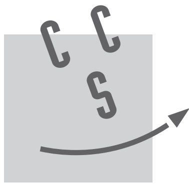

CONCOURS CENTRALE•SUPÉLEC

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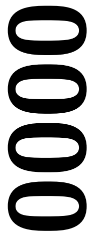

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British Identity

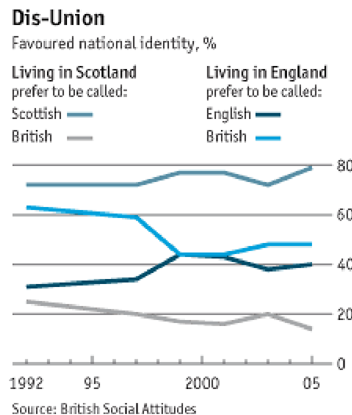
Waning

How an island nation sees itself

FOR Gordon Brown, the chancellor of the exchequer, Britishness encapsulates such laudable values as fair play and an "unshakeable British commitment to liberty". Mr Brown has been calling for a national debate on what the Union Flag represents for several years, and often seems to be doing most of the debating himself. His most recent contribution was to describe a campaign for English votes on English laws, which would also disenfranchise the MP for Kirkcaldy & Cowdenbeath and prime-minister-in-waiting himself, as "a Trojan horse" for the separation of Scotland from England, leading to the break-up of Britain.

Unfortunately for Mr Brown, his timing looks poor. A string of recent polls has shown increased support among English people for separation from their northerly neighbours. And the most recent edition of the annual British Social Attitudes Survey, published on January 24th, provides further evidence that a more general sea-change may be taking place.

For one thing, the commitment to those very British civil liberties seems to be declining fast. In 15 years there has been a large fall in the number of people who think it is worse to convict an innocent person than to let off a guilty one: from 62% in 1990 to 52% in 2005. The number who think the police should be able to question suspects



for up to a week without giving them access to a solicitor has risen from 9% to 25% over the same period, and support for compulsory ID cards from 37% to 54%.

The notion of Britishness itself is losing favour. Decreasing numbers of the residents of the island of Great Britain now regard "British" as their primary national identity. Part of the reason is that since devolution in 1998 the Scots and, to a lesser extent, the Welsh are keen on expressing their new political independence. But not all of it. Those living in England also see themselves differently. There has been an increase in the number opting for the label "English" as the one that best describes their nationality (see chart).

Respondents not only embrace a British identity less readily than they did but also have trouble ascribing a distinctive meaning to it. When asked what it meant by pollsters, most struggled, then fell back on such banalities as "the stiff upper lip" and "drinking tea". Those who described themselves as British were no more likely than others to express an attachment to such British institutions as the monarchy or the system of government. This week Alan Johnson, the education secretary, proposed teaching Britishness in schools.

For some groups, Britishness has a particular importance. "English" seems to convey an ethnic, rather than a civic, identity. One of the useful attributes of the British label is that minorities often prefer it. In 2002 pollsters at MORI found that only 9% of ethnic minorities strongly identified with England, Scotland or Wales, compared with 39% of the general public.

Other sorts of social identities too are in flux, including class, political affiliation and religion. All are declining. Although as many people as ever think of themselves as belonging to a social class, this is no longer correlated with a set of beliefs about such things as the merits of income redistribution. Class warfare is out of fashion, the ideological line between Britain's two main parties has blurred and voter turnout, at 61% in the 2005 general election, is near a post-war low. Even those who identify with a particular party do so less strongly than they used to.

The most marked change is in the number of people who say they are religious. In 1964 nearly three-quarters of Britons not only belonged to a religion but attended services; by 2005 only three in ten did.

The Economist
January 27th 2007

Bagehot | The uncomfortable politics of identity

Multiculturalism may be dead, but it's not clear what will replace it **The Economist** October 21st 2006

TONY BLAIR this week confirmed what has become ever more apparent in the fortnight since Jack Straw lit the blue touch-paper with his comments on the wearing of the veil by Muslim women. The government now believes that Britain has struck the wrong balance between the tolerance of cultural diversity and the need for minority communities to integrate with wider society.

Asked at his monthly press conference whether he agreed with the suspension of a Muslim woman assistant teacher in the Yorkshire town of Dewsbury for refusing to remove her veil at school, Mr Blair said that he "fully supported" it and that he believed the veil was a "mark of separation". It was time, said Mr Blair, for these issues to be properly debated.

Thanks to Mr Straw that is certainly happening. The former foreign secretary and now leader of the House of Commons is the MP for Blackburn, an old mill-town in the north-west with a large Muslim population of mostly Pakistani origin. Earlier this year he treated his friend and American opposite number, secretary of state Condoleezza Rice, to a tour of the town. Ms Rice was reportedly astounded by the lack of integration she found there.

As one of Britain's canniest political operators, Mr Straw knew he would create a stir in revealing he had asked constituents wearing the *niqab* to remove the veil from their faces when meeting him and that he regarded it as a barrier to good community relations. But even he has been surprised by the reaction.

For two weeks, the airwaves and the newspapers have been dominated by what it is fashionable to call the politics of identity. There is still no sign of the debate flagging. Indeed, the government seems to be doing everything it can to keep it going. Last week Ruth Kelly, the communities secretary, announced that the government was undertaking a "fundamental rebalancing" of its relationships with Muslim organisations and that funding would shift towards those which actively tackled extremism and defended "our shared values".

Ms Kelly was reflecting growing government disillusionment with the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), an umbrella body that claims to speak for Britain's 1.6m Muslims. Ms Kelly, a devout Catholic, took particular exception to the MCB's refusal to join in the commemorations of Holocaust Memorial Day. She also criticised both its insistence that British foreign policy was anti-Muslim and its routine denigration of police anti-terrorism operations.

Meanwhile, as minister after minister has weighed in on the subject of veil-wearing, there has been wide coverage this week of government plans to open up a quarter of the places in newly established "faith" schools to non-adherents—a measure some see as aimed primarily at Muslim schools that are now eligible for state funding. In another sign of the times, an education department document, leaked to the Guardian newspaper, warned that universities had become fertile recruiting grounds for extreme Islamic groups and proposed that academic staff should keep a close eye on their Muslim students.

The trigger for much of this is not the London bombings carried out by British-born Muslims on July 7th last year, shocking though they were, but an allegedly much more extensive plot to blow up airliners flying to America that was foiled in August. Since then, the security services have reached alarming conclusions about the number of young British Muslims who have been radicalised and their potential to become terrorists. Increasingly, ministers believe that the willingness of successive governments to tolerate and, in some ways, encourage the separateness of Muslim communities in the name of multiculturalism has been a colossal error.

The result is that the government has started to ask itself some profound questions. How far is a liberal society obliged to go in defending attitudes and behaviour that are hostile to it? Is it reasonable to demand that members of all minority communities integrate, at least to some degree, with the majority?

This has traditionally been difficult territory for many on the left. Partly it is lingering colonial guilt, but mainly it is because the left is uneasy with notions that appear to claim superiority for majority cultural norms or which confuse the duties of citizenship with loyalty to the symbols of nationalism. In the search for a fairer society, the concept of national identity seemed either irrelevant or unhelpful.

Those sentiments still exist within the Labour Party, but they are in retreat. As John Denham, the Labour chairman of the home affairs select committee, recently put it: "A society with a weak sense of any cohesive identity will necessarily find it more difficult to organise and sustain the collective responses that are needed not just to tackle disadvantage, but the welfare state, crime and security issues that dominate today's political agenda." Or, as the author Salman Rushdie observed: "No society, no matter how tolerant, can expect to thrive if its citizens don't prize what their citizenship means."

An idea of Britain

Ms Kelly has made a stab at defining "non-

negotiable" British values—respect for the law, freedom of speech, equality of opportunity, respect for others and responsibility towards others—that every citizen must sign up to. Steps are also under way to introduce an inclusive, narrative account of British history to be taught in schools as part of compulsory citizenship classes.

Both are doubtless worthwhile. But it may be beyond the exhortations of worried, well-meaning politicians to revive an idea of British national citizenship that is relevant and powerful enough to do what is needed. Unless Mr Blair's debate takes place where it matters most, within the Muslim communities themselves, it is likely only to deepen existing prejudices.

Comment & Analysis

Guardian Weekly December 15-21 2006

The US is not free from Islamophobes, but nor is it a racially monolithic, culturally static state like Blair's Britain

A question of identity

Gary Younge

According to a Pew research survey this year, Muslims are viewed less favourably in the US than in Russia, Britain and France. There has been progress. Last month Minneapolis elected the nation's first Muslim congressman — an African-American convert, Keith Ellison. But with each advance come new challenges. There is a brouhaha over Ellison's request to swear an oath on the Qur'an.

But while many Muslims here looked to Europe in the hope that it might provide a counterbalance to America's disastrous foreign policy, they also look across the Atlantic in horror at the experiences of their co-religionists. There lies the paradox: the country that has done more than any other to foment Islamic fundamentalism abroad has so far witnessed relatively little of it at home. "Europe is not coping well with the emergence of Islam," says the executive director of Cair, Nihad Awad. "It has taken a long time for them to accept that Islam is part of its future and also part of its past."

The different experiences have emerged partly, it seems, because the Muslim communities on either side of the Atlantic are so different. The patterns of migration have differed. A large proportion of Muslims who came to America arrived with qualifications and were looking for professional work. As a result, they are generally well educated and well off.

In Britain, the overwhelming majority of Muslims came from former colonies to live in poor areas and do low-paid work, and they remain the most economically impoverished. In 2004 Muslims had the highest male unemployment rate in Britain, at 13% — three times the rate of Christians. Meanwhile, 33% had no qualifications — the highest proportion of any religious group.

In the US, most Muslims had been keeping their heads down. "Before 9/11, Muslims were all too happy to be building homes and families," says Ali Jaafar, who runs a medical research company in Minneapolis. "Afterwards, they were doubly shocked. First by the attacks themselves and then to see their neighbours turn against them. After 20 or 30 years, we realised it was not the place we thought it was." To many Muslims in Britain, their neighbours reacted just as they thought they would. Bradford had gone up in flames several months before 9/11 and the BNP was already making a comeback.

Yet it is notable that when Tony Blair lectures Muslims about integration, as he did last week, the issue of economic alienation barely ever arises. How are people supposed to integrate culturally when they cannot move professionally, economically or even geographically? Just over 50 years ago, the US supreme court banished the "separate but equal" policies that segregated state schools here; it seems Britain is embracing a dogmatic version of its antithesis — "united but unequal".

"There do not seem to be many opportunities for people to integrate into the economy [in Europe]," says Fedwa Wazwaz, a board member of Minneapolis's Islamic Resource Centre. Wazwaz had arrived at al-Amal school in suburban Minneapolis to pick up her daughter, Maryam. On the wall in an office hangs a T-shirt asking "Got Islam?" — a play on a popular milk commercial — while a poster invites entrants for the Qur'an competition.

This private Muslim school is the only one of its kind in Minnesota. Wazwaz, who is originally from Jerusalem, does not regard her desire to send Maryam there as one of segregation but as one of "preserving some sense of Islamic identity for the child". "Everybody needs a sense of their identity," she says.

In a country where every national group gets its own day, complete with a parade, flags and delicacies from the home country, there is greater scope for understanding the difference between autonomy — a distinct cultural space base from which people interact with the rest of society; and segregation — where people seek to separate themselves from the mainstream. To qualify your national allegiance through ethnicity, race or religion is not necessarily regarded as diluting it (unless you're Mexican and demanding immigration rights).

The Britishness currently on offer from New Labour, however, comes in just two flavours: Anglo and Saxon. Thus are the limits of the political class's understanding of cultural hybridity, rendering Britain a racially monolithic, ethnically pure and culturally static state into which non-white and non-Christian people can either adapt, or from which they should be banished.

"Our tolerance is part of what

makes Britain Britain. Conform, or don't come here. We don't want the hate-mongers, whatever their race, religion or creed," Blair said. Quite what one does with the hate-mongers who were born here — whether they are the jihadists or the BNP — is difficult to fathom.

Finally, American identity is rooted in something more than mythology. Blair seeks to transform "values" that are evolving and contested into those that are "essential" and "common", by the power of rhetoric alone. Americans can reach for something more substantial — the constitution. "There are built-in constitutional rights that are guarantees," says Awad. "We have to work hard to protect our rights as citizens and also to safeguard the constitution."

You would be hard pressed to find a Muslim here who is optimistic. Yet American identity is not something they are threatened with but an ideal they want the rest of the country to live up to. "There is a road map," says Jaafar "It may be difficult, but we are getting there."

To be British: Gordon Brown reminds us Brits why we should be so proud

So can we be more precise about this elusive Britishness that we recognise when we see it? Is it, in fact, part of the British genius, to have built it on a coin — or 60 million coins — with two sides?

On one side, our nurturing Scottish, Welsh, Irish and English identities and sensibilities — now, of course, added to by many others — mixed in with our religious, local, recreational, cultural and sporting identifications.

On the other, carefully balanced and held in tension, the organisations and operations of a British state that, shorn of nationalistic baggage, are the patriotic aspects of the nation state.

Thus we can comfortably support our local or regional or national teams, and equally comfortably feel patriotic about the great overarching public institutions that unite us — such as our NHS, our Armed Forces, the BBC and the monarchy — wherever we live.

Our various institutions and constitutional arrangements have served us well down the centuries, though perhaps for reasons that are not immediately obvious.

Many are less ancient — 'the invention of tradition' is now well-documented — than they seem to be, and also more malleable and more adaptable than is generally assumed, but they survive and serve us because, as they change, they continue to reflect our enduring values.

There are external reasons, too, for taking our Britishness more seriously than we have in the past.

Among the most striking historical developments of the past half century are the rise of the new Europe to the global influence that a population of half a billion and major trading-bloc status commands, and the more recent, vastly increasing influence and power of globalisation.

But in every European country there is a strong sense of patriotism — of people in Poland being Polish, and in France being French and in Britain being British — because we want to be rooted, to feel a sense of belonging, to feel that we are part of a community more tangible and immediate than the larger grouping.

While almost everyone recognises the opportunities that globalisation has brought, we also see the insecurities that have come with it.

So in times of such unprecedented change and pace of change, there is much to be gained from a clearer sense of ourselves, our common values, behaviours and traditions.

As we face the risks and benefits of globalisation, there is a need for a stronger sense of common purpose, too. A purpose that recognises our strengths and the need to build on them — our past achievements and our potential for the future.

Of course, none of this means that we need to think of ourselves any differently. We are what we are, and what our traditional values of openness, tolerance, respect for liberty, and all the other things we have taken for granted, have made of us.

In changing circumstances, the task — and the reason for having a debate about Britishness — is to be more explicit about all this. For far too long — but with typical understatement — we have been too reticent about the values and conventions that make us British.

I believe we are discovering that what unites us is far greater than what separates us, and that the values we share most are those that matter most.

Recognising them, and with them the rights and responsibilities that citizenship involves, will strengthen us as an open, diverse, adaptable, enabling and successful modern state.

We should never forget how much there is to celebrate about the busy, beautiful, rain-drenched islands that we call home.

Being British: The Search For The Values That Bind The Nation.
Introduction by Gordon Brown, edited by Matthew d'Ancona, published by Mainstream.