Time for an optimistic Englishness

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We need a new debate on Englishness.

National communities tend to be imagined or re-imagined at times of convulsive change and crisis. Yet though such change - social, economic, technological and constitutional - is currently undermining the political status quo, the English political conversation continues to be avoided. My argument here is that this avoidance is becoming increasingly unsustainable - and that a serious conversation on the issue is now overdue.

There are three potential sources that could force the English hand in this regard: an increasingly assertive and antagonistic English nationalism; a resurgent and forceful Scottish nationalism; and the changing contours of the international economy and financial crisis, which are likely to lead to constitutional change, especially - for our purposes here - within the EU and eurozone. And there are two dominant forms of evasion.

Sources of evasion

The first seeks to avoid rekindling *any* nationalism in a globalised, post-national world. But this liberal universalism has found it hard going in a post-9/11 world where security concerns and economic anxiety mesh: cultural antagonism has blended with economic insecurity to create nationally based resistance to the changes wrought by globalisation. Increasing labour mobility protectionism is just one example of this reactive impulse.

But the stronger force for resisting a politics of Englishness is a status-quoism that wants to keep the Pandora's Box closed. The fear in this mind-set is that to open the dialogue is to take undue risk. In its conservative guise, the concern is the risk to the constitutional order: the argument seems to be that Englishness is a dormant identity that shouldn't be disturbed. In certain ways this is right. In British Social Attitude surveys over a number of years only one third of English respondents regard themselves to be English rather than British (though only a quarter favour British over English). The English want their own Parliament but are hardly mobilising with pitch-forks in order to secure one. And liberals and multiculturalists too have a voice in this risk-averse perspective. The fear is that antagonistic forces will take control of the dialogue, resulting in social and political disturbance. The fears are entirely understandable given the historical connectedness of nationalism, antagonism, racism and violence. As Paul Gilroy writes: 'The politics of "race" in this country is fired by conceptions of national belonging and homogeneity which not only blur the distinction between "race" and nation, but rely on that ambiguity for their effect'.[1] As Gilroy also notes, the Union Jack has now been replaced by the cross of St George as a threatening emblem of the far right. Englishness is replacing Britishness as the favoured form of exclusive identity. Contrastingly, only 14 per cent of Asians considered themselves English or 'hyphenated-English' rather than British in a recent survey that asked them to choose between these identities.[2]

The nub of the issue is whether a nation in mourning over its relative economic and geopolitical decline has the capacity for a generous dialogue about its English ethos: one that can find broad, inclusive and legitimate political expression. If the risks of initiating an Englishness dialogue are so great, why gamble? The answer is that there may be little other option.

Compelling reasons for discussion

England currently faces threats to its economic, cultural, and constitutional order both within and beyond its borders. The degree to which it is able to confront these threats will depend on a new political settlement.

Within its borders, the internal threat comes from an increasingly menacing expression of assertive and antagonistic monocultural nationalism. These forces take a number of forms: from violent street confrontation to nationalist populism.

They mobilise around forms of English symbolic expression in a context of anxiety induced by economic change and dislocation, nostalgic loss of national pride, and significant cultural shifts. It is easy to dismiss the English Defence League simply as thuggery, or the British National Party as a rabble in respectable dress (interestingly, the party has suffered widespread defection to the *English* Democrats). But they represent something more sinister: a mutated nationalism in the absence of serious mainstream engagement with the natural desire for national belonging and meaning. This opens up the space for a rhetorical and angry lament of victimised alienation.

In 2010, the first man to be convicted under the Chemical Weapons Act 1996 was a white supremacist working with three other men. This has been largely ignored in the mainstream media. So the violent threat is real, but there is also a populist English nationalism that has yet to find mainstream political expression in the way that it has done in France, the Netherlands or Germany. And yet a similar widespread notion of cultural threat exists in England as in its European partners, as the Searchlight Educational Trust *Fear and Hope Report*, and other research, has demonstrated.

There are echoes here of the immigration debate, where mainstream political forces - particularly on the left - shied away from the issue in the early 2000s, only to find that by the time they arrived in the discussion the terms had already been set by the fearful tone of the right in media, popular and political discourse. Essentially, the mainstream emphasis has been on the more pluralist notion of Britishness - the good nationalism - while a political focus on Englishness has been largely avoided, leaving it as a cipher for more antagonistic political forces. But what then happens if Englishness is thrust centre-stage by external developments? There is enormous risk in mainstream political discourse trailing behind on this terrain.

Proceeding hand in hand and in intimate communion with antagonistic nationalism is the external threat of global economic change and crisis. The shift of the international division of labour towards emerging nations, and the economic muscle of those nations who enjoy a financial surplus, has had an impact on perceptions of identity. Taken at purchasing-power parity, the economic output of emerging economies overtook that of the OECD nations in 2008, and this has concentrated both the winners and the losers from global economic change within the UK.[3] And it is in the localities of loss, where economic change is most visible, that this process of identity reaction has been greatest; while the identity around

which people have mobilised has increasingly been one of assertive Englishness.

There is also a constitutional ramification of global economic change that will increasingly impact on the UK's ability to maintain a flourishing economy amidst change. While the future of the eurozone is unclear, its survival is likely to depend on a new constitutional settlement between members, including some form of fiscal union. This will return the UK to a fringe position, with the main economic show being elsewhere - as it was prior to its signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1973. The concern is the degree to which this economic (self) exclusion will start to place England in an unfavourable position vis-à-vis neighbouring eurozone members, as they collude to stack the rules of game in their favour.

Over time, eurozone membership could become a more attractive proposition for Scotland if insider status becomes critical. This is one of the sources of threat to the continuance of the United Kingdom. If British economic and political union snaps, England could be left alone in its untended garden of antagonistic Englishness, facing unfavourable global economic change and constitutional change within the EU/eurozone. And even if independence and the eurozone do not prove to be sufficiently enticing alternatives to the UK for Scotland, any further devolution will place the politics of Englishness front and centre. Such change is a real possibility - and sooner rather than later.

Scotland's optimistic nationalism

Reformulations of national identity and major constitutional change have usually tended to be a response to some serious threat: security, cultural, or economic. The Act of Union in the early eighteenth century was such a response, as England sought to nullify ecclesiastical, dynastic and security threats from France and Catholicism, while Scotland sought to extract itself from an economic and financial hole. A similar period of political, civil and constitutional change occurred in the aftermath of the French revolution and Napoleonic wars. And Krishan Kumar notes that the first successful attempt at the formation of an English *nationalism* - though more cultural than political in form - was in the context of demands for Irish Home Rule and nationalist fervour on the continent at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.[4]

It is less clear what threat motivates the current increasing success of Scottish

nationalism as a political movement: Scottish nationalism is, it would appear, a nationalism of choice rather than necessity. Yet it has been remarkably successful, and this has significant consequences for England. John Curtice of Strathclyde University reports polling that shows 60 per cent of Scots in favour of either full independence (28 per cent) or so-called 'devo max' (32 per cent), whereby all powers are devolved to the Scottish Parliament other than those related to foreign policy, defence, and monetary policy. 'Devo max' is now a mainstream argument, and even received the backing of former prime minister John Major in a recent speech to the Ditchley Foundation:

> Why not devolve all responsibilities except foreign policy, defence and management of the economy? Why not let Scotland have wider tax-raising powers to pay for their policies and, in return, abolish the present block grant settlement, reduce Scottish representation in the Commons, and cut the legislative burden at Westminster?[5]

In a straight choice between separation and maintaining the status quo, it seems likely that the status quo would be maintained. But once 'devo max' is in the mix, things become significantly more complex, with the status quo becoming the second most likely option in any referendum. Furthermore, things may change over time - and rapidly. Another recent poll showed that support for independence was very strong amongst 18-34 year olds, and evenly split between 35-44 year olds; only those aged 44 and over are against.[6] Whatever happens in the Scottish government's proposed referendum, the current constitutional settlement seems an unstable one: a change of some sort is likely.

Scottish National Party leader Alex Salmond and his party have been able to construct a pluralistic and optimistic nationalism that fits Scottish society as it is, not as an idealised tartan utopia. At the 2011 opening of the newly-elected Scottish Parliament, Salmond evoked Robert the Bruce and William Wallace, but as voices of the *past* rather than of an Anglophobic present. Instead he reached for Scotland's twenty-first century voices: MSPs whose first language was Italian, Urdu and Arabic, alongside English, Gaelic, Scots and Doric. Scotland was to emerge from the 'glaur of self-doubt and negativity', no longer the junior partner but standing as an equal with England. This optimistic nationalism is about being better, whether it's a question of defeating alcohol abuse, building a new

renewable-energy economy or confronting sectarianism.

If optimistic nationalism results in 'Devo max', it would create new English political institutions by default. New constitutional arrangements, a new economic challenge, and the sudden re-emergence of political Englishness would surely then focus the English political conversation. The internal threat of distorted Englishness, the global economic changes and constitutional change within a newly federal United Kingdom would combine to make the question of Englishness a mainstream and urgent political concern.

Paradoxically, Scottish nationalism is both a catalyst for this dialogue and also a guide as to how it can be managed while avoiding toxic overflow. Scottish nationalism's recent rise has been achieved without English people being beaten up in the streets, and without political vandalism or violence; though it aggressively and consistently challenges the constitutional order, it does so through democratic channels; and it presents a vision of the future rather than nostalgia or melancholy for the past. Scottish nationalism is not only a challenge to political Englishness; it could also chart its salvation.

Cultural liberty and national identity

There are, of course, limitations in adapting the optimistic nationalism pursued in Scotland to the conditions in England. Englishness and Britishness are proximate, and there is still an enormous commitment to the latter. The two terms are so close that they have often been used interchangeably - and this is perhaps one reason why the constitutional absurdities thrown up by devolution have largely been ignored.

Scotland has always been differentiated in some sense as a nation within the UK, even when this did not have political expression. As Arthur Herman has shown, Scotland was deliberately transformed intellectually, economically and culturally after the Act of Union.[7] This was a point of historical rupture. For England there was not a similar point of rupture after the union. There isn't a similar sense of an alternative view of national destiny that can be reached for; and nor do many English people contemplate the removal of the Stuarts from the throne in the Glorious Revolution (the most recent point of rupture in English history) with a sense of bittersweet regret. In contrast to this, many Scots mourn the end of independence in the context of national failure.

Nonetheless there are clear elements of the Scottish approach which suggest a workable politics of national identity. It is non-culturally-deterministic, which enables it to respond to a pluralistic society. It is defined in its own terms, which avoids the pitfalls of creating a cultural 'other', to be differentiated or demonised. It is forward-looking, and so contains promise and avoids a debilitating politics of loss. Cultural liberty and national identity would seem to pull in opposite directions, but Scottish optimistic nationalism suggests that this need not necessarily be the case. It is possible to achieve an accommodation between the two.

In many ways, this approach to Scottish nationalism is compatible with the thinking of Amartya Sen, who rejects the notion of a singular and compulsory identity: 'The insistence, if only implicitly, on a choiceless singularity of human identity not only diminishes us all, it also makes the world much more flammable'.[8] For Sen the issue is choice: he is concerned about both communitarian monoculturalism and separatist multiculturalism (in effect 'plural monoculturalism'); and he quotes Gandhi's objection to groupist separatism as being the 'vivisection' of the Indian nation. It is possible for national identity to accommodate self-expression, as long as it does not take an acute form in which a sense of national coherence and togetherness can be lost.

In this context, a plural yet grounded national identity is but one aspect of an individual's identity, albeit one that has political consequences in a nation state - which is why Englishness is so politically contested. Two major strands, both of them unhelpful, have heretofore dominated the political discourse of Englishness - idealism and instrumentalism, as outlined below.

Contested Englishness

For Stanley Baldwin, Worcestershire-born Conservative prime minister of the 1920s and 1930s, Englishness was a sensibility:

> The sounds of England, the tinkle of the hammer on the anvil in the country smithy, the corncrake on a dewy morning, the sound of the scythe against the whetstone, and the sight of plough team coming over the brow of a hill, the sight that has been in England since England was a land … the one eternal sight of England.

It is a beautifully constructed political speech. Unfortunately, it describes an England that no longer exists: there is no longer a tinkle of the hammer on the anvil; we don't hear the scythe on the whetstone; the corncrake is on the RSPB's red alert list, occasionally glimpsed only in western Scotland and Ireland; and the plough team is now mechanised - not so eternal after all (and already a very partial view of England in Baldwin's day). As evocative as Baldwin's speech was, it describes an England that we can only now access through the words and art of the past.

When Englishness assumes a monocultural form, when it is idealised and amplified, tightly defined and dissected, it quickly slips from grasp. Soon after, there is little option but to pursue an elegiac course and inevitably declare its death. Thus Conservative philosopher Roger Scruton has declared England dead - what else is there to do? His England includes parlour songs, the Saturday-night dance, the bandstand, and so on. And yes, those cultural forms and institutions have almost entirely gone.[9] Sir Roy Strong, in an iconographic account of England, locates Englishness - as an ideal - in rural traditions exemplified by landscape and social order. With breath-taking and unjustified boldness, he argues that this is the England we went to wars for: 'They [soldiers] did not fight for Manchester or Birmingham but for the likes of Chipping Camden and Lavenham'.[10]

Simon Heffer also sees England as 'monocultural' - though 'tolerant of other cultures'. No wonder there is such suspicion of Englishness amongst the many who don't feel that they fit into this monocultural straitjacket. A national identity with such an unbending attitude cannot hope to survive. And so England is declared dead, over and over again. And yet - Lazarus-like - it returns to life. Perhaps it is the universalising, idealised monoculturalism of a certain - admittedly often intoxicating - view of Englishness that needs to be rejected rather than Englishness itself.

Though often deploying similar techniques of belonging and loss, radical instrumental Englishness is usually framed as an alternative to this idealised monoculturalism. Alastair Bonnett has pointed to important sources of nostalgia in radicalism, and there is a recurring theme of returning home to a lost and uprooted existence.[11] Perhaps George Orwell's description of England as 'a family with the wrong members in control' encapsulates this perspective best, tied as it is to notions of 'home' that are intrinsic to nostalgia. Orwell was determined to separate patriotism from conservatism in his revolutionary Englishness. But this

form of patriotism can quite quickly become instrumental, put to the service of a wider revolutionary mind-set. For Hobsbawm, patriotism must be fused with working-class interests. E.P. Thompson also, while rescuing Englishness for the English people, sees it as benign when put to the service of class interests.

Both these versions of Englishness - idealised and instrumental - fail to provide a viable pathway for an English political conversation. The first has little regard for the actual lives of English people as lived; the second is put to the service of some class interest and can only be justified in those terms. Both are unsatisfactory.

The work of Benedict Anderson always arises in discussions of national identity, and particularly his formulation of nations as 'imagined communities'. But Anderson's theory points to the historical development of nations as being embedded in specific convergences of economy, culture and technology. And if technology and economic change are key factors in creating the context for new ideological forms, then what of our current technological and economic context?

Technological and economic changes are fragmenting and pluralising culture. These include the rise of the internet, social media, and cable and satellite television; and the growth of the service sector, the expansion of consumerism and the decline of the large-scale employer and single-industry town. Social change is also contributing to this fragmentation, for example the increasing privatisation of community life, changes in family structure and power relations between men and women, historically significant migration flows, the diversity of popular culture, and the secularisation/religious diversification of spiritual life. The notion of the existence of a homogeneous working class - or any other historical agent for that matter - ready to be mobilised for revolution, seems fanciful in this technological and socio-economic world. Mass events that have near-universal national appeal, such as the royal wedding, are notable because of their rarity.

So the question then becomes: are there any fixed points of commonality? For without fixed points Englishness is likely to become a weak and divided plurality of monocultures. It is not at all clear that any national identity, other than a thin one of passport, flag and sports allegiance, could hold us together without thicker points of reference. There are notions of Englishness that have fixed form, including the primacy of the English language and the rule of law and the common law, supplemented by democratic statute. There also exists an affinity for the land - both rural and urban landscapes - and an aversion to extremes, which some argue can be seen in the Book

of Common Prayer, and in English political history. But beyond these fixed notions there is a constant antagonism between different aspects of our national sensibility that is never resolved: little England v global citizen; north v south; radical v conservative; rural v urban; scientific v humanistic; and modern v traditional.

Englishness has elements that are sturdy, but also elements that are in perpetual tension. Some English cultural forms combine elements of fixedness and fluidity. There is a body of literature and art that is seen as a repository of commonly valued works of English iconography, and there is also an ever-changing and diverse body of new and newly discovered work. A set of historical stories enmeshes with a global history of nations and economic and intellectual development. Collective senses of memory and loss also include that of the migrant experience.

Fixed and contested - and beyond this fluid, plural and individual - notions of identity form a complex sense of modern Englishness. The challenge is to grasp all these components of national identity into something both real and imagined that can support a nation-state amidst internal and external change. To do so in a way that is meaningful and workable requires more than imagination; it requires political dialogue.

An English political dialogue

Scottish devolution was the outcome (but not the end point) of an inclusive civic process. By the time of the 1997 referendum, Scottish civil society was reconciled and positive about devolution. In other words, in contrast to referendums which have been defeated, such as that on AV and on the north-east assembly, civic dialogue led to constitutional change rather than vice versa. If the English question - how to politically reflect notions of Englishness - is to assert itself in a time of internal threat and external change, it is crucial to begin a dialogue immediately. But before dialogue can take place it is important to identify as dead ends both idealistic and instrumental Englishness. Neither permits a meaningful dialogue to take place, since their conclusions are predetermined. Equally, this exercise is not about rejuvenating an imperialistic missionary nationalism. That is another dead end that drags England back to a romanticised past. Instead the dialogue needs to be non-deterministic, pluralistic and democratic.

It will have a cultural element that will give voice to Englishness as actually

experienced and felt, as both everyday practice and art (and the past is part of this story). It will have a civic element, as institutions of congregation and association on a local level and in new communities of interest are expressed as a relational Englishness (and there is much that is Burkean and Oakeshottian in this).

While Englishness is unlikely to be exclusive - the commitment to Britishness is deep - it will also be expressed in constitutional forms. Already there is an informal English legislative process: English laws, policies and regulations are passed in the Westminster parliament; it is just that non-English representatives vote on them too. If Scotland moves to 'devo max', this constitutional anomaly will be unsustainable. English parliamentary arrangements are likely to be necessary should devolution proceed any further - though they cannot simply take the form of the existing British institutions (of which many still remain), made English by a sleight of hand. Instead new institutions must fit the reality of English pluralism - an English Parliament for the English people as they are - not as we feel they should be, or once were.

Commitment to a national identity can move beyond cultural, civic and constitutional. There is also the promise of national identity - the 'American dream', Bismarck's corporate state, the extension and universalisation of the British welfare state after World War Two - all were, in Oakeshottian terms, 'enterprise' projects designed to underpin a sense of common citizenship. This substantive offer cannot be sidelined in any discussion about English political expression.

The demise of the corncrake, parlour games, and the forward march of the English working class may be regrettable but Englishness lives on. It appears to die and yet is continually re-born. This death and re-birth is traumatic. In the face of an alternative that is corrosive and antagonistic, and includes a threatening undercurrent of assertive Englishness, there can be no waiting for others to decide the English national fate. A constitutional, cultural, civic and citizenship-centred dialogue about Englishness becomes necessary. Paradoxically, such a dialogue could lead to a more settled and balanced federal United Kingdom. At the very least it should prise Englishness away from those who wish to use it to exclude and harm.

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Notes

1. Paul Gilroy, *There ain't no black in the Union Jack*, 2002 edition, p44.

2. Nick Lowles and Anthony Painter, *Searchlight Educational Trust Fear and Hope Report*, 2011.

3. *The Economist*, *Why the tail wags the dog*, 6-12 August 2011.

4. Krishan Kumar, *The making of English national identity*, 2003.

5. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14093640.

6. www.politicshome.com/uk/article/29601/scots_independence_surge_backs_up_salmonds_strategy.html.

7. Arthur Herman, *The Scottish Enlightenment: the Scots' invention of the modern world*, 2001.

8. Amartya Sen, *Identity and violence: the illusion of destiny*, 2006.

9. Roger Scruton, *England: an elegy*, 2006.

10. Roy Strong, *Visions of England*, 2011, p10.

11. Alastair Bonnett, *Left in the past: radicalism and the politics of nostalgia*, 2010.