Préface

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'(...) the answer to the question "Who are you?" is: "Who's asking?"'[1]

Words ending in '-ness' point to an abstract way of thinking and therefore seem to be less immediately understandable than most other abstract words that are not the result of an accretive process (eg 'health' or 'thought'). However, since the stem is normally an adjective, as in 'openness', or 'seriousness', their meaning is never really obscure, far from it. But there always are exceptions to the rule. Prominent among these, many say, is the term 'Britishness' because the stem itself, 'British', is open to interpretation. 'British' indeed is not the word quite a few, whether of Scottish or Pakistani origin eg, would use to describe themselves (though they inhabit that part of the world known as Britain and hold a British passport), which makes a precise definition of the concept elusive.

Britishness then had better be left alone, because of its inherent fuzziness, if anything definitive, or, say, merely relevant, is to be said about the 60-odd million people who live in the country known as Britain. In fact, when I first floated the idea of dealing with the notion of Britishness, a senior colleague of mine said quite matter-of-factly: 'This is a non-starter; dealing with Englishness would be a far better idea.'

This approach is widely shared in academic circles. To historian David Starkey, the well-known specialist in the Tudor period and TV and radio presenter, it is impossible to teach Britishness because 'a British nation doesn't exist'[2]. Back in the late 1980s already, Marxist historian R. Samuel (1934-1996), who was professor of history at the University of East London, had seemed to lament the fact that British society had 'lost its assimilative power.' Reminding his readers that the number of ethnic newspapers had soared, and that there were then upwards of 200 independent black churches in the country, he had gone on to conclude: 'It is indeed an open question whether such a thing as the British nation exists.'[3]

Almost twenty years on, the stakes are clearly higher. Not only has immigration soared over the last few years, but immigrants now come from a broader range of countries, especially non-Commonwealth and non-European; there are huge differences in age, gender structure, languages, religions, etc. (there are actually over 80 migration categories and immigrant legal statuses). The challenge Britain faces is clear: she must cope with such diversity, ensure the democratic representation of differing interests and foster a common sense of participation[4].

According to a May 2006 survey, white people seem to be the most aware of this perceived decline of Britishness; they tend to feel under pressure because of the presence of people from different national, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds, because there is a

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[1] Trevor Phillips, 'British identity and cultural renewal', in Michael Jacobs (ed.), *Creative futures: culture, identity and national renewal*, London: The Fabian Society, December 1997, p. 11.

[2] Quoted in 'Can pupils learn 'Britishness'?' – *BBC News*, 12 October 2007.

[3] Raphael Samuel, 'Introduction: The 'Little Platoons', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity – Vol. II: Minorities and Outsiders*, London & New York: Routledge, 1989, p. xxxiv.

[4] Steven Vertovec, 'New ethnic communities – From multiculturalism to super-diversity', in *Britain Today (The State of the Nation in 2007)*, Swindon: Economic and Social Research Council, 2007, p. 94.

general sense that they are losing out to ethnic minority groups in the competition over state resources, and because they believe they are no longer seen as a moral or normative majority, but merely a statistical one. Though much less salient as a cause of decline, the erosion of British sovereignty through the intrusion of Brussels in national affairs also got a mention[5].

Even the phrase 'white people' is problematic in fact. During the debate on Britishness on 19 June 2008, Lord Prys-Davies, a Welsh-speaking Member of the House of Lords, spoke thus:

> the British Social Attitudes Survey 2007 (…) shows that surveys conducted in England, Wales and Scotland during the past 10 years reveal a notable increase in the proportion of the public preferring a national identification, be it English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish, over their British identity. It is interesting and significant that that is particularly true among people under the age of 35. (…) the Camelot Foundation report *Young People and British Identity* (…) published in 2007 (…) considered how Britishness resonated among young people. It found that for many young people, it appeared to be old, hierarchical and traditional, although that was not necessarily true of those who considered themselves Welsh, Scottish or Irish. (…) That suggests that some of our leaders need to define in more explicit terms what is meant by the concept of Britishness. We require considerable skill, courage and insight if we are to define Britishness in terms which are meaningful to the rising generation with plural identities, each of equal strength.[6]

However, before anyone can talk about the vagueness of Britishness (whether from a cultural, or social, or artistic, or political, point of view), or the crisis of identity affecting Britain today, or even the death of Britishness, there are basic questions, both technical and philosophical, that have to be answered. Isn't it a fact that dual or plural identities do exist the world over? Why should Britishness be any different? Can't it fit into, or complement, other forms of identity? Are Welshness, Scottishness and Englishness more 'real', more homogeneous? Doesn't the perceived decline of Britishness have primarily to do with a certain approach to the notion of identity that starts from the premise (called 'the completeness assumption') that 'individuals' identities are completely shaped by their membership of a single cultural, political, etc., group'?[7]

Then, there is the question of continuity. Has Britishness already been under pressure in the past, but eventually adapted and survived? Lack of uniformity or homogeneity may indeed always have characterized Britishness, even in the days when the concept was apparently taken for granted. Did such a thing as Britishness, too, exist before the Act of Union of 1707 between England/Wales and Scotland? If so, what could then be the implications, both theoretical and practical?

Besides, isn't disagreement a permanent feature of democratic life, and consequently something to be welcomed, which therefore calls for a far more balanced approach? Even multicultural pressures for the recognition of minority rights, if W. Kymlicka is to be believed, can be construed as a yearning for integration and as the best recipe for political stability, because the whole point is to remove 'the barriers and exclusions which prevent minorities from wholeheartedly embracing political institutions.'[8]

Can't the (perceived or real) fuzziness of the concept itself offer enough leeway to help integrate immigrants eg, which would probably be precluded by a more homogeneous sort of identity? In other words, if state and nation in Britain are not quite coextensive, a fact some doom-mongers seem to suggest and lament, then surely integration should be facilitated.

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[5] See *The Decline of Britishness – A Research Study*, London: Commission for Racial Equality, May 2006, pp. 4, 8-13, 18 & 14.

[6] *Hansard*, House of Lords, col. 1159.

[7] 'Introduction', in Anthony Simon Laden & David Owen (eds.), *Multiculturalism and Political Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 18.

[8] Will Kymlicka, 'The new debate on minority rights (and postscript)', in Laden & Owen (eds.), *Multiculturalism and Political Theory*, p. 47.

Britishness may indeed be hard to define in a holistic way; nevertheless, this is precisely why, in all likelihood, it is far from dead. Only a monolithic type of identity, easily recognizable and, by definition, timeless, alien, i.e. not moving with the times, runs the risk of conflicting with society and the numerous interpretations (whether complementary or otherwise) it can give rise to.

Each contributor to this issue of *Cycnos* has deliberately addressed at least one of the questions raised above, either through a case study or by adopting a wider perspective, with a view to tackling the complexity of Britishness with all the care it deserves, i.e. by engaging in the basic spadework of taking nothing (whether the concepts or the facts) for granted. The overall result tends to show that, today, Britishness is above all being revisited, redefined, but as one cannot redefine something that has never existed, that just does not exist, or has simply ceased to exist, the implication seems therefore to be that the ongoing debate on Britishness, both in Parliament and in the wider British society (including the sporting world and that of art), should not be primarily or exclusively interpreted as a tell-tale sign of its impending, or very real, demise, but rather as a healthy reminder of its fundamental plurality, its inherent flexibility, in other words, its high potential for adaptation and survival, regardless of its inherent contradictions.

Last but not least, I would like to express my most sincere gratitude to all the contributors to this issue of *Cycnos* for their hard work, time *and* patience. It has been a real privilege and pleasure to work with them. All my thanks to Profs. Michel Remy and Jean-Claude Souesme too, for their invaluable support all along, and for helping me with the editing work.