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British civilisation and institutions

Attitudes to national, regional and local identities

Immigration to Britain has often been seen as a threat to British moral, social and cultural values. Yet the British-Irish Isles have always been culturally and ethnically diverse. There are many differences between England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and distinctive ways of life and identities within each nation at national, regional and local levels. The meaning of contemporary 'Britishness' consequently becomes problematic.

The history of the British-Irish Isles before the eighteenth century is not about a single British identity or political entity. It is about four different nations and their peoples, who have often been hostile towards one another. 'Britishness' since the 1707 union between England/Wales and Scotland has been largely identified with representative and centralized state institutions, such as monarchy, Parliament, law and Protestant churches, and their values. Concepts of Britishness were more widely used in the nineteenth century and tied to the Victorian monarchy and Britain's imperial, industrial and military position in the world.

Terms such as 'British' and 'Britain' can seem artificial to many people in the contemporary UK population, who have retained different cultural and national identities. Foreigners often call all British people 'English' and have difficulties in appreciating the distinctions, or the irritation of the non-English population at such labelling. It is argued that the 'British' today do not have a strong sense of a 'British' identity. In this view, there needs to be a rethinking of what it means to be British in the contexts of a multinational, multi-ethnic UK and a changing Europe.

There has obviously been ethnic and cultural assimilation in Britain over the centuries, which resulted from adaptation by immigrant groups and internal migration between the four nations. Social, political and institutional standardization and a British awareness were established. However, the British identification is often equated with English norms because of England's historical role: political unification occurred under the English Crown, UK state power is still mainly concentrated in London, and the English dominate numerically.

English nationalism has historically been the most potent of the four nationalisms, and the English had no real problem with the dual national role. But some now seem to be unsure about their identity in a devolved Britain. The Scots and Welsh are more aware of the difference between their nationalism and Britishness, resent the English dominance, see themselves as different from the English, and regard their cultural feelings as crucial. Their sense of identity is conditioned by the tension between their distinctive histories and a history of centralized government from London. National identity in the four nations was until recently largely cultural and the British political union was generally accepted, except for some people in the minority Catholic population of Northern Ireland. But political nationalism increased in the 1960s and 1970s in Scotland and Wales. The Welsh, English and Scottish seem increasingly to be defining themselves more in terms of their individual nationalities, rather than as British.

However, there are also differences on regional and local levels within the four nations themselves. Some English regions such as the north-east and north-west react against London influences and demand decentralized political autonomy. Since the English are a relatively mixed people, their customs, accents and behaviour vary considerably and some regional identifications are still strong. The Cornish, for example, see themselves as a

distinctive cultural element in English society and have an affinity with Celtic and similar ethnic groups in Britain and Europe. The northern English have often regarded themselves as superior to the southern English, and vice versa.

In Wales, there are cultural and political differences between the industrial south (which supports the Labour Party) and the rest of the mainly rural country; between Welsh-speaking Wales in the north-west and centre (which supports Plaid Cymru) and English-influenced Wales in the east and south-west (where the Conservative Party has some support), and between the cities of Cardiff and Swansea. Yet Welsh people generally are very conscious of their differences from the English, despite the fact that many Welsh people have mixed English-Welsh ancestry. Their national and cultural identity is grounded in their history, literature, the Welsh language (actively spoken by 19 per cent of the population), sport (such as rugby football), and festivals such as the National Eisteddfod (with its Welsh poetry competitions, dancing and music). Today, many Welsh people feel that they are struggling for their national identity against political power in London and the erosion of their culture and language by English institutions.

Similarly, Scots generally unite in defense of their national identity and distinctiveness because of historical reactions to the English. They are conscious of their traditions, which are reflected in cultural festivals and different legal, religious and educational systems. There has been resentment against the centralization of political power in London and alleged economic neglect of Scotland. Devolved government in Edinburgh has removed some of these objections and focused on Scottish identity. But Scots are divided by three languages (Gaelic, Scots and English, the first of these being spoken by 1.5 per cent of the Scottish population or 70,000 people), different religions, prejudices and regionalisms. Cultural differences separate Lowlanders and Highlanders and deep rivalries exist between the two major cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow.

These features suggest that the contemporary British are a very diverse people with varying identities. It is as difficult to find an English, Welsh, Scottish or Irish person who conforms to all or even some of their assumed national stereotypes as it is to find a typical Briton. Within Britain, ethnic minorities (both white and non-white) may use dual or multiple identities and embrace different loyalties. Many call themselves British or more specifically English, Welsh, Irish or Scottish, while still identifying with their countries of origin or descent. Sometimes they employ their ethnic ties to define themselves as Afro-Caribbean, Black British or British Asians. They may also embrace identities which relate to their religion, for example British Muslims or Hindus and British Jews.

Foreigners often have either specific notions of what they think the British are like or, in desperation, seek a unified picture of national character, based sometimes upon stereotypes, quaint traditions or tourist views of Britain. The emphasis in this search should perhaps be more upon an examination of ethnic diversity or pluralism in British life. A *British Council/MORI* poll in 1999 found that overseas respondents felt that Britain is a multicultural society though opinion was divided as to whether or not it is also racially tolerant. It found that the countries that are least willing to believe that UK society is racially tolerant are those that are least aware of its multicultural composition. But ‘multiculturalism’ is a strongly debated issue in Britain. Some critics favour the separate development of cultural groups and the preservation of their ethnic identities. Others argue for assimilation.

These concerns are central to attempts to define ‘Britishness’. Surveys suggest there is a popular movement away from the allegedly negative, imperial and English-dominated historical implications of Britishness to a more positive, value-based, inclusive image with which the four nations and their populations can feel comfortable. A Britishness which encompasses opportunity, respect, tolerance, supportiveness, progress and decency is supposed to

be attractive to the Celtic nations and ethnic minorities. But these values have to be realized within defining institutional structures.