

## Missing England: Identifying the Eighty-Five Per Cent

Arthur Aughey  
School Of Economics and Politics  
University of Ulster at Jordanstown

A recent best-selling book on contemporary Englishness by the journalist Jeremy Paxman begins with the line: 'Once upon a time the English knew who they were'. However, the conclusion to Paxman's book is that the English can no longer avoid asking the question: 'Who are they?' (1998: 23). Self-understanding, he thinks, was the norm but what if the English have suddenly realised that they misunderstood themselves all along? This is the condition of anxiety upon which the politics of identity thrives and it provides intellectual space for all sorts of historical and cultural revisions. The question of English identity today is also bound up with the new complexity of British governance and with the new uncertainty of how England fits into it.

This paper engages with the question of contemporary English identity in three related parts. The first part identifies a former narrative of integration, a narrative that reconciled Tory and Whig visions of English exceptionalism *and* its exemplary quality. This narrative was integrative in two respects. It served as a useful public doctrine of English institutionalism and it also helped to integrate the other nations of the Union into that culture of English institutionalism. This narrative survived remarkably well into the twentieth century and it can still claim adherents. One consequence of its persuasiveness was what Sir Ernest Barker once called the traditional, 'never reflective', character of political Englishness. The second part identifies a more recent narrative of disintegration, the falling asunder of this integrative idea, understood as both as a return to the particular and the loss of the universal. This has been a very adaptable narrative, weaving together theories of decline, loss of empire, the break up of Britain and the inevitability of European integration to propose, as Pocock once noted, that constitutional *modification* in the United Kingdom must mean constitutional *disintegration* (2000). One consequence of this narrative (and it must be stressed not the only consequence) is that some have been so alarmed that they are determined to ensure that political Englishness remains unreflective no longer. The third part, then, examines varieties of contemporary engagements with the 'particular' of England and Englishness through a review of some of the recent literature on national identity. Two of the many possible versions of contemporary Englishness are explored.

The first is a conservative version of the English 'particular' that celebrates – if not unreservedly - a populist idea of England, an idea that it struggles to reconcile with civic, liberal and multi-ethnic values. This England is sceptical of Europe and seeks to preserve its national integrity within the global market. The second is a radical version of the English 'particular' that celebrates a civic, liberal, multi-ethnic idea of Englishness, an idea that it struggles to reconcile with native populism. This vision of England is located very firmly within the new 'universal' of the European Union as the exemplar of political virtue.

## A Narrative of Integration

Dyson has argued that English political theory was historically accessible to ideas of reform. 'Consequently, there was a remarkable continuity of assumptions among intellectuals, a relative indifference to theoretical disputes elsewhere and a tolerance for theoretical and ethical muddle' (1980, p. 195). It was a tradition in which, as A. J. P. Taylor once quipped, Whig plus Tory equalled eternal truth (1977). This was a distinctive political relationship. 'The bonding of the English with their common law could make conservatives into radicals and radicals into conservatives'. When, in the course of the nineteenth century, national identity became bound up with notions of the 'British Constitution' and 'Empire', the same bonding applied for this too 'was said to be a people's story' (Colls 2002: 28). What Colls reveals is a common framework of assumptions within which significant arguments took place about the ethnic or civic nature of English identity (Kearney 2000); whether empire was, in Seeley's terms, all 'wonder and ecstasy' or whether it was an 'excrescence' that exposed England to war and corruption (Watson 1973: 216; Rich 1989); or whether, as Elton put it, 'English history most convincingly demonstrated how man should order his existence on earth' (what he called the Froude complex) or whether it served 'to demonstrate the opposite with equal coherence and conviction' (what he called the New Statesman complex). Whatever side was taken in these arguments, Elton continued, the nature of the debate testified to the belief 'that England and her history enjoyed the special privilege of providing an example to mankind' (1991: 110-11). In short, the 'English ideology', to use Watson's term, was exceptional (particular) but also exemplary (universal) and it was the positive quality of the relationship, this *exemplary exception*, from which issued a powerful liberal-conservative public doctrine. In countries of notable self-possession this is not unusual. The American sense of manifest destiny, for instance, remains simultaneously exceptional and universal, unique in the good fortune of its institutions and exemplary in the power of its attraction (Anderson 2002: 23). Where Whig and Tory met was at the intersection of the notion of English experience as irreducibly different from others (especially continental Europe's) and the notion of that experience being prototypical, 'blazing trails which others followed' (Collini 1985: 41; Clark 2003: 210).

Others were less impressed. In 1953, for example, Eric Voegelin commented that Oxford political philosophers assumed that 'the principles of right political order have become historical flesh more perfectly in England than elsewhere at any time'. Happy the political philosopher, then, who finds that these principles are 'identical with those of his own civilisation' (1953: 101). Voegelin was rather contemptuous of this style of English parochialism and the continuity of its assumptions. However, this English ideology did have its sophisticated and self-possessed exponents who, while drawing sympathetically on a wide philosophical inheritance, remained in no doubt about the unique value of England's experience. Michael Oakeshott, for one, stated the case concisely. 'Reputable political behaviour', he argued, 'is not dependent on sound philosophy'. Rather 'constitutional tradition is a good substitute' and in this respect English politics was remarkably rich. He concluded that the form of parliamentary democracy which England had made 'British' was not an abstract idea. It was 'not the gift of nature but the product of

our own experience and inventiveness'. Left at that, Oakeshott's estimate of the British political tradition would have been unexceptional. But it was not left at that. The freedoms bequeathed by England to the United Kingdom, guaranteed by law, represented an exceptional method of social integration, 'the most civilized and the most effective method ever invented by mankind' (1948: 476; 489-90).

This method of social integration translated a specific aspect of the English political tradition - parliamentary sovereignty - into a British one in order to secure the unity of the United Kingdom (Crick 1991). This made the development of a specifically English nationalism not only counter-productive but also irrelevant (Crick 1995). This has been usually interpreted as an expression of English arrogance. The opposite reading can also be made and it is possible to interpret it as an expression of English modesty, for what is often ignored is the attraction of English civilisation as a method of social integration. In the mid-nineteenth century even one of the stalwarts of the proud *Edinburgh Review* was prepared to declare that 'the nearer we (the Scots) can propose to make ourselves to England the better' (cited in Massie 2002: 13). Moreover, its method of social integration was also here a method of multi-national integration. England, while remaining England, 'a concrete reference' for poets, in a real sense also *became* Britain, as its economy drew in the Irish, Scots and Welsh. As an 'absorptive *patria*', there was no need to base Englishness on blood or soil or even a flag and 'flying the Cross of St George was a protest or a foible, usually Socialist or Anglican' (Grainger 1986: 53-5). The good fortune of this social and national integration relied in large measure upon the relatively stable identity that England gave to England/Britain (Stapleton 1999). The United Kingdom was a nationality not a nation, one that had taught 'its citizens at one and the same time to glory both in the name of Scotsmen or Welshmen or Englishmen and in the name of Britons.' (Barker 1928: 17). Nevertheless, this narrative of integration remained decidedly Anglo-centric and tinged with a definite sense of universal mission (even if only understood as 'decency') as Orwell's reflections confirmed (2001: 321-30; see also Kohn 1940; Kumar 2001).

### **A Narrative of Disintegration**

The exemplary nature of the English exception - the hope of liberals – was something that disturbed conservatives. As Oakeshott also observed, English experience 'became the model for peoples whose powers of social and political invention were unequal to their needs'. If the rights and duties were exported 'the genius that made them remained at home'. What 'went abroad as the concrete rights of an Englishman have returned home as the abstract Rights of Man, and they have returned to confound our politics and to corrupt our minds'. Furthermore, he feared English principles 'returning to us, disguised in a foreign dress, the outline blurred by false theory and the detail fixed with an uncharacteristic precision' (1948: 490). This corruption he later called rationalism in politics and for Oakeshott its popularity was a measure of England's loss of self-possession.

This loss has informed a recently popular narrative of the disintegration of 'England/Britain' and has promoted a sort of inverted Podsnappian culture in which, as

Johnson concluded, 'the majority of modern commentators on the constitution appear to assume as a matter of course that foreigners generally do it better than we do, especially if they are our partners in the European Union' (2000: 127). The narrative of disintegration has proved attractive because it appears to synthesise two apparently contradictory developments: nationalism and a new global framework for politics.

This narrative located disintegration in England/Britain's loss of both uniqueness and universal significance and this has taken a number of expressions. The first was historical pessimism, summed up in Cannadine's remark that there is no longer any reason for the world to be interested and if 'British history no longer seems a success story, then why bother to make it a story at all?' (1987: 189). The second was political fatalism. The old narrative of England/Britain was exhausted, it was claimed, because it was nothing other than an imperial construct. What remained after the sun had set on the imperial state were separate nations on the one hand and the 'bloodless, historyless, affectless' administrative structure of the United Kingdom on the other (Marquand 1997: 200). The third was national assertiveness. The Anglo-centrism of the narrative of integration promoted two anxieties within the other parts of the United Kingdom. On the one hand was an anxiety of provincialism, in which acknowledgement by England was thought necessary to validate local cultural achievement. On the other was an anxiety of influence in which such validation resulted in appropriation into an English cultural mainstream. The narrative of disintegration neatly reversed these anxieties. It was now England, formerly first among nations, that was to be pitied as the laggard of historical destiny. The invitation now was to reject poor old England rather than to emulate her. That was *Schadenfreude* indeed. The fourth part was European expectation. Europe was expected to provide a new model union, one in which a tolerant cosmopolitanism would complement resurgent civic nationalism in Scotland, Wales and ultimately in England.

For those on the left of British politics, this narrative provided resistance to the Conservatism of the 1980s. Thatcherism, in this case, was interpreted as a re-assertion of the key elements of Anglo-centric integration. The uniqueness of parliamentary sovereignty, distinctiveness within Europe and the universal model of market evangelism as the secret of England's greatness were promoted with a moral fervour that others could only understand as English hypocrisy (Bellamy 1989). Challenging Thatcherism meant 'deconstructing' Anglo-centricity and 're-imagining' Englishness.

The devolutionary project of New Labour, then, may be interpreted as an attempt to preserve what is best in the narrative of integration, the idea of British solidarity, and to prevent the worst in the narrative of disintegration, the possibility of separatism. That project has been long in the making and one of its essential ingredients was thought to be the promotion of a benign form of English identity. 'We English', Crick wrote, 'must come to terms with ourselves'. It was time to stop infusing 'everything that is English into the common property of Britishness' (1991: 104). The answer to disintegration was 'not less English nationalism'. On the contrary, the English, like the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish, should develop 'a self-confident and explicit national feeling' (1995: 180). In this perspective, Englishness is defined in terms of what it *lacks* on the (questionable) assumption that everyone else does possess a dignified and proud national identity.

As the editors of *Political Quarterly* noted, it was now time for England to engage in identity politics. The English, they argued, 'have begun to look grumpily insecure in the face of the external pressures of Europe and the internal pressures from Scotland and Wales'. Now, however, England was on the move, twitching and stirring 'as if awakening from a prolonged period of slumber' (1998: 1-3). One of those editors, Tony Wright, wrote (more grumpily) two years later that the English were the 'silent and uninvited guests at the devolutionary feast' (2000: 11). An even grumpier Kenneth Baker objected to the idea that the people of England should be treated as 'the residue of constitutional change', inverting their true significance within the United Kingdom (1998: 15). One can detect a mood of English discontent though one should be cautious about attributing a profound depth to that mood. Whatever the reasons for putting out more flags here was a new condition of Englishness in which the politics of identity, predicated on the notion of a lack, intersected with the politics of territorial institutions, now also predicated on the notion of a lack. Together they suggested that England was being denied (or 'forbidden' as Scruton claimed). This politics of denial has issued in two distinctively nationalist modes of identity politics, one conservative and the other radical.

### **Conservative Englishness**

It was an *English* politician speaking about *England* who best expressed the context in which a return to the particular appeared politically seductive. That politician was Enoch Powell who revealed the unresolved tensions of conservative Englishness apparent in subsequent attempts to define it: cultural authenticity and cultural diversity; constitutional wisdom and institutional alienation; the renewal of England and the decadence of England. Ironically, like the view expressed in Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, Powell appeared to believe that because British history had happened overseas the English had lost a sense of their own selfhood. Modern England needed to re-attune itself to an older, pre-imperial England. Here was a familiar nationalistic appeal to authenticity, a call to remember, as Kitson-Clark so concisely put it, that 'the English also were English before they were British' (1950: 13).

Powell's idealism traced authenticity from the soil of England, to its laws, disciplines and freedoms emanating from 'a thing called "Parliament"' that dispensed the same justice to all the people of England. But what if those institutions that had served England so well had themselves become 'inauthentic'? What if they were prepared to alienate the 'alchemy of centuries', estrange themselves from England herself and confound the homogeneity of the country? The irony of Powell's Englishness is that in the pursuit of authenticity he only discovered alienation, internally with immigration policy and externally with European policy (Rich 1988: 676). The discovery encouraged his successors to substitute populism for old-style constitutionalism. Recently, Simon Heffer has provided a good example.

Hitherto, he wrote, English nationalism was thought to involve 'bonkers theories of racial superiority' (Heffer 1999: 93). The challenge 'would be to forge a nationalism that, while respecting and advancing the aspirations of the English, does not contribute to xenophobic feelings among the inhabitants of these islands' (119). The task was indeed a populist one, subverting what Heffer believed was 'the obsessive desire by much of the political class to eradicate the notion of nationhood' in England, an obsessive desire it shared with bureaucrats in Brussels (105). He conveyed a distinctively Anglo-centric resentment: the English had now become foreigners in their own country. The Blair government was 'probably the most anti-British and certainly the most anti-English in history' and the ancient institutions that conservatives revered, that the English had built and that worked so well in the past had been 'wrecked in the interests of political expediency and democracy has been perverted' (2002: 15). England was denied what devolution was apparently delivering elsewhere - cultural self-confidence and clarity of identity.

The case for English independence, however, is not really the message of these reflections. The mood is the message. That mood is 'irritable growl syndrome', a high-brow version of Carry On England, an oft-repeated 'return, on the part of a substantial number of our compatriots, to the most formative and "most desirable of all caves"' (Adair 1986: 56). Heffer's political version mimics that English manner spoken of by Alan Bennett, joking but not joking, serious but not serious (cited in Paxman 1998: 18). 'Most English people still find chauvinism a bore; yet they have noticed that, nowadays, nationalist whingeing seems to pay off'. Nevertheless, there remains an 'inescapable element of self-mockery in the current wave of nationalist fervour' (Cox 2002: 16). Intelligent Tories are aware of that too.

Was the very idea of English nationality, one scholar asked, 'inevitably tinged with the elegiac?' (Light 1991: 19). Roger Scruton was so certain of it that he wrote *England: An Elegy*. Scruton's former England consisted 'in the physiognomy, the habits, the institutions, the religion and the culture' of a very distinctive way of life. 'Almost all have died'. They depended on 'England being somewhere and a home' but that 'somewhere' and that 'home' have been dismantled. In short, 'England has been forbidden - and forbidden by the English'. This forbidding of England from within has been complemented by its subjection from abroad, especially by Europe and 'this political disenfranchisement is also a disenchantment of their country' (244-57).

Here again, the message is not necessarily a call to English independence. It is an inverted form of patriotic pride, an attempted re-enchantment of those qualities that identify the country and its people as unique and special. Yet again the argument is both serious and not serious. It is serious when it invites the reader to consider what has been lost (even if some may think it worth losing). It is not serious when it implies that England is going to hell. Beneath the veneer of such elegies remains 'profound gratitude for the existence we already have' (Grant 1998: 31). The expression of alienation is clear but its very expression in elegiac tones helps the alienated to live with reality. Contemporary political events are an occasion for revisiting fondly a more beautiful

Englishness rather than turning that reverie into a nationalistic programme. In many ways, that has always been the English conservative condition.

### **Radical Englishness**

The radical tradition also shared in the idea of England being not only exceptional but also exemplary. E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) told a particular national story that was also a universal one. This radical tradition claimed to embody the true spirit of Englishness against the more limited class sympathies of conservative England. If one can detect a constant in radical Englishness it has been the objective to transform England in the image of the (real) people and to rescue it from class. The challenge that faces contemporary radical Englishness is clear. Embracing populism may generate an ethnic nationalism nastier than the conservative identity it seeks to replace. This has generated two anxieties: the potential chauvinism of popular sovereignty and the possibility that popular Englishness may not be so respectful of 'difference' as radicals would like. These anxieties can be traced in some of the recent literature.

Richard Weight, for example, thought that the solution to England's sense of dislocation and the solution to its democratic deficit were one in the same: independence as a nation state. The English should be given the 'chance to rediscover and re-imagine themselves within a progressive framework'. Weight celebrated the nationalism that attached itself to England's football team as a cultural model. The Cross of St George, he argued, was the symbol of English inclusiveness and that meant blacks and Asians as well as whites. He and his friends proclaimed their Englishness with the Oasis song 'D'You Know What I Mean?' the chorus of which runs 'All my people right here, right now, d'you know what I mean?' (1999: 25-7). Did Weight really know what he meant? Could he be sure that 'my people' would always be his (inclusive) sort of people? The English people were betrayed by a 'self-serving political elite' suspicious of the people and their culture. 'England, the last stateless nation in the United Kingdom, was leaderless and adrift' (2002: 726). Conservative elegy has here become radical self-pity which, when mixed with populist self-righteousness, is the basic stuff of nationalist grievance. Like much in contemporary conservative Englishness the focus is on what the country *lacks*. This is expressed as a cultural longing for the 'cuddly' sort of national identity that is life-affirming, one assumed to be the property of the Irish, Scots and Welsh and which is supposed to display itself in its embracing universality during international football competitions. What is longed for is nationalism without tears.

Another explorer of radical Englishness, Billy Bragg, has gone looking for a healthy nationalism to reconcile the patriotism of the majority with democracy and equality. The quest is to make 'English an inclusive identity rather than an exclusive nationality'. Though that English identity was 'bound to be tainted by fears of national chauvinism and racism' he believed it was worth taking the risk to wrest it from the political right (1996: 15). In this quest one finds an ideal and an anxiety. The ideal is the old radical faith in the decency of English people who, when being true to themselves, are disposed to tolerance and solidarity and who 'put themselves in positions of extraordinary

openness to the cultures of other peoples' (Colls 2002: 380). The anxiety is becoming 'some sort of British rump', of failing the future, as the United Kingdom breaks down (Bragg 1996: 15). Englishness is experienced as a present void to be filled by a positive civic nationalism, made all the more urgent as populism emerges from its former socialist shell (see Howe 1989).

However appealing such arguments may appear one cannot help thinking that there exists a subtext of mistrust for the very English identity that is being advocated. There is also something rather Germanic about its European enthusiasm. Like the German left's support for European integration, the English version implies a revulsion against 'the "two world-wars and one world cup" variety of belligerent, alcohol-fuelled nativism', a turning away 'from the morbidities of living in an old country' (Gilroy 1999: 67). As Alibhai-Brown has argued, multicultural England has excluded the English as a specific group and fostered acute resentment. The project now should be one of 'encouraging the English to be English' as part of an inclusive, progressive multi-ethnic British identity and this 'cannot be done unless the English are brought in from the cold' (2002: 47-50). Here is an optimistic invitation to engage in the therapeutic engineering of an identity and one cannot avoid the observation that there is something rather patronising about this.

### **Putting Out More Flags: A New Englishness?**

In the weeks of the Euro 2004 football competition Boris Johnson observed that never 'in history has the flag of St George been so popular', never 'has it been so prevalent in the decor of our streets'. He thought the ubiquity of the English flag was 'a huge political message, a statement of exuberant loyalty, and also of a certain frustration'. The loyalty was to the country and to its football team. The frustration was the consequence a 'sense of constitutional oppression' at the consequences of devolution that had left the English without a proper forum for English laws and he thought that this vindicated Heffer's analysis (Johnson 2004). One could also argue that it vindicated both Weight and Bragg. Actually, the pervasive presence of the English flag made it difficult to make any clear judgement of its significance. This was, of course, a brash demonstration of nationality but it was difficult to relate it to any popular mood of discontent, as Johnson claimed, with the absence of 'English votes for English laws'. Despite the novelty of the display, it is impossible to associate it directly with a desire for English independence, an expression of Euroscepticism or any political programme. What did it say about contemporary English identities? It has been suggested (as this paper has suggested) that much of popular sentiment revealed in the display of the Cross of St George was fake and Johnny-come-lately. The underlying notion seemed to be that if 'everybody else has an identity, including some insignificant ethnic minorities, perhaps we should have one too' (Cohen 2000: 578).

If there was one political aspect that could not be ignored it was the autonomy of populism. For much of recent British history populism had been contained by the class system of English society. Conservative politics had contained populism within a culture of social deference. Labour politics had contained populism within a culture of working class solidarity. The withering of social deference and the demise of working class

solidarity has permitted populism to escape the confines of traditional conservatism and radicalism and one manifestation of it was the flag waving of late May and early June 2004. Extracting the Cross of St George from the Union flag as a way of celebrating popular sporting emotions is a style statement rather than a proclamation of nationalist intent, a cultural projection (having a good time) rather than an exclusive identity.

It is, of course, tempting to detect some turning of the tide, a confluence of those currents of national sentiment explored in this paper. The sense of loss recounted by conservative Englishness, it argued, is actually part of a politics of confirmation. This can be in the form of an elegy, as with Scruton, in the form of a rage against the times or it can be in the form of a project of recovery, as with Heffer. These works translate specific and legitimate concerns about constitutional change into grandly metaphysical meditations on decay and possible regeneration, though the waving of flags may provide hope that popular regeneration is at hand. This paper also proposed that the sense of frustration found in radical Englishness has been, as Pocock argued, that it wants 'the English to cease being British, but does not know whether they will or can' or, indeed, 'what they are supposed to become'. One alternative, he thought, was 'that popular, soccer fan Republic of St George' and one could argue that it was this very alternative which demonstrated its colours before and during Euro 2004. Conservative and radical Englishness could take inspiration from that event and start re-writing the past and the present in nationalist mode. There is a possibility that things take this self-consciously nationalist direction but that has not happened.

For Pocock, the English can never have a past that is post- or anti-British and their Britishness can be transformed but not terminated. England/Britain does not need the simplicity of a clear-cut identity. Rather, the English and their British partners 'need a complex history and a complex politics, if they are free to argue with themselves as well as with each other'. The English, above all, should avoid at all costs revelling in their grievances, real or imaginary and commit themselves to sustain 'a politics in which multiple identities are both intermixed and respected' (2000: 41-52). England/Britain, albeit a modified England/Britain, would appear still to be the framework that respects that complexity.

## **Conclusion**

Paxman concluded (in a very English way) that national identity was a good thing but in England's case it would not be a nationalism of flags and anthems. It would be, apparently, 'modest, individualistic, ironic, solipsistic' and it could well be the 'nationalism of the future' (1998: 265-6). In other words, it would *not* be a serious nationalism at all (it would be exceptional) and, unsurprisingly, it would become *the* model for others to copy (it would be exemplary). Moreover, this was also the conclusion reached by a recent academic exploration of English identity (Kumar 2001: 269-73). Even in revising their past it seems that the English are destined to confirm it. That is a discovery that may tell us a lot about the English and their sense of themselves, even

when they are draped in the Cross of St George. There can even be self-possession in coping with the loss of a former self-possession and it appears that the nationality-not-a-nation form of the United Kingdom continues to be the appropriate framework for its expression.

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