

'A museum of Britishness would show all that is great about Blighty'

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Christopher Hope finds great support from across the political spectrum for Lord Baker's plans for the first national institution devoted to British history

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Lord Baker of Dorking plans to meet Gordon Brown next week to press the Prime Minister to release up to £100million of public money to pay for [the first Museum of British History](#).

The meeting comes as historians and politicians led the chorus of support for the plans for the plans, which were proposed by the former Tory education secretary as part of the Telegraph's Call Yourself British campaign.

Lord Baker has already held exploratory talks with officials from 10 Downing Street. However he said he was now ready to ask Mr Brown directly for money.

Under the Baker plans, the new Museum of British History will cost about £150million. More than half of the funds - £100million - should come from the public purse with the remainder from the private sector.

Lord Baker said he was delighted that the plans for [the museum had attracted the backing of Mr Brown](#): "The next stage is for me to say to the Prime Minister 'well, you ante up'. I want a financial commitment from him."

Lord Baker, who as Kenneth Baker served in Margaret Thatcher's Cabinet, first attempted to establish a Museum of British History shortly before the 1997 General Election, but the plans were vetoed by Tony Blair.

Lord Baker said he would co-ordinate the fund-raising by private companies and individuals for the new museum. He said the Government's commitment would be relatively small. "When you see how much is being spent on the Olympics, this is chicken feed," he said.



Strong opinions: Sir Richard Branson

Earlier this week Mr Brown admitted that the museum could only become a reality with the backing of public and private money.

He said: "Such a venture would require considerable private backing as well as public funding but I know there are numerous British companies and benefactors who would be interested in offering their support."

"We will focus not just on how a museum could relate the narrative of British history, but how it could celebrate the great British values on which our culture, politics and society have been shaped."

Last night Sir Richard Branson, the billionaire, said his company Virgin Group would consider sponsoring the new museum and act as a rallying point for any private investment.

Sir Richard, who described the idea as "magnificent", told The Daily Telegraph: "We would look at proposals for the Museum seriously and would also try to raise interest among other British businesses to support these plans."

Support for the museum has come from across the political spectrum. Chris Huhne, one of the challengers for the Liberal Democrat leadership, said: "A museum of Britishness should celebrate all that is great about Blighty. For me, Britain means everything from the Beatles through bobbies on the beat, the Brighton Pavilion, Sir Bobby Charlton, bagpipes and beer."

Nick Clegg, his rival for the party leadership, added: "It is vital that we celebrate and champion the quintessentially British values of tolerance and liberty; we have been a model for emerging democracies around the world for centuries and are unique in the distinctive structure of our union."

"I would like to see a museum of British history which not only celebrates the richness of our cultural heritage, but also reflects the diversity and multiple influences on that heritage. It would be wonderful to have a facility which is the focus of our national pride."

Vince Cable, the acting leader of the LibDems, added: "We can't identify our identity as a country unless we know the rich tapestry of our history. Although there are many specialist museums I know of no overarching museum that tells the story of how we got from the past to today."

This museum can only help to strengthen our pride in the United Kingdom and what we have achieved as a Union."

Party elder statesmen also supported the plans for the museum. Sir Malcolm Rifkind, the former Conservative Foreign Secretary, said: "Countries remain united when they share the same values and loyalties and have a great deal in common. For England and Scotland that remains true notwithstanding devolution. If the United States can have 50 parliaments or legislatures the United Kingdom will survive with four."

Lord Steel of Aikwood, the former Liberal Democrat leader and former Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament, also backed the plans for the museum.

He said: "The arguments for a United Kingdom remain as true and strong as they were at the time of the Treaty of Union in 1707 - namely the folly of wasteful economic rivalry between Scotland and England and the avoidance of unnecessary expenditure on separate defence forces and foreign embassies."

Lord Hesketh, who was Baroness Thatcher's chief whip in the House of Lords, said: "Ten years ago I would have said that we don't need one. But the problem now is that no one talks about Britishness - so we do need one. British history is no longer really taught in schools. Yes - I think it is an excellent idea."

Historical groups were also supportive. Dr Sean Lang, Honorary Secretary of the Historical Association and author of "British History for Dummies", said: "When I first heard of it I was not quite sure. But it had not struck me that we have not got a Museum of Britishness."

"We have so many museums - we have the sights and the great houses but we do not have one

museum that tells the whole story. There is a real public need for it."

Gareth Griffiths, director of the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, added: "There are so many museums in this country but there is not one which looks at all of British history. There is a need of an institution which provides an understanding of British history in these islands. I fully support the plans without reservation."

Some had their doubts. Steve Mastin, head of history at Sawston Village College, a secondary school in Cambridgeshire, said the museum could be very "fraught" because of concerns about its content.

He said: "It is an interesting idea but it would be hugely political. Who would design it and what would go in it? It would depend on whether you are talking to Darcus Howe or Niall Ferguson."

Peter Furtado, Editor of History Today, said he supported the idea of the museum but suggested that identifying a single story of Britain might be contested by scholars.

Other celebrities who have pledged support include forces heroine Dame Vera Lynn, broadcaster Sir Trevor McDonald and Trevor Baylis, who invented the clockwork radio.

Billy Bragg, the former punk musician who has campaigned to retrieve the term "British" from the Far Right, said that setting up a Museum of Britishness was not enough to enshrine feelings of nationality.

Mr Bragg, author of "The Progressive Patriot", said: "Imagine the European Union came up with a plan for a Museum of European History with the stated aim of making us all proud to be European.

"While care was taken to be fair to each country, the overarching message would be that it would be a great political and historical folly to abandon the European Union - an immensely successful political, economic and cultural entity. Would the existence of such an institution make any Telegraph readers more likely to think of themselves as proudly European?"

However Jilly Cooper, the novelist, sounded a note of caution: "I find it bizarre that we are signing this EU Reform Treaty at the same as we are being told that Britain should be together. It is schizophrenic. It seems a political contrivance. I'd rather go to the Tate or the V&A."

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