these
ISLANDS

Plural British Identity
by Josh Simons

January 2018

The single most important event in the history of the Union may yet prove to have been a football match. It was 1886. Queen's Park were taking on Preston North End in a first-round FA cup match, in front of a crowd of 15,000. Jimmy Ross, a Scottish player at Preston, fouled Harrower, the Queen's Park centre-forward. Queen's Park fans invaded the pitch, forcing officials to bundle Ross out of the grounds. In the dispute that followed, the Scottish Football Association declared independence in 1887, withdrawing its teams from the FA cup. Our most important game would never again be organised along British lines. The back pages of Scottish newspapers would be filled with not British but Scottish teams.

Britain is used to dealing with this kind of complexity and contradiction. Our language is diverse. To express bravery, we can say valour or courage (French), tenacity or fortitude (Latin), fearlessness, guts, or balls (Anglo-Saxon English). Our people are diverse. 14 percent of those living in England and Wales are not white, four percent of those in Scotland. 3.5 million citizens of other EU countries live and work on these islands. It is natural that our identities should be diverse and multi-layered. At a moment in which identities are driving political turbulence across the world – including in the continuing crisis in Catalonia – we should not miss the opportunity to explore and discuss these identities.

Britishness is an identity which embraces pluralism, which views it as a source of strength. It is an identity resolute in its internationalism, defined and redefined over three centuries by men and women looking outward, seeking to understand the place their island should take in the wider world. I believe that our shared history has left British identity with a dynamism and adaptability that is particularly well-suited to a country proud of its diversity, and one that is facing some of the most significant political and constitutional challenges in its history. I would like to explore three factors that drove the formation of British identity – war, religion, and trade – which can help us to understand its continued resonance in modern Britain. By harnessing the strengths of British identity left to us by history, and confronting its weaknesses, we can forge a civic-minded and plural identity that will assist us as we meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

***

Over three centuries, war did much to bind Britons together. In a moment of war, citizens must decide whether to defend their country. In the French Revolutionary Wars, for the first time, Britain faced an army of mass conscription. Parliament passed the Defence of the Realm Acts in 1798 and 1803, to determine who could and would fight. It was a success: the army grew fivefold over the course of the war, the navy almost ninefold, as voluntary recruits joined the ranks. Some fought to show courage or pugnacity, whilst others, like Peter Laurie, from a family of East Lothian

farmers, thought of pragmatic self-interest. Laurie went to London to make his fortune, joining the metropolitan volunteer corps, later becoming Director of the East India Company and Lord Mayor of London.

Wars produce potent symbols of shared experience. After the Napoleonic Wars, monuments to Lord Nelson sprung up across the country, often paid for by public donation, from Glasgow to London, Dervock to Birmingham. Our wars have encouraged proud moments of social change. After Trafalgar, Britons began to ask: if we can fight, why should we not also vote? Two decades later, as the Great Reform Act of 1832 sat before Parliament, which would increase the number of eligible voters in Scotland by more than tenfold, the *Scotsman*'s 'National Movement' column declared, 'A united nation is master of its own destiny; and the people of Britain are now as fully united – are…nearly unanimous in support of this bill.' The two World Wars similarly united Britons, and also produced demands for social and political change.

Too often, we recoil from this history, as though it has nothing to do with us – or our future. Yet to believe that this history is not ours, or is not relevant to our future, is to take an especially sanguine view of what that future will hold. We live in an increasingly insecure world, not one in which we have successfully averted and overcome the spectre of war. It seems more likely that though we do not intend it, our world is building towards a future of even greater crises. There is great value in an outward-looking and unifying identity, oriented towards a state that is still capable, if less capable than before, of engaging seriously in international politics.

Britain also has a history of negotiating complex religious conflicts. In the eighteenth century, anti-Catholic sentiment was widespread. Our national history was told in explicitly religious terms, in widely-read almanacs. Guy Fawkes was the Catholic who tried but failed to destroy James I and Parliament. National disasters, such as the Great Fire of London in 1666, were the Catholics' fault. Anti-Catholic riots were common. The most notorious were the Gordon Riots of 1780, led by the Scot Lord George Gordon, the first protest which involved collaboration between ordinary English and Scots, when Britain was at war with Catholic enemies. Catholics were often described as 'outlandish' – they were quite literally from elsewhere. They were not Britons.

Though the process was far from peaceful, Britain's religious history became one of compromise. The established Church of England is effectively both Catholic and Protestant. The Church of Scotland is a Presbyterian church and is not part of the Anglican Communion. This means that in England, the monarch is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, whilst in Scotland, though she is duty bound to protect the church, she is simply an ordinary member. Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Buddhists are all Britons now. In a world of growing religious conflict, it is

an immense strength of Britishness that it is sensitive to other identities in these islands, comfortable with religious diversity.

If Britain's religious history left Britishness with a tolerance and pluralism, its economic and imperial history tied British identity to the rest of the world. In 1718, *The Present State of Great Britain* opened its first chapter on trade by declaring, 'next to the purity of our religion we are the most considerable of any nation in the world for the vastness and extensiveness of our trade.' In the nineteenth century, men and women from all four nations – Scotland in particular – saw great opportunity in Britain's empire. A Scot, Allan Octavian Hume, founded the Indian National Congress in 1885, and another, Patrick Geddes, inspired Jawaharlal Nehru, the founding father of modern India. The first Labour Prime Minister in the world, in Australia in 1908, was an Ayrshire miner. Though the United Kingdom is often referred to as England, the Empire is never English.

Britons have always defined who they were by looking beyond their shores. Our imperial history has often been a story of racial supremacism and exploitation. Yet it has left to us a multi-ethnic and multi-racial sense of Britishness, a shared linguistic and legal heritage that binds members of the Commonwealth. Similarly, as we navigate our exit from the European Union, Britain's history reminds us that our fate will always be tied to the continent's, no matter what form of partnership emerges over the coming years. Britain must look outward in a spirit of generosity and partnership; isolationism has never been British.

***

We must get better at telling our national story, with pride and sensitivity. It can be a source of great strength as we confront the challenges of the twenty-first century. However, political leaders must focus on the civic as well as the national aspects of British identity. This is not because national identities do not matter, or because they are intrinsically illiberal or shameful, but because their fate depends on more than political will. Identities endure because they capture the experiences and aspirations of ordinary men and women over decades and centuries, sometimes in the patriotism and courage that war invites, sometimes through quite conscious calculations of practical self-interest. Over the coming decade, Britain's constitution and place in the world will be transformed. I believe we should grasp that opportunity to reinvigorate a civic and plural British identity. We should focus on three areas.

First, clearer boundaries of citizenship must be drawn. Many democratic polities are now dealing with the consequences of having blurred the lines of citizenship – of who is and who is not a citizen. We should begin by offering citizens of other EU countries

who have lived and worked on these islands full British citizenship. The domestic politics of such an offer should be simplified by the greater degree of control over our migration policy that will result from our withdrawal from the EU. Even most Britons who embrace diversity and pluralism must recognise that membership of the EU does challenge ideas about the relationship between taxation, representation and citizenship that are at the core of modern democratic states. We should not miss the opportunity to offer a clear, political solution to an issue that has bubbled under the surface of British politics for decades.

We also need a clearer sense of what it means to be a British citizen. Being a United *Kingdom*, Britons are not used to this idea. Very often demands for a practice of modern citizenship are ridiculed as overly rationalist and un-British. I do not see the force of these objections. Britain does not have an uncodified constitution, it just has a constitution whose core documents are dispersed and often understood only by constitutional lawyers – not even always by them. Why can we not have a public debate about what a Citizens' Charter might look like, which draws together these documents in a coherent and accessible fashion? Such a Charter would not be a statement of important but abstract 'British values' – democracy, tolerance, fairness, and so on – but of the concrete and enforceable rights and duties of which citizens, and those who wish to become citizens, are widely aware. Our distaste for such public debates and documents may in the long run be counterproductive. Similarly, our system of rank and privilege, reflected most brazenly in the residual power of the House of Lords, is surely incompatible with the idea of the political equality that modern citizenship entails.

Second, political leaders must develop a language of citizenship that reflects the diversity of modern Britain. Pluralism is not only an economic and cultural strength, it is one of the best arguments for why Britishness still matters. We should demonstrate this in our public symbols and public culture. For instance, the Remembrance Service is perhaps our most respected national ceremony. It reminds us about the sacrifice and sufferings of war. It is a ceremony that evokes symbols and music from across the nations of the UK – Men of Harlech, Skye Boat Song, and Flowers of the Forest – as well as Britain as a whole – Rule Britannia, Heart of Oak, the Last Post. We should recall at these moments the one million men from ethnic minorities who served in World War One, and the almost three million men provided by the Indian Army in the Second World War. We should celebrate our national institutions which reflect this pluralism. For instance, the BBC, like so many other British institutions the creation of a Scot, John Reith, remains perhaps the world's most trusted media organisation.

We should be ashamed of how we treat so many British citizens who are ethnic minorities, particularly Muslims, in our public culture. How can anyone feel a sense of loyalty to the idea of British citizenship if the values espoused in its defence –

fairness, tolerance, and liberty – are often flagrantly ignored in practice? Ethnic minorities are still more likely to be poor and unemployed than the UK average. We must renew our focus in public policy on persistent social inequalities: between genders, ethnicities, and regions. The inclusivity of Britishness is perhaps its greatest strength. Our political language, the symbols we choose and the way we choose to portray them, should confidently reflect this.

Third, political leaders – especially on the left – must rediscover an idea of economic citizenship that cuts across national, ethnic and religious boundaries. Over the past few decades, Britons have lost the sense that they belong to a community in which we share a common economic fate. As Hobsbawm described the aims of the socialist movement, so important in driving the creation of the welfare state, 'the socialist argument was not just that most people were 'workers by hand or brain' but that the workers were the necessary historic agency for changing society. So, whoever you were, if you wanted the future, you would have to go with the workers' movement.' This politics of course involved internal distributive conflicts, but these conflicts were viewed as *domestic* conflicts between citizens. Working class history was quite definitely British history.

This kind of politics cannot and should not be revived. But this does not mean a politics based on hard economic interest is dead. Most Britons still care a great deal about their jobs, perhaps more even than their identities. As the world of work is transformed by technological change, common social and economic challenges will become sharper: stagnant real wage growth, now projected to continue well into the 2020s; the declining power of labour relative to capital, and the growth of insecure work. More and more economic power is now held in fewer and fewer hands. A politics that is built on these shared challenges, rather than on a coalition of identities, may help to reinvigorate a sense of what it means to be British.

These ideas all aim at the same end: to remind ourselves that we, as British citizens, are members of a shared political community. This means we accept that at times in politics we win, and at others we lose. Historically, this has been one of Britain's great strengths: the largely peaceful transfer of power, even in times of great turbulence, such as the decline of Empire or the Irish Home Rule Crisis. To be a political community is to trust your fellow citizens to make collective political decisions. This does not mean that when those decisions are not what you hoped for, you must renounce the right to persuade others they are mistaken. But to understand that such decisions are what make shared history, that in politics they have a strange power of their own – that is what it means to build a common future.

Britishness is an identity that can support our ambitions. Over three centuries, it has developed a core of tolerance and pluralism, adaptability and strength, and a focus on our place in the world – invaluable qualities as navigate the century ahead,

characterised as it is likely to be by diversity and great international uncertainty. The strengths of British identity must be brought out by a renewed focus on the civic aspects of Britishness: a clear sense of the boundaries and meaning of British citizenship; a language that emphasises and takes pride in our shared symbols, plural as they are and should be; and a revived focus on the shared economic interests that bind citizens together across the nations, ethnicities and religions that coexist in these islands.

We should recall Caliban's reassurance in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, which Kenneth Branagh boomed from the top of a green hill at the Olympic opening ceremony in 2012, as pounding drums signalled the arrival of the Industrial Revolution: 'Be not afraid. This isle is full of noises.' Stephano responds, 'That will prove a brave kingdom to me, where I shall have my music for nothing.'

Josh Simons is a Kennedy Scholar at Harvard writing a PhD on why the impact of technology on work has historically mattered for politics. He is co-editing an essay collection on Political Economy and Justice, and working with Michael Sandel on the meaning and ethics of work. He has worked as a policy advisor for the Labour Party and as a policy researcher for the Institute for Public Policy Research.