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The English question

It's not just a matter of national identity; we need a comprehensive review of how England is governed



Richard Hayton and **Michael Kenny**
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Rarely has a government been so keen to promulgate a sense of national identity as that led by Gordon Brown. And rarely has Britishness itself been such a topic of political debate. We are promised a British bill of rights and duties, and before that a statement of British values. Meanwhile Margaret Hodge, the culture minister, in a speech on Britishness, [generated a furore](#) for criticising the absence of diversity associated with The Proms.

What lies behind this resurgence of interest in Britishness? Brown's view is that a shared sense of British identity is needed to provide a vital source of cultural stability and social solidarity during periods of dizzying economic and cultural change. In this sense national identity goes to the heart of policy debates far beyond constitutional reform, affecting issues as diverse as Europe, immigration, education and terrorism. Britishness is also the glue with which the prime minister would like to hold the United Kingdom together, particularly in the context of the re-emergence of Scottish and, to a lesser extent, Welsh nationalism.

But turning British identity into a goal of public policy is increasingly running up against a steadily strengthening sense of Englishness. The most recent British Social Attitudes Survey (2006) found that when English people are asked to select one national identity for themselves, 47% chose English, up from 31% in 1992. And this has been a steadily increasing trend. But Englishness has in general terms tended not to find favour with British progressives and remains the object of considerable suspicion. The discomfort with English identity carries to the very top of government, where its increasing salience sheds awkward light on the prime minister's own Scottish background.

In [a report](#) published last week by the Institute for Public Policy Research, we argued that inaction in the face of Englishness is no longer a wise or viable option. A greater sense of Englishness is clearly related to the increasingly apparent anomalies of the devolution settlement introduced by Labour in 1999, but actually predates these reforms by several years. Moreover, although English identity does include some shrill, nationalistic political voices, it is also made up of more benign and diverse cultural elements. These offer a potentially fertile source for the development of a meaningful and pluralistic sense of belonging for those whose primary allegiance is to England.

Such an identity should not be seen as inimical to, or incompatible with, Britishness or a multinational British state. A distinctive English culture has developed alongside and indeed informed a sense of British identity throughout the history of the union. It is time for government to allow the flourishing of the very different ideas of England that permeate its cultural life. An active and positive engagement with Englishness is by no means incompatible with the kind of civic patriotism that the government would like to promote. But an aggressively-pursued promotion of Britishness around values that do not tally with the lived experience of ordinary people, or that have the feel of state orthodoxy about them, may well leave too little space for people to explore their sense of Englishness, or appreciate its inter-relation with British culture and institutions.

[Recent research](#) by Professor John Curtice suggests that the anomalies of the current devolution settlement are just beginning to rankle in England. Constitutionally, a number of solutions have been proposed to the so-called [West Lothian question](#), but none of them look particularly robust. Elected regional assemblies in England failed to

command public support, as the referendum on the proposed body for the North-East comprehensively demonstrated. The small but vocal [Campaign for an English Parliament](#) is unable to explain how the enormously lop-sided political system that this would create (given that approximately 85% of the population of the UK live in England) would function within the union framework. Curtice shows that this represents the preference of approximately one-fifth of those polled on options for change, with little sign of any rise in its popularity over the last few years.

The obvious threat to the union posed by such a scheme has dissuaded the Tories from endorsing it, despite the potential electoral advantages for what is now a predominantly English party. David Cameron has put Conservative policy on this issue under review as part of the Democracy Taskforce chaired by Ken Clarke. This is likely to suggest some variant of "English votes for English laws", a policy with which the Tories have toyed since 1997. Proponents of this idea need to indicate more fully how to manage the tangled implications of dividing up all parts of Commons legislation along distinct national lines. And they need to show how we would deal with the chaotic possibility of a United Kingdom government, with legislative responsibility for England, unable to command support amongst a majority of English MPs.

These are important ideas, and ought to be given proper consideration. But "the English question" is not just about post-devolution constitutional tinkering. While Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish now have a sense of key decisions being taken closer to home, and government has approved a review of the powers of the Scottish parliament, on the governance of England there is silence. Indeed, since the collapse of the regional assembly model in 2004, a policy vacuum has opened up in government's thinking about England.

Yet "the English question" is as much about governance as it is about identity, and is crying out for constructive policy engagement. The English are governed by a mish-mash of bureaucrats in Whitehall, quangos and unelected regional bodies. We need a comprehensive review of how England is governed. This would provide the opportunity for some seriously joined-up thinking about the accountability and authority of the multiplicity of local, regional and national bodies that decide on, among many other things, how we are policed, how welfare is organised and delivered, and how our children are taught.

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