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The return of “Englishness” in British political culture – the end of the Unions?

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Abstract

This paper approaches the interpretation of elite and popular attitudes towards the UK’s membership of the EU through an analysis of some of the rival perspectives on the national identity of the English that have become increasingly salient during the last two decades. It highlights their role as sources of some of the most influential ideas about nationhood, governance and state now shaping public discourse on the UK’s membership of the European Union. These include radical-democratic, restorationist, and Anglo-British forms of patriotic discourse, which have prompted and responded to the growing prevalence of England as ‘an imagined community’, a trend which has rendered other circles of attachment – to the UK and Europe – more tenuous and distant. A central conclusion of the paper is that these emerging perspectives have spawned webs of belief which connect new and old ideas of nationhood to the political judgements that different actors are making about the European Union.

Introduction

This paper approaches the interpretation of elite and popular attitudes towards the UK's membership of the EU through an analysis of some of the rival perspectives on the national identity of the English that have become increasingly salient during the last two decades. An evaluation of these outlooks highlights their role as sources of some of the most influential ideas about nationhood, governance and state now shaping public discourse on the UK's membership of the European Union. The paper also seeks to erect a bridge between two conventionally separated debates – that focused upon the shift towards a more pronounced Euroscepticism, at both popular and elite levels, and that directed at the complex question of how and why the English have gradually returned to a more Anglo-centric, rather than Anglo-British, sense of identity. This latter theme has been the subject of considerable academic enquiry (for instance Aughey 2007; Kumar 2003), yet this has been conducted at some remove from the growing focus upon the sources and traditions pertinent to Euroscepticism (for an exception see Wellings 2012). A key contention here is that the emerging perspectives to which I draw attention have spawned webs of belief which connect new and old ideas of nationhood to the political judgements that different actors are making about the European Union.

The crystallisation of several politically resonant, historically informed perspectives upon Englishness can be shown to represent an important, overlooked resource upon which those making anti- and pro-European arguments have drawn in the last twenty years. And these outlooks have also contributed to a rising uncertainty about the viability and appeal of Britishness – the encompassing form of national identity which has been promoted by the British state since the eighteenth century (Colley 1996). A significant shift in the manner in which the English have come to see themselves as a people -- and an increasing propensity to define themselves in institutional and political, as well as cultural, terms -- is an important, overlooked factor in the shaping of English Euroscepticism. Recent polling suggests that this attitude is more extensive in England than in the other territories of the UK (*YouGov/The Sun* 2013), and the renewal of Englishness is one possible explanation for this important difference.

The framework employed here is what some political scientists term an 'interpretive' one (Finlayson 2007), with an analytical emphasis upon the webs of belief from which new forms of English identity have been crafted, as opposed to the conventional tendency to treat Englishness as a reflexive response to exogenous forces (for instance Marquand 2008), or as a local version of a universal shift towards the politics of identity in European societies (Castells 1996). Instead, I highlight how an emerging body of nationally rooted thinking came to influence the calculations and expectations of politicians and various public audiences, notably in relation to the two Unions – the UK and the EU -- to which England uneasily belongs. The competition these have engendered will help determine whether, for instance, Englishness is framed as an insular, parochial and conservative identity, or is developed as a more outward looking and liberal formation. And the terms of this contestation are integral to the politics of the national and European questions in UK political life. An interpretive sensibility also helps shed light upon the extended crisis of confidence apparent among the political elite from the early 1990s, which was brought about by a declining faith in the viability of pre-existing understandings of constitution, nation and territorial governance.

A disparate and contested politics of English nationhood represents a distinctive, historically shaped response to the interlocking sets of pressures and crises which have also been felt in

many democratic states in the last thirty years, and are often linked to the development of a more globalised economy and the transition to post-industrial society. A turn towards a more entrenched and insular sense of nationhood among national and ethnic majorities has happened across Europe since 2000 (Kaufmann 2004). But the ideational focus which is explored here brings to the surface some of the specificities of the English context, not least the continuing impact of the abandonment of Empire and the specific challenges arising from the loss of faith – at elite and popular levels – in the viability and cohesion of the UK as a union state.

Much academic debate on this topic, however, proceeds from the assumption that the introduction of devolution to Scotland and Wales by the Labour government in 1999 was the trigger for a delayed, but inevitable, backlash among the English (Kumar 2003; and, for scepticism on this score, Curtice 2009). Yet, this kind of causal proposition is challenged by research highlighting the range of meanings associated with a renewed sense of Englishness, not all of which relate to constitutional questions (Kenny 2014). The ingrained tendency of much political science to view nationhood as an identity that moves along a single dimension, and which can thus be measured in quantitative terms, neglects the consideration of how national ideas are employed by actors in different contexts (Mandler 2005). And, it thus occludes an appreciation of the cultural and political implications of different, competing constructions of nationhood, and their potential significance for shifting public attitudes towards European integration. Importantly, there is a growing recognition in intellectual and political circles that new patterns of national sentiment apparent among the English are integrally connected to the diffusion of Euroscepticism (Wellings 2012), and are shaped also by factors such as the impact of inward migration and the manifold changes to the UK's political economy associated with its rapid transition to a post-industrial economy (Kenny 2014). The notion of devolution as the causal trigger for an English backlash – which remains prevalent in parts of the political science literature -- fails to address these dimensions of the politics of Englishness.

In the political world, however, there is an increasing fatalism among policy-makers and commentators about how the EU is perceived by the English public, with many believing that this populace is irredeemably opposed to the European project, in part because its technocratic character is impossible to legitimate in a context where populism and nationalism are so prevalent (Gifford 2008). One of the assumptions informing such a belief is that Europhobia has strong roots in deep-rooted patterns of national sentiment which politicians are themselves unable to shape. But the passive manner in which the role of political actors is characterised in this kind of narrative is, I will suggest, belied by an analysis of the shifting patterns of thinking about nationhood in this period. This suggests, to the contrary, that political actors played a key, active role in licensing and stimulating the perception that established forms of Anglo-British nationhood were no longer viable or adequate.

Crisis over Britain? - the 1990s

This rising sense of fatalism should be seen in historical terms too -- as a product of a deepening uncertainty, which has been building for several decades against the backdrop of the abandonment of empire, recurrent anxieties since the late 1950s about the UK's relative economic decline, and marked disagreements within elite circles about its geo-political future (Gamble 2003). The various 'shocks' administered during the Thatcher years to the

institutional order and ethos of the British state, and the economic dislocation occasioned by the rapid shift to a post-industrial economy in the 1980s and 1990s, also served to accentuate a gathering sense among influential intellectuals and opinion-formers that established forms of self-understanding – about the British state and its accompanying form of nationhood – Britishness -- were no longer adequate to the challenges facing the polity. While several of the exogenous factors which combined to generate a growing sense of uncertainty among the governing institutions and political parties were not unique to the UK, the tightly interwoven character of leading ideas about British nationhood, deeply embedded ideas about the constitution and its virtues, and a marked unease at elite level about the capacity of the English to accept the idea of pooled sovereignty or the granting of limited forms of self-government to the Scots and Welsh, ensured that this sense of crisis was framed in highly particular ways in the UK context, as indeed it was in other European countries.

It was during the early 1990s that increasingly divergent conceptions of the UK's optimal relationship with the emerging system of European integration became particularly pronounced (Forster 2000), and these differences triggered broader debates about nationhood. One response to these was for progressively minded intellectuals to conflate a universalistic idea of a civic-liberal Britain with a celebration of the intrinsic merits of trans-national forms of identity and action. Leading figures such as Anthony Giddens (1998), the intellectual architect of Prime Minister Tony Blair's much heralded 'Third Way', and Will Hutton (1995), author of one of the leading accounts of the way out of UK's economic weaknesses, were influential disseminators of such thinking. Within this increasingly salient discourse, Europe was conceived as a hinge between a post-nationalist Britain and a progressively inclined version of globalisation. This became an influential and attractive frame for a wide range of thinkers on the liberal-left, including a number with links to the pro-European wing of the Labour party (Liddle and Mandelson 1996).

There also arose at this time a markedly different, nationally conceived response to the dilemma represented by the European issue. This was fixated upon the quintessential differences between 'the British tradition' of statecraft and constitutional development, and the approach to governance and law-making associated with the leading powers of Continental Europe. While this was the minority view on the political right when the European question first arose in British politics, a belief in the fundamental incompatibility of these governing models became a matter of national and democratic conviction, attracting a growing number of thinkers, politicians, journalists and campaigners to the idea that core aspects of the tradition of parliamentary sovereignty were being jeopardised by the European project (Spiering 2004).

The rising sense of uncertainty to which these divergent patterns of thinking were responses, led to a widespread emphasis – apparent across the party political divide – upon the purported 'crisis' of established forms of state and nation during the 1990s. And this mood was expressed and accentuated by an extended period of soul-searching within the political and cultural worlds (Kenny 2014). Different figures, from a variety of genres, contributed to this anxiety-fuelled conversation, which fed into a spate of popular television histories about the national past, innumerable journalistic commentaries, novels and non-fiction books, all dissecting the national predicament and identity confusion from which the English were often said to be suffering (see, among others, Paxman 1998; Marr 2009; Moreton 2011). It was from within this anxious discourse that politically resonant claims about national identity emerged and became prominent in a way that had not been seen in Britain's public life since the exigent circumstances of the 1940s.

The notion that Britishness was a declining force at the popular level was a familiar theme in public discourse during the mid-1990s, but so too was the contrary contention -- that a revamped sense of Britishness could provide the unifying sense of identity and moral purpose required in an increasingly diverse and divided society (Goodhart 2004; Brown 2007). Political opinion subsequently became increasingly polarised around these two rival frameworks. On the one hand, Labour's historic victory in 1997, and the incoming government's support for globalisation and culturally metropolitan leanings, ensured the prevalence of those voices celebrating a nationhood that was identified with universalist liberal values, and which was designed in part to enable the UK to re-discover itself as an international actor. And, on the other, voices from the political right adopted an increasingly apocalyptic understanding of the implications of EU-wide integration during the 1990s, and bundled these together with fears about the consequences of some of the new government's keynote reforms – including the introduction of the Human Rights Acts in 1998 and the provision of devolution in Scotland and Wales in 1999. Well-known pundit Peter Hitchens wrote a widely discussed book -- *The Abolition of Britain* (2000) — which chimed with the pessimism evoked in philosopher and campaigner Roger Scruton's (2000) elegaic account of the disappearing English lineage. In these quarters New Labour's determination to pass sovereignty downwards to political centres in territories outside England, and upwards to Brussels – projects that were congruent with increasingly fashionable theories about the demise of the nation-state in the era of globalisation – were viewed as irredeemably destructive of the Anglo-British nation. Out of this outlook there emerged an impulse to envisage radical measures in order to disrupt the federalist and devolutionist intentions of the Labour government. The idea of a referendum on Europe, which would herald either a major re-negotiation of the UK's relationship or lead to outright withdrawal, emerged as an iconic expression of such sentiments. So did a discourse of complaint about the beleaguered position of the national heartland – increasingly now depicted as England, not Britain – after devolution (Parris 2010; Aughey 2010), and a rhetorical tendency to separate the 'core' national territory from the kinds of entanglement, redistribution and territorial management associated with the United Kingdom. Englishness was therefore an integral thematic within a broader populist outlook, but it was also becoming the subject of other kinds of claim and characterisation in this period, and it is to three of the leading expressions of these that I now turn.

Narratives of Englishness

1) The Radical-Democratic Critique

One of the most prominent and influential approaches to the question of the UK's geo-political future is associated with the work of leading Scottish nationalist and New Left intellectual Tom Nairn. The radical thesis which he first set out in the 1970s drew attention to the imminent and inexorable 'break-up' of Britain, and advanced an interpretation of English nationhood which stressed its stalled and pathological character (1977). This became a widely held orthodoxy in progressive circles. The emerging issue of European co-operation and the possibilities that might flow from such a development, were presented as a significant antidote to the stultifying conservatism of the English. Nairn's argument did much to challenge the prevailing scepticism of the political left during the 1960s and 1970s about the prospect of Britain joining the Common Market. Indeed his thesis exerted a greater influence than any other single work (with the possible exception of historian Linda Colley's *Britons* (1996) upon how progressives in the UK have thought about Englishness in the last fifty

years. Its core arguments, and Nairn's subsequent analyses of the obfuscatory mystique fostered by the inner institutions of the British state, gradually coalesced to become a template for progressive thought (Nairn 2011).

Nairn devoted considerable space to the emergence of an anti-European English nationalism orchestrated by the maverick Conservative politician Enoch Powell in the late 1960s (1977: 256-90). The latter's politics, notably his willingness to present immigration from the Commonwealth as a direct threat to the national interest, and his inveterate opposition to the Common Market (Powell 1971), were deemed to represent a '... comment on the absence of a normal nationalist sentiment, rather than an expression of nationalism' (Nairn 1977: 78). Much was to hang -- here and elsewhere in his work -- on his use of the term 'normal' (see the critique advanced by Thompson 1965). It referenced an ideal-typical modern, egalitarian nationalism, and was the necessary preliminary, he believed, to the dissolution of the quasi-feudal order which was a precondition for socialist advance in Britain. Powellism, while deploying the rhetoric and syntax of nationalism, offered something different altogether -- a further, morbid symptom of the continuing power of the *ancien régime* state to divert and suppress the national will of the English. The more the opportunity to express and inhabit a shared sense of popular nationhood was delayed, Nairn maintained, the more likely it was that resentment, grievance and racist sentiment would emerge instead (2000: 89).

Nairn's emphasis upon the close correlation between regressive and chauvinistic expressions of Englishness and the Eurosceptic impulse has provided the template for the progressive judgment that English nationhood sustains an idea of a sovereignty that is indivisible, and cannot therefore permit the development of alternative sites of political authority beyond, or within, itself (for instance Marquand 2008) -- a disposition which some also identify as a hangover from Empire. It is this property, it is often said, which renders the English unable to engage confidently with the kind of trans-national arrangements that are imperative in a world of multi-level governance (Colley 2013).

For Nairn, the European project necessarily represented an elemental challenge to the Anglo-British hegemony (1977). And, this idea became a major point of reference in the British left's evolving thinking about the European issue, and reinforced the tendency in these circles to dismiss Englishness as a formation defined by its insularity and narrowness. His argument was one of a number of influences presaging the wholesale shift of the Labour party, during the 1980s, towards an embrace of the European agenda as a terrain upon which a modern social democratic politics might be constructed -- a change of heart that was rooted in the experience of many years of Conservative political domination after 1979.

The imprint left by Nairn's thought has been considerable, both among English progressives and Scottish nationalists. Leading figures in the Scottish National Party have continued to rely upon his twin assumptions that Anglo-nationalism tends to harbour regressive, anti-liberal sentiments, and that the English can only regain a sense of their own national sovereignty following the dissolution of the UK state (Jackson 2013). One further aspect of Nairn's analysis has also been transmitted more widely. This stems from his depiction of the 'void' that supposedly lies at the heart of English national identity, the result of the blocked sense of aspiration associated with the delegation of sovereignty to Britain (this notion remains ubiquitous in the literature on Englishness; for instance Young 2007; Kumar 2003). Without a robust and democratic national 'myth', the English have returned again and again to a familiar stock of pastoral and aristocratic fantasies when called upon to depict their own imagined sense of national community.

Nairn's arguments also boosted the increasingly favoured idea that the left needed to assist the construction of forms of community that spanned national borders in the era of globalisation, with the EU the most evident starting-point for such a 'post-national' project. Along with other major social democratic thinkers –including Will Hutton (1995), Tony Judt (2010) and David Marquand (2009) – Nairn yoked the longstanding tradition of radical-democratic republicanism to the pro-European cause. Yet, this lineage was, in other manifestations, a decidedly patriotic one, and had been deployed by earlier radicals – for instance historian and campaigner E.P. Thompson and left-wing MP Tony Benn -- to critique the forerunners of the European Union (Osborn 2002). From the 1990s onwards, however, only a small number of voices on the left offered a sustained critique of the European project on national-democratic grounds (Newman 1996).

Nairn's thinking has, over the years, been subjected to some significant criticism, not least from those arguing during the 1990s that a progressive and democratically inclined Britishness could be redeemed from the carapace of conservative constitutionalism. In his critical response to *Break-up*, for instance, leading intellectual historian J.G.A. Pocock insisted that Britain's history should be conceived as 'a pattern held together by its divisions and antagonisms'; and 'British history ... has been, and is, a game for a number of players, in which each player's self-image, and image of the game, must be taken into account' (2000: 48). Nairnite thinking occluded the very real possibility that the English might have good reasons to remain members of a political association that would preserve their established inter-relations with the Scots, Welsh and the Northern Irish.

This critique reflected the kinds of sentiment that undergirded the attempt by senior Labour politicians, notably Chancellor of the Exchequer and then (from 2007) Prime Minister Gordon Brown, to promote a civic understanding of Britain as the progressive alternative to the 'narrow' nationalism that prevailed in the different constituent territories of the UK. But there is considerable evidence to suggest that not only was this project unsuccessful in the 'outer' territories of the UK, but it was also ineffective and probably counter-productive in England too, with notable increases in the proportions of citizens identifying as English, not British, being reported in different polls during the 2000s (Wyn Jones et al., 2012). Indeed, different researchers, using various methodologies, concur that a significant further increase in levels of English identification took place around the time that Brown, an MP for a Scottish constituency, was anointed Prime Minister in 2007 (Kenny 2014; Skey 2008).

In these same years, however, English nationhood was claimed by a number of distinct, rival cultural-cum-political narratives, and yet few left-of-centre politicians or thinkers sought to address Englishness in positive terms (for a notable exception see Blunkett 2005). The multiplicity of competing claims upon Englishness is overlooked in most political discourse or academic scholarship, even though different ideas of England have been marshalled in support of a range of different political and democratic arguments.

(2) Restoring England

The second perspective to which I draw attention also took its bearings from the dilemma generated by the perceived crisis of British identity, but articulated an entirely different response to it. As Britishness was becoming fatally weakened, it was suggested, European integration represented a potent threat to the interests and cultural traditions of the national heartland which liberal-minded politicians were disinclined or unable to protect. The territorial core of the nation was now increasingly frequently labelled England, not Britain or

the UK, and Englishness itself was presented in some conservative quarters as an older and more durable lineage than the national and constitutional orthodoxies associated with the British state. English nationhood was a patrimonial lineage, not a newly created identity, or modern form of nationalism, and could only be grasped through engagement with the unbroken ways of living and feeling, sentiments that came from contact with a select band of traditions, customs and places (Wright 2009). The countryside played an especially important role in this idiom, often depicted as a venue where the sense-experience of Englishness could be developed, and as a tenuous refuge from a variety of threats associated with modern life (Featherstone 2010). This form of nostalgic Englishness was framed in the late 1990s as a meaningful site of political resistance to the metropolitan Labour government by activists from the Countryside Alliance, an umbrella organisation that campaigned against reforms such as the ban introduced upon the hunting of foxes (in 2004), and objected more generally to the perceived neglect of rural interests and institutions.

This sensibility prompted a new melding of conservative and radical ideas (Aughey 2006), typically evoking a powerful sense of nostalgia for a formerly great nation that was once more in peril. Its signature contention -- that an unchanging English spirit was being re-born in the present, casting off the different masks it has worn since the establishment of Britain -- has sustained a powerful and resonant seam of thinking in public discourse, and had a major impact upon debates about Europe -- framing the latter as the preference of political elites that were slavishly devoted to the kinds of economic and social liberalism favoured by business elites and endemically hostile to the organic, national culture of the English people.

One of the leading intellectual architects of this restorative approach to Englishness was philosopher and campaigner Roger Scruton (2000). He emerged as a prominent opponent of the New Labour governments, becoming a leading campaigner against the legislation banning hunting with dogs (2002). Scruton located his opposition to the metropolitan liberalism which he saw as the underpinning of the New Labour governments in a wider lament about the imminent demise of institutional and cultural aspects of the English tradition. He declared that ‘... things had moved on so much that the whole concept of Britain had been thrown into disarray. It had become quite apparent that there is no such cultural entity any more’ (2000: 30). In response, he turned his attention to the ideals, institutions and landscapes that had prompted an Englishness which was now on the verge of extinction.¹ In the Burkean compact between the living, the dead and the unborn, he intoned, trust is placed in our collective inheritance, particularly in the form of those organisations, practices and traditions that had emerged out of the customs and cultures of the English past. A sense of place and territorial loyalty, he argued, were central to the inner core of this people (2000). And while a good deal of this account of England’s law, customs and ways of life borrowed heartily from the tradition of Edwardian ruralism -- which one important recent account identifies as the key source for modern English nationalism (Kumar 2003) -- his argument also contained some decidedly new elements, and these were prescient of the shifting patterns of conservative sentiment in this period. He supplied a redoubtable critique of the contempt shown by the liberal political elite for the heritage of England. This -- for him and other conservatives -- was vividly illustrated by the government’s apparent compliance with the intention of the European Commission to promote a ‘Europe of the regions’, a project which was widely viewed as representing the potential erosion of England as a sovereign territory (*Daily Mail* 2008). A plethora of directives and regulations flowing from Brussels in subsequent years

¹ Scruton was commissioned in the early 1990s to write a book about Britain. But by the time he came to write it, roughly a decade later, it felt unimaginable that he could or should now refer to Britain, as opposed to England; interview with X and X, 25 June 2008 (transcript available from the author).

were repeatedly presented as antithetical to the beleaguered traditions of the national majority (Gifford 2008). Accordingly, in the context of the perceived threat to national sovereignty posed by Europe, and following Labour's devolutionary policies -- which appeared to many as a reckless break with the conventions and statecraft that underpinned the UK -- many on the political right were inexorably drawn towards radical constitutional positions. An increasing number of conservatives began to favour the introduction of an English parliament (Wyn Jones et al. 2013) either as a bulwark against a devolution settlement that appeared to favour the non-English territories or, for some, as a route towards the dissolution of the UK and a retreat to the English heartland. It was in these circles too that the idea of holding a referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union became iconic (Gifford 2008).

But the familiar seam of Tory Englishness that Scruton mined, and his reworking of the traditionalism associated with philosopher Michael Oakeshott in particular, was leavened with novel elements – angry, populist notes about Europe, greater inward migration and the alleged suppression of English traditional culture. Scruton's polemical characterisation of an England at the mercy of the interlocking processes of globalisation, immigration and Europeanisation, and increasingly unprotected by its political and economic leaders, spoke to, and helped order, an important shift in parts of the public mood during this period, signalling the emergence of a populist mind-set which was increasingly opposed to the constitutional settlement which Toryism had helped foster and defend.

The sudden rise to prominence, after 2010, of a new right-populist challenger party (the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)), and its significant breakthrough at the county and local elections of 2013 (it received 26% of all votes cast in England), also signalled the growing popularity of this new instantiation of Englishness. Increasingly, the English and their heritage were framed as an endangered and embattled grouping, derided by a political establishment which was ideologically inclined to use the state on behalf of other ethnic and national minorities, rather than the indigenous English (Ashcroft 2012). This populist-nationalist perspective, which was widely evoked by a number of tabloid newspapers, Tory MPs and media pundits, was catalysed into an increasingly resonant mixture of nostalgia and resentment by UKIP, as it evolved from being a party obsessively focused upon the European issue, into a more flexible, 'catch-all' right-populist force, modelling itself on similar parties elsewhere in Europe and drawing upon indigenous nationalist thinking (Tournier-Sol 2014).

More generally, the restorative ambition of re-kindling the unbroken, but endangered, English pathway did not just speak to Conservatives and right-populists. It also became an appealing trope for writers and campaigners across the ideological spectrum (for instance Moreton 2010). This mood of English revivalism led some radical minds towards a more conservatively inclined conviction that the progressive future lay in renewing the fusion of patriotism and radicalism that had been characteristic of earlier periods in the left's history (Cruddas 2010). Anti-globalisation campaigner Paul Kingsnorth gained considerable attention for his populist contention that the political left also needed to reclaim an authentic England that has latterly been betrayed by the country's economic and political rulers (2009). Taking his readers on a journey in search of the 'real England' that was on the point of vanishing, he offered a repeated, emphatic contrast between Anglo-cultural artefacts and practices -- including traditional farming, rural pubs and small shops -- and the forces of progress determined to obliterate them in the name of profit and consumer choice. This nostalgic re-imagining of a disappearing English heritage received extensive coverage in the media and blogosphere.² While his ire was mostly directed at home-grown bureaucrats,

² A number of reviews are collected at: <http://www.paulkingsnorth.net/books/real-england/re-reviews>.

politicians and planners, Kingsnorth's book was also peppered with negative references to the impact of European regulations and laws upon indigenous traditional customs and practices. The wide interest in his book illustrated the growing resonance of arguments pitched in relation to a reclaimed English heritage. Most strikingly of all, the author endorsed an assertive kind of political nationalism, a sensibility that he acknowledged was a heterodox one in progressive circles. England, he declared, '... is a nation, Britain is a convenience' (2009: 17).

In these different political incarnations, the argument for the restoration of an unbroken English lineage revived the ingrained habit of conceiving Englishness in strongly exceptionalist terms, with particular emphasis given to the unique properties of place, landscape and topography, and their implications for English character and culture (Bunting 2008). Some commentators have argued that the roots of this discourse lay in the renunciation of empire and the weakening hold of the idea of a pan-national Britishness in the twentieth century, developments which led intellectuals and politicians from the 1950s onwards to re-imagine the national heartland in shrunken, Anglo-centric terms (Esty 2003). The highly particularistic vein in which Englishness has increasingly been invoked in political circles has underscored its presumed incompatibility with the universalistic qualities embodied in the model of civic Britain and the rights encoded within the EU's constitution and laws.

And yet, these forms of particularism have merely veiled the re-circulation of some resonant propositions about the English that are deeply universalist in implication. It was the English, Scruton declared, who had given the ideal of ordered liberty to other European nations (2000). And more generally, the appeal to the English heartland was frequently premised upon the conviction that England had pioneered a pathway to modernity – an argument that was at the heart of Liah Greenfeld's much debated characterisation of the history of English nationhood (1993) -- and which chimed with a re-emergent celebration of the Anglosphere in some circles in these years. The deep preference for the free market and small state favoured by proponents of this national vision were typically presented as fundamentally antithetical and institutionally superior to the kinds of Napoleonic statism associated with Brussels (Redwood 1999).

3) Anglo-Britain – an on-going dialogue

The third, nationally-focused perspective to which I draw attention reflects the renewal of the assumptions and values associated with the governing wisdom still embedded within the practices and institutions at the heart of the UK's political system. It stemmed too from a body of academic scholarship devoted to re-assessing the political thinking associated with leading expressions of the British national and constitutional traditions (for instance Aughey 2006; Mandler 2006; Stapleton 2004). Of late there has been a revival of liberal-conservative constitutionalism in both of these milieux. But, whereas for several centuries this represented the unwritten ethos of the constitution, this is now a perspective that feels itself under considerable threat and has to fight for its place within the market-place of national ideas. It has its roots in the whiggish liberalism that infused the thinking of the political elite during the nineteenth century and coheres around the conviction that the British tradition continues to offer a supple and broadly liberal framework with which the English are, by and large, happy to identify. The revival of this perspective was demonstrated by the work of leading historian of ideas and constitutional commentator, Arthur Aughey (2007; Aughey and

Berberich 2012), who deployed Oakeshottian motifs for very different ends to those pursued by Scruton.

The perspective exemplified by Aughey seeks to avoid the more strident forms of universalism and particularism that are typical of the restorationist and radical-democratic paradigms. The influence of this impulse can be identified too in the political science field, where a number of experts (most notably academic and member of the House of Lords Philip Norton (2013)), have continued to propound the virtues of the established parliamentary system against various proposed schemes for reform. This pragmatist school of commentary often invokes many of the assumed virtues of the liberal-constitutionalist tradition, and has supplied a counter-point to the claim of many progressives and conservatives that the achievement of a more secure and stable sense of English nationhood is contingent upon the re-organisation of the constitutional and political structures of the British state. It also, importantly, reflects many of the underpinning assumptions to which political practitioners and civil servants still cleave.

Aughey has provided perhaps the most comprehensive and evocative contemporary expression of this diverse lineage (2006), charting the importance of a supple and interwoven body of ideas about nationhood, parliamentary sovereignty and English culture, which he characterised – following Oakeshott -- as the governing tradition of the polity (Oakeshott 1962). On this view it was continuity, adaptability and evolution that have been the hallmarks of the constitution, and these have been buttressed by the stable and non-nationalist character of English self-understanding. In a recent essay he pursued the conversational metaphor derived from Oakeshott in more depth (Aughey and Berberich 2012). Englishness ought to be understood not as a tradition with a fixed essence, but as: ‘... a national conversation, an imaginative rather than a purely functional engagement, about the country’s history, culture and society, where what is being conversed about is the meaning of England itself’ (2012: 2). This is a dialogue that takes its bearings from, and is made possible by, the established tradition that precedes it, and which, by definition, ‘... involves a plural notion of *these Englands* rather than the singular notion of this England ...’ (2012: 2). The Oakeshottian understanding of tradition as an ensemble made up of many contingent elements, and not dependent upon a single rationale, is commended both as a methodological approach to the appreciation of nationhood and as an embodiment of the main attributes of Britishness itself. Aughey employed it to underscore his account of the national paradigm as a multi-vocal entity, which is not anchored by any one claim or practice.

This account faces the growing difficulty that many of the English are increasingly unlikely to relate to their own sense of nationhood in this way, and appear disinclined to develop this kind of disposition. Political and cultural claims made in relation to English identity are increasingly characterised by their loud, partisan and vernacular qualities, as various recent sociological studies make clear (Skey 2012; Mann 2011; Mann and Fenton 2009; Garner 2012). And in this populist idiom, Englishness is often advanced as an endangered species, in need of defending from a (British) state that tends to favour minority groups and the smaller nationalities of the UK, and is in thrall to the bureaucratic imperatives associated with the European Union.

Equally, this paradigm is under considerable strain as a result of the markedly divergent views of the UK’s role in, and relationship with, the EU that are favoured by its advocates. For a shrinking, but still significant, pool of political actors and commentators, the British tradition can be pragmatically reconciled with membership of this larger Union, on the condition that the terms of European membership do not impinge upon fundamental aspects

of national sovereignty – a principle that has been the subject of increasingly vigorous contestation in policy terms. And yet, for others on the political right, there is a fundamental antithesis between the British tradition of parliamentary sovereignty and the customary nature of its legal tradition, and the forms of governance associated with the Commission and European Parliament (Crowson 2006), and this antinomy renders England’s participation within this venture inherently problematic.

Appeals to ‘the British tradition’ – for so long a fixture within established forms of constitutional argument -- have therefore ceased to provide a source of unambiguous wisdom for political practitioners. And this development reflects a growing sense of uncertainty about the continuing viability of the British national story to which its constitutional tradition is tied. The notion of the UK as an exemplar of the principle of ‘civil association’ (in Oakeshottian (2000) parlance) makes it increasingly inapplicable to a context in which both state and union are overwhelmingly cast in the terms which he associated with ‘enterprise associations’ -- as the English are ever more prone to pose in instrumental terms the question of what it is that they get from the two unions to which they belong. More generally, the ideal of the civilised, national dialogue that has prevailed in such venues as Westminster and Whitehall, now speaks to a significantly smaller pool of citizens than was the case twenty years ago. It requires a quite considerable leap of faith to assume that the British tradition, and the kind of political conversation it embodies, retains the capacity to underpin a stable territorial and state system in the UK.

Political insiders, leading commentators and liberal intellectuals who still abide by the terms of this deeply rooted paradigm retain the hope that the wisdom accumulated within the British model of statecraft might yet point towards a way of re-organising the furniture of government and representation in a way that would head off English disaffection, as well as nationalist currents elsewhere. And yet, all around them Englishness is becoming a much more prominent point of reference, in political as well as cultural terms, a development that renders the prevailing idea of the English as a people who readily identify with the unionist tradition an increasingly fraught one.

Conclusions

The three broad, internally differentiated perspectives sketched here have each tried to establish a stranglehold on the public understanding of the character and implications of the renewal of an avowedly English form of nationhood. Each also carries significant implications for the way in which this sense of nationality is calibrated in political terms in relation to the British state, the domestic union and the EU. Together, they have shaped some of the main arguments about nationhood and governance in the increasingly contested Anglo-British case. And each has prompted and responded to the growing prevalence of England as ‘an imagined community’ (Anderson 1991), a trend which has rendered other circles of attachment – to the UK and Europe – more tenuous and distant.

But while conventional wisdom tends to maintain that the renewal of a sense of English identity is an insuperable blockage to the project of legitimising the EU, the analysis offered here points towards a different conclusion -- that political analysts need a more sophisticated appreciation of the different, contending constructions of nationhood that have become prominent in the recent period, and the various political ends to which these are put. The interpretive sensibility upon which I have called draws attention to the contingent, not inherent, character of the opposition between English nationhood and wider circles of

national association and engagement. Importantly, there have emerged powerful and resonant versions of Englishness which are in direct competition with the more nativist and populist idiom that has become prominent of late, and the contestation between these expressions may well be a major factor in determining whether an English sense of nationality might be reconfigured as a form of identification that will ‘nest’ within wider multi-national unions and alliances.

Equally, some of the beliefs that arise from these frameworks have become important causal influences upon the calculations of political actors and commentators, and are worthy of more serious political analysis for this reason alone. Thus, characterisations of English national identity as exceptionally insular and inherently parochial have featured in the reflections and calculations of numerous politicians and policy-makers in recent years. UKIP, for instance, is widely viewed as successful because of its ability to relate to a more salient sense of English disenchantment, and the latter is typically presumed to constitute a seedbed of anti-European sentiment (Ashcroft 2012). This perception was one of the factors informing the UK Prime Minister’s decision in early 2012 to call for a referendum on European membership in a future government should he not succeed in re-negotiating its relationship with the EU.

The bulk of Labour’s parliamentary leadership, meanwhile, remains convinced that it can or should say little about a shift in Anglo-consciousness which, *pace* Nairn, many in its ranks believe is conducive to a conservative or populist, disposition. The party remains predominantly hostile to any reform that might offer the English a greater degree of political and institutional recognition (including the very mild proposals for reform to the way in which the House of Commons handles legislation that affects England only, that were outlined in the independent McKay Commission in March 2013)³, in part because many progressives believe that England would be highly unlikely to elect a Labour government (despite Labour’s performances in the general elections of 1997 and 2001). The continuing influence of this fear can be traced back, in part, to the perspectives outlined above.

Progressives and conservatives alike are increasingly convinced that the re-animation of Englishness necessarily means a rejection of the kinds of trans-national involvement and co-operation which the liberal ideal of Britishness was intended to legitimise. Yet, the analysis pursued here suggests -- to the contrary -- that such an assumption reflects the kind of fixed, essentialist characterisation of Englishness which is challenged by a recognition of the contingently formed, narrative perspectives which have been drawn towards it. English nationhood is far more fluid, divided and open to contestation than any of these competing outlooks, and much current political judgment, tend to admit.

A critical focus upon these developing debates about English nationhood, therefore, brings some important insights to the political analysis of perceptions of the European project within the UK. It suggests, above all, that the level of hostility to the EU which distinguishes England from other national groupings in the UK has its roots in patterns of national discourse as well as other sources of disillusion, such as the Eurozone crisis. And, it highlights the important role that ideological frameworks and narratives have played in shaping and ordering public sentiments on the interlocking issues of nationhood, constitution and governance in UK politics. Whereas conventional wisdom has it that the intertwined forces of nationalism and populism are inexorably undermining the legitimacy of the European enterprise across many of its member states, the analysis pursued here suggests that

³ Details of the McKay Commission can be found at: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130403030652/http://tmc.independent.gov.uk/>. Labour declined to make a submission to it, or respond publicly to its final report.

political analysts would do well to pay greater heed to the ideas, expectations and stories that have been propounded by politicians and intellectuals 'from above', and consider their impact upon, and relationship with, shifting patterns of national sentiment in society at large. More generally, it implies that the political analysis of Euroscepticism ought to pay greater heed to the deep roots and pre-existing traditions of national thinking upon which newer populist currents are able to call.

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