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# Call Yourself British? National identity in the United Kingdom in the twentieth century

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Britishness has come under much pressure since the mid-1960s and many commentators consider that the scale and extent of the challenges to being British are so great that a unified British national identity is coming to an end. This essay argues that Britishness was challenged across the twentieth century, both territorially, from Scotland and Wales, and ethnically, and that state and society have grown accustomed to responding to desire for national distinctiveness within the United Kingdom. It moves on to consider the qualitative difference in discussions of Britishness after the 1960s, focussing on suggestions that the end of Empire removed the reason for being British. It questions such an assumption because the British accommodated 'end of Empire' within their Britishness rather than seeing it as a challenge to traditionally-held notions of their national character. Subsequently, the essay suggests that forecasts of the demise of Britishness need to be treated with caution.

Britishness, United Kingdom, Empire

## Introduction

Recent years have seen almost constant discussion of the state of national identities in the United Kingdom. A few examples from the past few months are enough to suggest the range of this discussion. In December 2007 the Sunday Telegraph launched a campaign imploring readers that 'You may be English, Scottish, Welsh or come from Northern Ireland, but we want you to Call Yourself British.'[1] In March 2008 a report produced by Lord Goldsmith, the former attorney general, considered that encouraging Britishness lay at the centre of strategies to reinforce 'citizenship'. He suggested the introduction of a day to celebrate Britishness and that children leaving school ought to make an oath of allegiance to their nation.[2] The sub-text of the report was a response to concerns about the integration of some Muslims into British society following the London bombings of 7 July 2005 and the conviction of a few extremists in the West Midlands for their plan to kidnap and behead a British Muslim soldier. In May 2008, Wendy Alexander, the leader of the Labour Party in Scotland challenged the Scottish National Party (SNP) government in Edinburgh to test the adherence of the Scottish people to the Union through an immediate referendum.[3] Presiding over all of these discussions is the

[1] 'Call Yourself British', http://www.telegraph.co.uk/opinion/main.jhtml?xml=/opinion/exclusions/british/nosplit/british.xml. I owe many thanks to JW for support and encouragement during the writing of this essay.

[2] 'Goldsmith unveils proposals to strengthen citizenship', 11 March 2008, http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/mar/11/britishidentity.

[3] 'Alexander Makes Referendum Threat', 6 May 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/ 7386258.stm.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who has made the encouragement of Britishness a central part of his political project.[4]

Many of these discussions centre on the notion of the weakness of Britishness in light of challenges from constitutional territorial changes through devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and from the ethnic and religious diversity of the United Kingdom at the beginning of the twenty-first century, brought about by mass immigration since 1945. Most commentators – politicians, journalists and academics – recognize that Britishness is facing severe challenges and many suggest that indeed the resulting crisis may well be permanent and fatal. Again, such prophesies emerge from the directions of both territorial and ethnic politics.

The classic book and argument to which all writers on constitutional arrangements and national identity in the United Kingdom pay homage is Tom Nairn's *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism*. First published in 1977, the book described 'the twilight of the British state' and forecast the demise of the United Kingdom. It mainly considered the extent of nationalism in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland but through a discussion of Enoch Powell and English nationalism drew attention to the place of ethnicity in considerations of Britishness. Others have pointed towards crisis coming from the ethnic diversification of Britain. Darcus Howe, a radical black journalist, suggested in 1999 that the white English were 'a people who are in crisis. Something is finished; there's nothing in its place. And anything can happen.'[5] Many other voices have added to the chorus of demise and the feeling of crisis has entered public consciousness.[6] The Telegraph's campaign, mentioned at the head of this essay, was based on an opinion poll that suggested that 69 per cent of those polled 'want to keep the historic Union between England and Scotland,' but that nearly half of these English voters believed the Union would survive for only another 25 years. With a SNP government in Edinburgh, committed to independence (though not yet, as Alexander has pointed out), it does seem that the decisive point is approaching.

This essay recognizes the extensive discussion of the condition of national identity in the United Kingdom. But it seeks to place such discussions in historical context by drawing attention to the constant negotiation of the political expression of national identities in the UK across the twentieth century. Not a decade has passed in which national identity has not constituted a major part of political discourse. The UK has been multi-national across the century and it has also been multi-ethnic. Discussions of national identity were therefore normal and everyday, a necessary part of political and cultural conversation. Discussion of national identity alone, therefore, does not signify that a crisis of Britishness is approaching. Indeed, it might be suggested that the extensive discourse on Britishness is a sign of its adaptability. The essay begins, therefore, by considering discussions of the multi-national and multi-ethnic nature of the United Kingdom before the onset of tales of crisis after the 1970s, when Nairn published *The Break-up of Britain*.

The second part of the essay turns its attention to considering what can be discerned as different in the discussion on national identities in the last three decades of the twentieth century. This discussion has been, without doubt, marked by a change in tone and forecast but the historical context of the discussions has changed rather than their content. Instead of attempting to consider all possible aspects of this change of context, the essay focuses on one: the suggestion that the end of the British Empire removed the underlying reason for being

[4] 'Brown speech promotes Britishness', 14 January 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4611682.stm.

[5] *White Tribe*, Channel Four Television, 1999.

[6] See for example Tom Nairn, *After Britain* (London: Granta, 1999) for a later commentary in which Nairn confirms that his prophesy had been fulfilled, but also, from a very different political perspective see John Redwood, *The Death of Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).

British. It is a useful notion; for, again, it retains the twin aspects of the sense of crisis of Britishness – its territorial and ethnic components. This essay suggests that while the structural context of Britain's position in the world changed, it was not accompanied by such a rapid psychological change. The mentalities of the British remained caught up in one of the founding myths of British imperialism, that it was intended to lead to the export of the British genius for government to peoples unfortunate enough not to have been born in the United Kingdom. End of empire was not a traumatic process with profound psychological effects but instead added to the sense that the British so often got things right and that in withdrawing from Empire they were fulfilling its promise rather than repudiating its value. Much of the discussion of adapting arrangements within Britain was intended to ensure that Britain would still be able to play a global role. Having failed to achieve this, in more recent years the Empire has entered much less into discussions of Britishness. The debate has become post-imperial.

This is symbolic of the gradualist nature of the changing direction of Britishness. There has been no explosive crisis. Indeed it is difficult to date the turning point in the undoubted decline of Britishness. Every decade since the 1960s can be considered as the years in which the crisis of Britishness began. It is wiser instead to consider continuities with the earlier period. Rather than seeing a disjuncture, it is better to see that there has been a continuing development of the debates around Britishness. This has implications for deciding where Britishness is currently headed. The predictions of constitutional crisis and the failure of multiculturalism are often hysterical. This essay suggests that it makes more sense to take a cautious view of the future.

## The moment of British nationalism

David Marquand has argued that 'the legitimacy, the authority and the efficacy of the British state were on a rising curve from around 1920 to around 1950; and … from around 1960 to the present day they have been on a declining curve.'[7] This essay accepts this schema, considering that in many ways the legitimacy of the British state stands as the keystone to the strength of Britishness. This part of the essay discusses the mid-twentieth century, the period which Christopher Harvie has described as 'the moment of British nationalism.'[8] Being British seemed remarkably uncomplicated and unproblematic. In particular, the challenge to the British Empire posed by Germany in 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 had been met successfully. The British state had proved its value by withstanding, with quite some external aid, the challenge of Europe's strongest industrial and military power, on two occasions. The state was not seen as something divorced from the people. While sovereignty lay with the monarch, there was a significant sense of attachment of the British to their state in the early twentieth century. Participation in elections, as one measure, was remarkably high. Both wars were fought around the notion of parliamentary government and the wars also enhanced the role of the state. At the end of both wars elections were fought and won by those arguing that the outcome of war would be 'homes fit for heroes'. The British congratulated themselves on their success, usually then congratulating themselves on the understated way in which they celebrated their triumph in war. The strength of the state reflected the resilience of the character of the British in defence of what they considered to be the defence of right against wrong and the weak from the strong. The monarchy presided over and symbolised this system, combining tradition with a connection to the people through their extensive attempts

[7] David Marquand, 'How United is the Modern United Kingdom?', in Alexander Grant and Keith Stringer (eds), *Uniting the Kingdom: The Making of British History*, (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 279.

[8] Christopher Harvie, 'The moment of British nationalism, 1939-1970', *Political Quarterly*, 71 (2000), pp. 328-40.

to integrate a society separated by class difference, gender and different nationalities.[9] This then reveals that living in the United Kingdom was in no way as uncomplicated as many narratives suggest. Instead, the relationship between the people and the state was dynamic, responding to major events.

This dynamism can be seen in the Abdication crisis of 1936.[10] In that year, George V died after 26 years on the throne. His eldest son succeeded him as Edward VIII. He wished to marry an American woman who had been divorced. This was constitutionally unacceptable in Britain, since the monarch was also head of the Church of England. In December 1936 the Conservative Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin informed the king that his government would resign if the marriage went ahead. The Labour Party leaders had told Baldwin that they would not form an alternative government and he also had the support of the prime ministers of the white dominions. Edward VIII abdicated to marry and was in turn succeeded by his brother, who took the name King George VI, to symbolise continuity with his father despite the rupture in succession. The event usually constitutes little more than a footnote in most history books. The speed of resolution of the crisis and the unanimity of the political parties (other than the maverick Winston Churchill, who hinted that he would form a king's party) continue to add to the suggestion of the period as one of political and national stability. Yet the management of restoration of the monarchy under George VI suggests the complexities of the United Kingdom in the mid-twentieth century. In April 1937, the News Chronicle reported that the new King had 'surprised and delighted four workpeople' by inviting them to the Coronation service. These four were obviously intended to represent their class, but their origins suggest that the intention was also to accommodate the multi-national diversity of the United Kingdom at this royal moment, since 'one is a Scotch woman weaver, another a South Wales steel works foreman. Then there is a girl employed at a Birmingham electricity works and a young pit worker at Chesterfield.'[11]

The United Kingdom was multi-national. Even in periods of stability, this knowledge underlay most thinking – in politics and society – because the relationships between the nations, or more often between government in London and the non-English nations, were always dynamic. Kenneth Morgan has accurately described modern British history as 'an exercise in pluralism.'[12] This applies when Britain witnessed tension over multi-nationality but also when it did not.[13] From the 1880s to the 1920s, the United Kingdom had been challenged by Irish nationalism. The consensus in Britain was that the Union should be maintained but there was disagreement over how this could be achieved. The Liberals, supported by Labour, hoped that Irishness could be held inside the Union by granting Home Rule. The Unionists opposed and prevented the passage of Home Rule until after an armed rising in 1916 and a war of independence between 1919 and 1921. Around 2,500 people were killed in the Rising, the war and the violence which followed in the partitioned statelet of

[9] Paul Ward, *Britishness since 1870* (London: Routledge, 2004), chapter 1. See also David Cannadine, 'The context, meaning and performance of ritual: the British monarchy and the "invention of tradition", c. 1820-1977', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 101-64, and Andrzej Olechnowicz (ed.), *The Monarchy and the British Nation, 1780 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[10] See Philip Williamson, 'The monarchy and public values, 1910–1953', in Olechnowicz, *The Monarchy and the British Nation*, pp. 223-57.

[11] Quoted in Ward, *Britishness since 1870*, p. 27.

[12] Kenneth O. Morgan, 'England, Britain and the Audit of War', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 7 (1997), p. 140.

[13] This theme is explored in Paul Ward, *Unionism in the United Kingdom, 1918-1974* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

Northern Ireland after the granting of dominion status to the new Irish Free State.[14] The period of the stability of Britishness had therefore been born in blood. The partition of Ireland meant that Irish issues were removed from the remit of Westminster. Even the issue of the relationship between Catholicism, Protestantism and national identity in the north of Ireland no longer concerned the parliament in London. The establishment of the Northern Ireland parliament (later known as Stormont) meant that such issues were discussed away from the British political arena.

This did not mean that national identity stopped being discussed in the United Kingdom except in the 'backwaters' of Belfast and Derry. Naturally, there, the politics of national identity remained paramount. Unionist governments saw their chief role being to defend the state that had been foisted upon them in 1920 because it offered the best chance of defence against British governments which might seek to undermine the constitutional position of Northern Ireland. The Unionist Party relied on reminding the Protestant working-class majority that they were Protestant first and foremost and working class only behind that, because if the tables were turned and class became pre-eminent, support for labour parties would undermine the Unionist majority. They reiterated that being British meant an improvement in social conditions as Northern Ireland could only afford social improvement through its economic subsidy from the United Kingdom. In this way, the conservative Unionists accepted the establishment of a complex and extensive welfare state, linked to the socialism of the British Labour Party, as the price they paid for maintaining electoral support of a unionised working class.[15]

Northern Irish Unionism was the political expression of Britishness. Many Catholics and all nationalists opposed the right of others to call them British just because, technically, they held British citizenship. Such opposition was extensive, expressing itself in bitter political and social conflict, particularly because the Northern Irish state rested on coercion rather than persuasion of Catholics. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) continued to operate across the century and organisations such as the Anti-Partition League continually demanded the unity of all of Ireland. Hence displays of Britishness in Northern Ireland were necessary because, while the Union was firmly supported by the Protestant majority, it was 'a Union that was always under inspection, one that could not be taken for granted but must be defended repeatedly'.[16] It is easy to reject such debates on national identity for being outside of the British experience, to see Northern Ireland as 'a place apart.'[17] The contest over nationality, the repudiation of Britishness by some and its full support by others, is too often seen as an exception to the prevalence of the 'moment of British nationalism' elsewhere in the UK. It is accommodated too by the exclusion of Northern Ireland from discussion in order to maintain the notion of the stability of Britishness in the mid-twentieth century.

The discussion of national identity throughout the rest of the United Kingdom should make the omission of Ulster from consideration in the 'moment of British nationalism' untenable and Ulster should in turn encourage historians to take national identity seriously in the rest of the UK. In a multi-national state, discussion of relations between the core and the various parts of the periphery are always likely to be asymmetrical but they were not entirely divorced

[14] See for example Alvin Jackson, *Home Rule: An Irish History 1800-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), and Thomas Hennessey, *A History of Northern Ireland 1920-1996* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997).

[15] Paul Bew, Peter Gibbon and Henry Patterson, *Northern Ireland 1921-1994: Political Forces and Social Classes* (London: Serif, 1995).

[16] D. George Boyce and Alan O'Day, 'The Union: Introduction', in D. George Boyce and Alan O'Day (eds), *Defenders of the Union: A Survey of British and Irish Unionism since 1801* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 7.

[17] For a repudiation of the 'place apart' epithet see D. George Boyce, 'Northern Ireland: A Place Apart?', in Eamonn Hughes (ed.), *Culture and Politics in Northern Ireland 1960-1990* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), pp. 13-25.

from one another. As discussions went on in Northern Ireland, so they also continued in Scotland and Wales. On the whole, the Scottish and Welsh people were satisfied with the constitutional arrangement with parliament in London. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, many people in Scotland and Wales supported campaigns to grant Home Rule to their respective nations. In Scotland, two million people pledged themselves to a 'covenant' 'to do everything in our power to secure for Scotland a Parliament with adequate legislative authority in Scottish affairs.'[18] Similarly, in Wales, nearly quarter of a million signed a petition in support of a parliament for Wales. Undoubtedly such actions expressed dissatisfaction with the current constitutional position, yet such dissatisfaction was restricted in a number of ways. The Covenant needed to limit its demands quite considerably to attract such considerable support. The oath to 'do everything in our power' was preceded by a pledge to 'loyalty to the Crown … within the framework of the United Kingdom.' Additionally, calls for greater autonomy had no positive impact on the nationalist parties' performance in either country. The Scottish National Party vote fell from 1950 to 1951, with less than 7,500 people supporting them in the latter year. Support for Plaid Cymru rose across the early 1950s, from 11,000 votes in 1951 to 45,000 in 1955, but this represented only three per cent of votes cast in Wales. Finally, while Richard Weight has argued that 'The Covenant was the first serious tremor in the body politic of post-war Britain. It proved that Scottish nationalism was no longer the obsession of a few romantic individuals' and that the Parliament for Wales Campaign had considerable moral authority and wide support, no government concessions were made directly to either campaign.[19] The Home Secretary of the Conservative government responded to the Welsh petition dismissively remarking that 'There are people who will sign petitions for anything. They do not like to disappoint.'[20] His remarks were not taken as insults because he was Gwilym Lloyd-George, Welsh-speaking son of David Lloyd George and minister responsible for Welsh affairs who could undoubtedly claim equal national belonging with those who had supported the campaign. Lloyd-George in any case had a point, many people in Wales and Scotland thought Home Rule a good idea and would sign petitions in its support but gave it little priority in their political programmes. In any case, the Conservative and Labour parties seemed to be responding to the needs of Scotland and Wales, through concentration on the pan-British economy and welfare state, with some continuing developments in governance across the post-war years.

The Conservative and Labour parties were able to respond to the limited demands for change in Scotland and Wales because they were genuinely British parties and it was within them that most discussion of the politics of national identity took place. While Conservative electoral strength was based in southern and midland England and the party was quite weak in Wales, the party could gather substantial support in Scotland. From the 1930s to the 1950s, the Unionists, as the Conservatives were called in Scotland, did remarkably well in elections. The Unionists achieved 54.5 per cent and 49.8 per cent respectively in the elections of 1931 and 1935. In the Labour landslide of 1945, the Conservatives saw their Scottish vote fall to a 41.1 per cent share, yet in the next three elections their share of the vote rose, from 44.8 per cent in 1950, to 48.6 per cent in 1951 and 50.1 per cent in 1955. This was a remarkable achievement and was based both on relative affluence during the world economic boom and the Unionists' ability to connect to Scottishness even when their main concern was with Britishness – in policies and ideas. Scottish Unionists, such as Walter Elliot, Noel Skelton,

[18] Quoted in Richard Weight, *Patriots: National Identity in Britain 1940-2000* (London: Macmillan, 2002), p. 130. See also Richard J. Finlay, *A Partnership for Good? Scottish Politics and the Union since 1880* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1997).

[19] Weight, *Patriots*, p. 130.

[20] House of Commons Debates, 5th series, vol. 537, col. 2469, 4 March 1955. See also J. Graham Jones, 'The Parliament for Wales Campaign, 1950-1956', *Welsh History Review*, 16 (1992-3), pp. 207-36.

Bob Boothby and the Duchess of Atholl, contributed a distinct Scottish flavour to British Conservative politics and the Checklands have commented that 'It was a curious circumstance that the Conservatives did more to recognize Scottish claims than the Liberal Party so favoured by the Scots.'[21] It is not so curious if it is considered that being a Conservative did not lead one to forget one's Scottishness even while maintaining a clear commitment to the Union.

Walter Elliot provides a clear example of the way in which Conservatism in Scotland always maintained its grip on its Scottishness.[22] Elliot was a Member of Parliament for Scottish seats between 1918 and 1957. He was Financial Secretary to the Treasury between 1931 and 1932. In 1932 he was promoted to the cabinet as Minister of Agriculture. Between 1936 and 1938, still in the cabinet, he became Secretary of State for Scotland. In the latter year he was appointed as Minister of Health. He fell from favour under Churchill but remained important in Scottish politics into the 1950s. Elliot took a historical overview, suggesting that the reason that the Union worked so well was because Scotland had stood its ground in the past. It had entered the Union as a partner rather than as a subordinate. Elliot considered that Unionism had to demonstrate that it could respond to the continuing Scottish sense of national distinctiveness. In pursuit of this aim, Scotland was subject to more royal visits in the 1930s, in 1938 a major British Empire exhibition was staged in Glasgow, and Elliot ensured that much administration of Scotland was conducted from Edinburgh rather than London. In the post-war period, he developed a line of opposition to Labour based on the Conservatives' desire to defend Scotland against the centralising tendencies of socialism. Hence he argued that

> The legislative Union between Scotland and England was never meant to entail, and should not entail, a complete swamping of the economic identity of the Northern Kingdom such as is now being conducted in the name of nationalisation. The transfer by statute of the control of the whole of Scottish industry to Westminster is not nationalisation, it is de-nationalisation.[23]

Elliot was by no means alone in the Conservative Party in walking this line between Scottishness and Britishness. It was a stance that was at the crux of Unionism, which sought the representation of Scottish national identity within the constitutional settlement of the Union.

Within Labour too, the multi-national nature of the United Kingdom remained at the forefront of political discussion. Again it is possible to illustrate this through a focus on individuals – and there are many to choose from. Much of the Labour leadership was from Scotland and Wales. From its origins through to the twenty-first century, Labour has been disproportionately led from the Celtic nations. Of sixteen party leaders, at least nine have had substantial connections with Scotland and Wales. At the lower levels of leadership proportions are similar, because the structure of the British economy meant that Scotland and Wales were highly significant among the most unionised sections of the manual working class.

On the whole, Labour favoured a centralised state for much of the twentieth century, believing that the economy and society was better controlled from the centre. This certainly led to tension on occasion over relationships between Wales, Scotland and the national leadership and Labour governments. But as with the Conservatives, there was substantial recognition of national distinctiveness within the party. Some figures, like Tom Johnston, Secretary of State for Scotland in the 1940s, were able to secure considerable concessions for Scotland from centralist governments. Others were often more frustrated, so Huw T. Edwards,

[21] Sydney and Olive Checkland, *Industry and Ethos: Scotland 1832-1914* (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), p. 170.

[22] See Ward, *Unionism*, chapter 2.

[23] Election Address, 1946, Walter Elliot Papers, National Library of Scotland, Acc. 6721/1/1.

a leading trade union official in Wales, eventually resigned from Labour to join Plaid Cymru, because he believed Labour had abandoned its socialism (under Hugh Gaitskell) and was neglecting Wales. He rejoined when Labour returned to power in 1964 and established the Welsh Office with a Secretary of State for Wales. For Johnston, Edwards and numerous other Scottish and Welsh Labour Party members, everyday political life brought consideration of the multi-national nature of the party and of the United Kingdom. They expressed the tensions in the relationships between their nations and the Kingdom as a whole. They negotiated and renegotiated over this relationship. The period of the 'moment of British nationalism' was not therefore marked by a lack of discussion of national identity.

Discussions of Britishness and other national identities were not only territorial. They were paralleled by conversations about ethnicity that prefigure those of the late twentieth century. Non-white immigration in large numbers did not have a major impact until the late 1960s, which is also when territorial politics was changed by the limited rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalism. However, Britain experienced substantial immigration before the Second World War. It is easy to debate the qualitative and quantitative differences between pre- and post-war immigration and particularly to presume that the skin colour and numbers of post-war immigrants and their descendants make disjuncture a more appropriate way of viewing the two periods. Yet there are substantial continuities in the ways in which immigrants discussed their own place within British society and the way in which they were viewed by the already resident population (which itself was a mix of indigenous and migrant-descended ethnic groups). There has been a long-term relationship between Britishness and ethnicity, taken here to mean 'the way in which members of a national, racial or religious grouping maintain an identity with people of the same community in a variety of official and unofficial ways.'[24]

People's everyday lives encouraged the expression of such ethnicity and the consideration of national identities. A single example casts light on such deliberation. Anne Higgins, born in 1930s Manchester of Irish origin, describes how national and ethnic identities were played out:

> We were under a kind of siege being Irish Catholics in Manchester in the thirties and forties.... I suppose it was our accents but mainly our religion which set us apart from the rest.... We had the Holy Days of Obligation and St Patrick's Day. They had Empire Day and Guy Fawkes Day and you would go and look through the railings of the local C. of E. school when they were having fun and games which you were a bit jealous of but at the same time despised. My mother would never let us, even if we could have afforded the uniform, join the Girl Guides or Boy Scouts because that was English and protestant as far as she was concerned.... Because people were anti-Catholic and anti-Irish, you tended to go out of your way to assert the fact that you were proud of being Irish and Catholic whenever the opportunity arose.... My religion, political beliefs and national identity were all inter-related when I was a child.[25]

It seems short-sighted not to consider such evidence as suggesting substantial continuities between ethnic communities feeling separate and apart from the 'native' society in which they found themselves. One aspect of the current 'crisis' of Britishness is held to be the support for Islamic 'fundamentalism' and associated terrorism among some parts of the British Muslim community, based on a desire for residential and community segregation. Yet it is remarkably easy to find continuities in such concerns based on the sense of different expressed by Higgins.[26] In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Irish in Britain were widely

[24] Panikos Panayi, *Immigration, Ethnicity and Racism in Britain 1815-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 76.

[25] Quoted in M. Lennon et al, *Across the Water: Irish Women's Lives in Britain* (London, 1998), pp. 146-155.

[26] Michael Collyer, 'Secret agents: Anarchists, Islamists and responses to politically active refugees in London', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28 (2005), pp. 278-303.

viewed to be foreign even if similar to the British in many ways (they were of course legally British, as were post-1948 immigrants from the British Commonwealth).

Irish and Jewish 'communities' were often considered to be holding themselves apart from the 'British' population, living in 'Little Irelands' or 'Little Jerusalems.' These spaces were seen as unfamiliar and alien. The maintenance of separate allegiances seemed suspicious and immigrants were suspected of harbouring criminality and terrorism. Some Irish areas were known as 'Fenian Barracks' and the separate cultural organisations with links to Irish nationalism, like the Gaelic League and Gaelic Athletic Association, were seen as seedbeds of the politics of violence. Nationalist historiography emphasises the continuities from the Fenians in the nineteenth century to the IRA in the twentieth, and it is also possible to see the continuity of hostility to the Irish in Britain for allegedly supporting or being involved in such violent acts. Jewish immigrants too were suspected of political radicalism and terrorism, with the Sydney Street siege of 1910, in which robbers who had shot dead three policemen were besieged by the police, the army and Winston Churchill in the East End of London. The event was transformed from simple crime into the mysticism of international revolutionary anarchism through political and media representation. The siege led to a change in the law that meant that 'aliens' had to licence firearms while the British did not.

While numbers of immigrants and their offspring were smaller and Britain was less diverse before the Second World War than after, Britain was already multi-ethnic before the current 'crisis' of Britishness. There were Irish and Jews as well as Italians, French, Spaniards, Greeks, Indians, Africans, West Indians and Chinese living in the United Kingdom and they were discussed extensively. In 1941 Mass-Observation described Tiger Bay in Cardiff as 'a cosmopolitan community representative of nearly every nation on earth'[27] and while Tiger Bay was unique it was not entirely exceptional, for other port cities and London revealed the fluid and diverse nature of a global Empire. Laura Tabili has shown how some immigrants tackled their oppression in Britain with appeals to 'British justice.' In 1919, a resolution by black seafarers in Britain declared that 'Some of us have been wounded, and lost limbs and eyes fighting for the Empire to which we have the honour to belong … We ask for British justice, to be treated as true and loyal sons of Great Britain.'[28] The United Kingdom was therefore both multi-national and multi-ethnic, with political and cultural discourse taking account of that fact long before the 'crisis' of Britishness at the end of the century.

## Ending Empire, ending Britishness?

Discussions about territory and ethnicity, therefore, are not new in British history. It is the context that has changed rather than the content. It has been widely suggested that the key event which has provoked the crisis of Britishness is the drawing to a close of the British imperial project. David Marquand, for example, has seen this as the crucial factor forcing the questioning of the Union and what it means to be British. He has argued that 'The British state was, by definition, a global state … whig imperialist Britain was Britain … Empire was not an optional extra for the British … it was their reason for being British as opposed to English or Scots or Welsh'.[29] Richard Weight has considered that 'The United Kingdom was primarily established to further the quest for Empire. When the Empire disappeared, the original raison d'être of the United Kingdom disappeared too.'[30] David McCrone has

[27] Quoted in Ward, *Britishness since 1870*, p. 120.

[28] Quoted in Laura Tabili, *'We Ask for British Justice': Workers and Imperial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 15.

[29] Marquand, 'How United is the Modern United Kingdom?', pp. 287-8.

[30] Weight, *Patriots*, p. 727.

suggested that 'If we accept that in essence Britishness was an imperial identity, then the loss of Empire eroded that identity at home and abroad.'[31]

This provides an interesting way of understanding the context in which Britishness has been discussed at the end of the twentieth century. John MacKenzie has argued that in the late nineteenth century, British patriotism was transformed into an imperial patriotism, that what it meant to be British became inextricably associated with the Empire.[32] MacKenzie's argument was that various social forces and interests conducted sustained propaganda campaign that amounted to an 'ideological barrage' from which there was no escape for a public faced with this onslaught in almost every aspect of their lives. If the impact of Empire was so profound on Britishness, then it could be presumed that the impact of rapid decolonisation between the late 1940s (India, Palestine) and the mid-1960s (Africa) was equally profound, leading to a crisis of Britishness linked to the psychological trauma brought on by no longer being a ruling imperial power and race. This encouraged the rise of nationalism in Scotland and Wales as a common interest was removed, and was combined with the impact of mass immigration from the former Empire.

This is quite an appealing scenario. The end of Empire, the growth of nationalism and the rise in non-white immigration apparently happened together, coming to the fore in the 1960s. But there are substantial problems with such an argument. McCrone's supposition was based on the premise that there was a general acceptance that being British was an imperial identity, and there is not, nor should there be, a general acceptance of such matters without rigorous examination. Bernard Porter has recently argued that the impact of imperialism on British society was minimal. He therefore concludes that 'Impacting as little as this domestically in its lifetime, it is probably not to be expected that the empire would have left much of a residue when it died.'[33] Porter's interpretation has been challenged strongly, because of his narrow definition of imperialism as the will to dominate and rule other peoples.[34] None the less, Porter's desire to sift through evidence for the claims that empire profoundly affected British society and therefore Britishness should act as a corrective to bold statements about the impact of the end of empire on national identities in Britain.

There are certainly some clear links that can be considered: the imperial adventure of recapturing the Falklands in 1982 can be seen as directly responsible for the resurgence of historians' interest in questions of patriotism and national identity.[35] However, too many commentators have looked for a totalising link between Empire and British society. Instead the links were far more nebulous. Andrew Thompson has concluded his recent book on the matter very sensibly:

> The empire, then, was a significant factor in the lives of the British people. It was not, however, all-pervasive …. The "big theory" behind this book is that there is no "big theory": no uniform imperial impact, no joined-up or monolithic ideology of imperialism, no single source of enthusiasm or propaganda for the empire, no cohesive imperial movement.[36]

This allows consideration of the uneven impact of the end of empire. Certainly in some aspects of society, the loss of imperial power was played out in diplomatic, political and

[31] David McCrone, 'Unmasking Britannia: The rise and fall of British national identity', *Nations and Nationalism*, 3 (1997), p. 592.

[32] John MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

[33] Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 299.

[34] Stuart Ward, 'Echoes of Empire', *History Workshop Journal*, 62 (2006), pp. 264-78.

[35] Stephen Howe, 'Internal decolonization? British politics since Thatcher as post-colonial trauma', *Twentieth-Century British History*, 14 (2003), pp. 293-4.

[36] Andrew Thompson, *The Empire Strikes Back? The Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Harlow: Pearson, 2005), p. 241.

cultural arenas. For a diplomatic class trained in thinking imperially, old habits died hard. Sir Michael Quinlan, a Ministry of Defence civil servant between the 1950s and early 1990s, explained of his peers that

> We have a certain sense of ourselves, born of history which does mean that we view what we might do rather differently from some of our partners … we spend … twice what Italy does on defence. Now, that I think can only in the end be explained by having a different view of what kind of contributor we are in the world.[37]

In culture and particularly film, Wendy Webster has suggested that a 'siege mentality' was displayed as a result of the end of empire. She considers that the colonial wars of independence fought in the receding empire were represented in feature films about Kenya and Malaya and as a result England (her book is about Englishness) turned in on itself, and the white English began to feel themselves under siege from non-white immigrants from the former empire.[38]

It is possible also to find contemporaries and later commentators linking end of empire to the emergence of Scottish and Welsh nationalism if one looks hard. The independent Welsh nationalist H.W.J. Edwards suggested in the 1950s that 'The Empire is now in a ramshackle state … The black folk of the Gold Coast have already reached a stage of self-government which puts them ahead of Wales.' He hoped that such statements would spur the Welsh on, but even in 1964 and 1966, by which time Africa had seen a wave of decolonisation, less than five per cent of Welsh voters responded to nationalist calls. Angus Calder has suggested that things were different for the Scottish, who had played a much wider role in Empire: 'And came, as the disintegration of Empire deprived Scots of the basis of their British identity, the first real electoral impact – ever – of Scottish Nationalism, in the late 1960s'.[39] Yet T.M. Devine has convincingly argued that as the Empire came to be seen as less economically important to Scotland in the period of industrial decline so it came to be seen as less culturally important.[40] Both Conservative and Labour parties addressed economic weakness through the rhetoric of the welfare state, modernisation and later through the turn to European integration. On the one hand, as Finlay argues, 'The era of the Welfare State and the managed economy revitalised the Union and made material sense to the Scots.'[41] On the other, some Unionists, however imperially minded, could see Scotland's links to Europe providing the potential for revitalisation. At the Foreign Office in the 1970s, Lady Tweedsmuir, daughter-in-law of the imperial novelist John Buchan, explained how.

> Without undue pride I can say that Scots have skills and ideas to contribute to the growth of Europe and we still have the Scottish qualities of perseverance, spiced with ambition, which helped to forge the prototype of all Common Markets – the Union of Scotland and England two and a half centuries ago.[42]

New directions taken in British foreign policy were not seen as a rupture with the past, but instead as a fulfilment of destiny. The development of empire had always been accompanied by rhetoric about the British giving the gift of their genius of government to the colonised peoples. Increasing self-government in the white dominions, confirmed by the Statute of Westminster in 1931, and dominion support for Britain in the Second World War helped such delusions. In the 1950s, after one last attempt to build empire in Africa, many in Britain convinced themselves that decolonisation amounted to the completion of the imperial project.

[37] Quoted in Ward, *Britishness since 1870*, p. 33.

[38] Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire 1939-1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[39] Angus Calder, *Revolving Culture: Notes from the Scottish Republic* (London: IB Tauris, 1994), p. 9.

[40] T.M. Devine, 'The Break-up of Britain? Scotland and the End of Empire', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, no. 16 (2006), pp. 163-80.

[41] Richard J. Finlay, 'The Rise and Fall of Popular Imperialism in Scotland 1850-1950', *Scottish Geographical Magazine,* 113 (1997), p. 20.

[42] 'Speech at dinner for Vice-President of the Commission of the European Communities', 3 February 1972, Lady Priscilla Tweedsmuir Papers, National Library of Scotland, Acc. 11884/29.

Hence John Darwin argues that the end of Empire was not part of a belief that British world power and influence was at an end. Instead, 'Decolonization was the continuation of Empire by other means.'[43] Scottish and Welsh nationalism were weak in the 1960s. Two by-elections successes in 1966 and 1967 masked the parties' underlying inability to become more than parties of the fringe until the economic crisis and political dealignment of the 1970s. The end of empire may have had a significant cultural impact in the UK, but its political impact was complex and subtle.

Empire was in any case but one issue to be taken into account when considering national identities at the end of the twentieth century. Its demise did change the context of discussions of national identity but many other factors continued to hold the United Kingdom together. For one, the monarchy remained important during the period of decolonisation, disentangling itself from Empire. The end of Empire was accompanied by royal weddings (1947, 1960, 1973, 1981 and so on), the coronation in 1953 and jubilees (1977 and 2002). Even if the reputation of the royal family became tarnished in the 1990s and a hint of republicanism became more respectable, the royal family remained popular across the United Kingdom, though unevenly so. More people in Scotland than England, for example, have been prepared to consider alternative heads of state. Equally, the notion of a British welfare state remains important, with the National Health Service being held up as a model for the world. In many ways, the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly can be seen as defending such institutions of Britishness against market forces, and this has equally been the case with the 'British' parties in each body as well as the Scottish and Welsh parties.

## The future of Britishness

The context of discussions of Britishness has changed, but the end of Empire has not fully pulled the rug from under the feet of Britishness. The end of empire happened rapidly but was accommodated within the belief that a readjustment was taking place rather than the end of an epoch. In the 1960s, when British governments turned towards Europe they did not do so as a sign of retreat but in an attempt to maintain their global role. Likewise, devolution at the end of the century was considered to be a way of maintaining rather than ending Britishness.

Britishness continues to have a number of supporting structures, despite the variety of centrifugal tendencies. It is worth considering the areas for potential fracture first, thrown up by devolution. The most obvious site for irresolvable tension currently resides in Scotland. Since May 2007 there has been a Scottish National Party government in the Scottish Parliament. As the party states clearly, 'The primary aim of the SNP is to take Scotland forward to independence.'[44] Yet, as Alexander's challenge to the SNP shows, there is a fundamental gradualism associated with the devolution of power to Scotland and Wales. The powers of the parliament and assembly may well be increased in the future but such changes are likely to be incremental rather than abrupt. It is likely that it will be a single issue that causes dispute between Edinburgh and Westminster and that the latter, which ever party is in power, will seek to resolve such crisis without reference to wider issues.

Given the sense of disengagement with national politics in Scotland, a British government in London may well be able to limit the political fall-out of such a dispute. Despite the relatively high turnout of 60.4 per cent of the Scottish electorate in the referendum of 1997 there has been a disengagement from politics subsequently. In May 2007 only 51.8 per cent of the electorate voted in the elections to the Scottish Parliament. Additionally, the SNP, despite 'winning' the election of May 2007 did so on a very slender share of the vote and seats. The

[43] John Darwin, 'The fear of falling: British politics and imperial decline since 1900', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 36 (1986), pp. 39, 42.

[44] SNP website, http://www.snp.org/node/240.

SNP won 32.9 per cent in the constituency vote while Labour achieved 32.2 per cent. In the regional vote, the share was 31 and 29.2 per cent respectively. This was hardly a conclusive victory for the SNP though it did signify a substantial advance and a historic and symbolic victory. Likewise in Wales, in the National Assembly elections, Labour remained the largest and most popular party with 26 seats to Plaid Cymru's 16, the Conservatives' 12 and the Liberal Democrats' 6. Plaid Cymru averaged 21 per cent of the vote in the constituency and regional votes. In both Wales and Scotland, the majority of voters continue to support political parties that can best be described as 'British' and many do not see the inherent tension between their Welshness, Scottishness and Britishness suggested by the nationalist parties.

Then there is the English question. This has provoked substantial academic discussion, with some commentators suggesting the emergence of Englishness in the wake of the end of Empire. Hence Krishan Kumar argues that while the Empire existed the English had no need for an identity separate from being British. He suggests that there was very little tradition of the English reflecting on their own identity as distinct from being British. With the end of Empire in the 1960s and the strengthening of nationalisms in Scotland, Wales and Ireland, the English had little choice but to examine their own identity.[45] This fits alongside Arthur Aughey's recent claim that Englishness emerged in the mid-1990s as one of the most urgent political questions, represented on the flags of St George flown in support of the England team in the Euro 96 football competition.[46] Yet there remains confusion over whether there currently is a real English political question; while there are all sorts of organisations seeking to establish English governance, such as the Campaign for an English Parliament, the level of popular support for such organisations is slender, and the Conservative Party, which might have become the voice of England, has been reluctant to take that political route. Whether it will do so in the future remains to be seen but it remains unlikely to abandon its Scottish and Welsh supporters altogether.

In another area, there is a directly positive force for Britishness in the desire of the majority of non-white residents in the United Kingdom to adhere to and develop such an identity. Tariq Modood's extensive research on visible ethnic groups in the United Kingdom has shown that a substantial majority agree with the statement 'In many ways I think of myself as British.'[47] His original question was asked in 1997, in the year of the passing of devolution through the UK parliament and long before the London 7 July bombings of 2005, in which Islamist extremists killed 52 people. These events have caused much soul-searching among Britons of all ethnicities but while they have led to a rise in Islamophobia, they have also confirmed the Britishness of the majority of British Muslims. Hence in Bradford a recent academic survey found that among young Pakistanis 87 per cent described themselves as 'British', 11 per cent as 'Pakistani' and 2 per cent as 'English'. In interviews, one 17-year old Pakistani girl told the researcher that 'I consider England and Britain to be my home, so it's everything,' and another 16-year old girl said, 'They (young people) definitely think they are British, gora (British), that everything about them is gora, even food they want to eat chips, pizzas instead of chapattis and also they behave in a gora way and wear British clothes.'[48] In 2000 Bikhu Parekh's report on multi-ethnic Britain suggested that Britishness has racial connotations (he was accused wrongly of suggesting that it had 'racist' connotations). His recommendation

[45] Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[46] Arthur Aughey, *The Politics of Englishness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

[47] Tariq Modood, 'Culture and identity', in Tariq Modood and R. Berthoud (eds.), *Ethnic Minorities in Britain: Diversity and Disadvantage* (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1997), p. 329.

[48] Ikhlaq Din, *The New British: The Impact of Culture and Community on Young Pakistanis* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 76-7.

was the 'decoupling [of] Britishness from whiteness, so that Black and Asian people do not feel excluded.'[49] It can be suggested that this decoupling has been widely achieved.

## Conclusion

The future of Britishness therefore seems to lie in a number of directions. There are still significant forces that encourage a sense of Britishness – not least in a sense of United Kingdom-wide culture that encourages everyday responses to be shaped by and reflected in a mainly national media (however globalised). There are tensions in the newly negotiated shape of the Union and it is likely that political conflicts between Scotland and Westminster and Cardiff and Westminster will bring the question of national identity to the fore in the future in quite stark ways. But there is also some disengagement from political Scottishness and Welshness displayed in the low turnouts in elections to the parliament and assembly, which matches the widespread English indifference towards considering political forms of the representation of English national identity despite the sense of frustration at particularly Scottish quasi-autonomy in domestic affairs.

The continuing discussion of national identities in the United Kingdom is not a new development. It is an inevitable part of the multi-national and multi-ethnic nature of the British population. The seemingly endless discussion of the tensions between national identities in the United Kingdom has in the past allowed the successful adaptation of Britishness to a changed context. Across the twentieth century there was dynamism associated with the multi-national and multi-ethnic nature of the United Kingdom. Late twentieth century discussions had already been foreshadowed earlier in the century, both in terms of the territorial and ethnic dimensions of being British. Towards the end of the century, there was substantial change in the context of such discussions. The scale and extent of ethnic diversity was greatly enlarged. By 2001 eight per cent of the British population were from ethnic minority groups. Britain's position in the world had been much reduced. It had lost its empire and been eclipsed by the United States. But it is still a leading world power. The decline has not been as severe as some have suggested. The loss of empire was rapid but not as traumatic for the British as for those in the former colonies.[50] The British, in England, Scotland and Wales, did not view the loss of empire as a defeat, because its impact was numbed in the 1960s by the sense that Britain was adjusting rather than declining. Other parts of the British infrastructure remained strong, such as the welfare state and the monarchy. There were economic problems, especially in areas of heavy industry, but living standards rose for the majority, expressed in growing consumerism, which itself encouraged the British to think in national terms, emphasizing shared culture and values. Britishness has not been left untouched. It is far less important as a primary identity now than in 1900 or indeed 1970. But it has not gone yet and it continues to be developed as a direct outcome of ethnic diversity. The language of British national identity is vague but in this vagueness and in the space for its discussion it is likely that a significant number of those living in Britain will continue to call themselves British for the foreseeable future.

[49] Quoted in Ward, *Britishness since 1870*, p. 139.

[50] See for example Caroline Elkins, *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).