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The Britishness debate

Identity issues in a contested United Kingdom

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The last night of the Proms, one of the most popular classical music concerts in the world, transmits traditional British anthems to a multi-million audience across the world. Held in Royal Albert Hall, the event also incorporates a number of outdoor venues, such as London's Hyde Park seen here in 2008. [Photograph: Neil Rickards. Published under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 License]

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Editorial

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?

Øivind Bratberg and Kristin M. Haugevik, Editors

Contents

| | | | |
|--|---------|---|-----------|
| The end of Britishness? A historical perspective <i>Paul Ward</i> | p. 3 | Britishness, multiculturalism and ethnicity <i>Espen Kallevik</i> | p. 9 |
| What is Britain for? <i>Arthur Aughey</i> | pp. 4-5 | The architectural aesthetic of Britishness <i>Dana Arnold</i> | pp. 10-11 |
| The British question <i>Christopher Bryant</i> | pp. 6-7 | Britishness and the international dimension <i>Kristin M. Haugevik</i> | p. 12 |
| Chasing Britishness: a post-colonial project <i>Vron Ware</i> | p. 8 | | |

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 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.



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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' work should be mentioned, and Linda Colley's *Britons* (1992) is probably the most cited book on Britishness. Colley argues that Britishness emerged out of Protestantism in the eighteenth century, while Britain was engaged in a series of wars against the French Catholic "other".

The early modern period is now also well covered by historians such as Steven Ellis, Sarah Barber and John Morrill. Historians such as J.G.A. Pocock and Hugh Kearney have emphasised just how important it is to consider the history of the Atlantic archipelago in its Britannic context, as a

history consisting of unity and integration as well as disunity and disintegration. This array of historical examination suggests that current debates are part of a continuum rather than a break with the past.

And these historians are exploring discourses contemporary to their periods. Some of these, without doubt, are discourses challenging Britain and Britishness. From the very beginning of the union between the UK and Ireland in 1801 there have been multiple voices opposing the imposition of Britishness.

The outcome in the early 1920s was the first contraction in the size of the UK for some centuries with the establishment of the Irish Free State, later the Republic of Ireland. However, not all non-English commentators on Britishness in the period before the 1970s were seeking to undermine it. It has not been easy for the Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish living in a UK dominated by the interminably insensitive English. But outer Britain has been part of Britain while cultivating cultural belongings remote from any centrally imposed uniformity. Underway, there has been a constant dialogue about what it means to be British. In the last hundred years alone it is possible to name David Lloyd George, James Ramsay MacDonald, and Andrew

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

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 twenty-first 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. In the 1940s, Jewish ex-servicemen battled British fascists. 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.

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 share something that amounts to Britishness. These shared institutions and values include Parliament, the monarchy, the British Army, the BBC, and the National Health Service. None of them are unanimously popular and unchallenged, but they do provide a core around which discussion of Britishness continues. When that discussion stops, then so too will Britishness. But so far, people are still talking, as Google shows.

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/asb/index.php>

POBLAcht NA H EIREANN, THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT OF THE IRISH REPUBLIC TO THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND.

IRISHMEN AND IRISHWOMEN In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.

Having organised and trained her manhood through her secret revolutionary organisation, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and through her open military organisations, the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army, having patiently perfected her discipline, having resolutely waited for the right moment to reveal itself, she now seizes that moment, and, supported by her exiled children in America and by gallant allies in Europe, but relying in the first on her own strength, she strikes in full confidence of victory.

We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish people. In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty - six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on that fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State, and we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the cause of its freedom, of its welfare, and of its exaltation among the nations.

The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.

Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women, the Provisional Government, hereby constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.

We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the Most High God, Whose blessing we invoke upon our arms, and we pray that no one who serves that cause will dishonour it by cowardice, inhumanity, or rapine. In this supreme hour the Irish nation must, by its valour and discipline and by the readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good, prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called.

Signed on Behalf of the Provisional Government,
THOMAS J. CLARKE,
SEAN Mac DIARHADA, THOMAS MacDONAGH,
P. H. PEARSE, EAMONN CEANNT,
JAMES CONNOLLY, JOSEPH PLUNKETT.

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.

Photograph: public domain