
Special issue: *Decolonising the School Curriculum*

Commentary

Decolonising the school curriculum in an era of political polarisation

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Abstract

Recent consciously curated conditions of political polarisation have prevented English schools from taking even the first tentative steps towards decolonising the curriculum. Since returning to power in 2010, successive Conservative Secretaries of State for Education have resolved to restore traditional learning methods to English classrooms, championing the need for children to passively accept content chosen for them by government appointees who are answerable to political rather than to pedagogical priorities. This had already created an unsupportive political environment for transforming what children might learn, before such difficulties were magnified following the Brexit referendum of 2016. Decolonisation has increasingly been identified by Conservative Party strategists as one of their beloved wedge issues, something that can be used to stoke electorally expedient anger against 'the Remain elite' among Leave-voting communities. Hopes for a serious debate about the principles of decolonisation were frustrated by the Johnson government hijacking the very mention of the word to use as evidence that the 'woke' brigade was running hopelessly out of control. The case for

decolonising the English school curriculum has been subjected to a full-frontal populist culture-war attack on an educational establishment accused of refusing to allow children to see the good in their country.

Keywords decolonisation; school curriculum; political polarisation; culture wars; war on woke; Johnson government; citizenship; English schools; history; Conservative Party

Introduction

We are writing on the day that Boris Johnson tendered his resignation as leader of the Conservative Party after his government ceased to be able to function following mass ministerial resignations. Neither he nor it is likely to be remembered for their policy record. Johnson's three-year premiership was cast very much in the Vote Leave mould of being asked to be judged not by facts on the ground, but by success in manipulating the national mood. Having identified what its key strategists considered to be a previously ignored patriotism among swing voters in marginal seats – those who disproportionately influence the country's overall electoral arithmetic – the Johnson government invited all others onto the cultural battleground it believed best reflects their concerns. The requirement that public buildings should always fly the Union Jack; the furore over whether even a pandemic based on airborne viral transmission should be allowed to prevent Rule Britannia from being sung at the Last Night of the Proms; the defence of English football fans' right to boo the national team's players for taking an anti-racist stance; the suggestion that public service broadcasters should be forced to play the national anthem at the end of each day's live transmission; the discussion paper advocating the return of imperial measurements; the willingness to repeatedly break international law if this is a way of reducing perceived incursions into British sovereignty by what it insisted on calling 'foreign judges': all of these are divisive issues on which the Johnson government was always happy to fan the flames further, confident from its focus group polling that it would benefit electorally from doing so.

It approached the issue of decolonising the school curriculum from the same perspective. The case in favour reflects the desire for a genuinely dialogical negotiation of the pedagogical principles of curriculum design in a multicultural country, but it has all too quickly been reduced by the political right to the accusation that it is about talking the country down. The Johnson government refused to allow a serious debate about the principles of decolonisation to occur, instead filling that space with its own performative outrage that the question of curriculum design had been captured by those who refuse to allow children to take pride in their country. That essentially pedagogical question has been turned for reasons of political self-interest into what the Conservative Party's favoured election strategist Lynton Crosby calls a 'wedge issue'. The assumption is that blue-collar workers whose economic interests do not align with the Conservative Party's will nonetheless find its social conservatism sufficiently appealing to lend it their votes. Under such thinking, the content of the issue is rendered subservient to the gains that can be made politically by exploiting its potential to cause trouble for the opposition. It was in this vein that even the potential for engaging in an actual debate about decolonisation was treated by Johnson's aides as collateral damage of the perceived electoral advantage of being seen shouting down the idea in public whenever possible. This was a clear attempt to govern through emotional manipulation, having first divided those who are comfortable with such a strategy exhibiting an overt culture-war face from those who are not.

Our short Commentary piece asks what it means to try to make the pedagogical case for a suitably decolonised school curriculum in the context of such deliberate political polarisation. The jury must necessarily remain out for now on whether these difficulties spiked during the Johnson government, or whether they will prove to be an enduring aspect of contemporary Conservative Party politics.

Divergent accounts of UK citizenship

The dividing lines over decolonisation reinforce what is, at heart, a dispute about the model of citizenship to which the political community aspires. To decolonise is to recognise that all knowledge claims

arise from a particular historical context and that many of the claims that have for so long formed core curriculum content emerged from within specifically imperial and colonial contexts (Christie, 2020). This should be an uncontroversial epistemological observation, yet it has been systematically reworked in right-wing culture wars into calculatingly provocative statements about the forced removal of their legitimate cultural inheritance from what children get to learn. The image of a domineering 'woke' aggressor is usually very close to the surface of such claims, whereby a patriotic counter-attack on behalf of the silent majority is said to be the only thing protecting children's right to develop an emotional connection to their country. However, the culture-war perspective narrows access to Britishness only to those who can see people like themselves represented in core curriculum content (Harris and Reynolds, 2014; Alexander and Weekes-Bernard, 2017). It thereby becomes an exclusive entity, one where the historically privileged are able to present as being universally applicable the much more particular experiences they have of what it means to be British. They are therefore systematically overrepresented in that meaning.

Returning decolonisation to a purely epistemological matter, even the most cursory questioning of the origins of curriculum content reveals a lack of diversity in what is taught. It immediately exposes an obvious prioritisation of some experiences over others, so that White, male, heterosexual, ableist and capitalist world views are placed at the centre of what we might want to know about our historical selves (Arday et al., 2021). The staples of British cultural inheritance are embedded in such world views, whereas the urge to decolonise is to ask whether this exhausts everything of interest that could be said about the national 'us'. Providing a genuinely inclusive response to that question brings more diverse knowledge into classroom discussions, and, more broadly, it validates the idea that the 'view from elsewhere' can carry equal weight to the 'view from here' (Akhter, 2020). Decolonising captures a desire to recontextualise claims to all forms of knowledge – be they scientific, historical, social, economic or political – in a way that no longer masks the power relations they might reflect (Shilliam, 2021).

The case for decolonising the school curriculum would therefore seem to require a rethinking of UK citizenship in more expansive terms. It was only through the British Nationality Act of 1981 that the legal principle of *jus soli* was tightened to equate citizenship by birthright more closely to being born physically within the British Isles (Patel, 2021). The act was an attempt to realign separate UK statutes on nationality and immigration, to reflect in nationality law the impediments to free Commonwealth immigration that had been introduced throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Karatani, 2003). The British Nationality Act of 1948 had conferred nationality on anyone born within the Empire under the new legal status of 'Citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies'. However, the boundaries of the country's immigration laws had increasingly been redrawn to refuse right of entry to legal British nationals who were racialised in minority terms from the perspective of British society as a whole (El-Enany, 2020). What it meant to be a British national was therefore redefined during the post-war period in line with an ever more restricted view of who those born within the British Isles would consent to share their homeland with.

We hear nothing of this political circumscription of British nationality, however, in how the UK state sets out its conception of Britishness in its *Life in the United Kingdom* handbook (Home Office, 2013). This document presents the state's preferred conception of citizenship to those who aspire to that status, but it does so on the basis of a much less conflicted narrative of who counts as belonging to the nation (Brooks, 2019). The most recent version was published in 2013 under the Coalition government, but through a Home Office very much under Conservative stewardship. Its content was criticised by the Historical (2020: n.p.), the umbrella organisation that defends the interests of the country's historians, for being 'fundamentally misleading and in places demonstrably false', particularly with respect to what it says about the UK's involvement in practices of enslavement and the process of imperial retreat. History is therefore told through the perspective of what Conservative ministers want to preserve as the dominant political sense of the national 'us', not through the picture of the past that the collective, painstaking effort of professional historians has pieced together over many years (Trentmann, 2020). Slavery is thus something that 'we' ended through our altruistic abolition acts, rather than participated in and benefited handsomely from through exploiting the ancestors of many millions of people whom the British Nationality Act of 1948 deemed to be legal British nationals. The process of imperial retreat was likewise something that 'we' permitted, rather than violently resisted through the imprisonment and torture of fellow legal British nationals. The viewpoint is parochial, the tone self-congratulatory. The content of the school curriculum is likely to display these same features for as long as the demand for its decolonisation is neutered by confected culture-war attacks. It will continue to be built on knowledge claims that obscure alternative accounts of what might be known through the partiality it displays to

majority epistemologies, and the invitation it advances to those who recognise themselves in these forms of identification to believe that they speak to a universal experience of Britishness.

Perhaps most obviously in this regard, the current school curriculum continues to popularise the faulty assumption that the UK is an archetypal nation-state, and has been so since it was formed. Under the Johnson government's political censoring of those it has reproached for trying to traduce the country's reputation, it might well have world-beating capacity in its DNA, making the UK 'the greatest place on earth', as Johnson (2019) himself said in his first address from the Commons Despatch Box as Prime Minister. Yet it is conceptualised as a normal nation-state, as per the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia. Within this conception, it first had a national people who recognised that they shared a common heritage linked to a shared home on the British Isles, before then constructing political institutions that could enforce sovereign claims on that territory in the name of the national people. Those who use culture-war arguments to ensure that the case for decolonising the school curriculum does not get a hearing have in mind a model of citizenship for the country's children that is embedded in this myth of origination.

What happens to the underlying model of citizenship, though, if the premises on which it is based are changed to reflect a very different reality? Linda Colley (1992) has shown how the UK had state institutions in place from the moment that the English and Scottish Parliaments finalised the Treaty of Union in 1707, but the idea of a British nation only began to take shape in subsequent communal experiences of war, empire and a Protestant culture. She argues that it makes more sense to think of the UK as a state-nation, because the concept of a nation-state invokes an obvious chronological contradiction in its case. Gurminder Bhambra (2016: 344) makes the equally telling point that the UK was an 'imperial polity' until comparatively recently, perhaps – in law, if not necessarily in practice – even as recently as the redefinition of the *jus soli* principle in the British Nationality Act of 1981. It makes little sense, she says, to think of the UK historically as a nation-state when for such a long time the territorial reach of its political institutions was so much greater than the geographical boundaries of the nation. The term empire-state should be preferred as a result. Liam Stanley (2022) has brought these insights together to speak of the UK, historically, as an empire-state-nation.

Consider what schoolchildren need to learn if they are to develop the historical awareness to become fully reflexive citizens of an empire-state-nation that only latterly has sought to act as a modern nation-state. Presumably, such students will come to maturity as citizens only through exposure to complexly layered knowledge claims that accept multiple perspectives arising from differently grounded epistemologies. The 'view from elsewhere' will always have to be understood alongside the 'view from here', even on occasions as a direct antidote to it. However, if the school curriculum is to be kept as the sole preserve of the 'view from here', it is difficult to understand how children are likely to form an empathetic response when their minoritised classmates say that they are unable to see people like themselves in what they are being taught. A decolonised school curriculum can provide suitably recontextualised knowledge that helps to create solidaristic foundations for a model of citizenship adapted to life lived within a historical empire-state-nation. However, this very possibility is denied when questions of curriculum content are placed instead in a knowingly polarised template in which they are reduced to an allegedly woke preoccupation with national self-denigration.

Nostalgic impediments to a decolonised school curriculum

Johnson's ministers gave every indication of having calculated that the Conservative Party could make political capital within Leave-oriented constituencies by signalling a commitment to a model of citizenship that finds virtue in its own parochialism. As Francesca Melhuish (2021) has shown to devastatingly good effect in her study of the UK's 2016 EU referendum, Brexit was forged through the creation of overlapping nostalgia moods which fed a populist instinct to 'take our country back'. Taking it back to what or to when was never fully explained, but there were enough hints in the successful Leave campaign to allow anyone who already believed that the national grass was greener in the past to endorse its position. Vote Leave bombarded the electorate with what Melhuish (2021) has identified as a 'banal' nostalgia (the general sense that there have been fewer things for Britons to take pride in since the national heyday has passed), an 'empire' nostalgia (the more specific sense that this heyday coincided with the high-point of imperial supremacy) and a 'Powellite' nostalgia (the even more specific sense that post-imperial immigration has undermined the country's authentic self). Having won the right to take the UK out of the European Union in this way in 2016, and then having won the right to govern the country

solely for Leave-oriented voters in the general election of 2019, the Johnson government showed no eagerness to indulge alternative conceptions of the country that exist beyond these dominant nostalgia moods. Yet that is exactly what engaging seriously with demands for a decolonised school curriculum would entail.

The Johnson government's covenant with members of its electoral base appears to have been that it would move rapidly into culture-war mode to defend their right to think what they want and to be as exclusionary in that thinking as they like in their conceptualisation of the national 'us'. It embraced an evidently partisan model of citizenship built on an understanding of a glorious past, in which the duty of the citizen is to praise the country for its values, its achievements and its overarching sense of self. The past therefore always deserves acclamation, and the only stories that can be told about it are of a nation that was consistently able to punch above its weight to leave a positive imprint on the rest of the world (Watson, 2020). It is this insularity that allowed Johnson (2020) to position himself as the personification of long-term national historical trends in describing the love of freedom as the primary characteristic of British nationhood. It is the same mindset that allowed his ideological allies to claim that, as a nation, 'we invented freedom' (Hannan, 2013: 1), while simultaneously arguing that this freedom should be restricted today to those who conform to only the most stringent definition of the *jus soli* criterion (Home Office, 2022).

The case for a decolonised school curriculum clearly sits awkwardly alongside such a political position, because it is diametrically opposed to a national imagination constructed through nostalgic imagery. The Johnson government's culture wars were all fought on behalf of a supposed majority conception of what it means to be British. It is far from obvious that they represented the opinions of a numerical majority in the country as a whole, and it is blindingly clear that they did not do so for the age group who would benefit most directly from a reworking of the content of the school curriculum. Nonetheless, such benefits were rendered invisible by a government politics of national self-importance grounded in limited empathetic responses to alternative forms of self-awareness. There can be no recognition from this perspective that much of the knowledge contained in core curriculum content reflects the imperial and colonial contexts in which it was originally produced. Within the framework of right-wing culture wars, the only legitimate content is that which helps to develop children's instincts to exult their country. Everything else tends to be dismissed as cultural vandalism. The politics of national self-importance is inherently celebratory, and it demands classroom content to match (Brocklehurst, 2015).

However, it only celebrates what looks to be normal from the perspective of the majority population. It tells the story of a nation-state dedicated to preserving a political apparatus that reproduces White, male, heterosexual, ableist and capitalist world views. The Johnson government's culture wars allowed its electoral base to affirm the sentiment that these world views capture 'who we are', because they also capture who we look back on and think we were when embracing the currently dominant nostalgia moods. Yet this version of the national 'us' is defined significantly more narrowly than the population of the country as a whole, as all sense of difference to the mainstream is erased. By contrast, the case for decolonising the school curriculum speaks directly to the lived reality of such difference. It seeks to explain how Melhuish's (2021) banal, empire and Powellite nostalgia present a one-sided depiction of who we were when British imperial ambitions were being satisfied, and it shows how there is no route from the present to the world portrayed by those nostalgia moods. This is why, from a right-wing culture-war perspective, it is necessary to drown out arguments for decolonisation before they can gain further traction.

The desire to decolonise the school curriculum reduces in practice to adding new perspectives to what already exists. The culture-war shouting-down response, though, immediately re-presents this logic of addition as one of replacement. Those who see themselves in the restricted model of citizenship that maps the boundaries of the nation on to the world views of the socially privileged protest that their lives are being invalidated if they are asked to reflect on whether there might be more to the modern UK than that. Throughout its tenure, the Johnson government stoked deliberate political polarisation in its insistence that anyone with whom it disagreed was seeking to diminish the patriotic identities of the silent majority by requiring them to apologise for who they are and what they believe. The case for decolonising the school curriculum was caricatured as a desire to force children to reject the specifically Conservative approach to the love of country. A juxtaposition was made between, on the one hand, instinctive respect for patriotic symbols and for the historical accomplishments that bring such symbolism to life and, on the other hand, attempts to rid young people's minds of national self-respect.

Former Prime Minister Theresa May (2016) famously dismissed the right of the Brexit-sceptical proportion of the UK population to be heard politically in her 2016 remark that they stood outside fundamental tenets of Britishness in their desire to be seen as a 'citizen of nowhere'. The Johnson government's culture-war framing of a decolonised curriculum took the same idea, but added a further twist to it. The self-congratulatory model of citizenship it sought to promote through limiting curriculum content transformed the globally aware 'citizen of nowhere' into an 'anti-citizen of the UK'.

Conclusion

The discussion of proposals to decolonise the school curriculum should revolve primarily around the pedagogical issues of how best children might be taught and what they should be encouraged to learn. Yet whether such proposals will ever be genuinely debated takes us beyond the pedagogical realm and into the political, particularly when the Conservative Party's strategic calculations involve investing heavily in carefully curated outrage. Vote Leave certainly made hay from convincing significant numbers that a liberal establishment was talking down to them, ridiculing their patriotism and turning their inherent love of country into something they should keep to themselves. The Johnson government adopted a similar tactic at every available opportunity during its three-year tenure in Downing Street.

The pedagogical case for decolonising the school curriculum thus looks as though it has become trapped in political limbo. Whenever that case is articulated, and however many olive branches are offered to make it appear unthreatening, it has recently been turned into something inherently forbidding in an effort to serve the electoral interests of the Conservative Party. Johnson's ministers sensed that there were votes to be harvested if they could distract the public's attention from their government's policy void by finding an example of woke thinking to shout down. The political elision between the drive to decolonise and the appropriation of the national consciousness by a woke elite already seems to have been secured in the broader right-wing media ecology that served as the Johnson government's facilitator in mood curation. The pedagogical benefits of children learning alternative viewpoints and perspectives have been sacrificed along the way. This is not to say that a future reactivation is now impossible, especially with Johnson's personal fall from grace likely to usher in an overhaul of ministerial personnel. However, our analysis suggests that it will first be necessary for political conditions to change really rather significantly, and certainly much more significantly than a new prime minister sticking to old Conservative tactics.

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