Beyond the Constitution?

Englishness in a post-devolved Britain

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Introduction

The notion that we are currently witnessing a growing commitment to English nationalism and deeper and wider identification with Englishness, as opposed to Britishness, is becoming part of the political wisdom of the age. An increasingly familiar idea in the village of Westminster as well as in the London-based media, the suggestion that the English are beginning to think of themselves as a nation with a clearly separated identity from the other constituent nationalities resident within the United Kingdom feeds into an increasingly vexed debate among politicians and commentators about the constitutional, political and cultural status of the UK and the identity and future of 'Britishness' itself. This theme is most obviously linked in political terms to the landmark reforms associated with the granting of devolution to Scotland and Wales in 1999, though a growing commitment to Englishness pre-dated this legislation. A new mood of English nationalism was discernible as far back as the early 1990s, and was gathering momentum well before New Labour came to power in 1997.

Quite how widespread is this stronger identification with Englishness, and how new is the idea of belonging to an English rather than a British nation, represent important questions that have been rather buried beneath the sounds of the trumpeting or denouncing of this purportedly new phenomenon. While a full examination of the historical dimensions and depth of identification with Englishness is beyond our remit here, this paper seeks to put the case for the adoption of a greater sense of historical proportion about these changes, and challenges the widely held presumption that the rise of Englishness necessarily signals the death-knell of the values and identities associated with Britishness and the legitimacy of the UK's polity. We engage these questions by separating out and providing some critical reflections upon three of the main characterisations of English nationalism that dominate thinking in elite political and cultural circles. None of these, we maintain, is adequate to the task of providing an intellectually robust, historically proportionate or politically wise framework for policymakers and politicians. In conclusion, we point towards the merits of a rather different reading of, and approach to, Englishness for the political elite in Westminster, a paradigm characterised by a commitment to adaptive reform, constructive engagement with English identity and an awareness of the values and benefits still attached to British identity, and some of the core political traditions and institutions of the UK.

The first 'narrative' we consider is the increasingly prevalent idea that the English are asserting themselves because they are resentful at the inequities associated with post-devolution fiscal and constitutional arrangements, and due to the vacuum created by the demise of Britishness as a historically meaningful cultural identity. These views correspond to the intellectual model of the nation that mobilises and comes to a sense of its own self-consciousness in the context of political grievance and constitutional change.

Second, and somewhat different in character, we suggest, is the sense of Englishness that has been promoted and explored by a host of culturally-orientated commentary since the mid 1990s. This rather disparate body of writing posits and promotes a sense of cultural reawakening which is more akin to the model of the nation as a primarily cultural construct espoused historically by figures such as Herder and critically analysed more recently by scholars such as John Hutchinson (1987, 1994). Some of the arguments emanating from these quarters struggle to provide a convincing account of how English identity in the present relates to some of the grand narratives that have shaped English perceptions of the past. But this paradigm provides some useful pointers, we suggest, towards the kind of engagement which the political class needs to develop in relation to this phenomenon.

Third we point to the emergence and influence of a powerful counter-discourse to those affirming, or seeking to exploit, current emphases on Englishness. This perspective tends to present new cultural shifts as utterly threatening in character to the traditions and values of Britishness and the British state. In so doing, it tends to underplay the nature and scope of the challenges facing the latter, and, we suggest, overlook the complexities and ambiguities of national affiliation and identity in Britain. A commitment to a strongly held sense of Englishness and the desire to articulate and explore English national identity is by no means a novel feature of British cultural life, nor is it necessarily an indication of the demise of Britishness. The politics of national identification and cultural attachment in Britain does not have to be seen as a zero-sum game.

1. The politics of English nationalism

The Labour government elected in 1997 has overseen the most far-reaching reform of Britain's constitution over the last century. Whether this programme represents a continuation of the supple and adaptive traditions which some commentators have long celebrated as the hallmark of governance from Westminster, or amounts to a shorter-term politically-driven effort to breathe new life into the ailing Union, or represents a defensive response to the declining legitimacy of Britain, remains the subject of considerable debate. The political reasons given for the devolution of some executive responsibility to, and the creation of legislative bodies in, Scotland and Wales, relate to the desire to head off some of the long-held grievances that had fired nationalist movements in both countries. Labour's 1997 election manifesto promised to 'meet the demand for decentralisation of power to Scotland and Wales, once established in referendums' and argued that doing so would strengthen the Union and remove the threat of separatism (Labour Party 1997).

Very little was said about England and the English when these changes were introduced. However, in the years since devolution, three different grievances with these new arrangements have been aired on their behalf. These concern: the apparent inequity of Scottish MPs at Westminster being able to vote on matters that only affect England – the continuing conundrum known as the West Lothian Question; increasing disaffection about the markedly different proportions of public expenditure incurred per capita in England compared with Scotland; and the emergence of marked differences of attitude and policy toward the public funding of education, healthcare, and other services in Scotland. The *de facto* subsidising of Scotland by the English taxpayer is actually a long-standing feature of the policy landscape, and has surfaced before

as an issue in British politics. Fearing a revival of Scottish separatism (which reached its electoral peak in 1974) the Conservatives shielded Scotland from 'the full rigour of the Barnett formula'[1] (McLean and McMillan 2003: 54), and, contrary to popular belief, from the full force of Thatcherite policies (Gamble 2006: 27). This differential has persisted under Labour, while devolution has served to make it more apparent. Consequently this inequity has become a key target for a vociferous band of critics who regard devolution as an affront to English sensibilities (for instance Heffer 2005a). As another noted, the Scots might be regarded as building their New Jerusalem with English money (Johnson 2001).

Yet, whether the incensed character of the writings of right-wing English populists like Boris Johnson and allies such as the Associate Editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, Simon Heffer, accurately reflects the sentiments of the English is harder to assess. Specifically, there is little evidence that the greater self-identification with England which some opinion polls have tracked across this period means that the new Englishness is as defined by grievance and political resentment as these figures assume. Fiscal inequities between England and Scotland have not assumed any consistent political priority, though for obvious tactical reasons, the Conservatives in Parliament are beginning to press this issue more forcefully now that the Government is headed by a Scottish MP. More important, perhaps, is the potential for grievance about these issues to become conjoined with other contentious issues where a sense of English tradition is involved – the issues mobilised by the Countryside Alliance, or hostility towards the European Union.

Few mainstream figures have associated themselves unambiguously with the politics of English resentment, while the Conservative Party as a whole has been wary since 1997 of making capital out of the West Lothian question. However electorally attractive the idea of stoking-up English complaints about the burdens of devolution may be, its own historic commitment to the Union has tended to dampen down Conservative radicalism. As the party's last national election manifesto declared, 'Conservatives believe that the Union of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland brings benefits to all parts of our United Kingdom' (Conservative Party 2005: 21). As such, with the exception of a few fringe campaign groups, the tiny UK Independence Party, and the far-right, English post-devolution grievances have not yet found a home within British party politics.

Whether this is a good or bad thing remains to be seen. Certainly there is evidence that some of the issues raised by devolution about the representation and governance of England might be ripe for mobilisation. A recent YouGov poll reported that 76 per cent of respondents thought it unfair that Scottish MPs can vote on matters that only affect England, and 68 per cent thought that it was unfair that Scots pay the same rates of tax as the English but enjoy higher public spending per head of population. Those polled were less clear about how these inequities could be resolved, although 51 per cent agreed with the idea of preventing Scottish and Welsh MPs from voting on matters that affect only England (YouGov 2007). Another poll, conducted for the BBC's *Newsnight* in January 2007, recorded 76 per cent of English respondents favouring the continuation of the Union, and 61 per cent in favour of an English Parliament (BBC News 2007).

When confronted directly with the issue, significant numbers of respondents articulate sympathy for the view that the current arrangement is unjust to England, but little evidence exists that this constitutional anomaly figures high in their own policy preferences and voting intentions. The political fall-out from this rising sense of disgruntlement remains fluid. Now confronted with a Scottish Prime Minister, and a tighter public spending settlement, the Union may face a greater legitimacy crisis in the form of heightened English resentment than has hitherto been the case.

Rather than assuming this to be so, however, we need to ask whether English nationalism necessarily points in this constitutional-political direction. For a start, it is worth noting that for all its imperfections, the post-devolution constitutional position may have some merits, and prove more long-lasting than many assume, as the least-worst option currently available in constitutional and fiscal terms, in this debate. The other main reform scenarios – either reorganising the business of the House of Commons so that only English MPs vote on English matters or the more radical idea of an English parliament, to match the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly – come with a tangle of political and constitutional complexities and risks (Lodge and Schmuecker 2007). A few 'mainstream' commentators have begun to toy with the creation of an English parliament within an overarching new constitutional system, but have said little about the implications of the seismic shifts, and their implications for the Union, which such a project implies (Marr 2000, Wheatcroft 2007).

In fact, there is evidence to suggest that in terms of public endorsement for available constitutional options, the status quo has been the most popular choice of the English. As John Curtice has shown, this has been the most consistent frontrunner in the opinion polls since 1999 (Curtice 2007). Indeed, the absence of agitation in England about asymmetrical devolution is a real cause of frustration for separatists such as Simon Heffer, for whom the English 'construct the pretence, rampant at the moment, that all the devolution that is now taking place need have no impact on the Union' (Heffer 1999: 31). He paints a picture of the English as a decent-minded people, suffering from both 'an incipient fear of asserting themselves', and 'a national characteristic of taking too much for granted' (ibid: 105). The 'secret people'[2] hailed by the iconoclastic early twentieth-century author G.K. Chesterton, are simply too private, unpolitical and content to go in for the kind of mobilisation that English populists anticipate.

Others, from left and right, see the rise of political Englishness as an unavoidable consequence of the inexorable waning of the values and traditions that underpinned the dominant sense of Britishness (Marr 2000). The English, Richard Weight argues, 'invested their Englishness almost wholly in the idea of Britain' (Weight 2002: 10). As the traditions and values of Britishness cease to have the cultural pull they once did – with Gordon Brown's generation perhaps the last to feel an uncomplicated and proud sense of being British – it is

1. The Barnett Formula is the mechanism used to allocate spending blocks from the Treasury to the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
2. The title of Chesterton's famous poem, available at: www.cse.dmu.ac.uk/~mward/gkc/books/secret-people.html

suggested that Englishness emerges, confused and disorientated, into the light of day. For social theorist Krishan Kumar, 'having for so long resolutely refused to consider themselves as a nation or to define their sense of nationhood [the English] find themselves having to begin from scratch' (Kumar 2003: 269). Britishness and the defunct British state should be abandoned, asserts Weight, not least because 'the United Kingdom was primarily established to further the quest for Empire, and with the loss of Empire went its raison d'être' (Weight 2002: 727). Separation would help to free England from its imperial past, and afford the left the opportunity to develop a radical alternative vision, wresting patriotism from the right.

Such an argument gets its bearings from the influential analysis laid out in Tom Nairn's landmark text *The Break-up of Britain* (Nairn 1977). On this view, devolution represents a last desperate attempt to appease the forces of Celtic nationalism and save the creaking structures of the post-imperial British state. It has also, Weight argues, 'forced the English to do what their partners did in the second half of the twentieth century – to reconsider who they are as a people', a task made all the more difficult 'because their national identity was subsumed within the Union for so long… and because they are doing it by default' (Weight 2002: 731). The notion that English identity has been sunk in or subsumed by Britishness, popular with writers from across the political spectrum, fits awkwardly with the equally popular idea that the English were the dominant partners within, and indeed shapers of, the cultural values and traditions associated with British identity. It is still far from uncommon to find commentators from both right and left sliding between these two very different propositions in the same argument.

A small but perhaps growing body of political opinion is beginning to call for a careful re-engagement with Englishness in the context of devolution, primarily to offset the perils of populist nationalism. Former Minister David Blunkett, for example, sees the chance to develop a new progressive form of Englishness that is not seen as a threat to Scotland but is 'compatible with a civic value-led sense of Britishness' and 'is strengthened from its position in a multi-national Union' (Blunkett 2005). Blunkett's confidence that a rejuvenated idea of Englishness can be accommodated within a Unionist framework is significant in this regard. This kind of sentiment clearly played a role in animating the development of plans, in the first Blair administration, to grant some executive powers to regional authorities in some parts of England, notably the North West and North East. With the demise of this project, following the 'No' vote of the North East referendum in 2004, there remains a policy vacuum at the heart of the Labour Party's thinking about the governance of England.

Beyond interventions on some symbolically important, but as yet rather isolated, issues – calls for St George's Day to become a public holiday being one example – none of the parties displays any kind of confidence or willingness to bring Englishness into the heart of its strategic and policy thinking. Fearfulness and the hope that English nationalism will quietly subside have been the abiding watchwords of the political elite. With the ascendancy of Gordon Brown to Prime Ministerial office, and his apparent willingness to deliver a further phase of constitutional reform (particularly in relation to the relationship between executive and legislature), the Tories may edge closer to mobilising English nationalism. At the same time, David Cameron has been keen to emphasise his Unionist credentials, and to distance himself from 'sour Little Englanders' (Cameron 2006). He does not, however, look likely to drop the Conservative pledge of 'English votes for English laws' adopted by the party under William Hague[3], even though some suggest that such a move 'raises the prospect of a UK government being unable to govern England, its largest constituent part'[4] (Stirling 2007).

Englishness is, then, by no means absent from mainstream politics. Indeed its motifs, anxieties and grievances continually recur in British political life, and find their ways into a host of different, apparently unrelated policy issues. But taken as a whole, the political parties, and their most proximate media commentators, appear either unduly optimistic or unduly worried about the likelihood that English nationalism will mutate into a small-nation resentment at its position within a larger multi-nation entity. One important explanation for the lack of proportion adopted towards this phenomenon is that political calculations about English disquiet have wrongly been separated from the cultural-cum-historical dimensions of contemporary Englishness.

2. Englishness as a cultural identity

Alongside the popular celebration of symbols of Englishness in the theatres of international sporting competition, a more considered re-examination of England's culture and history has been underway since the early mid-1990s. This is a process that has been most visibly developed by leading political and media commentators, including figures like Jeremy Paxman (1998), Andrew Marr (2000) and Billy Bragg (2006); and has found expression in a number of landmark popular television series and books published by a band of public historians. Figures like Simon Schama, David Starkey and Niall Ferguson have reached a wide audience through their polished and popular TV histories of the English/British past. This theme has surfaced too in popular fiction and cinema in this period[5], and stretches as well into the academy. Englishness and the idea of English national identity have been the focus of major historical studies in recent years, and are now established as themes of great interest to historians, literary scholars and social scientists (Kumar 2003, Stapleton 2001).

This cultural outpouring is marked by its particular combination of sharpened anxiety and lingering cultural self-confidence – revealing characteristics of the current state of English national identity. In combination with the apparent weakening of the hold of the national myths, narratives and values associated with the once-mighty British nation, these developments have prompted an extended moment of cultural introspection on behalf of the English.

3. In February 2006 Cameron established a 'Democracy Taskforce' to review Conservative policy on a range of constitutional matters. Chaired by Ken Clarke, it has yet to submit its final report.
4. Such a situation might arise if the party composition of the majority of MPs for England differed from that for the UK (see Russell and Lodge 2006).
5. See for instance Julian Barnes's *England, England* (1998; London: Jonathan Cape); and the film *This is England* (2006; directed by Shane Meadows).

While there is clearly an overlap between this extensive enquiry into the English past and the character of its people, and the political nationalism described above, the two are also quite distinct in kind. Political nationalism involves organised struggle towards the achievement of some formal goal, usually constitutional, institutional or state-centred. Cultural nationalism may be less goal-orientated and more reflective of a sense of communal identity and self-image. While these two phenomena are, historically, often entwined, they thus possess different emphases and dynamics (English 2007).

Here, it is the cultural-nationalist notion of England as a community united by shared culture and a distinctive historical story that has been central. The attempt to capture what is supposedly essential or distinctive in the national character of the English clearly arises against a backdrop of a host of socio-economic and geo-political changes, as well as some ongoing pressures, notably the impact of American values and culture. But the genre to which these cultural commentators and national-historians are contributing is perhaps best understood as a very long-standing, if overlooked one. This is the tradition of speculation about the national character of the English, a lineage that, as Peter Mandler has demonstrated, assumed a particular significance in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries (Mandler 2006). It was, he ably demonstrates, interwoven with, but in certain respects relatively independent from, ideas about British culture and identity. A more symbiotic and subtle sense of their inter-relationship is conveyed through this work than is supplied by the largely self-serving myths about the English either subordinating themselves to, or dominating, Britain.

Importantly too, Mandler reminds us of the patchwork of different versions of England's history and character that have been invoked across this period. Some of these have long fallen out of use. Others, however, remain very much alive in the contemporary cultural consciousness. Patrick Wright observes the durability of a sense of Englishness which is deeply connected with an idealisation of the landscape of the South East and which is characterised by aversion to modernity (Wright 2005).

Not all of the fragments of Englishness that get recycled in later times travel well. As Wright again observes, Baldwin's plough teams, or 'Orwell's more static list of smoky towns, clattering clogs, red pillar-boxes, autumnal mists and bicycling old maids', seem 'threadbare and sadly exhausted' when revived in a different era (Wright 2005). This particular vision of England has also informed the heritage-industry Englishness that Wright has railed against elsewhere, maintained by the National Trust ('an ethereal kind of holding company for the dead (but not gone) spirit of the nation' [Wright 1985: 56]), and which Wright regards as both a source and reflection of the nostalgic misuse of history for political ends. But Wright's Englishness is itself reliant on the idea of characteristics, particularly the persistence of the propensity to nostalgia, which he seems to regard as the defining trait of current English identity.

The quest for meaningful answers to increasingly pressing questions about who the English are and what they have in common almost invariably takes a historically inclined form. 'England' is continually re-imagined through two genres of historical recollection. One of these involves a melange of memories of leaders, battles and periods from the past, which embody a tangle of differing narratives and values relating to the supposed 'character' of the English. The second relates to more generalised attributions of characteristics to the people of England, typically identified in relation to the pre-modern past. Alongside these discourses there has emerged a growing disquiet, expressed in literature, film and song, about England's current inhabitants' increasingly troubled relationship with these versions of the past. Thus Julian Barnes's satirical novel *England, England* (1998) takes as its central theme the paradox that the English are torn between the hankering to reconnect with a mythical understanding of their history and the tawdry kitsch that characterises today's market-led efforts to recreate what went before.

In comparison with earlier 'moments' of Englishness (notably that of the end of the 19th century, and that associated with the crisis of 1940), latter-day attempts at its cultural characterisation are more shot through by anxiety about the possibility and/or desirability of developing an imaginative frame of reference for England's current inhabitants. For some this is because of changes in the ethnic composition and social character of the English people, who now require a more inclusive, less militaristic and more avowedly modern sense of themselves. Others concur with Barnes that the English are engaged in a tragic and sometimes farcical attempt to define their identity in terms that are simply no longer appropriate to the early 21st century. In his important re-examination of the major contending historical theses about when a sense of English national identity first developed, Kumar (2003) argues for the importance of the late 19th century as the defining 'moment' when English culture and sense of history was fixed. At the very zenith of imperial strength, when a sense of Britishness was at its height, and Britain's institutions and prestige were projected internationally through its powerful economy and colonial possessions, Kumar proposes, somewhat counter-intuitively, that the English began to find the need to define themselves separately from their national counterparts – the Welsh, Scots and Irish, having previously been largely comfortable with their relationship to Britishness. This they did through the articulation of a distinctively English literary, poetic and pastoral sensibility, generating a structure of national feeling that was to surface thereafter in the work of key intellectual figures throughout the last century.

Whether these perspectives offer either plausible historical accounts or politically useful resources for the English seeking to come to terms with their national identity now, are questions that deserve more sceptical enquiry within the academic and political worlds. Despite the multiplicity of accounts of the English/British past that have been propounded from within the media and the academy, English historical understanding remains tied to a remarkably selective set of (largely mythical) stories and icons. The recurrent mythology of the English destined to be an island race defined by hostility to rival European powers, with Nazi Germany playing the role previously filled, from the late 18th century, by Catholic France, remains remarkably prevalent – and totally ill-equipped as an intellectual template for a people seeking to come to terms with its status as one nation in a multinational political structure.

The two different relationships with the English past that this wave of cultural self-assertion offers us have some worrying limitations. Narratives that seek to draw morals and point to lessons from the heroic deeds or narrow escapes of England/Britain often provide

shrill and under-developed accounts of who the English should and could be in very different circumstances of the present. Equally, the lingering suspicions of intellectuals (of both right and left) towards the idea that England's current inhabitants might engage in fruitful dialogue with their national past typically rests on the conviction that Englishness is inescapably parochial, exclusionary and chauvinist.

But the diversity and lingering resonance of the historical and cultural manifestations of Englishness observed by commentators such as Wright, Marr and Mandler signal the potential for more pluralistic and adaptive political responses in the 21st century. The presumptions that Englishness was essentially expressed through Britishness until recent times, and in its current forms bears the imprint of the cultural and ethnic characteristics of the Empire, have been extensively assailed in the historical scholarship of the last 20 years (Mandler 2006, Stapleton 2001). Just as other imagined national communities and cultures subsisted within and alongside Britishness for several centuries, so too, it can be demonstrated, did a relatively autonomous and organically developing sense of Englishness. This provided sustenance for some powerful political identities and visions over the same period. Disallowing a healthy dialogue with the rich treasure of writings, thought and political deeds that were done in the name of Englishness over the last two centuries is just as unlikely to cement a robust and flexible identity for today's inhabitants as is the nostalgic idealisation of a select number of episodes from this past.

3. Britannia in peril?

Located across the political spectrum is another view of Englishness which regards it as a threat not only to the Union but to the common values and shared identity that once animated Britishness. Traditionally this standpoint is most closely associated with the Conservative and Unionist Party, but in more recent years, particularly since devolution to Scotland and Wales, it has been voiced more regularly by a Labour Party that is ever more aware of its electoral dependence on Wales and Scotland. While in 1997 it was the outgoing Conservative Prime Minister warning that the British people had just '72 hours to save the Union', in 2007 it is the incoming Labour Prime Minister, goaded by Conservative jibes about his Scottishness, who is forced to articulate his Britishness. From this perspective, the 'new Englishness' is associated with the 'Little-Englander' populism of Mrs Thatcher in her most Europhobic form, and is regarded as a contingent, opportunistic and potentially dangerous political force. Britishness, by contrast, is preferred either for the civic and/or institutional values ascribed to it, or for the sense of moral tradition which it is seen to embody.

This notion that Britain, and a variably defined 'Britishness', are under threat is a misguided and rather unsatisfying response to the (re)emergence of a more vocal English identity, and is probably best seen as a further symptom of the declinist mentality which the British political elite has tended to adopt since the late 1960s (English and Kenny 1999). The columnist Peter Hitchens makes a gloomy assessment linking the passing of the imperial age with a declining sense of Britishness, and – his greatest concern – the moral degeneration of the nation. Hitchens is uneasy about the recent movement towards identification with 'the narrower loyalties of the UK's smaller nations' and the concurrent turn from Britishness (Hitchens 2000: xxiii). His concern with this trend is partly cultural – English identity has been tarred for Hitchens by the 'mobs of fat, beery men' who wave St George's flags at England football matches (2002) – but it is also political. Calls for greater sub-national autonomy are not, contra Heffer, a chance to revive a deeper, ancient England, but part of a continental/left-wing plot to 'abolish' Britain and create a European super-state. The United Kingdom as a whole is 'far too big and powerful to be swallowed whole into the bland blend of the new multicultural Euroland', so must first be broken up (ibid: 347). The issue of European integration is the ultimate bogeyman, as it 'unites all the threads of the cultural revolution into one. The things which made Britain different were the things which made it different *from the continent*' (ibid: 364, original emphasis).

For more centrist commentators such as Marr, such shifts are not necessarily causes of lament, but may offer the opportunity to forge a more civic form of Britishness better suited to 21st century life. Britishness – despite its current travails – remains for many liberal writers a more attractive national identity than Englishness. In part, this is because members of various ethnic and immigrant minority groups have found space within the broad set of values, laws and attachments which the British identity encompasses. More generally, this approach reflects the shift in perception to the idea of Britishness as a set of values, as opposed to substantive moral and cultural traditions, within liberal circles. For some, the abstract quality and relative austerity of the surviving values of Britishness – tolerance, pluralism, and fair play – are potentially suitable to a context in which many different traditions and communities are now apparent in its cultural life, and need to find terms on which they can come to co-exist with each other. For others, something more ambitious is invested in the idea of Britain. Thus for Jonathan Freedland, the question is whether Britishness might be developed and reinvented in a way that provides a more substantive parallel with the civic patriotism associated with national identity in the United States, that simultaneously ignites and requires pride in the national community and allows space for one's own community to be recognised as of worth (Freedland 2007).

Others are less convinced that Britishness should be viewed as quite this accommodating or indeed vacuous. For a number of public historians, retelling the history of the British, and indeed calling for the 'national story' to be told more forcefully, coherently and unapologetically in British schools, is a vital prerequisite of a renewal of national identity. Though sometimes articulated in very recognisably nostalgic or conservative tones, this kind of perspective is, interestingly, one on which historians of varying political hues agree. Tristram Hunt, for example, argues that: 'We need schools to teach a history syllabus which inculcates a sense of identity beyond race and religion; something of a common culture; and a sense of ownership in the institutions and functions of the British state and civil society together with the ideals and history they embody' (Hunt 2007). From a rather different angle, David Starkey concurs on the importance of a collective cultural memory, without which 'any notion of community, value or stability vanishes and we become merely individualised flotsam and jetsam' (Starkey 2005). The problem, he suggests, stems from the fact that 'we have overdone the critical element of history… With our perpetual

questioning of history, partly from a Tory point of view, partly from a Marxist point of view, partly from a postmodern point of view, we have really lost a sense of the larger generalisations about our past'. All of these commentators make a powerful connection between the ahistorical mindset that prevails in British culture, and the importance of history as a source of national identity and belonging. What pervades these calls for a more sonorous grand narrative is an anxiety that British identity is in decline, and a fear that its absence will be filled with an unsettling mix of atomised, consumerist individualists, with no loyalty to their nation; and the kind of grievance-fuelled nationalism described above.

In January 2000, then Home Secretary Jack Straw, warned of the 'potentially very aggressive, very violent' nature of English nationalism, which he feared would be increasingly articulated following devolution. In the same debate, the leader of the Conservative Party, William Hague, described it as 'the most dangerous of all forms of nationalism that can arise within the United Kingdom, because England is five-sixths of the population of the UK' (BBC News 2000).

Such fears have informed the unwillingness of politicians to engage with Englishness. But this conception of Englishness, and the idea that where it apparently divides, Britishness can unify, deserves to be sceptically received for two reasons. First, it is based on an unjustified presumption that the main forces of British identity – Empire, Crown, warfare and particular cultural traditions – have all now disappeared or dwindled. In fact, a more sophisticated historical perspective regards these as among the many contingent features of, and institutional sites for, Britishness. Some of these have undoubtedly waned yet new sites and agents of national identity – the health service, for example – have arguably risen. The possibility that change rather than decline may be the best way to capture the shifting complex of British cultural identity, is all too rarely considered.

The second reason for doubting strongly pessimistic narratives about Britishness arises from the resilience of the various political-constitutional attachments and traditions what have also given it life. As the eminent historian David Cannadine recently observed,[6] a rather hard-headed sense of the benefits that come from the British state – in terms of security, economic stability, shared cultural interests – has proved remarkably durable, even if some of the sentiments and sense of being that cultural nationalism provides are no longer available from Britishness. There may be, therefore, a good case for a concerted re-evaluation of the relationship between Britishness and English identity, and a consideration of how a positive vision of Englishness can complement, rather than threaten, a rejuvenated civic Britishness.

Conclusion: Engaging Englishness

Two years ago, Gordon Brown noted that 'almost every question that we have to deal with about the future of Britain revolves around what we mean by Britishness' (*Prospect* 2005: 20). The identity debate, Brown suggested, has implications far beyond merely the question of constitutional reform, but affects public policy issues as diverse as immigration, the European Union, globalisation, and terrorism. In the current post-devolution context, however, we suggest that such issues can only be fully addressed through a politics that is not only framed in terms of Britishness, but is willing to engage positively with an increasingly self-conscious Englishness. Merely focusing on the prospects of Britishness, whether along the lines suggested by Gordon Brown, Jonathan Freedland, or Peter Hitchens, fails to acknowledge the transformative effect of the new Englishness on British politics. This is apparent in terms of the increasing sense of disaffection among English voters about the post-devolution constitutional settlement, the increasingly explosive potential of controversial issues that carry a strongly English cultural or historical dimension, and the growing interest of commentators, pundits and political actors in considering alternatives to extant constitutional arrangements. Failing to address this new faultline may well have the consequence of fortifying the kind of grievance-fuelled nationalism described above.

What principles and values should inform such a political engagement? Below we sketch three different ideas that together could give shape to an important political-cultural, and not just constitutional, agenda on these issues.

First, and most pressingly, engagement with Englishness suggests a readiness to contemplate the next stages of constitutional reform in a manner that engages with Englishness, even if from within a broadly Unionist perspective. Labour's programme of constitutional reform has, as noted above, had very little to say about the position of England. The only seriously debated proposal, for elected regional assemblies with very modest powers, has been taboo in political circles since the North East region resoundingly defeated the idea in a referendum in November 2004. Yet it would be quite extraordinary if the radical transformation of the UK's constitution, from its historic, uncodified, organic past to a future form 'created by deliberate human agency' (Bogdanor 2005: 73) were to take place without serious consideration of the status of the largest constituent part within it. Justified in terms of a call for democratic renewal, any such programme would need to address not only Westminster constitutional questions, but the emasculated status of local government, and the powers exercised by the quangocracy bequeathed by the Conservatives in 1997 and expanded by Labour since.

In his early days as Prime Minister, Gordon Brown has demonstrated a refreshing willingness to pick up the torch of constitutional reform. Yet for all of its scope, the *Governance of Britain* Green Paper (Cm 7170, 2007) betrays a degree of uncertainty about the English Question. In his accompanying statement to the House, Brown clearly excluded as unworkable the current Conservative Party policy of English votes for English laws, but made little progress beyond this condemnation (Brown 2007). Only the tentative step of Ministers for the English regions, to be scrutinised by the creation of new regional select committees, is proposed. In an intriguing paragraph, the Green Paper notes that, 'A large part of what we describe as Britishness traces straight back to our own civil war, its ultimate resolution in the Declaration of Rights of 1689 and the Acts of Union. Our relative stability as a nation is reflected in a relative lack of precision about what we mean to be British' (Cm

6. Interview with Richard English, June 2007.

7170, 2007: para. 184). The confidence and perspective provided by this invocation of British history could well be extended into a parallel discussion of the prospects for a review of the system of English governance (providing a review of the democratic credentials of the complex body of public authorities, elected bodies and institutions that currently wield authority over the English).

There are potential hazards here for sure, but adopting a purely defensive stance also entails significant risk. Brown's administration might well consider including within any constitutional consultative process a Commission examining the governance of England, from centre to locality, and engaging the English in a serious debate about how they wish to be governed. Against all the obvious potential pitfalls of such a move, a strategy built around promoting a consultative process from which government itself was several steps removed might well provide an important bulwark against seductively populist proposals about an English parliament, or votes on English laws for English MPs.

Second, it is worth bearing in mind the durability and adaptability that have been characteristics of Britishness since its 'invention' in the late 18th century (Colley 1992). Against the presumption that the end of Empire, the rise of the European Union and the major changes in personal morality that have swept across British society since the 1960s necessarily mean the demise of a meaningful British identity, it is perhaps worth recalling that for many inhabitants of these isles some sort of dual pattern of identification to nation and state has for a long time been the norm. And while some of the props of British culture and nationhood have undoubtedly waned in the late 20th century, this does not necessarily signal the demise of an appreciation of, as opposed to a deep attachment to, the merits of the institutions, traditions and governance provided by the multinational state that is the UK. The possibility worth retaining here is that a dual sense of identification – proudly English and happy to be a member of the UK – may well bed down as a more normal pattern of personal identification than the jeremiads and cheer-leaders for English nationalism tend to imagine. As Robin Cohen has noted, having 'an elaborated, multi-layered identity is not the same thing as not having one at all' (2000: 582).

Although the UK attracts little of the emotional and fashionable enthusiasm commonly associated with Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish/Irish or English sentiment, it continues to possess an appeal to many people within each of these national constituencies, often for very practical and economic reasons. And while many of the elements of traditional British identity have been eroded or greatly altered – Protestant religion, monarchy, empire – this could be said to have produced a refashioning rather than disintegration of what it means to be British. Here, the example of Northern Ireland may be instructive; specifically attention to the changing political character of, and cultural identification with, Britishness in that context. In the six counties, the decline of each of these elements of British identity has not resulted in the demise of Ulster unionist Britishness, but its slow reformulation in a different but equally committed form.

Third, as the brief survey above demonstrates, a cornucopia of historical and cultural accounts of Englishness have been proffered over the last decade and more. By themselves these writings do not amount to the basis for a new English identity, but they do provide some valuable starting points from which the development of a more positive and pluralistic political Englishness may begin. Such an outlook would reach, for example, beyond the rather bucolic and nostalgic imagery of England that has pervaded much of the literature in previous decades (see, for instance, Scruton 2000, 2004). Engaging with the multiplicity of historical narratives of England, and being open to less familiar and newer ones, offers the best hope for the emergence of a progressive Englishness that can provide a meaningful sense of belonging for those who identify this as their primary source of national allegiance. This commitment has some important potential implications for the History curricula taught to secondary-school children. But it is not just in the classroom that a more pluralisitic and liberal sense of Englishness needs to be revived and promoted. Attempts to re-engage the complexity as well as intellectual and cultural breadth of the English past ought to be actively promoted by liberals and progressives, in part to offset the presumption that conservatism and Englishness are natural handmaidens.

The shadows of the past should not drown out the tensions and debates associated with this topic in the present, either. The political class needs to become far more attentive to the many different ideas of Englishness and the cultural singularities of the many different inhabitants of England. Bringing Englishness into the open in these kinds of ways, and gaining a sense of the range of political perspectives and cultural ambitions with which it co-exists, represents one important way of challenging the dangerous myth, fuelled by radicals of the right (and a few on the left) that England is a dominated minority nation, destined to achieve full recognition only when it has thrown off the shackles of an imaginary oppressor. This leitmotif is well described by Andrew Marr: '…unless England is recognised and given a new sense of its own security, then all the hopes for a liberal, open, democratic and tolerant future are in danger' (2000: 230).

Since Marr wrote those words, the pressures on those who wish to promote a sense of Britishness have only increased. As Philip Norton demonstrates, devolution has by no means killed off the impulse to independence among a significant proportion of the Scottish electorate (Norton 2007). But proponents of Britishness, fearing the ugly face of English nationalism, have, by and large, failed to engage with the rise of more self-conscious identities in the constituent nations of the UK. While an increasingly political Englishness comes with attendant risks, the best hope for the survival of the Union, and the political-legal concept of Britishness, is to be found in the promotion of the two as complementary, rather than conflictual, identities. Such layered identities within more flexible states might even be seen as a practical means of reconciling the tensions of political organisation and cultural identity within a liberal framework. A modern, vibrant, English identity need not be a British loss. Indeed, the future strength of the democratic, civic Britishness that Gordon Brown wishes to advance is substantially dependent, we suggest, on the nature of the Englishness accommodated within.

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