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The Importance of Being English: National Identity and Nationalism in Post-Devolution England

Ross Bond, Charlie Jeffery, Michael Rosie

This themed section of *Nations and Nationalism* emerges from the Institute of Governance's seminar series, 'Identity and Governance in England', funded by the James Madison Trust. The Institute is a focal point for research on the politics and sociology of sub-state nations and regions and the series thus reflected two key areas of interest: 'territorial' identities (both 'national' and 'regional') and the means by which such territories are governed. This is of particular relevance in a contemporary European context where decentralised government is increasingly the norm. The focus on England derives from its seemingly anomalous status with respect to these issues. While other parts of the UK are now represented by their own devolved parliament and assemblies, England (with the partial exception of London) continues to lack any elected political institution a national or regional level. Further, while political developments in other parts of the UK are often assumed to be strongly related to distinctive territorial identities, recent scholarship has identified ambivalences and ambiguities characterising English identities. The position of England and of Englishness appears all the more interesting since 2007 from when devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland included parties committed to the dissolution of the UK. The widely expected election of a Conservative UK government - with that party's strongly English core support, tradition of strong commitment to the Union and greater scepticism towards devolution - promises to be a further significant development.

From the latest empirical evidence and scholarly thought presented by the series, this themed issue brings together key contributions to our understanding of English identity and English nationalism¹. It is notable, although not altogether surprising, that the series was devised and hosted in *Scotland*. People in Scotland are more familiar with, indeed accustomed to, viewing political and social matters through plural (Scottish and/or British) national lenses and are sometimes curious that a similar perspective does not seem to hold in England. However, as the following contributions make clear, it would be unwise to conclude that questions of national identity have little resonance in England. Overall, our contributors address (implicitly or explicitly) a number of 'English questions' to different degrees and in different ways.

Where stands England?

The contemporary status of England and Englishness must be understood not only through comparison with other parts of the UK but equally importantly through relation to the broader - and to some degree overlapping - question of Britishness. Wider supranational and global developments such as post-imperialism and the growth of the European Union is also significant. Krishan Kumar's contribution notes the oft-paraphrased clue from Conan Doyle's *Silver Blaze*: "English nationalism is the dog that did not bark" (Kumar, 2009: pX). Kumar notes the limitations of comparison in these islands, arguing that "England and the English have played too distinctive and peculiar a role in the United Kingdom for easy analogies with other

nationalisms, politically pleasing as [these] might be” (2009:X). Here any ‘crisis of identity’ being faced in England has to be understood in terms of the historic entanglements – confusion even – of Englishness and Britishness. Strikingly, we find ourselves in a historic moment when the English (“whatever their past misdemeanours”) have a clear conception about the distinction between both England and Britain, Britishness and Englishness. For Kumar this might well presage ‘the death of England’ – or at least the England ‘of old’ – and its re-invention and re-definition. His essay marks a useful and constructive starting point on just such a journey.

Ben Wellings is less confident that the English now recognise the distinctions between England and Britain. He focuses on one potential vehicle for English nationalism, though, paradoxically, a potential distraction from it: Euroscepticism. Wellings argues that “Euroscepticism is in all but name English nationalism”, albeit an English nationalism that “speaks the language of Britishness”. Indeed Euroscepticism’s popular appeal, he implies, lies in the continued invoking of an Anglo-British version (and conflation) of England and Britain. Here the keystone to English nationalism is the valorisation of ‘Parliamentary sovereignty’ and a concomitant historical narrative which stresses the great victories of Britain/England. Such a narrative is not merely the stuff of Euroscepticism – note, for example, the implications of Peter Keller’s recent *Democracy: 1,000 Years in Pursuit of British Liberty* (Mainstream, 2009). For Eurosceptics, though, running along the Anglo-British narrative is a strong sense that where Britons once triumphed through the sacrifices of war, indeed ruled the waves, they have contrived to have lost the peace. Here Wellings focuses on ‘anxieties’, in particular over the loss of Britain’s ‘greatness’, and a continuing European threat to Parliamentary sovereignty.

Arthur Aughey’s paper also focuses on such contemporary English ‘anxieties’. While the ‘anxiety of absence’ relates in part to the perceived erosion of the essence of Englishness as a result of the wider social processes of globalisation and consumerisation, two other anxieties concern how England relates to the other parts of the post-devolution UK. The ‘anxiety of anticipation’ reflects a fear that England is ill-prepared for any *post-UK* future to which its neighbours will more readily accommodate. This negative self-comparison with the other UK nations extends to the final anxiety, the ‘anxiety of imitation’: rather than England being the agenda-setting core of the UK state, it must now ape the peripheral nations in finding a more assertive national confidence. In contrast, Susan Condor’s paper finds less evidence of such anxieties suggests that the response (by ‘ordinary’ people in England) to nationalism and political developments such as devolution is more phlegmatic and considered than the statements of those who would speak for them often suggest. This contrast between popular and elite discourse is an issue of fundamental importance and one we will return to in our final question. First though, we consider evidence on the contemporary expression of English identity.

Expressions of English national identity

This question of English identity, and its expression, is addressed in quite different ways by Curtice, Condor and Aughey. John Curtice’s focus, by way of contrast to much of the chatter from political and cultural commentators, is on English opinion measured rather than simply invoked. Curtice asks whether the experience of the

devolution settlement has moved England any closer to being in possession of a recognisably *English* nationalism. One important element here concerns whether the asymmetry of governance in the UK has left people in England sufficiently aggrieved so as to develop a distinctive (and distinctively English) sense of identity. His careful study of survey data from the British Social Attitudes series reveals “a little evidence” of an increased identification with Englishness, though he is cautious as to the extent to which this can be emphasised or, indeed, mobilised upon. Drawing on a quite different body of evidence – an impressive corpus of interview data amassed over the course of a decade – Condor’s contribution partly addresses the perception that the English suffer from a failure to recognize their own national identities. She identifies four broad perspectives, only one of which (‘Popular Nationalism’) represents an explicitly English Nationalist (in a political sense) view. The other perspectives – ‘Localism’, ‘Reasonable Pragmatism’, and ‘Liberal Cosmopolitanism’ – respectively represent more disengaged, suspicious, and openly oppositional stances toward the strong assertion of national identities and political Nationalism. However, Condor’s overall argument suggests that this should not lead us to conclude that the English are suffering from collective national identity confusion or amnesia. Aughey considers English nationalism in terms of anxiety and injustice, and as both ‘mood’ and ‘movement’. The ‘mood’ is outlined through four related political and cultural anxieties, one of which, the ‘anxiety of absence’ relates to an English lack of reflection on matters of national identity. The potential for anxieties such as these to be mobilised via political *movement* is central to the next two questions.

Is there a demand for devolved government in England, and why (not)?

Curtice’s and Condor’s quantitative and qualitative approaches offer us the ideal basis on which to answer each part of this question. Shortly after devolution in Scotland and Wales Curtice, alongside Anthony Heath, posed the question ‘Is the English Lion About to Roar?’ (Curtice & Heath, 2000). They came to the conclusion that claims over an ‘English backlash’ were inflated. In his contribution here, Curtice asks whether the experience of the devolution settlement has moved England any closer to seeking institutional recognition of its national distinctiveness. The survey data he examines offers some evidence that resentment and grievance over the present constitutional arrangements *are* growing. However Curtice concludes that this does not translate into support for change, in terms of either an English Parliament or for regional assemblies across England. In 2007 - just as in 2000 - a majority of respondents in England believed that the best manner in which England could be governed was “as it is now, with laws made by the UK parliament”. Such a careful perspective is of central importance given that many commentators continue to warn that an ‘English backlash’ is looming, and that some particular aspects of the politics of anxiety and grievance have become more palpable.

Condor’s paper also emerges from a concern with perennial siren calls over such a ‘backlash’ despite its continued and ‘enigmatic’ absence. She begins by identifying two contradictory views which underlay predictions of English grievance: that the devolution legislation denied the English the political expression of their national identity; and that it would encourage the politicization of this identity. One of the most commonly proposed sources of this absence of English discontent considered by Condor is the alleged English failure to recognize their own national identities and interests, which we discussed above; a second commonly cited reason is that the

English are apathetic. Condor concludes that neither of these offers a satisfactory explanation. The four broad perspectives on devolution and national identity which she outlines (and which we discussed above) are distinct in many respects, but what they share is a disinclination to see devolution to the other UK nations as inherently problematic and the lack of an unequivocal desire for distinctively English representation. She argues that the absence of an English backlash is due to neither apathy nor the absence of Englishness but relates to the different ways in which people in England understand their national status and their tendency to view devolution as a matter of justice rather than of national interests.

While Curtice's and Condor's contributions illuminate and explain the (lack of) popular appetite for constitutional change in England, Aughey considers two potential vehicles for heightening and mobilising English nationalism and its political expression through elected institutions. The Campaign for an English Parliament (CEP) is the most obviously radical of these with its eponymous objective fairly straightforward (although there is some equivocation as to whether the final outcome ought to be a devolved or fully independent England). The key obstacle to the success of the CEP is the level of popular support for its aims, which Curtice's analysis suggests is modest at best. The Conservative Party, a more established and moderate vehicle, may seem to have much to gain from adopting a more strident English nationalism. However, Conservatism is a prisoner of its unionist history and principles and, as Aughey shows, its proposed answers to constitutional asymmetry have, if anything, become more cautious in recent years. Ultimately then, the continued absence of a powerful political vehicle with an obvious appetite for English nationalism – and, as shown by Curtice, a muted desire for such a movement amongst broader English opinion – would seem to present a fundamental obstacle to any radical constitutional change involving England.

The contrast between elite and popular perspectives

Arguably, this contrast between popular perspectives and the views of some elite nationalist figures is fundamental to the limited nature of any English 'backlash'. It is here that we might find an answer to the English 'enigma'. The comparison and relationship between elite and popular perspectives is of course an issue familiar to scholars of nations and nationalism. (Democratic) governance may be something primarily 'done' by elites, but it requires popular legitimation, which in turn derives to some extent from the ways in which national and/or state identities are understood. In Aughey's paper, the political and cultural anxieties and sense of injustice which constitute the 'mood' of English nationalism are largely expressed at an *elite* level. Ironically one of these anxieties – the 'anxiety of silence' – suspects suppression of debate on the English question by another elite group: an intelligentsia distrustful of and inimical to English national pride. Similarly, for Condor the predictive warnings of future grievance and conflict based on the suppression (or encouragement) of English national identity are sourced largely from the political class. Here the continued contemporary warnings of an impending English backlash are attributed principally to the media. This is why contributions like those of Curtice and Condor are so important, because in different ways they offer the people of England the opportunity to speak for themselves, to "... consider what, if anything, The English have to say for and about themselves" (Condor, this volume). As we have seen, neither Curtice's survey-based evidence nor Condor's analysis of interview data

suggests that there is a popular mood of English nationalist anxiety and grievance to match that often voiced at an elite level.

¹ Other speakers in the series included Sarah Ayres, Chris Bryant, Michael Keating and Varun Uberoi, as well as three speakers from beyond the academy: Wendy Alexander, Henry McLeish and Peter Riddell