

Prospect

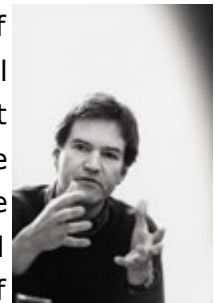
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Britain rediscovered

The British have traditionally had a rather weak sense of identity. Politicians of the left now want to construct a more visible, inclusive national story. What should it be based on? Can it be done top down?

NEAL ASCHERSON

David Goodhart (chair) It is often said that Britain has a fuzzy sense of its own identity compared to the classical nationalisms of continental Europe, France in particular. Many reasons for that are given: the fact that our institutions evolved slowly over many centuries, the fact that we are four different nations in one state, the fact of the empire. But the "who are we?" and "how can we live together?" issues—in part questions of national identity—have recently moved up the political agenda. That is the result of several developments: 9/11 and Islamic terrorism, devolution in Scotland and Wales and the consequent return of the English question, constitutional reform, European integration, a sharp rise in immigration, controversies around multiculturalism and the question of whether we need a strong common culture to sustain a welfare state. These things have underlined to some people the need for an inclusive national story, fearing that the alternative is not a laid-back post-nationalism but a strident, exclusive national story, or a drift into anomic individualism. But what should an overarching sense of Britishness—one that includes English, Scots, Welsh, Northern Irish and ethnic minority Britons—consist of? Should it be based on values or on institutions? Is civic citizenship enough? And can any of this be created top down?



Gordon Brown I think almost every question that we have to deal with about the future of Britain revolves around what we mean by Britishness, whether it is asylum or immigration, the future of the constitution, our relationship with Europe or terrorism. Who we are, what we stand for, what we are fighting for, is crucial to any nation's future in the modern world. Unless you have a strong sense of shared purpose, a strong sense of who you are, you will not succeed in the global economy and global society. And I believe that we have not been explicit enough about what we mean by Britishness for far too long. When we look at history and at the values and ideas that shape British national identity, I would want to stress a belief in tolerance and liberty, a sense of civic duty, a sense of fair play, a sense of being open to the world. The real challenge over the next few years is to see how our institutions can better reflect these values. That may mean quite profound changes in how our constitution is organised, how civic rights work—especially at



a local level, where big changes need to be made—and an anti-protectionist approach to the wider world. And we've got to think about the symbols of integration for the future—this is not just about a national day, or how to treat the festival of remembrance, it is about greater emphasis on the shared values that unite us. Our values have influenced our institutions and traditions in a particular way—partly because we have been a multinational society over centuries. And one proposition that I am keen to support is the idea of an institute of British studies, or something similar, that looks in depth—and in a non-partisan way—at how the ideas that shape our history should shape our institutions in the future and what effect that might have on policy.

Goodhart Does anybody want to contest the idea that Britishness should be based on values?

Billy Bragg I wouldn't contest that idea, but I would point out that one of our problems is that Britain doesn't have a founding ideal in the way that France or America does. We have Magna Carta and recently we have been talking a lot about habeas corpus but these are not easy, accessible things.



Brown My point is that there is a founding ideal; it is just not codified in any one document.

Bragg Should we be looking to codify it?

Brown Whether you codify it or not, you have got to rediscover it. You don't invent it, you rediscover it.

Tariq Modood I think I would hesitate to define Britishness in terms of values. Any national identity is a tension between particularity and universality. Obviously we have got our own geography, our own history and all kinds of cultural distinctions, above all the English language. Then there are more universal values like fair play and constitutional democracy. Britishness can't be reduced to these values. But our particularities will give us our own take on them. So we might talk about fairness in one way, the French in another. I would stress ideas, principles and norms that crop up in a variety of ways, and also that different people have different angles on them. Our values are in a state of flux and cannot easily be codified.



Linda Colley I would be in favour of some kind of a document; a building block in some larger constitutional edifice. But what I really want to stress is that it is inappropriate to discuss Britishness solely in terms of these islands. I think we have got to look much more broadly than that. Since 1945 the sovereignty of this country has been modified in various ways—in one direction towards the EU but in other ways, of



course, in the direction of America. The English language makes us wide open to American culture. Then there is the influence on our foreign policy and the fact that we have US bases here. These are things we ought to discuss too. It is difficult to do so without sounding anti-American or anti-European, which I am not. It is often said by politicians that citizens are not interested in foreign policy, only domestic issues, but many Brits do have a vague sense that their sovereignty has been eroded. It may be that this erosion is inevitable. But the way that our fortunes are so strongly linked with other parts of the world challenges people's idea of themselves as British. I think that needs discussing at the highest level because it leaves a lot of citizens feeling worried.

Roger Scruton I would like to go back to what Billy Bragg said. People don't seem to have a clear picture of the past of their country any more. It is not a question of the actual history, but rather the history that is required to create a national loyalty. If you look at the Poles or the Czechs, every schoolchild can tell a story about what his or her country is. It is not necessarily the truth—it is a bit of the truth with a lot of embellishment—but it is a loyalty-creating story that gives people a way of attaching their emotions to each other, and in particular to strangers. I suspect that behind Gordon's stress on values is an attempt to make up for the fact that we have lost our national story, we lost it with the empire in a way. And you don't acquire values in a fit of absence of mind.



David Lammy I would be against any idea of seeking to codify what it means to be British based around our values. I say that as an MP representing a constituency in which 183 languages are spoken. The many different people within a constituency like mine need to be part of the discussion around shared values. When you look at some of those shared values, there are tensions. Look at the debate over terror legislation: we have a long history of the rule of law, separation of powers, of democracy, and now the Human Rights Act. But we also have an in-built flexibility, and I wouldn't want to see that flexibility diminished by codification. Also we must remember that some of these values are contested. I speak as a centre-left politician, preoccupied with the collective good and the challenge to ensure that people buy into the NHS, buy into local government and the other means by which we share things. But I accept and understand that there is also a rich tradition of individualism in this country that competes with that. We need to develop a narrative that understands these competing strands, which run to the heart of being British. We should not forget, too, that there are the competing values of the street. I worry a lot about the bling bling materialism, the rabid consumerism, that pervades many of our inner-city areas. To promote the civic perspective that I want to see at a local level, we must make this discussion an open and amenable one. It mustn't just be top down.



Kenan Malik I think we are confusing two questions here. Who are we? And what kind of society do we want to live in? They are linked,



but they are also separate. "Who are we?" looks to the past, to history. When asking what kind of society we want to live in, we are looking to the future, the commonality of values. History and values can be linked—in the French republican tradition for instance. But the values we aspire to have to stand up on their own, not simply because they are a matter of history. It is like that old dichotomy between Enlightenment and Romantic views of identity—identity as a social contract and identity as history and heritage. The problem is that the social or civic contract cannot be a purely managerial contract—the state providing the rule of law, economic opportunity, good public services, while citizens in return obey the law, pay their taxes and so on. It has to be something deeper than that, it has to be about fundamental political values around which a community can be built. And I think part of the problem is that politics has become managerial and therefore we find it very difficult to discover what those values are. It ends up being rather banal—Britishness is democracy, decency, tolerance, diversity. Everyone has a different list, and people sometimes throw in Dickens and Shakespeare. But these values cannot bind people precisely because you do not need a political struggle over them.

Colley There has to be a way of linking past, present and future. And one of the ways we could do this is surely with a document. We don't necessarily want a codification of British values, but there is a case for a new bill of rights, or a bill of rights and responsibilities, which would include values. One of the things we need to do too is improve the history curriculum in schools. It is right that Scotland, Wales, England and Northern Ireland should have their distinctive histories taught. But there could be common history lessons too, which would recognise all kinds of diversity but which would also hammer out something of a common story. This would be partly an invention; all histories are. But it might be a useful invention.

Goodhart We have spoken about values, and constitutional things, and some people have suggested that this is too "thin"; that if we want something to replace the old ethnic glue based on past struggles and myths of shared ancestry, it needs emotional force, it needs to provide a sense of belonging. But surely the only thing that can do that is shared experience.

Neal Ascherson There is a slightly absurd aspect to this—it reminds me of Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, where they have this great committee in which they think about what it is that makes the Habsburg empire so wonderful. But the truth is that there are few things left of Britishness in emotional terms; fewer people feel primarily British. Gordon, you once proposed a British patriotism based on the NHS—and that made sense to me and many others. I was also struck recently by the Ellen MacArthur moment. There she was, an Englishwoman with part of her family originally from Skye. Above all, she was out there on the sea. And that seemed to make people feel all British about her. It doesn't happen often.



Brown That's exactly the point, isn't it Neal? Why is it that Britain, of all countries, created an NHS? And why is it that the British take greater pride perhaps in someone who sailed around the world? The reason lies not just in the bare facts of our history; it lies in the ideas that underpin our history. We were talking about liberty and opportunity long before America was established—and America was based on British ideas, some of them Scottish! And if you look at British history, then the fact that four nations eventually came together means that Britishness could never be based on ethnicity; it had to be based on something deeper. The fact that we have never been explicit about it or codified it does not mean that that set of values does not exist. There is a British view of the relationship between civic duty and fairness that underpins why we have an NHS, and there is British openness to the world that explains not only the support for and success of Ellen MacArthur, but the British empire, our concern about developing countries today, free trade, Cobden and Bright. The question is not what's left of Britishness, but discovering what is so rich in Britishness and then seeing if it gives us bearings for the future.

Eric Kaufmann I see a lot of parallels between the debate in Canada, where I am from, and the debate here. At state level you are trying to define a national identity that will include everybody, but because we live in a time of great diversity, the only values that can include everyone are universal ones such as tolerance and fair play. But I don't think you can define something particular like a nation by something universal like values. Unless you have got radically different values from other countries, it is not going to give you a lot of purchase. For me, as an outsider, I think a lot of the richness comes from the component nations: the English, the Scots and the Welsh. It is at the level of the nation that one should look for the richness and cultural continuity, while at the state level it is more a matter of managing the diversity.



Goodhart But isn't there this fear that the English are simply too dominant within Britain and that Britishness is a means of keeping that dominance invisible?

Bragg We are invisible. England doesn't have its own parliament or national anthem. I watch the rugby, and I see the Welsh singing "Land of Our Fathers," and the Scots have "Flower of Scotland," while we are singing a song that doesn't even mention our country. These are small things but millions of people are starting to notice that England is the elephant in the room that no one wants to talk about.

Brown But surely it is the fact that the nations of Britain did have to learn to live together, which was difficult for them to do, that justifies this stress on tolerance as an especially British virtue.

Ascherson I think there's a problem here, a difficult one to express. We have been talking about British political values. But a lot of those values and virtues are actually English. Scotland is a different country, and not a very tolerant society in many ways.

Brown I don't agree with that...

Ascherson England is at a strange state of its development in which it underestimates its own achievement. Much of what keeps Scottish politics from perilous collisions is an English import. England is still a more tolerant society, socially and politically.

Lammy I am reluctant to go down the English route because I think it is a digression. But Britishness is a kind of model, whether you talk about England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland coming together or about our understanding of multiethnicity today, compared to, say, that of France or Germany. We have made a big contribution to understanding what a multiethnic society means. In the US there is a history of assimilation; you become American first and foremost. That is not the British way.

Goodhart I don't want to let the English question slip away. Eric Kaufmann has used the phrase "asymmetrical multiculturalism" to describe the delegitimising of dominant groups like the English. Within Britain, it is said, the Celtic nations and ethnic minorities are encouraged to express their cultures and collective identities, but there is a nervousness about the English doing the same. The English don't have their own political institutions, nor do they have a strong cultural sense of themselves, particularly the English in the midlands and the south. It is slightly different in the north. Should we worry about it?

Colley In the past, there was a kind of deal that wasn't spelt out but was understood by everyone: England had the bulk of the population, the bulk of the wealth, and the bulk of the seats in parliament, and so you didn't need to worry too much about Englishness. The Welsh might have worried about their place in Britain, the Scots too, but the English knew where the power was. Now, because of devolution, because of so much more diversity, this deal doesn't work so well, and the English are saying: we want our culture too. And rightly. We are very bad in this country at using flags to signal messages. Why shouldn't we, within England, have the cross of St George flying in towns alongside the Union Jack, with the equivalent in other parts of Britain? That would underline that multiple identities are possible and desirable.

Ascherson Yes, there is an emerging Englishness which is still thought to be slightly incorrect. Something is bursting to come out. But sadly, the English intelligentsia, or the liberal English middle class, which ought to be leading political developments, ought to be taking over this emerging feeling—saying yes, let's make a democratic, tolerant, forward-looking nation—is just sitting back and saying: "English nationalism, awful, horrible, leave it to the yobs."

Bragg Just to go back to flags. The flag of St George reappeared when England played Scotland in the European championships in 1996. The Union Jack, which had been the flag favoured by English football fans, was no longer useful. Instead, they reverted to the flag of St George, and it stuck. I am from Barking and when I went home to my mum during the last European championships, everyone, including the Asian guys down our street, had

an England flag on their cars. Now I think that's positive. But the point is that Ukip and the BNP don't have any following in Scotland and Wales. They are an English phenomenon and an English problem, and we have to deal with it by repossessing these symbols and values. The Scots have been able to define a positive national identity—compare the SNP to the BNP—perhaps because there the liberal middle class did get involved.

Scruton This goes back back to the distinction between nations that are metropolitan powers and those that define themselves in opposition to the metropolitan power. The English are the British metropolitan power—the creators of the language, of the institutions by which the empire and the four constituent nations were governed. So it is harder for them to go in for this exercise of nation-building. Gordon's proposition is interesting because he is the first politician who has said to me, an Englishman, why don't you build a nation but based on a British idea rather than an English one? I was brought up with a sense of Englishness that definitely involved values. But they weren't universal values; they were very English: stiff upper lip, the gentleman—things which have a very quaint air now but which got people through two world wars. They are also hard to incorporate into that wider British notion of values.

Brown But you, Roger, when you talk about land and home, and a sense of belonging, you come back all the time to the ideas of duty and local civic responsibility, certain ideas of fairness, the importance of tolerance and liberty. You come back to a core set of ideas that I think you can define as British. I think the reason that this is a difficult discussion is that after the second world war, as we lost the empire, and as our economy went into relative decline, we lost confidence in ourselves, and forgot that the basis of Britain's success was the values that bound us together. I think we have got to rediscover them, and that's why I'm forcing the debate back—I want to have this debate with you, Roger, and Neal and others, about whether Scotland has a different view of tolerance to England, or whether Scotland has a different view of the stiff upper lip and so on—I want to debate these things in far more detail. There is a huge debate in America about what it is to be an American and what American values are. But in Britain we have barely begun.

Bragg Partly I think it is because the classic British identity is based on the Whig interpretation of history: the idea that we were chosen, and that the empire was an expression of that. But what that history can't do is deal with decline, because it is all about greatness. So should we try for a more cultural definition of Britishness? That's confusing too because of high culture and popular culture. When Roger in his book [England: An Elegy] talks about English culture he says the last great English musical talent was Benjamin Britten. But most people have no experience of Britten's music. I would argue that the last great talent was the Streets. So perhaps we are forced back to history and the formative experience of the second world war and the emergence of the welfare state. That was when Britishness had its most powerful meaning: when the fates of England, Scotland, Wales and even Ireland were tied in together. And it was not narrow or exclusive. When Churchill talked of "their finest hour," he meant 500m men and women of different languages and cultures, all coming to our small island to fight fascism.

Goodhart But strong feelings are usually forged by a powerful adversary—for Britain it was France in the 19th century, and Germany in the first half of the 20th. Can you sustain unity without an adversary?

Brown Well, the modern challenge is globalisation. In a global economy and society, nations that lack a strong sense of themselves and a strong sense of purpose will not be successful, because they will not be able to face up to the difficult decisions that countries have got to make to succeed. Unless Britain becomes a more educated, skilled, better trained nation, it is not going to be able to compete with China, for instance.

Goodhart That may be right, but it's very economistic reasoning. Doesn't the real "we're all in this together" Britishness need a Hitler to define itself against?

Bragg The war against Hitler also represented a kind of opening out to the world. Before 1939 you could grow up in England eating only English food, listening to English music, wearing English clothes. But this was impossible after the second world war because of the internationalisation that was necessary to defeat fascism, plus the US servicemen coming over with their cultures, and the young Jamaicans on the Empire Windrush, many of whom had already been here in the RAF as ground crew...

Modood And the Indian army...

Bragg Yes. The answer to the "who are we?" question is found in our history but also on the streets. Why is London the most multicultural city in Europe?

Modood I agree with Gordon that successful countries require a collective spirit which can't be generated by economic individualism, but we don't need a list of British values to do it. I think we need a certain amount of ambiguity, rather than clarity, about what holds us together. The worry would be if people lost interest in arguing about Britishness, not whether they failed to reach agreement on what the five or six key values are. Let's just keep the argument going. On Englishness, I have colleagues at the University of Bristol who are doing interviews on Englishness in a small Gloucestershire town where people do talk about it, like Roger, in terms of decline, and a loss of civility. But elsewhere, people are talking about English identity in a less beleaguered way—young people are more likely to talk about having an English identity than older people. Regrettably, from my view, the new English identity tends to be sport-based and more to do with leisure than civic purpose. But it definitely exists out there, and as Billy says, black and Asian young people are buying into it too. People like me have always said, well yes, that's England, that's an ethnic identity, but we are all British—I am a British Pakistani, or a British Muslim. But younger people are saying: I am an English Muslim; I am a Scottish Indian.

Bragg Sport is a focus, whether we like it or not. And the fact that the national teams—football, cricket and rugby—reflect our multicultural society is hugely important. It is only a matter of time before an Asian kid plays football for England.

Modood I think it would better reflect our multicultural society if an Asian didn't play football for England. Different groups have different priorities. Why should everything be a population microcosm?

Bragg Football is our international shop window.

Colley It's all a bit male though, isn't it!

Brown To get back to Tariq's broader point, I am not proposing some formulaic list of values that embodies Britain for the next 200 years. Equally I don't think it's good enough just to have all these ideas floating around and to say the debate is an end in itself. One reason for that goes back to David Goodhart's [piece](#) in Prospect—whether in the longer run there is enough feeling of mutual obligation to sustain a generous welfare state and a free NHS, especially at a time of relatively high immigration.

Goodhart I wrote about a general splintering of solidarity, in the white majority too. This is not just a problem arising from immigration.

Brown But you propose some sort of new contract to resolve it. I'm not sure how that works. But clearly it's a lot easier if people believe that these welfare or political institutions are underpinned by values that we all share that arise from our shared national identity. Roger and I, for example, from different points on the political spectrum would not be too far apart on definitions of citizenship, on the importance of voluntary organisations, local civic pride and so on. This is not just an academic debate about what is left of Britishness. It is about the core values that underpin the integration of our society, otherwise some of the fears that David has expressed may come true.

Goodhart One of the problems here is that generating solidarity is hard in rich countries. Mutual obligation can be created in many ways, but the most basic way is through shared experience. Yet the modern world is about mobility and choice, not about the stability and continuity that generates shared experience. Mobility is usually a good thing, of course, but it makes it harder to build up banks of reciprocity out of which a more trusting and optimistic idea of local and national community can arise.

Brown But I don't need to lead the same lifestyle as you to share similar values. I think if you underestimate the importance of values, you end up leaning towards a kind of loyalty test—are you one of us?

Goodhart I think I am trying to say the opposite. If you have shared experiences, it doesn't matter so much if you have quite different values, or if you look different, or if you

pray to a different god, because you learn from experience that there are enough general, human things to transcend the differences.

Malik I am one of those people who supports the England football team, the England cricket team, and, God help us, the England rugby team. But beyond the tribalism of the sporting arena I have no sense of being English. It has no content. Trying to recreate a new sense of English identity runs into the same problem as recreating a sense of British identity. The myths and symbols of national identity were created at a time of mass nation-building. There was a sense of wanting to be American, say, and wanting to be a part of that project. The problem now, I think, when we talk about constructing our identities, or creating citizenship ceremonies, is that it is done in a political vacuum. There is no popular upsurge saying I want to be British, I want to be English. What you have instead is tired consultation documents on integration and endless committees. But you cannot build national identity from the top down. [Gordon Brown has to leave the debate at this point.]

Goodhart I think it has to be both top down and bottom up. But the top down is not as impossible as you think. Look at the way our language has changed on a whole range of things from race to gender since, say, the mid-1970s. This is sometimes disparaged as the political correctness revolution, and perhaps in some respects it has gone too far. But it was a conscious elite-led thing and the BBC was central to it.

Colley Wherever we stand on Britishness or Englishness, pretty well all of us agree that the idea of citizenship needs to be stronger. And we could be much more adventurous in deciding new rituals, new national holidays and so on. We are coming up to the double centenary of the abolition of Britain's participation in the slave trade. That was a phenomenal event: can't we have an abolition or a liberation day?

Ascherson The trouble with celebrating past achievements like that or basing patriotism on the NHS is that these things are very old. To survive, Britain needs new achievements to celebrate from a reforming government, big changes that people could look back on and say: yes, it's part of our national tradition.

Kaufmann I just wanted to address this American point that has come up a few times, that somehow the US has got this very secure sense of identity. It is simply not true. The Americans are fighting all the time over these issues. Moving to a bill of rights, US-style patriotism is not going to be the answer.

Goodhart To turn briefly to Britishness and Europe. It is said that one of the reasons that Britain has had a special problem with European integration is that we have a sense of identity that is based, at least in part, on history and political institutions that are subject to change and interference from Brussels. In continental European countries, by contrast, the sense of identity is based more on language and culture, and therefore there is less at stake in relations with Brussels. My hope, in a way, is that we may develop a kind of

cultural notion of Britishness which will then make us less anxious about being submerged by Europe—but that might require becoming more culturally distinct from American mass culture.

Colley Yes. On the continent, one of the strongest arguments for the EU is that by banding together Europe can assert itself against the US; we can acquire some autonomy vis-à-vis the other side of the Atlantic. For obvious reasons this is not an argument that British politicians are very comfortable with.

Scruton But one of the key institutions that has undoubtedly shaped our identity and helped to create a problem with European integration is the common law or English law, which we share with the Americans. The common law has traditionally been very careful of the rights of the individual accused, more so than the Napoleonic system in Europe.

Ascherson I think Britain as a state pays the highest price for entry into the EU. For Britain it means not just pooling sovereignty and all the rest of it, but changing the whole power structure. Britain is changing slowly, painfully, making these adjustments. But it is much more difficult here.

Kaufmann I wonder whether Englishness could come to the rescue here. An English identity has to be more cultural and less about state institutions, so might make European integration easier.

Goodhart We will have to stop there. Thank you all.