

10 | WHO ARE WE NOW AND WHO DO WE NEED TO BE?

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Traditionally, the left has used the idea of 'British' identity to encompass a huge range of people. This doesn't hold sway in the face of Scottish, Welsh and English patriotism, or in light of demographic changes occurring across Britain. We need to develop an inclusive British national identity which is respectful of and builds upon the identities that people value.

The subject of British identity always evokes a fraught reaction from both the left and right, as conversations are contoured by deep-rooted anxieties about who we are as a nation. At a time of rapid global changes and demographic shifts occurring in our own population, we are faced with a range of challenges that need to be negotiated due to the varied cultural, ethnic and religious differences that exist among our people.

Social inclusion, community cohesion and British values have become frequent terms in political discourse since the first wave of mass immigration from the Commonwealth countries after the second world war. They have become more pronounced during the past two decades as a consequence of our membership of the European Union and as conflicts around the world lead to mass movement of people and heighten debates about refugees and immigration.

And now questions of national identity have been brought even more sharply into focus by the devolution and localism agendas. The Scottish independence referendum in 2014 and this year's EU referendum have brought to the fore Britain's multiple identities. There's been a passionate revival of nationalist tendencies, not only in Scotland and Wales but also in England: all challenging long held views of what it means to be British and our attachment to Britain's history of empire and colonialism.

In the 2011 census, when the question of nationality was asked for the first time, 60 per cent of people in England subscribed to a purely English identity. This is compared with just under 30 per cent who felt a predominant British identity and 20 per cent a uniquely British identity. All English regions, with the exception of London, saw an English predominant identity record more than 70 per cent, the highest of which was recorded in the north-east of England. By contrast, 38 per cent of English people from an ethnic minority said they were exclusively British, as against only 14 per cent of white people. The ethnic groups in England most likely to say they were British were Bangladeshi, Pakistani and people who trace their background to India.

Labour has struggled to grasp the significance of Englishness in its traditional voter heartlands and faces a challenge around national identities. Traditionally it has used the idea of 'British' identity to encompass a huge range of people. This doesn't hold sway in the face of Scottish, Welsh and English patriotism, or in light of demographic changes occurring across Britain. So the progressive left is confronted by both a set of exciting opportunities and potentially disruptive challenges about how best to construct a notion of British identity as we continue to define our place in the world in this complex 21st century.

While it feels like the greatest challenge for our politics today is how to bind us together, this argument is

not new. Back in 2000, the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain addressed some of these questions at a time when multiculturalism was being criticised as a failure. It was felt that the policy was causing breakdowns in community relations in some parts of the country because it weakened the processes that could forge a shared British identity. It raised a fundamental question: whether a multicultural society needed a single common identity to hold it together at a time of rapid social, economic and cultural changes brought about by globalisation.

So what lessons can be drawn from that period to answer that very same fundamental question today? At the time, the Commission recognised that “the fundamental need, both practical and theoretical, is to treat people both equally and with the respect for difference; to treasure the rights and freedoms of individuals; and to cherish belonging, cohesion and solidarity”. This suggests that a singular British identity is not needed, but two things are: a set of moral values and principles (for example a commitment to democracy and equality) and a shared political culture in the sense of institutions and practices (such as adherence to the rule of law).

The Commission talked about cohesion in connection with its notion of a “community of communities”:

“Britain needs to be, certainly, ‘one nation’ – but understood as a community of communities and a community of citizens, not a place of oppressive uniformity based on a single substantive culture. Cohesion in such a community derives from a widespread commitment to certain core values, both between communities and within them.”

So difficult questions about what it means to be British are not new. Yet it is a debate that can too easily

adopt a cultural essentialist approach, which in defining Britishness produces a checklist of core common characteristics that everyone has to encompass. Such developments are also linked with increased emphasis in official discourses in Europe and North America on culture as a source of tension and conflict, and the emergence of religion and belief as a polarising fault line in the world today. The picture is made more complicated by the growth of fanaticism and by a suspicion amongst many in the UK, Europe and the wider world that religion is a significant source of the world's ills.

British social attitude surveys have also revealed what the public think about British identity, with the bar being raised for Britishness as more people expect those who are truly British to live in Britain, speak English and have British ancestry. Over the years, we have seen measures such as naturalisation ceremonies, the requirement for English language proficiency, and citizenship education for migrants and all school children. However, this doesn't adequately respond to the dynamic nature of culture or the diversity of cultures which need to co-exist within national boundaries, whether that be different faiths, different ethnic backgrounds, or the constituent nations of the UK.

So how does the progressive left respond to issues of British identity? The Labour party is still experiencing convulsions from its seismic 2015 election defeat, when it was roundly routed in significant parts of the country: in the words of Jon Cruddas, Labour "lost everywhere to everybody". What can the left offer in response to the sociological, demographic and economic trends that are re-shaping our country and which need to be understood more deeply as Labour embarks on a renewal process in the run-up to 2020 and beyond? Crucially, the left needs to find a language and practice that can respond to the dynamics of identity and belonging, which are shaping both domestic and global politics.

Lessons from other parts of the world can be instructive, where multiculturalism has been adopted as a state or national project: Canada, Australia and Malaysia. Even in the US, where the federal state has had a much lesser role in the multicultural project, the incorporation of ethno-religious diversity and hyphenated Americans (such as Italian-American) has been about country-making, civic inclusion and making a claim upon the national identity. This is notwithstanding the emergence of Donald Trump as a serious contender for the Republican presidential nomination, which has revived debates about race, religion and minorities in America. Closer to home, both Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party, broadly progressive parties, have been successful in constructing notions of identity which are open to everyone.

If we can reframe the debate to ask *what* does it mean to be British given our multicultural reality (reflecting the multicultural world), then the conversation can be more inclusive. This would draw all people into a conversation about a common sense of belonging, equality and fairness and justice; and how a meaningful stake in society can be transmuted at a time when technological innovations, the digital revolution and the complexities of the global economy are profoundly transforming the way we live, work and interact with each other.

It is a debate that needs to acknowledge that people may want to hold on to and cherish 'difference' but doesn't preclude an emphasis on commonality. That commonality is promoting multicultural citizenship, a citizenship seen in a plural and dispersed way – where the celebration of multiple identities makes for a stronger collective whole. This is especially important as the progressive left debates Britain's role in a rapidly changing world and how we can construct a British identity that looks outward based a new internationalism: curious about the new world and interested in adapting to it.

There is no contradiction here, for emphasising and cultivating what we have in common is not a denial of difference – it all depends upon what kind of commonality is arrived at. Difference and commonality are not either or opposites but are complementary. More than that, commonality must be difference-friendly, and if it is not, it must be remade to be so. Labour needs to confront the reality of nationalist tendencies that exists in different parts of Britain; but also ensure that when it comes to Englishness, it is as inclusive as is Welsh and Scottish patriotism.

This does not mean weak or indifferent national identity: on the contrary, multiculturalism requires a framework of dynamic national narratives and the ceremonies and rituals, which give expression to a national identity. Minority identities are capable of generating a sense of attachment and belonging, even a sense of a 'cause' for many people – look at how London was projected as a vibrant, dynamic *and* diverse global city which led to Britain hosting the 2012 Olympics.

We need an inclusive British national identity which is respectful of and builds upon the identities that people value and does not trample upon them. And a sense of belonging to one's country is necessary to make a success of a multicultural society that is responding to the challenges of an interconnected world. This needs to underpin the political vision of social reform and justice in the 21st century being debated by the progressive left in Britain as Labour embarks on its renewal; and it must include these aspects of multicultural citizenship.

EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE: BRITAIN

Britain has always been an awkward partner for the EU, with renegotiations, opt-outs, special rebates and a general contrariness. Whatever the final outcome, the 2016 renegotiation and referendum is another step in an increasingly clumsy dance. From a progressive European perspective, the British situation poses a number of challenges.

First of all, the British situation is an infuriating distraction from the real problems the EU faces. The renegotiation does nothing at all to help respond to the financial crisis, to the migrant crisis, to the democratic crisis of the EU. Indeed, if anything it deepens them by permitting one country to negotiate a special deal for itself – something that goes fundamentally against the grain of good principles in an international organisation.

Secondly, the terms of the British renegotiation represent a further dilution of the progressive content of the EU. Lighter regulation has too often become a code-word for weakening standards in employment laws, in social protections, in environmental safeguards. The opt-outs in relation to common provisions regarding benefits represent a further weakening of common standards, and results in citizens from some countries being forced into second-class status.

But does that mean a progressive Europe would be better off without Britain? No – simply because progressive ideals and principles demand that we be open and inclusive. Speaking about J. Edgar Hoover, Lyndon B. Johnson famously said it's better to keep troublesome colleagues inside the tent rather than have them outside creating trouble. For progressive Europeans, it is of course better to have Britain inside the tent, but let us also hope they can be persuaded to be less troublesome partners in our union in future.

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