


Britishness, Identity and Citizenship

The View From Abroad



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Introduction – Britishness, Identity and Citizenship: The View from Abroad¹

Recent years have witnessed an increase in the profile of debates about national identity and citizenship (two separate but often conflated concepts) in the UK. A palpable sense of a crisis of Britishness can be discerned within this debate, which has been conducted in academic, media and political circles. The former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown clearly hoped that one of the key achievements of his time in office would be the successful re-shaping of British identity to underpin a strongly articulated sense of belonging based on nationally-located values such as fair play, tolerance and liberty, which he saw as a ‘golden thread’ running through British history.² These values together with enduring British institutions such as Westminster, the BBC and the NHS would form the basis of an inclusive civic citizenship that could accommodate an increasingly diverse population.

In the end this project was not the hallmark of Brown’s tenure, as the sharp recession engendered by the international banking crisis became the focal point of political discourse and action. However, while the economy may now dominate British political debate, the fashioning of a ‘national’ narrative that can bind citizens together is still a much sought-after, if

- 1 As organisers of the conference *Britishness, Identity and Citizenship: The View From Abroad*, we were grateful to receive financial and administrative support from our institution the University of Huddersfield which played host to the conference in June 2008. We would also like to acknowledge the support of the British Academy through the provision of conference grant BCG-48407.
- 2 See, for example, Brown’s speech to the Fabian Society on 14 January 2006 or his article, ‘The golden thread that runs through our history’, *The Guardian* (8 July 2004).

inherently contentious, goal. At first sight it would appear that Brown's successor Prime Minister David Cameron's understanding of Britishness and UK citizenship is informed by a similar set of institutions and values. But Cameron prioritises a more organic and emotional sense of national identity that seeks to prioritise 'forgotten' institutions such as the monarchy and the armed forces combined with, as we note in our own contribution to this volume, an innate faith in the potential for school history to 'teach the nation' – though he appears less sure which nation that is.³

One of the most notable aspects of this debate has for us been the astonishing amount of introspection on display. On the surface, discussions about defining the legal and cultural bonds between citizens in the twenty-first century United Kingdom are inherently enmeshed within international forces, as globalization has through the increased movement of information, capital and people, challenged the sovereignty of states and offered ways of creating and sustaining community memberships that stretch mentally and physically beyond borders. In addition, one of the most divisive issues for commentators has been how to acknowledge and interpret an imperial past. However, the resonance of the legacy of empire and the ongoing significance of constitutional and emotional ties is overlooked for the most part, meaning that even migrants from the Commonwealth are seen as outsiders requiring tutoring in the values of Britishness before they can successfully attain citizenship.⁴

This myopic focus on what Kumar terms the 'inner Empire' of Great Britain has, in our opinion, truncated contemporary understandings of Britishness as an identity.⁵ To act as if Britishness has been shorn of any transnational dynamic beyond that of the potential for social, economic and cultural forces to penetrate the UK from outside is to remove many potentially rich layers of connection that could create an understanding

3 D. Cameron, 'Proud to be British', *ConservativeHome* (10 July 2009) <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/platform/2009/07/david-cameron-proud-to-be-british.html>, accessed 6 August 2010.

4 A. Mycock, 'British citizenship and the legacy of empires', *Parliamentary Affairs* 63 (2) (2010), 339–55.

5 K. Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003).

of British community far beyond the limited formalities of legal citizenship. The interconnected relationships between national, multi-national and transnational constructions of citizenship and national identity ensure that debates about national and imperial Britishness cannot be confined within sovereign nation-state parameters. Moreover, the intersections between the post-imperial and the post-colonial mean that established and new conversations about Britishness must be recognised if we are to understand how old and new voices connect.

This was the guiding conviction that prompted the organisation of an inter-disciplinary conference, *Britishness: Identity and Citizenship: the View from Abroad*. The conference, held in June 2008 at the University of Huddersfield, brought together a range of international scholars who presented work that revealed the dynamism of contemporary and historical experiences of Britishness through popular cultural transmission, education, and travel and migration. The chapters in this volume have all been drawn from the conference and together they act as a challenge to the increasingly inward-looking popular, political and academic debate about identity and citizenship in the UK, asking commentators to acknowledge that the transnational nature of Britishness transcends a simple home/abroad dichotomy.

The View from Abroad

In some ways the work in this volume could suggest that Britishness appears as a more easily pinned-down phenomenon when viewed from abroad. Whether that view is a positive one, such as the admiration historically displayed with an element of deference in other educational systems for literature, the political system, military prowess and supposedly innately British values, or the less laudable figures of the drunken British stag or the aloof and superior colonial administrator, a defined picture of the British and a sense of assured self-confidence about the virtues of Britishness is projected. This perception is noticeably of an Anglo-Britishness. For

example, the historical enmity the French media detected in what was seen as Prime Minister Tony Blair's capitulation to a long-standing Euroscepticism has been presented as an element of the 'forging' of Britishness in the eighteenth century.⁶ However, this was built on a much older antagonism between the English and the French and the contemporary Eurosceptic position is deeply imbued with an Anglo-British identity.⁷ In addition, the canon of literature exported as the hallmark of British civilization and its physical geography (From Wordsworth's Lake District to Shakespeare's Stratford) overlaps with the borders of England and Englishness, cementing the conflation of Englishness and Britishness.

It could be easy to assume, in such a light, that the projection of Britishness abroad both during the era of empire and in the modern world has obscured the problems of promoting cohesion within a multi-national state, problems that have become increasingly apparent when the concept is discussed domestically.⁸ In fact, many of the contributions to this volume show how these problems are replicated in many ways in settings outside the UK, reflecting the struggle experienced by other core ethnic groups (such as the Russians) in a time of imperial disintegration.⁹ This replication can be detected both amongst those coming to Britain and those leaving it.

For many of those travelling outwards, it is apparent that their sense of Britishness did not – and does not – replace strong ethnic affiliations, even if like William Knox they consciously saw themselves as representing and furthering the interests of the empire. However, for the English the legacy of denying an institutional framework for their identity has played out in a similar manner across the former empire as it does within an increasingly constitutionally devolved UK. The work here on migration to Australia shows how the English Diaspora can struggle to define itself once legal and

6 L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1992).

7 C. Gifford, 'The UK and the European Union: Dimensions of British Sovereignty and the Problem of Eurosceptic Britishness', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 63 (2) (2010), 321–38.

8 For an excellent discussion of the multi-national nature of the UK state please see C. Bryant, *The Nations of Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2005).

9 V. Tolz, *Russia: Inventing the Nation* (London: Arnold, 2001).

cultural ties to Britishness diminish in importance in post-independence Commonwealth states and how the long subsuming of Englishness within Britishness has eroded both a civic institutional and an ethno-cultural basis for a twenty-first century Englishness. The experience of those travelling to the UK further illuminates the tension between civic Britishness and the hidden ethnic base of Englishness from another perspective. For example, the experiences of the educated Indian middle class show how those who envisaged a sense of fraternity through the shared connection of literature and culture also had to struggle with the exclusion and derogation they experienced when they came to visit the origin of this community of which they saw themselves as full members.

In light of this it could be argued that the global ties established through migration, imperialism and cultural profile do not actually have much to offer to debates about defining an accommodating contemporary Britishness within the UK. If the transnational dynamics merely replicate the complications and tensions of the debate at home, what need is there for British citizens and policy-making elites to turn their gaze outwards? In addition, the broad popularity enjoyed currently by historians such as Niall Ferguson who attempt to present the imperial past as largely positive, not just for the UK but for the former empire (if not the entire world) suggests how deep-seated the resistance to learning about Britishness from those whose connection is not based on birth and citizenship could be.¹⁰ The strong unease stoked when modern politicians are called upon to apologise for past actions rests on anxiety about 'a broader decline in national self-belief and standards of behaviour, highlighting the seemingly limitless potential for British national history to be debunked', suggesting that this kind of confrontation with the legacy of Britishness abroad can only lead to negative consequences.¹¹

10 N. Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane and Penguin, 2003).

11 A. Mycock, 'Sorry Seems to be an Easier Word: Brown and the Politics of Apology', *Open Democracy* (30 November 2009) <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/andy-mycock/sorry-seems-to-be-easier-word-brown-and-politics-of-apology> accessed 20 August 2010.