

Cohen, R. 2000. The incredible vagueness of being British/English. *International Affairs* 76 (3): 575-582.



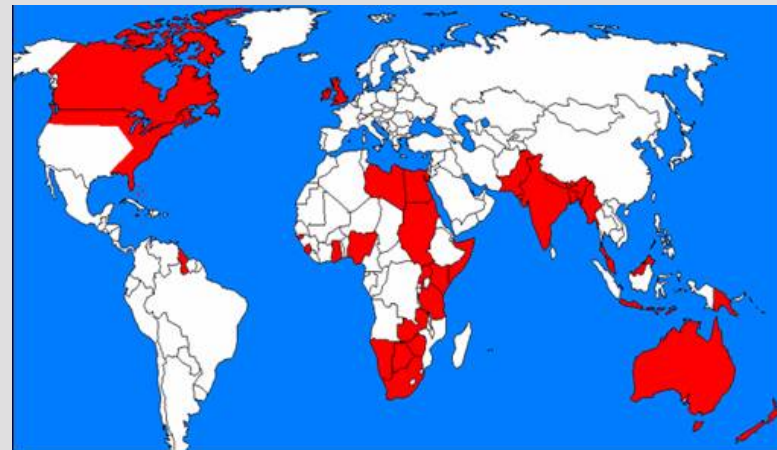
Collective identity is important (1) to protect minorities and improve their self-image, (2) to help the majority define itself in terms of excluding others, and (3) to promote coherence between a people and where they live.





Britons do not have a strong national identity, in part because Britishness is often used synonymously with Englishness. Eighty percent of Britons are English, and they borrow much from the Welsh, Scottish, and Irish

The British Empire is one strong component of being British/English. It has been observed that the problem with the English is that their history happened overseas and they don't know what it means.



Globalization is challenging the concept of nation-states, which depend on taxing their citizens, etc. However, there has been a loss of sovereignty that adversely affects popular notions of national unity.





Some fear that the UK might fragment like the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc nations in an attempt to restore citizens' trust in government

The UK has undergone many political configurations, none of which has been especially generous toward the Northern Irish, whose territory is included in the UK due to British loyalists who colonized it. The Irish question is a source of indifference or embarrassment for most English.

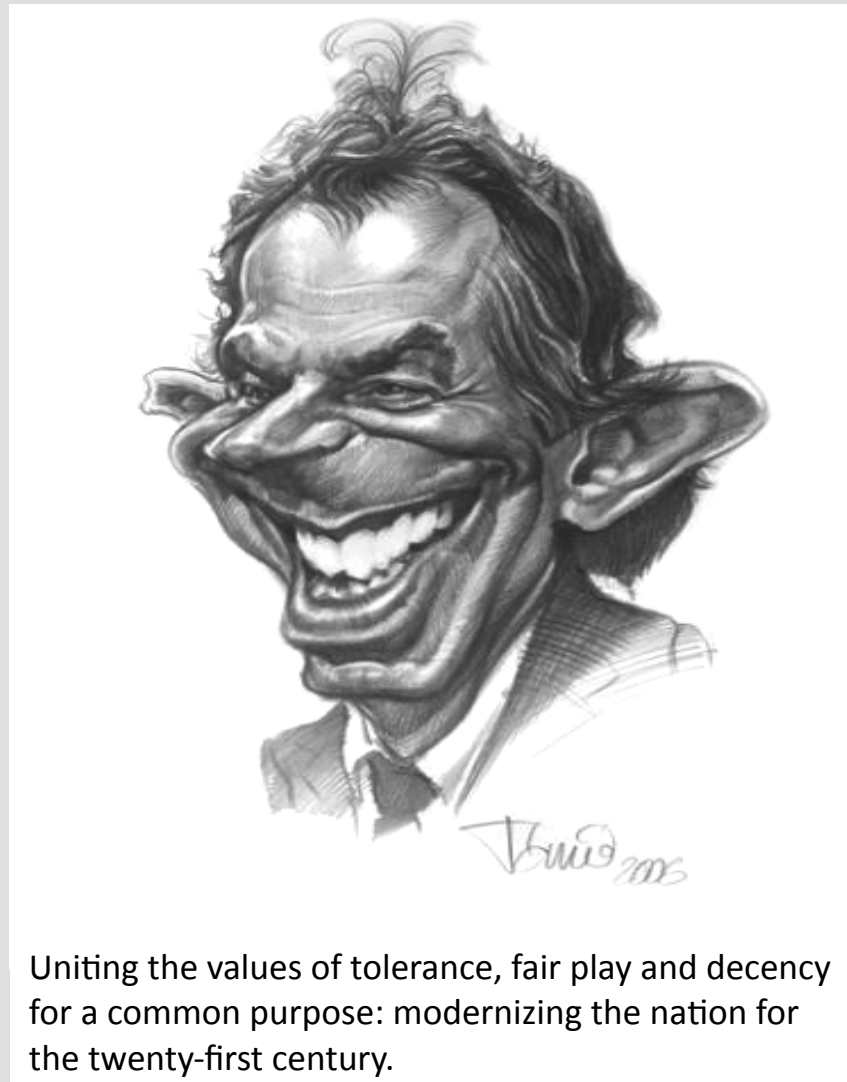


Though the UK is an EU member, most Britons share an unfriendly attitude toward mainland Europeans: the French are perceived as untrustworthy, the Germans as former enemies who are now at economic war with everyone else. Other perceptions are as follows: Spaniards are sinister, Italians excitable, Greeks impoverished, Irish vengeful. The British have a very us/them perspective of Europe.



Stereotypes are that English are generous, honest, taciturn, tolerant, eccentric, brave, bad loves, decent, good losers, trustworthy. They have an ironic sense of humor, charming manners, a sense of fair play, and sense of stoicism.





Uniting the values of tolerance, fair play and decency for a common purpose: modernizing the nation for the twenty-first century.

Six uncertain frontiers—those with the United States, Europe, the former white Dominions, the wider Commonwealth, the internal Celtic fringe and the body of ‘aliens’ seeking to acquire British citizenship.

We know who we are by agreeing who we are not. Others judge us as we judge others. The Other cannot be separated from the Self.



The British/English, after the end of the Empire, do they seek hegemony over other people and do not need the simplicity and uniformity of an overassertive identity.

Review article

The incredible vagueness of being

British/English

ROBIN COHEN

Why then have the British/English managed perfectly well without a strong national identity and why do they appear to aspire to one now? Is such a prospect in sight? The starting point to answer these questions—as the forward slash indicates—is to distinguish between Britishness and Englishness, two notions that are so widely conflated in popular sentiment and public discourse that all four authors of the books reviewed here have a wretched time trying to come up with a satisfactory means of separating them.

For Nairn, who proclaims simultaneously his Scottish nationalism, Marxism and belief in democracy, the British/English confusion is enraging and frustrating. He sees the English, who constitute 80 per cent of the United Kingdom's population, as unthinkingly appropriating the cultures and distinctiveness of the Welsh and Scottish. (I shall ignore the Irish, southern and northern, for the moment.) For him the break-up of Britain into its component 'nations', which he sees foretokened in devolution and which he has been announcing for 27 years, cannot come too soon.



The military prowess of the British and the British Empire are also at the heart of an innovative account provided by Baucom, a South African literary scholar working at Princeton and Duke Universities. His central epigram derives from one of Salman Rushdie's stuttering characters who suggests that: 'The trouble with the Engenglish is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they dodo don't know what it means.' Englishness is thus locationally, and in its provenance, conjoined to the British Empire.

Relative global impotence and the re-imagining of Britain have also had to take place in a context of internal challenges to the old hegemonies. Nairn is here almost drooling in his certainty that Scottish devolution (in particular) is not going to stop where Prime Minister Blair hopes it will. Rather than assuage local sentiment, the logic of nationalism together with Blair's clumsy attempts to manage the politics of post-devolution will, he argues, simply feed the desire for separatism. Davies is more cautious, but also accepts this possibility (p. 1043). Unlike the USSR, the UK is small, democratic, and, he claims, 'gentle'. If the imperial nation can maintain its profile and overlap its populations, the composite nations will sink back to regional curiosities. But if, as in the USSR, the imperial nation 'loses its citizen's trust', the small nations will revive and seek to restore (or establish) a sovereign status.

The final source of pressure to resolve the ambiguities of British/English identity derives from the moderate but definite growth of internal expressions of English identity. Paxman notices that a greetings-card retailer started marketing St George's Day cards in 1995. Within two years the shops were selling 50,000 every April. The non-U quarterly magazine *This England*, published in Cheltenham since 1967, now sells a quarter of a million copies. As Paxman notes, this outsells the *New Statesman*, *Tatler*, the *Spectator* and *Country Life* added together. A populist *lumpen* phenomenon of St George's crosses painted on the shaven heads of football supporters parallels the nationalist stirrings in the shires. A lot of this English sentiment seems rather fake and Johnny-come-lately. If everybody else has an identity, including some insignificant ethnic minorities, perhaps we should have one too, seems to be the underlying notion.

I can repeat the point with more vigour. There is no 'essential Britishness', though imperial and English mythologies can be brought into play for rhetorical purposes. I have argued at book length (*Frontiers of identity*, 1994) that Britishness is best understood in terms of interactions along six uncertain frontiers—those with the United States, Europe, the former white Dominions, the wider Commonwealth, the internal Celtic fringe and the body of 'aliens' seeking to acquire British citizenship. There is no need to repeat the argument here, except in so far as I want to emphasize that all identities (and definitely not least a British identity) are more situational and negotiated than the 'essentialists' appear to understand. A method for analysing an identity cannot start from the crease and move the boundary or migrate from the core to the periphery, as there is no kernel and no core. Instead, the fuzzy edges of an identity are where the action is and where the answers lie. We know who we are by agreeing who we are not. Others judge us as we judge others. The Other cannot be separated from the Self.

Of course such identities are not stacked like commodities on a supermarket self, ready to pluck and chuck into one's wire identity basket. But the point here is that an identity is like a trolley with holes carted hither and thither; it is not a safe with locks entombed in Fort Knox. Identities are made and remade, invented and inherited. They are contingent and situational (one can be Muslim in the mosque, Asian in the street, Asian British at the political hustings and British when travelling abroad, all in a single day). Identities are hybrid, multiply-located and complex. We should distinguish between complexity (which is wrought by globalization, international migration and an unruly international political environment) and confusion (which derives from anxiety and fear of the decidedly unbucolic, post-lapsarian world we live in).

To return to my starting point about why strong collective identities are normally formed. The British/English are not a threatened minority. Neither, after the end of Empire, do they seek hegemony over other peoples. Despite Scottish whinging about English domination, Scots occupy the three most important offices of state at Westminster, while Scotland gets a disproportionate share of the taxpayers' money. The people of Britain do not need the simplicity and uniformity of an over-assertive identity and they should beware of politicians wrapping themselves either in the flag of St George or the Union Jack. Having an elaborated, multi-layered identity is not the same thing as not having one at all. At any rate, given the peculiarities of their imperial and post-imperial history, this is the best the British are likely to get.