The Britishness debate
Identity issues in a contested United Kingdom

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Identity in an age of uncertainty

Questioning national identity is a sign of our times. Throughout Europe, nation states are grappling with the challenges of subnational autonomy, globalisation, European integration and multiculturalism. Hardly anywhere, however, are these questions more prevalent than in Britain, where openness to international trade and migration has often been accompanied by caution and restraint when it comes to displays of national unity. British patriotism was confirmed by the Second World War, so it is said: hardly a sufficient platform for a national unity fit for the twenty-first century.

Arriving in England, wrote George Orwell in “The Lion and the Unicorn”, “you have immediately the sensation of breathing a different air... The beer is bitterer, the coins are heavier, the grass is greener, the advertisements are more blatant. The crowds in the big towns, with their mild knobby faces, their bad teeth and gentle manners, are different from a European crowd.” While Britons may still be a particular breed, they are also asserting separate national identities to the extent that the future of the United Kingdom is in question, as discussed in the spring issue of British Politics Review. This is also the challenge for Gordon Brown, a Scot yet a British prime minister, whose advocacy of Britishness and a shared national credo has expanded over the last few years. Brown’s version of Britishness defends a historical set of values, summarised in his British Council annual lecture of 2004 as “a passion for liberty anchored in a sense of duty and an intrinsic commitment to tolerance and fair play”. The Prime Minister’s efforts to create a united British football team for the 2012 London Olympics reflect a wish to popularise this perception of unity.

The Prime Minister has an arduous task in defining Britishness across geographical and political divides. His Conservative predecessor, John Major, met with criticism for championing the white middle classes of southern England, his reference to “the country of long shadows on cricket grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs” finding little resonance in other parts of the population. A shared vision of Britishness today carries even greater difficulties. The recent announcement on the planned introduction of ID cards for British citizens illustrated the problem, seeing the Union Jack removed from the card to the benefit of a floral pattern of shamrock, daffodil, thistle and rose, signifying the four nations of the UK.

The present issue of British Politics Review discusses Britishness in light of the multiple identities of Britain today. Our fine team of guest contributors include Paul Ward, Arthur Aughey, Christopher Bryant, Vron Ware, Espen Kallevik and Dana Arnold. Together, they show the many dimensions of the debate today as well as its historical antecedents. Resolving identity in a multi-national and multicultural “nation of nations” will be vital for the future of the British state. Can Britishness provide the answer?

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The end of Britishness? A historical perspective

By Paul Ward

Revival of a debate. Discussion of Britishness now seems endless. Googling “Britishness” returns hundreds of thousands of results for the last month alone. Almost any event relating to sport, politics and culture seems to provoke commentators to raise the spectre of the crisis of Britishness. There have been newspaper and magazine articles, radio and TV programmes, and a stream of blogs discussing what it means to “be British”. Without a doubt, Britishness is being discussed at unprecedented levels.

It is too often the case, though, that this discussion is taken to mean that Britishness is at its end. It has been widely assumed that the discussion of national identities in the UK is relatively recent, beginning with Tom Nairn’s The Break-Up of Britain in 1977. Nairn suggested that it was only a matter of time until Britain and Britishness was no more. The articulation of arguments about Britishness have therefore been taken to imply its demise. It is necessary, however, to take a historical perspective on current discussions of national identity in the UK – viewing them in their historical context rather than as containing some essential truth about the future of Britain.

Debates about Britishness have occurred frequently in the past – hence the volume of historical discussion in the last 20 years or so. Much of this, like that of Nairn, focuses on the contemporary UK, and the recent past, but it is possible to cite books and articles that push discussion back and back through history. There is a substantial number of works on Britishness in the twentieth century, including my own Britishness since 1870 (2004) and Richard Weight’s Patriots (2002), which argue very different positions. For the nineteenth century, Keith Robbins’ Britishness (Routledge, 1982) is probably the most cited book on Britishness. Colley argues that Britishness emerged out of Protestantism in the eighteenth century, while Nairn, in The Break-Up of Britain, identifies the 1970s as a period of “Britishness” playing out globally in the end of the British Empire. But despite these traumas, substantial numbers in the UK continue to consider themselves to be the end of Britishness, and to share something that amounts to a fixed entity that would shatter if was removed.

Britishness has therefore never been a fixed entity that would shatter if was discussed or challenged but has been fluid and contested for centuries. Sometimes this has resulted in crisis – Catholic and nationalist Ireland’s war against the British between 1916 and 1921 certainly warrants the description of revolution, and the crisis of Britishness was played out globally in the end of the British Empire. But despite these traumas, substantial numbers in the UK continue to consider themselves to be part of a broad range of academic disciplines. For more information see http://www2.hud.ac.uk/asp/index.php

Proclamation of the Irish Republic, Dublin 1916. Unity within the UK and the British Empire has been challenged on a number of occasions before, under different and harsher circumstances.

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“Britishness has never been a fixed entity [...] but has been fluid and contested for centuries.”

The University of Huddersfield has set up its own Academy for the Study of Britishness. Established in 2008, the Academy coordinates research on citizenship, nationhood and identity across a broad range of academic disciplines. For more information see http://www2.hud.ac.uk/asp/index.php

By Andrew Bonar Law among prime ministers who have not been English and who have addressed the multi-national nature of the UK. All of them found themselves at the centre of power, foreshadowing Gordon Brown and his emphasis on Britishness in the twentieth century. Alongside these discussions of the territorial aspects of Britishness there have been equally persistent discussions of ethnicity and Britishness. It is well to remember that the Irish were frequently considered racially different in the nineteenth century, and from the 1880s to 1930s Jewish immigration drew attention to the multi-ethnic nature of the UK, enriched also by pockets of black settlement in British port cities. In the early twentieth century, some Jews tried to train others on how to be English in the Jewish Lads’ Brigade, and black seafarers in the British merchant marine used the phrase “British justice” in their demands for improved working conditions. In the 1930s, Jewish sportsmen wore the star of David and the Union Jack. The post-1948 immigration of West Indians and South Asians was on a different scale to previous waves of immigration but many of the discussions of what it had meant to be non-white and British that would follow had already been pre-figured.