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The rise and rise of English nationalism?

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Abstract
This article reviews myths about English identity, using 'myth' in a social scientific way, a truth held to be self-evident; not something which is patently untrue. It argues that there must be three defining dimensions of English 'nationalism' if it is to be treated as such: first, whether there has been a significant increase in the proportion of people claiming 'English' as their national identity; second, how 'England' is treated as an 'imagined community'; and third, the degree to which the Conservative Party is the political vehicle for English nationalism. These dimensions are labelled the social, the cultural and the political. Only if there is sustained evidence for all three aspects might we consider English nationalism to be a significant phenomenon.

Keywords: Englishness, national identity, Brexit, conservatism, nationalism

IN 2015, Frank Bechhofer and I published our book *Understanding National Identity*. We wrote: 'We may well have moved on from the view that national identity is *not* about England, to one in which it is *all* about England'.[1] Since then, the growth in books about England would seem to have proven us correct. We pointed out, however, that 'national identity' is not straightforward. It is not something that we bring into the world fully formed at birth. It is a set of claims frequently implicit that are made in certain contexts for particular purposes; what we have referred to as claims made in contexts.

In this article I begin by reviewing 'myths' about English identity, that is, truths held to be self-evident, rather than those patently untrue. I then argue that there are three dimensions of English 'nationalism' if it is to be treated as such: first, whether there has been a significant and sustained increase in the proportion of people claiming 'English' as their national identity; second, how 'England' is treated as an 'imagined community'; and finally, the degree to which the Conservative Party can be considered the political vehicle for English nationalism. These aspects are labelled as the social, the cultural and the political. Only if there is sustained evidence for all

three aspects might we consider English nationalism to be a significant phenomenon.

English myths

There are five connected myths about being English. The first myth is that people in England haven't thought very much about being English, at least in comparison with their neighbours, the Scots, Welsh and Irish, all of whom seem to define themselves vis-à-vis 'the English', as 'the other'. True, all forms of social identity, be it social class, gender, ethnicity, involve saying who you are *not*, at least by implication. Minorities are far more likely to be aware of who they are. The English, who are over 80 per cent of the UK population, have had little reason to puzzle out who they are, especially in relation to others in these islands. They are, after all, the overwhelming majority and it is an understandable error, but still a category mistake, to confuse England and Britain.

Hence, the second, related, myth is that people in England cannot tell the difference between being English and being British. The assumption is that being English is an implicit affair, rarely talked about because there is no need to. There is also something threatening about the much-used G K Chesterton quote from the 1908 poem 'The Secret People': 'Smile at us, pay us, pass us, but do not quite forget, for we are the people of England that have never spoken yet'. Brexit happened because

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people in England voted for it; there has been a succession of Conservative governments at Westminster because the English voted them in. We have to go back to the 1970s before the English got a government they had not voted for. So much for the English 'not having spoken yet'.

The third myth is devised to explain *why*, ostensibly, people in England are unable to tell the difference between being English and being British. The late Bernard Crick, who lived in Scotland for much of his later life, argued that the confusion was deliberate, because the British state, grandly titled 'The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland', would fall apart if the majority people asserted their 'national' identity over their 'state' (that is, British) one.[2] In other words, the British state could not afford, in Crick's view, to have the English prioritise being English in case the state—that contradiction of being multinational, yet unitary (not federal)—came apart at the seams.

Then there is the myth that England is so diverse that the English are far more attached to their region than their nation; classically, 'I'm not English; I'm from Yorkshire'. In our surveys of national identity, respondents in Scotland and in England were asked how attached they felt to different territorial identities.[3] We found that people in Yorkshire, north-east and north-west England *did* have strong attachments to their regions, but not at the expense of 'England'. Being 'English' was not significantly lower than in other English regions. It was a matter of both/and; not either/or.

The fifth myth asserts that the peripheries—Scotland and Wales, in particular following devolution—have forced the English to consider their national interests. This has relied upon a reading of surveys and opinion polls to the effect that in the light of 'devolution' to Scotland and Wales in 1999, England too should have its own parliament. Furthermore, and as a result of this view, people in England have become 'more English' at the expense of being British. Significantly, former Prime Minister David Cameron's first act on the morning after the 2014 Scottish referendum on independence was to assert that it was now England's turn at self-government: and so EVEL came about—English votes for English laws. That, though, seems to have died the death post-Cameron and we have heard nothing much about it, largely because the Tories have had a large majority in the House of Commons.

We have, then, five myths connected in a putative causal chain: (a) that 'the English' haven't thought about being English very much; (b) that as a result, they can't tell the difference between England and Britain; (c) that there were geopolitical reasons for the British state to discourage 'being English' lest it erode national/state identity; (d) that England is too diverse and committed to regional identities at the expense of a national one; and (e) that devolution in Scotland and Wales has stirred up the hornets' nest and that people in England have become more English on the back of it.

Critical myths

What is wrong with those myths? Actually, quite a lot. They may be the stuff of newspaper columns and punditry, but the evidence is to the contrary. First of all, the English were, and are, quite capable of distinguishing between being English and British according to cognate research by Susan Condor and her colleagues.[4] It is not a kind of cognitive puzzle that people in England cannot solve. Rather, their reticence, such as it is, reflects awareness that there are people on these islands other than the English. Condor concluded that there is no evidence that, if you talk to people on the ground, they are not able to talk about being English.

It follows, then, that English people have indeed given it quite a lot of thought, but that it did not come up much in conversation, though when it did, they usually had a worked-out and nuanced view of being English and being British. It is, however, part of a more general puzzle about how people 'do' national identity. The Scottish writer, William McIlvanney, once likened national identity to an insurance policy: we have one, we

[2]B. Crick, 'An Englishman considers his passport', *The Irish Review*, iss. 5, 1988, pp. 1–10.
[3]McCrone and Bechhofer, *Understanding National Identity*, pp. 50–52.

[4]S. Condor, 'Devolution and national identity: the rules of English (dis)engagement', *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2010, pp. 525–43.

can't immediately lay our hands on it and we are vague about what the small print means. It was a general point which McIlvanney was making and if that vagueness was attributed to Scots (he was writing in the context of voting for a Scottish parliament in 1999, another referendum), it also surely applies to other people in these islands and beyond.

But haven't the English become *more* English? Only up to a point if by that you mean that significantly more people in England are choosing to say they are English rather than British, or even that they are *not* British. The convention has been to use a five-point scale, from 'English not British', and 'British not English' at either end, with a mid-point of 'equally English and British', and 'more English than British', and 'more British than English' as intermediate points. First used by Juan Linz in the mid-1970s to compare being Catalan and being Spanish, it was adapted by Luis Moreno in the 1980s to compare being Scottish and being British (that is, 'national' and 'state' identities). It was extended to England in 1997 and to Wales in 2001 by means of social surveys such as the British Election Study, and British Social Attitudes. As a shorthand, we can collapse the two options at the 'English' end of the scale into 'only or mainly English', and similarly for 'only or mainly British'. The use of the Linz-Moreno scale is to be preferred to the use of census data, for example, in that it has a longer pedigree and is better nuanced at getting at how people relate their 'national' (here, English) to their 'state' identity (British).

Using these scales for England, we find that, according to the British Election Study of 1997, 24 per cent said they were only or mainly English, 45 per cent equally English and British, and 23 per cent only or mainly British. Twenty years later, in 2017, the proportions had changed very little: respectively, 23 per cent, 41 per cent and 23 per cent. At the time of the British general election of 2019—the 'get Brexit done' election—32 per cent said they were only or mainly English, 41 per cent equally English and British, and 26 per cent only or mainly British; thus, an increase in 'being English', but still only one-third. Again, to anticipate, those who *did* prioritise being English seemed much more susceptible to Brexit appeals. Claiming to be English was significantly associated in statistical terms

with voting Leave in 2016 and with wanting a specifically English parliament.[5]

To summarise the argument so far: there is little evidence that people in England cannot tell the difference between England and Britain; they think about being English and about being British, not a great deal of the time, but then neither do the Scots, the Welsh or the Irish. National identity is a taken-for-granted identity which is only activated in certain circumstances and these are usually 'political'. That is why referendums such as the 2014 Scottish one on independence and the 2016 Brexit one on EU membership were so significant. They magnified and catalysed the connection between national identity and 'politics' in the broad sense of the term.

The 'Brexit election' in 2019 saw the Conservatives swept to power ostensibly on the back of Brexit, notably in the so-called 'red wall' seats in northern England. As noted above, being English (rather than British) was an important predictor of voting Leave in 2016. Turning that around, what predicted whether people said they were English or not? Taken together and using binary regression analysis, we can pinpoint the factors which matter most in terms of the propensity for 'being English'. These are: having low levels of education, being older (over 55), voting Tory in the 2019 British general election and being on the right in terms of social and political values. Thus, if you think of yourself as 'English not British' (for shorthand, 'the English'), you were far more likely to have voted Leave in Brexit 2016—81 per cent, compared with only 36 per cent of the 'British not English' (shorthand, 'the British'); and to have voted Tory in 2019 (75 per cent), compared with only 27 per cent of 'British'; and placed themselves on the right ideologically (77 per cent), compared with 21 per cent of the British. It is difficult to hold on to the view that people in England are unable to tell the difference between England and Britain in the face of such evidence.

So, what do we make of the latest cluster of articles and books on Englishness? Is it the case that, in the title of one such article, we are

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[5]'What is your national identity? (English views "Moreno" question)', What Scotland Thinks, July 2011–August 2022; https://www.whatscotlandthinks.org/gb_questions/what-is-your-national-identity-english-views-moreno-question/

seeing 'the dog that finally barked: England as an emerging political community'? Two of the authors, Ailsa Henderson and Richard Wyn Jones have written it up as a book with the title *Englishness: The Political Force Transforming Britain* (2021). It is based on analysis of the Future of England surveys (FoES), but mainly on the survey for 2016. They write: 'Unlike Irish, Scottish and Welsh nationalisms, which by the 21st century and with only relatively minor caveats, can all plausibly be interpreted as a rejection of Britishness, English nationalism continues to hold Britain dear'.[6] That is a big statement. The authors' data show that there has only been a modest increase in the proportions who say they are English more than British (+2 per cent between 1997 and 2016). If we wish to identify the English barking dog, then knowing what it is barking at, to say nothing of what its bark means, we need a much more subtle analysis.

Much of the claim that we are seeing a rise in English nationalism, however, simply relies on measuring and extrapolating from 'national identity' measures such as Moreno. Furthermore, we need to keep separate three key concepts if we are serious about finding out if English nationalism is on the rise. First, there are matters of national identity and how we choose to measure it; second, what constitutes 'the nation' in question, how it is imagined; and third, there is nationalism, a political ideology for achieving national self-determination. Let us label these 'social' (national identity), 'cultural' (nation), and 'political' (nationalism).

Social

Suffice it to say, then, that there appears to have been a modest rise in the proportion of people saying they are English (from about a quarter to one-third in 2019). More to the point, as we have seen, there are interesting 'political' proclivities associated with saying so, notably associated with how people in England voted in the Brexit referendum of 2016. So, something is going on such that there are stronger associations than previously between national identity in England and how people do their politics, at least as reflected in the British general election of 2019.

On the other hand, the 2019 data suggest something of a 'spike' in terms of English national identity. While a YouGov poll in May 2021 indicated that 32 per cent said they were either 'English not British' (17 per cent) or 'More English than British' (15 per cent), by August 2022, this had fallen to 28 per cent (respectively, 14 per cent and 14 per cent). British Social Attitudes survey data for October 2021 put the only or mainly English figure at 22 per cent (respectively, 11 per cent, and 11 per cent).

We would be hard pressed, then, to claim that there had been a sustained increase in people in England claiming to be English, other than at the 'get Brexit done' election of 2019.

Cultural

A much trickier question relates to the concept of the English 'nation'. Here we are in realms of cultural analysis and require to get at what constitutes the core idea(s) of Englishness. The political scientist, Michael Kenny, in his important book *The Politics of English Nationhood*, observed that 'English' is an empty or floating signifier. That is, it is vague, underspecified and highly variable. Meanings come to 'settle' on the signifier rather than being inherent to it. Kenny comments: 'A host of clichés, caricatures and canards are indissolubly attached to the subject of Englishness', and furthermore, 'the recurrent appearance of a pretty standard set of national images … led many commentators to the erroneous conclusion that English nationhood can be characterized in simplistic, reified terms'.[7]

Benedict Anderson defined the concept of 'the nation' in the abstract as an 'imagined community', that nation-ness as well as nationalism are cultural artifacts of a particular kind: 'to understand them properly we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy'.[8]

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[6]A. Henderson and R. Wyn Jones, *Englishness: The Political Force Transforming Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 34.

[7]M. Kenny, *The Politics of English Nationhood*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 6.
[8]B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London, Verso, 1996, p. 4.

What and, indeed, where, is 'England'? The tradition of Robert Colls and Philip Dodd, whose collective volume *Englishness: Politics and Culture, 1880–1920*, published in 1986, became the pathfinder for subsequent work on Englishness and, as Krishan Kumar observed, 'quickly established itself as a key text for thinking about the subject of English identity'.[9] Kumar, whose two books on England, *The Making of English National Identity* (2003), and *The Idea of Englishness* (2015) are central to an understanding of Englishness, credits Colls and Dodd with focussing on 'the moment of Englishness, and for originating certain themes which became central to most attempts to understand Englishness'.[10] Kumar himself attributes the rise of Englishness to the end of empire.

Furthermore, there is a deep ecclesiastical aspect to Englishness: it has its own 'established' church, the Church of England, formed in the middle of the sixteenth century (formally by The Act of Supremacy in 1558), with the monarch as its head. No such relationship exists in the Church of Scotland, which considers itself the 'national' church, with the deity as its head. The Church of England has issued these guidelines: 'If flying the flag of St George from your church, the diocesan arms must be included in the top corner nearest to the mast, as defined by the 1938 warrant by the Earl Marshal'.[11] The English arrangement provides a nice example of what Michael Billig called 'banal nationalism' for the English flag (of St George) flies from many churches, thus insinuating itself as an implicit icon of (English) national identity.[12]

This is a conservative and provincial England, recognisable in the work of Roger Scruton, with a commitment to rural pursuits. After all, Scruton's book was called *England: An Elegy* (2000), and as Michael Kenny observed 'Scruton offered an elegy for this [English] supposedly disappearing cultural formation'; the focal point for the expression of Englishness was the countryside, 'the locus of a resonant sense of home and belonging'.[13] The simple fact is that most of the English do not live in the countryside and England is one of the most urbanised countries in the world. And the giveaway is Scruton's book title: it is an *elegy*, which means that it is over.

Kenny makes the important point about 'the English and their lists'. He observes that 'English nationhood has typically been imagined through reference to objects that signify the commonplace, the domestic and the particular, with dashes of nostalgia and pastoral fantasy added to the mix … a swathe of nostalgic and elegiac appeals to a disappearing England'.[14] In an interesting essay introducing their edited book, Arthur Aughey and Christine Berberich latched on to the listing device, that 'listing … is a way of talking about England without having to theorise it, for the enumeration of the references already requires a personal command of relations, *conscious and unconscious*' [my italics].[15]

There are two key metaphors which they attribute to the conservative thinker and philosopher, Michael Oakeshott: the 'dry wall'; and Englishness as 'conversation'. The 'wall' is held together by interlocking shapes cunningly designed, and not constructed in a premeditated way. It is a structure held together by its own weight. The second metaphor is Englishness as conversation (as if other nations do not have such). This is 'a dialectic of its own; circular, without beginning or end', with conversation as Englishness involving a plurality of voices within a common tradition of behaviour.[16]

Political

To recap the argument: if we wish to argue that there has been a rise in English nationalism, it is necessary to disaggregate three elements: English national identity—the extent

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[9] K. Kumar, *The Idea of Englishness: English Culture, National Identity and Social Thought*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2015.
[10] Ibid.
[11] For precise details on flying flags on English churches, see Church of England, 'Flags and military colours', n.d.; https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/advice-and-guidance-church-buildings/flags-and-military-colours
[12] M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, London, Sage Publications, 1995.

[13] Kenny, *The Politics of English Nationhood*, p. 67.
[14] Ibid., p. 10.
[15] A. Aughey, and C. Berberich, eds., *These Englands: A Conversation on National Identity*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2011.
[16] Ibid., p. 15.

to which people in England increasingly call themselves 'English'; English*ness*, specifically, England as an imagined community; and in this section, the degree to which Englishness has become an '*ism*', a political ideology of nationalism.

To what extent, then, are politics in England amenable to constructing a distinct national-ism? It is true that valiant souls such as John Denham, formerly a Labour politician and government minister, who set up the Centre for English Identity and Politics, first at Winchester and later at the University of Southampton, and Billy Bragg, who has been singing about, and campaigning for, a new England since the 1980s (and is still 'Looking for a New England'), have sought to recover Englishness for the left. It is not at all easy. That is because, as we have seen, there is a 'natural' streak of conservatism involved. The lower case 'c' is deliberate, but it also elides easily into big C-Conservatism. The iconography of England and Conservatism go together (think of their logo of the iconic sturdy oak tree).

Furthermore, the Labour Party is 'British' in origin and persuasion, with strong roots and a presence in Wales and in Scotland. To speak the exclusive language of 'England' is much harder for Labour (but not impossible), and while it can give Welsh and Scottish accounts of itself with some ease (in the latter case, at least for the moment, historically), being English comes less naturally. Put simply, Labour is *the* British party, and hence is the party of Union, even where that implies devo-lution; after all, power devolved is power retained in constitutional terms.

Conservatives, of course, make much more about unionism, in large part because they are addressing an *English* audience, especially because that is where the vast majority of voters live and under 'winner-takes-all', that is what it has to do to get elected as a govern-ment. Why, then, is the Conservative *and Unionist* party not a party of explicit English nationalism? Fundamentally it is, but it would be seriously diminished in its own eyes and abroad if 'England'; was simply England. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is, and sounds, much more portentous. 'The United Kingdom' also carries the legacy of imperial *grandeur*.

If Conservatives are, by and large, English, is it also the case that the English are

Conservative? Recall the figures on those who, in the British general election of 2019, described themselves as English (not British) and compare them with their antithesis, British (not English). In 2019, 75 per cent of 'the English' in these terms voted Conservative, compared with 27 per cent of 'the British'. On a scale of social-political values running from right to left, 77 per cent of 'the English' are on the right, and only 21 per cent of 'the British' are. We can argue about how long this has been the case, but in 2019, the most recent Brit-ish general election after Brexit, the association is very strong, and furthermore, 81 per cent of 'the English' said they had voted Leave, while only 36 per cent of 'the British' did so. The alternative party for this tranche of English voters is UKIP, a party even further to the right.[17] This propensity of 'the English' to vote right, or righter-still, suggests that English nationalism does, on the face of it, have a political voice.

There is one major problem with that argu-ment. How can nationalism in England pursue a political strategy of 'independence' by means of the party of privilege and class which is already in possession of power? True, there have arisen populist parties in modern times, but whether they are genuinely nationalist parties, or simply right-wing populism masquerading as such, is an open question. This is worth exam-ining given that social class is taken to be the defining dimension of British (and English) society.[18]

The capture of working class votes by the Conservative Party is not new. After all, Disraeli referred to them as 'angels in marble'. This descriptor was picked up by Robert McKenzie and Allan Silver in their 1968 book pointedly entitled: *Angels in Marble: Working Class Conservatives in Urban England*. The cen-tral question posed in this article is whether the attachment of the English working class to voting Tory is construed as structural or contingent, that is, whether it is in the nature of 'being English', or simply historically contingent on unfolding political events.

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[17]R. Ford, and M. Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain*, London, Routledge, 2014.

[18]P. Pultzer, *Political Representation and Elections in Britain*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1967.

This argument has a longer pedigree. Tom Nairn, for example, in an important essay in his book *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977) took the view that 'the dominant *Gestalt* of political England is patrician, not popular'. The Conservative patrician machine is able to mobilise for short-term electoral gain: 'a team of decent chaps up there will do the possible', but that is that. 'The contradiction between the form of the United Kingdom state and any would-be English nationalism can be resumed in a word: *class*.[19]

Nairn was writing in the late 1970s and, fifty years later, the Conservatives having been in power since 2010 and Brexit having happened by way of a peasants' revolt, instigated by the more right-wing elements in the party—with UKIP waiting ominously in the wings, *pour encourager*. Nairn's rejoinder would possibly be that once Brexit was achieved, the ruling clique had no need of such minions and a thoroughgoing form of English nationalism had nowhere else to go but down. Brexit was, in large part, a revolution instigated from above, once it had banished its Remain tendency. Its foot soldiers in the provinces, the so-called red wall, were dispensable. Those in possession of English nationalism were already in power and had no need of their services.

The most trenchant critique of the Nairn view remains that of the historian E. P. Thompson, author of 'The peculiarities of the English', which appeared in *The Socialist Register*, in 1965. As a practising historian, Thompson found what he called the (Perry) Anderson-Nairn view somewhat absurd. He argued that what irks Anderson and Nairn most of all is 'the shameless observances of status and obsession [of the English bourgeoisie] with a spurious gentility'. The English bourgeois were not, 'all of them, the bloody fools that Nairn and Anderson take them to be'. Thompson concluded: 'there is a stridency in the way our authors hammer at class and tidy up cultural phenomena into class categories, as well as a ruthlessness in their dismissal of the English experience, which stirs uneasy memories'.[20] It is interesting that it was a professional historian, used to grubbing around in evidential records, and the author of the classic *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) who made this critique.

We can see in the debate between Nairn and Thompson something of a predictive divide. On the one hand, Nairn argued that the enigma of the English is that while there were strong elements of populism (mobilised at the time of his writing by Enoch Powell on grounds of race), at root nationalism takes a patrician, not a populist, form, because any would-be English nationalism is rooted in class. Thompson took Nairn to task because his writing on the English working class indicated 'genuine' roots for nationalism, rather than an *ersatz* form. Put simply, what prevented nationalism in England from emerging were contingent, not structural, barriers, and in that regard Thompson's optimism contrasted with Nairn's pessimism.

This point was picked up fifty years later by Michael Kenny when he observed that: 'Nairn's thinking and that of the many progressive commentators who have followed his lead, has been fatally alienated from the actuality of English culture and identity … 'Nairn's sweeping dismissal overlooks the persistence and reappearance of a much more varied stock of national mythologies, a number of which have been of considerable resonance for the left—the freeborn Englishman, the yoke, Magna Carta, and Robin Hood'.[21]

Discussion

Let us take stock of our argument. For a thoroughgoing nationalist movement to be considered as such, there needs to be (a) a substantial and consistent proportion of the population committing to a national identity which is not that of the state; (b) a conception of the nation as imagined community which is more or less coherent and relevant in modern times, while at the same time mobilising a past, however confected; and (c) a political ideology—an *ism*—which adheres to a political party or social movement which is its carrier. We might refer to these necessary elements as 'identity', '-ness' and 'ism', what I have labelled here the social, cultural and political aspects of nationalism.

[19]T. Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain*, London, Verso, 1977, pp. 287–288.
[20]E. P. Thompson, 'The peculiarities of the English', *The Socialist Register*, vol. 2, 1965, pp. 311–62, at pp. 330, 359.

[21]Kenny, *The Politics of English Nationhood*, p. 57.

In the case of England, this requires a substantial and sustained commitment to 'being English' which is substantially at odds with being British. There has been some shift towards saying one is English, at the expense of being British, among English people, but spiking around the 'get Brexit done' election of 2019. Certainly, in the context of Brexit, saying you were English was a good predictor of voting Leave, of voting Tory in the subsequent election and generally having right-wing views. How long-lasting this relationship is remains to be seen.

Whether this apparent shift to English national identity is the beginnings of a social and political movement which we can label 'English nationalism' is quite another matter. What is presented as the 'English nation' (the -ness), the dominant iconography, is very particular and peculiar and, on the face of it, does not obviously make sense of most people's lives in big cities, among young people, the highly educated and ethnic minorities. It is retrospective, rather than forward-looking.

Thirdly, the 'ism': it is not obvious that its political carrier, the Conservative Party, is fit for purpose in that regard. True, it has mobilised effectively to capture the 'English' vote among working class people, but if, after the next British general election in 2024, the red wall in Northern England reverts to true colours, then we are likely to hear far less of the English who have not spoken yet, and will, presumably, be speaking even less. Indeed, other, more progressive, versions of 'England' might well (re-)emerge. All is not lost.

Conclusion

My argument is that it is not enough simply to express some semblance of national identity; rather, there needs to be a sense of 'nation', one which is seen as serving interests of nationals in question, and it needs to be the people's story. Furthermore, there has to be an 'ism'—an ideology in which nationals mobilise in pursuit of interests of the 'nation' with a view to expressing it more fully and in a way commensurate with cultural expressions. Nationalism is an oppositional culture—a question of the vis-à-vis. Nationalism cannot exist in a vacuum, in a bubble of its own; a process of 'othering' is key and it is not obvious, in the case of England, what that is or would be, excepting that 'Europeans' in the form of the European Union performed that role in the Brexit referendum campaign in 2016 and thereafter. Grumbling a bit about the Scots and the Welsh having their own parliaments, the Barnett formula (assuming they know what that is), English votes for English laws, does not amount to a political programme with much going for it, nor creating an English, as opposed to a British, parliament in which the people of England are 84 per cent of the UK population.

What really matters, however, is how the various political parties reflect and refract issues of identity and values. It has mattered that since 1945, Scotland got a UK government it had not voted for more than 50 per cent of the time, whereas for England it was only 3 per cent of the time. Thus did the term 'democratic deficit' enter the vocabulary of Scottish politics. What about EVEL? What of the demand for an English parliament? The answer is that England has one: it is called the Westminster Parliament. So, one may think that people are fooled, or naïve, but there is no huge increase in demand for a separate English parliament as opposed to a UK one. According to the definitive British Social Attitudes survey, in 1999, 18 per cent of people in England wanted an 'English parliament', rising to 29 per cent in 2009 and falling back to 22 per cent in 2020.

The Conservatives, with UKIP, a more radical English party hard on its heels, were better able to appeal to people in England on the basis of being English. 'Take Back Control' was a wolf-whistle for English nationalism. Its 'other' was not the smaller countries of these islands but 'Europe', imagined as the significant other in this slogan.

It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that there is something inherent and inevitable about the relationship between national identity and politics, but this is not so. It is a matter of what national identity comes to signify in the political-cultural moment. And where does that come from? It comes from the mobilisation of systems of meaning which are refracted through political ideologies and practices. Think of it in terms of setting the frames of reference. Parties are successful when they domesticate people's concerns, when they frame the suitable solutions to their problems. They act as a prism through which

issues are refracted to their advantage. That can seem like a 'natural' thing to do, but it is *the* consummate political skill.

Scots are intrigued by the language of English nationalism, recognising that there is a new force in the neighbouring land, albeit that it can appear as inchoate and unfocussed. How it will play out will affect all of us who inhabit these islands. What forms it takes, progressive or reactionary, will depend on how those in the game play their hands.

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