS 3 para. 1. "Pupils should be taught about ... (b) the diversity of national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the United Kingdom and the need for mutual respect and understanding"'. And, talking of history, in KS 4 'the origins and implications of diversity'. Is this too brief? We had prided ourselves, in David Blunkett's words, on being 'light touch', to give teachers the flexibility and freedom to adapt these general prescriptions to varying circumstances. I echoed 'light touch' fervently seeing it as basic to freedom itself – philosophically basic to the citizenship curriculum. But I grant that 'light touch' has been misinterpreted, sometimes innocently, sometimes willfully, as meaning that some parts of the curriculum (particularly the difficult and contentious parts!) need only be lightly touched upon. So greater guidance is needed, which can now be found in Sir Keith Ajegbo's sensible proposals.

However, all day long, in the important conference of which this paper was a part, we seemed obsessed with one form of diversity – the Islamic – an obsession not surprisingly shared by many Muslims too. But I want to broaden the picture, if all forms of diversity and an understanding of British history are to be considered.

That every nation *should* constitute a state was an idea and an ideal of nineteenth century European nationalism, arising from the French Revolution, and which spread throughout the world. Here in Britain we used to remember vividly the struggles of the Poles, the Hungarians

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and Garibaldi's Italians against dynastic oppression. And at the end of the nineteenth century, feudal Japan in the Meiji restoration adopted western style nationalism as well as western science and industrial and military technology.

But in fact not every nation does constitute a state, and many states in Africa, the Middle East, South America and South East Asia have proved highly unstable as state and party bureaucracies try to create an artificial nation out of often highly diverse groups within externally, fortuitously imposed colonial boundaries.

England was a state for almost 800 years before 1707 when a negotiated union with the slightly less ancient state of Scotland created the UK, which after 1800 (the Act of Union with Ireland, in fact the suppression of the Irish Parliament) became the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. And in 1922, with the secession of the Republic of Ireland, our country became the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. But the English majority did not try to make the other three nations culturally English. Anglicisation was not pursued in the French manner. So the UK is an example not only of a multinational state, consisting of four self-consciously diverse nations, but increasingly since 1707 a multicultural society. Scotland when it gave up its parliament for the sake of peace and to share in England's external trade and internal economy did not lose its intense national consciousness. Today, of the sixty million or so inhabitants of the UK, the Scots constitute only a tenth and the Welsh half that. Northern Ireland has a mere million and a half inhabitants, smaller, for all its troubles to itself and others, than each of the six major cities of the mainland.

The industrial revolution gradually brought appreciable numbers of Scots immigrants into England, large numbers of poor Irish peasants migrated to Scotland and England, and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Jews fleeing persecution in Russia, Poland and the Ukraine entered the UK, as Protestant Huguenots had entered from France a century and half before. They are all now well enough integrated, and integrated through gradual social change more than by government policies. But originally they stirred quite as much prejudice and worry as did post-war immigrants from the third world.

In the nineteenth century Great Britain was seen, all over the world, as the very model of a centralised sovereign state with representative government (well, more or less representative) – and with, it was falsely believed, by the English as well, a high degree of cultural and religious homogeneity. Until quite recently statistical tables either did not differentiate Scotland and Wales or simply gave figures for England. The English tended to believe that these little local differences would soon iron themselves out and Scots and Welsh would inevitably become more or less English. Perhaps the English never felt the need to impose Englishness. The governing class was happy enough and in time of war cried patriotism, but they were suspicious that nationalism, Englishness was something popular, radical, even threateningly democratic, a myth of 'the people'. Ireland, of course, was a different question.

But how many times did I hear 20 and 30 years ago the cry from Scottish orators 'we will lose our very identity if we do not regain our parliament!' But it seemed to me plain as a pikestaff that Scots had not lost their identity. In fact national consciousness is far less dependent on political institutions than most historians and political scientists have believed.

My passport calls me a 'citizen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland' but I notice that hotel registers demand 'nationality' (a nationalist assumption, for the bureaucrat's question plainly means of what country am I a legal citizen). Most of my fellow citizens, I notice, write 'English' rather than 'British'. This is not merely because most of them are English, but because they ordinarily think that 'English' is the adjective corresponding to 'citizen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland'. Most English do not use the word British very much. Please reflect on the oddity that we compete in football as four separate nations not as the United Kingdom.

That the English confuse English with British angers me personally because my children are half-Welsh, I came to live in Edinburgh, the capital of Scotland, with a Scottish partner (herself a signatory of 'The Claim of Right'²) and Edinburgh is now the seat of a devolved Parliament with considerable powers. After the Act of Union Scotland retained its own legal, ecclesiastical and educational systems, this resulted in a kind of administrative federalism but not a political or legal federalism. And the confusion of English and British irritates me intellectually precisely because I think it is all too clear that the UK state is a union of different nations with significantly different cultures and histories.

The older generations of gentlemanly Conservative politicians, who were nicknamed Tories, knew this well. They knew that the main business of politics for almost three centuries had been holding the UK together. But the new breed of Thatcherite men on the make had none of the historical sense that the old gentry had possessed. Margaret Thatcher in speeches north of the border twice inadvertently referred to a strange country called 'England-oh-I am-so-sorry-I mean-Scotland-of-course'. English Labour leaders are more careful; a lot of their votes depend upon it. Scots happen to be disproportionately well represented in parliament and in the present cabinet.

So some questions of national identity are not simple. Many of us in the UK have a strong sense of dual identity. I am obviously British and English, and as I have lived in Scotland for nearly 25 years and have been a prominent devolutionist; but while sceptical that a majority of Scots, even of SNP voters, want separation, I believe that a majority should have the right to separate if so they clearly wish (as is acknowledged in statute law in the case of Northern Ireland). When I say sincerely that some people begin to think of me as Scottish and British, at least I hope so – despite my accent. Indeed all questions of identity are not simple. National identity exists alongside many other meanings of identity. It does not always override them all, or not in every circumstance. Consider personal identity both philosophically and psychologically. Three questions can be asked: How do each of you perceive yourself, how do you want to be perceived by others, and how do others actually perceive you? These three questions are obviously related, but do not always give the same answer at all times and in all circumstances.

Then there are social identities, some more important than others, but all real: family, occupation, religion, neighborhood, region, ethnicity; and clan was once as important in the Highlands and on the borders of Scotland as in pre-modern Japan. These identities can be cross-cut and complicated by class, religion and also by political and intellectual ideologies. Transnational or even international political identities have been obvious enough, such as commitment to types of socialism or convictions like democracy, civility or citizenship. Some of us in Britain think of ourselves as European in part, culturally and politically I mean not just ethnically; and this part-identity is stronger in the political classes in Scotland than in England. None of these identities are necessarily exclusive, all can overlap and have different intensities of affiliation and allegiance at different times; some by force of circumstance, some by individual choice. In the old pre-industrial world there was far less individual choice of identities, for many no real choice at all. When most people never left their locality, neighborhood and region certainly counted for more than nation.

National identities have come to dominate the modern world more than ideological identities, but not always more than, as we have been surprised to learn of late, religious identities. The old feudal divisions of loyalty, even of languages, suited neither the needs of the new economies and market relationships nor the bureaucratic and impersonal rather than the older dynastic ethos of the state – the state itself a modern political institution. There is no putting the clock back, even when ethnic nationalists turn racist and persecute and purge minorities. But it is worth reminding ourselves of what is both a sociological and a moral proposition when we live in a societies larger than ethnically defined tribes, specifically in a modern world of diverse values

and interests: *that loyalties can never be exclusive*. Therefore, even the claims of a national state cannot be exclusive, except by excessive force; and nor are national characteristics any longer, if they ever were, sufficient explanations and justifications of behaviour.

So I think it is more important to understand that 'Britishness' for a long time has implied diversity than to demand, as my friend Lord Bhiku Parek does, that Britishness should be redefined. His argument implies a stereotypical English Britishness which has been, all too clearly, in steady decline ever since the Second World War. Both recent immigrants and many long settled English need to recognise the history of diversity in our country, the long history, not some sudden happening as sections of the press seem to believe. I understand why the discourse of human rights is taken up by leaders of immigrant groups but I suggest it might be more effective, against the prejudiced and the worried they need to convince and reassure, if it was couched in more historical terms. There is more to British history than imperialism. The history of representative government and the growth of religious toleration should not be forgotten or devalued.

The UK is not only a multi-national state practicing, contrary to what was in all the old textbooks, a kind of quasi-federalism, but a state in which many people have a real sense of dual nationality. Most Scots see themselves, clearly enough, as Scottish and British. In Northern Ireland nearly all Protestants and, it is often forgotten, about 20% of Catholics, favour the Union. The conceptual difficulty among the majority in Northern Ireland is not in having a dual sense of identity and calling themselves British, but in agreeing what to call, how to conceptualise, their other local half: Ulstermen, Northern Irish, just Irish sometimes, or 'the Protestant people' – if they are Protestant. And their uncertainty is not helped by the undoubted fact that to the majority on the mainland they appear more foreign, certainly more obviously strangers, more obviously 'others' than do the Irish of the modern Republic of Ireland, or certainly than the large immigrant Catholic Irish population in England and Scotland, which is almost as large as the population of the Republic of Ireland.

The English are the most confused about national identity, confusing as they do 'English' with 'British'. And this has left them uncertain, sometimes angry, sometimes xenophobic, when faced with new circumstances. Among these circumstances was the post-war influx of immigrants from the 'new Commonwealth' which has certainly resulted in discrimination and revealed racial prejudice. How badly? Comparisons are difficult and circumstances differ so much. But while, unlike in Germany, there was no legal obstacle to full citizenship (though increasing legal obstacles to immigration itself), yet unlike in France, the idea of an official campaign to Anglicise the immigrants has neither been debated nor attempted. The American public school system emerged in the late nineteenth century specifically 'to Americanise the immigrants', and Americanism then, let it not be forgotten, was taught as a universal secular civic religion. But equally in Britain the theory of multi-cultural education, an admission of, acceptance of, even sometimes a positive welcoming of cultural diversity, has become only a half-hearted and somewhat confused policy, if national policy it ever has been at all.

But it is the new immigrants who have the clearest view as to the distinction between British and English. I have never heard anyone call themselves 'Black English' or 'Black Scottish'. They say 'Black British', or more and more they would say 'Asian British' or 'Afro-British', although there is now much anecdotal evidence that many Asians in Scotland call them themselves Scottish-Asians (but that does not at all put them in separatist ranks; they are plainly also British in their allegiance). I think that immigrants see instinctively that the adjective 'English' refers to a culture, as does Scottish and Welsh; but that British refers to an allegiance. The immigrant gives his or her allegiance to the state, in Britain symbolically the crown. The immigrant rarely tries to become English: enough for legal citizenship to speak English. So 'British' is either not a cultural term at all, as we speak of Scottish, Welsh and English novels, poetry, music and folk

song, but never of British novels, poetry, music and folk song. But if British is a cultural term at all, then it refers to a narrow if strong and important political and legal culture: the union itself, the rule of law, the Crown and Parliament, perhaps the practice of a common political citizenship. But there's a lot of society and human life beyond these pillars of the state, the political and legal culture. And never forget that within the umbrella of Britishness there are three thriving national cultures, interactive indeed and also with Ireland. Is there any other state in the world that FIFA allows to field four national football teams?

I see Britishness as a form of patriotism, simply love of one's country, the familiar, common customs, language and traditions; whereas nationalism is invariable a claim to superiority over some other, usually a significant other. To be patriotic, to love one's country is one thing; but to be nationalistic, to believe in its superiority, is quite another. But I point to a growing paradox, a paradox to Scottish and Welsh nationalists: that the English should no longer suppress their Englishness and should see what it means to be both English and British, not to swallow the one in the other. The sporting community has, for once, done us all a great service by reviving the flag of St George and snatching it back from the BNP. Scots and Welsh take no offence at that, rather they are relieved that the English no longer treat the Union flag as an English flag. But having said this makes it hard to avoid the speeches of Gordon Brown on Britishness before he became Prime Minister, and before an SNP government in Scotland. It could also take us to Mr Blair and Mr Blunkett, but time and life are too short. When Brown characterises Britishness, it is as a civic culture:

The values and qualities I describe are of course to be found in many other cultures and countries. But when taken together, and as they shape the institutions of our country these values and qualities – being creative, adaptable and outward looking, our belief in liberty, duty and fair play – add up to a distinctive Britishness that has been manifest throughout our history, and shaped it.³

Now I find these quite acceptable as generalities – as usual the devil will be in the detail, how such values appear in practice and policy, or sometimes disappear in practice. But I won't go into that now. These are indeed strong values of Britishness, if more narrow, less comprehensive, than many commonly think. Britishness needs rounding out, however, with a narrative of three nations, at least, and Northern Ireland and Islam need more empathy to join in this narrative than exhortation to abide by a common civic culture. But this is precisely what Brown does not do. Not merely is there this understatement of the exact nature of the union, but the examples he gives of our long British tradition, he says, of civic values are all English. The myth of the importance of Magna Carta is once again disinterred and nary a word on the Declaration of Arbroath. The Bill of Rights is fundamental to Britishness, which would have surprised the *English* legislators of 1689. And he invokes Milton, Wordsworth, Edmund Burke and Orwell as British rather than, it seems to me, typically English voices. Significantly Walter Scott and Robert Burns are, for once ignored, though both are unionists of a kind, powerful voices for a dual not a single identity.

Continuity is also a Brownite theme of Britishness. For, he tells us, we have never had a revolution nor a foreign conquest since 1066. This does rather ignore the interlocking civil wars in the three kingdoms of mid-seventeenth century and also a Dutch fleet and army in 1688.

Brown clearly wants us to believe that a heightened Britishness is necessary both to combat terrorism and to hold the Union together, rather than simply a rational calculation of mutual advantage and – as David Hume would have said – habit and Adam Smith – interest. So he attacks the SNP in Scotland with the wrong weapon. He plays into their hands by confusing nationalism as tradition and as national consciousness with nationalism as separatism. Identity politics may come a poor second to pragmatic worries about disruption and scepticism about the economic benefits of separation. Also he ignores the comforting fact that about a third of SNP voters

favour the union and uncomfortable that many SNP voters are old Labour voters mostly unhappy with New Labour. Politically, of course, he walks a tightrope: British Brown for Middle England is neither music to Scottish ears nor faces squarely the task of persuading English voters to distinguish Englishness from Britishness and to be both.

Brown's disappointing mixture of rhetoric, bad history and perhaps a wee poke of political opportunism comes out clearly in the mission statement or *sloaghan* he had drafted for a conference hosted by HM Treasury in November 2005.

How 'British' do we feel? What do we mean by 'Britishness'? These questions are increasingly important in defining a shared purpose across all of our society. The strength of our communities, the way we understand diversity, the vigor of our public services and our commercial competitiveness all rest on a sense of what 'Britishness' is and how it sets shared goals.

So Britishness must express 'a shared purpose' and 'shared goals'? And he wants this to be taught in 'the new citizenship curriculum', forgetting that it only applies to schools in England.⁴ Such language is like that of the old-fashioned nationalism of central Europe between the two World Wars. But is that really how states hold together, especially in the modern world of, whether we like it or not, a global economy and of all notions of national sovereignty needing to be so qualified as to be almost useless in understanding actual politics.⁵ I do not believe in overriding national purpose 'purpose', rather I believe in behaviour – decent civic behaviour to each other as common citizens.

This idea of national purpose is what Goethe called 'a blue rose'. And the search for it could prove damaging as well as frustrating. Both Thatcher and Blair openly speak of restoring our sense of national importance, a hangover from the days of Empire and the Second World War – which, of course, we won, with a little help from the US and the USSR. The only way to box above our declining weight, fatally assuming that we need to box above our weight, has been, of course, to tie ourselves to the coat-tails of the US, no matter whether Clinton or Bush was President both embodying very different rival national identities. Indeed if one must talk about British national identity, there has been at least different conservative and radical versions.

Perhaps it is thinking that the UK lacks a unified national culture and purpose that makes so many English (more so than Scots) nervous of European Union, prone to fear mythic monsters like 'a federal superstate' (if it was federal it could not be a superstate at all). Belief in the sovereignty of parliament lingers on: federal implies parliament being restrained by constitutional law, a terrible thought to many of the English political elite from Blackstone to Blair, perhaps even to Brown (that is the testing point of current proposals for constitutional reform). All this was strengthened by Blair's presidential populist style. All demagogues appeal to an unthinking patriotism. A thinking patriotism can appreciate, value and respect complexity and diversity.

How ever many times have we all heard pundits quote the words of that former American Secretary of State Dean Acheson: 'Great Britain had lost an Empire and has not yet found a role'? But 10 years ago I became curious to see the context of that sentence. Curiosity was rewarded by the archivist at West Point Military Academy. For the Anglophile but wise and shrewd Acheson went on to say:

The attempt to play a separate role – that is, a role apart from Europe, a role based on a 'special relationship' with the United States, a role based on being head of a 'Commonwealth' which has no political structure, or unity, or strength and enjoys a fragile precarious economic relationship by means of the Sterling area and preferences in the British market – this role is about played out. Great Britain, attempting to work alone and to be a broker between the United States and Russia, has seemed to conduct policy as weak as its military power. HMG is now attempting – wisely, in my opinion, to reenter Europe, from which it was banished at the time of the Plantagenets, and the battle seems about as hard fought as those of an earlier day.⁶

I rest my case. I leave you to consider either that our rulers have been playing the wrong kind of game of national purpose and identity politics or whether that game is itself mistaken. Certainly Blair's conceit that he could be a bridge between Europe and the US is blown. And perhaps rather than a world role under a pretend world leader, we would be left with our diverse selves and our partners in Europe. Is that too bad? I think not.

Notes

1. This is an expanded version of an address given at the conference Education for Democratic Citizenship of 13 July 2007 under the joint auspices of Birkbeck College and the Institute of Education London. Some of the additional material is adapted from a public lecture on 'Identity politics' given at the University of Glasgow on 25 January 2007.
2. The document of 1988 written by a diverse group of Scottish notables asserting both the right to a devolved parliament and, should a majority of the people in Scotland wish, independence. I said at the time that it was as well reasoned and yet popularly comprehensible as any of the great American state papers of the 1770s and 1780s, not so, alas, as widely read. 'For my fellow English'. In *A claim of right for Scotland*, ed. O. Dudley Edwards. Edinburgh: Polygon, 1989.
3. Speech of 8 July 2004 on 'Britishness', the British Council Annual Lecture. See also his speech of 14 January 2006 to the Fabian Society's Conference on The Future of Britishness. And see Simon Lee's detailed dissection 'Gordon Brown and the "British Way"' (2006).
4. As former chair of the committee whose report brought in the schools' citizenship curriculum for England, based on learning for active participation, I protested strongly against the sudden proposals of Ministers to include 'the values of Britishness as shown in social and cultural history'. But there is no harm and some profit in classes discussing the nature of Britishness, as Ajegbo recommended, so long as no Minister attempts authoritatively to define it.
5. See 'The sovereignty of parliament and the Irish question' and 'On devolution, decentralism and the constitution' in my *Political Thoughts and Polemics* (1990).
6. Speech of 5 December 1962 at the United States Military Academy, West Point. The full text is in their library.

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