



Scottishness and Englishness versus Britishness. Major Identity Concerns

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Abstract: This article is dissecting what makes British people British and what are the differences between the Scottish and the English, the most numerous people of Great Britain. People in the United Kingdom get to be both: British on one hand, and Scottish or English, or Welsh, or Irish on the other. Despite the fact that these identities are supposed to complement each other, sometimes people perceive them as alternatives. As a matter of fact, there has been a decrease in the number of those who view themselves as British around the UK. People have been developing a stronger sense of nationalism.

Keywords: Britishness; Scottishness; Englishness; the United Kingdom; national identity; multiculturalism; mixed identity; nationalism; political institutions.

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1. Introduction

A stronger sense of nationalism has been developing due to “the rise of political parties in Scotland and Wales dedicated to loosening or even ending the ties that historically bound this island together. [...]The relative autonomy of civil society in Scotland and Wales is one of the key reasons why there is a sense of distinct national identities, for a long time nested within but independent of British identity”¹ Take the Scottish for instance. They have been raised and educated in Scottish institutions; they have their own legal system and their own national church. Their universities have promoted national movements inside the country and abroad. The professional classes in the UK's nations are also distinct from each other, for the education systems, the broadcasting and print media are carriers of national identity. On the news, there are reported home events, but less information about the other members of the Union.

As a result, in relation to the English, the Scots consider themselves more friendly and relaxed. They are pretty clear about who they are and what they stand for. The English however, who are the greatest in number, view themselves as British, taking England and Britain as synonyms. Their sense of identity is rather fuzzy, lacking awareness of the true differences between being English and British. But, in the context of contemporaneity, “England has had to endure the sight of Scotland and Wales being granted separate national political institutions – and then use those institutions to pursue different public policies. Scotland, for example, scrapped upfront tuition fees for university students and introduced ‘free’ personal care for older people. Wales got rid of prescription charges. More recently, in both countries, power has been secured by nationalist parties strongly committed to advancing the interests of their particular part of the UK. If people in England were not previously aware of the distinction between Britain and England, then arguably they ought to be now.”²

2. Historical background

Britishness is not something that was considered before 1707. Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland were hostile and different in relation to one another. The first step towards unification was taken by Wales and England, which joined around 1530. Next was the Act of Union which added Scotland to the group and formed Great Britain in 1707. The party got bigger in 1801 when Ireland decided to join, and they have all lived, well... not so happily ever after, but definitely known to the world as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to be specific. The British identity mainly developed in the 18th Century, when the Union had a

¹ Frank Bechhofer, David McCrone (eds.), *National Identity...*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

² *Ibidem*, p. 41.

central monarchy, military victories that rendered an expanding empire, and a religious domination of Protestantism.

These aspects placed Britain on a stair of superiority over continental Europe. “The establishment of foreign markets expanded trade and job opportunities, promoted wealth and economic strength and increased a sense of national identity. The English, Scots, Welsh and (partly) the Irish all participated in and accepted the notion of a British empire.”³ Since the Church has a lot of influence in the state, Protestantism was used by the governments to unite the British under the same flag and against Catholic enemies. The British Empire was thriving under the expertise of doctors, traders, explorers and administrators. The monarchy flourished from 1819 to 1901 under Queen Victoria, and “by 1900 Britain controlled over one-fifth of the world’s land surface and ruled one-quarter of the world’s population. Its land forces remained small but its navy was still maintained at a level where it would be superior to the two next most powerful navies combined.”⁴ In the 19th Century Britain knew a culminating industrial point, producing half of the world’s coal, iron, cotton and steel. It dominated trade, globally predominating commerce and economy.

As the saying goes, one day you are up, tomorrow you are down. With Britain this is almost literally. By the end of the 20th Century the British Empire had disappeared. While remaining one of the richest economies in the world, still possessing a nuclear arsenal, strong arm forces and a seat on the United Nations Security Council, its sovereignty has weakened in the actual context of interdependence. Britain is known to have suffered from the so-called British-disease: in the second half of the 20th Century the British consumed too much and worked too little, living beyond their country’s means, as Andrew Gamble put it in his article, *Britain in decline* in 1994 (Oakland, 2001).

Contemporary Britain’s identity cannot be defined outside a historical context. There is still a political union and common features between its nations despite of the differences generated by factors like competing histories or cultural differences. Since they started on the same foot in 1603, the present work will further analyse the relationship between Scotland and England.

3. Territorial identity concerns

This is an analysis on territorial aspects in the context of national identity and the cultural relationship between Scotland and England. Between these two countries lies a town called Berwick-upon-Tweed, which is currently within English borders, but has a long history of changing ownership – 14 times to be exact.

³ John Oakland, *Contemporary Britain: A Survey with Texts*, London, Routledge, 2001, op.cit., p. 72.

⁴ Andrew Gamble, *Britain in Decline*, London: Macmillan, 4th edition, 1994, abridged, in John Oakland, *Contemporary Britain: A Survey with Texts*, London, Routledge, 2001, op. cit., p. 5.

Naturally, people there have issues of territorial identity. They stress on their Berwickness in order to solve the matter. As the ditty goes, “They talk about Scotland and England indeed; There’s Scotland, and England and Berwick-upon-Tweed”.⁵ Local identity wins over national identity in this case.

However, when asked, the inhabitants of Berwick-upon-Tweed sometimes feel English, sometimes feel Scottish. Although currently considered the northernmost town in England, most Berwickers feel they should be in Scotland. Factors like devolution and constitutional change, which got the Scots their own Parliament, made England and Scotland two increasingly contrasting nations with differences in respect to public and social services or education. The situation here is even more complex since the county of Berwickshire was in Scotland, but the town of Berwick was in England. This rendered a tricky political atmosphere, both governments disputing ownership.

As far as territory is concerned, social acceptance in certain places goes hand in hand with economic aspects. We choose what to visit, where to live and where to work. “This issue of labour mobility [...] is, of course, critical to the well-being of a market economy. For the system to work as it is meant to, people have to be willing to move to where jobs are available and to be sensitive to inducements such as higher wages.”⁶ Along with devolution came different market regulations, depending on the territory. The lowest employment rate in the UK is in Scotland. In the actual context of Brexit and coronavirus, the figures dropped even lower. “Scotland's Business Minister Jamie Hepburn said: “The Job Retention Scheme continues to play an important role in supporting employers and employees and, combined with the huge economic uncertainty caused by Brexit, this remains an extremely uncertain time for the economy and jobs.”⁷ Considering these factors, how do Scots feel about working in different parts of the UK?

Relocation is a topic that cannot be discussed without their concern about fitting into an English setting. Elements like the accent seem to be a matter of insecurity, worrying over how the English could react to it. Someone put it this way: “if I went to an English place I might sound common.”⁸ There is an obvious reticence of the older of moving to the city, on one hand. “As one young woman put it when talking of London (although she later made clear that her feelings referred to English city life in general), I never know what to say when I’m on a bus, or, like, do you ask the guy in the taxi before you get in? Or when you’re in? Or just things like

⁵ Frank Bechhofer, David McCrone (eds.), *National Identity...*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

⁷ *Scotland's jobless rate remains below UK level*, 23 February, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-56165671>, accessed on June 7, 2021.

⁸ Frank Bechhofer, David McCrone (eds.), *National Identity...*, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

that remind you that you're not used to city life"⁹ On the other hand, the young may find home a bit claustrophobic: "I want new people and I don't want a place that is going to be so similar in culture and attitude and personality to Dumfries. I want a change. [...] Life experience, you don't get life experience in Dumfries because it is so small. It is not so cosmopolitan. You don't – most people are so similar – you don't get a lot of really rebellious people or people who are extremes of anything."¹⁰

Sometimes people want to explore and build an individual identity instead of getting stuck with what they inherit from their community. With respect to young Scots, it seems that mobility and identity are in a complicated relationship. While striving to broaden their networks by leaving Scotland, they are reluctant to move to England: "I'd rather be a Scottish person in a Scottish university with lots of other Scottish people than a Scottish person in a university full of English people and hardly any other Scots. [...] You'd be known as 'that Scottish girl' because there probably wouldn't be that many others there."¹¹

4. Multiculturalism, mixed identity

Britain has always been a very open territory, and above all England, which hosts Celts, Anglo-Saxons and Normans, along with European Protestant refugees and Jewish immigrants. Later on, after World War II, significant numbers of Polish and Italians, and after the Cold War, even people from behind the Iron Curtain arrived. Since the 1960s England has taken in Chinese, West Indians, Indians, Bengalis, Greeks, Turkish Cypriots, and high numbers of Nigerians and Albanians. Last, but not least, there is, of course, an abundance of Scots, Welsh and Irish inhabitants. Considering this impressive racial and ethnic conglomerate, at a first impression it is hard to fathom England having racial tolerance issues. "About 20 percent of the population of London, and nearly 15 percent of the West Midlands, are from what are loosely called the ethnic minorities."¹²

London is a city by name and a whole world in essence, being far more cosmopolitan than other European capitals. Thanks to mass post-war immigration, England has become a diverse society. But who is really worth it of being called British? In order to integrate so many ethnicities, Britishness has been promoted as a multicultural identity, incorporating a wide range of cultures and symbols. Thus, "as well as being associated with, for example, pubs, Dickens and Shakespeare, Britishness is also said to embrace the Asian corner shop, Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith."¹³

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

¹¹ *Idem*.

¹² Matthew Parris, 'Mongrels not Angles', Author copyright, 21 November 1998, abridged, in John Oakland, *Contemporary Britain: A Survey with Texts*, London, Routledge, 2001, op.cit., p. 91.

¹³ Frank Bechhofer, David McCrone (eds.), *National Identity...*, op. cit, p. 42.

To put it simply, British national identity can be claimed by all those who reside in Britain, irrespective of birth place, ethnicity or religion. They get to call themselves British, but, attention, not English. This identity only belongs to those born in the country from English parents. Hence the first differences between Englishness and Britishness. Ethnic minorities are seen as British, but only those of English origin are considered English. I am sensing a little bit of prejudice here, do you not?

How are things in Scotland from this point of view? “First Minister, Alex Salmond, in a speech to the Scottish National Party Conference in 1995: ‘we see diversity as a strength not a weakness of Scotland and our ambition is to see the cause of Scotland argued with English, French, Irish, Indian, Pakistani, Chinese and every other accent in the rich tapestry of what we should be proud to call, in the words of Willie McIlvanney “the mongrel nation” of Scotland’.”¹⁴

This is a different and encouraging perspective in terms of ethnic tolerance, since the Scots are willing to attribute the Scottish identity to all those who prove worthy of it by embracing their Scottishness and by genuinely arguing Scotland’s cause. Their nationhood is thus characterized by inclusion, being a matter of choice, unlike the English whose nationhood is rather exclusive, based on uncontrollable factors like parentage and descent. Migration in Scotland is taken more lightly also due to the post-devolution state of affairs, characterized by low birth rate and shortage of labour. Therefore, people are welcome and encouraged to settle. Let us give a clear example to better understand this. The largest non-white group of ethnic minority in the UK are the Pakistanis. Those of them who reside in Scotland adopt hybrid identities, considering themselves either Scottish-Pakistani or Scottish Muslim, unlike those from England who are British. Ironically, the English are someone’s largest minority: Scotland’s. Although they resonate very well with Scottish icons and easily embrace Scottishness, their sense of identity is so inflexible that they cannot identify themselves any other way but English.

Generally speaking, those more tolerant in matters of race are Britain’s highly educated people. Among the big family of British identities, English is the one which remains exclusive.

5. Conclusions

So, in the end, does national identity matter? It probably does, since it is used as a key descriptor of people who define themselves as belonging to a country along with other identification marks such as being a parent, a worker, a partner and so on. The social organization of a country relies on it to establish who is entitled to society’s goods and services, and who is not. Although national identity is not an

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

abstract notion pretentiously used in political speeches to look good, in the context of contemporaneity, when everything changes so rapidly and radically, identity adapts to the new realities and has the ability to construct itself on what it is being provided.

The British, who live in one of the most cosmopolitan places on earth, are counting on a range of tools to choose from in order to define who they are. The conclusion is they are who they want to be, and lately that is the source of conflict between them. For now it is the United Kingdom who sets the rules, but who knows if we will not be witnessing a sort of “Scotexist” in the near future considering the way things go.

6. References

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