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The Future of Citizenship

Andy Mycock and Jon Tonge

A discussion of what constitutes identity and citizenship is timely and welcome. The linkage of citizenship to history and the association of citizenship with rights and responsibilities are appropriate. Nonetheless, we have concerns with some aspects of the discussion on citizenship.

What is meant by the idea of citizenship?

The Green Paper suggests 'we can learn much from countries that have a more clearly defined sense of citizenship', citing a number of examples including Australia, South Africa, and France. Such comparisons are of limited value, failing to acknowledge that anxieties concerning citizenship and national identity, and the values that inform them, are as prevalent. These are evident in the 'culture' or 'history' wars in most examples identified, where competing constructions of the national past reflect the plurality of their contemporary societies thus challenging orthodox views of national identity.

There appears to be inconsistency within the Green Paper regarding the deployment of the terms 'British' and 'UK' citizenship. Paragraph 193, for example, refers to the need to 'ensure that there is a common bond between all types of citizens in the UK' to clarify the 'common core of rights and responsibilities that go with British citizenship'. This imprecision and assumed interchangeability in terminology reflects a wider flaw within the Green Paper, the perceived synonymy of citizenship and national identity, which is reflected through the inconsistent use of 'Britain' and the 'UK'. The UK is not a nation, but rather a multi-national state whose origins lay in series of Acts of Union. The term 'union' state more accurately reflects the series of legislative measures which saw Wales, Scotland and Ireland incorporated into a unitary state which some UK citizens view as 'colonial'. Moreover, plural interpretations of 'Britain', viewed within the paper as a nation (para. 182), 'a nation of nations' (para. 199) and as a multi-national state (para. 141), reflect a lack of surety as to its definitive articulation.

Highlighting the difference between Britain and the UK is not merely constitutional pedantry. The Government's attempted promotion of the primacy of UK citizenship fails to acknowledge its contestability in Northern Ireland. It appears to breach the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which recognises 'the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British' and promises 'full respect for, and equality of, civil, political, social

and cultural rights...and of parity of esteem and of just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos and aspirations of both communities'.^[1] Given that the Irish government has also legislated, on the basis of referendum support for the Agreement, to entitle any person born on the island of Ireland to Irish citizenship, the promotion of a 'common bond' between all types of citizens in the UK by the government may be strongly contested.

Indeed, ambiguity persists throughout the paper as to whether the government is attempting to define and promote 'Britishness' or 'UK-ness'. The Green Paper rightly acknowledges that UK citizens possess 'multiple identities' (para. 182). However, the suggestion that UK citizenship promotes a national identity which 'brings the nation together' (para. 183) is problematical as the assumption of an organic and homogeneous form of Britishness is more claimed than proven. Although there is acknowledgement of the 'relative lack of precision about what we mean to be British' (para. 184), it is unclear whether 'Britishness' is viewed as a wholly civic construct or is tied to cultural practice which potentially establishes citizenship and identity norms that can exclude some citizens.

The demand to be British?

The assumption that all UK citizens wish to ascribe to an overarching identity is myopic. Certainly a series of important shared experiences, such as the growth (and decline) of empire and heroic efforts in two World Wars, has helped shape a sense of Britishness extending beyond England. However, a range of statistical studies has highlighted the relative decline of British identity across the home nations during the last decade.^[2] Although the Green Paper suggests that there are 'many cultural traits and traditions' that characterise being 'distinctively British' (para. 185), these are not identified. To what extent do they exist, or are they amount to dated clichés or cultural stereotyping, which, if matched by discussions of other nations in similar ways, would be seen as patronising or offensive? The Green Paper is ambiguous if and in what ways factors such as ethnicity, culture and religion inform national identity.

The Green Paper fails to fully acknowledge how nationalist tensions challenge the legitimacy of UK citizenship and identity. Some citizens, particularly those who promote separatist nationalist agendas, view conceptions of 'Britishness' as the antithesis of their own identities. Moreover, the reference to our 'relative stability as a nation' (para. 184) begs the question, relative to what, exactly? The UK was, prior to the Yugoslav wars of secession in the 1990s, the site of easily the worst ethnic conflict in post-World War II Europe, one in which more British lives were lost than in Iraq or Afghanistan. In Scotland, the largest party in parliament wishes to sever the Union, whilst the significant minorities in Northern Ireland, Wales and in some communities in England do not associate their nationhood with the UK or Britain.

Establishing the Values of Britishness?

We agree that good citizenship should be seen to positively promote the values outlined in the Green Paper. But it would appear however that the Green Paper is tied to an increasingly fraught search for the 'elixir' of Britishness, this highlighted by the perceived need to develop a British statement of values. An aspiration to 'rediscover' fixed and immutable 'British' (rather

the UK) values assumes that the UK was once successfully bound together by 'benign' qualities which merely require rehabilitation. Although a general commitment to such values as liberty, tolerance and fair play is desirable and can be tied to positively to the political development of the UK state, they are neither universally ascribed to nor understood by many UK citizens.^[3] Furthermore, ascription to such values is contentious and contestable both within historical and contemporary contexts, particularly in light of the British imperial legacy, and fail to acknowledge enduring discrimination and inequality of contemporary UK citizenship. The proposed codification could merely present a view of a UK political culture whereby the values eulogised are portrayed as banal, static, and immutable, rather than developmental, progressive or aspirational.

A British statement of values, if framed in a rigid codified framework, could actually emphasise schisms in UK society. The Green Paper fails to recognise that some within the devolved administrations in the UK locate their values which inform citizenship at a sub-state national level, and therefore question the necessity or desirability of a British statement. Nationalist parties in the devolved territories have identified and promoted national values which are distinct from those of what they perceive to be an 'Anglo-British' state. This concern over the projected synonymy of Britishness with the political culture of the dominant nation, England, is well-founded. By primarily locating the historical development of Britishness in 'our own civil war', 'the Declaration of Rights of 1689 and the Acts of Union' (para. 184), the Green Paper projects an Anglo-British view which is insensitive to the sensibilities of some UK citizens. Continued asymmetric devolution of power could further undermine the common relevance of some institutions, thus Anglicising the UK state and its associated citizenship.

Spreading citizenship

It is right that the Green Paper acknowledges inconsistencies of UK citizenship, particularly concerning entitlement rights and responsibilities (paras. 192-3). This noted, the remit of the proposed review of citizenship is narrow and unclear. The Green Paper appears to question the lack of a British national context of the ECHR. It fails to acknowledge the plurality and transnationality of UK citizenship. The three categories of UK citizenship which differentiate rights and responsibilities for UK citizens, particularly residency, welfare and democratic rights, are not considered. Though the implications of dual citizenship are recognised, the Green Paper does not consider the asymmetry of some arrangements, affording preferential rights to some Commonwealth and other foreign nationals, as problematical. Overall, the projection of a nationally-bound citizenship reflects a political discourse which is inward-looking and fails to acknowledge the positive contribution of transnational and supranational community to our understanding of Britishness.

Although the Government rightly believes that all citizens should understand their rights and responsibilities, it targets immigrants and young people as being somehow distinct in their lack of comprehension of the norms of UK citizenship or their integration into a national culture. It is questionable as to whether citizenship ceremonies are 'highly successful' (para. 186) or whether they successfully inculcate a sense of Britishness which the Green Paper acknowledges lacks clarity for many existing UK citizens. There would appear to be little concern for the possibility that broader society is failing to fully understand or satisfy their rights or responsibilities. We

would encourage a holistic approach to inculcation of a citizenship culture and identity, thus avoiding the singling out of specific sections of society.

- [1] HMSO *The Agreement: Agreement reached in multi-party negotiations*, Belfast: HMSO, 1998, Article 1, paras. V/Vi
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Lucy Stone and Rick Muir, *Who Are We? Identities in Britain, 2007*, London, IPPR, 2007.
- [3] Anthony Heath, Jean Martin and Gabriella Elgenius, 'Who do we think we are? The decline of traditional identities', in Alison Park, John Curtice, Katarina Thompson, Miranda Phillips and Mark Johnson (eds.) *British Social Attitudes: the 23rd Report – Perspectives on a Changing Society*, London: Sage, 2007, pp. 1-33.